

WTAW aired first football broadcast

After 38 years of service, Aggies sold station in 1957

By BETH CALHOUN
Focus Editor

TB-A-45-Y . . . T-FP-8-Y-L.

These initials and numbers weren't secret formulas or new recipes for Turkey Day dinner, but code letters for the first play-by-play football game ever put on the radio airways.

The game was the Aggies hosting Texas at Kyle Field on Thanksgiving Day, November, 1919. And the abbreviations meant Texas ball on the 45-yard-line; Texas attempts a forward pass that is thrown for an 8-yard loss.

That football broadcast was the beginning of what is now WTAW, a local radio station.

W.A. "Doc" Tolson, '23, and a partner, B. Lewis Wilson, '17, collected parts for the original transmitter in a lab in the electrical engineering building soon after World War I.

"Dr. F. C. Bolton (then professor of electrical engineering) was guilty of permitting, nay, even encouraging, me to become so innoculated with the germs of radio that my case was practically hopeless," Tolson wrote some years ago.

Wilson, then a lab technician in the department, helped Tolson to "procure by night" most of the parts necessary to build the transmitter.

"Our first step in building the Rock Crusher transmitter was to steal from Professor O.B. Wooten's testing laboratory a high-voltage transformer, which had been built by the students in the two-year course for electricians," Tolson wrote.

The transmitter's condenser consisted of about 100 glass plates from the campus photo studio and a copper lined box from a laboratory. A suitable rotary spark gap turned out to be a difficult item to find.

"In Professor W.G. James' office was an object which made our mouths water. It was an electric fan with a beautiful overgrown motor. However, the progress of science was somewhat delayed by the adamant refusal of Prof. James to allow his fan to be placed in winter storage until the weather got cool," Tolson wrote. "If my memory does not play me tricks, fate intervened in favor of science.

"It seems that the fan accidentally fell out of the window, where it had been carelessly placed by someone. When the fan was retrieved from the sidewalk, it was found that the blades were hopelessly damaged. There was no reason, however, why the motor could not serve a useful purpose as the prime mover for a rotary spark gap."

Harry M. Saunders, '22, Harley C. "Dutch" Dillingham, '22, and other students also joined the experimenters.

Bolton fought for and secured

a transmitter license for the station which carried the call letters 5YA, Tolson wrote. The "Y" at that time designated an educational institution. Later the letter "X" was used to designate an experimental station and the call letters were changed to 5XB.

Tolson and his cohorts had been operating 5YA as a typical ham relay station. But they received so many requests from stations throughout the southwest that they agreed to get on the air after the Thanksgiving game and give them the score.

"Then the idea began to grow that it would be swell to give them a play-by-play account of the game," Tolson recalled.

But since Morse Code was too slow to allow them to follow the game, they consulted with an assistant of Coach D.X. Bible, and made up a list of the aforementioned abbreviations.

Saunders was chosen to send the broadcast from Kyle Field, which went smoothly.

"He was by far our best operator," Tolson wrote, "since he had considerable experience with the A.P. (Associated Press)."

The radio setup became a part of campus life, and it had to be regulated as other campus activities. A microphone was hung out the window each morning when reveille was played, indicating that the station was "signing on."

It was authorized to broadcast only until 4 p.m. in order not to interfere with Aggie study hours.

For many years it was the origination point for state-wide agricultural programs put on by the Agricultural Extension Service. The education programs were transcribed there for distribution.

But on May 19, 1957, "Radio station WTAW, College Station, is being offered for sale to the highest bidder by the A&M College of Texas," the Bryan Daily Eagle reported.

The reasons given at that time for selling the station was that Texas A&M lawyers feared a new federal tax regulation would cause the state to pay taxes on the station.

The studios that were originally built in the electrical engineering building, first moved to the YMCA and later to the System Administration Building, had to be moved by the purchaser within 90 days, the article stated.

And on June 20, 1957, The Battalion reported that a high bid of \$35,257 was received and Hardy C. Harvey and R.E. Lee Glasgow were the new owners.

Then in 1961, Radio Bryan Incorporated purchased the station.

Since that time, the story has been one of progress. WTAW



Courtesy University Archives

W.A. "Doc" Tolson sits by the equipment he and his cohorts used to broadcast the 1919 A&M-UT football game.



Photo by Lynn Blanco

WTAW disc jockey Jim Miller sits by the equipment he uses today. The station now broadcasts AM and FM.

has been the starting point for many careers over the years.

A.J. Wynn, voted number one country D.J. in the nation for several years, was such an

attraction that people would line outside the studio and watch him at the mike as they listened to him over their car radios.

Today, WTAW broadcasts

both AM and FM programs. That's a long way from the original broadcast that was considered as only a stunt by the Aggies involved.

Little MEXICO



Restaurant

Authentic Mexican dishes prepared fresh daily the old fashioned way — DELICIOUS!

Hours

11-10 p.m. Tues.-Sun.
Closed Mondays

Culpepper Plaza

Orders to Go
693-3996