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'CCO RADIO
IS FIFTY

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By CHUCK SARGEANT

A radio station as successful as WCCO has been for the past 50 years is regarded differently by the people who listen to it, who do business with it, or who happen to work there at a given moment in time.

On the occasion of its 50th Anniversary, WCCO is still far and away the "most listened to" station in the territory. It has a program mix so widely varied there is something to suit every listener—not all at once—but certainly during an average broadcast day. It's true the music addicts think there is too much sports, while the sports minded think the mix is just fine the way it is.

The advertising agency account executive, concerned with marketing plans and moving product or service for the client, sometimes curses under his breath at the amounts WCCO Radio's rate schedule can suck out of an ad budget. But when product does move and the dollar signs begin zinging on the cash register, the agency man and the client generally get together and agree it has been worth it.

To employees, WCCO Radio is a fascinating place to work even though the hours are—to say the least—queer. A part of the staff must be constantly at work while normal-living people are home with their families or are otherwise taking their leisure. This, over a period of years, can wear on the nerves. Yet, it is a fast-moving business, intensely varied from day to day and, besides, "you meet such interesting people."

Bob Sutton, who was a program director in the 1940's, used to enjoy saying: "Around here we have a crisis every hour, a catastrophe every day, and a national disaster a couple of times every week." It was Bob's way of shrugging off the fact that you can't please all of the people all of the time.

Management Was a Key To Success

It was William J. McNally, the late board chairman of Midwest Radio-TV, Inc., who put a finger on one important factor that has made WCCO Radio a success. He pointed out the station has been singularly fortunate in having the right management in the right place at the right time. Mr. McNally was speaking from the vantage point of longtime competitor and later as an owner.

In 1924, when Donald D. Davis, vice president of Washburn Crosby Company, rescued WCCO from the wreck-

age of old WLAG, he convinced Henry A. Bellows to accept the position of manager. A Ph.D. graduate of Harvard and a former University of Minnesota Professor, Bellows was both dedicated



D. D. Davis



H. A. Bellows

and erudite. He felt strongly the integrity of the mass media should be protected as a public trust. More practically, he had important connections in Washington which led to WCCO's clear channel designation and ultimately to its 830 frequency.

Earl Gammons, who had served as the station's publicity director, succeeded Bellows as manager in 1931. He brought with him a wealth of promotional and advertising experience acquired at General Mills. It was Gammons who "discovered" Cedric Adams and brought him along to become a talented and highly valuable personality.



E. Gammons



L. Haeg

Two managers in the CBS owned and operated era of the 1940's also proved to be outstanding: Austin E. Joscelyn and Merle S. Jones. Joscelyn hired Sig Mickelson and charged him with the responsibility of building a news organization staffed by professionally-trained journalists. Jones, a Nebraska educated attorney, was an unusually capable administrator at WCCO as he again demonstrated when he became president of the CBS Television Network.

When Midwest Radio-TV, Inc., acquired WCCO in 1952, the logical choice for manager was Larry Haeg, longtime farm director who was well known to

employees, advertisers, and to WCCO listeners. Under Haeg's leadership, the station achieved a public service orientation of such quality that scarcely a year passed that WCCO Radio failed to achieve awards of national merit. He accomplished a most difficult task: guiding the station and maintaining its profitability despite the onset of the television era.

Using the past as a beacon the present manager, Phil Lewis, probably will be recorded as the man who prepared WCCO Radio technologically for the Twenty-first Century. As he is well aware, this challenge is proving to be quite as difficult as those which were resolved so successfully by his predecessors.

Johnny Who?

Talent on a radio station is an ephemeral thing. Nobody can predict with any degree of accuracy whether today's "nobody" will turn out to be tomorrow's super-star or whether a personality with high promise may lack that certain "something" which captures the imagination of an audience. In 50 years at WCCO, this fact has been demonstrated many times.

It was late in 1955 that Larry Haeg called a staff meeting to announce plans for the WCCO Winter Carnival show which would be held at the St. Paul Auditorium early the following year. The star of the show, he announced, would be Johnny Carson.

Somebody asked, "Johnny who?" The group broke out in derisive laughter. There was chit-chat along the lines of "what a bummer." "Is that the best we can do?" And so forth. Haeg let his happy group of extroverts have their laughs. "All right now, that's enough. Let's cut the comedy. With the money they're offering acts at Las Vegas," he explained, "big names are getting tougher to sign up. Really, Carson isn't that bad. He's a clever young stand-up comedian, and he's a comer. Now what I want is cooperation from all of you."

