

*The*

# WKSR

## *Story*



by  
**George  
Martin**

*Proceeds to benefit The George Martin Scholarship Fund*

# *The WKSR Story*

*A gift of Pulaski Publishing  
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## **THE GEORGE MARTIN SCHOLARSHIP FUND**

*All proceeds from this publication will be donated by Pulaski Publishing to the endowment of a Communications scholarship to be given annually to a high school graduate in honor of George M. Martin whose tenure of service at WKSR spans the period 1950 to the present.*

*August, 1995*

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Hershel Lake, publisher

## INTRODUCTION

Most of the articles that make up this book were printed in installments in *THE PULASKI CITIZEN* and *THE GILES FREE PRESS* in 1992-93. At the suggestion of readers of those newspapers, the series has been compiled in booklet form. It is the only documentation of the history of Giles County's first radio station. *THE WKSR STORY* also serves as an incomplete listing of several significant community happenings of the past 4 1/2 decades — a period that is yet to be properly recorded for history. The list of WKSR alumni (former employees and executives) is far from complete and many of them are not otherwise mentioned in this publication. It should be noted, however, that the roster of those who worked at WKSR in one capacity or another includes some of our community's most worthy citizens and some of the radio industry's most successful figures.

*THE WKSR STORY* is dedicated to them.

*George Martin*

Herewith is a partial listing of former employees, owners, and managers of WKSJ from 1950 to the present. Many are now deceased and the whereabouts of many others is not known to the writer. Tenure one year or more.

OWNERS:

Robert. W. Rounsaville

John R. Crowder (deceased)

W.K. Jones (deceased)

John R. Stephens (deceased)

Beechie J. Stephens

Allene W. Cane (deceased)

D.L. Hoover

Alma S. Myers

George M. Martin

Hershel Lake

EMPLOYEES:

George Eubanks (deceased)

Virgil Trimm (deceased)

Jack Hendrickson

Benny Lott

Garth Freeze (deceased)

Bud Hall (deceased)

Charlie Hicks

Bill Potts

Jack Pullen (deceased)

Tommy Tate

Jack Melby

Bill Garner (Foster)

Kaye Cloud

Ryan Britton

Suzie Hedgecoth

Darlene Barnett

Nate Street

Dan Goodman

Jim Reynolds

Tom Pardon

Tim Beddingfield

Dave Curtis

Bill Dunn

Barry Bass

Wally Beecham (deceased)

Helen P. Abernathy

Elton Chick (deceased)

Harold Starks (deceased)

Norris Hammond

Kent Gowan

Johnny Prince

Audie Ashworth

Ronald Solomon

Steve Dunnivant

Noble G. Morgan (deceased)

Paula Philo

Ronnie Rose

Kent Kressenberg

Jerry Binkley

Murphy Aymett

Ed Carter

Bill Moore

Bob Plunkett

Karen Gowan

Bobby McCurry

Andrea White

Sandra Hughes

Corky Hoover

Mike Freeland

Bill Shoecraft

Richard Spruill

Lee Blaine

Gerald Phillips (deceased)

Don Young

Kenneth Crook

Leon Holt

Bobby Stone

Bill Adams

Connie Hayes

Karl Garner

Bill Williams (deceased)

Cindy Williams

Don Eastep

Jerry Thompson

Andy Chunn

Bill Wiseman

Glenn Lance

Tommy Jackson

Barbara Portay

Chris Williams

## WKSJ: A PULASKI FIRST CONTINUES TO SERVE

### FOREWORD

Feature writer Johnny Phelps recently presented a two-part series of articles on my long association with WKSJ in his Giles Paths column. During the interviews Phelps conducted for those two articles, it became apparent to both of us that any comprehensive history of radio in this community could not be incorporated into the brevity required of him in Giles Paths.

At the suggestion of Editor Joe Collins and Publisher Hershel Lake, I will endeavor to present in the next several issues some of my own recollections about WKSJ and recall some of the information gleaned from those who were associated with the station in the three years before I arrived on the scene in 1950.

Drawing only from personal memory can be dangerous, I realize. Dates, places and other facts sometimes can't be precisely recalled, but these articles will be my best effort at that.

We learned from the two Giles Paths articles that many Giles Countians have an abiding interest in radio in this community.

The station and the community have had an inter-relationship through the years that is unique, I feel, in the radio industry, and its past should be chronicled in some orderly fashion.

The effort will be an honest one, although based solely on one man's memories.

### THE BEGINNING

In almost every small town across America today there's at least one long-tenured radio station. Typically, it was built in the 1940's when rural radio proliferated in communities that were previously thought to be too small to sustain it. Most often it consisted of a tall antenna and a small building sitting on the edge of town with offices and studios somewhere downtown.

Radio in those days was limited to the AM dial and the small market stations were usually assigned 250 watts of power on frequencies occupied at night by the more powerful stations in larger cities. For that reason, many small-market operations were called "day-timers", signing on the air at sunrise and signing off at sunset. That meant local radio service wasn't available until as late as 7 a.m. in the winter months and stations had to sign off as early as 4:30 in the afternoon. Local nighttime service was virtually non-existent.

In most cases, the stations were owned by an individual or a group of individuals in the community and staffed by a small cadre of persons with some degree of expertise in the business — usually imported from other stations because of their previous experience. These persons enjoyed a degree of celebrity in the community and often stayed only a short time before moving on to another similar operation.

This is the story of one such station — WKSJ.

Robert W. Rounsaville, a Cleveland, TN, broadcaster who owned WBAC in that city, drove to Pulaski one August day in 1946 to look at a town he had heard about that didn't have local radio and might be large enough to



*Johnny Phelps, then basketball coach at Giles County High School, discusses a just-ended contest in about 1980 with newsman and broadcaster George Martin.*

support a station. He later sent a friend and fellow Cleveland resident, Virgil Trimm, to take a look at Pulaski to see if he thought a station might survive here — in other words, was there enough retail business in Pulaski to generate the advertising revenue necessary to sustain a small radio operation?

Trimm drove into town, swung around the public square and counted the number of sizable stores he figured would be doing enough business to advertise on radio. Since almost all retailers were located around the square and up and down First and Second Streets, it didn't take Trimm long to see them all. He returned to Cleveland and reported to Rounsaville the town looked promising to him.

An application for a frequency and construction permit was filed with the Federal Communications Commission in Washington for a station to be designated WKSR. Rounsaville figured he'd memorialize his wife and daughter with his new radio venture — his second station — and would couple the call letters K S R with the FCC-mandated W to honor Katherine and Susan Rounsaville.

The permit was granted for a station to be located at 730 kilocycles with 250 watts of AM power. In those days, the low frequency location on the dial coupled with 250 watts was more than adequate to cover the community, albeit that the station would operate only during the daylight hours. The 730 position was also occupied by powerful metropolitan stations whose signal couldn't be interfered with at night because of their squatter's right to the frequency.

The favorable dial location provided WKSR with an advantage not enjoyed by most local stations today because of the more than 3,000 AM stations now crammed onto the dial. In 1947, when WKSR finally signed on, the 50,000-watt big-city stations barreled across much of the nation at night but faded at sunrise because of the nature of the AM signal to extend itself during the nighttime hours but constrict itself in the daytime.

WKSR's 250 watts were sufficient to push Pulaski's radio station 50 to 60 miles into homes in several surrounding Tennessee and North Alabama counties with a primary, listenable signal that's virtually unattainable nowadays.



*The opening of a new Sun-drop plant in 1980 was one of the many major local business stories covered by WKSR. Pulaski's first radio station and a local news institution since May 6, 1947. Discussing the new plant with David Johnson Jr., left are WKSR's George Martin and Nate Street*

On May 6, 1947, engineers from Rounsaville's WBAC, under the direction of Elton Chick, finished putting WKSR together. Its antenna was erected on rented land belonging to Mayor Erskine Sharp on Highway 64 just west of the city limits. A little wooden building was set alongside the highway to house the station's original Raytheon transmitter. A small portion of a downtown building was rented to house two offices, a control room and a single studio. The building is the same one that is WKSR's home today, although in 1947 the second floor studios were shared with a local lawyer, the late Ewart Hagan, and the empty offices of a doctor who had once practiced there. The same transmitter site is also still in use.

Rounsaville, wanting to invest as little as possible in his new station, sent over a small four-channel amplifier which served as WKSR's main control room console for the first few years. He sent along a couple of microphones, a spare desk and filing cabinet from WBAC, bought a new transmitter and antenna and told Trimm to go to work as station manager.

As is often the case, there were construction and technical delays and the May 6 opening date was later than had been intended. During the final days of assembling and readying the little makeshift station to hit the airways, Trimm would drive to the transmitter site in the evenings, sit in his car, and watch the blinking red lights on the tower thinking how exciting it would be when the station came to life. By day, Trimm was trying to convince local merchants they should buy advertising on this marvelous new medium that would soon be signing on the air.

The advent of WKSJ had been noised about considerably all winter and spring. Townsfolk were buzzing about how Pulaski would soon have its very own radio station — just like the big city Nashville.

Opening day was marked by appropriate fanfare. Mayor Sharp and other city and county dignitaries gathered at the South Second Street studios to make speeches welcoming WKSJ to town. There was live entertainment provided by a local band or two and WKSJ thus began its adventure on the airwaves.

At Minor Hill School, students were called into the auditorium where a radio had been placed and they were allowed to listen to the new radio station and its grand opening.

All over the county, there was an atmosphere of excitement and pride that the community had entered into the radio age with its very own magical, mystical voice.

WKSJ had arrived!

## **WKSJ: STILL GOING STRONG And So Is Swap 'n Shop**

### **THE EARLY YEARS: 1947-1953**

Two of the programs that appeared on WKSJ's program log from day one were Swap 'n Shop and Man On The Street. The former is still heard today and in its original time slot, 7:45 a.m. In succeeding years, Swap 'n Shop has become a morning-noon-and-night fixture airing three times a day.

The Man On The Street died a slow and agonizing death in the early 1950's. It consisted of an announcer broadcasting live from a downtown sidewalk and accosting passersby to coax them to talk to him on the air. The novelty of the program caught on at first with some regular downtowners eager to appear on the show, but as time went on fewer and fewer people made themselves available and interviews became hard to come by.

The program was eventually discontinued when one innovative announcer, Lee Blaine, was reduced to using two voices creating the illusion that a two-way conversation was going on. He was pretty good at it, too — faking interviews with farmers and townspeople from his street corner location just outside the studios — until station management caught on and observed a dialogue being carried on with only one person present.

Swap 'n Shop enjoyed a different fate. The enduring popularity of the buy-sell-or-trade program has kept it on the air continuously and with continuous sponsorship — the last 30 years by Morris Harwell & Son on the morning edition.

"Stars of Tomorrow" was another of the early favorites. This program, which aired on Saturdays, provided a showcase for local musical talent and lasted some three years.

Local news consisted of whatever community bulletin board announcements were handed in or called in, plus the daily obituaries. Coverage of "spot news" and more introspective news would come many years later.



*Kellye Cash, Miss Tennessee who went on to become Miss America 1987, is one of the many celebrities WKSJ's George Martin has interviewed during his career at the radio station.*

Ownership of WKSJ first changed in 1949 when Fayetteville businessman John R. Crowder purchased the station from Robert Rounsaville. The station's original owner and founder went on to become one of the South's leading broadcasters, owning radio stations in Nashville, Birmingham, Louisville and an early TV station in Atlanta.

The first few years did not prove to be a financial boom for WKSJ's owners. Spot announcements sold for as little as 50 cents and at times were hard to market, even at bargain prices. Eventually, the rate was raised to \$1 for a 60-second announcement — a price that remained prevalent for several years.

Crowder recalled Virgil Trimm to manage the station when he bought it. Management had earlier been entrusted to a Jackson, TN, radio veteran, Bill Williams, after Trimm departed the first time.

Trimm returned to Pulaski in 1950 to run WKSJ and remained as its manager for two more years until taking a management position in Murfreesboro.

Crowder sold the station after a couple of years to a Pulaski man, W.K. Jones, and Trimm left during the Jones era.

Jones was considered somewhat eccentric, but was also known for his appreciation for quality and the finer things of life. He had no previous experience with radio but had become interested when a local group applied in 1951 for a second radio station to compete with WKSJ.

Williams, who had been replaced as manager when Trimm was recalled, was slated to head up the new station and run it. Eventually, the partnership became disenchanted with the idea of putting a second station in a market where the first one wasn't doing all that well. When the move for the new station fell through, Jones bought WKSJ and announced immediately it would move to new quarters and would offer full-time service instead of being a daytime operation.

WKSJ moved out of its drab quarters on South Second to a new building Jones had built on South First Street (the site of the present law offices of Henry, Henry, Garner, Stack and Speer).

