

ON THE AIR!

~~~~~ THE "VOICE OF CENTRAL MINNESOTA" ~~~~~

*by Sister Owen Lindblad*

## Part I

I'm sure that when Italian-born Guglielmo Marconi developed wireless telegraphy in the 1890's and first transmitted the human voice via pulsating waves through space, he had no idea of the extent of his discovery. The basis for telephone, radio, television, and computer lay hidden in the simple employment of electromagnetic impulses. So today, we touch the stars with such a movement and probe the nebulae of deep space.

Communication is the key to fruitful living; a basic premise of peace and understanding. And here in Central Minnesota a "Voice" developed which united farmer and city dweller; scholar, artist, housewife, child, parent, laborer. It was radio.

The "Newest Wonder of this Age of Magic" is what the TIMES-owned WFAM radio station in St. Cloud termed its new venture. The announcement was made May 26th, 1922, and the broadcasting station, the first commercial one west of Chicago, was still largely experimental. Its technical creator and "wizard" was Robert "Bob" Witschen who two years previous had been broad-

casting music over his own home radio station, 9SV. In fact, the development of radio was due in great part to amateurs like Bob who engaged in experimentation.

WFAM's new steel aerial erected under the supervision of engineer J.P. Ellenbecker, towered skyward atop the TIMES building in downtown St. Cloud and beamed its Central Minnesota "Voice" across a 50-mile radius.

By 1924, the surrounding towns - as far away as Brooten - were equipped with home receiving sets and were literally "listening in" with earphones to concerts that echoed "loud and clear" across the prairie.

Would this new-fangled invention usurp the power of live theatre and concert hall? It was a very real concern to the public just as television would be in its turn a quarter of a century later.

WFAM was begun by Fred Schilplin, Sr., innovative owner and publisher of the St. Cloud Daily TIMES. Until 1927, the station carried on bravely with a staff of eight newscasters from the TIMES newsroom, and 14 hours of daily broadcasting. But due to increased financial loss from a rapidly changing technology, the radio beams grew fainter and were at last stilled until 1937 when Schilplin was able to revive his dream.

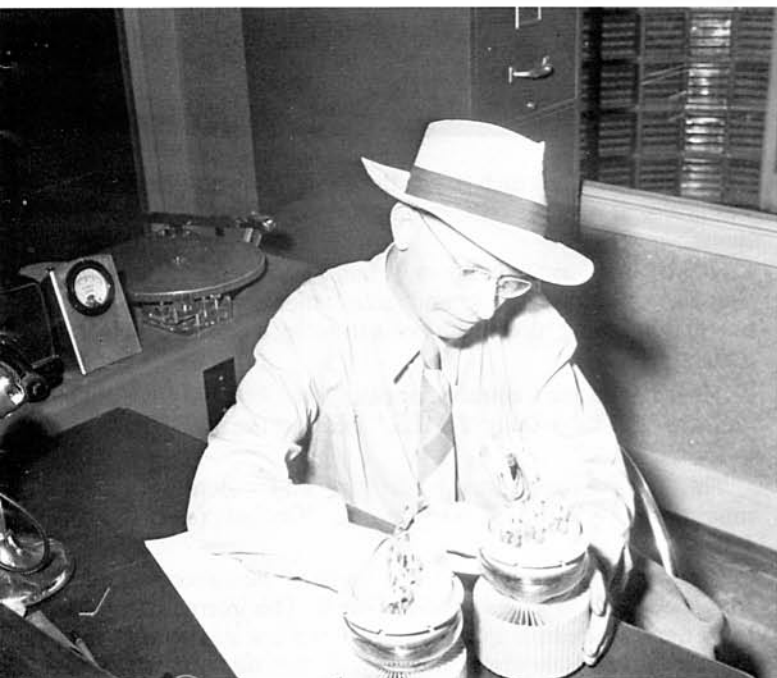
By this time, new call letters were necessary as WFAM had been adopted by an Indian station. Federal regulations determined that all cities west of the Mississippi would use call letter "K;" those east of the river would use "W."

Thus, after various trials with letter combinations, a revitalized St. Cloud "Voice" appeared as KFAM, 1450 on your dial. It was speculated

KFAM, 1450 on your dial. It was speculated that the FAM stood for "Fred and Maude," the Schilplins themselves! At any rate, a new radio manager, George B. Bairey, began work in November.

Left: "BOB" WITSCHEN, ST. CLOUD'S FIRST RADIO VOICE, WENT ON TO BECOME KFAM's CHIEF ENGINEER. HE COULD ALMOST "SMELL" WHEN SOMETHING WENT WRONG AT THE TRANSMITTER OR STUDIO.

(Photo courtesy: Myron Hall)



