

SCBA at 60

Celebrating 60 Years of Service

By Professor Haney Howell

The popular movie title "Back to the Future" could sum up the South Carolina Broadcasters Association as it reaches its 60th year. Born a few years after World War II, broadcasters in the state knew they must band together to survive and thrive. They faced a wide-open future; many new stations were on the air or being planned, they knew that television was just down the road, and there were threats to broadcasters from other media and the political process.

The same is true today. HD television and radio, new technologies, new rules and an exciting but uncertain future continues to be the challenge. In this look back, we'll explore how the Association and its leaders and membership fought those battles, raising broadcasting in the state to the high standard we know today.

The SCBA Archives, located in the McKissick Museum at the University of South Carolina, is filled with fascinating historical items. The purpose of the 60th Anniversary History Project is to supplement the current collection with new materials and several dozen interviews with major figures in South Carolina broadcast history. The archive staff is in the process of transferring the older taped interviews to digital, and DVDs of the recent interviews along with transcripts are available as well. You can find a listing of items contributed to the project at www.scba.net.

Broadcasting is unique in many ways. To start a newspaper or magazine, all you need is a press and financial backing. To start a radio or television station,

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you must obtain a license from the Federal Government, at no time an easy task.

The "Pioneers" of the SCBA witnessed the birth of broadcasting in the United States. From scratchy Morse code, unlicensed stations and an amateur hobby turned serious, radio exploded in the minds of Americans in the late 1920s. Men of vision like General Robert Sarnoff foresaw the day that point-to-point radio communication would become a "music box", providing free entertainment and a reason for the consumer to buy his company's radio receivers. As a form of mass communication, radio stations could not control who received the signal, thus the term "broadcasting", a reference to farmers seeding their fields.

At least eight stations were approved in South Carolina in the early part of the decade, including ones in Clemson, Charleston, Anderson and Greenville. However, all of these early stations didn't last. WBT in Charlotte first broadcast in 1922, and managed to survive and finally gained a 50KW signal on the directional frequency 1110 KHz.

To gain control of the airwaves, Congress passed the Radio Act of 1927 and formed the Federal Radio Commission, which became the Federal Communications Commission in 1934. It set the frequencies for the AM broadcast band between 550 KHz and 1500 KHz, with 50 KHz spacing in each market. It also established the criteria of "public interest, convenience and/or necessity" for granting licenses. (History of the Mass Media in the United States, 1998).

Many early stations were forced off the air or moved, and frequencies were assigned with the intent of minimizing interference. While surviving stations were few, most were powerful and could be heard afar, especially at night.

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Stations like KDKA in Pittsburgh, which is thought to be the first station to broadcast on a schedule; WSB in Atlanta and WBT in Charlotte soon became staples in the living rooms of America. This country was mostly rural, and radio broke the isolation for many people, including the housewife doing her daily chores, providing the break from a hard day's labor with musical shows and baseball games. Compared to North Carolina, South Carolina was behind by a few years. Three North Carolina stations signed on before any appeared in the Palmetto State.

The new decade of the 1930s saw radio finally established in South Carolina. On February 17, 1930, WSPA signed on from Spartanburg. WCSC in Charleston took to the air on May 8th and WIS in Columbia, the last station in the nation to receive a treasured three-letter call sign, soon followed on July 10th. While they each dominated their local audience, they faced major hurdles. How did you fill the broadcast day?

Recordings were still in their infancy, and years of legal battles followed over the use of recorded music on the radio, just as the current battle over Internet music downloads dominate the courtrooms today. Stations fought battles with newspapers over the broadcast of news and the use of the wire services. Conflicts over music licensing with ASCAP saw stations airing only songs in the public domain. Many of the stations joined the fledging radio networks, NBC Red, NBC Blue, CBS and Mutual. This provided long form programming and specials that helped fill their days and nights. The half hour and hour-long format soon set the standard for radio broadcasts both nationally and locally.

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By the end of the decade these premier stations were joined by WFBC in Greenville (1933), WAIM, Anderson (1935), WOLS Florence (1937) and WTMA in Charleston (1939). Interviews with many of the early broadcast pioneers are part of the Thomas Howard Collection in the SCBA Archives. They tell of long performances by local musicians and orchestras, and the scramble to fill the hours of the long broadcast day. There were technical hurdles to overcome, and there was a constant shuffle of frequencies as stations tried to improve their coverage and avoid interference. Personalities were born, and South Carolina listeners soon identified with the voices coming out of their radio as friends and trusted companions.

