

**Subject: Re: [Fwd: Barry Mishkind]**

**Date:** Fri, 10 Jul 1998 21:25:14 -0700

**From:** Barry Mishkind <barry@broadcast.net>

**To:** mrkdrnbrgr@state.net, dxas@wlio.com

Mark,

At 09:22 PM 7/6/98 -0500, Mark Durenberger wrote:

>BTW Barry, if you are in need of info on some older stations, please let  
>me know. I'm not sure what the scope/intent of your project may be, but  
>if I can help with info from my own library, please holler.

That would be wonderful. I would certainly  
appreciate any and all assistance in  
filling in the "holes".

>Finally: Of course, now I can't find that original WBBM/KFAB story.  
>But it'll surface; it's buried somewhere in my "stuff".

May 10, 1998

PIONEER PROFILES for MAY 1998

WBBM - A PASSION FOR RADIO

by Barry Mishkind

TUCSON, Arizona] There's no question about it. Broadcasting is a business. Without attention to the bottom line and ensuring sufficient spot load, no station can survive, regardless of the number of listeners. Although many oldtimers decry the "Age of the Beancounter," claiming radio has lost its "soul," that is just too simplistic.

True, Radio is not what it was. And, in some ways that's good. The current state of the art allows stations to serve their markets more effectively than ever before. Yet, some companies have used the same technology essentially compress a radio station into a computer in a closet.

Still, for the true professional, broadcasting isn't just a job or a paycheck. It is a passion - a passion for excellence.

Many of the early pioneers were captivated by the new technology. Being able to send programs into the ether was a thrill. But even moreso than in the technical aspects, Les Atlass had a passion for excellence in programming, and his legacy to us is one of America's great radio stations - WBBM.

Radio in his blood

Born in 1894, H. Leslie Atlass was 17 years old in 1911, when he and his eight-year-old brother Ralph built their first amateur station. Originally using a spark transmitter, Station 9DFC was located in the basement of the Atlass family home in Lincoln, IL.

Les Atlass went on to serve as an officer in the Signal Corps during the first World War. As soon as he returned to Lincoln, he resumed his wireless activities with his brother, in addition to working in the family produce business.

As with all amateur stations, 9DFC was asked by the government to suspend operations until the end of the war for security reasons. Returning to the air in 1921, the Atlass brothers continued under their amateur license, now with a 200 watt transmitter. However, this would only last two years, as Atlass saw clearly the potential for broadcasting to the public.

He asked the Department of Commerce to trade his 9DFC license for a new commercial license, and on November 14, 1923 received the license and call letters WBBM. After some testing and tweaking, the Atlass brothers quietly debuted their new station, still down in the basement, on April 14, 1924.

However, the event that shaped the history of WBBM was the sale of the family business. Atlass' father decided to move the family to Chicago. Les and Ralph asked the government to delete the Lincoln station, and allow them to move to Chicago. They were rewarded with a grant to move the station and increase power to 500 watts.

After a restart in the new family home's basement, Atlass arranged for a transmission site on the Broadmoor Hotel. WBBM soon began to make a name for itself with local listeners. At first the programming consisted mostly of recorded jazz music, although the first offering transmitted to Chicagoans was "Barney Google." The programs were popular, but this wasn't good enough for Les Atlass.

A man with a quick, decisive mind, Atlass felt that live entertainment would be the key to success. Searching out talent from all over the Chicago area, Atlass even recruited a staff orchestra for the station. The small studio became crowded, but the programs themselves were among the best on the air.

Still, there was a rather haphazard quality to the WBBM schedule, as no one could predict if enough "free" talent would show up to fill the broadcast day. Often the station announcers would be pressed into duty as performers, singing and playing the songs they knew over and over. Unfortunately, it was apparently a short play list!

Atlass had a vision of what radio should be. He felt that his listeners should hear nothing but the best, from wherever it was happening in Chicago. A new policy was announced: programs would be 95% music, live music. Over the years Atlass' sharp "feel" for honest, fresh programming of high quality would bring the station renown.