~~~~~ Continued Next Page ~~~~~



Above: RADIO RECEIVERS SUCH AS THIS MODEL WERE POPULAR AROUND 1922.

(Photo courtesy: Stearns County Historical Society)



CLIFF SAKRY, ANNOUNCES A JAYCEE AIR CIRCUS AT THE ST. CLOUD AIRPORT - JULY 1939.

(Photo courtesy: Cliff Sakry)

~~~~~ Continued ~~~~~

KFAM now served a radius of up to 100 miles. It operated at a minimum of 12 hours a day on 1,420 kilocycles. Its studio and office were in the Grand Central Hotel until 1938 when they were moved to the 2nd floor of the Weber Building. A new tower site lay southwest of the city on old Military Highway 152.

Amateur broadcasting outfits were now operating in barns and attics from California to Texas and Maine. Radio, indeed, was making an impatient debut.

By June of 1938, KFAM took to the air amid a gala celebration. Because the old WFAM never had an official birthday, a two-day christening event took place beginning at 7 AM on June 4th with Fred Schilplin's cheery "Good morning" followed by TIMES writer Cliff Sakry's song composed for the occasion and which became the station's themesong: "K.F.A.M. is On the Air!"

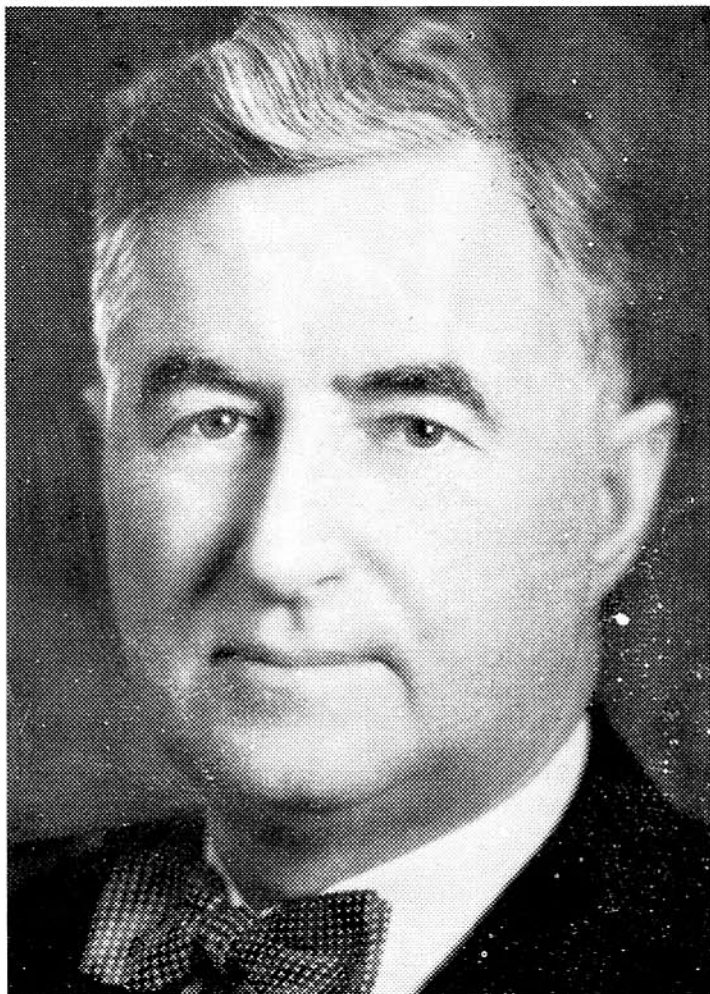
The "Voice of Central Minnesota" was carried to 200,000 listeners that day by staff announcer Robert Rathe.

Fandel's Department Store was the first to sponsor a commercial program on KFAM with a singing jingle, "Fandel's Song," written and sung by Cliff Sakry. When the St. Cloud Chick Hatchery opened their daily 5-minute program on poultry raising, they, too, began with a singing commercial, the "Jack Frost Chick Song," again done by Sakry and heard for the next 3 years on KFAM.

In 1939, KFAM flaunted a new transmitter station and a 179 ft. Truscon tower set in 90 tons of concrete on the chosen site southwest of town. Local architect Louis Pinault was engaged and contractor Norbert Heiman. Chief engineer was the very competent Bob Witschen.

The staff at KFAM now numbered 14 and broadcasting with 250 watts of power was extended into 40,000 radio-equipped homes for 18 and a half hours daily.