An application was filed in Washington to convert WKSJ to a full-time facility and the move into the smartly-appointed new quarters was completed while the application was still pending. In order to get nighttime service, WKSJ was forced to give up its beloved 730 frequency and relocate to 1420 — a channel that allowed for night operation under strictest conditions.

No evening service could be obtained on 730 because of the requirement that the clear channel stations not be interfered with at night.

In order to make the frequency move and increase the hours of operation, additional equipment had to be bought. Jones invested heavily in a new 1,000-watt transmitter, a phasor which controlled the new directional signal at night, the erection of a second antenna and the laying of a second ground system, plus other technical improvements



along with, of course, the outfitting of the new eye-catching offices and studios that had been built on the second floor of his new South First Street building.

By the time the costly engineering services needed for the transformation of WKSR into its new mode of operation had been added to the cost of the building and equipment, Jones had invested far more than twice the amount he had paid for the station. He also had one of the best-equipped and most attractive small-town radio stations in the country.

In the winter of 1953, Jones died.

## WKSR RADIO — FULL-TIME RADIO WAS GOOD NEWS

The conversion of WKSR from a daytime station to full time in 1952 afforded the station some advantages it had never known before. Television was in its infancy and there was still a large nighttime audience for radio.

WKSR became affiliated with the ABC Network during the Jones ownership and, for the first time since its early days of part-time affiliation with the Mutual Network, Giles County listeners were able to hear soap operas in the afternoon and network block programming at night. Staple fare like *The Long Ranger*, *Lum and Abner*, radio mysteries and dramas became regular features on WKSR in the evening hours.

Network news commentators such as Gabriel Heater, Paul Harvey, Martin Agronsky and John Daly were added to the program schedule.

Initially, WKSR stayed on the air until 11 p.m. with the final hour given over to a local record show — *Night Train*. Announcers played telephone requests interspersed with light chatter on what became a favorite program of the 1950's for local teenagers.

Music was changing its emphasis from instrumental big band and pop sounds to songs that featured vocalists or singing groups such as Johnny Ray, Patti Page, The Four Freshmen and The Hilltoppers.

Rock and roll arrived with Elvis Presley in the mid-50's (a full installment on the topic of music will come later).

The advent of a full-time service also enabled WKSR to establish its first real audience for early-morning programming. No longer was the station forced to move its sign-on time from month to month according to the time of sunrise, but an established 5:30 a.m. sign-on was possible. At about this time, more attention was being paid to news since the expanded hours gave listeners a predictable time slot for the news on a year-round basis.

In the early 50's, TV was not a competitor to WKSR as far as audience was concerned. Only one station, WSM-TV in Nashville, could be seen in Pulaski and only then with a costly array of outside antennas placed on the higher hills.

In 1952, only a handful of TV sets were in use in Pulaski and radio continued to be the staple medium for entertainment and information. At WKSR, entertainment came first and news was dead last in emphasis.



*Don Eastep is a veteran broadcast team member at WKSR, Pulaski's pioneer radio station.*

The full-time signal also brought live local sports into Giles County's homes for the first time. Coverage was limited at first to football games and basketball tournaments involving Giles County High School and the seven other rural high schools that existed in the county at the time.

The 23rd District tournament was the sports highlight of the year. It pitted the eight Giles County schools and four from Marshall County against each other in a marathon playoff that took 10 nights to complete.

Using live telephone hookups from the tournament sites for the first time, WKSR carried all the games involving the county schools.

Corky Hoover and George Martin were the first sports team on the WKSR mikes. Hoover did play-by-play with a machine-gun delivery style that attracted considerable attention and built quite a following.

The sheer excitement of the tournament games was often more than Hoover could handle. At one particular game played at McCord Elementary School gym in Lewisburg, a player Hoover was dating at the time made the winning goal for Prospect High School in the last second. Beside himself with joy and overcome with the drama of the moment, Hoover literally tossed the heavy mike into the air at the final buzzer.

There being no such thing as pressboxes at the time, the broadcasters sat shoulder-to-shoulder among the fans. It was widely reported that someone else caught Hoover's mike in midair, thus preventing an unsuspecting spectator from being beamed by the ponderous object on its way down.

The standardization of sign-on and sign-off times, the implementation of network programming, and the airing of live local sports all proved to be pluses for WKSR after it made the transition from 730 to 1420.



*Veteran radio broadcasters Nate Street, left, and George Martin have been conducting the popular 1420 Martin-Street program on WKSR since 1964. It is still on the air today.*

But there were also drawbacks. Because of the presence of other stations on the 1420 frequency, WKSR was required to operate in a directional pattern before sunrise and after sunset. Special equipment literally “pulled” the station’s signal in during directional hours to points specified by the FCC in the station’s license. The result was that WKSR’s nighttime coverage map resembled a butterfly with large wings spreading east and west of Pulaski, covering Lawrenceburg at night with a primary signal and extending eastward almost to Fayetteville. The catch was — and still is — that coverage north and south of Pulaski was sharply limited.

FCC-mandated monitoring points were placed at Pigeon Roost to the north and at Chicken Creek to the south. Engineers were required to physically go to these two locations at least once a week and take “readings” to ensure the signal was going no farther in those directions. This eliminated much of the area north and south of town from WKSR’s evening coverage and prevented listeners in such places as Elkton, Minor Hill, Lynnville and Campbellsville from hearing WKSR after sunset and before sunrise.

This proved to be a disappointment both to the station and to the affected listeners. In order to get nighttime service, WKSR had to give up the sprawling daytime coverage it had enjoyed on the 730 frequency. It was also a trade-off that had to be lived with since the frequency swap had already been made and another station in Athens, Alabama, had snapped up the 730 spot on the dial when it was relinquished.

It also was a fact that, despite its coverage limitations, the 1420 slot afforded WKSR its only chance for full-time operation. At the time there was no local station in Lawrenceburg and it had been deemed advisable to accept a frequency that would allow day and night coverage in that community also.

WKSR had served as Lawrence County’s radio service ever since its inception because of the absence of a local station in that market in the 1940’s. Considerable advertising revenue had been pulled from Lawrenceburg to supplement the marginal business generated from Pulaski in the early years.

Sponsor disappointment with the limited coverage of the new full-time frequency, coupled with a steady out-migration of population in the 1950’s helped impose economic hardships on WKSR. For these and other reasons, the station’s billing not only failed to grow after the frequency switch, but actually declined to the point WKSR was losing money at the time of Jones’ death.

WDXE had been established in Lawrenceburg and WKSR’s revenue from advertisers in that market had dried up. Business conditions everywhere were depressed and local radio still had not displaced the high-power metropolitan radio stations in garnering the local audience in dominant numbers.

WSM-AM in Nashville was WKSR’s chief competitor when it came to listeners — especially in the early-morning prime time. Because of all these factors, sales of advertising at WKSR continued to dwindle until the red ink appeared well before Jones’ death.

His demise left the station in the hands of his estate and efforts were launched to find a buyer at once.

## **FIFTIES BRING NEW FORMAT FOR WKSR**

Moving into the early ‘50’s, management at WKSR became more willing to spend money to be able to offer the music that was popular at the time.

WKSR subscribed to several major record label services such as Columbia, RCA-Victor, Decca and Mercury and received most of the new records they turned out.

Music selection improved to the point that most of our record shows offered a fair number of the latest hits. The rest of the time was filled with what were called “standards”—tunes that had been popular 10-20 years earlier but had remained in favor through the years. And then there were the freebie non-hits that came to us without cost and — mostly — without much appeal. Small record companies were viewed with suspicion by most of the announcers. They were referred to as “off brand records” that nobody wanted to hear and played only out of necessity.

Somewhere in the early 1950’s, however, new record labels began to appear with new artists. Small labels began to produce hits. One of the earliest minor-label successes was Dot Records located in Gallatin, TN, by Randy Wood. Wood found a group of college students in Kentucky whose voices blended well and turned them into hit-makers.

The Hilltoppers churned out several hot-selling records and they represented one of the earliest departures from the sounds of the 1940’s that largely featured blended instruments rather than blended voices. Big band music was still in vogue in the ‘50’s, whether dance bands or studio orchestras.

What vocals there were were enmeshed — usually a single voice — in the orchestral sounds. Vocalists up to that time had played second fiddle to the musicians on most hit recordings.

The Hilltoppers, The Four Freshmen and other groups began to change all that. The voices became the main attraction of the record. This was followed by solo singers like Johnny Ray, Joni James and others whose vocals overshadowed the musicians in their appeal.

In 1954, a single record arrived at WKSR’s studios by mail from an unheard-of label, Sun Records in Memphis. It had been mailed out to stations large and small as a freebie — another label hoping to get enough airplay to cause the record to sell.

This particular recording had been made by an unknown singer named Elvis Presley and the “A” side was a song called “Blue Moon of Kentucky”. The song wasn’t exactly a stranger to those operators who played music on the radio. Country mandolin picker Bill Monroe and his Bluegrass Boys had recorded it several years earlier and it had gotten mildly-favorable airplay on the country shows.

At WKSR, the Presley record was received coolly. In fact it was auditioned and tossed aside for several weeks because it had a rather strange and irreverent sound to it — a speeded-up tempo that seemed to be a contest between the singer and the band. The instruments were played loudly with a heavy drum cadence and the singer’s voice had a peculiar “trashy” sound.

“Blue Moon of Kentucky” was certainly a radical departure from the music being played on radio in those days. Was it hillbilly or was it pop? Was it fit for the airwaves or was it offensive — even though there was no hint of off-color language or profanity? Really, what kind of music was this? Was it music at all?

At WKSR we were slow to catch on. I’m not sure exactly when Presley’s record was played on the air for the first time, but if memory serves me well, we didn’t play it at all until people began to phone in and ask about it.

At about that same time, the record began to get exposure in the trade magazines and on other radio stations. Everyone knows the rest of the story. Elvis exploded onto the airwaves with hit after hit, he hit TV on “The Ed Sullivan Show” and made national headlines with his swivel-hipping that wasn’t allowed to be shown by the censors — an event that probably did more to bring him into the national focus than any other single happening.

With all the hype and the mushrooming popularity of the former Memphis truck driver, WKSR’s announcers continued to play his records sparingly — mainly, I suppose, because of the new beat that we now call rock ‘n roll and

the new way of presenting the instrumentation that seemed to run counter to everything we had known before.

Because of the morality issue raised by Presley's public gyrations and the selection of songs he did, there seemed to be some risk associated with just putting his music on the air. Audiences were accustomed to the smoother sounds of bands, orchestras, crooners and harmonizing groups. Presley's music was 180 degrees from all that.

Many times, when an Elvis song was played on WKSJ, telephone calls would come in shaming us for broadcasting such "trash". We made sure the Presley records were played only when we were programming to the younger segment of the audience — such as late night programs like "Night Train" from 10 to 11 o'clock.

From that uncertain beginning, however, emerged America's new music — rock 'n roll. Other artists quickly followed Presley and before half the decade of the '50's had passed, some radio stations were playing little else.

The arrival of rock 'n roll also saw the emergence of something called "format radio". Stations in metropolitan markets — usually the low-wattage stations that had always had trouble competing with the 50,000-watt powerhouses



— found out they could attract large audiences by playing nothing but rock 'n roll music.

They developed "formats" that gave the operators — now called jockeys — a rigid formula for filling every hour. Some stations became selective enough to play only the top 40 or 50 records based on their chart popularity and to play them over and over again, delivering on their promise — "nothing but the hits".

Forty records all day and night — every day and night. For many little stations in highly competitive markets it worked. They became the stations with the top ratings.

Not so at WKSJ, the all-things-to-all-people station in Pulaski. Programming had to be more general in scope — or so we believed. We continued to program music in the early morning hours — country music — standards in the daytime, pop and some rock in the late afternoon, and rock 'n roll in the late evening hours.

In between was a mix of ABC Network programs and news, plus our own limited local news, local features and, of course, Swap 'n Shop.

From 1950 to 1960, radio's music underwent a total metamorphosis — from the lush, string-filled sounds of “Three Coins In The Fountain” to the Beatles plaintive “Mrs. Robinson” and Elvis Presley's raucous “Hound Dog”; music had turned a new direction and would never be the same again.

## WKSJ BECAME A COMMUNITY LEADER DURING STEPHENS' YEARS Considered Small-Town Station Model

John R. “Happy” Stephens was in the ready-mix concrete business in Pulaski. Earlier he had managed local grocery stores and was married to the former Beechie Johnson. Upon W.K. Jones' death, the couple became interested in owning WKSJ. Stephens would manage the business and his wife would act as sales manager. Both were well-known in the community and envisioned the radio station could — and should — become an active partner in the progress of the town and county. In May of 1952, their application to purchase WKSJ from the Jones estate was approved in Washington and they took over.

