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Bits and Pieces

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WIEL Radio Celebrates 70 Years on the Air by Paul W. Urbahns

WIEL Radio in Elizabethtown will quietly celebrate a 70th Anniversary on September 28, 2020. That event is certainly a reason for celebration. In this era where radio stations change frequencies, change formats, and call letters frequently, it is especially interesting to note that the present owners, Commonwealth Broadcasting, have maintained the same call letters since establishment.

I admit an above average interest in radio (at least of the 50s thru 80s). My father always told me I come by it from my mother. When I was very small, my family lived in a second floor apartment. Seems the neighbors downstairs objected to noises I might make, but didn't mind hearing the radio playing. So, Mom kept it on all day long. Talk about subliminal brainwashing.

Eventually, I started in radio as a DJ (Disc Jockey) at the age of 18 in my hometown in West Virginia, I eventually joined the WIEL announcer staff on a part time basis while stationed at Fort Knox. We are not going to reflect on WIEL in the early 70s when I was part of the history. Instead we will go back to the beginning, in 1949 when a group of Elizabethtown businessmen petitioned the FCC for a radio station at 1450 KC. That request was refused, but the following year 1950, a station was authorized on 1400 KC at 250 watts. You probably have appliances that use more electricity.



A small tract of land for the new station was purchased in April 1950 from H.B. Clark on US 62 a few hundred yards from the city limits. Work on the new state of the art studio facility was begun during the week of April 21st by Diecks Lumber Company. The owners were announced as Stokley Bowling, Holly Skidmore, Horace Tabb, J.W. Hodges and Clifford A. Diecks.

Anticipation of the arrival of this modern miracle in the local community ran high. Inside *The Turret*, a Fort Knox newspaper, gave a fairly complete announcement of the new facility in its August 17th issue, stating "The opening of this station will be of considerable importance to Fort Knox since the post is located well within the broadcast range of the station." The newspaper informed readers, "The management has given assurance that news concerning Fort Knox will be broadcast regularly in close cooperation with the Public Information Office. The station will afford an excellent medium for the dissemination of Army information to Elizabethtown and vicinity and by strengthening the bond of community friendship for all concerned." These great expectations were actually realized many times over the following years.

As soon as the station was on the air, fifteen minutes programs of Fort Knox news (Knick Knacks from Knox with Rick Richardson) was aired about three times a week. Fort Knox sports became a popular item for the new station. One year after being on the air, WIEL was sending sports crews to some of the farthest originating points from the station to record every game by the Ft. Knox Tankers football team. The station's crew went to Keesler Air Force Base at Biloxi, MS and San Antonio, TX during the 1951 season.

Recordings of the games were broadcast on the Sunday afternoon following the weekly game. Ft Knox's Rick Richardson was at the mike for these broadcasts. But here we are getting ahead of the story.

Local newspapers were full of anticipation for the station to hit the air in September 1950. The *Hardin County Enterprise* issue of September 14th carried a story "Radio Station WIEL Slated to Open Tomorrow". The paper reported that "County Attorney J.W. Hodges, one of the owners of the station, said today that final authorization had not been received from the Federal Communications Commission". Apparently, some jockeying of frequencies was necessary because the paper stated the new station would have 1400 KC on the dial which was then occupied by WGRC in Louisville.

WGRC was an early pioneer station dating from 1936 licensed to New Albany, Indiana. The call letters stood for 'George Rogers Clark', the Revolutionary War hero and founder of Louisville. Following the war, WGRC decided to move its



**Paul Urbahns at WIEL Console
(1972-1973)**

transmitter and tower from New Albany, so it could up its power to 5000 watts (daytime) and 1,000 watts (nighttime) with a switch in frequency to 790 KC.. This move was opposed by the three other major Louisville radio stations. This opposition created legal delays in WGRC vacating the 1400 frequency needed in Elizabethtown.

