
NORTHWEST PIONEER BROADCASTERS

BRAKEMAN BILL - HOW THE PROGRAM STARTED

By David Richardson

Tom has asked me to recall some highlights from my broadcasting experiences, and how my book **PUGET SOUNDS: a Nostalgic Review of Radio and TV in the Great Northwest** came to be researched and written. I'll try not to get carried away, but I do cherish many fond memories of those earlier days. Broadcasting seemed so young, brash and untameable. As were we!

MY EARLY YEARS

My mother was a writer who, when I was about 6, got a job cranking out "continuity" (mostly music intros and fertilizer spots) for **KJR**. She even scripted what was going to be the first locally produced soap opera, but something went wrong--the sponsor backed out over a disagreement about television rights!

It was 1932, but everyone thought TV was just around the corner.

Anyway, I had the backs of those piles of canary-yellow scripts to scribble and color on for months afterward.

I don't actually remember visiting the station but mother's tales of it are still vivid. It was such a big deal. Even though there were no audiences, announcers wore tuxedos to work.

Broadcasting seemed the ultimate magic (it still does) and as I grew up I never really hoped to make my living any other way. Like so many mike-struck kids I hung around the Seattle stations and no doubt made a terrific pest of myself. My favorite haunt was KXA, which was in a sort of dog-house atop Rhodes Department Store at 2nd and Union.

HOW I STARTED AT KXA



Dave At KXA About 1943

One morning in 1943 I came down to the Rhodes store early to watch the station sign on. The night watchman knew me and let me go up, even though the morning announcer-engineer wasn't there yet. Sign-on time came and passed, and still he hadn't arrived.

I "just happened" to have my FCC ticket in my pocket so with the cockiness of youth I picked up the phone and called **John Dubuque**, the chief engineer, and offered to put the station on the air.

John said to go ahead, and somehow I got the old transmitter cranked up, read the sign-on and was having a fine time playing records and reading spots when John came huffing in after twenty minutes or so.

It turned out the missing operator was about to enter the armed services anyway, and had been celebrating his last days as a civilian. So I didn't feel too guilty when John offered me his job then and there. I was one week away from graduating from high school, and in seventh heaven for sure.

THE ARMY YEARS

I worked at KXA for a year before entering the Army myself, and war's end found me in Germany, where the American Forces Network was about to open its big European studio in an old, romantic-looking castle near Frankfurt. I put in for a transfer and eventually found myself in even more heavenly circumstances.

No amateur operation, AFN then had on its staff many professional announcers, actors, writers and directors, and even movie stars like **Mickey Rooney**, with whom I worked daily. **Roy Neal** (his real name is Hinkel), NBC News' West Coast voice for decades, was my boss, and grand to work for. When I auditioned for him he cut me off after a couple of sentences: "That's enough. I know an announcer when I hear one."

(Other AFN alums who retired in this area include **Johnny Boor**, formerly Chief at KMO and later with Channel 9; and KOMO's **Bill Pickering**.)

After separation from the Army I went to the UW while working off and on at KXA, KBRC, and the U's Radio Hall, where we produced radio shows that were bicycled around the state on transcriptions. (KUOW was still around the corner and KCTS undreamed of.) I even met my dear wife through KXA, she was the elevator operator whose car would take me to Rhodes' top floor during store hours.

Upon graduation I let a government recruiter talk me into a paper-pushing job that promised better pay and advancement, but it didn't take long to decide this was not at all my "bag." During my first home leave I went to Tacoma and got a job at KTNT, mailed in my resignation to that other Washington, and became a morning shift combo man again.

THE KTNT YEARS

This was 1952, KTNT had just gotten its CP for channel 11, and in due course I went over to the other side and became a shader, and then a switcher, in this fascinating new branch of the industry which, to me, is still radio--with illustrations.

In 1955 the programming powers at Channel 11 were looking for a viable children's program to compete with KING-TV's popular Stan Boreson and Sheriff Tex shows. They decided on a blatant copy of a hit Los Angeles vehicle built around a model train set, to be called the "Engineer Walt" show. The emcee was to be **Warren Walter Reed** (hence the name), by all odds the station's most talented on-air personality. Warren decided not to do the show, but by then the name had been leaked; so KTNT held auditions for a substitute "Walt."