The Stephens' ownership saw the station emerge as a much stronger force in the community. Additional local programs and features were added to the schedule, live remote broadcasting outside the studio was initiated, sports programming was beefed up, local news was given a higher priority and, for the first time, WKSJ began to exert a strong influence on the day-to-day life of Giles Countians. Mrs. Helen Abernathy was hired to gather and write a complete local newscast which aired at noon each day. Local news was also incorporated into early morning and early evening programming for the first time.

Candidates for statewide political office began to drop by WKSJ's studios to be interviewed. Remote broadcasts such as “Supper at Abernathy Lake” were added to the program log. Stronger efforts were made at seeking out governmental news and regular coverage of city council meetings was instituted.

With it all, a much stronger sales effort spearheaded by Mrs. Stephens resulted in growing revenue, and before long, WKSJ was a modest profit-maker instead of a money-loser.

Stephens was also the first owner to utilize young people as regular staff members at the station. The first local teenager to work at WKSJ was Gerald Phillips. Gerald was selected from auditions which were held at Giles County



*Gerald Phillips*

High School. During his high school years, he worked regular evening shifts as DJ. Eventually, he moved to WBMC in McMinnville, to WSIX in Nashville, then to Birmingham and eventually to the New York City market where he was, according to “Billboard Magazine”, the highest paid disc jockey in the nation under the name of Sabastian Stone.

Later in life, Phillips worked as a contract consultant in other major markets and was, at the time of his death, packaging medical shows for both radio and TV that were distributed nationally.

Technically, WKSJ was a model for small-town radio stations in the 1950's. Its equipment had been upgraded during W.K. Jones' ownership and meticulously maintained by Noble G. Morgan, a Lawrence County native hired by Stephens to serve as chief engineer. Morgan was a stickler for technical perfection. He tirelessly tinkered to refine and improve WKSJ's AM signal. In addition to his maintenance



*Music has been a programming mainstay for WKSJ throughout its history. This group was heard on Saturday mornings in 1952 and 1953. "The Jolly Five Quartet" includes from left: Bill Binkley, Robert Lee Townsend, Guy Phillips, Odus Campbell and at the piano W.C. Middlebrooks.*

duties, Morgan was at various times the only licensed engineer on the staff.

As required by the FCC at the time, he was on duty at the transmitter site during all the evening hours of directional operation. Only technicians holding FCC First Class licenses could operate directional stations and that meant endless hours at the transmitter — including all seven nights of the week. Morgan's dedication to quality kept WKSJ humming flawlessly for more than a decade.

Eventually, the heavy demands of the nighttime transmitter duty brought a second engineer on board giving Morgan a slightly lighter load.

Typical of WKSJ's involvement in community life was the role the station played in Giles County's Sesqui-Centennial Celebration in 1959. Stephens himself agreed to take on the herculean task of heading up the month-long celebration of the county's 150th anniversary.

It was an event that would require a large budget and would include a full week of parades, pageants, big-name artists' concerts, celebrity programs, extensive downtown decorations and much more. Stephens decided to ask the County Court and City Board to put up a large chunk of the money with a promise it would be repaid if the celebration broke even or turned a profit.

Toward that end, he dedicated the resources of the radio station and his own time and expertise as a fund-raiser and administrator. WKSJ's program director George Martin was removed from the station's staff duties to serve as the information and publicity director for the celebration for a period of four months. The strong efforts made by Stephens and others to subscribe the remainder of the budget from within the business community cost WKSJ thousands of

dollars of advertising revenue that eventually went to the Sesqui-Centennial treasury to help pay the bills. Thus the financial aspects of the celebration actually cost the station money by reducing its revenue so merchants could spend many of their advertising dollars in support of the Sesqui.

WKSJ carried daily news stories and many special programs dedicated to the celebration for several months before the July festival. Martin's salary as a celebration employee was paid by the radio station rather than being charged to the celebration, although he worked in the Sesqui-Centennial office on a full-time basis.

Despite the fact that a monsoon-like weather system settled in on Giles County and Tennessee during the crucial week that climaxed the celebration — and despite the negative effect the bad weather had on crowds attending the various events — the Sesqui-Centennial managed to pay off its indebtedness, return the money to the city and county and wipe the financial slate clean.

Because of Stephens' personal commitment to the celebration and his willingness for his own business to suffer some of the consequences, the 1959 event was successful without expense to the city and county governments. WKSJ did live broadcasts of the major events — often without commercial sponsorship — to make sure the celebration got media coverage and the community was kept abreast of the happenings.

Stephens was also a political activist, making two unsuccessful races for Mayor during the time he owned and operated WKSJ. On both occasions his defeats were by narrow margins. He was also an outspoken advocate of stronger community efforts to attract industry. The county's economy was largely based on agricultural endeavors and in the 1950's serious out-migration of population occurred as it became harder and harder to make ends meet in farming. Stephens pushed hard for more vigorous efforts to attract industry — a call that was eventually heeded and resulted in a strong number of industrial successes here.





## CHRISTMAS 1958: WHEN HOLIDAY CHEER TURNED TO TRAGEDY

The date was December 23, 1958. I was working late trying to finish recording a program to be aired on Christmas Day.

That wasn't unusual for the time of year. We tried to put many of our holiday programs on tape ahead of time so the Christmas Day announcer wouldn't be faced with producing one special program after another on a day when he'd rather be home anyway.

Sometime after 5 p.m. the fire siren atop the recently-built Fire Hall on East Madison Street sounded. Since the fire station was less than a block behind our South First Street studios, the piercing sound came right through our studio walls and even filtered into our mikes when they were turned on.

Annoyed that the siren had sounded while the recorder was on and knowing its wail would go on the air when the tape was played, I stopped the machine and called the fire hall as we always did when the alarm sounded. We would interrupt the on-air program in such cases and broadcast the location of the fire.

The announcements were sponsored by Zuccarello-Rackley Insurance Agency and their sponsorship was considered a plum because radios were flicked on all over town to get the fire location.

"It's on Highway 31 South," said the voice at the Fire Hall.

At about the same time a second fire engine raced by our studios alerting me there must be something special about a fire that required two pumpers.

"It's some kind of fire in a bus," the voice on the phone said impassionately, and that was the end of the conversation.

I clipped off the network program that was on the air at the time and inserted the announcement, "The Fire Department is answering a call to a fire on Highway 31 South."

Wanting to finish recording the Christmas show and knowing I was supposed to pick up my wife and get to Hillcrest Country Club by 6:30 for the annual WKSR Christmas staff party, I returned to the task at hand quickly.

"A bus fire?," I wondered, "Does that mean a bus with people on it is on fire? Is it a school bus? Some other kind of bus? Is anyone hurt?"

Racing after fire engines and ambulances has never been my favorite thing to do. Most such stories can be covered from the telephone after the emergency is over and when details are assembled and given out by the proper authorities. But, a bus fire. . .?

I called Mabel to tell her that I might be a little late picking her up because I had to check on a fire but not to worry, I'd be home as soon as possible and we'd probably get to the party on time.

It was a fairly warm and damp December night — a little too warm for Christmastime. I headed south out of town wondering how far I might have to drive to find the fire and hoping it wasn't far.

The haze turned to heavy fog as soon as I left the city limits. Suddenly, flashing lights came up behind me and I pulled to the side of the road to allow a hearse from Bennett-May Funeral Home to race by. Before I could get back on the road, another ambulance loomed just ahead of me heading north into town. Then, a few volunteer firemen went around me going south, and a third ambulance from Pulaski Funeral Home appeared.

Sensing this was no ordinary fire story, I tried to speed up only to encounter even denser fog and having to pick my way carefully while being on the lookout for still more emergency vehicles.

About four miles out of town several flashing red lights pinpointed the scene. Just south of what we called “the tankage plant” — now Griffin Industries — the hulk of a major wreck appeared almost smack in the middle of the road and silhouetted by several flashing emergency lights. A southbound tractor-trailer truck had buried itself into the front of a northbound Greyhound bus. Off to one side and partially down an embankment was a third vehicle, a truck bearing the name “Brindley & Son Coal & Lumber Co.”

Parking the car, I started walking through the fog toward the wreckage. As I got near, State Trooper Homer Smith recognized me saying, “George, I’ve sent seven bodies to the hospital so far and I don’t know how many more are in there,” gesturing to the smoldering bus.

Firemen were pouring water into the bus through several broken windows, and people were huddled along the roadside — some of them lying in the grass and others walking around or standing silently while funeral home attendants checked for the most seriously hurt. There was no county-operated ambulance service in those days.

Ambulances from the two funeral homes were pulling in and pulling out to take victims to Giles County Hospital. The stench from the wreckage discouraged me from getting close enough to look inside the bus, but suddenly, in the glare of the headlights of Trooper Smith’s parked car was an arm hanging high in the twisted bulkhead of the bus. An arm, but no body.

“It’s the bus driver’s arm, we think,” said someone who was trying to pry into the bus. “The driver’s dead — he’s already been taken into the funeral home.”

WKSR had no mobile broadcasting facilities in those days and no portable recording equipment which meant I couldn’t make a live — or even a recorded — report from the scene.

I talked to a few of the bus passengers who were coherent enough to talk, learning they didn’t know how or why the wreck had happened. Some had been dozing in their seats when the crash took place, tossing them around inside like rag dolls or slamming them into the seats in front of them. There wasn’t a lot to be learned from the survivors and both drivers had died almost instantly.

Much later it would be surmised that the Greyhound had attempted to pass the local truck and in the heavy fog had veered to the southbound lane squarely into the path of the snub-nosed tractor trailer headed in the opposite



direction. The two big vehicles hit head-on and apparently at full speed. It had been a terrific impact.

The accident happened just south of the small bridge over Buchanan Creek and only a few hundred yards from the Griffin Industries main building.

I went to a nearby residence and asked to use the telephone, calling back to the station to make a report. By that time, another staff member, Corky Hoover, had arrived at the studios and he recorded my remarks and then put them on the air immediately.

I returned to the wreck scene where all the injured had been attended to or taken to the hospital. Wreckers were prying the bus and truck apart to get the highway open again and by that time, long lines of traffic stretched on either side of the accident scene.

I-65 hadn't been built and Highway 31 carried heavy, north-south traffic, especially during holiday seasons.

Going next to Bennett-May Funeral Home, I attempted to make some kind of determination of the death toll. Within an hour after the wreck and following my first report from the scene, every major news organization in the nation was calling WKSR for information or for live reports for their newscasts.

Because the wreck happened just hours before the peak holiday travel time, the wreck became a priority story for every network. After all, many of the bus passengers were holiday travelers headed home for Christmas.

Since WKSR was an ABC Network affiliate, the network wanted a firsthand report for its next newscast. ABC News instructed Hoover, who was at the studios, to prepare a 45-second report on the wreck complete with casualty figures for its 7 p.m. news. That was heady stuff for an announcer at a little 1,000 watt radio station in rural Tennessee — to air the story of the tragedy to the nation in what was then radio's prime time listening slot.

Hoover assumed he would have time to write a 45-second summary of the report I had given him from the scene and have it recorded by ABC for inclusion on the 7 o'clock news. Instead, the network producer who called told him he would be going on live in two minutes. Later, Hoover recalled his stage fright at the prospect of broadcasting coast-to-coast, but he managed to maintain control and did his usual good job.

At the funeral home, meanwhile, they were trying to count bodies and assess the toll. Some wire services had already reported as many as 13 persons had died in the accident and the figure might climb still higher, they said.

As it turned out Trooper Smith had been squarely on the money when he gave out his first figure — the number of dead remained at seven, including both the bus driver and the driver of the tractor rig. Twelve other persons had been hospitalized for varying degrees of injury.

One of the things that had made the death toll hard to figure was the fact that some bus passengers had frozen turkeys on board which they were taking home for the holidays. In the ruins of the bus, smoked and mangled, one or more turkeys had been found by rescuers and put in ambulances in the belief they were body parts. Some of them actually turned up at funeral homes.

The bus had burst into flames and most the dead were burned beyond recognition. Dr. S.A. Garner worked for several days to identify the victims from their dental records.

Some were difficult to trace, and one man was buried in Maplewood Cemetery as "unknown". Through Garner's persistence, he was eventually identified as a man from Winchester and his body was claimed.

Today, Garner remembers his fee for all that was \$150 — a bill that was eventually paid by the bus company.

Several major lawsuits followed the wreck and Greyhound Lines eventually paid out several large claims related to the deaths and injuries.

Well into the night I finally got to the Christmas party. The food was cold by then, but it didn't seem to matter.

The indelible memory of Giles County's worst traffic accident in history, and my first major national news story would remain for a lifetime.

### WKSJ PROVED A STATION CAN GO HOME AGAIN

WKSJ occupied the South First Street studios built by W.K. Jones, the previous owner, through the first few years of John R. Stephens' ownership.

But Stephens subsequently purchased the three-story building at the corner of Madison and South Second Streets in 1960 and decided it was time to locate the station in his own building rather than the rented quarters on First Street.