The following day, the Elizabethtown News story carried the headline, "Radio Station Soon To Open - WIEL Will be On Air Waves Maybe Today" the story recounted the same basic information as previously reported in the Hardin County Enterprise. In anticipation of the coming of the new radio station, S. B Goodman, editor and publisher of the Hardin County Enterprise wrote in an editorial in the September 18th issue: "Welcome WIEL-The Hardin County Enterprise welcomes station WIEL to Elizabethtown and extends best wishes for its success. The Elizabethtown trading area is large enough and prosperous enough to support such a station. It will be a valuable medium for the dissemination of news and entertainment." The newspaper went on to say, "A radio station can be an influence for good in the community it serves. Knowing the character of the men who are behind the local station, there can be no doubt that such will be the case here." Glowing words for sure, but there was silence on the air until around noon on September 28th when WIEL joined the ranks of numerous other small town stations coming on the air during that period in our country's history, just following World War 2.

The Elizabethtown News on September 29th reported a description of the new stations, historic sign on. "An opening talk was made by Mr. Harris and Dr. L. E. Martin. The first program was one of "Hillbilly" music".

Local advertising in all local media took a more "radio" oriented slant than previously. Modern Electric Store and others purchased newspaper space to advertise the features of their radios currently in stock. One such ad for the General Electric Clock Radio, "Lulls you to sleep with music" turns itself off and then on automatically and "Wakes you up with Music!" Available in brown, ivory, red or porcelain white plastic cabinet for the low price of \$34.95. Not to be out done, Hardin Furniture Company on West Dixie advertised, "Enjoy Your Radio - The World's Best Music and Entertainment and all the Latest News Comes Over It." But music and news were not the only thing on the radio in those last seconds of "Radio's Golden Era." Religion took to the radio immediately to spread the Gospel. Severns Valley Baptist Church held revivals with Rev J.G. Cothran of Arkadelphia, Arizona and broadcast a morning devotional over the station from

10:15 to 10:30 am daily except Sunday. Evangelists L.G. Hoover and Estel Beeler started regular broadcasts on Friday afternoon October 20th at 5:30 pm.

**NOW ON
THE AIR!**

Radio **WIEL**
Station

(1400 on your Dial)

Elizabethtown and Hardin County's Own
Station

Located Here	Owned and Operated Here
-----------------	----------------------------

**For Music
For News
For Entertainment**

TUNE IN ON

Station WIEL
at Elizabethtown!

**Here to Serve You
Here to Please You
Here to Benefit You**

WIEL, under the management of Bill Harris, established a regular block schedule of programs mostly sponsored by local businesses. Some of these included, "Swap Shop" each Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday at 8:30 to 8:45 am sponsored by Lincoln Loan of Elizabethtown. First Federal Savings and Loan had a five minute program Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays at 6:30 pm. Elizabethtown's three motion picture theaters presented "Movie Mirror" every evening from 6:35 to 6:45 pm. Probably a roundup of the movies currently playing in town, hoping to lure residents to the evening performances. The State Theater held an "Amateur Hour" contest show every Tuesday night starting on November 7, 1950 sponsored by Browns Ice Cream. The contestants had a chance to win one of three weekly prizes of \$25, \$15 and \$10. Naturally the "Amateur Hour" was a remote broadcast live every week on WIEL from the stage of the State Theater with Rex Jones serving as Master of Ceremonies. The Grand Prize included a guest appearance on Station WIEL.

WIEL placed advertisements inviting the local population to stop by the studios and watch their favorite show being broadcast. Like most businesses, the station was on the air for a short period before holding a "Formal Opening" broadcast, held on Sunday afternoon, October 22th. Live from the studios, local residents heard a program of speeches and singing. According to newspaper accounts of the period, welcoming

remarks to the listenership was presented by Dr. L.F. Martin of the

Ministerial Association; the Commanding General of Ft. Knox; Judge J R Layman; Mayor Harry Miller of Elizabethtown; Ed McCullum president of the Elizabethtown Chamber Of Commerce; County Judge W.S. Long; Mayor George Cooper Of Vine Grove; Mayor Claude Polley of Hodgenville; Mayor Frank Wilson of Bardstown.

