

# Origin Of Call Letters In The Early Days

By Cary Simpson

Back in the early 20s when radio was just beginning, broadcasters had no choice as to call letters. The Department of Commerce, which had the responsibility of administering radio stations in those days, assigned callsigns as they saw fit. The first licensed radiotelephone apparatus was arbitrarily given the call letters, KDKA, on October 27, 1920. It was nearly a year later that the first station expressly licensed for broadcast service, WBZ, Springfield, Mass. was authorized. That was September 15, 1921, according to the archives at the FCC.

When licensing of broadcasting stations began, the call letters were all three letter combinations, except KDKA. There were 676 possible combinations beginning with W (26 X 26), and an identical number beginning with K. Since all types of authorizations from the government came in rotation, including broadcasters, ships, land stations, police and aircraft, these 1352 combinations were used up quickly. In fact, the last three letter call was assigned in March, 1922, barely 6 months after the first assignments of broadcast station calls had begun. Thus, any 3 letter call existing today means the station was authorized between September 15, 1921 and the end of March, 1922. The FCC records indicate that 112 stations had been authorized, and that all the other combinations were for non-broadcast use.

## FOUR LETTER CALLS BEGIN

Beginning in April, 1922, four letter callsigns were assigned in a rotation. Licensees had no choice. East of the Mississippi, the callsigns began with a W, and the third letter was always A. First issued was WAAA, then WAAB, WAAC, etc. through WAAZ. Then, the second letter changed to B, and the calls WBA, WBAB, etc., were authorized, followed by WCAA, WCAB, WCAC, etc., WDA, WDAB, WDAC, etc.

Calls continued through the rotation of the second letter, except WX, which were reserved for experimental stations. The last station with A as the third letter was authorized in late 1922. Then the third letter was changed to B. WABA, WABB, WABC, WABD, etc., followed by WBBA, WBBB, WBBC, WCB, WCBB, WCBC, etc. through the alphabet.

By mid-1927, more and more pressure was being exerted by politicians on behalf of constituents desiring certain callsigns that the Federal Radio Commission, who had assumed the duties of administering the airwaves, gradually stopped assigning the arbitrary callsigns. The series, WNB was the final group and according to available information, WNBZ, Saranac Lake, N. Y. was the last station so assigned, in September, 1927.

## WEST OF THE MISSISSIPPI

Likewise, in the western part of the nation, arbitrary assignments were made. However, the K group did not begin with A, but instead with F. KPAA was the first station in the four letter group in the west, followed by KFAB, KPAC, KPAD, etc., through KFAZ. Then, KFBA, KFBB, KFBC, etc., followed by KPCA, B, C, KPDA, B, C, etc. The final group of KF stations was the KFY group.

Then, the second call was changed to G. KGAA was first, then KGAB, KGAC, etc., followed by KGBA, B, C, through KGHA, B, C, etc., where the alphabetical assignments were ended. This was also in late 1927.

## EXCEPTIONS

Since that time, call letters have been assigned on the basis of availability and good taste, although this last requirement has now been eliminated. With a few exceptions, all stations east of the Mississippi have been assigned callsigns beginning with W, and three letters to follow. West of the Mississippi, the call has always been a K, followed by three letters.

There are exceptions, of course. WACO, Waco, Texas, received its authorization because of political "suggestions". Other stations that originated on one side of the Mississippi later moved across the river and were permitted to retain their calls. WDBQ, Dubuque, Iowa, began as WKBB (arbitrary alphabetical assignment in 1923) in Joliet, Illinois, and in 1933 moved to East Dubuque, Illinois. Later the callsign was changed to WDBQ. Still later, the station was moved across the river, and its call was not changed.

There is a story connected with every exception, such as WTAU, College Station Texas, which was licensed in October, 1922. Perhaps you know the story of a station in your area that today has an exception to the call letter rules.