This was the same building where WKSJ had its makeshift studios when the station was built in 1947. It was antiquated and in poor repair at the time Stephens bought it, and that meant a major building job had to be done to ready it for WKSJ's relocation.

The entire second floor was dedicated to the station's studios and offices and the space was remodeled and modernized into basically the same configuration in use today. The moving of the station also meant a major engineering



*Ryan Britton, who used to be employed as a DJ at WKSJ, is now in the military service in Massachusetts.*

job had to be done in transferring all equipment from the Jones building to the new quarters. All station wiring and circuits were located in the floor and wall recesses.

Under engineer Noble Morgan's direction, cables were laid in heavy conduits to shield out interference and enhance the station's sound. In the spring of 1960, and through Morgan's ingenious planning, a switch was thrown in the First Street studios in the middle of the day transferring all operations to the new Second Street location and WKSR continued regular broadcasting without missing a beat.

In May of 1960, the community was invited in for a look at the "new" WKSR in its spotless home. Again the station boasted some of the finest facilities known in small-town radio. More than 2,500 persons visited the Open House which also marked the station's 13th anniversary.

In August of 1961, Stephens opened a second weekly newspaper in Pulaski. *The Giles Free Press* was located on the first floor of his Second Street building directly below WKSR's studios.

It was a bold undertaking. Establishing a new paper against the entrenched competition of *The Pulaski Citizen* proved to be a long uphill climb and a week-to-week scramble for advertising revenue to sustain the new venture.

As he had done in directing the Sesqui-Centennial, Stephens threw himself heart and soul into the new paper and managed to build a substantial subscriber list in a few months. This gave *The Free Press* its "toe-hold" in the community that would eventually result in making the new paper a bona fide competitor for *The Citizen*.

WKSR's local news flow was sharply increased in the early '60's as more and more of the station's resources and manpower were brought into play for news gathering and presentation.

With the arrival of *The Free Press* and its demand for longer, more complete news stories, WKSR began to probe deeper into the community and produce longer local newscasts.

Much of the WKSR news copy was channeled downstairs to *The Free Press* for re-writing, editing or expanding. Local news was programmed on radio more frequently. Whereas the station had originally featured a single local newscast per day, it was now programming news several times daily. Hard-copy sports news was added and made available to the newspaper also. Feature stories began to be included in radio newscasts, and the station even ran editorials on hot local topics from time to time.

## A NEW YEAR MEANT NEW OWNERS OF WKSR, FREE PRESS

On January 1, 1963, Stephens sold both *The Giles Free Press* and WKSR to four long-term employees of the radio station and retired from the broadcasting business.

In August of 1964, Senator Estes Kefauver died unexpectedly and Stephens' close personal friend, next-door neighbor and long-time political ally Ross Bass successfully sought to become Kefauver's replacement. Bass had represented Tennessee's Sixth District in the House of Representatives for a decade and he won the election to complete Kefauver's term.

Stephens and his wife moved to Washington where he became Bass' administrative aide. Bass subsequently won election to a full term in the Senate and the Stephens remained in the nation's capitol until Bass' defeat in 1967. They returned to Pulaski and on November 26, 1970, Stephens died.

The four employees who purchased the newspaper and the radio station were D.L. "Corky" Hoover, George Martin, Alma Ruth Myers and Allene "Tootie" Cane.

Hoover was among the earliest members of the WKSR staff, coming to Pulaski as a teenage announcer in 1949. After a short stint in the Navy, he returned to WKSR in 1951 and had served in various capacities as announcer, sportscaster, copy and traffic director.

In the late '50's, Hoover had accepted a staff announcer's job at WATE in Knoxville, later becoming a newscaster on WATE-TV. He again returned to Pulaski in late 1962 when Stephens announced his intention to sell his media properties here. Hoover became the managing editor of *The Free Press* when the sale of WKSR was approved by the FCC in December of 1962 and remained in that capacity until both properties were sold by the Hoover-Martin-Myers-Cane partnership.

Martin joined the WKSR staff in December of 1950 and like Hoover had remained through several ownerships until the sale by Stephens.

Martin had left WKSR in January of 1954 during the Stephens era to help in the opening of a new station, WHDM in McKenzie. He was in McKenzie for a year, returning to Pulaski and WKSR in January of 1955.

During most of his tenure he had served as program director and had copy and production duties.

With the purchase of WKSR and *The Giles Free Press*, Martin became manager in January 1963.

Mrs. Myers was office manager and traffic manager under Stephens' ownership and had been a member of the radio staff for some seven years at the time she became a partner. She remained active in the business until its sale in 1980, serving as head bookkeeper for both the radio station and the newspaper.

Mrs. Cane had also been on the WKSR staff during its earliest years, starting in 1949 as secretary, and later assuming the title of sales manager under Stephens in the late 1960's. She continued in sales until illness forced her retirement in early 1970.

Mrs. Cane died in May of that year. Her interest in the business was purchased from her estate by the three remaining partners — Hoover, Martin and Myers. It was this partnership which sold both *The Free Press* and WKSR to its present owner, Hershel Lake.

The newspaper changed hands in August of 1979 and the sale of the radio station was approved by the FCC in May of 1980.

Hoover became chief executive officer for both the paper and the radio station, operating the two for Lake who at the time lived in Carthage, Tennessee.

Martin, not wishing to retire, accepted part-time employment with WKSR, serving as news editor. He also remained sports editor of *The Free Press* — a position he had maintained during the time he, Hoover and Mrs. Myers owned the two businesses.

In 1984, Hoover left his position with the two businesses and later became editor of *The Cleveland (TN) Daily Banner*.

Mrs. Myers retired upon the sale of WKSR and *The Free Press*. She and her husband, William, live on Johnson Branch Road near Bodenham.



*Jerry Binkley conducting a tour of the WKSR facilities.*

During the 1963-1980 period WKSR enjoyed steady growth and increased community involvement. Billings tripled during the 17-year period and additional technical improvements were made. Increased use of remote facilities included coverage of more and more local sports and in the mid-70's live broadcasts of the meetings of the County Commission were begun.

The FCC relaxed some of its rules concerning remote transmitter operation. New equipment which enabled the studio operator to monitor the performance of the Highway 64 transmitter even in its directional mode removed the necessity of an on-site engineer during all nighttime broadcasting hours.

In the late 1970's, WKSR pulled some of the best audience survey ratings in the broadcasting industry. Independently-done surveys by Arbitron Measurement gave the station extremely high listenership and loyalty numbers.

Audience-participation shows in which the listeners became a part of the program content were increasing in popularity in the 1970's. Talk radio was emerging in the large markets and some stations which had had trouble being competitive in the constant ratings battle found they could attract sizeable and loyal listeners by putting callers on air live and allowing them to express themselves on topical matters. For the sake of protection against slander and obscenity, the talk stations installed three-second delay mechanisms that allowed the station operator or the program's host to throw a switch when objectionable statements were made, giving barely enough time for the station to escape embarrassment or legal action.

WKSR's early effort at talk radio began the first day it signed on the air when Swap 'n Shop made its debut. There was no danger involved in airing of only one end of the phone conversations — the announcer's comments and explanations of the callers' wants and wishes — what he wanted to buy; what he had for sale.

In those days, the three-second delay was unheard-of and most stations didn't have the capability to transfer phone conversations onto the air anyway.

Swap 'n Shop was done with one-way conversations until the early '80's when WKSR began to allow the callers to describe their merchandise or voice their needs on the air themselves.

A delay technique had been used by WKSR in the 1970's but was not reliable enough to be a dependable tool in broadcasting phone talk and keeping programs running properly. The delay was abandoned altogether and, although there's risk and occasionally unwanted material still gets on the air, WKSR has aired live phone dialogue for several years.

Talk radio continues to grow in the '90's in large and medium markets, but still is not regarded as feasible in a community the size of Giles County.

In recent years, WKSR has intermittently served as forum for listeners to express themselves on controversial topics, but the potential audience still is not regarded as big enough because the station is limited in coverage and potential participants. The main concern is that a few loquacious listeners would dominate the programs from day to day.

Some believe, however, that small stations in small towns will eventually let down enough barriers to permit a frank and informal give-and-take in a devil-may-care attempt at talk radio.

With the difficulty that most AM stations are now having in attracting audience and advertisers, more and more such stations are looking seriously at the talk format. Talk networks have sprung up offering the small station not able to afford the expensive talk hosts a chance to provide a reasonable facsimile of talk programming.

At WKSR, talk radio is limited to three Swap 'n Shop programs daily, live birthday call-ins, audience participation on 1420 Martin-Street on occasion and special programs such as the annual charity auctions and election night coverage.

One of WKSR's most enduring and most popular programs, 1420 Martin-Street, was begun in 1964 when Nate Street returned to Pulaski after stints in Nashville and Cincinnati — first at hot-rocker WKDA in Music City and later at 50,000-watt WCKY.

At the Cincinnati powerhouse, Street ran the all-night show which consisted of pop music and live celebrity interviews.



*Nate Street ran the all-night show at WCKY, a Cincinnati powerhouse. Nate's show was rated as the most-listened-to-12-midnight-5 a.m. program in the nation. He operated under the name Stan Street. He returned to Pulaski in 1964.*



At one time, his was rated as the most-listened-to 12-midnight - 5 a.m. program in the nation. He operated under the name Stan Street.

With his return to Pulaski he and Martin initiated a morning talk-interview program that derived its name from the last names of the two hosts and WKSR's frequency on the dial.

1420 Martin-Street continues as one of the station's fixtures today and has provided a forum for many state and national political figures, entertainment celebrities and hundreds of hometown folks.

Local news, public affairs and live sports were the strong points of WKSR during the Hoover-Martin-Myers-Cane years. The station programmed local news with more frequency than ever, increased its coverage of sports to include Martin College basketball, Giles County High School football and basketball and even play-by-play coverage of Little League and Babe Ruth League baseball including post-season tournaments.

Memorable among these were broadcasts of the 1970 state Little League tournament from Johnson City when a Giles County team came within an inning of winning the state title.

WKSR also covered the exploits of Little League softball teams that won state championships and played in two Southeastern Regional Tournaments in St. Petersburg, Florida. WKSR sent staff members to cover these tournaments with live play-by-play.

## STATION, NEWSPAPER HAVE NEW OWNER

Hershel Lake, publisher of *The Carthage Courier*, became owner of WKSR and *The Giles Free Press* in 1979-80.

Interested originally in owning a newspaper in the Pulaski market, Lake made overtures to the owner-publisher of *The Pulaski Citizen*, Harwood Smith, but learned that Smith wasn't interested in selling.

Upon learning that *The Free Press* was for sale, he negotiated a buyout for both the newspaper and its companion WKSR.

Fully occupied with running his Carthage paper and well-ensconced in that community, Lake employed one of the selling partners, D.L. Hoover, to manage both the Pulaski properties. It was during this period that WKSR's competitor WMGL-FM was offered for sale by its owners, Bob Lochte and Jay Austin.

Lochte and Austin and their wives had purchased the FM station from its original owner, Ron Solomon, and aggressively competed for a share of the market's revenue and audience for some five years. Both the partners decided they wished to pursue other interests and offered the station for sale to Lake.

The purchase was consummated in 1983 and Pulaski's two radio stations are presently operated under Lake's ownership.

WMGL's studios were located on the west side of Pulaski's Square in second-floor quarters only a few doors from WKSR's studios.



*Hershel Lake*

In 1985, Lake moved the FM station into WKSR's studios and extensive remodeling was done to give the two stations side-by-side control room facilities.

WMGL continued to program separately using the country music format while WKSR stuck with its contemporary music style.

Late in 1985, the stations did a format switch with WKSR becoming country music oriented and WMGL changed its call letters to WINJ and its music format to rock.

The stations now simulcast from WKSR during the early morning hours and their main local newscasts at midday and late afternoon are also simulcast. Sports programming remains separated with WKSR airing Giles County High School basketball and football, plus University of Tennessee football and basketball. Early morning programming is simulcast from 5 to 7 a.m.

WINJ covers the Richland High School sports beat and airs the Vanderbilt football games as well. The FM station is currently airing "oldies" music on an automated system and the AM station is programmed live as a country music outlet.

For special events such as local election coverage and major fundraising radiothons, the two stations join forces with a single program source.

Lake has upgraded and updated most of the station's major equipment, adding signal processors and volume stabilizers to provide clear, interference-free signals. With the recent arrival of several state-of-the-art advances including a new main transmitter, WKSR's signal became stronger and clearer.

All music is now reproduced on magnetic tape and compact disc, replacing the traditional donut records and albums to improve music quality and eliminate the common problems of turntable operation.

A single staff of eight full-time members and four part-time employees operate both stations. George Martin, who had taken part-time employment with Lake in 1980 when ownership changed, became station manager again in 1984, retiring from that position a second time in 1988.

