

TV's early years included short-lived Bloomington station

Strange thought it may seem, in the early, golden days of commercial television there was an ABC affiliate right here in Bloomington.

Undercapitalized from the start, small market and small-time WBLN (“BL” for Bloomington and “N” for Normal, naturally) channel 15 never really had a chance. Be that as it may, for a few short years in the 1950s Twin City residents could boast of having their own local television news, as well as an assortment of anything goes live programming, from “Hillbilly Jamboree” to Uncle Ralphie and Randy Riggins.”

The station’s founder and first owner was Cecil W. Roberts, a Missouri resident who owned several small radio stations in the Show Me State and Kansas. Roberts first hoped to have WBLN on the air by October 1, 1953.

Temporary offices were set-up in the Rogers Hotel in downtown Bloomington until completion of WBLN’s “Television Center” complex near the corner of the Route 66 ‘beltline” (now Veterans Parkway) and Morrissey Drive / Highway 150. The “Center,” such as it was, consisted of a modest one-story concrete block building and a 450 foot broadcast tower (which on a clear day could be seen as far away as Funks Grove). The building also included two garage doors so local car dealers could roll in their showroom beauties for live commercials.

Yet construction, labor and equipment troubles led to repeated delays. At long last, on Dec. 6, 1953, WBLN made its on-air debut. The four-and-a half-hours of programming that Sunday evening 66 years ago included local weather and sports, as well as “Repeat Performance,” a 1947 film noir starring Louis Hayward and Joan Leslie.

Although station manager Jerrell Henry called the picture quality “pretty good,” many viewers said it was blurry. For their part, two area men who sold and installed televisions called the reception “lousy.”

By the following weekend, WBLN was on the air from 7:00 p.m. to 11:00 or 11:30 p.m. Programming included a half-hour of local news, weather and sports at 7:30 and 9:30, as well as a hodgepodge of offerings, including the 1930s serial “Radio Patrol,” professional wrestling and the syndicated TV series “The Range Rider.”

WBLN's reception and picture quality steadily improved (though problems persisted throughout the station's troubled history), and soon folks as far north as Wenona and as far south as Decatur were picking up its signal.

The little station began attracting steady viewers, but advertising revenue was harder to come by. In the spring of 1955, owner Cecil Roberts sold his struggling, perennially cash-strapped station to two Anderson, Ind. men headed by radio station manager Worth S. Rough. The agreement entailed Rough paying Roberts \$1 and assuming nearly \$200,000 in liabilities.

Much like his predecessor, Rough lacked the capital to make needed upgrades and investments to compete against stations in Peoria, Springfield, Decatur and Champaign. On the evening of Feb. 5, 1957, WBLN went off the air after the failure of a main power tube. Three days later, Rough announced the breakdown had brought the station's precarious finances to a head, forcing him to suspend operations an "indefinite length of time."

Rough then sought to get the station's fiscal house in order by raising \$30,000 through the issuance of stock at \$25 a share. At the time of the blackout, the station had a small but loyal viewership, what with programming that included "The Lawrence Welk Show," the popular western series "Cheyenne," and "Walt Disney's Disneyland." "Many who called us after we went off the air," Rough told *The Pantagraph*, "volunteered to make small investments in WBLN to get it back on the air."

But the stock scheme couldn't keep creditors such as General Electric at bay. At a late August 1957 McLean County courthouse hearing, GE attorney T.R. Schwarz told those gathered that "our people don't think there's any future for the station here." To add insult to injury, he also said the corporate behemoth "ain't about to take" 13 cents on the dollar to settle its accounts.

A debt agreement to GE's liking was finally reached in October, with a relieved Rough telling *The Pantagraph* that he felt "like the load's been lifted."

WBLN returned to the air Dec. 1, 1957, no longer an ABC affiliate but operating as an independent station. The back-on-the-air celebratory telecast included appearances by Bloomington Mayor Robert McGraw and other local dignitaries. The station promised lots of local programming, including twice-a-day newscasts with sports and weather, a weekly panel discussion on the Bible called "Thinking About Life," a sports roundtable featuring area coaches and athletes and other shows.

The station also purchased the “champagne package” from movie distributor National Telefilm Associates, and on most nights it would air two movies, the last one—beloved by local night owls—beginning at 10:30 p.m.

Yet the resurrection was short-lived. The station went off the air yet again on Jun. 5, 1958. This time there would be no comeback. The ignoble end came in late November 1960 when WBLN directors agreed to liquidate the remaining assets of the “non-operating” station.

Much of this story is covered in Doug Quick’s fascinating book *Pictures on the Prairie: The First Ten Years of Mid-Illinois Television*, which came out last year. Many will know Quick from his career as a Central Illinois television and radio personality. He’s currently a weathercaster and anchor on WCCU, FOX-Channel 27 out of Champaign.

It’s a shame that so little of the early years of small city television—the richness and eccentricity of local programming—survives today. Oh what untold treasures have been lost to time! Take for instance WBLN’s “Hillbilly Jamboree,” which aired for a while on Wednesday evenings from 8:00 to 9:00. An advertisement from early December 1957 promised appearances by “Uncle Johnny Barton, Clara Mae and all the ‘Hillbilly Jamboree’ gang.” The show was sponsored by Clay Dooley tire and auto, Marben’s, a downtown Bloomington men’s clothier, and the Bloomington Livestock Pavilion.

Jack Keefe, Bloomington resident and current compiler of *The Pantagraph*’s popular daily feature “How Time Flies,” remembers as a seven or eight-year-old being a guest on WBLN’s “Uncle Ralphie and Randy Riggins,” a children’s show featuring a ventriloquist act. Randy, Jack tells us, was the dummy.