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REMINISCING (Column)

Channel 2, Du Mont Split Up

By ROGER M. GRACE

...As we left off last time, KTSL, Channel 2, was the Du Mont outlet in Los Angeles, having allied itself with that network in 1948.

Then came a shuffling of ownerships and affiliations in 1951, which included KTSL's divorce from Du Mont. CBS bought KTSL, renaming it KNXT (its radio station being KNX) — and KTTV, Channel 11, which had been the CBS affiliate since 1948, became the Du Mont outlet. It was if the caller at a square dance had shouted out, "Switch your partners."

As of the fall of 1951, CBS shows such as "What's My Line?" "Studio One," and "Arthur Godfrey and His Friends," previously seen on Channel 11, now were found on Channel 2; Du Mont's "Cavalcade of Stars" and "Ted Mack and the Original Amateur Hour," erstwhile features on Channel 2, were transported to Channel 11.

In those days when network operations were centered in New York, and the West Coast was treated like a far-off colony, not all of the shows of either CBS or Du Mont (or ABC or NBC, for that matter) were aired here. Among the CBS shows that had been beamed by Channel 11 which were not included on Channel 2's 1951-52 lineup was Ed Sullivan's "Toast of the Town." (Sullivan's show returned to the air in L.A. the next year, and was carried by Channel 2 until the program's demise in 1971.)

Channel 2 presented a half-hour special ("Then 2 Now") on April 2, 1984, to herald the changing of its call letters from KNXT to KCBS. Host Ralph Story traced the history of the station from its launching in 1931, as Don Lee's experimental station W6XAO, to the present time. One gaffe on that show I previously pointed to was the statement, "We were the first and only television station on the west coast for nearly a decade" when, in fact, there were other

experimental stations here during that period, including some that came earlier.

The discourse on the station's history naturally included reference to the conversion of KTSL into a CBS owned-and-operated station. Curiously, however, Story's script portrayed CBS as having wed a virgin bride, making no mention of KTSL's first marriage to another network, Du Mont — by then long defunct. (Likewise, Channel 11, in its 35th anniversary special on Jan. 1, 1984, omitted any reference to its one-time union with CBS.)

Even more curious was that Channel 2, which surely had access to the facts, botched its rendition of how the station came to be sold to CBS. Story recounted that after World War II, Don Lee changed the call letters to KTSL and...

“It wasn't long before the new KTSL caught the eye of CBS, and Don Lee sold his station to the network after meeting with CBS President William Paley.”

Such a post-war meeting did not take place. There really can't be doubt about that; Don Lee died in 1934.

As Story told viewers of the supposed meeting between Lee and Paley, there was flashed on the screen a photo of six persons, with the camera zooming in on two males — presumably Lee and Paley. However, if a tape of the broadcast is played back, and attention is focused on the photo, it is seen that the two males were Paley and comedian George Burns.

A meeting between Lee and Paley, resulting in a deal between CBS and Lee, *did* take place — but it wasn't a post-World War II confab, and did not concern KTSL. It took place in December, 1929. The upshot of that meeting was that the Don Lee radio stations would become the western outlets of CBS. The Don Lee-Columbia Network (as it was called) remained in existence through 1936. The Don Lee stations, steered by the founder's son and sole heir, “Tommy” Lee, at that point linked up with Mutual.

The circumstances under which CBS acquired KTSL were quite different from those set forth by Story. General Tire and Rubber Company, through its subsidiary General Teleradio, in 1951 bought Don Lee Broadcasting from Thomas S. Lee Enterprises, Inc. in the aftermath of Tommy Lee's suicide. Topping the list of assets was KTSL, which General Tire — and not the ghost of Don Lee — sold to CBS.

The assets General Tire bought included Don Lee Broadcasting's network of west coast radio stations, two of which were KHJ-AM and KHJ-FM in Los Angeles. General Tire retained those stations and proceeded, in this musical chairs game, to buy KFI-TV, Channel 9, from auto dealer Earl C. Anthony, renaming it KHJ-TV on Sept. 6, 1951. (Anthony, who reportedly had never made any money with the TV station, continued operating the lucrative KFI radio station, the NBC affiliate in Los Angeles.)

Channel 9 billed itself, for the next few years, as "Don Lee Television," notwithstanding that Don Lee never had any connection with that station.

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