

CASE STUDY ONE: WMUS-FM and WKBZ-FM IN MUSKEGON

By the late 1940s, Muskegon was in the midst of a post-war boom. In 1948, the Greater Muskegon area broke the 100,000 population mark and statistics published in the August 14, 1950 edition of *Broadcasting* magazine showed 33,124 radio families. Muskegon had been a one-station town for years but that was soon to change and eventually four AM stations were licensed to Muskegon/Muskegon Heights with additional AM stations springing up in nearby towns including Whitehall and Grand Haven.

Grant F. Ashbacker, a radio pioneer and ham operator, along with his father, Karl L. Ashbacker, built WKBZ in Ludington in the early 1920s with 15 watts. As reported in the *Muskegon Chronicle* on September 27, 1991, "It wasn't long before the Depression severely affected the Ludington area, so (George) Krivitsky (Engineer) and Ashbacker, figuring that Muskegon was better off, loaded their equipment onto the back of a truck and set up shop...(in Muskegon)." WKBZ signed on in Muskegon with 250 watts at 1490 KHz in 1934. By the late 1940s, it was an ABC affiliate (with a secondary Mutual affiliation) and had studios and even a spacious performance auditorium in a building that at one time housed a church on Apple Avenue near downtown (the building, now vacant, is still standing and was occupied by WKBZ after a fire forced them from their original Muskegon location, the Occidental Hotel).

On April 13, 1947, Ashbacker got his first competition as WMUS signed on at 1090 KHz as a 1kw daytimer. It was an independent station with news services from the Associated Press. On April 14, 1947, the *Muskegon Chronicle* carried an article about the breakfast dedication of the station. It stated: "Scheduled broadcasting time on AM and available to all listeners in the area will be between 6 am and 7:30 pm." Then with much understatement that belied its real significance of history in the making it added this comment: "Evening programs available only to those **with frequency modulation installations** {bold type added} are scheduled to start in two weeks...." The two weeks was optimistic—it turned out to be four months-- but the first incarnation of WMUS-FM signed on August 9, 1947 at 100.5MHz with 3.2kw. (Actually it carried a pre-dedication program on Friday, August 8th; it was an All American Football Conference Exhibition Game featuring the Chicago Rockets). Twelve Greater Muskegon radio stores stayed open until 11:00pm so that people could hear the first FM broadcast and Stromberg-Carlson put on a big factory promotion for FM radios.

That summer was particularly hot in Muskegon with the mercury topping out above 90 degrees for much of August. However, the weather wasn't the only thing that was hot. Across town, WKBZ's Ashbacker obviously felt upstaged by WMUS-FM. On July 29, 1947, just a few days before WMUS-FM signed on, WKBZ made a major announcement. It was about to spend \$125,000 to build a new transmitter facility south of Muskegon on Pontaluna Road. It would include a four-tower array for WKBZ that would relocate from 1490KHz to 850 KHz and increase power to 1kw directional-unlimited (to get that frequency and pattern, Ashbacker took on and beat John Fetzer in a case that went all the way to the US Supreme Court in 1945. To this day it is referred to as the Ashbacker decision). But the big news was that Ashbacker would also build a new 50kw state-of-the-art FM station on the site. Then, on August 12th, three days after WMUS-FM officially signed on, Ashbacher fired an obviously angry shot over the bow. He took out a quarter-page ad on page three of the *Muskegon Chronicle* titled "What is Delaying FM Broadcasting?". Here is its text:

“What is Delaying FM Broadcasting? Simple lack of good programs, because Petrillo, the Music Czar, will not permit his musicians to play for network programs on FM without double pay. Thus those FM stations now operating have small audiences, and the public has not much incentive to invest in a new receiver when little more than phonograph records and news, both plentiful on AM, are available. When FM broadcasting stations can furnish the same high quality network programs on FM and especially in instances where AM signals are weak, with clearer reception, then YOU...THE PUBLIC, will have good reason to want an FM receiver in your home. WKBZ applied for an FM license in 1941, it was granted in November, 1945 (delayed because of the war) and now, in 1947, we are building a 50,000-watt FM station to serve Western Michigan. By the time it is completed, it is hoped the Petrillo situation will have been cleared and WKBZ-FM, as a supplementary service to Pioneer WKBZ, will bring you the same high quality programs from ABC and Mutual on both stations.”

(Note: The reference to Petrillo is James Caesar Petrillo, Head of the Musicians' Union).