## REMAINING TODAY

Today, many stations continue to use their original callsigns. When the call is only three letters, its age is obvious. But, among the four letter calls, you can readily identify the following, in alphabetical order: WBA, Lafayette, Indiana, WBAP, Fort Worth, WBAX, Wilkes Barre, PA, WCAO, Baltimore, WCAU, Philadelphia, WCAX, Burlington, VT (now used only by tv offspring of WCAX), WCAZ, Carthage, IL, WDAE, Tampa, WDAF, Kansas City, WDAY, Fargo, WEAN, Providence, WFAA, Dallas (just changed), WGAL, Lancaster, PA (now tv offspring only), WHAZ, Troy, NY, WJAG, Norfolk, NE, WJAR, Providence, WJAS, Pittsburgh, WMAQ, Chicago, WMAZ, Macon, WNAD, Norman OK, WNAX, Yankton.

Others with "A" as the third letter still using the same calls today are WOAI, San Antonio, WPAX, Thomasville, GA, WQAM, Miami, WRAC, Williamsport, PA, which actually began in Michigan in 1923, WRAW, Reading, PA, WSAI, Cincinnati, WSAJ, Grove City, PA, WSAN, Allentown, WSAR, Fall River, MA, WTAD, Quincy, IL, and WTAU, mentioned above.

In the "B" sequence, these remain: WABI, Bangor, WBBL, Richmond, WBBM, Chicago, WCBM, Baltimore, WCBS, Springfield IL (now WCVS, after selling their call to CBS for New York City station), WDBJ, Roanoke, WDBO, Orlando, WEBC, Duluth, WFB, Greenville, WFBG, Altoona, PA, WFPM, Indianapolis, WFB, Baltimore, WGBB, Freeport, N. Y., WGBF, Evansville, WGBI, Scranton, WHEC, Canton, WHEF, Rock Island, WHEB, Sheboygan, WHBU, Anderson, IN, WIBA, Madison, WJBC, Bloomington, WJBK, Ypsilanti (now Detroit), WKBB (mentioned above), WKBH, LaCrosse, WKBN, Youngstown, WKBV, Richmond, Ind., WKBW, Buffalo, WKBZ, Ludington (now Muskegon), WLBC, Muncie, WLBL, Stevens Pt (now Auburndale) WI, WLBZ, Dover-Foxcroft (now Bangor), Maine, WNEF, Binghamton, WNBH, New Bedford, and WNBZ, mentioned above.

## WESTERN STATIONS TODAY

In the west, KFAB, Lincoln (Omaha), was one of the earliest 4 letter calls. A few days later, KFBB, Sacramento was licensed. KFEL, Denver, is now KLMN. KFBA, St. Joseph, MO, was followed later by KPIZ, Fon du Lac, KPJB, Marshalltown, IA and KPJZ, Fort Worth. The very next station after KFJZ was KFKA, Greeley, CO, which was followed immediately by KFKB, Milford KS. This was the infamous station operated by Dr. John Brinkley, whose license was revoked, whereupon he moved across the Mexican border and opened the first superpower border station, XER.

KPKF, Shenandoah, still operates with its original calls, as does the other station in the same town, KMA. KFOR, Lincoln, KPRC, San Francisco, KFUO, St. Louis, KFVS, Cape Girardeau (used by tv offspring), KFXD, Jerome, ID (now Nampa) KFYR, Bismarck, KGEK, Yuma, CO (now KSTC, Sterling), KGER, Long Beach, KGEZ, Kalispell, KGFJ, Los Angeles and KGFX, Pierre, SD.

## FCC ARCHIVES RETAIN INFORMATION

Fortunately, the FCC has retained all of the records from the earliest days of broadcasting, so it is possible to trace the origin of stations for historical projects, etc.

These days, when a broadcaster can change call letters every week if he wishes, and can request any combination, even those judged suggestive or downright obscene, it is interesting to look back at a time when the licensee had no choice as to the call he received.