Radio transmission had yet to be perfected but this form of communication was quickly progressing. A schedule of radio pro-



grams was published each day in the TIMES. Because the station was affiliated with the NBC radio network, it received all the top shows.

KFAM, was, as well, the only radio station tied to a major newspaper. Both newspaper and radio station worked side by side as communicating forces with goals to serve, enhancing the community.

"If it's good for Central Minnesota, then it's good for KFAM and the St. Cloud Daily TIMES," became Fred Schilplin's enthusiastic motto.

This man's inspiration, leadership, and vision of a communicative world led KFAM into its "Golden Years" of the 1940's.

But first there was a war to win. Some of the station's top personnel went off to serve in World War II. This interruption provided time for Fred Schilplin to brood over a new star being born in the shadow of Columbia University. A star destined to revolutionize radio. It was radio frequency modulating FM broadcasting. And Bob Witschen would again be the "electronic wizard" to bring forth this "first" to Minnesota listeners.

Next month: THE "GOLDEN YEARS"

# ON THE AIR!



Above: CA. 1940. A LIVE BROADCAST FROM STUDIOS IN THE WEBER BUILDING FEATURING THE THEISEN SISTERS OF COLD SPRING WITH ACCOMPANIST BYRON HOLTZ AND M.C. CLIFF SAKRY.

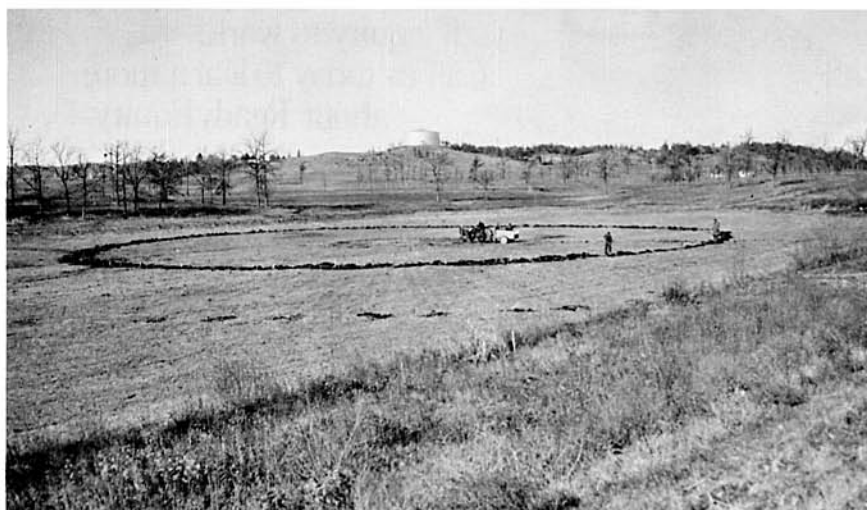
(Photo courtesy: Cliff Sakry)

Left: FRED SCHILPLIN, SR. BEGAN AS AN APPRENTICE BOY IN THE "TIMES" OFFICE IN 1888. HE WAS AN ENTHUSIASTIC BUILDER OF THE ST. CLOUD COMMUNITY.

(Photo courtesy: Stearns County Historical Society)

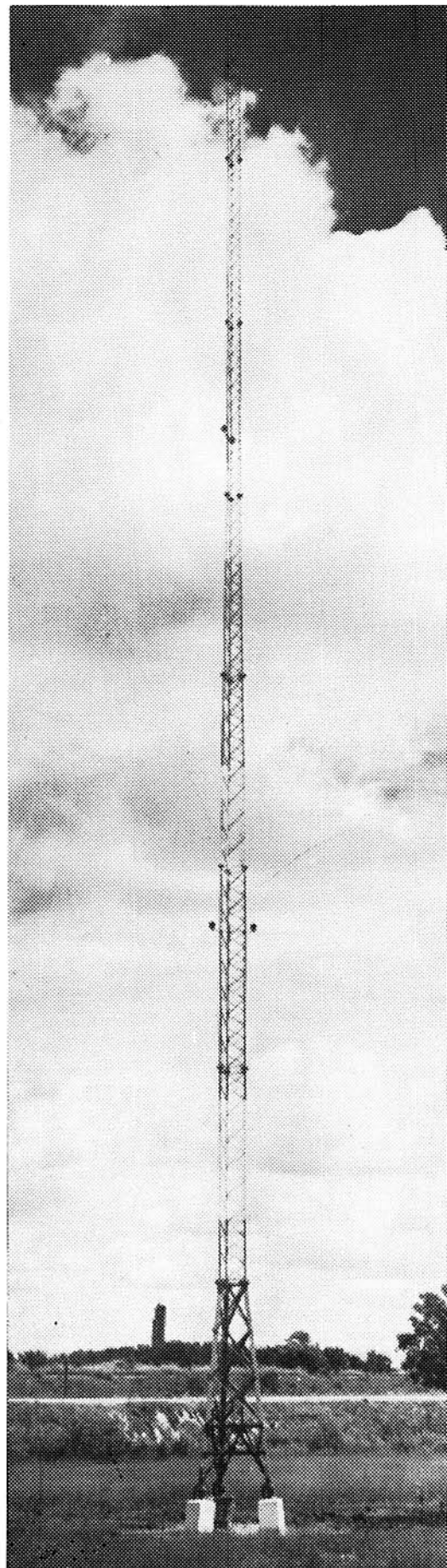
Below: GROUNDS ARE BROKEN FOR THE KFAM TOWER SOUTHWEST OF ST. CLOUD, MARCH 1938.

(Photo courtesy: Stearns County Historical Society)



Right: THE KFAM TRANSMITTER BUILDING AND TOWER AS THEY APPEARED "BRAND NEW" IN 1939. THE "VOICE OF CENTRAL MINNESOTA" WAS ON THE AIR.

(Photo courtesy: Stearns County Historical Society)





# ON THE AIR!

