

### **CASE STUDY THREE: WJJW IN WYANDOTTE**

In most towns when you mention a long-silent early FM radio station that once existed there, all you get is blank stares. However, that's not the case in Wyandotte. Enter the Bacon Memorial Library and mention WJJW, and you will be immediately guided to a historical reference section in a magnificent old mansion where you will be presented with a maroon folder containing lovingly preserved and carefully catalogued articles about "their" radio station, even though WJJW has been silent since May 1, 1951. The *Wyandotte News-Herald* applied for an FM license in late 1944. An article in the November 2, 1944 edition of the paper discussed their decision to seek an FM permit by stating that "The entire radio industry is fast changing to FM broadcasting." They also told of plans to join one of the growing number of FM networks that "will bring to listeners the finest radio entertainment that the nation can offer." It also stated that "The revolutionary FREQUENCY MODULATION SYSTEM {emphasis theirs} of broadcasting will be used, making it possible to give the listening audience clear, undistorted reception day or night...."

On December 19, 1945, the FCC approved an FM station for Wyandotte and assigned the call letters WJJW. The *News-Herald* immediately set to work building studios in their newspaper building. An article in the December 24, 1945 edition of the paper discussed the challenges of isolating the studio from the noise and vibration of the presses and the clatter of Teletype machines, but said that acoustical engineers were on site and using a studio design pioneered by NBC in New York. The antenna was erected on top of the newspaper building during the week of July 3, 1947 and on September 11, 1947; the 1kw REL transmitter began operating for equipment tests at 103.1MHz, having been first turned on with great fanfare by an eight-year old girl, Barbara Lee Gantz, from the Garfield School. She is looking with wide-eyed wonder at the window in front of the final output tube as she flipped the switch; they must have told her that it would light up real brightly and it obviously did. She was most likely the daughter of the station manager, Straus Gantz. The paper logged calls from listeners as far away as the Thumb and Cleveland and personnel from the station traveled to an FM clinic at REL where they were able to discuss the results of their tests with MAJ Armstrong personally.

The station formally began its 16-hour (7:30AM-11:30PM) daily schedule at 8:00PM on August 23, 1947 with a service contour that projected a 1,000 UV/M signal into Dearborn, Riverview, and Trenton, and a 50 UV/M signal as far away as Pontiac, Mt. Clemens, Monroe and Ann Arbor and which included most of Detroit. On September 25, 1947 it linked with the Michigan FM Network (see the WOAP-FM Case Study above) to carry that network's first broadcast. Here is the text of an article about that historic broadcast from the Mt. Clemens *Daily Leader-Monitor*, WMLN's (106.3MHz, 340 watts) owner:

FM Station WMLN, "The Voice of Macomb County" will participate Thursday in the first network broadcast in the Middlewest made by frequency modulation stations. The program, originating in Ypsilanti, will be aired 48 hours prior to the previously announced "first" FM broadcast, which will come from the Ann Arbor football stadium Saturday. Wilburn Schattler, WMLN engineer, revealed details of the FM station's latest "first." It will program the celebration of the 100,000<sup>th</sup> Kaiser-Frazer automobile, with talks by Henry Kaiser and Joseph Fraser from Ypsilanti's Charles McKenna Hall. This program will be broadcast by WPAG (Ann Arbor) and taken from the ether by WMLN at Mount Clemens with a special receiver on the roof of The Monitor-Leader Building. It will

then be instantaneously beamed by an antenna built for this purpose to station WAJW (*sic.*) (Wyandotte). This program will start at 7:30 p.m. and last 30 minutes. The triangular hook-up is the first attempted outside of the East Coast.”

Interestingly, at the time WJJW signed on, a piece in the August 22, 1947 paper quoted Joyce Anderson, the Program Director (who came to WJJW from WWJ-FM in Detroit) saying that “Network shows will be broadcast to our listeners soon ‘Caesar Petrillo willing’. The music czar has temporarily banned live music on the FM networks pending a union contract.” This appeared to be similar to the issue of carrying AM network programs on FM that I discussed in conjunction with WKBZ-FM in Muskegon above). WJJW’s schedule was reminiscent of the earliest days of radio with scores of local programs and remotes of every type, plays, concerts, homemaker shows (some originating from grocery stores), church services, a mental health program, contests, live music (in 1950 the station invested in a Wurlitzer “organo”, which appears to be similar to a Novachord device common in studios back then), interviews, newscasts, comedy shows (including “Two Surly Birds” which featured Strauss Gantz, the station manager, and Warren Lalonde) and municipal meetings. A second studio was built in Lincoln Park in the Charles Nixon Building on Fourth Street.