Former president and Hall of Fame member Frank Harden is proud of the impact of WIS Radio. "Whatever came along WIS was right at the front of it, because at the time, there really wasn't a great deal of competition around in broadcasting. The only real competition was The State Newspaper." (Interview, July 10, 2007).

As radio was inventing itself, The National Association of Broadcasters was founded in 1923 to represent radio stations in Washington and the states. Broadcasters quickly realized that Congress would regulate every aspect of their business unless they could show a commitment to quality programming and service to the community. Thus was born the NAB Code of Ethics, which clearly spells out the obligations of broadcasters to their audiences. It also specified the number of commercials allowed each hour. The clear need for a national voice planted the seed for a similar organization at the state level.

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There was another flurry of stations in the early 1940s. WCOS Columbia, WORD Spartanburg, WMRC in Greenville, WFIG in Sumter and WCRS in Greenwood all made it on the air before the start of World War Two. The addition of WORD and WMRC to WSPA and WFBC made the Greenville-Spartanburg market the first competitive market in the state. Many other towns wanted a station, but the war slowed the licensing process to a crawl.

WRHI in Rock Hill was the exception. Founder Jim Beatty continued to push the application during the war years, and the station aired for the first time on December 14, 1944. As part of their 60th anniversary celebration, WRHI recreated the first day and brought back several of the original announcers for the station.

Buddy Fields was the morning host on WRHI for the first 20 years, and he remembered the early days. "The equipment we worked with, Jim Beatty built it from scratch. There was a mixing board but it didn't have switches on it. You brought up the pots like you do here. The preamplifiers and turntables were here, old tubes, and you had to kick one every once in awhile to get it to work right." (Interview, December 14, 2004).

In 1945, the sign-on's of WLAT in Conway and WKIX in Columbia rounded out the list of the first 15 radio stations in South Carolina.

WESC in Greenville went on the air on St. Patrick's Day, 1947. In his book *Tall Tales, High Towers and Simple Ideas*, Wally Mullinax, WESC veteran and former SCBA president and Hall of Fame member, the station's slogan was "WESC, 5000 watts on clear channel --- 660 in Dixie --- starting from Greenville". Led by President Scott Russell,

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WESC was more than ready to join the fray that made radio exciting in the Piedmont.

Congressman John Spratt, who recently helped clear the way for FM translators for AM stations, has distinct memories of the impact of radio on local politics: "...at the big stump speakings, if you weren't able to attend, radio was the medium you had to go to find out what happened, to get the full flavor of it, which was lost in the print media but was captured by radio. There was a certain excitement to radio, partly because you had to lean close into the radio to hear it above the static, above all of the background clutter to hear what was being said." (Interview by Haney Howell and Mark Nortz, Documentary, 2006).

Immediately following World War II, there was an explosion in the number of stations on the airwaves in South Carolina. By 1948, 24 new AM stations were on the air, joining the 15 that pioneered South Carolina radio from 1930 until 1945. During the same period, the FCC also issued 11 FM station licenses across the state, led by WSPA-FM in Spartanburg, which signed on in October 1946.

It took more than three years for WBCU in Union to make it to air. The flood of applications in Washington slowed the process, and the need for directional towers to allow nighttime operation ran up the cost. But as Bob Doll points out in his book, *A Perfect Union - 50 Years in a Small Town and Its Radio Station*, the station founder, Everett H. Hughes, raised the money because he strongly felt that Union deserved and needed its own radio station. While in the shadow of Charlotte and Piedmont stations, WBCU would soon prove the value of local radio. The station officially took air on August 27, 1949. Doll also

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notes that when the application was filed in 1946, there were around a thousand station applications pending across the United States. By the time WBCU signed on, the number had jumped to two thousand.

Doug Williams, who spent most of his 50-year career at WOLS, recalled working for Melvin Purvis and the impact of the station on Florence. He hosted the live "Holiday Show" for 35 years, where he had the opportunity to truly get to know his audience. This was typical of the impact of AM radio in this era. On-air personalities were ambassadors for the station, and feedback in the smaller markets was instantaneous. (Interview, July 18, 2007).

The rapid growth of stations in the state led directly to the founding of SCBA. G. Richard (Dick) Shafto, who managed WIS in Columbia, met on June 30, 1948 in Myrtle Beach with other key state broadcasters. Bringing them together was not a simple task. Some broadcasters feared the growth in competition, and it took Shafto's personality and persuasion to bring them together for a common cause.

