

FARM AND HOME RADIO

KXXX Radio Station

1065 S. Range

[The following story is based on the article written by Donna Lamm for the *Colby Free Press* which was printed in five parts: May 21, 28, June 4, 11 and 18, 1999. Special thanks to Keela Case for some in depth research.]

It was April 1946 and with World War II over, people were trying to adjust to life without a war. Colby was experiencing a building boom as well as an expanding population. It was at this time that a famous war commentator from the West Coast announced that he planned to apply for a license from the Federal Communications Commission for a 5000 watt regional AM radio station. The main coverage area would be a 14-county area, although the signal would extend approximately 150 miles in any direction.

John B. Hughes was the man interested in starting the station. He was nationally known for his program "News and Views by John B. Hughes". He also had ties to the Colby area, as his wife Ariel, was the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Harry Fike.

Hughes put together a group called Western Plains Broadcasting Company, Incorporated, which included local investors. The FCC received the formal application October 31, 1946. Although the station could not broadcast until a license was granted, Hughes ordered studio equipment and the most modern transmitter Western Electric made.

In April 1947, the license was granted and residents of northwest Kansas, southwest Nebraska and eastern Colorado looked forward to the day that KXXX would be on the air, because it was hard to pick up any radio station in the tri-state area.

An advisory council composed of people from the nine northwest Kansas counties was created. Its job was to provide programming ideas and serve as a liaison between the people in the coverage area and the station. Of course, agriculture news was to play a prominent role in what KXXX broadcast. There would be coverage of fairs, sporting events, festivals, important news events, and man-on-the street programs.

In July 1947, the 300-foot antenna tower was trucked in from Sioux City, Iowa. The 120 copper radials needed to anchor the base were already in place extending out from the base for over 600 feet. Hopes were that the station would be on the air by July 10.

KXXX started broadcasting from the basement of the Cooper Hotel at 3:30 p.m. July 14 at 790 kilohertz on the AM dial. A special program was planned for 6 p.m. and following it, station personnel were to be introduced and then regular programming would begin. During July, the station was on the air from 5:30 a.m. to 8:15 p.m. daily.

"Since the station went on the air Monday, Colby radio station KXXX has been enthusiastically received by listeners over a wide Kansas, Colorado and Nebraska area, attested by reactions reaching the Colby offices. All parts of the wide wheat area in this section have been profiting by the frequent mention of labor and machine needs. Reception by home and car radios is clear and good" (*CFPT*, 7/17/1947).

The story also listed part of the programming schedule, which included news and music programs, programs for women, newscasts at 15 past the hour and sports at 6:20 nightly, and religious programming. To end the day, "Evening Dreams" aired at 8 p.m. and ran until sign-off at 8:15. The newspaper also noted that since KXXX signed-on, stores were having a hard time keeping radios in stock.

The October 20, 1947 *Colby Free Press Tribune* reported that almost all KXXX employees were paid with \$2.00 bills that day and on the bills was a sticker that read, "Payroll: Please keep in circulation." The enterprise is a neat bit of advertising on the part of the radio station, designed to give proof of the business value of the station to the community.

In November, 1949 stockholders of KXXX sold the station after Hughes and his family moved to Connecticut. It was ironic that only three months before leaving, the newspaper had

run a story telling the reasons Hughes liked Colby. The FCC approved the sale of KXXX to Dan Searle in May 1950.

Two men who joined the staff of KXXX in 1950 ended up having a tremendous impact on the station. The first was Ed Mason. He arrived in early July to take the position of farm director. Before taking the Colby job, Mason had been at WLW Cincinnati for seven years and held the position of farm director when he left. Mason had spent 18 years at Midwestern radio stations before moving to Colby.

The second person to join the staff was Vern Snider, better known as "Weatherman Snider." Snider was hired to be chief engineer, but Mason finally convinced him to do the on air weather reports. As a result, Snider became very well known for his weathercasts. Although Snider was offered better paying jobs, he chose to stay at KXXX for his entire career. Snider died of cancer in 1975 at the age of 55.

KXXX was dedicated to providing news for its listeners in the tri-state area. When the station first started broadcasting in 1947 it had International News Service. Three years later, the station decided to switch to United Press news service.

