

# Getting the Ear of the State: A Pioneer University Radio Station in the 1920's

JEROME L. RODNITZKY

DAVID KINLEY, President of the University of Illinois from 1918 to 1930, was by nature, philosophy and inclination a conservative. He viewed the new and untried with marked suspicion, and he was equally distrustful of the gaudy, the common and the exuberant. Thus, his use of the new jazz age medium of radio to publicize his University seems somewhat ironic. In any case, Kinley rose to the height of his academic career in America's gaudiest, most exuberant decade—the Roaring Twenties. It was an age of frenzy and boredom; a period when a restless nation demanded to be entertained.

The new media were ready to supply the demand. The number of newspapers declined as their average daily circulation increased. The survivors improved their competitive position by titillating their audiences with an endless parade of gimmicks and sensational news items. A local editor could fill his paper with material from press associations and syndicated features. Comic strips, household hints, medical talks, sports gossip and Sunday features were provided for a massive national audience. The number and circulation of magazines steadily increased, fed by rising advertising revenues. All in all, it was a period of intense competition for public attention. As Frederick Lewis Allen suggested, it was an age of ballyhoo: "the country had bread, but it wanted circuses." (1) President Kinley realized he had to get the public's attention if the University was to remain

---

*Mr. Rodnitzky is an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Texas at Arlington.*

well nourished, but he approved of neither ballyhoo nor circuses. Furthermore, he was economy minded and loath to spend University funds on unproven innovations.

Yet, the 1920's brought Kinley, the University and radio together in an uneasy alliance. Broadcasting was closely connected with universities, since physics and engineering departments were experimenting with transmitters and receivers. Illinois' Department of Electrical Engineering, which had recently pioneered in the field of sound motion pictures, was particularly involved with radio research, and in March 1922 the University received a Federal Radio Commission authorization to broadcast for three hours an evening. By June 1922 the station (using the call letters WRM) had permission to broadcast without limit. Like America in general, the University was slow to perceive the new media's possibilities, but Illinois was one of the first institutions to use radio for publicity and extension work. (2) By 1924 Josef Wright, Director of University Public Relations, was in charge of arranging programs for WRM and also did some announcing. He reported that the station was used to broadcast student plays, programs of music, nontechnical lectures and athletic contests, while serving as a working laboratory for student instruction and faculty research. The Agricultural College began using the station for extension announcements that same year, and Wright began to publicize the farm programs in advance. Operating the station with a 500 watt capacity, Wright claimed that WRM had been heard on both coasts.

Several alumni suggested that the University build a more powerful station, but Kinley was against the plan for his usual financial reasons. He did not feel "justified" in spending \$15,000 to \$30,000 on the project, and complained:

They seem to think that we people here are not busy and have leisure enough to be putting on programs, giving lectures, etc., for broadcasting. . . .

I cannot myself see that there is any advantage in it excepting what might be credited to "advertising." (3)

In 1925 Boetius H. Sullivan, a wealthy Chicagoan, solved the financial impasse by giving the University a new station in memory of his father.

The University's radio problems, however, were just beginning. With the growing number of stations, it was one thing to broadcast and quite another to be heard. Until 1925, WRM had broadcast at 833 on the waveband. In the spring of that year it moved to 1100 kilocycles and by 1928 (when it changed its call letters to WILL) as many as ten other stations were trying to broadcast on the same frequency. The Federal Radio Commission then shifted WILL to the Canadian 890 frequency, with only 250 watts of nighttime power. Two powerful Chicago stations were only twenty kilocycles away on the dial and often drowned out WILL over most of the state. Wright waged a continual fight for fair federal treatment of educational stations, but the University did not receive a suitable wave length until 1933. The radio work was so handicapped that by 1930 Kinley questioned whether or not it was worthwhile developing new programs under existing conditions. Wright complained that farmers thirty miles away often could not pick up WILL broadcasts. (4)

