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## **WIRO Radio: A Brief History**

I grew up watching the pulsing red light blinking through the sycamore branches from our front porch on Seventh Street. The red light crowned the top of the tower perched on the plaza above the little radio station on the hill. And listening to the voices and the music broadcast from that 205 foot tower: Mac McElroy and Joe Bowman, Noah Don Adams and Mike Todd; Hal Murphy and Ronnie Bell; “Johnny Dollar” and the “Flying Dutchman.”

In time I would play the hits there and gaze out the control room’s picture window overlooking our hometown toward those razorback Kentucky hills just across the Beautiful Ohio. For so many of us radio boys, it was our place of beginnings—WIRO AM, 1230 KHz, “1-2-3-GO Radio!” Ironton, Ohio. Here’s *our* story.

### **The Founders**

WIRO Radio signed on the air in the fall of 1951 at 250 watts of power. Low power, hometown radio stations were called “teapots.” Glacus G. Merrill served as President of the Iron City Broadcasting Company, and Robert Edge was the station’s General Manager. Within a year, however, a new group of owners acquired the station license, and beginning in June, 1952, WIRO blossomed.

Keeping the Iron City Broadcasting name, the new team included President and Chief Engineer Clarence Baker, Business Manager Ted Nelson, Sales Manager Pat Shannon, and General Manager Clinton E. McElroy. The Big I quickly became must-listen-radio deeply invested in the life of its community.

### **The McElroy Years**

Donna Secrist was WIRO’s first secretary/receptionist. When the station changed hands, she stayed on. “They got me when they got the station!” she laughs. It worked out pretty well; Donna married Mac McElroy. They had three children.

Under Mac's inspired guidance, the *new* WIRO energized its programming and participated in every possible social event in the listening area:

- Broadcasting Johnny McCoy's Big Band Orchestra *live* from the Marting Hotel
- Greeting downtown business leaders for the "Breakfast at Kresge's" morning broadcast
- Hosting meet-&-greet remote music shows at the Frisch's Big Boy drive-ins on SR 141 and on 2<sup>nd</sup> St.
- Introducing the *Sandman Serenade* record request program
- Showcasing Ironton High School sports
- Airing the Ironton/Lawrence County's signature event—the Memorial Day Parade
- Offering soul-stirring church programs each weekend
- Investing in innovative DJs who went above-&-beyond by selflessly, altruistically involving themselves with the personal concerns of their listening family: If your dog was lost, call the Big I. If you needed a hot sports score, call Je-2-1922.

"The community was overwhelmingly receptive," says Mrs. McElroy. And that community, she points out, ran from Ashland to Greenup, South Point to Wheelersburg, and Waterloo to Kitts Hill.

Another major reason the community responded so enthusiastically was the Big I's emphasis on presenting up-to-the-minute news and weather. Mac McElroy's driving motive was simple: "If you read it in the paper, it's history. If you hear it on the radio, it's news!"

Then there was the juggernaut of exciting hometown sports on the air. Mac called Ironton High School play-by-play with gusto, and Joe Bowman delivered color commentary with style. It was the beginning of a torrid love affair between WIRO and the Ironton Tigers. And it was Mac McElroy, who on a football Friday night, *first* called the IHS band the "Million Dollar Marching Band!" (Next time you go to Tanks Memorial Stadium, look toward the band shelter; you'll see a banner there honoring Mac.)

In 1961, nevertheless, with some of the Iron City partners drifting away, the full burden of running the powerhouse radio station fell upon Clarence and Mac. And Mac's health was wearing him down. They chose to pass on the WIRO torch.

**Clinton E. McElroy, Junior's** abiding memory of that time is "Everybody in town knew my Mom and Dad, and by extension me, Little Mac. *Anything* that was going on in Ironton was represented on the Big I. It was IRONTON's heart!" Beginning his own career as a newsman,

Clint's years in Tri-State radio were consistent ratings- and award-winners. One of the favorite jobs of his 46 years in broadcasting, was managing WIRO's Fox Sports programming for later owner iHeart Radio, keeping up the family tradition.

Today, he's in business with his three sons who have more than twenty terrific podcast series to their names. He also writes the NYT Best Selling series of graphic novels, "The Adventure Zone."

### **The Auble Years**

Kenneth H. Auble of Orville, Ohio loved radio. Radio consumed his thoughts. His life's goal, according to his wife Rose, was to own a radio station that was the heart of its community. (See *Ken Auble: A Tribute*.)