A big change came in July 1963 when the station became a member of the CBS radio network. According to the July 11, 1963, *Colby Free Press-Tribune*, KXXX would be one of only a few daytime stations that CBS would add to its network. With KXXX as an affiliate, CBS was able to fill a void in coverage. The closest CBS affiliates were Wichita, Denver, Topeka and Omaha. Before joining CBS, KXXX had carried some ABC programs, but was never affiliated with the ABC network.

The first big news event the station covered was the April 27, 1948, fire that started in George Harrison's garage, which housed the city's fire fighting equipment and truck. KXXX was already off the air, but because the situation was an emergency, the station was signed back on and an urgent call for help was made. Because of the request for help, fire-fighting crews from Atwood, Brewster, Goodland, McDonald, Norton, Oakley and Rexford responded, according to "A History of Thomas County, Kansas."

In April 1951, the paper announced that KXXX was leaving the Cooper Hotel basement for a residence on the southeast corner of Fourth and School that Western Plains Broadcasting was leasing from the Bannister Brothers. Floyd Brown had the job of remodeling the residence to fit the needs of the station. Management felt that their business offices and studios should be located where not only the residents of Colby will be able to see them, but all who pass through the town also.

Then around 1960, station officials decided it was time to move again. This time the facilities would be a brand new brick building located on South Range where the ground was purchased from Wallace and Muriel Mosier. It was designed by the Hutchinson firm Miller, Hiett, Hockett, Dronberger & Arbuckle and was one of three buildings Bushboom and Rauh Construction were erecting in Colby at that time.

The most significant features of the one-story Modern building are the glass cupola incorporating a meteorological observation station and the giant concrete letters advertising the station's call letters, which support the roof of the covered entry. Clarence Brown, superintendent on the job, was pleased with the ease that they were able to pour the 10' 10" letters (CFPT 6/16/1960).

On Veterans Day, the station's flag pole was dedicated. It came to the station from the Winter Olympics at Squaw Valley, CA held earlier in the year.

February 13, 1961 was set as the first day of broadcasting from the new studio, which would now be home to 18 staff members. Ed Mason, station manager, told the newspaper that the studio was the only new station to be built in the last five to six years because of the emergence and popularity of television.

In November 1970, another dream became a reality. KXXX was notified by the FCC that a permit for a 24-hour, maximum power FM station in Colby had been granted. The station, KXXX-FM would have an effective radiated power of 100,000s watts at a frequency of

100.3 megacycles.

The tower for the new station was erected on land owned by Dale and Doc Mustoe 3.5 miles north of Gem. The building construction was being done by the Junction City firm of Ervin Brothers Construction Co. It stood 660 feet tall, making it the tallest individual FM tower in the state. Two other stations in eastern Kansas had taller towers, but their transmitters were located on television station towers. A dual polarization was selected because it allowed for good reception in cars without a special antenna and in homes. Music played on the FM station would be broadcast in stereo. After almost a year of preparation, the big day finally arrived. The FM station started regular broadcasting September 10 at 5:30 a.m.

The first two employees of the new FM were night technicians Carlos Saddler and Donald Snider. Both were sons of KXXX engineers, Don Saddler and Vern Snider. Dean Moore was hired in October 1971 as an announcer.

KXXX was sold in 1965 to Ed Mason and Sam Lowe, Colby; Ed Shurick, New York and Charlottesville, Va.; and Dwight Reed, Chicago. Following the death of Mason in 1981, KXXX AM/FM sold to Larry Steckline, who said he had always dreamed about owning a station like KXXX AM because of its strong ties to agriculture and powerful signal. Along with the sale of the stations came a name change for the FM. KXXX-FM also known as Stereo Sunshine and KX-100, became KQLS. In addition it became affiliated with the ABC network.

On March 1, 1997, KQLS became part of the Good Star Network. A legal notice appeared in four issues of the *Colby Free Press* in November 1996 announcing the prospective sale. Wichita Great Empire Broadcasting, Inc. had submitted an application to the FCC "for the assignment of the KQLS(FM) license, 100.3 MHz, Colby, Kansas from Lesso, Inc." In 2001, the stations sold to Waitt Radio, Inc. of Omaha, NE.

"KXXX -790 on your radio dial." It was the station that brought the world to the corners of three states in 1947.