The staff did turn to and the Winter Carnival show staged by WCCO Radio that year proved highly successful. Haeg's judgment, as everyone knows today, proved to be correct.

Inevitably, of course, some mistakes were made. Harry Reasoner joined the WCCO news staff in the late 1940's after the Minneapolis Daily Times was shut down. Though Harry was a thoroughly competent newspaper reporter before he joined WCCO, the

talent bug bit him hard and he begged for a chance to go on the air. Management turned a deaf ear to Harry's pleas, but finally relented and permitted him to do the 5 a.m., five-



Harry Reasoner

minute newscast provided he would come in early, write the show, air it and agree to no extra fee since it was not sponsored.

Harry accepted the terms and worked diligently on his "big opportunity." Meantime, a self-appointed posse from the regular announcing staff was selected to gun down this ambitious young interloper. They were most successful in their efforts. It was a crestfallen Harry Reasoner who returned to the newsroom after being told, "You're not WCCO on-the-air caliber." Harry, with his irrepressible sense of humor, makes jokes about the episode with no trace of bitterness. To the contrary, he regards it as a turning point in his career.



The Original Wheaties Quartette

The super-stars of years gone by survive only in the memories of the so-called "oldtimers." Only a handful of people remember that Paul Johnson, the first announcer on WLAG and again on the new WCCO, rated seventh in the nation in a Radio Digest popularity poll. Few can recall it required police and fire department reserves to Oscar Danielson's orchestra at the old Nicollet Hotel studios. Not many peo-

ple remember that Clellan Card literally jammed the Nicollet Hotel ballroom each April Fool's day for his annual doughnut dunking contest. When the conversation turns to Cedric Adams, as it still frequently does, there are apple-cheeked young people in the gathering who ask, "Cedric who?"

It was in the late 1950's that a group of WCCO Radio staffers were ruminating about the future. They could see that Cedric Adams was approaching the end of his career, expecting that he would retire. One offered the opinion, "When Cedric goes, this station will collapse like a house of cards." Most shook their heads in agreement, pondering their own futures. There was one lone dissenter who was promptly asked what right he had to disagree with the majority.

"I have every right to disagree. I just know this station is bigger than any single individual connected with it—past, present, or future."



Cedric Adams

While that statement proved to be true, WCCO Radio today is nevertheless the sum total of every person who has ever worked there—and over a span of 50 years they number in the thousands.

"Now, A Word From Our Sponsor"

Over a period of 50 years it is difficult to estimate how many times these words—or variations of the same—have been heard on WCCO. They had to be said a great many times for the station to achieve the success it has in the Northwest region.

In a reminiscing mood, Bob Woodbury, commercial manager, pondered this question recently. Whipping out a paper and pencil he calculated that during his 35 year tenure at WCCO he has handled some 2,000,000 pieces of commercial copy: 10's, 20's, 30's and 60's. That total, he figures, does not include commercials aired by the CBS network.

Occasionally a piece of commercial copy is overlooked or is wiped out in accidental "cross talk." But considering the huge volume of commercial



Clelland Card

copy handled over the years, mistakes have been few and the necessity for "makegoods" infrequent.

The care and nurture of commercial sponsors, of course, is the responsibility of the advertising sales staff. There have been times when an announcer's indiscretion has created one of those "national disasters" Bob Sutton used to talk about.

One announcer in the 1940's had the habit of ordering breakfast at the old Freddie's Cafe. It was a "he-man" breakfast usually consisting of steak, eggs and southern fried potatoes. Since the announcer was the talent on a program sponsored by a local cereal company, he was invited to be present at a breakfast board of directors meeting where, of course, the company's product was served. Our man poured cream and sugar over the cereal, puddled around in it with his spoon, and then announced to the assemblage: "So, this is the stuff I've been advertising all these years."

The chairman of the board bit his lip and waited until the meeting was over. But within the hour phone lines into the WCCO manager's office were scorching hot. The request was blunt: "Get that sonovabitch off the air or we cancel—right now!"

The manager, followed by the sales manager and a couple of key salesmen trooped over to repair the damage. They convinced the chairman the announcer was just "kidding," he didn't mean it, that actually he loved the company's product and ate it every morning. The now contrite announcer was called in and told with equal bluntness, "One more blooper like that, fella, and you're through around here."

Fortunately, WCCO's relations with sponsors have been amiable over the years as attested by the list of companies that have advertised on the station continuously for 25 years or more.