Scouting for a radio station to purchase, Ken and Rose Auble stopped in Ironton. They'd heard good things about WIRO. Rose recalls the station had "an impeccable reputation." And it was for sale. Ken promptly made his bid. The acquisition of Ironton's hometown radio station by Tri Radio Broadcasting, Inc. became official in February, 1962. Before the ink was dry, Ken Auble set about working tirelessly as President, General Manager, and Chief Engineer. "He *loved* engineering!" says Rose. But Ken was not only the Big I's new engineer; he was its engine. According to one of his DJs, "Ken Auble worked 25 hours a day!"

"Ken's goal was to make the radio station a vital part of the community," Mrs. Auble remembers. He had a sound foundation upon which to build. According to Rose, the dynamic impact of WIRO on its listening community grew ever stronger through Ken's vision and tireless hard work.

Mrs. Auble was the bookkeeper, check-writer, and supervisor of her trusted right hand—the secretary/receptionist who also served as the traffic coordinator, program log typist, and sometimes mom to the DJs. Marlene Ferguson held the position for twenty years beginning as a high school junior in 1952. Audrey Hunter put in more than a decade of loyal service. And there was always a work-study high school student in the office learning the business of business hands-on.

Besides talented disc jockeys playing popular music and constantly updating the news and weather, the Big I also broadcast Ironton City Council meetings and local election returns *live*. The beloved tradition of airing the Ironton Memorial Day Parade—still the longest running

such parade in the USA—continued with Ken Auble on the mic. The commitment to broadcast the best in sports leapt to super heights on his watch. While WIRO proudly aired Cincinnati Reds baseball and Ohio State Buckeyes football, among others, local high school sports drew in a multitude of faithful fans. Ken’s enduring love for the Ironton High School Fighting Tigers, his voice booming with excitement on the radio broadcasts, proved legendary.

But remember, Ken Auble was also the station engineer. In 1964, he flipped the switch, and WIRO’s power increased to 1,000 daytime watts significantly increasing its coverage area; the signal fell back to 250 watts after local sunset. In 1972, Ken’s love of engineering brought another stellar project to Radio Plaza—WITO FM. The AM’s sister station took its first steps in 1972 and officially joined the family in the summer of 1973. WITO operated its three kilowatts at 107.1 MHz. The format was County & Western. And the new station welcomed Russell High School Red Devil sports into the fold.

Ken Auble wasn’t finished. (Ken was *never* finished!) He engineered the first completely transistorized, solid state transmitter in the Tri-State and, according to a representative of Harris Radio Equipment Company, most likely the first in America! This innovation not only made the AM sound cleaner but also boosted the reach of the 1230 KHz signal. Ken, still working ahead of the rest of the country, also transistorized other key pieces of studio equipment and most of WITO’s transmitter.

In 1985, after more than twenty years of extraordinary success, Ken’s health was forcing him to slow down. He and Rose sold the Big I stations. Regardless, he continued to be the champion of Ironton’s hometown radio station until his death at age 72 on September 16, 1999.

(Sidebar: “**Engineering**”) An AM radio station emits a circular signal pattern from its tower. The WIRO 1230 AM footprint—once its power increased to 1,000 watts—covered all of Lawrence County and also reached deep into Scioto County, Ohio, as well as three Kentucky and two West Virginia counties. Put another way, WIRO could be clearly heard in a twenty mile radius from New Boston to Chesapeake and from Grayson to Getaway. The Tri-State radio market of Ironton, Ashland, and Huntington at that time boasted some 50,000 potential listeners.

## **“You’re On the Air!”**

Ken Auble loved and trusted his announcers. He had an ear for talent and an intuition for potential. Scott Sims, aka “Johnny Dollar” was his first Program Director, and Hal Murphy was his first Sales Manager. Both were major talents on the air as well. Ken could be stern—he expected his rules to be kept—but he gave so many of us our first chance in the Radio Biz. And even a second chance. Meet some of the Boys of the Big I:

**Noah Don Adams**, an Ashland native, responded to a newspaper ad for a job at WIRO in 1962. He was among the first to be hired by Ken Auble; it was his first job in radio. As a fledgling DJ, Noah found himself working a double shift. On the air from 9-til-noon, he played the bright, “good music” of the times as Sam Smith, a name bequeathed by Mr. Auble. Then, from 9-til-midnight, hosting *The Sandman Serenade*, he played rock-&-roll, taking the requests and making the dedications that packed the program each night. The wildly popular show always began with its theme—the Chordettes’s 1954 hit, *Mr. Sandman*. (Bill Trowbridge, the original “Sandman,” was followed by Joe Bowman, and Noah took the coveted air chair after Joe.)

