

TWO STATIONS IN ONE

by Bill Hardy

In early 1982, the sale of KITN-920 Olympia, Wash., and its subsequent call-letter and format change, brought to an end nearly three decades of owner Don Whitman's radio service to Washington's state capital. But it also wrote the final chapter to the story of KITN's joint operation with co-owned KITI-1420 Centralia-Chehalis for 15 years in the 1960's and 1970's.

Now that KITN has become KQEU and switched to an adult-contemporary music format, this seems like an appropriate time to review the history and mechanics of the KITN-KITI story.

• THE "JOINT OPERATION" CONCEPT

In the more remote regions of the U.S.A., you find "satellite" television stations. No, not the new cable-TV stations you pick up from space with a "satellite dish" antenna. These are regular, over-the-air TV stations which relay nearly the entire broadcast day of a sister TV station in another, larger community. This concept dates back to the 1950's and 1960's.

For instance, in the Tri-Cities area of Washington state (Richland-Pasco-Kennewick), all three commercial TV stations carry the programming of their sister stations in nearby Yakima. The Tri-Cities stations are considered "satellites" of the Yakima stations. Except for some local commercials and maybe a local newscast or two, Tri-Cities viewers get almost 100% duplication of the Yakima TV fare. This means that the owners can use one switching post, in Yakima, to program two stations. This brings local TV to two communities that would barely be able to support a station on their own.

The satellite idea works well for TV stations in sparsely-populated areas like the Rocky Mountains. So why hasn't it caught on in radio? You find simulcasting by some AM-FM combinations in smaller cities, and in Canada there are numerous "twins" that feed two or more cities with the same radio programming for a major portion of the broadcast day. But satellite operation has never really caught on among AM stations in the U.S.A.

Perhaps it's because satellite TV stations can be manned by one FCC-licensed technician (who sometimes is also DJ'ing at an AM or FM station as well), freeing up the usual cameramen, switchers, etc. that drive up TV costs. AM-FM combos can be run by one man if one or both stations are automated. And Canada has much more liberal provisions than the U.S.A. has for unattended transmitters. But in the U.S.A., basically, all AM, FM, and TV stations need to have an FCC-licensed operator on duty during all broadcast hours, and this makes attended automation more feasible than unattended satellite operation.

So the combination radio operation of KITN-920 and KITI-1420 in Washington state may have been quite unique in the U.S.A.

This joint operation began in the early 1960's, and ended in October 1977 after FCC approval of the sale of KITI to separate owners. In December 1977, I had an opportunity to talk to Don Whitman, owner and general manager of KITN-KITI Corporation. He explained the unique set-up and history of KITN-KITI.

• TWO STATIONS, ONE MUSIC SOURCE

At the outset, Whitman made it clear that KITI was not a "satellite" of KITN, nor were the stations "twins" in the Canadian sense. Each station had its own commercials, PSA's, ID's, and local-community programming, while simulcasting their music, national and regional news, and feature programming.

Both KITN and KITI went on the air in the mid-1950's as 1kw daytimers, each the second radio outlets in their respective markets. KITN-920 was in Olympia, and KITI-1420 was in Centralia-Chehalis some 25 miles away.

Initially, each station had live DJ's with a standard format of music, news, and features. Then, in the early 1960's, Whitman began looking into a new development in broadcast programming: Automation equipment and syndicated music programming.

Whitman wanted a way to bring professional quality to small-market radio. He felt then, and still feels today, that a DJ should be a "showman," but that genuine

personality was hard to keep in small markets because they tended to move on to higher-paying jobs in larger cities. Whitman felt that syndicated programming, using professional talent not otherwise affordable in smaller markets, would provide a quality air sound to his stations, and that automation equipment would allow the local program elements to be inserted while freeing the studio engineer to work on other duties.

He says that he planned to have similar programming on both KITN and KITI. Rather than have two basically-duplicated systems in each of his cities, he says it made sense to buy one automation system, centrally located in Olympia. "Since the most minutes of each hour were music programming," says Whitman, "the source of that music wasn't important as far as the listener was concerned."

Furthermore, Whitman realized that the bulk of regional news originated right in Olympia, the state capital. "Credibility in news is extremely important," Whitman notes, saying it made more sense to carry the same regional and national newscasts on both stations, rather than have the announcer in Chehalis read the same news from a teletype wire.

So in the early 1960's, KITN and KITI began their "combination operation."

• HOW IT WORKED

These elements were simulcast: Music programming, with professional syndicated announcers; state and national news, plus those local stories which would interest listeners in both markets; sports news, weather reports, stock market news, and a variety of recorded features of interest to both communities. When the stations obtained ABC-Entertainment Network affiliations in the late 1960's (after ABC split into four networks), the network feed came into Olympia and was simulcast.

The following elements were fed separately to each station: Station ID's promos, program opens and closes (such as "Kitten Radio Digest" and "Kitty Radio Digest"), commercials for each station, local public service announcements (PSA's), and other material peculiar to only one of the stations. Local newscasts were precisely timed to be the same length, and fed separately to each station at the beginning of each 20-minute-long major news block. After the local news, KITN and KITI would simulcast the state and national news, but would have separate commercials and program closes in many cases.

The combination operation required commercials, station breaks, and the like to be exactly the same length on each station, so that when the separate programming ended there would be no delay in resuming joint programming. If one station had sold more advertising than the other on a given day, the other station would run additional PSA's to make the timing come out even.