Ashbacker wasted no time. In May 1948, (based on ads and articles in the *Muskegon Chronicle*) WKBZ began operations from the new transmitter building and tower array on the 850KHz frequency. At the same time, he announced the appointment of one of his vice presidents, Harold W. Kehlet, to be in charge of building the new 50kw FM station. The issue with the Musicians' Union that drew Ashbacker's ire was resolved and all four networks cleared their programs for FM broadcast in February 1948 as reported by an article on FM in the August 1948 edition of *Consumer Reports*. WKBZ-FM debuted on August 16, 1948 at 106.5 MHz, not with the promised 50kw but with 4.7kw. Ashbacker carried ABC programs on the FM station that he pre-empted on AM so that he could carry local programs and sports. WMUS-FM and WKBZ-FM fired one more round at each other. WMUS-FM took out ads billing itself as West Michigan's FM pioneer and a particularly caustic WKBZ-FM ad retorted, “At last there is something worth hearing on your FM receiver”. On September 26, 1950, the FCC authorized a license to cover a frequency shift for WKBZ-FM to 98.9MHz (reported in *Broadcasting* October 2, 1950) for no apparent reason and with no change in power. I will interject a theory here as to why I think they made the change. Ads for the stations touted the fact that they were at the center of the dial or the center of the bulls-eye as some ads put it. In 1949, Muskegon gained another AM station, WKNK, a 5kw directional-unlimited station at 1600KHz—in 1957 it became the legendary top-40 station, WTRU, “Sweet 16”, home of “TRU Chime Time”—and leaving the FM at 106.5 would have put anyone changing to the AM band practically right on top of WKNK and above WMUS. The change appears to only have been made to align the AM and FM stations near the center of both dials.

Both Muskegon FM stations failed almost immediately. All references to WMUS-FM in newspaper ads, program logs, and in the *Broadcasting Magazine's* Yearbook ended by late 1950. On March 7, 1952, WKBZ-FM turned over evening operations to the Muskegon High School to train students and shortly thereafter, based on entries in the MHS Yearbook, *Said and Done*, WKBZ-FM was entirely programmed by MHS for training and broadcasting of all school sporting events. During 1956, references to WKBZ-FM in various materials to include *Broadcasting* and the local phone directory ended. Michigan's most populous city on the Lake Michigan Shoreline had lost all FM broadcasting until the Fall of 1962, when a series of rainbow colored “Day-Glo” signs appeared on radio shop windows in the city inviting people to stop in and get free

information on FM. "Be prepared to Receive This New Hi-Fidelity Music" it said, as WMUS would soon begin "broadcasting FM Programs". WMUS was by then an MOR station that had been moving toward a more easy listening format and had even run a series of ads calling itself "the AM station with the FM sound" as Grand Rapids FM stations started to make their mark in the Port City.

On November 1, 1962, the reborn WMUS-FM signed on at 106.9 MHz with 2.85kw with a Gates FM-1-C transmitter. In 1965, as WMUS was about to convert to Country Music as "Top Gun Radio", it changed the FM call letters to WFFM. As WFFM it was engaged in an interesting facet of early FM broadcasting called "storecasting". While FM stations often used a Subsidiary Communications Authorization (SCA) to broadcast background music services (WJEF-FM's monumental 500kw power output was surely motivated in part by the need to serve John Fetzer's Muzak customers with the station's SCA), storecasting was different as it did not use an SCA but was actually the station's entire programming content. An article in *FM and Television* in December 1948, written by Stanley Jose Loff, President of Storecast Corporation of America, describes the first use of an FM station, WEHS in Chicago. The concept was that "the programs...for the stores will be equally acceptable in homes." An article in *Broadcasting* on October 31, 1949 indicated that WSAM-FM in Saginaw was engaged in storecasting and that WJLB-FM (W49D/WLOU) in Detroit was entering into an agreement with Consumers' Aid Incorporated, another third party provider of storecast programming, to begin storecasting for grocery stores. WFFM served the Greater Muskegon supermarket chain, Hasper's, a Division of the Grand Rapids based Eberhard's Stores (no longer in business). Simply put, it was a 100% brokered format, which consisted of background music interspersed with announcements, aimed more at shoppers already in the stores than the home audience. WFFM's programs were in mono.

