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On the air Akron's first radio station crackled to life in 1922

BY MARK J. PRICE , Beacon Journal staff writer

Oh, WOE was Akron.

When the city's first licensed radio station went on the air in April 1922, the joys of "wireless telephony" reverberated throughout the community. Yet the important event became just a footnote in local history books -- if mentioned at all.

Perhaps it's because the station had such a short life span.

Or perhaps it's because the city's biggest newspaper chose to ignore the station entirely.

The Akron Beacon Journal maintained radio silence when the oddly named WOE crackled to life. The newspaper must have considered the broadcaster to be electronic competition. Furthermore, the station was allied with the rival Akron Press, which provided WOE's news bulletins and baseball scores.

Ron Syroid of Akron has been piecing together WOE's lost history while doing some research for former Cleveland WMMS program director Donna Halper, an author, radio marketing consultant and instructor at Emerson College in Boston.

What little we know of WOE can be found on microfilm reels containing Akron Press articles. So let's start at the beginning.

"IT'S AKRON WOE" the Akron Press reported on April 13, 1922. "Local Radio Station Receives License to Broadcast."

On April 6, the federal government granted permission to Buckeye Radio Service Co. to operate a station at 569 S. Main St. across from B.F. Goodrich Co.

Syroid says the federal government doled out the Akron call letters by the sequence that radio stations became licensed. "They're alphabetical: WAB, WAC, WAD, and it kept going as corporations applied for licenses," he says.

In other words, Akron could have landed WOD or WOF, but WOE was just its luck.

Akron tunes in America was in a radio frenzy in the early 1920s. Early stations such as KDKA in Pittsburgh, WBZ in Springfield, Mass., KYW in Chicago, and WJZ in Newark, N.J. -- all of which could be heard in Akron -- ushered in modern broadcasting. Until then, wireless technology was used chiefly for communicating with ships. Jack J. Gritton is credited with having Akron's first radio: a small set he built in 1912. A year later, Paul Derr and Leo Price built radios, too, and the three formed the Akron Radio Club.

Over the next decade, hundreds of young Akron residents assembled crystal radios to snag signals out of the air.

To capitalize on the trend, the Buckeye Radio Service Co. opened in 1920 as a side business to the Buckeye Cycle Co. at 65-67 E. Mill St.

Radio buffs could visit the store to buy supplies needed to build radio sets, including crystals, dials, condensers,

knobs, tubes, sockets and wires.

Meanwhile, the Akron Press published a series of diagrams and step-by-step instructions on how to build radio outfits.

Akron inventor John Gammeter was president and founder of the radio company. His brother, Emil, served as treasurer.

The Gammeters knew that radio sales would soar and interest would grow if Akron had its own station. If they owned the station, they could control supply and demand.

Buckeye Radio began a crafty marketing campaign that involved a free theater party for youngsters.

Children were invited to the Colonial Theatre to see a screening of the movie *Make It Yourself*, which demonstrated how to build a \$6 radio set. No one was admitted without an Akron Press coupon.

Hundreds of youngsters attended the screening, and about 200 stayed afterward for a question-and-answer session. Over the next several nights, the movie was shown at Akron high schools to drum up more support for the radio hobby.

Strong signal fades One week later -- on April 27, 1922 -- WOE radio went on the air. Performers that first night included Campbell's String Quartet, musicians Francesco DeLeone and Robert Reimer, and vocalists Clifford Wilson and Mr. and Mrs. T. Stephen Eichelberger.

There were no recordings. Everything was done live at the South Main building, which had a transmitting room, clubrooms and tower.

The signal on a wavelength of 360 meters "came in strong" at 50 checkpoints across Summit County, the Akron Press reported.

In fact, it could be heard all the way to the East Coast.

Akron's first station was allowed to broadcast music and news from 7 to 8:15 p.m. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, and church services from 10 to 11:15 a.m. Sundays.

The station's personnel included H.J. Tucker as program director, Alfred Bachtel as station manager and Paul Heasley as station operator.

"Almost always, they had local musicians performing," Syroid says. "It was usually highbrow stuff."

In addition, WOE offered farm reports, market conditions and baseball scores.

It sounded like a winning formula. Yet, for reasons that remain unclear, the radio station didn't survive.

"Gammeter must not have been anybody's fool," Syroid says. "They got into it and it ran its course. One year later, they shut down the radio station. Everything just disappeared."

WOE went off the air in July 1923, but the Buckeye Radio Service Co. continued to operate until the early 1940s.

By then, Akron had welcomed WADC (founded in 1925) and WAKR (founded in 1940), the two local stations most closely associated with the golden age of radio.

Alas, poor WOE. It could have shared the spotlight if it hadn't met a woeful fate.

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