~~~~~ THE "VOICE OF CENTRAL MINNESOTA" ~~~~~

Conclusion

by Sister Owen Lindblad

The "Golden Years" of radio extended approximately from the decade of the 1940's to the advent of television in the early 1950's. It was a time of technical blooming and blossoming; a time of rapid development in electronic communications.

Radios were now sophisticated devices, common in every household across the country. KFAM welcomed back the young men and women who served in the war.

St. Cloud, too, began to change. With a burst of energy, the quiet, sleepy little community expanded its industrial and residential opportunities. An augmented economy lifted the spirits of newcomers and old timers alike.

Station KFAM offered the best in network entertainment through its collaboration with Northwest Radio and NBC's vast system. It received all the programs KSTP got in St. Paul and so became the mid-central outlet for lots of shows that featured people like Bob Hope, Jack Benny, George Burns and Gracie Allen.

In addition, there were weekly broadcasts of public interest: the "Farmer's Round Table," a live talk show monitored by Cliff Sakry; "Home Talks with Marjorie Bruce;" County Agent News by Ed Lenzmeier, Stearns County Agricultural Agent; and "Great Issues" with O.J. Jerde of St. Cloud State Teacher's College on rural and urban education issues.

Daily programming included newscasts, weather, comments, live musical shows, commercial jingles, and special interviews by Sakry who also wrote a good deal of the advertising copy, handled promotion, sales, and public relations, and generally managed the station; Johnny Krauel and Bob Ryan - later KSTP-TV newscaster - had a daily afternoon musical show.