According to the 1971 SCBA History, Paul Benson, John Rivers, Robert Bradham, Ralph Norman, Joe Martin and Roger Shaffer joined Shafto. They met for two days, joined by four men from other states with broadcast associations. The NAB District Director and a national representative from the organization were joined by John Willoughby of the FCC to help the group organize and to emphasize the importance of creating the organization.

Officers were elected during this organizational meeting. Dick Shafto became the first president; John Rivers vice president, and Melvin Purvis of WOLS was elected secretary-treasurer. They also planned the first convention, which was held on January 13 and 14, 1949 at the

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Wade Hampton Hotel in Columbia. Several notables spoke to the convention, including Governor Strom Thurmond, who later as a U.S. Senator became a major proponent of broadcasting in the state. Many pioneers credit Thurmond for the number of VHF television stations in the state, including an unprecedented three in Charleston.

B. T. "Bevo" Whitmire, who worked to bring the organization to the next level, followed Shafto. Purvis presented the Radio Libel Bill, which would protect broadcasters from libel and slander accusations when political hopefuls used radio for their campaigns. Whitmire also urged members to support a law that allowed all broadcasters to cover sporting events in the state, a source of pride and revenue for many stations. Despite his efforts, the law was later rescinded and stations could buy exclusive rights to the games.

Whitmire handed the gavel to Dan Crosland in 1950. His goal was to strengthen the organization. At a board meeting in 1950, Crosland proposed hiring Doug Youngblood as Secretary-Treasurer on a part-time basis. Youngblood came on board in 1951. Crosland worked hard to expand the membership, and he planned the first summer convention in Myrtle Beach.

Melvin Purvis, the former "G-Man" credited with bringing down John Dillinger, took over in 1951. He was a strong manager and the right person to continue the drive for the Radio Libel Bill. This was the first time SCBA tested its muscle, and the membership turned out in force to lobby for the bill, which passed in 1952. He also led a drive to bring down the cost of vinyl for the disc recorders.

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These early efforts quickly brought the organization together. It also didn't hurt when John Rivers hosted a dinner at his home in Charleston during the January 1953 convention. The 1953 president also arranged a demonstration ride for the attendees aboard the minesweeper USS Rodman! (1971 SCBA History).

Yet despite the rapid growth of AM radio in the state, it would only rule for two decades. In 1939, General Sarnoff and NBC showed the reality of television, and Edwin Armstrong's FM showed that radio could be static free. Like broadcasters across the nation, SCBA members struggled with the high cost of both of these new mediums. The number of AM stations continued to grow, but already WSSX-FM in Charleston, WMRC-FM, WFBC-FM and WESC-FM in Greenville and others were among the stations testing the FM waters in the late 1940s. Unfortunately, most radios of that era didn't have the FM band, and the stations were forced to convince the consumer that FM was a good purchase and a good choice. A number of the early FM licenses were returned to the FCC.

Early television sets were crude and expensive. Like early radios, they were first a novelty until technology and programming caught up with the demand. Like other technologies, television received a major boost from World War II. The cathode ray tube, which was also used in radar, was produced in large numbers during the war and much research was done at Clemson University. This same tube was the basis for the television receiver.

The year 1953 marked the birth of television in the state. To avoid the early chaos of radio, the FCC "froze" television licenses for a few years to work out channel spacing and other technologies. A few stations, like WSB-

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TV and WBT-TV were already on the air. When the freeze lifted, the race to be the first continuous South Carolina television station came down to which station first received their transmitter. WCSC-TV in Charleston convinced Dumont Electronics to put them at the top of the list, and their first video aired on June 19th, 1953. WCOS-TV, channel 25 in Columbia, actually operated first in 1953, but it went dark in 1956. It returned in 1961 as WOLO-TV when Cy Bahakel purchased the station. WAIM-TV in Anderson joined the growing number of signals in January 1953 and was managed by Betty Black, who also managed WAIM-AM and WCAC-FM for the company. After the owner's death, the stations were sold and it became a satellite to WLOS-TV in Asheville. In 1995 it became a stand-alone station in Greenville operating as WFBC-TV, the original call of WYFF. It is now WMYA-TV and is owned by Sinclair.