The mechanics of the joint operation are equally fascinating.

Originally, commercials for KITI were inserted by equipment in Chehalis, triggered by a signal coming down the program line from the combined music system up in Olympia. However, Whitman says they found later that they could

maintain better control by bringing all commercial tapes to Olympia and playing them from up there. Commercials for KITI were normally recorded by the local staff at the Chehalis studio, then brought up to Olympia for playback. In a pinch, commercials could be fed by telephone line to the KITN studio, where they could be recorded for playback within minutes, or else could be inserted at Chehalis if an advertiser suddenly requested ten ads that same afternoon.

KITI maintained its own news and sales staffs in Chehalis, as well as recording facilities. Much of the time, the studios were actually unattended.

Since FCC rules required a licensed operator to be on duty during all hours of the broadcast day, KITI used remote control

to maintain transmitter watch from 6am to sunset. This freed the news and sales staff from being tied to the studio all day. The original studios were in the St. Helens Hotel in downtown Chehalis, so KITI trained the hotel's desk clerks to operate the remote-control equipment and take meter readings for the logs. (This may have been the only hotel in America where all desk clerks on the day shift had to have a third-class FCC license!) Later, when the studios were moved to the transmitter site between Centralia and Chehalis, KITI moved the remote-control point to the Emergency Dispatch Center across the street. Finally, when technology had advanced to the point where the transmitter could be controlled remotely from 25 miles away, KITI's



remote-control point moved to the KITN studios in Olympia, allowing one licensed and fully experienced operator to control both stations.

"We had a very sophisticated private telephone system between Chehalis and Olympia," Don Whitman points out. "There was one line for programming, one line for controlling the studio equipment down there, and one line for remote control and telemetry of the KITI transmitter. On a fourth line, when no one was at the KITI studios and their local telephone rang, it would ring up here and we could answer the call at our main office. Whether it was a news story, a sales call, or just a listener asking a question, we wouldn't miss any calls. When someone was at the KITI studios, they could switch the local phone there and use the private line for two-way communication with the KITN studios without having to pay for a long-distance call."

Among the various dignitaries who have visited the state capital and seen Whitman's unique two-station operation was Rosell Hyde, Chairman of the FCC under Presidents Eisenhower and Johnson. "The FCC is always concerned about the licensee maintaining control of the station whenever there's a case of absentee ownership," adds Whitman. "With this joint operation, I was in the main office every day, so I actually had better control than if the KITI programming all originated in Chehalis."

Did any other AM stations in the U.S.A. ever follow KITN-KITI's lead in joint operations? "Not to my knowledge," was Whitman's reply. "Some other station owners explored it, but as far as I know, no similar operations are underway anywhere else. However, the system we originally used to start commercials down the program line in Chehalis is similar to the system the Mutual network is using today to start commercials for automated stations all over its network."

He says there haven't really been any major snafu's in the 15 or so years of joint operation, such as KITN programming going out over KITI or vice-versa. He admits, though, that "sometimes it was like a three-ring circus with lots of things going on at once - feeding one program to KITN, another to KITI, a third program to another out-of-town station, and taping a fourth program for playback at a later time!"

Interestingly, sign-off times for the two daytimers matched up every month of the year, "except December. In December, KITN was required to go off at 4:15pm, while KITI was authorized for a 4:30pm sign-off. We decided to match up the two times and simply close down both at 4:15."

In recent years, the KITN-KITI joint operation studios and offices moved from the Capitol Center Building in Olympia to a new office building $\frac{1}{2}$ mile east of a major shopping mall in nearby Lacey. KITN changed its ID to "Olympia-Lacey" during nondirectional hours (sunrise or 6am, whichever was earlier, till local sunset). KITN received a construction permit to go "unlimited time" with 1kw-D, 500w-N, DA-N, and began fulltime operations in spring of 1977. KITI applied for similar nighttime facilities, and began using them in late 1979.

• GOING THEIR SEPARATE WAYS

Why did the joint KITN-KITI operation come to an end in 1977?

"Somebody made me an offer," explains Don Whitman. "I really wasn't looking for a buyer! But I was busy trying to get KITN on fulltime, and someone approached me with an offer to buy KITI, so I said to myself, 'Why not?'"

On Sept. 6, 1977, the FCC approved the sale of KITI-1420 to new owners. On Oct. 1, 1977, the new owners took over actual control of KITI, but not all of the new studio equipment was ready to go. So Whitman says he helped them out by providing programming down the line for the first four or five days. After that, once KITI started their new popular-music format from their own studios, they had trouble getting their ABC network feed established in Chehalis, so KITN fed it down the phone line from Olympia. But soon, the stations were completely independent of one another.

For some 15 years, motorists traveling Interstate 5 between Seattle and Portland had been able to pick up two 1kw daytimers with nearly identical "easy listening" formats. What they hear today bears little resemblance to the KITN and KITI of the past. KITN has changed call letters to KQEU. Both have changed to adult pop music with local live DJ's. Both have added nighttime operation; KITI has upped day power to 5kw and KQEU is seeking higher day power as well. Both are 24 hours (off after midnight Monday mornings), and KITN (and now KQEU) picked up the Larry King all-night talk show.

It's like the end of an era.

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