

Barely a year after the Great War (World War I) mercifully ended, the commercial radio era commenced in America when the Westinghouse Corporation received the first Government license for a commercial radio station, KDKA, in Pittsburgh. Less than a year later Westinghouse started broadcasting in Chicago at station KYW, the first station in Chicago. Within months, hundreds of small radio stations were broadcasting across America but mostly in the Eastern more populated half. Americans were fascinated by the “box with sound in it” just as they had been fascinated two decades earlier by pictures that moved when a viewer looked into a box built by Thomas Edison. Yet neither the radio broadcaster nor the radio listener was too sure what radio was supposed to be. It was the technology that fascinated them not the programming. One Chicagoan immediately saw radio not as a novelty but as a grand opportunity and he would become America’s first radio star: Wendell Hall.

Wendell Woods Hall was a young musician, song composer, singer and war veteran working in Chicago for a music publisher, Ted Browne, as a song-plugger. Prior to the war, Hall had had some local success as an entertainer known as “the singing xylophonist.” One day in early 1922 while working in a loop music store, someone had a radio and demonstrated it for Hall. Hall immediately realized how this technology could change the world; at least his world. Hall spent his day trying to sell music by singing to people who came to him but with radio he, in effect, would be going to them. Wendell Hall resolved to become a radio singer and a store song-plugger no more. Hall evidently possessed musical talent as well as karmic perfect timing. When Hall went to KYW, Chicago’s first radio broadcaster had been on the air only half a year and had broadcast nothing but the Chicago Civic Opera with its popular native diva Mary Garden; but the opera season was ending, forcing the station to look for something else to broadcast just as Wendell Hall arrived. As a published composer and veteran of the live music circuits, Hall had credentials and he was more than willing to work for nothing. After the opera season ended in spring 1922, Wendell Hall, the singing xylophonist, premiered on KYW with several other local singer-entertainers. Several days after the broadcast, mail arriving at KYW’s studio indicated it was Wendell Hall who had had the most audience impact. Hall already knew that because the day after his broadcast, sales of his sheet music in the Loop music stores had significantly increased. Wendell Hall had become Chicago’s first radio star.

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Besides the emphasis on program content over star power, there was another less marked but still significant difference in Chicago radio in comparison to the industry in New York or Los Angeles: women were far more prevalent in positions of creative control and ownership in Chicago than on either coast. The largest producer of nationally broadcast radio programs in the first decade of radio was Blackett-Sample-Hummert in Chicago. The programs were not all owned by the agency some, especially when done for WGN, were owned by the station and many were owned by the sponsoring company. Frank Hummert was the man behind the business but Anne Hummert appeared to be the woman in control of the programs, especially the dramas. It was more often Anne Ashenhurst Hummert who gave direction to the writers, directors and cast of a radio program than Frank. A magazine reporter trying to get information about the reclusive Hummerts reported that Anne had become ill from lack of sleep because she would dictate story-plots in her bedroom

into a Dictaphone during the night. Her doctor insisted the Dictaphone had to come out of the bedroom if she was to regain her health. The archive records of NBC never mention Anne Hummert; their battles were always with Frank. Frank Hummert was the business genius, the Mogul, while Anne was the woman behind the throne who actually made the dramas what they were, for better or worse, they entertained the nation.

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The network era for television in Chicago began on September 20th, 1948 when the large cities of the Midwest were connected to each other via A.T. & T.'s coaxial cable system with just two Chicago stations participating: WGN and WENR (ABC). NBC's transmitter was not yet operational so their programs coming from St. Louis weren't seen in Chicago. Paramount which had no other stations in the Midwest besides WBKB was not involved. There was still a gap in the system that prevented transmission any further east than Cleveland. The first program produced in Chicago and sent out over a network was a puppet show, *Art Nelson's Marionette Theater* starring Art Brody a puppet proprietor of a record, radio and television shop, produced at WGN. The first ABC program transmitted out of Chicago was the genteel storytelling panel show: *Stump the Authors*. The first cables in the network only had the capacity to transmit one program each way at a time. Thus the two stations had to alternate program transmission instead of broadcasting simultaneously as normal. Both WGN and ABC followed these programs with standard Vaudeville style variety shows with a bill of music, comedy, puppetry and dance. The September, 1948 Midwest Network premiere was not the inauguration of a new programming initiative but just the introduction of a coming technology held concurrent with the National Television and Electrical Living convention being held in Chicago. It was a showcase to present a product to a new market and Chicago's video maestros felt most comfortable offering a children's show, a panel game show and a variety show.

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Lessons Learned from History

“It is fascinating, now, to see history repeating itself in this new dimension of sight that has been added to blind radio. For while Hollywood rushes to film, and New York frantically tries to force the theatre through the cathode tube, Chicago almost alone has recognized a new art form for the television medium. The Chicago *Garroway* variety television show stands out in sharp contrast to the frantic Berle imitation of the Palace two-a-day; it recognizes the relaxed intimacy of the television viewers' attitudes. Where Chicago radio discovered that the listener was as close to the performer as the microphone was to the performer (hence the projection of the New York theatre-type acting made for listener discomfort) so Chicago television underlines a similar truth--that the television viewer is only a handful of feet from the performer, intimacy, again, is the keynote.”

And so wrote Arch Oboler, born and raised in Chicago, writer, director and producer of network radio programs, in an article for *Theatre Arts* magazine in 1951. He was not the first to publicly make this observation of Chicago-based producers' creativity in program production. In October of 1950, Jules Herbuveaux, who would become legendary as the head of NBC's Chicago television station, wrote an article published in the *Chicago Tribune* describing Chicago's success in television program production and he made the same point as Oboler: "At the outset, it was easy to see that television in the Hollywood manner was simply a case of the motion picture industry adapting its techniques to the new medium. New York, on the other hand, had a tradition of stagecraft which it immediately applied to TV. Having nothing but radio to bother us here, we were probably more plastic in our thinking about television; we assumed that it was something new, and that it was necessary to produce along new lines of thought to make it really work."

Jules Herbuveaux referred to television program production in Chicago as "the Chicago touch" while some television critics called it the "Chicago Style" or the "Chicago School." Certainly there was a perceptual difference between entertainment programming that originated in Chicago both in radio or television to that which originated in New York. Yet Oboler and Herbuveaux's supposition doesn't explain why New York programs like Milton Berle's, Ed Sullivan's, Red Skelton's which was clearly Vaudeville forced through the cathode ray tube were so immensely popular. Or why similar programs, like the *Jack Carter Show* or the *Wayne King Show*, done in Chicago failed? Or why Arch Oboler who was so successful in radio production failed in his television efforts? Or why Chicago had been the leading center of radio production but in television, the industry was losing national market-share at the very time Oboler and Herbuveaux were singing its praises?

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