The 1948 Farmer's Round Table Of The Air. (L to R): Cliff Sakry, Ed Lenzmeier, Rudy Pelzer, Robert Rassier, Caesar Copeland.

KFAM personnel were a very versatile group adding commentaries, piano playing, singing, and DJ skills whenever needed.

The radio station and the TIMES continued working together. Stories covered by KFAM were also featured in the TIMES and vice-versa. Portable recording equipment could be taken anywhere in Central Minnesota to record on-the-spot news, and TIMES photographer Myron Hall was usually accompanied by a staff writer and newscaster.

Meanwhile, station owner Fred Schilplin, Sr. was all ears as his chief engineer, Bob Witschen, reported on FM - frequency modulation - broadcasting. This was the latest in radio technology, and would virtually eliminate all static, interference, distortion, and fading in sound reproduction.

"It sounds, great!" Schilplin exclaimed. "Let's go for it."

At the same time, Schilplin was watching station KSTP in St. Paul with great interest. Another fascinating development in communication was evolving: television. Schilplin realized that St. Cloud would probably not get ahead of the Cities in having a TV station yet he DID want KFAM to be the eyes and ears of all Central Minnesota and that meant television, so he announced: "We're going to build a tower."

It was necessary to construct a higher tower to reach further across the state. The old antenna was dismantled and a new \$100,000 KFAM-FM transmitter tower began to rise beside the expanded transmitter facility just outside the southern limits of the city.

It was 1947. An eastern tower company was contracted to do the work.

"How high should it be so we can beam it clear into the "Twin Cities area?" Schilplin queried.

It would rise 525 feet - half the height of the Eiffel Tower in Paris as Mayor Chaveton of St. Cloud, France told the TIMES during a visit here. Its range potential would be well over a hundred miles.

Every week, Mr. Schilplin viewed the tower's progress. Every week, the 80-year old visionary tipped his head back a little further to watch his dream rise higher and higher.

The public was puzzled. "Why such a huge tower out there for this little radio station?"

But the tower was not being built just for radio. It was for the coming of television, and Fred Schilplin knew that.

By early fall of 1948, KFAM's tenth year of broadcasting, ultrahigh frequency FM radio was available to Central Minnesota listeners insuring the best in radio enjoyment. Surprisingly, as Minneapolis and St. Paul lay in a lower plane than St. Cloud, the tower beamed DOWN to them and beyond!

Listeners from as faraway as Alma, Wisconsin were "tuning in" to KFAM-FM's clear and brilliant NBC broadcasting of symphonic music.

Studios remained downtown in St. Cloud on second floor above the old Weber Jewelry store building across from the Zapp Bank.

Poetry contests on farm safety were popular with boys and girls in 1947 and 1948. Sponsored by the TIMES and KFAM, these contests drew entries from as far away as Annandale, Foley, and Holdingford. Cash prizes were awarded along with the honor of reading one's winning poem over the radio.

Continued Next Page



My tractor and I
I had a little tractor once,
It was my pride and joy.
Until one day I tried to climb
Upon an old embankment.
The tractor did its best I'm sure,
But soon we two were parted.
Now, this is my advice to you
Be easy on the draw.
The tractor's made for work you see,
But not for crazy capers.

Donna Jakubski,
St. Cloud, Minn.,
P. R. 2.



O.J. Jerde, pictured left, interviewed prominent guests on topics of "Great Issues."

(PHOTOS COURTESY CLIFF SAKRY)

Other essay contests for young people included "The U.S. in World Affairs," and "I Speak for Democracy."

Special promotional stratagem kept listeners "tuned in." There was the annual "Easter Egg Hunt" in the city parks, the "Second Honeymoon" contest, "Lucky License," and the "\$1000 Treasure Hunt."

Live programs during this era included the KFAM Jamboree with the SJU Big Band, the Billy Miller Band, Jess Skelton Band, and a variety of soloists, the Orpheus Chorus, concerts, school and college concerts. There was Organ Melodies by gifted Byron Holtz who played the great Paramount Theatre stage organ "on the air."