WNOK-TV (WLTX) signed on Channel 67 in September, 1953 led by former president and Hall of Famer Moody McElveen, and a young Dick Laughridge behind the mike boom. Laughridge, a former SCBA president and Hall of Fame member told stories of visiting viewers homes with McElveen, both crawling through attics in their suits to tweak the bowtie antennas and converters to receive the high UHF signal. "Moody McElveen was a very hard worker, he had tremendous tenacity, and he was determined to make the thing work." (Interview, July 9, 2007). WIS had superior coverage, and controlled 100% of the national advertising. WNOK-TV later moved to Channel 19 and onto a two thousand foot antenna, increasing their coverage beyond the immediate Columbia area.

WIS, under the strong leadership of G. Richard Shafto, managed to convince the FCC that Columbia needed a VHF

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station, and they signed on Channel 10 on November 7, 1953 from the press box at Carolina Stadium with live coverage of a Gamecock football game. (Louie Lang, history of WIS). They were quickly followed by WJBF in Augusta and WGVL in Greenville, and on New Year's Eve by WFBC-TV (now WYFF) in Greenville. WBTW in Florence had a notable launch in October 1954. Hours after the station signed on, Hurricane Hazel struck the city, knocking it right back off the air. (SCBA 50th History)

Walter J. Brown wanted another VHF in the upstate. He used his considerable influence to get Channel 7 in Spartanburg. WSPA-TV signed on in April of 1956 and was licensed to Spartan Radiocasting.

But television took more than listeners from radio. By the end of the 1950s, radio stations with network affiliation found their sustaining programs shifting to television, which cloned their format, and they were again left with the task of filling airtime. Radio was again forced to reinvent itself. In many cases, the advent of format radio saved the day. A stack of 45-rpm records and a young disc jockey could pull in the young listeners, and additional sports and local originations filled much of the void in the 1960s.

The emergence of rock and roll, country and other music forms laid the groundwork for FM. By the end of the 1960s, listeners discovered the quality of FM stereo, and turned away from AM for their music. Once again, a segment of the broadcast world had to quickly adapt. The SCBA gave members the opportunities to talk and listen to others fighting the same battles in their markets. Speaker selection for both the summer and winter convention addressed the burning issues of the day.

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Work by SCBA leaders also led to the emergence of women in key roles in broadcasting. Betty Black became the first woman disc jockey in the state and in 1985 was tapped by Wally Mullinax to run WMTY-AM and FM in Greenwood. Women like Diane Bagwell rose through the management ranks at WIS-TV under the watchful eye of Hall of Fame member Dixon Lovvorn, who was truly committed to developing young talent. And Betty Roper of Manning became a prominent radio station group owner and the first woman president of SCBA in 1979.

Many of the people interviewed for the project count the founding of the broadcast program at USC as one of the most significant accomplishments of SCBA. There was no school in the state teaching broadcast, and many of the early broadcast news staff came from Georgia and North Carolina. Like many other schools of the time, the University of South Carolina School of Journalism did not consider electronic media as a valid outlet. When John Davenport was president, he appointed Dick Laughridge as head of the educational committee. They couldn't get to first base with USC.

Laughridge and Davenport decided to go to Clemson... "We got an appointment with the president and made the presentation that the state of South Carolina needed a broadcast school." The Clemson president said they didn't have a journalism program, but said, "I'll tell you what I'll do... if you'll go down and see Tom Jones, the president of the University of South Carolina, and if he doesn't put it in, Clemson will." When they told Jones of Clemson's offer, he said, "we'll do it". He asked that SCBA be involved in the effort.

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After an extensive search, the school hired Dr. Richard Uray, who would found the broadcast program and serve as the executive director of SCBA for the next 30 years. Not only did Uray provide a solid base for SCBA growth, he never forgot the students. The SCBA Educational Foundation was chartered in 1982 under the leadership of WYFF General Manager and SCBA past president and Hall of Famer Doug Smith. An endowment was created, and with the hard work of former president and Hall of Fame member Dave McAtee of WYFF, and it has grown to nearly a million dollars. The scholarships are distributed to students at the various schools in the state that teach broadcast. SCBA's support also led to the growth of the other nationally accredited program, along with USC, at Winthrop University in Rock Hill.

The 1960s and 1970s produced a variety of radio stations that reflected different communities. WPAL in Charleston is a good example. Guided by William "Bill" Saunders, the SCBA president in 1988 and Hall of Fame member, the station reached the African-American community in this vital market. The station remained on the air during Hurricane Hugo, when listeners brought tanks of propane to the station to keep it on the air. He feels that the station served a vital role during the Civil Rights movement, giving voice to many and a way for Charleston leaders to reach the community. (Interview, July 11, 2007).