Ronnie Rose is now the manager of the two stations.

Martin has returned to a news and public affairs role and another long-time staff member, Nate Street, continues five days a week as Pulaski's morning personality in the 5 to 9 a.m. slot.

Technical maintenance is under the supervision of Bill Wiseman and Bob Plunkett. Terri Jones and Ed Carter comprise the sales staff with Rose and Street. Veteran announcer Don Eastep serves as program manager and personnel director, and the rest of the 1992 on-the-air staff includes Jim Reynolds, Glenn Lance, Andy Chunn, Dan Goodman and Andrea White.

Karen Gowan is secretary-receptionist and traffic director.

## **WKSR NEARS 50TH ANNIVERSARY**

WKSR continues under Hershel Lake's ownership to demonstrate a solid commitment to the community and his own personal desire to see both his stations serve local needs.

In recent years, the stations have generated hundreds of thousands of dollars for charities and service institutions. The annual January-February auctions have raised remarkable sums of money for such agencies as the Rescue

Squad, the New Canaan Ranch, American Cancer Society, National Foundation for Birth Defects and others. Free time and the human and technical resources of WKSR/WINJ have been generously given for a myriad of causes.

A commitment to technical excellence has resulted in the purchase of state-of-the-art equipment to enhance and improve the station's listenability as advances in electronics occur.

Lake himself has given his time to head such noble endeavors as the Martin Methodist College Giles County Scholarship campaigns, various Rotary Club projects, membership on the Board of Trustees at Martin Methodist, various positions with the Chamber of Commerce and Main Street and the Industrial Board.

Lake's employees will attest to the fact that he avoids negative interference in operation decisions and exerts no restrictive influence over the content of editorial and journalistic materials.

Despite earlier concerns in the community about a common ownership of two radio stations and two newspapers in a community the size of Giles County, Lake's style has been to own, but not to manage; to exhibit a presence without domination.

A philosophy which provides a reasonable hope for continued progress as WKSR moves toward the 21st Century and its own 50th anniversary of informing and entertaining Giles County.

In 1993, Lake broadened his involvement in radio by leasing two stations in North Alabama and linking one of them with WINJ and programming sports talk on the other. WKNI is a 5,000-watt AM located in Lexington and WFIX is an FM signal whose transmitter is located at Elgin Crossroad. From WINJ, an oldies rock format is now programmed through the leased FM station, to a repeater station in Decatur which is received on the FM dial at 96.3 megahertz. In addition, an AM station WAVD in Decatur also receives the program feed from Pulaski giving the WINJ fare to a wide area of North Alabama including the populous Quad-Cities, Athens-Decatur area.

The "network" is programmed live-assist during most hours of operation, but is automated in the late night hours to provide 24-hour service.

WKSR remains separated from the linkage of the FM stations and the repeaters and continues to operate as Giles County's local radio service. To provide full signal coverage for local news, WKSR and WINJ are simulcast in the early-morning hours. However, during that time, Oldies Rock continues to be beamed from WINJ's studios to the North Alabama net.

### **Music, Music, Music!**

The greatest evolution to take place in radio during my 43 years in the business is the change in music that has come about — specifically the emergence of rock 'n roll and its impact on our whole society. More on that later.

Almost from its beginnings, radio has relied on music as the staple of its programming diet. From the live



*Kent Gowan a former disc-jockey at WKSR.*

orchestras that supplied music for American's pioneer radio stations in the 1920's to the compact discs used today in most stations, music is the commodity that has tied it all together.

The phonograph record — as much as anything else — helped bring radio to small-town America because even the smallest operation could fill the hours with recorded music. No longer was it necessary to have studio orchestras to bridge the gap from one network program to another. Any 250-watt radio station in any place in the country could feed its listeners a steady diet of music — professionally performed on 78 rpm records.

My first exposure to radio was in the 1930's when our Atwater-Kent receiver brought us mostly network programming from places like New York, Chicago and New Orleans. It seemed that most of that music was played live by bands that were popular at the time. Guy Lombardo, Jan Garber and Paul Whiteman were big and had half-hour programs on a regular basis — usually played from some faraway ballroom described in dulcid tones by the announcer who made the scene sound like the Taj Mahal.

As a teenager in the early '40's, I was more captivated by the first “record shows” programmed by the local stations. The men who introduced the records were the forerunners of today's DJs, although that term hadn't been coined yet.

The announcers on WTJS in Jackson, WSM in Nashville and WMC in Memphis were allowed to play recorded music — usually for an hour or so in the late afternoon or early evening.

They chatted a little between records, but were not permitted to become too informal. Most of the conversation was about the artist, the song and the author of the music. It would be another decade before “personality radio” arrived on the scene with the announcer or DJ becoming the main attraction and the music often taking second place with the listener.

My first radio job was at WMMT in McMinnville — that typical 250-watt station I've already described in previous installments. It was locally owned and operated and struggled to gain an identity with the community against the superior coverage and familiarity of the 50,000-watt clear-channel stations that had dominated the airwaves for so long.

WMMT was an affiliate of the Mutual Network and, to fill the 16 hours of airtime each day, the station leaned heavily on the network. From mid-morning until late at night, most of the programs came down a leased telephone line and were put on the air — almost without regard for their audience appeal or lack of same. It was a matter of economics that the station had to survive with only three or four operators or announcers. They were all that could be afforded. In order for them to work the long hours required to keep the station on the air seven days a week a lot of “canned” and network programming had to be utilized.

In the early-morning hours, in the late afternoon hours, and about an hour before sign-off, the announcers had their “record shows”. Music was grouped in two classifications — “hillbilly” and “popular” — and never were the two mixed. Those types of music were the only ones contained in our record library at WMMT.

Hillbilly (country) music was played in the very early hours of the day, popular music was aired around breakfast time; an hour of the country music was played in the late afternoon and another hour of popular music was offered just before signoff at 11 p.m.

Eager to cater to the every whim of the individual listener, WMMT played requests and made personal dedications. For whatever reason, listeners had to write in their requests and dedications for the country music shows, but

were allowed to telephone them for the programs of popular music. This meant that the same records were played over and over again and the same dedications were made almost daily. "Dear Hillbilly Jamboree: I want you to play 'Peace in the Valley' by Red Foley and dedicate to my mother, Mrs. --- --- who passed away 10 years ago."

"Now, here's Frankie Laine singing 'Mule Train' for Mike, Ann, Jody, Betty Jean and the sweetest boy in the world, -----, as requested on the telephone by --- -----."

Personal dedications like that could lead to some embarrassing situations, especially when names were romantically linked that crossed lines of wedlock, but management figured it was a risk worth taking to impress sponsors by being able to say "we get 20 calls on that program every night" or "we get 15 letters for that show every day." What it did to or for the size of the audience I never figured out. It did seem odd to me that the record shows never seemed to have many commercials — if any at all.

Such was small-town radio in the 1940's and early '50's.

Small stations rarely had music budgets. They depended on free sample records mailed to them by the recording companies and that meant most of them were not exactly block-buster hits. In WKSR's early days, the music library was limited to perhaps 500 of the clunky 78-rpm records that were played on two turntables. Two tables were necessary so that one record could be "cued" manually and made ready for airing while the other was spinning on the radio.

Albums containing four or five songs on each side were just beginning to be marketed, but WKSR had very few of them.

My first days on the job at WKSR in 1950 soon told me that the station was making no effort to obtain the top records of the day. In order to have the songs most in demand at a given time, small stations had to go to record shops and buy them — mostly at retail prices — and that kind of expenditure at WKSR apparently was out.

The library was made up almost entirely of minor label recordings that had been sent to the station for free in hope they'd get played on the air, plus a stock selection of popular music that seemed to have been in the shelves for a long time maybe even sent from the first owner's station in Cleveland, Tennessee, when WKSR when on the air in 1947. At any rate, we were certainly not able to play the popular tunes of the day with any consistency, simply because we didn't have the records.

From time to time, WKSR would subscribe to a record service that would promise to keep us up-to-date by sending the latest hit records each month. Usually, these contracts were short-lived because we would soon discover we weren't really being supplied with all the hit music but were paying a rather handsome fee anyway. Sometimes, stations would make deals with record stores to be able to swap free air time for the store for free records. This also proved



*"Good Day!" Paul Harvey intones as he completes an airport interview with WKSR Manager George Martin in 1967. Harvey was in Pulaski as guest speaker at an Exchange Club meeting. Kermit Smith, president of the club, looks*

unsatisfactory because small-town record stores didn't always carry the current hits.

For these reasons, WKSJ played a hodge-podge of vintage music with only an occasional hit record we had come into possession of by one means or another.

## GILES EDUCATION SAGA TOPS LIST OF LOCAL NEWSMAN'S 'MOST COMPELLING STORIES'



I'm often asked to name the most interesting or most exciting news events I've covered during my 43 years in radio. Some people have the notion that certain happenings are sensational enough to actually provide a kick or thrill for the person who's writing or broadcasting them. In fact, I've heard others in the business use those very terms in describing the impact of some news event on them personally.

I must say I have never experienced such emotions while working on news stories and that's probably one reason I never progressed beyond small-town radio news reporting. I've never been much on confrontational reporting nor have I found any real enjoyment in working on highly-controversial stories.

The newsman who lives for a very long time in a small community cannot help but hurt when his friends hurt, agonize when he sees injustice or dishonesty, and have deep feelings about clearly defined issues. Learning objectivity and practicing it is the newsman's greatest challenge and one that isn't mastered easily. My own education in this regard was a long and sometimes painful one.

To the highly opinionated person, radio news reporting quickly becomes a bore because he or she doesn't have freedom of personal expression in the work. The story should always go straight down the middle.

To be sure, there is a place in journalism for informed, reasonable opinion. The editorial page of our newspapers serves a valuable purpose in airing the views of both the editor and the readers.

No so in small-town radio. Although there's no government restriction against expressing opinion in clearly-identified radio editorials, I am not aware of anyone who's been able to do it in small communities when volatile and emotional local issues are involved and still accomplish any good on a consistent basis. It's been tried at WKSJ but rarely with any definitive results.

Rarely does the situation present itself where the station can expound its own views on controversial topics without alienating at least half the audience. Maybe it's just a radio shortcoming; maybe stations haven't learned how to do it right, but the fact remains that editorializing on radio just hasn't proved very useful in the long run.

Having said all that, let me again address the subject of compelling stories I've covered in my years — mostly as a broadcaster, but occasionally as a newspaper reporter, too.

At the top of my list is the saga of public education in Giles County.

It began in the early 1960's when the State of Tennessee began to look askance at Giles County and its multiplicity of high schools — some of them with very small enrollment and very restrictive opportunities; some of them with poor and inadequate physical plants and with extremely-limited curricula.

As time took its toll on their buildings, as fires destroyed first the school at Minor Hill and later at Elkton, and as state officials turned up the heat in demanding that improvements be made, it became increasingly clear that the eight high schools' days were numbered.

When the school board began to try to respond to the state's ultimatums, it faced adamant opposition from residents in the communities where the schools were located. They considered their schools the hub of the community, they revered their basketball teams and they wanted both left alone.

Push came to shove, however, and demands were made from Nashville that Giles County bring up all its schools to state standards, devise a new plan to reduce the number of schools and build adequate facilities for them, or face the loss of state money to run the schools.

Various plans of consolidation were proposed and considered. All of them drew opposition in one degree or another and more than one plan was rejected by the state.

As the years went by the County Court authorized non-binding referenda on the number of schools that should be operated and as plans were scrapped, the school board wound up considering a single consolidated high school that would serve the whole county. That plan had been recommended as far back as 1962 when an independent study commissioned by the magistrates was done by Peabody College in Nashville. But it had drawn immediate fire and was put aside by various delaying tactics and counter-proposals.

The one-school plan proved to be a highly-charged issue with massive opposition in all parts of the county. As the School Board drew nearer to approving it in the face of the opposition, the feelings grew more intense. Since the overwhelming sentiment against a single school came from the rural areas where schools would be lost, the issue unfortunately grew into a county-versus-town fight.

Boycotts of Pulaski merchants were threatened, verbal abuse was heaped on board members and others who supported consolidation, and even threats of physical violence were rampant.

It was a very difficult story for the local media to cover. The county's two newspapers were divided on the question of consolidation and their publishers freely expressed themselves with *The Giles Free Press* supporting the one-school plan and *The Pulaski Citizen* opposing it.

WKSR was the county's only radio station at the time and its newscasts were dominated by the continuing school story.

Community meetings were held to marshal resistance against the closing of schools, and in many cases the tone of the speakers at those meetings became frightening.

Despite all this, the State Department of Education kept the pressure on. Although state administrations changed and the faces in the state department changed, the message was always the same — do something about your schools, Giles County, or the money will be cut off.