Perhaps WJJW’s most popular show was a weekly “Polish Hour”. In January, 1948 when Frankie Lane showed up at the studios for an interview two policemen had to be dispatched to control the “bobby-soxers” who mobbed the station. WJJW claimed that Beverly Norberry, the hostess of a program called “Drums in the Night” was the first and only woman disc jockey on FM anywhere. While an impressive claim it seems rather a dubious one to be sure, as other stations including W47NV (WSM-FM) in Nashville used women announcers as early as 1944 (see photo number 65.078 in the Library of American Broadcasting achieves showing Peggy McComas, announcer at W47NV on May 29, 1944; women often replaced male announcers on FM who went off to war). However, they were known as “announcers” and not “disc jockeys”; if this claim is valid it is likely so only on the basis of this terminology. Even the WJJW program director, Joyce Anderson, was on the air previously at WWJ-FM as an announcer, in addition to writing children’s stories and performing other duties for her previous employer.

The paper took essentially the same tack, as did the *Owosso Argus-Press*, encouraging residents to buy FM radios. As early as 1944 it reminded people that the expectation was that 750 stations would be on the air within a year and that “radio buyers are cautioned to bear this in mind” when choosing a radio (unfortunately, if they did buy an FM radio in 1944 they would never hear WJJW on it, because while the station was first licensed in the pre-war FM band WJJW never operated there; radios built in 1944 still tuned only the 40 MHz band).

Despite the obviously tremendous efforts that the operators of this station put into it, two events sealed WJJW’s fate. One was the construction of a second station serving the downriver area, an AM station, WKMH, which was licensed to Dearborn (1310 KHz, 5kw Directional-Unlimited)- this station later became one of America’s premier top-40 stations, WKNR, Keener-13. By then the Wyandotte newspaper was called the *Wyandotte Tribune*, and even though an article in the October 30, 1950 edition proclaimed that it had sold every commercial spot that week and enjoyed a backlog of advertisers on its FM station, the paper by then realized that FM was not succeeding. In fact in March 1949, it teamed with WKMH and supplied the news gathering resources as that station opened a Wyandotte satellite studio. In an article the paper wrote: “With

the advent of television and its vast strides, what little claim to recognition FM broadcasting had, along with their claims that FM radio sets must be purchased, has been lost in the rush to TV sets. Meanwhile, every American home has at least one and sometimes three AM sets and all automobile reception is likewise AM.”

On March 21, 1949, an up-and-coming WKMH announcer, none other than Robin Seymour, officially opened the studios in Wyandotte. On April 26, 1951, the paper stated that WJJW was discontinuing operations. Straus Gantz, the Managing Director, stated: “There has been a profound disturbance in the pattern of American lives brought about by this thing called TV.” On May 1, 1951, WJJW went dark forever. Eventually, Detroit’s downriver area played host to second hard-charging but ultimately failed FM station and one of the first to program Top-40 music in the 1960s, WLIN, Lincoln Park (see discussions of this station and air checks contained as part of the Detroit Radio History produced by Art Vuolo in 1971 for station WDRQ).

The scenario portrayed in these case studies was replicated countless times throughout Michigan and nationally. For example, here is a quote from the Mt. Clemens Public Library’s Web Site’s Local History Section concerning WMLN:

Another local media milestone was reached at 67 Cass on May 1, 1947, when WMLN-FM, dubbed the "Voice of Macomb County," began broadcasting from studios in the Monitor-Leader Building. The station, also owned and operated by the Macomb Publishing Company, was the first in county, and one of the first post-war FM stations in Michigan to provide regularly scheduled programming. However, as FM receivers were not widely owned at the time, the station survived only a few years, and quietly dropped from the radio dial in early 1954.

And so it went, again and again, until the 1960s heralded FM’s rebirth.