Noah continued playing the hits beyond the confines of the Big I studio at afternoon Junior High sock-hops, as well as counting down the hot hits of the week over the public address system at a local drive-in movie theatre making him, he remembers, “a rock-&-roll hero” to his fans. “WIRO,” he reports, “was never anything but a good time!”

Eventually, Noah Adams found a home on a public radio station in Lexington, Kentucky playing progressive rock and bluegrass before moving to National Public Radio in Washington D.C. as a writer and editor. In 1978, beginning on the weekend edition, Noah became the long-time co-host of one of NRP’s flagship programs, “All Things Considered.” He still fields reporting assignments for NPR.

**Mike “Todd” Tussey** also began his broadcast career—sixty-one years and counting—at WIRO. You’re on the Air is the title of his radio memoir. As a teller at an Ashland bank, Mike looked up one day to see Big I personality Hal Murphy at his window. Hal suggested he might have a future in radio. But Mike’s bank job frowned on moonlighting, so he needed an on-air name to cover his tracks. Johnny Dollar helped him out. They came up with “Mike Todd;” it was strong, easy to remember, and one-syllable perfect. Trained by Noah Adams, Mike worked

weekends over WIRO's airwaves for a year before moving on. He returned to 1230 Radio as a full-time DJ from 1964 to 1967.

Starting on the mid-day shift, he was soon called upon to replace the departing Johnny Dollar as Hal Murphy's "sideman" during the station's morning drive-time's *The Coffee Grounds Show* **and** the afternoon drive-time's *The Town Clowns* program. The hilarity-packed shows became staples of the WIRO listening day.

Curiously, Mike and Hal never worked in the same studio. Hal broadcast from remote locations in Ashland including the Ventura Hotel and, later, the Blue Ribbon Lanes at the foot of the Ashland Bridge. Both of these studios had large picture windows at street level, so Hal Murphy was *seen live* on the radio!

Mike Todd also partnered with Ken Jones in calling Ironton Fighting Tiger games. Mike, says, "Ken taught me *everything* I needed to know!" Ken Jones, for whom the Ironton High School football press box would be named, was the radio station's long-time Sports Director. He died in the Marshall University plane crash in 1970.

One of Mike's favorite remembrances: Ken bet him five dollars he could hit a golf ball over the U.S. 52 interchange and bounce it straight down Ironton's Park Avenue. He lined up his shot in the station's small yard and...Mike had to pay up!

After his WIRO years, even as an Ashland police officer, Mike kept a hand in local radio. Today, Mike Tussey, a 2010 inductee into the West Virginia Broadcasting Hall of Fame, calls college Division I play-by-play for ESPN+. Perhaps, though, Mike's greatest claim to fame is the naming by an Ironton drive-in eatery of a sandwich in his honor: The Todd Burger.

**Ronnie Bell** began his life on the air as the mid-morning DJ on Big I radio. When Mike Todd left, he took over as co-host with Hal Murphy on the popular morning and the afternoon drive-time programs for 5½ years. He also eased into the Sales Manager spot following Hal Murphy's tenure in the position. Altogether, Ron worked at the Big I stations for 23 years. But there's a backstory.

Hal Murphy began airing a fifteen minute gospel music program, *The Singing Convention*. He had only a few records, so he played the same ones over-&-over. Ron liked the program but knew it could be better. As he watched Hal approach his cash register at his Kroger's grocery job in Ashland, Ron determined to say something. After hearing Hal's explanation for the tired record repetition, Ron suggested if he couldn't do a better job he should

quit. Hal paused...then asked for suggestions. Ronnie, an avid gospel music lover, said he had dozens of gospel albums from which to choose and would glad to bring them in. Hal said three albums would be enough. It worked, and it opened the door for Ken Auble to ask Ronnie Bell to join the WIRO family.

Ronnie brought his LP's to work, and the Saturday morning Gospel Singing Convention soon expanded to three hours from 9:00 until 12 Noon. The program remained sold-out with eager sponsors waiting in the wings until the Big I stations changed hands. A taped evening edition, *Gospel Music with Ronnie*, also had a long run.

After the Auble's retired, Ron took his joy of playing gospel music—and presumably his record cache—to other local stations, and the Singing Convention remained popular for another 29 years.

**Bob Miller**, a home-grown Irontonian, began his 45+ years in radio in September, 1970, as a weekend warrior at the little radio station on the hill. For his audition, Ken Auble directed him to read stories straight out of the local newspaper, the Ironton Tribune. He did okay. Bob got the job. (I was happy to put in a good word.)