We wonder what will happen to the call KFBI. That was assigned in September, 1923 to Wichita, Kansas. During World War 2, the government forced the station to change calls to KFDI, because of the thought that someone might think it was an official station of the FBI.

## MORE ON THE ORIGIN OF CALL LETTERS IN EARLY DAYS

By Cary Simpson

After the earlier article on call letter origins, information was received from Thomas H. White of Richmond, Virginia, who has studied call letter originations far more extensively than I have. He refers to an article he wrote for the Sept. 29, 1979 DXM, Vol 17, Number 2, which covers much of the same information contained in my article, but which adds several very valuable things for anyone who wants to have the story in full, or as full as someone can make it in 1984, looking back 65 years.

## FRC CONTINUED TO ASSIGN CALLS

Tom says he finds no evidence that the Federal Radio Commission stopped the arbitrary assigning of calls with WNBZ, as I stated in the article. "Starting in October, 1927," he writes, "a number of WQB\_\_ calls were assigned, including WQBA, Miami (not the same WQBA as today), followed by a few WRB\_\_ calls through March, 1928, and a couple WTB\_\_ calls later in the year. It seems that after this, they switched to W\_\_D\_\_ calls, until my list runs out in December, 1930.

"In the west, KG\_\_ calls were assigned until at least December, 1930. Thus, I see more of a petering out than an end to arbitrary assignments. In fact, I remember from a few years ago that the application for call letters for a new station still provided assignment by the FCC if the applicant had no preference."

I know from personal experience that what Tom said at the last is true, but that it was not in any alphabetical sequence, but simply what Mr. McVay, the man who was in the call letters division for many years, thought might be appropriate.

## DEMARCATON OF "K" AND "W" CALLS

Tom has another highly interesting conclusion. "I think I have finally figured out how the Ws and the Ks have been segregated. According to the Radio Service Bulletin lists, the Mississippi River has served as the boundary only since Feb., 1923. Previously, the boundary was the eastern border of Montana, Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico. Thus, WTAW (and WFAA) are really conforming to the prevailing practice.

## EARLIEST CALL ASSIGNMENTS

In his DXM article in 1979, Tom gives the 1912 international assignments of callsigns for all land and sea stations. They included "N" plus two letters (676 possible assignments), "W" plus two letters, (676) and 598 combinations from KDA to KZZ, with Germany having been assigned the KAA-KCZ calls.

Tom's article continues. "Unfortunately there weren't enough 3 letter calls to go around. The obvious solution was more letters, and 4 letter KE\_\_ signs became the predominate issue for the rapidly expanding ship service." The Department of Commerce, Tom says, went on to assign other 4 letter groups sticking to vowels for the second letter, KI\_\_\_\_, KO\_\_\_\_, and KU\_\_\_\_. Then, they moved back to the earliest K call they could use, which, you will recall from above, was one beginning with KD\_\_\_\_. This is how KDKA, East Pittsburgh, PA received their first authorization-- the first one using the word broadcasting in the license. Others assigned calls in this era included KDYW, Phoenix, AZ, a land station. When it was relicensed specifically as a broadcasting station, it became KFCB, and in 1930 was renamed KOY. And as Tom points out, KDYL, Salt Lake City, was the only remaining land station call other than KDKA until KDYL became KCPX in 1959. It was not relicensed from land to broadcasting until 1923, but it retained its land station call, as did KDKA.

By early 1921, 3 letter calls were reinstated for broadcast stations, according to Tom, and since there was a large turnover of licenses among ships and shore stations, calls such as WBZ were available when the first broadcast stations began to be authorized. As Tom says, "KDKA was left as a monument to aberration," and also to the fact that the government didn't assign any other licenses specifically for broadcasting for 11 months, until WBZ was licensed September 15, 1921.

It is interesting to gather this information. If any others can add to the topic, I hope you will do so.