It actually came to that in 1969 when the county court refused to fund a consolidation plan the school board had passed. State funds were held up and schools shut down for the better part of three weeks. That set off a shrill clamor

from persons on both sides of the issue who wanted their schools opened and their children back in the classroom.

Ultimately, the court funded a two-school plan closing all high schools except Giles County High and building Richland School to absorb students who had formerly attended Campbellsville, Bodenham, Jones School at Lynnville and Beech Hill. Also closed was Prospect School, and high school students from Elkton and Minor Hill were incorporated into Giles County High.

It proved to be my most difficult news assignment — the consolidation fight that went on for more than a decade before it was resolved.

In retrospect, I did not always measure up to the challenge. Coverage was sometimes too detailed, with angry quotes from the most vocal of the opponents and proponents of consolidation that further fueled the fires. Radio editorials in support of the merging of schools were not well received by either side and did nothing to cool the emotional turmoil. It was a time of deepest division among the citizens of Giles County when nothing seemed to work right.

In retrospect, I'm still not sure how the long, winding, sometimes agonizing story might have been better handled.

And, I hope never to see that kind of strife in our county again.

## RADIO SPORTS IS VERY MUCH ALIVE



*George Martin interviewing Pat Head Summit, Women's Basketball Head Coach at the University of Tennessee.*

Many thought television would be the death of live sports on radio. After all, who can bring more vivid images of a ballgame to the audience with close-up camera work, instant replays and insightful analysis and commentary?

While TV is the unquestioned leader in sports coverage nowadays, radio continues to attract sizeable audiences and has doggedly stuck by its guns in presenting the major sporting events of this nation. Regional and local play-by-play broadcasts have held their own despite the presence of TV and the mushrooming coverage now available on cable channels. For sure, the sports fan never had it so good — in view of the variety of sports events now presented on both radio and TV.

Obviously, local radio stations like WKSR have modified their selection of events to broadcast. Regional radio networks like the Vol Network out of Knoxville and the Commodore Network from Nashville still reach large audiences in carrying football and basketball games of the major universities — and local stations still sign on as affiliates but, for the most part, local radio means local sporting events. High school basketball and football give stations the only exclusivity they can find in today's crowded sports field.

Interestingly, sports broadcasting is the most demanding aspect of radio at the hometown level. There's considerable out-of-pocket expense connected with going to neighboring towns to cover football and basketball. It also



demands personnel with some reasonable level of expertise to do the games.

In today's economy of rising telephone costs, higher gasoline prices and the talent fees required to staff an event some small stations have all but given up on regular-season coverage of high school sports. Such games often do not command the sponsorship rates necessary for the station to pay the bills and realize a return.

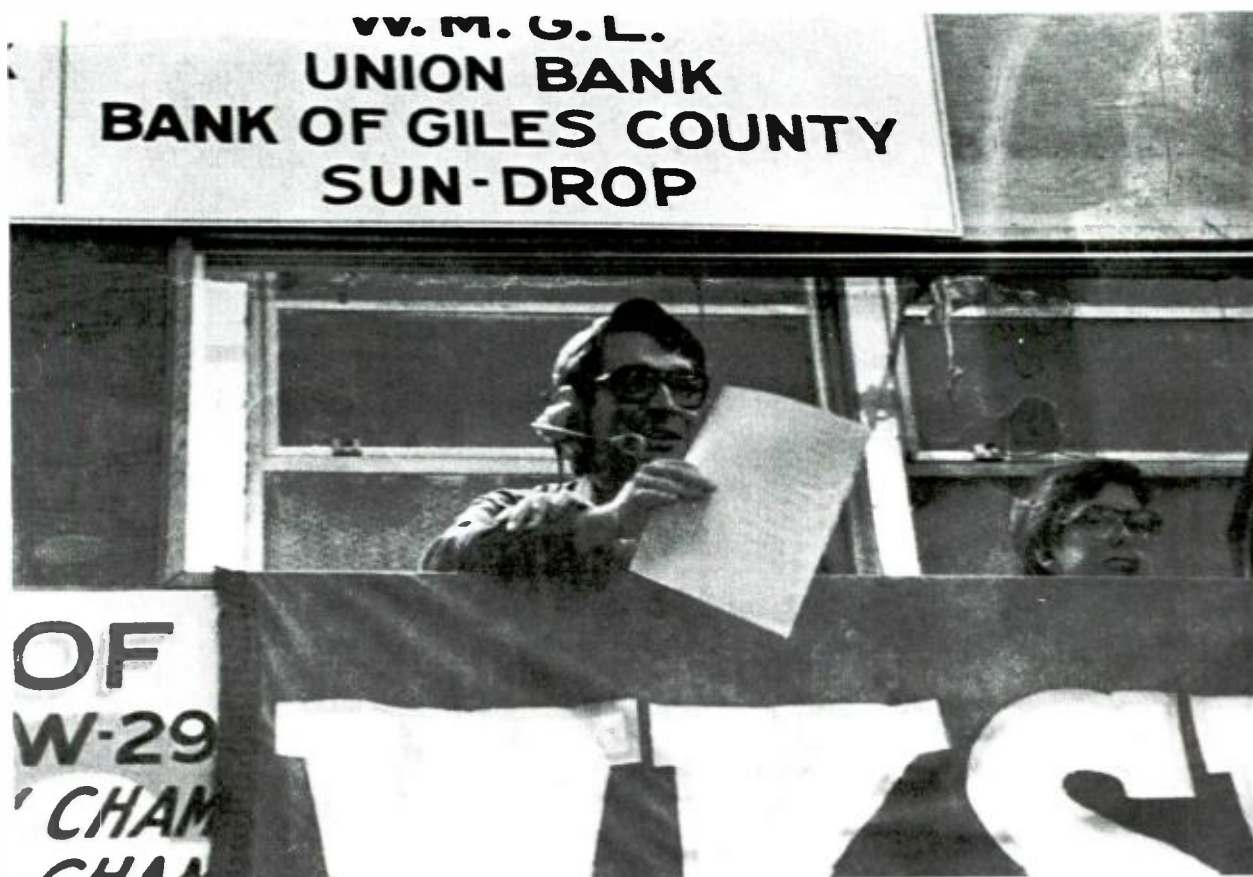
Approaching its 45th year of broadcasting sports, WKSJ still continues to provide full-season coverage of local sports. Its sister station WINJ, covers the football and basketball games of Richland High School while WKSJ offers coverage of the athletic programs at Giles County High School. No one can say how long this extensive coverage can last in the economic environment of the times, but for now it remains intact.

### A Shaky Start

WKSJ's early efforts at sports were primitive, to say the least. In the beginning, the station wasn't on the air at night and had to record the football games on Friday night for playback on Saturday morning.

In the late 1940's, recording equipment that could be afforded by the small station was unreliable and its capabilities were extremely limited.

My first hands-on experience as a sports broadcaster consisted of accompanying the station's play-by-play man Corky Hoover to Loretto to record a Giles County-Loretto football game. Neither of us had any experience in sports and were coerced by station management into even attempting to call a game. It was agreed that Corky would do the play-by-play and I would do the "color".



*Bill Holt is the play-by-play man for WKSJ in the local football broadcasts. His years in the coaching business makes him uniquely equipped for the job.*

We talked local businessman Tommy Harrison into going along as our “spotter”. In those days it was believed that an additional person was needed just to silently identify the players as they were involved in the action. The “spotter” had to search out the player’s number and then point to it on the spotter card that was made up in advance of the game.

There were very few pressboxes at high school fields in those days. We took up our position in the grandstands on the home team’s side — sitting only about eight feet off the ground with little or no chance of seeing the action once the teams crossed midfield.

At Loretto on that maiden broadcast, there was a flurry of last minute activity as we stretched an extension cord from the nearest electrical outlet, hooked up our Webcor recorder, spread out our spotter’s sheets in our laps and waited breathlessly for the kickoff. Corky had already confessed he knew little or nothing about football, much less was he equipped to do play-by-play on the radio. I, too, was a total novice.

At the moment of kickoff, a puff of wind blew through the stands and Corky’s spotter sheets went fluttering to the ground below. Harrison threw up his hands as if to tell us he didn’t know who kicked the ball nor who received it, because all our lineups and charts were on the ground and out of reach. From that futile beginning, we did our first sports broadcast knowing full well we’d have to listen to it on the air the next morning with all the mis-identification and all the wrong names, and all our other mistakes exposed for all to hear — including the players themselves.

For two or three years, we covered football games this way, sometimes with recorders that wouldn’t work, sometimes with the machines running at the wrong speeds and most of the time with inadequate preparation and precious little knowledge of what we were doing. The malfunctioning machines would present some hilarious play-backs with our voices sounding like Donald Duck at times and like Frankenstein at others.

I played only a backup role on sports broadcasts until the late 1950’s when it became necessary that I do the play-by-play. By then WKSJ was a full-time station and we were carrying local sports live. Since I never played varsity sports in high school or college, I had only a passing acquaintance with the vernacular of basketball and football. In view of the fact that I have since done hundreds, maybe thousands of games on the air, it may come as a surprise to some that I never felt comfortable in the sportscaster’s role. I never felt that I had the basic knowledge of the sport to be able to communicate it properly on the air.

At the same time, however, I enjoyed the contact with the coaches, the fans and the players. I relished the atmosphere of excitement and exuberance that surrounds sports to the point that I continued to air the games until only a few years ago when I gave up doing basketball and went to a second fiddle role on the local football broadcasts. WKSJ and WINJ have capable play-by-play men now in Bill Holt and Ed Carter.

Holt is uniquely equipped for the job because of his years in the coaching business. He’s capable of communicating more meaningful interpretation into the calling of the action than most sportscasters in small markets.

Sitting in the booth as statistician and sometime observer is more the role I’m suited for.

### One Who Excelled

During my nearly 40 years as a station owner and tutor of young people, I rarely encountered a youngster who had the desire and/or the ability to become a capable sports broadcaster. Since the work pays very small remuneration and is usually added to an announcer’s regular duty hours, not many young people at WKSJ have ever exhibited a

serious interest in sports broadcasting. An exception was Ronnie Rose. Beginning at WKSR as a part-time 15-year-old DJ in 1974, Rose soon showed a willingness to learn what little I knew about sportscasting and to give me some help in the booth. We started with basketball and progressed later to baseball and football. By the time he finished high school, Ronnie had become quite proficient at doing play-by-play and, in fact, was better at it than me. Later Rose did sports for WMGL and more recently for his own station in Decatur, Alabama. Rose was recently a candidate for a Commodore Network vacancy.

Earning a living in sports broadcasting alone is almost an impossibility, making it one of the least attractive fields for young people today.

### **A Wing And A Prayer**

Sports broadcasting at the WKSR level requires lots of ingenuity — and lots of faith. Until recent years, many high schools didn't have pressboxes where radio equipment can be set up with any degree of safety and reliability. At WKSR we have broadcast football games from the tailgate of a pickup truck, from a swinging platform at Overton High School in Nashville, from the back end of a station wagon parked at one end of the field at Centerville, from a rickety wooden platform at Hohenwald, and from the roof of pressboxes.

In earlier years such broadcasts had to be done on specially ordered telephone lines put up in whatever fashion the facilities allowed. I remember doing a football game at Waynesboro in which the phone company ran our line from a nearby residence, tapping into the owner's telephone and stretching the line across a street to the nearest grandstand at the field.

At Hohenwald, the line was once draped across a vegetable garden that happened to be adjacent to the football field. In Sparta, it was literally strung through the woods to reach our broadcast location.

We would typically arrive at the field to do a game about 45 minutes before kickoff. First it was an adventure to find out if the phone line had been installed at all, then to see if it was a working line, and then to try to make contact with an operator on a switchboard in Nashville who would, in turn, place a call to WKSR's studios and attempt to connect the line from the field to a line that ran to Pulaski. Before South Central Bell made its own advances and improved its equipment, live broadcasting from many places was a high-risk proposition. Line failures and interruptions were commonplace and it was a rare occasion that an entire broadcast went smoothly. The development of much more sophisticated telephone equipment in the last 15 years has greatly reduced such failures.

Getting the game on the air was rarely easy. Sometimes it was downright impossible, and oftentimes, the broadcasts were poorly done — but it was always fun.

The quality of telephone service is greatly improved nowadays. WKSR's equipment for out-of-studio broadcasting is much better, and the skill level of the broadcasters has improved.

And radio sports is very much alive, thank you.

### **WKSR GIVES FREE TIME, SERVICES TO ACCOMPLISH A WORTHY OBJECTIVE**

If it were possible to add up the total amount of money raised by all the radio-thons held on WKSR during its 45-year history, the figure would be astounding. Since the early 1950's, the station has given over large blocks of time to fundraising efforts for local and national charities and service agencies.