When the FCC approved SCAs on July 1, 1955 and, based on an article in the March 1956 edition of *Radio-Electronics Magazine*, WFLY-FM in Troy, New York, became the first station to use an SCA commercially, the FCC sought to end storecasting. The FCC felt that, based on an article in *Broadcasting* on November 4, 1957, "FM stations must operate a general broadcast service to the public and that the specialized programming is not this kind of service." Several broadcasters led by WPEN-FM in Philadelphia appeared to have fought off the ban on storecasting, claiming that they could not survive without it and also charging that SCA reception had technical issues such as cross-talk that were not fully resolved. (Note: In 1978 WDET in Detroit became the first station in Michigan to use the SCA to broadcast spoken word programs such as book readings for the visually impaired, a service they still provide). Eventually, in 1970, with the Country format enjoying very strong growth on AM, the station returned the WMUS-FM call and simulcasted WMUS, boosting power over the years and eventually adding Stereo in 1975. Of course, no study of early FM can be complete without the "war stories", the heroic efforts to keep early FM stations on the air despite little revenue or interest. Here is what it was like at WFFM during its Storecasting days as told to me by Jack Maciejewski (K8CYV) then an engineer at the station:

"I recall the WFFM operation during its final days programming to the Eberhard Food Stores. They were only using ten 10-inch reels of music. The tape heads on the two machines had so much oxide buildup on the heads that I could not even find any signal of the 5000-cycle tone of the alignment tape. I cleaned about an 1/8 inch of junk off the heads and just barely found the 5000 cycle tone after considerable alignment. I suggested they purchase some new tape heads immediately. They were installed

about 10 days later. Everyone could not believe the clarity of the tapes even though they had been run thousands of times over the years. The sad thing that happened, about two weeks later they started to simulcast the AM programming on the FM, they dumped the newly reconditioned tape decks and NEVER used them again. What a waste of my time and their money. Oh well, that's the whims of broadcasting. That was in April or May of 1970.

The disc jockeys used to kid me when I first started there about the FM coverage when the wind was from the right direction. I noticed what they were talking about and had a tower crew investigate the antenna system. We found that there was an adjustable section of transmission line halfway up the tower. When this section of line was moved slightly, the transmitted signal changed drastically. The tower repair crew found the adjustable section of line to be totally burned open and only the charred section of copper line connected when the wind blew from the right direction. We replaced the vertical section with one that was identical and used with the horizontal transmission line that ran to the studio building from the base of the tower. Then they had fantastic coverage all the time.”

WMUS-FM retains the same Country format today as a Clear Channel-owned station, nearly 40 years after WMUS first adopted it. Muskegon eventually got its first 24-hour, full service FM Stereo station, WQWQ, in November 1971 with 50 kw at 104.5MHz (a web site with detailed information on this station, including an audio clip and a page from an early program log, can be found at <http://www.sxu.edu/~rogers/wtr/WQWQ.html>). WQWQ was affiliated with the new ABC FM Network, which carried news on high fidelity landlines in a style aimed at FM stations. Again, here are Jack Maciejewski's comments, this time about WQWQ:

“I conceived the 104.5 facility {WQWQ} for Muskegon back in 1968. We finally got it on the air in November 1971. It was the first Stereo facility in Muskegon. It was a most difficult installation, as the company providing the broadcast station package of equipment (CCA) ended up shipping the antenna on the wrong frequency. It was supposed to be on 104.5 , but was actually tuned up on 104.1. Needless to say, the station on 104.1 was not to happy when they also received the wrong antenna and burned it up during the tuneup process. The problem appeared to be a mixup in shipping the wrong antennas with the correct shipping labels. You would not find out that you had a problem until you actually fired up the antenna because the shipping label indicated the correct frequency. There was NO label on the antenna itself. Our antenna tuning unit on the tower smoked not just once but twice, because CCA felt the that they were positively correct about the antenna. It wasn't until we shipped the entire antenna back to the factory, that we found out the actual problem. By that time the other station with our antenna smoked theirs for the first time. That delay set us back about a month and a half.”

In the 1980s, WKBZ purchased an FM station, WLRQ (licensed to suburban Whitehall) at 95.3MHz, changing the call letters to WKBZ-FM, and used it to simulcast WKBZ and to continue the AM format on FM when sports events were carried on AM pretty much the same way that Ashbacker used the original WKBZ-FM in 1948. (A postscript is that new owners of WKBZ eventually went bankrupt and the stations were acquired by Grand Valley State University, which operates them today ending the WKBZ call sign that had existed for 70 years.)