Nevertheless, by broadcasting at certain hours WILL was able to reach a statewide audience periodically and serve the immediate area regularly. However, the University's programming came under ever increasing criticism from local residents, since WILL drowned out distant stations and refused to play jazz. The University felt that popular music was not in keeping with the dignity of the institution and usually broadcast classical music interspersed with short talks by faculty. The ten-minute talks ranged from agricultural advice to a home economics discussion of "The T-Bone Steak and Kindred Subjects." By 1930 Wright convinced Kinley that the station should broadcast a wider variety of popular music to placate listeners. Wright argued:

While the purpose of Station WILL is not to entertain the public but rather to offer such educational matter as we have for the general benefit of our audiences, we have a very distinct duty, I think, in attempting to create a desire on the part of the radio fans to listen to all of our programs. And, having that desire, a listener will drink in the educational talks along with the entertaining features of the various programs. (5)

Live broadcasts of football and basketball games were among the most popular programs. Football especially had captured the imagination of Illinois citizens. During the late 1920's the University had produced a stellar attraction in the form of all-American football

hero Red Grange. In the era of the raccoon coat, frenzied alumni, Greek fraternities, hip flasks and the big Saturday game, football broadcasts produced synthetic alumni. People who had no college connections whatever became loyal collegiate partisans via the radio. Actual University courses were broadcast beginning in February 1931. That year Albert H. Lybyer gave his course, "The History of Europe Since 1814," over the air three times a week at eight a.m., and on alternate days, John G. Randall broadcast his course on "The History of the South Since 1850."

Aside from its educational advantages, radio is a powerful public-relations tool, since it provides direct contact with the general public, free of the distortion resulting from editing and rewriting by newspapers. However, during Kinley's presidency radio played a minor public-relations role because of the technical difficulties involved in getting the ear of the state. Wright claimed that WILL was a publicity asset, but in 1931 when questioned about specific results, he could only say:

What are the results? With a question mark as big as the house. No organized attempt was made to get responses to indicate the number of listeners, but from letters which have filtered in from time to time, we do know that there is a large group listening to the sort of thing we are doing. (6)

If radio was an educational and publicity weapon of the future rather than the present, it was a vivid example of the growth of American technology during the 1920's and the universities' central role in scientific progress. The prestige of science was at high tide. Americans were confronted with new technical devices every day, and they were ready to believe the laboratory could accomplish anything. Newspapers gave columns of space to informing or misinforming the public about the most recent discoveries. Einstein's theories were front page news, though nobody understood them. Atoms, electrons, vitamins, hormones and evolution were daily topics. Not surprisingly, the universities began to stress their research function and publicize their discoveries aggressively. Increasingly, university radio stations would become both trumpets and symbols of the new scientific era. Furthermore, as they broadcast to their constituents they would make the college coextensive with the community, and thus the boundaries of the campus would ultimately disappear.

## Notes

1. Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the Nineteen-Twenties* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1931), p. 190.
2. The Universities of Wisconsin and Iowa also had pioneer university stations. See Frederick M. Rosentreter, *The Boundaries of the Campus*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1957), pp. 116-19; Joseph Wright to David Kinley, April 9, 1924, copy in University of Illinois Archives. Unless otherwise noted, all unpublished sources are in the University of Illinois Archives.
3. Kinley to Merle Trees, March 24, 1925.
4. Wright, copy of a statement before the Federal Radio Commission, November 2, 1928; Wright to Federal Radio Commission, September 5, 1930; Wright to Charles Salzman, December 8, 1930; Kinley, *President's Report, 1929-1930*, pp. 52-53, 160.
5. Wright to Kinley, March 6, 1930.
6. *Illinois Alumni News*, May 1931, p. 313; Wright, "Significant Activities of the Radio Station at the University of Illinois," in Josephine H. McLatchy, *Education on the Air: Second Yearbook of the Institute for Education by Radio* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1931), p. 110.