*This group played key roles in one of the many March of Dimes auctions held annually on WKSR. From left: WKSR staff member Ronnie Rose, unidentified official from the National Foundation for Arthritis and Birth Defects, auction co-chairman Jim Porter and Clarence Stewart and WKSR's George Martin.*

Typically, a Sunday afternoon is turned over to the designated charity, all regular programming is suspended, regularly-scheduled commercials are moved to some other day or time, and the entire station staff is called into man the mikes, answer the phones, and otherwise assist with the task at hand — all without pay.

For several hours, the radio station becomes a public utility in the purest sense of the word, giving free time and the services of its staff to accomplish a worthy objective.

The March of Dimes Auctions became a tradition in the 1950's and '60's. Volunteers from the local chapter of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis (Polio) collected donated merchandise or services from local businesses and brought them to WKSR's studios.

Beginning as early as 1953, WKSR would reserve a January Sunday afternoon to sell each item through telephone pledges. Most articles were of modest value and each was painstakingly sold over the air with bidders sometimes upping the ante by only 25 cents at a time.

The auction would begin shortly after noon and usually would last late into the evening — sometimes until midnight. The first such March of Dimes radio-thon raised about \$1,500 — a modest take by today's standards, but considered remarkable in the economics of that time.

From the beginning, Giles Countians took the auctions seriously and paid their pledges promptly - usually achieving 100 percent of the amount pledged.

Through the years, the proceeds of the auctions grew until the Giles County Chapter of the National Foundation came to depend on the Sunday afternoon event to provide most of its total annual budget.

WKSJ received wide recognition on several occasions for the success of the auctions. Representatives of other fund-raising organizations would attend them to observe how they were conducted and to model their own after them.

There was something contagious about the way listeners responded year after year to buy every single item and service donated. From the first auction in 1953 until the most recent one, the amount of money raised has increased each year.

The beneficiaries of the auctions have changed through the years. The Giles County Rescue Squad supplanted the March of Dimes as the agency for which the sales were conducted and in more recent times the New Canaan Ranch and Martin Methodist College have received the auction proceeds.

The growing response of local merchants in donating items now requires two Sundays instead of one to complete the auctions and the amount of money raised has now climbed to the \$40,000 mark.

The auctions still represent the community spirit that characterized the earliest ones. They demonstrate what can be accomplished, even in today's high-tech and sophisticated environment of fund-raising, when a small town and county participate in a worthwhile cause with a common goal.



*Action during the auction at WKSJ Sunday, January 30, 1977 which resulted in contributions of more than \$6,100 to the county's March of Dimes campaign. At the microphones, wearing some hats which had been donated for sale, are Nate Street (left) and George Martin. Standing at left is Jim Porter. Seated with announcers is Mrs. Carolyn Petty. Standing at rear, Mary Ann Hosay and Ronnie Rose.*

Each of WKSR's owners through the years believed the station had an obligation to make a difference in the community and to make the station's resources available without charge to make a major contribution to a local agency.

For all their noble objectives, the auctions are also just plain fun. They provide a unique form of entertainment that Giles Countians have come to relish. There's something special about giving a few extra dollars to get Mrs. Jones' famous jam cake while making a charitable contribution at the same time.

Items sold range in value from \$1 to several hundred dollars — from a homemade rag doll to an automobile, a new TV or microwave oven. From a handcrafted zither to a valuable silver coin.

Even with the increase in the number of items and services sold — and the significant amounts of money now raised — pledges are still paid in full. For three days after each auction, buyers troop through the rain, snow and cold weather to bring their money to the auction office and claim what they bought. Net collections still run almost 100 percent.

There have been cases where buyers of auction items actually had to go to their banks to borrow the money to pay off their pledge — but they were paid.

A few years ago, the local industrial commission was trying to find an occupant for the former Genesco building. They were dealing with a Texas businessman who, for some reason, expressed a desire to own a Tennessee mule. If they would bring him a mule, the man said, he'd lease the Genesco building and use it as a distribution point for his products. The rest of the story is well-documented.

A mule was donated to the WKSR auction. The critter was promptly bought by the industry-seeking committee, delivered to Texas and the Murco Company now occupies the Genesco building.

## SPOTLIGHT ON SPECIAL INTEREST PROGRAMS



*George Martin (left), representing WKSR, accepts the state's top award for media support of the American Cancer Society in 1977. Presenting Martin the award was the society's president.*

This series of articles has prompted several readers to remark to me about various programs that were on WKSR in years gone by — programs that enjoyed popularity and longevity but are no longer being aired. Some of them were typical of small town stations in the 1940's, 1950's and 1960's but were of the nature to fade as times and audiences changed.

There was a perception years ago that radio stations were obligated to air certain types of programs at a particular time of day to reach specific audience demographics. For example, it was assumed that the mid-morning audience was predominately housewives and that no other significant audience existed at that time of day.

It was thought that young people — particularly teenagers — listened to the radio only in the late afternoon hours and late at night. General audience programming was reserved mainly for the early-morning hours. The automobile audience was largely overlooked — partly because

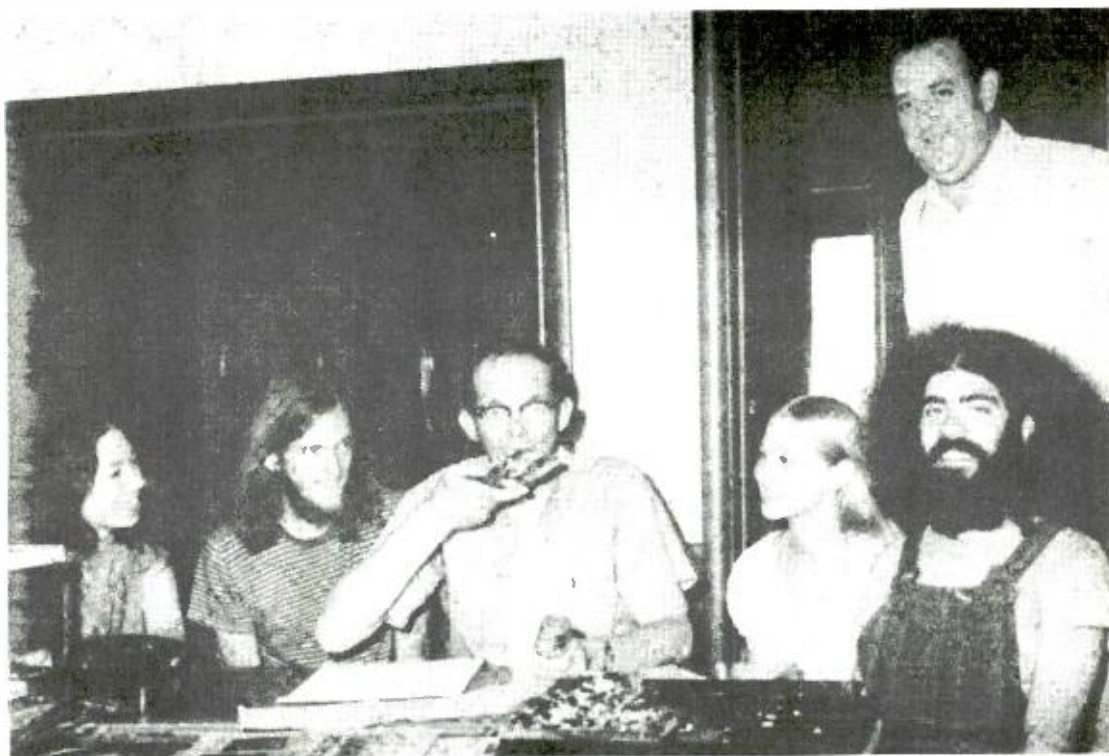
not every car had a radio until well into the 1960's. That attitude has certainly changed to the point that the moving audience is now considered one of radio's biggest potential audiences.

At WKSJ our efforts to reach the housewives were concentrated in the 9-11 a.m. time period. In the '50's Corky Hoover and I did a mid-morning program called "Here's To

The Ladies". It consisted of playing a few records, giving a little news from the UPI wire, making small talk about the weather and trying in our own ways to be clever and entertaining.

"Here's To The Ladies" stayed on the air until Hoover left Pulaski for Knoxville in 1959. For continuity's sake, I picked up the 10:30 time slot and renamed the program "Over The Back Fence". The half-hour show stayed on the air for about 10 years and had one of our most loyal audiences — mostly adult women. It was a program that left a lot to be desired from my point of view since it was extremely predictable from day to day. I had to pre-record the show each morning from 8:15 to 8:45 while a network show "Don McNeill's Breakfast Club" was being broadcast. We had no production room in those days and I would use the main console with all the functions turned in reverse to put the program into a tape recorder without slipping and allowing it to override "The Breakfast Club" and get on the air at the same time.

Taping the program also took the spontaneity out of it and made the show have a sameness that bothered me. "The Back Fence" trademark was poetry. As outmoded as it seems today, poetry read over the air had considerable appeal in those days. I would almost always put recorded organ music behind the reading of the verses — mostly inspirational and religious verses lent to me by loyal listeners or clipped and collected from whatever sources I could find.



*WKSJ's George Martin, center, samples a soybean pizza made by the California nomad group which visited Giles County in search of a permanent place to settle. The two bus-loads of scouts moved on after failing to buy a Sugar Creek property.*

The popularity of the “Back Fence” was testimony to the way radio was in those days in contrast to what’s acceptable today. Today’s audience would, I’m sure, consider such a show hokey, homely and hammy. Nonetheless, I made some dear friends through “The Back Fence” and was often touched by some of the letters that came in telling me how a certain poem or a certain song had affected someone. Frankly, “The Back Fence” was a program that I didn’t enjoy doing all that much, but one whose audience I respected very much. I always wished I could have done a better job.

“Braintrust” is another program that people still mention from time to time. “Braintrust” was an audience call-in-show that ran for several years in the ‘60’s and 70’s. It was heard at 12:30 each afternoon following our mid-day local news.

Nate Street and I worked the program together, fielding questions on any topic and then soliciting information or answers from the listeners. Housewives wanted to know how to remove fabric stains; some wanted recipes for certain dishes; others wanted information on current events or topical local happenings.

Much of the information exchanged on “Braintrust” was useful and helpful to someone but none more timely than the call that came in one day from an elderly gentleman. It was the day after Halloween and his question was “How do you get white paint off a mule?”

On another occasion, a lady called in with a question about a placket. I’ve forgotten exactly what the question was but neither Nate nor I even knew what a placket was. In his own inimitable way, Nate began to make some wisecracks about plackets that didn’t exactly fit the occasion.

An amused lady called in to tell us what a placket is and, in light of what had already been said, both of us became first embarrassed and then uncontrollably tickled. Each of us would try to continue and then break up in gales of muffled mirth.



*Nate Street and George Martin on the air at WKSJ.*



All that came out on the air for nearly five minutes was two guys bursting into guffaws and not able to say anything. It must have been contagious for we later heard of a listener who was driving into town for a doctor's appointment and listening to the radio. She, too, began to laugh and couldn't stop. Eventually the woman had to pull the car to the side of the road and sat there laughing and crying to the point she finally turned the car around and went back home, foregoing the visit to the doctor altogether. To this day, Nate and I find the incident funny but we always wondered — did the good laugh over our plight cure the good lady or put her back in bed?

## NATE STREET

Nate Street first developed an affinity for microphones when he was designated to be the public address announcer for the Sunday afternoon baseball games played in sight of his Wrigley home in Hickman County. They were called "independent teams" in those days — teams made up of men from various communities who formed a league and moved their fierce rivalries from ballpark to ballpark on summer weekends.

Nate gave his audiences a little more than the lineups. He provided a play-by-play commentary from his perch and, according to those who heard him, was pretty good at it.

It was no surprise then, that Street entered the Tennessee School of Broadcasting in Nashville a few years removed from Wrigley, to train for a career known then as a radio announcer. WLAC's John Richbourg and other Nashville radio personalities served as his instructors and mentors.

Nate's first job was at WKSJ when he was auditioned and hired by the owner, the late John R. "Happy" Stephens and his wife Beechie. That was in 1954. Street worked evenings and weekends as a disc jockey and first flexed his radio personality with a kiddie show on Saturday mornings when he was known as "Uncle Nate". "Uncle Nate", who was all of 21 or 22 years old, played children's records and read kids stories for a half-hour each week. He remained at WKSJ for almost three years, leaving the station in 1957 when the big market beckoned. He became a disc jockey for Nashville's WKDA, a low-powered AM station with a big clout in the capital city. The emergence of rock-n-roll music had spawned something known in the trade as "format radio". "Format radio" required a minimum of talk, no casual conversation whatever, a fast pace, and a carefully prescribed and controlled playlist of the hot hits. The style of the programming spawned a generation of "screamers" — announcers who pitched their voices loud and talked fast. Nate never fell into the screamer mode, but was adept at keeping the show moving and the music hot. Before long, he presided over the No. 1 rated show in the Nashville radio market.