However, this new policy came with a price tag. In order to pay for better talent, the station advertised its schedule, and became the first in Chicago to run advertisements. While advertisers such as the Yellow Cab Company did see results, it wasn't enough. Atlass tried selling all the airtime to one company, the Stewart-Warner Speedometer Corporation. This arrangement lasted about one year.

As WBBM cycled through the frequency, power and sharetime changes of the mid-1920s, it eventually landed on 770 kHz with 10 kW. Its reputation as "the station of the dance bands" was built on a full schedule of remote broadcasts from around the city. Perhaps inevitably, this led to union problems. The local musician's union demanded WBBM have a full house band, whether it was used or not, in order to do live its remotes. Oddly, when the station tried to use its union "house band", Atlass discovered none of them read music! Eventually, just before violence broke out, another "house orchestra" was assembled, which could preform.

As the years went by, Atlass continued his policy of attracting the best performers, and paying them well. He demanded the best from his staff, expecting all his employees to have the same dedication and drive as he had. Overseeing the programming, he seemed to be listening to the station around the clock, even an error at 3 AM could bring a phone call from Atlass.

Yet, if Atlass was demanding, he was also generous to the employees. He was known as a engaging manager with a sense of humor, interested in everyone and everything in the station. The staff responded with respect, loyalty and top quality programming. As a result, WBBM became one of the most profitable stations in the country. This continued after the Atlass brothers sold the station to CBS; WBBM was a key reason CBS was able to stay solvent through its early years.

### Hi-tech in the 30s

Of course, under Atlass' leadership WBBM excelled not only in programming, but also in its technical facility. From the WBBM studios came many of the CBS network programs: Jack Armstrong, Fibber McGee and Molly, Captain Midnight, Guiding Light, Amos and Andy, Easy Aces, and others, as well as many major singers and comedians.

A large special effects department was developed to meet the needs of the various dramas and variety shows. Some 2,000 records, including sounds recorded in the WBBM portable recording studio were augmented by hundreds of devices in studio, including 60 types of bells, dozens of different kinds of clocks, and 25 different auto horns.

Perhaps one of the more impressive achievements came in 1928, when it was noted that WBBM and KFAB in Lincoln, NE were "clashing" out in the rural areas. For example, listeners on 770 would hear both stations signals "fighting." And, when both ran CBS programming, the listener would notice a delay of about 34 milliseconds for the programs to get from Chicago to Lincoln via phone line and then transmitted.

The answer, as Atlass saw it, was to synchronize both the transmitters and the programming. During the evening hours, WBBM engineers devised a system to delay the program in Chicago, as well as synchronize the transmitters frequency. The Federal Radio Commission was keenly interested in the project and received monthly reports from the WBBM technical staff.

Of course, there were no digital delay units, not even a tape recorder available, to do the job in those years. Instead, a series of 19 amplifiers, coils and condenser units combined to create a 35 millisecond delay. The stations cooperated until 1944, when KFAB moved to 1110 kHz, even going "silent" for half of the 30 second network station break, so the other station could give its ID.

In addition to having the 780 frequency to itself when KFAB moved (both stations had shifted on 3/29/41), WBBM was now allowed to increase night power to 50 kW, matching the daytime power since 1935.

The policy of extensive local live programming to complement the CBS network continued into the 1950s. WBBM had seven studios in operation, and plans for more. However, radio was changing. Television was getting more attention, and live radio drama and variety was becoming harder and harder to accomplish. After nearly 30 years, WBBM acquiesced and started using records on weekends in 1955. A decade later, rising musician's union fees would cause CBS to cancel all live music.

Various format variations were tried, including news and talk radio. At first, the announcer would repeat the callers' comments. Eventually, a special arrangement was made with the phone company to put the callers live on the air.

Finally, in March 1968, WBBM went "all news." Over the past 30 years, the station has continued to maintain its standard of excellence. Winner of many local and national awards, WBBM Newsradio78 celebrated its 75th anniversary in April. From the basement of a home in Lincoln to a powerhouse in Chicago, WBBM has continued to pursue the passion of its founder Les Atlass.