Self-effacing, perhaps, Bob says Ken hired him not for his talent but for his voice. A classic radio voice—resonant and vibrant, to be sure—but with a phenomenal talent that could not be contained. In time, he moved on and up. He says he was blessed to learn cutting-edge radio as the protégé of WIRO alumnus Jim Schnieder, “The Flying Dutchman.” Schnieder himself, beginning as a Junior High student, was the Big I radio protégé of Mike Tussey.

As did many WIRO announcers, Bob put on his radio station blazer with the big WIRO logo on a breast pocket, packed all the necessary equipment, and served as point man in City Hall for the *live* evening airings of Ironton City Council meetings. During the summer the windows were kept open because the place wasn't air conditioned. Bob recalls the slow rumble of the DT&I engine that seemed always to roll past on Railroad Street during the Council sessions. And blow its loud whistle through those open windows adding a touch of drama, or perhaps humor, to the proceedings. (The Detroit, Toledo, & Ironton Railroad is, alas, a fallen-flag.)

Bob Miller was named the 1974 National Air Personality of the Year (small market category). Later, he became the National Radio Program Director for Gene Autry's Golden West Broadcasters in Portland, Oregon. He's also a member of the prestigious West Virginia

Broadcasting Hall of Fame. Although retired, he's still in demand for commercial voice work. And these days, he warmly welcomes his passengers as a rider-favorite conductor for the Astoria (Oregon) Riverfront Trolley.

**Steve Reinhardt** speaks of a “continuing passion” for WIRO by the many that were fortunate to work there, beginning as radio newbies under the tutelage of Ken Auble. WIRO was, he says, “a family thing, our place of beginnings.”

Steve grew up listening to WIRO with his Mom. We were neighbors. He accompanied me to the station on weekends, and I shared the ropes of the Radio Biz with this energetic, talented guy. He soaked it up, and after earning the required FCC 3<sup>rd</sup> Class License (with Broadcast Endorsement)—as we all did back in the day—hit the weekend airwaves in 1972 while still a high school senior. Steve jumped to full-time status in 1973 and soon become the Big I's Music Director. And, in turn, he trained radio newbies too, including his friend Rick Mayne, another key player in the history of WIRO radio. Steve worked for Ken Auble for eight years and added another 33 years to his resume during his Tri State area radio career.

Steve suggests WIRO was the audio version of the Ironton Tribune. “You got everything you needed: the day's news *plus* breaking news, sports, great music, and super DJs. Ken had the programming just right,” he says. “Really, no other station in the Tri State market offered what WIRO had. No other station was so diverse.” “Ken,” Steve recalls, “never worried about radio ratings. He knew he was touching the heart of the community and delivering the goods. Ironton and WIRO were synonymous!”

“Rhine,” as Ken called him, gladly accepted his boss's invitation to join the station's elite team of sportscasters, often calling games alongside the encyclopedic exuberance of Rick Mayne. Even after leaving the Big I, Steve and Rick moonlighted in the Tiger press box whenever possible.

**Rick Mayne's** residency at WIRO/WITO spanned six years beginning in March, 1977. He faced what he calls the “acid test” of reading news and sports copy as audition after interviewing under Ken Auble's raised eyebrow. His friend Steve Reinhardt put in a good word and then taught him how to operate the day-to-day of a radio station. Soon he was in the air chair running Sunday morning church programs and spinning records on the night shift.



Like many before him, he graduated to six-hour music shows, weekend shifts, and on game nights, simultaneously managed Ironton and Russell sportscasts on the Big I stations, which was yet another test of timing and technology.

Mr. Auble eased Rick into local high school sports in his second year, then in the spring of 1979, named him the new “Voice of the Tigers” for WIRO’s coverage of IHS games. Rick recalls his play-by-play being punctuated by Ken’s enthusiastic interjections like “You’d better believe it, baby!” and “The blocking downfield was just beautiful!” In addition, Bill Ball’s steady manner and sports know-how served as welcome guides for Rick.

“The highlight by far that first year was calling Ironton’s unforgettable football victory in their first state championship, the day after Thanksgiving, 1979. It seemed,” he says, “like half of Ironton was in Akron to see the game. The other half was back home counting on WIRO to bring all the live action to them on the radio.” (You’ll see Rick on the video documentary, “SEVENTY-NINE.”)

**The Big I & IHS Sports.** Steve “Rhino” Reinhardt contends that the partnership of WIRO Radio and Ironton Fighting Tiger sports was “a marriage made in heaven.” Rose Auble tells us, “Sports was *always* a big part of the station; it was *really* important.” And then some!

The excitement of the voices on the radio matched the excitement of the fans in the stadium, the gym, and at the Beechwood Park ballfield as our team fought for victory. Local businesses waited in line for the golden opportunity to sponsor the broadcasts the whole town was tuned into.

