

Radio in Minnesota

Radio in Minnesota, as in other parts of the country, began with experimental broadcasts in the 1910s. These often originated in the physics or engineering departments of colleges and universities. The University of Minnesota made its first radio transmissions in 1912, and in 1915 broadcast an entire football game with a spark gap transmitter. The University received a license for experimental station 9XI in 1920. Similar stations at St. John's University and St. Olaf College also began during this period.

Station 9XI at the University of Minnesota eventually was replaced by WLB, which became the state's first licensed AM station on Jan. 13, 1922 (twenty three years later WLB would change its call letters to KUOM). At least fourteen stations were licensed in Minnesota in 1922. Nearly all of them were assigned to share time on 833 kilohertz, with power ranging from 50 to 500 watts. Stations were operated by the Findley Electric Company (WCE), Dayton's (WBAH), The Minneapolis Tribune (WAAL), Commonwealth Electric Company (WAAH), and Dunwoody Institute (WHDI), among others. St. Cloud, Duluth, Hutchinson, Collegeville, Moorhead and Northfield also had stations in 1922. WLAG signed on in 1922 as well. Stanley Hubbard began station WAMD in 1923, and Hubbard Broadcasting was born (WAMD merged with KFOY in 1928 and became KSTP). By the mid-1920s, such mainstays as WCCO and WDGY were on the air in the Twin Cities, as well as WEBC in Duluth and KBRF in Fergus Falls.

With the popularity of radio growing and radios being fairly simple to build, radio manufacturing and sales companies sprang up by the hundreds across the country. Minnesota was no exception, with over 60 companies in the Twin Cities alone trying the radio business in the 1920s. Some of the familiar local companies included Northome, Northland, Roycraft, and Cutting & Washington (Cutting & Washington also operated station WLAG, which was eventually sold to the Washburn Crosby Company and became WCCO in 1924).

With the growth of radio stations came increased use of the airways, and sharing frequencies became unworkable. Frequency reassignments happened throughout the 1920s and 1930s, but came to a head with the adoption of the North American Regional Broadcasting Agreement of 1941. On March 29, 1941 nearly 800 U. S. stations changed to new frequencies. WCCO moved from 810 to 830, KSTP from 1460 to 1500, WDGY from 1180 to 1130, and WLB and WCAL from 760 to 770.

The 1930s saw several new stations take to the air in Minnesota. Rochester, Duluth, Hibbing, Albert Lea, Winona, St. Cloud and Mankato all had one or more stations by the end of the decade. WLOL in the Twin Cities and KWLM in Willmar went on the air in 1940, the last two stations in Minnesota until after World War II. In 1946 there were 18 stations on the air in the state, six of them in the Twin Cities. By 1950 there were 43 stations. Today there are over 200 stations in Minnesota.

Some notable facts about Minnesota radio: KUOM, when traced back to its beginnings (9XI-WLB-KUOM), is the country's oldest licensed non-commercial radio station; KSTP claims to be the first station ever meant to exist solely by advertising revenue; WCCO was one of 21 stations that participated in what is considered the first network radio broadcast, the March 4, 1925 inaugural address of President Calvin Coolidge (the stations were linked via telephone lines); WCCO claims to have aired the first singing commercial, a barbershop quartet singing "Have You Tried Wheaties," in 1926; Charles Persons built a station in Duluth in the late 1930s that became WEBC-FM and is claimed to be the first FM station west of Chicago; WDGY had the first television license in Minnesota (it experimented with mechanical television broadcasts between 1933 and 1938).