Barry Mishkind, aka RW's "Eclectic Engineer," has no basement out on the desert, but can be reached at 520-296-3797, or via email to "barry@broadcast.net".

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Remember, the original band plan had five clears per region.

With two clears in Chicago, that city already had its maximum, yet Chicago eventually wound up with four Class I-A clears.

Here is how it got one of the two additional ones ...

WBBM and KFAB were in a time-sharing arrangement on 770 kHz with the 24-hour day being broken down into nine 160-minute periods, or it could have been nine 120 minute periods. Anyway, it was nine periods of a certain equal duration, with the total broadcast day being 24 hours if those periods were 160 minutes or with the total broadcast day being 18 hours if those periods were 120 minutes.

WBBM was assigned five such periods while KFAB, then of Lincoln, was assigned four such periods, thereby completing the broadcast day.

Rather than alternate every two hours, or so, a la WBAP and WFAA with each station receiving "equal, but separate" time on 820 kHz, and with the other using 570 kHz (which one of the two time-sharers had purchased and then moved from Wichita Falls to Dallas, not unlike the relatively recent move of 620 kHz from Wichita Falls to Dallas), the WBBM and KFAB time-sharing arrangement was "unequal, but un-separate".

The spacing between WGN and WBBM was the usual 50 kHz, just as there was 50 kHz between WMAQ (670 kHz) and WGN (720 kHz), which were the original full-time clears in Chicago.

I suppose CBS decided it needed an affiliate in the Omaha general area, so rather than WBBM powering-off every 120 or 160 minutes so KFAB could power-on, with each station remaining silent during alternate 120 or 160 minute periods, both stations were operated simultaneously, with KFAB and WBBM being operated in synchronous mode.

However, that left WBBM in a somewhat inflexible position vis a vis the other Chicago clears, so CBS hatched an ingenious plan.

First, it bought WBT, which was not time-sharing, and had 100 percent of its schedule as a Class I-A clear.

Second, it sought approval to break-down WBT to what would later be termed a Class I-B.

Third, it brokered a deal whereby KFAB would receive 100 percent of the broadcast day on what is now 1110 kHz (shared with WBT, but directionalized and protecting WBT), PROVIDED KFAB vacate, FOREVER, 770 kHz.

OK, this now gave WBBM 100 percent of 770 kHz, but what to do with WBT?

Fourth, WBT, still under CBS' ownership, was required to directionalize, protecting KFAB, now of Omaha.

However, CBS sold WBT before any the required facilities changes could be implemented in Charlotte, and, anyway, there was no allocation for strategic materials during WW-II, so WBT operated with 50 kW during days, but 10 kW during nights, while KFAB operated with 50 kW during all hours, but directionalized at night.

In return for accepting this "interference", as KFAB was sending zero kW towards Charlotte, nights, but WBT was sending 10 kW towards Omaha, nights, KFAB received an extended non-directional broadcast day, which persists to this day.

Eventually, after the conclusion of WW-II many years later, WBT was finally able to fulfill its obligation to directionalize, thereby sending zero kW towards Omaha, nights.

Two additional towers, which were supposedly duplicates of the original, and formerly the sole tower at Charlotte, one of the infamous Blaw-Knoxes, were installed in a DA-N configuration, using plans for the original WBT tower as Blaw-Knox was now out of the tower business.

Presumably, this construction was done under the/a successor to CBS, most probably Jefferson-Pilot, but as far as is known it was not done by CBS, and was not paid for by CBS.

Presumably, the sale of WBT to the first successor included a "covenant to complete" the mandated construction "when it became possible to do so", which I am advised was in the very late 1940s, or possibly in 1950.

So, so ended the time-sharing arrangement between WBBM and KFAB, and

also so ended the career of yet another Class I-A, this one being in the South.

The ending of the careers of five Class I-A clears allocated to the West (640, 680, 790/810, 830/850 and 970/1000) has been documented earlier.

Oh, and the newly built Blaw-Knox duplicates proved to be inferior to the original, as both failed during a recent storm.

These were apparently rebuilt in-kind, and, hopefully, these will stand as long as their siblings.