Gene Nelson, who had joined KFAM in 1938, quadrupled his talent as staff announcer, pianist, singer, and DJ. Dudley Dane's ability to "spin the groove-plate" and "give with platter chatter" endeared him to Minnesota listeners. He was often heard on the Early Risers program, and was the big wheel on the Birthday and Anniversary Club show where studio audiences took active part.

Several women announcers gained popularity. Willie Schindler had a daily women's program for a time. Mary Jo Bauer was Fandel's Shopping Reporter and Campus Disc Jockey. Lucille Miller, a graduate of CSB, was Program Director during WWII and for a time afterwards. She was an extremely competent woman, a "liber" of her day. Lucille was followed by Rae Wilson, a real "spark plug" on the staff. She was a member of the American Women Broadcaster's Association and had a daily program called "Women Today."

KFAM's "roving recorder" - sound recorder, that is - made possible play-by-play broadcasts of local football games, public speeches, farm meetings, and other events requiring longer periods of broadcasting time. A Special Events crew consisting of Cliff Sakry (who once broadcast an entire play-by-play for TWO football games in one day,) Bob Rathe and Paul Edwards would set up their equipment, record an account of the activity, add some recorded accompanying music, and rush the discs back to the studio for immediate airing or for a delayed broadcast later that evening. On-the-spot events such as parades, county fairs, small town celebrations, and special interviews were covered this way.

It was during this time about 1948, that another marvel, TAPE recording appeared and revolutionized speech and music reproduction.

Then there were the live news dramatizations and special observance dramatizations that added a particular excitement to radio. These, too, were accomplished by KFAM's resourceful staff.

But the station's "Golden Years" came to a halt suddenly one April day in 1949, never to regain the momentum of its former brilliance.

Fred Schilplin, a month before his 81st birthday, was in New York enroute by taxi from an NBC meeting to this hotel when he succumbed from a heart attack. This radio and press magnate literally died with his boots on.

Earlier that spring, less than two months before he died, Fred Schilplin had seen the completion of one of his most exciting and satisfying civic involvements, a KFAM project he regarded highly and which owed much of its success to his enthusiastic support: The premier production of the great Centennial Stage Musical "Minnesota!" Locally written and produced by a key member of his staff, the show was an immediate sensation. It was given official state designation by Governor Luther W. Youngdahl and even attracted the attention of four Hollywood studios and a New

York music publisher. KFAM, jointly with the TIMES, had sponsored the production...which packed the 1400-seat Paramount Theatre for six capacity performances that filled the venerable old broadcaster/publisher with pride and joy. It was the kind of rare "forward step" for the community which he relished, and became, in a very real sense, a triumphant "last hurrah" for this truly remarkable civic leader. Ironically, it also sounded the swan song for his future KFAM plans...for with his death went also the dream he cherished of creating a television hub for Central Minnesota.

(Clockwise from right):

Fandel's spokeswoman on daily shows — Mary Jo Bauer.

Gene Nelson, key announcer for KFAM, reports on the "Harvest Festival" at the courthouse steps.

(PHOTOS COURTESY CLIFF SAKRY)



Schilplin's only son, Frederick II, had joined his father on the TIMES in 1922 and gradually gained management of KFAM. With his father's passing, he assumed ownership. But unlike his gifted and farsighted father, Frederick II allowed dreams of the future to fade.

Challenge and purpose disintegrated; foundations for progress so carefully laid stood abandoned; public service was sacrificed for instant profit.

Then in September of 1950, a second St. Cloud station, WJON, began broadcasting from studios at its transmitter site in east St. Cloud.

As television burgeoned during the 1950s, radio broadcasting declined rapidly into the far more limited medium (in terms of programming) that we see today. Large studio space for elaborate live shows was no longer needed, and KFAM finally moved its shrunken downtown facility into its small building out at the transmitter.

In 1975, KFAM-FM was sold by Frederick II's heirs to Alvar Leighton who changed the call letters to KCLD. The station and the tower along the highway were sold for \$400,000. The tower still stands there today, a proud, sad monument to Mr. Fred Schilplin, Sr. and a KFAM-TV that might have become a reality for mid-Minnesota.