Other SCBA leaders point to the role of broadcasting during these challenging times. They feel that objective reporting and a willingness to deal with tough issues helped the state accept the new reality. In every market, from major cities to small towns, citizens heard and saw

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reasoned people work for the common good. The ability to get the word out quickly paid huge dividends during this period.

The 1980s saw major changes in how the bands were structured when the FCC approved Docket 80-90 in 1983, which allowed closer spacing of FM stations and forced a number of Class D stations to move or go off the air. SCBA was deeply involved in interpreting the decision and helping member stations understand their options.

As FM radio took over the music market, AM reinvented itself with talk radio. The charge was led nationally by personalities like Rush Limbaugh, who turned a dead day-part into the backbone of many stations' programming. Local talk hosts reflected their own communities, and the appetite for talk continued to grow. The growth of satellite distribution gave stations additional ways to obtain and distribute their programming in high quality.

Religious stations also made their mark. Jimmy and Joanne Thompson founded WGGG-TV in Greenville as Dove Christian Networks. Started on a shoestring, the station has grown into a major outlet for Christian programming, including syndication of the popular "Night Line" show to stations around the nation.

NAB Board Member and SCBA Hall of Fame member Alex Snipe started putting together a group of stations that were inspirational in purpose. He found that the African-American community is quite loyal to their stations, and surveys show that the listeners stay with the station throughout the day. Like many others, Snipe was enthralled by the "power of the radio cockpit" and he worked his way up to station ownership. (Snipe interview, June 2006).

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In 1997, the FCC lifted the restrictions on station ownership, and ownership moved from small groups to major radio owners like Citadel, Cumulus, Cox and Clear Channel. For the first time, groups could own a number of stations in each market, and television stations could own more than one station in a market under certain conditions. At the same time, competition from the Internet and satellite radio added new factors to the equations for station owners and managers. Television operators had to contend with the explosion of cable television and its many channels, fighting to make certain the stations were carried by the cable operators. SCBA concluded the successful fight for the sales tax exemption on advertising, and joined with national broadcasters to help rescind the Fairness Doctrine.

Former president and SCBA Hall of Fame member Harold Miller said in his interview for the project that the secret of SCBA's survival was its ability to transform from an organization tightly run by the broadcast pioneers and local station owners to one that has embraced the changes and energy of corporate participation. He points to the financial health of the organization and the large membership compared to the early years.

SCBA continued to grow as younger station managers rose through the ranks. When Dr. Uray retired from SCBA and USC in 1994, a former student, Sunny Jewell, replaced him. The Association moved out of the School of Journalism into a stand-alone facility, where current Executive Director Shani White and Executive Assistant Karen Nettles coordinate the many projects of the SCBA. The group maintains a strong presence in Columbia and Washington,

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with the leadership traveling to the nation's capitol each year to meet with key Congressional and regulatory leaders.

The 21st Century brings a whole new set of challenges. Both radio and television are getting ready for the move to digital, and SCBA is focusing on helping members with the transition. The focus of the last two summer conventions has been on change. NAB President David Rehr forcefully made that point in 2006, but he's optimistic: "I think the future of radio is bright. It's going to be somewhat different from what the future of radio was twenty, thirty or forty years ago, but all things change and evolve". (Rehr interview, August 2006). He felt the same about broadcast television.

In 2007, South Carolina led the way when WRHI in Rock Hill became the first station in the nation to receive permission from the FCC to broadcast its AM signal on an FM translator. The FCC is expected to make the practice a permanent rule for all stations. Since then, seven stations have received permission to translate their signal, which fills in the holes in a stations coverage and gives the listener better service.

Much of the success of the Association is based on its ability to adapt with the times. Few industries have seen such change in sixty years, and without a state organization to keep an eye out for the interests of broadcasters, it would be hard to imagine the status of the industry in South Carolina today.

We've only tasted a bit of the rich history of SCBA. We encourage each member to continue making historical contributions to the SCBA Archives, so that we can preserve the rich history for the generations to follow.

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This look back only points to an exciting future. Never before has broadcasting faced such major technological and audience challenges. The choices for the media consumer continue to grow and broadcasting must work to capture the viewers and listeners. Yet that is also the strength of the South Carolina Broadcasters Association... stations with common interest working for the common good. Indeed, it is back to the future.