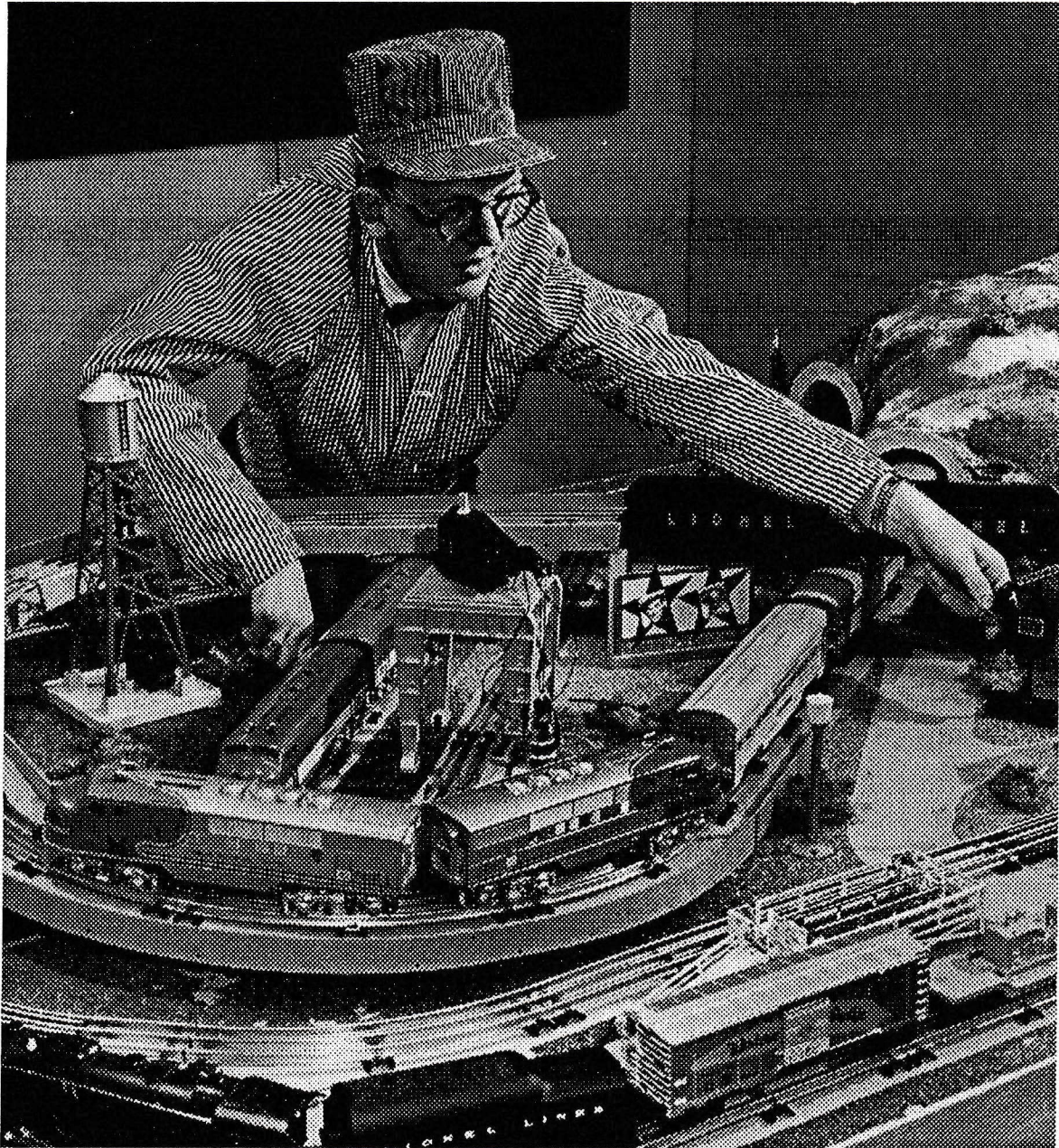
I was quite content working behind the cameras, but tried out for the show as a lark and was more surprised than anyone when it was offered to me. We built a fine, large outfit of 0-gauge Lionel trains and used lots of switch signals, telegraph sounders and other such paraphernalia in the set. Publicity went out to the papers, we did a number of dry runs of the show, and were down to the weekend before it was to start with the new fall schedule.

