

# Excerpt from 'Wisconsin on the Air' by Jack Mitchell

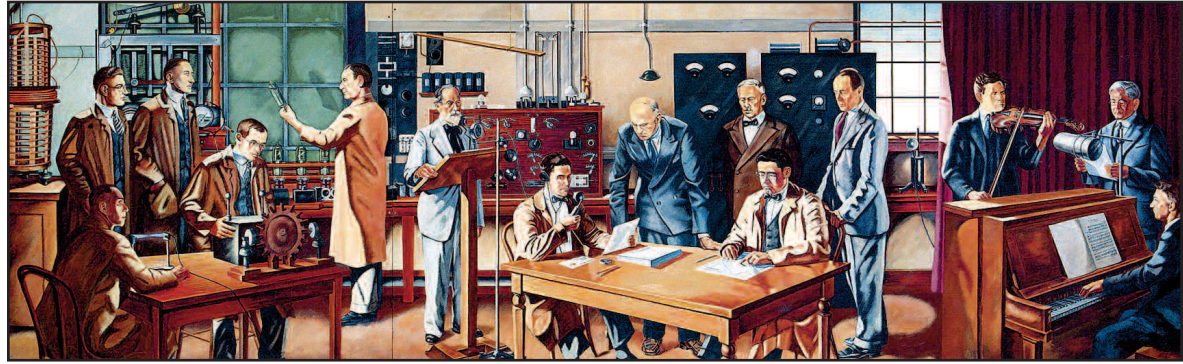
*Editor's note: The following is an excerpt from the book, "Wisconsin on the Air: 100 Years of Broadcasting in the State that Invented It," by Jack Mitchell, published by the Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2016.*

## Abridged excerpt From CHAPTER 1: Education Learns to Sing

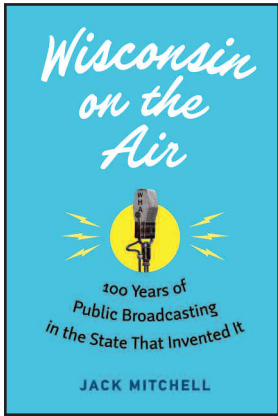
No one knows the exact date, but it happened during the first three months of 1917. Physics department assistant professor Earle Terry and his wife, Sadie, invited a group of faculty, deans, and friends to their home to hear the "first broadcast" of the University of Wisconsin radio station. For several years, Professor Terry and his students had been transmitting the dots and dashes of Morse code. Only the geeks of the day who shared their interest in radio technology could decipher it, but this night would open the transmission to all who listened. In Terry's Science Hall lab, graduate student Malcolm Hanson had rigged a telephone mouthpiece to capture the sound from the horn of a phonograph.

When his guests gathered, Terry called Hanson and said, "We are all ready." Hanson flipped the necessary switches to excite the wire strung between the top of Science Hall and the chimney of the old university heating plant behind it. He placed the phonograph needle on a record, and a receiver in Terry's living room began to emit the faint sound of a piano playing "Narcissus," a popular tune of the day.

The guests were underwhelmed. Years later, one of them said that she liked to think that all the guests "were as dumb about the whole thing as I was." Not a single guest realized that one hundred years of broadcasting from the University of Wisconsin had just begun. The lack of enthusiasm in the Terry living room that night matched the lack of enthusiasm in the professor's academic home, the physics department. Pioneer broadcaster Edgar "Pop" Gordon dubbed the department's attitude "scornful." The physics faculty prided themselves on the theoretical nature of their work and looked down on the "engineers," who sought practical applications for their theories. Using radio



This mural depicting the early days of public broadcasting was painted in the original Wisconsin Public Radio Hall, which still stands on the UW-Madison campus, behind Science Hall. (James Gill, Wisconsin Public Radio)



gear to reach a broad audience had little to do with the physics of radio waves, and Terry's colleagues punished his devotion to this peripheral activity. ...

The only other professor who shared Terry's interest in radio and with whom he collaborated was, in fact, an engineer. In 1914, engineering professor Edward Bennett received a license from the federal government for experimental station 9XM, but he soon turned the project over to Terry, whose passion for the enterprise exceeded his own. ... The Wisconsin Idea, extending the boundaries of the university to the boundaries of the state, drove Terry to push beyond Morse code and make broadcasts accessible to anyone with a receiver. Transmission of voice and music required glass vacuum tubes, which were not yet manufactured commercially. The only way to get them was to blow molten glass into the shape needed, install the required electronics, and then remove the air from the tube to create a vacuum. The process presented many opportunities for failure, but Terry mastered the techniques and taught them to his students. ...

Partisans of the University of Wisconsin's pioneering efforts in radio have proclaimed 9XM (later WHA) "the oldest station in the nation." This boast headlines the historical marker affixed to Vilas Hall, which now houses public broadcasting on campus. In reality, no broadcast pioneer can identify precisely when a station began. Each station developed incrementally, starting with point-to-point messages in Morse code, eventually adding voice and music, inviting people to listen to these "broadcasts," and, ultimately, producing a full schedule of broadcasts aimed at a broad audience. Wisconsin followed that progression. It was not until

four years after 1917's "first broadcast" that 9XM announced a limited broadcast schedule. It took ten more years to produce a full and reliable schedule.

Relicensed as WHA in 1922, 9XM's significance in broadcast history has less to do with being first to broadcast than with being first to implement a public service philosophy of broadcasting. The two great progressive leaders, Professor Charles McCarthy and

Continued on page 109

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