When the Tiger’s bus pulled into an opponent’s city, the Big I sports wagon parked right beside it. Ironton’s coaches respected Ken and loved seeing him scurrying about in preparation for the broadcast: arranging equipment, laying lines, testing microphones, making all-thing-technical perfect before the game.

There’s a long line of WIRO sportscast personalities who’ve applied their unique talents and love of the game over the years, gaining the respect and gratitude of Tiger fans, as well as the coaches and teams. They include: Mac McElroy, Ken Jones, Fred Hensley, Frank Houston, Ken Auble, Bill Ball, Greg Houston, Rick Mayne, Steve Reinhardt, and Homer Waddle. Jim Forrest, Bob Renzi, and Ronnie Bell performed the same yeoman’s work calling Russell Red Devil games on WITO.

**Frank Houston**, who followed Ken Jones in the press box, was the play-by-play announcer for many years. He was the man on the mic when the baseball team won the state championship in 1972, and when the football team won its second state championship in 1989. His son Greg, who was privileged to work beside his Dad before taking his turn on the hot mic says, “Dad was a great ambassador for IHS sports.” “Dad was feisty,” says Greg. “He called it like he saw it!” Something his listeners knew well.

In **Greg Houston’s** estimation, Ken Auble’s commitment to highlighting IHS sports defined WIRO’s professionalism in the community and the region. This unique *Ironton brand*—the symbiotic relationship between school and radio—led other radio stations to emulate the Big I’s broadcast excellence. People throughout the region knew Ironton sports *because* of “the strength of the sports programs and the enthusiastic, consistent coverage by WIRO.”

By the way, do *you* remember Frank Houston and his brother, Paul—the public address announcer in the Ironton press box—harmonizing on the Ironton High Alma Mater during half time? Classic.



**Rick Mayne** also reminds us of the times when WIRO’s role was to field the anguished phone calls, keep up-to-date information flowing, put on the brave voice, and lend a shoulder to cry on during times of tragedy: the deadly May, ’77, Beverly Hills Supper Club fire in Southgate, Kentucky, which had a heart-rending impact on many local families; as well as the sudden passing of Elvis Presley later that summer that triggered unbridled passion and non-stop requests to hear everything Elvis recorded.

“The most impactful local news story I experienced,” he recollects, “displayed WIRO’s professionalism to national and international news audiences by reporting breaking news on the disastrous Rich Oil storage tank fire in the heart of downtown Ironton in March, 1979. Media calls came in from all over the world demanding details on the catastrophic loss of two lives and the untold thousands of gallons of oil burning into thick, black plumes that smudged Ironton’s skyline.”

That’s WIRO—local radio at its best!



**Gordon Hall.** In January 1969, after a semester of radio school in Columbus, I embarked on a nearly 30-year-long, life-in-radio on the Monday through Friday 9:00-till-

Midnight shift on WIRO. As well as working pieces of Saturday and Sunday. *Sandman Serenade* was no longer on the air.

My program was “Music West of Midnight.” I’m not sure who came up with the name. My program opening and closing theme song was an instrumental medley of Paul Simon’s “Sound of Silence” and “Scarborough Fair” recorded by the Mystic Moods Orchestra.

It was my time of beginnings too—in radio and in life. I would have my turn working all the shifts and most of the jobs available in the small, full-service radio station: selecting the records, covering news events, and running the programming. Five years at the Big I; then three years as a broadcast journalist at other local stations; followed by twenty-two years in non-commercial radio.

I’m sure some of my ideas pushed Ken to distraction. In only a very few instances, however, did he address me as “Mister!” This was his trademark comeuppance for those of us who pushed his boundaries. It certainly caught my attention and reminded me whose radio station it was. Yet, he was always kind and supportive.

Sitting on a shelf next to me as I write this is the radio that Ken and Rose gave me and Sue Ellen for our wedding gift in 1973. A radio. It is so...them. Besides the echoes of the many memorable voices that return to mind time and again, I hear Ken’s strong voice and watch him rush past focused on his must-do engineering duties. I recall breathing those familiar radio smells of ozone and overheated transmitter tubes. And the scent of Ken Auble’s Borkum Riff pipe tobacco. We were family. We still are.

“Small towns need their local Big I-type, full-service teapots with music, news, and sports and church programs held together by friendly-voiced DJs who care about their community. Wy-Ro, as we called it off-air, was always right where it needed to be, serving as *the heart of its community*, part and parcel of the everyday life within its small footprint. It was the quintessential American radio station. In our hearts, long may you run.”

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