POLIO

With a couple of days to go my legs started to feel funny, and then I found I couldn't lift my foot off the floor. A quick trip to the doctor confirmed that I had contracted polio, one of the last victims in the last epidemic before the Salk vaccine.

At the station there was fair PANDEMONIUM. The management paid for preventive gamma globulin shots for the whole staff, and all the headsets, telephones, and other equipment I had touched were fumigated. As my paralysis

progressed I went into quarantine in the hospital and at almost literally the last moment **Bill McLain**, who had been assigned as a cameraman on the show, was tapped to substitute as my sidekick, "Brakeman Bill."



Dave As "Engineer Walt" On KTNT-TV



Brakeman Bill McLain and the late Warren Reed as Crazy Donk

Bill emceed the show for two months until I was well enough to take over but, though recovering slowly, I still needed leg braces and crutches to get around, was low on energy, emotionally strained, and simply not up to the demands of live TV. It was a considerable relief to me when Bill took over permanently in spring, 1956.

It's interesting that **Warren Reed** wound up starring in the show after all, following a somewhat impromptu appearance he made one day with a donkey-head hand puppet. Warren himself was never seen on camera, but was the manipulator and voice for the wise-cracking "Crazy Donkey," which became a regular feature. Bill McLain and Warren Reed had excellent rapport and it's amazing to recall their classic repartee was all ad-lib, and live. They don't hardly make 'em like that any more, folks.

ENTER CHUCK MORRIS

When Channel 7 came on the air early in 1958 I was one of several Tacomans who signed on with **Charles Morris's** engineers there. **Hal Willard**, who worked in master control, cameraman **Orville Dennis**, and I car-pooled to Queen Anne Hill daily for two years. I switched the live shows, including Brakeman Bill's new competition "J. P. Patches," played by **Chris Wedes**. Chris is another quick, fabulous talent, though his program was more structured and rehearsed than Bill's.

The Patches show was directed by young, talented **Tom Touhy**, one of the most vivacious people I've ever known. One day his automobile went out of control and killed him instantly. Sobered perhaps by this reminder of the uncertainty of life, and tiring of the daily commute and growing aggravations of city life, I began to yearn for my native San Juan Islands. On a whim I wrote KVOs chief engineer **John Price** to ask about openings at their transmitter site on Orcas, and spent the next 27 years at that blissfully peaceful spot.

MY WRITING CAREER



Dave Worked The J.P. Patches Show On KIRO-TV

Since the 50s I'd been moonlighting as a writer of newspaper feature stories, first for the Tacoma News Tribune and later the Seattle Times and other papers. Once established on Orcas I became fascinated with the history and legends of the Islands' colorful past and wound up Researching and writing the book *Pig War Islands*, which is still (I'm told) the classic work on that subject.

Following that success I got involved in a similar project to chronicle some of Alaska's more boisterous moments, an

exhausting research and writing task that occupied my "spare" time for years. When I was finally done with it I resolved to treat myself to a project that would be mostly for fun and decided a brief regional history of broadcasting would be enjoyable. The more I looked into it, though, the more I realized what a treasure of fascinating lore was there for the collecting. The "brief" history turned out to be a six-year project, culminating in a 192-page coffee-table book full of wonderful anecdotes and illustrated with a couple of hundred vintage photos.

I had heard for example that my alma mater, KXA, was once owned by rum-runners. Nick Foster had been their engineer at the time, and he told me all about that incredible era when "Aunt Vivian's" bedtime tales supposedly tipped off rumrunners when and where to land their cargo. Government agents finally raided the studio in mid-program, arrested the whole staff and put the station off the air.

Other friends shared their memories of personalities, bloopers, scandals and assorted shenanigans from the early days of TV as well as radio, and put me in touch with their old friends who told me more. Station archives and old newspaper and magazine columns fleshed things out a lot. Meanwhile everybody was ransacking attics and basements for pictures.

I'm indebted to broadcasting for a most enjoyable Working life, and to my colleagues for helping to resurrect the past so entertainingly in Puget Sounds.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dave's books are still available through your Northwest Pioneer Broadcasters. We want to thank Dave for donating to NPB most of his pictures and many notes and letters. He has been an invaluable help. At right, Dave, now retired from broadcasting, relaxes at his Eastsound home.