Songs were provided by Joy Bale; the Kentucky Rhythm Boys; the Melody Airs; The Lincolnaires and a selection by the Fentress twins. Introductions of the staff was given to: William "Bill" Harris, Rex Jones; Russell Honeyman; Chuck Hardin; Tom Baldwin; Burnette Day; Eugene Hornback; Lester Entringer; Shirley Belt and Rita Hays.



Radio Station Exhibit at Hardin County History Museum

But that was just the beginning and now 70 years later, WIEL still broadcasts on 1400 KC at 1,000 watts. But due to the shrinkage in importance of AM radio in general, the station has been rebranded "ESPN Radio 106.1" denoting its 250 watt FM translator. The original studio building was finally razed in July 2017 following years of neglect.

In early 2007, former disc jockeys and station personnel, both past and present, embarked on assembling a website in honor of WIEL. It can be found by googling, "Information Radio 1400." The Hardin County History Museum has a display, curated by Max Highbaugh, collecting original WIEL studio equipment and signage.

"WIEL adds 10 Radio Station WIEL at Elizabethtown will feed the N.C.A.A. final playoffs here this weekend to a 12-station network in Kentucky, Dee Huddleston, who docs the play-by-play for WIEL and WINN at Louisville, said, "tremendous interest in the Louisville-West Virginia game Friday has caused us to add ten more stations to our usual coverage."

The Courier-Journal Louisville, Kentucky 18 Mar 1959, Wed • Page 21

Longtime radio newsman Ron Boone dies unexpectedly of probable heart attack

ELIZABETHTOWN (AP) — Radio newsman Ron Boone died Sunday afternoon at Hardin Memorial Hospital after suffering a probable heart attack at his home, officials said.

Boone, 63, had been clearing snow on his driveway to prepare for a Super Bowl party, said John Wright, general manager of WRZI, WKMO, WIEL and WTHX, where Boone worked.

After finishing, Boone went into his home and told his wife, Judy, that his chest was hurting and burning. He laid down and soon began to gasp for breath, Wright said.

He was taken to the hospital by ambulance and pronounced dead at 5:15 p.m., Lee said.

Wright called Boone's death a "shock."

"It's just too soon to know what to say. This is too much of a shock," Wright said. "We've lost a real local legend here today."

Funeral arrangements were incomplete at Brown Funeral Home in Elizabethtown.

The Advocate-Messenger Danville, Kentucky Mon, Feb 02, 2004 • Page 3

"Around The Dial On Radio and TV STAFFERS at Elizabethtown's WIEL had a lot to do with the \$1,000 in pledges for the "Crusade for Children" which came from that town. Al Konen, Bob Daniels and Tom Maples gave up their off days to get the money pledged, and Dennis Wilson, Charles Lewis and James Rice came in to help with the funds for handicapped children. Hard work to help another station's effort had the WHAS boys calling WIEL "the little station with a big heart."

The Courier-Journal Louisville, Kentucky 28 Nov 1954, Sun • Page 112

A marker has been placed in the Lions of Glendale Park to note the history of the women's suffrage movement there and to commemorate the centennial of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Joyce Miller of the Capt. Jacob Van Meter Chapter Daughters of the American Revolution has researched to subject. The first women suffrage group in Kentucky was organized in Glendale in 1867 to promote equality and the movement grew briefly, but soon disappeared. Decades later, on Aug. 26, 1920, the 19th Amendment was ratified.

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*A book is a gift you can
open again and again.
—Garrison Keillor*

PRESIDENT JOSH COOPER:



What we had hoped would be a short 6-8 weeks of worry with the coronavirus, continues to be a disruption to what we thought of as “normal”. At this point, we will not be meeting again for 2020, but hopefully by March of 2021, we will be able to resume our meetings. I truly hope so as my plan as President it to bring our youngest “member” Boone Cooper, for as much of the meeting as he can handle at that point! Stay safe and well as we go through the remainder of the year, and I look forward to seeing you all in 2021

Hardin County Historical Society

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NO SOCIETY MEETING UNTIL APRIL 2021

