

‘Wisconsin on the Air’

Continued from page 108

President Charles Van Hise, died before WHA replaced 9XM, but their Wisconsin Idea dominated the campus when Professor Terry started his work in 1910. [He] embraced the ideal of the university as an empowering force for all state residents. Unlike the engineers, physicists, and tinkers who developed radio technology at other universities early in the twentieth century, Terry cared about the content his transmitter would broadcast. Terry understood that the real potential for radio was less about point-to-point communication (such as ship to shore) and more about reaching many people simultaneously, in “broadcasting.” He conceived of radio as a mass medium with receivers “more common than bathtubs in Wisconsin homes.”

Terry accepted the appointment as the first manager of 9XM, a parttime assignment, in addition to his other professorial duties. With no budgeted staff, he needed to enlist the services of other faculty and graduate students to operate and program the station. He found conspirators in Andrew “Andy” Hopkins of the Agriculture College and William Lighty, head of correspondence study for General Extension. Before radio broadcasting emerged as a useful technology, he “broadcast” useful information via available print media. When the Agriculture College created a Department of Agricultural Journalism to take over this function and to train students for media careers serving rural audiences, Hopkins became its chair and visionary leader. Like his peers in some other Midwestern universities, Hopkins saw radio as a better way to do what he was already doing in print. It was a perfect means of reaching the 190,000 small (seventy-acre or less) farms scattered throughout the state, particularly when the literacy rate among state farmers was only 60 percent. Even those who could not read English could understand it when they heard it on the radio. The station’s earliest transmissions in Morse code, and then voice, consisted of weather reports around the noon hour so that farmers could listen during their midday dinners. Market reports from the state department of agriculture followed the weather. Adding news from Hopkins’s agricultural journalism department created something like a noontime “farm” program.

While Hopkins served on the university’s radio committee for decades and his agricultural journalism department made the largest commitment to programming for 9XM/WHA, General Extension’s Professor Lighty threw more of his heart and soul into educational radio than anyone other than Terry himself. A very traditional man, [Lighty] sought to raise the cultural standards of those less fortunate in their tastes than he. Not surprisingly, his attempt to elevate tastes was not al-

ways appreciated by those whose tastes he targeted for elevating. In 1925, Professor Terry received a request from listener C. H. Alzmeier: “Give me something with a melody and you will git [sic] the applause.” He suggested songs such as “Carry Me Back to Old Virginia [sic].” He wanted fiddle tunes. “Fiddle don’t mean a VIOLIN,” he clarified. Terry’s response might have been written by Lighty. “Having been brought up on a farm myself, I think I understand quite well the character of the programs you would most enjoy.” But WHA, he said, broadcast only material of merit. “The air is overcrowded every night with jazz and other worthless material, and it would be quite beneath the dignity of the university to add to it.” He closed with the emphatic promise that WHA would never broadcast “old time fiddle music.”

Filling enough broadcast hours became an increasingly important challenge for Lighty. [His] concern was justified. In its first decade of operation, WHA’s programming consisted of the weather forecast, current prices for livestock and other agricultural products, and farm and home economics information for one hour at midday. The station returned to the air some evenings for an hour or two of educational talks, music appreciation, and live broadcasts of concerts and athletic events. The station needed to do much more to sustain its spot on the radio dial in the face of a frenzied gold rush for frequencies in the 1920s, when broadcasters realized they could get rich selling advertising around popular entertainment programs. A license to broadcast was virtually a license to print money and few not-for-profit broadcasters withstood the onslaught. In the view of the president of the University of Wisconsin [Glenn Frank] in 1935, the weak signal that failed to impress those gathered in Professor Terry’s living room in 1917 had acquired the power to become

central to the future of democracy, to a more educated nation, and to a better understanding among diverse people. For the Wisconsin Idea to have any meaning at all, it had to use radio.

Read the 100-year anniversary story of how the “Wisconsin Idea,” and the public broadcasting system that began around it, grew into the future Frank foresaw in Jack Mitchell’s book “Wisconsin on the Air.” Visit www.wisconsinhistory.org/whspress for more information.

Footnotes:

1. Roger Penn, “The Origin and Development of Broadcasting at the University of Wisconsin to 1940” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 1950), 128.
2. Ibid.
3. Mrs. I. F. Thompson to H. B. McCarty, May 2, 1949, quoted in Penn, “Origin and Development,” 110.
4. Penn, “Origin and Development,” 56.
5. Ibid., 52.
6. Ibid., 46.
7. Penn, “Origin and Development,” 35.
8. Larry Meiller, interview with author, May 21, 2014, Madison, WI.
9. C. H. Alzmeier to Earle Terry, 1925, WHA General Correspondence File, University of Wisconsin Archives, Madison, WI (hereafter cited as WHA GCF).
10. Ibid.

Summer trivia

Wisconsin’s official state animals are the badger and white-tailed deer. Its official state insect is the honey bee. Other official Wisconsin animals include the dairy cow (farm animal) and robin (bird).

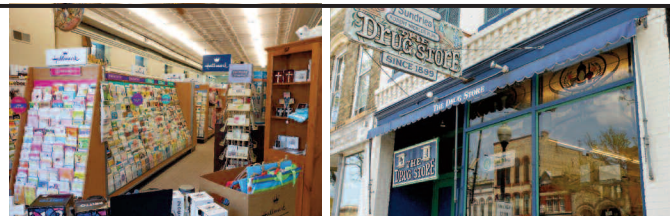
THE DRUG STORE

Mueller Drugs, Inc.

The Pharmacy With Years of Experience!

Prescription Delivery
to the Greater Jefferson Area

Russell Stover Candies • Hallmark Cards • Unique Gifts & More!



132 S. Main Street, Jefferson, WI • 920-674-5733

www.TheDrugStoreMuellerDrugs.com

Open Mon-Fri 8:30am - 5:30pm • Sat 8:30 am-Noon
Closed Sundays & Holidays

MIDPOINT



Eatery & Sports Pub

*With 16 BEERS ON TAP
and 11 TVs, Midpoint is the
best place to watch
Wisconsin sports!*



Happy Hour 4-6pm
featuring drink and appetizer specials

BUY ONE ENTREE



RECEIVE HALF OFF AN APPETIZER

1 Coupon Per Visit!

Expires October 31, 2017

385 Wright Rd., Johnson Creek • (920) 699-9174
midpointeatery.com