The late Gerald Phillips, who had also cut his radio teeth at WKSJ as a high school DJ, was Nate's roommate at a Nashville boarding house, although they were competitors on the air. Phillips — later to become one of the nation's highest-paid jocks in the New York market — worked for WKDA rival WSIX at the time.

Still bigger things called and greener pastures opened up for Street when in 1958 he landed a spot on WCKY in Cincinnati. Nighttime radio was still a force of considerable proportions in '58 and that meant large evening audiences. WCKY was a 50,000-watt powerhouse that covered much of the entire nation at night. Mail was pulled from virtually every state and several foreign countries. From 1958 until 1962, Nate was known as "Stan Street", playing what would now be regarded as "easy listening music" for WCKY audiences. For much of that period his late-night programs originated from Cincinnati's Colony Restaurant. There he had the nightly opportunity to spin the music and chat with the customers, many of whom were high-profile entertainers of the era. Stars of music and show business people he remembers having as guests on the Colony programs.

Street's life in the faster lane came to an abrupt halt, however, when WCKY was sold to new ownership and the new boss announced a whole new direction for the station — and a new staff.

Nate returned to Nashville and, for a short time, went back to WKDA. In 1963, he accepted an offer from Columbia's WMCP as the early-morning personality. That slot had gradually become the top spot on a station's staff with the decline of nighttime radio, and was generally regarded as the most prestigious position stations had to offer in markets big or small.

Early in 1964, Nate decided to pay a visit to Pulaski one Sunday afternoon. WKSJ's March of Dimes Auction was in full swing and Nate hopped a train from Columbia to drop in on his old friends for a day. The visit turned into a job offer, and two weeks later, Street returned to WKSJ where it had all begun for him a decade earlier.

Skeptics wondered why someone who had been as far up the ladder as Street would come back to a small station in a small town. Nate's answer was straightforward. "I always liked Pulaski better than any place I ever was", he said. He moved into a log cabin on the Harry Bryan farm near Bodenham and settled in for what would become a long and colorful reign as WKSJ's morning mayor. 31 years later, he's still presiding over the same slot — 5:00 to 9:00 a.m.

Now approaching his 65th birthday, Nate says of retirement "I haven't even thought about it". Moving into town and acquiring his own home in the late 60's, Nate has become a WKSJ institution. He doesn't own a watch, and never sets an alarm clock. Yet, he arrives at the studios before 5 a.m. day after day, year after year, with hardly an exception.

Street's demeanor on the telephone is legendary. His "Swap 'n Shop" programs are daily "events" not to be missed because of their unpredictability. He carries on a banter with callers, recognizing most of them instantly by their voices. He'll casually inquire of some personal matter that lets his listeners know he knows who's calling.

Street encountered serious health problems in the late 70's when he was found to be severely diabetic. Complications from the disease almost resulted in the loss of both feet. Through months of treatment and therapy, and weeks of hospitalization and rehabilitation, the limbs were saved, although Nate's mobility was greatly limited and his outdoor activities sharply curtailed. For the past 15 years, his work at WKSJ has been on a part-time basis with the four-hour morning stint representing his main involvement with the station. He has developed a wide clientele as a sales representative for the Electrolux Co. and now devotes much of his time to that work.

Despite these curtailments, Street remains a staple in the listening habits of thousands of Giles Countians.

## **THE WKSJ STORY GROWS A LITTLE EVERY DAY**

This one is strictly personal. It's also the final installment in a series that began last fall when feature writer Johnny Phelps decided to put me in the archives of his "Giles Paths". My friends kidded me then that I'd become history — and I guess they were right.

At any rate, the series of articles about WKSJ and its history has been well received. I'm flattered that so many of you have said you read the stories and enjoyed them. I'm also impressed that a series of recollections about a little radio station proved to be of such general interest to so many.

My wife, son and daughter have long insisted that I should write some type of autobiography based on my long association with WKSJ. I've even received note pads and pens at Christmastime and told to get started. The WKSJ story is as close as I'll ever get.

I suppose you could say I got into radio as much out of curiosity as anything else. Looking back, there wasn't much logic to it. I had dropped out of college to go into the restaurant business in my hometown of Henderson, Tennessee, telling myself I'd go back to school if the business venture didn't work out. I guess you could say it worked out until I got tired of working seven days and seven nights a week and having only a modest return to show for it. My partner and I put the business up for sale and I figured I'd go back and finish school. After we found a buyer, I told myself I'd like a few weeks off and enjoy life as a single unattached man whose nose had been put to the grindstone for far too long.

It was during that leisure time I picked up a copy of *The Nashville Tennessean* — a paper I rarely saw — and noticed an announcement that some members of the staff at WSM Radio were organizing the state's first school to train engineering and announcing personnel for careers in radio. Stations were springing up in small towns all across the state and there was a shortage of qualified personnel to operate them. I realized that kind of vocational schooling

wouldn't count toward a B.S. degree I'd started working on at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee, two years before. Still the idea of radio was intriguing so I drove to Nashville to check it out.

The man at the desk in a drab building at the corner of 21st and West End didn't impress me much. I left with the feeling this was just another trade school that was springing up in the post-World War II years to qualify for VA training benefits that were offered to all veterans of military service. Getting veterans to enroll was good for the school because the school got the tuition money. The veterans also got paid a nominal sum while in training and so for many of them it was a chance to cash in on a little "rocking chair money" while learning a skill that might or might not come in handy some day.

In retrospect, I probably was right — the school was little more than a for-profit venture on somebody's part and I never found out who owned it. The only problem was I couldn't shake the notion that this might be exactly what I was looking for in a career. I decided to enroll anyway and take a chance. After all, if it wasn't for me I could always drop out and go on back to college like my folks were telling me.

In every person's life there are one or two individuals who played key roles in shaping that person's destiny. All of us can point to someone who made a difference in our lives — someone who helped change a life's direction and purpose.

For me that person was a WSM staff member named Jud Collins. Jud was the chief instructor of announcers at the Tennessee School of Broadcasting. He was a Nashville celebrity, holding down a key position on the staff of Tennessee's most prestigious radio station at the time when radio was the dominant medium. I liked and respected him



*George Martin was in charge of publicity for the Giles County Sesqui-Centennial celebration. He readies one final poster advertising the event as he completes his pre-celebration duties.*

instantly. He took a sincere interest in each of the nine or 10 students who enrolled in the school's first announcing class and seemed to want to convince all of us there was a right and wrong way to do things in radio and the quality of the work done on the air did make a difference. In short, Jud taught professionalism and insisted we pay attention to grammar, that we expand our vocabularies, that we learn proper enunciation, diction, inflection and voice control.

That's in sharp contrast to the requisites for today's operatives in the business. Showmanship, bombast, daring and cockiness are rules to live by in the bigtime DJ field nowadays. They're expected to be reckless, high-energy performers with a flair for the risqué and with little regard for grammatical correctness and un-accented delivery. Such is the nature of the beast today.

Jud Collins is still alive today, living in retirement in Nashville and is still regarded as one of the real pros who ever graced the Nashville radio and television scene. I may be the only graduate of the first 1949 class who is still in radio. I lost track of all the others as the years went by. Most of them, I'm sure, came to the realization that local radio jobs don't provide much security and most certainly don't lead to wealth or fame. My own life took some twists and turns that allowed me to stay active in some phase of the business but to also achieve some degree of security.

I still enjoy sitting down at the WKSJ console each day at noon and doing a half-hour newscast.

Each one is still the challenge of the first one back at WMMT in McMinnville where I landed my first job out of the Nashville school. In fact, after five hours of chasing news stories, making phone calls and writing the news copy,



*WKSJ staff members gather for a Christmas party in 1978. From left, back row: Ronnie Rose, Andy Hoover, Kent Gowan, Jay Jones, Harold Starks, Bill Garner, George Martin, Kent Kressenberg; front row: Joann Smith, Frances Erwin, Alma Ruth Myers and Cindy Williams.*

the 30-minute pause to read it on the air is my best “break” of the day. The way I see it, I’m lucky even to be working at my age, doing the kind of work I always enjoyed best, and having no other responsibilities or worries that accompany operating a smalltown station.

It’s a great place for an old codger to spend his retirement — this WKSR. A little radio station in a little town, but, my, what an influence and force it’s been on the community! Three generations of Giles Countians have grown up listening to some of the personalities and the programs I’ve mentioned in this series. If we’ve jogged your memory and brought back a few recollections of the good times, the WKSR story has been worthwhile.

Besides occupying some of my free time on dull, gray winter weekends, writing this series has helped me master my new word processor I gave myself for Christmas. Yep, I’m trying to move into the modern age by learning to use a computerized typewriter. Not easy, but challenging. Who knows, I may soon be able to discard that 1941-vintage Underwood manual I’ve been hammering on for the last 45 years.

Thanks to those who made some of the pictures we’ve used in publishing these articles available. Special thanks to the many who have complimented this effort. I guess we’re all into nostalgia these days and anything from the past looks good.

I’ve had letters, phone calls and other communications from former staff members, relatives of deceased members of the WKSR staff, and friends of our present WKSR family.

The WKSR Story — a story that grows a little every day!

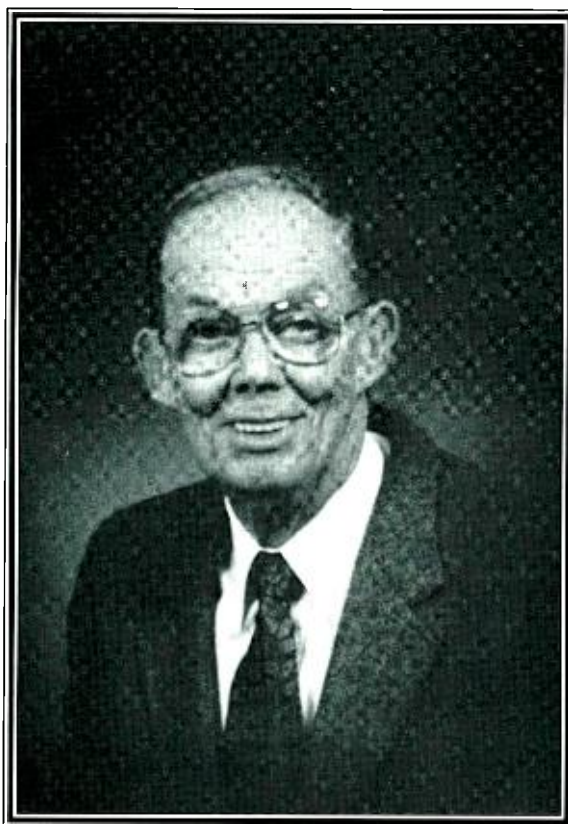


*Staff members of the radio station WKSR and newspaper The Giles Free Press proudly display awards received in 1970 for news stories and advertising promotions.*



**1947 - 1995**  
**...and the music still plays on**





## *About the Author. . .*

For 45 years the voice of Pulaski radio, George Martin's contributions to the community recently were recognized when the Broadcast Journalism Department at Giles County High School was named in his honor. A George Martin Scholarship Fund also has been established, with a scholarship to be presented annually to a senior from any Giles County school who plans to study communications in college.

A native of Memphis and graduate of Chester County High School in Henderson, Martin attended Union University in Jackson, West Tennessee Business School and was a charter member of the Tennessee School of Broadcasting in Nashville in 1949. He began his broadcasting career that same year at WMMT in McMinnville.

Martin joined the staff of WKSR in 1950 and has been there since, with the exception of one year in the mid-1950's when he served as operations manager at WHDM in McKenzie. He returned to WKSR in 1955 as program director and served in that capacity until 1960, when he took over the news department. Martin later became general manager and a partner in Richland Broadcasting Company, which operated the local radio station and a local newspaper, *The Giles Free Press*, until the businesses were sold in 1980.

Spurning retirement, Martin, now 71, assumed the position of news and sports editor until 1984, when he again became general manager. In 1989, he stepped back down to the news director's position, as well as taking on the duties of public affairs editor — positions he still holds today.

Martin also served for more than 20 years as sports editor of *The Giles Free Press*, receiving the Tennessee Press Association's Sportswriter of the Year award for 1964-65. For all of his 45 years at WKSR, Martin also has been involved in sports broadcasting, both as a play-by-play announcer and in various support roles.

Martin and his wife, the former Mable Hutcheson of Cookeville, have been married for 44 years. She taught for more than 20 years in the Giles County school system before retiring. Both are members of East Hill Church of Christ, where Martin has served as a Sunday School and Bible School teacher. The Martins have two children: Anna Claire Casey, a second-grade teacher at Richland Elementary School; and Philip Martin, an advertising and public relations executive in Nashville.

A member and former president of the Pulaski Exchange Club, Martin was voted into the Little League Hall of Fame in 1991. A veteran of military service with the U.S. Army's Second Armored Division in the European Theater of World War II, Martin is a life member of local VFW Post 4577.