

Who?

J. O. MALAND

of WHO, Des Moines, That's WHO!

By
WILL WHITMORE

Such little things shape the destinies of men! And by the same token, those very things shape the destinies of great industries.

In 1921, an advertisement, thrilling in its promises, appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*. "Buy this modern wireless receiver," it said, "and receive the finest music, and market reports from all over the world!" The ad caught the eye of a man in the little town of Frost, Minnesota. He was mayor, assistant postmaster, justice of the peace, and proprietor of a general store which sold everything from shoe strings to plows.

Frost then was more than 150 miles from the nearest broadcast station, and the little receiver, when it arrived, maintained a discreet silence. As far as it was concerned, the world-at-large remained at large. Hundreds of other men, who had had the same experience said radio was the bunk, put the receiver in the attic, and forgot about it. But not the mayor-postmaster-justice of peace-store proprietor of Frost.

He canvassed all the electrical jobbers in the Twin-Cities until he found a radio that would work. It was a Westinghouse detector and two stage amplifier, supplemented by a Western Electric amplifier and a Magnavox loud-speaker. When he turned it on full blast, it could be heard a mile from the store. Farmers stopped plowing their fields to listen. At night the store was full of townspeople and farmers who came from miles around to listen. Market reports broadcast during the day were particularly welcome and helpful to the farmers. The radio became the social center of Frost. It became, too, one of those small things which shape the destinies of men.

J. O. Maland, the man who bought it, saw how it appealed to his farmer friends and customers. He saw how it opened doors and let the outside world into farm-bound lives. He envisioned radio as an institution by and for the people. It was something of which he had to become a part.

A friend of Maland's who published a group of farm papers and owned a one-sixth interest in WLAG, Minneapolis, offered Maland a position



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on the papers. By 1923, Maland was farm program director of the station. In 1928 he became Commercial Manager of WLS when Sears Roebuck sold the station to the *Prairie Farmer*.

Better service to rural communities was and always will be Maland's "Holy Grail." The year 1930 found him and Edgar Bill presenting a plan to Columbia Broadcasting System for a farm network in the Middle West. The network was formed with Maland as sales manager. There were seven stations on the network—WCCO, WBBM, KMBC, KFH, WFBM, KOIL and WIBW. "At that time," says Maland, "there were only a Western manager and one salesman, besides myself, in the Chicago office of Columbia."

While Maland was with Columbia he became convinced that the future of radio depended upon high power—at least 50,000 watts. "I checked over 23 stations to see what the future possibilities were and it was obvious to me at that time that the greatest opportunity was in Iowa," he says.

WOC, Davenport, and WHO, Des Moines, were synchronously operated. The organization had made application for a 50,000 watt license. Maland joined them in 1931, and the same year the license for high power was granted. Despite little money and the depression at its worst, building was begun at once. On April 22, 1933, WHO went on the air with 50,000 watts. Two years later there was

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great jubilation when the last mortgage on transmitter and station was cancelled and burned with ceremony.

Such in brief has been the personal history of J. O. Maland, but it does not explain his success or the success of WHO. The explanation, however, comes when you talk with him.

I met him in Des Moines on a bright, sunny, spring day, but it had rained the night before. Almost every automobile in the city was splashed with mud. This does not mean that Des Moines has muddy streets. But it does mean that its citizens and the citizens of the great Corn Belt serviced by WHO come in contact with Mother Earth. Their feet may be accustomed to city streets, but their hearts, their minds and their business reach back into the soil.

Remembering this fact, and being constantly guided by it, is the explanation behind the success of Joe Maland and WHO.

Maland's background is ideal for his job. He is a graduate of the University of Minnesota and later had advertising experience in a Minneapolis agency. But you can't run a general merchandise store in a small town; serve in almost every official capacity in a community's life; work on farm papers; operate a 240-acre Iowa farm and do countless other things connected with rural activities, without acquiring a shrewd insight into the lives, ambitions, ideals, customs, desires and feelings of a people. Today he still keeps in close contact with his listeners.

He keeps a close check on the popularity of the station by constantly talking with a cross section of the station's listeners. Some stations might capitalize upon this and call it, perhaps, The Institute of Public Opinion. Maland has no name for it, but it amounts to that. Regularly he discusses WHO's progress with farmers, doctors, lawyers, scrub women in the studio, taxi-drivers, educators, housewives. Their criticisms and suggestions help to set the policies of the station.

"A radio station must have its own individuality. It must have a distinct and very definite personality if it is to be a success," says Maland. "The most successful newspapers and magazines are those which have individual editorial policies and give their readers what they want. Exactly the same principle exists in broadcasting.

"Stations should not rely upon chain broadcasts for the majority of their programs. A star or a program may be a hit in New York, but that does not mean it will be popular in Iowa or some other part of the country. We try to balance our programs so that there is never more than 50 per cent chain material going out over WHO. I know the trend is toward chain domination but I am not in favor of it. Perhaps the smaller stations have to rely upon the chains for the majority of their pro-

grams due to the expense involved in originating their own, but it is a mistake for a station like ours. The more you use a crutch, the weaker you become. The more you use outside program material, the more you lose the ability to build your own."

Newscasts, according to Maland, are the best means of holding an audience. WHO broadcasts news six times daily. One of the station's most popular programs is the Farm News broadcast each morning at six thirty. This newscast is prepared by a man who devotes his entire time to this one fifteen-minute daily program. He spends most of his time in the field, visiting farmers, attending farm meetings, and taking part in many rural activities.

It is significant that the most successful stations today are those which from their very beginning have regarded radio as a public service. WHO is in the front rank of stations operated for the benefit of the listener. Last year 14.2 per cent of WHO's time was given to public service organizations.

Such institutions often abuse their privileges. "When an organization is on the air regularly," says Maland, "it begins to feel that it owns that time forever. Often this attitude results in poor programs, of interest and value to neither the group nor the listener. If the time is taken away from the organization, hard feelings and misunderstandings may result. We have eliminated such trouble by making it a hard and fast policy to promise no organization more than four broadcasts. As a result, the four programs are carefully planned and presented in the best possible way. No more time is expected, and everyone is pleased. If the four programs are successful, then we can easily extend the time."

One of WHO's most successful public service programs has been its "Veterans' Forum," a 15-minute evening broadcast each week eagerly looked forward to by thousands of disabled soldiers. In the past three years more than 80,000 men have received individual help through WHO in obtaining federal aid.

There is one program, however, which is synonymous with WHO. It draws an estimated weekly audience of a million and half people. From two to four thousand people travel from miles around to Des Moines to see it each week. It is the Iowa Barn Dance Frolic. Traveling units of the Frolic have played at least three times in practically every town in Iowa. No one can adequately explain its tremendous appeal. Maland has gone to famous psychologists for the answer. Perhaps his own is best. "I suppose it brings back memories of childhood to people raised on farms and in small towns," he says.

Reasons, however, are not as important as results. WHO gives its listeners what they want. The Corn Belt looks to its radio for news of the world. It gets it through WHO. Farmers and small town merchants depend upon weather reports in the conduct of their work. Right now WHO is waging a campaign to better this service.