

Radio entrepreneurs helped to shape desert community

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Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

“For years the people of Palm Springs were confronted with serious radio reception difficulties, due to the ‘blackout’ action of stately Mt. San Jacinto which lies directly west of the village. Only under ideal conditions could villagers listen to their favorite network programs emanating from the Los Angeles stations. This condition was completely altered last spring, however, when RadiOasis, Station KCMJ, began operation.”

So began an advertisement in the newly minted Villager Magazine in 1947 for a new radio station in the Coachella Valley. The station, an affiliate of the Columbia Broadcasting System, was installed especially for the Palm Springs and Coachella Valley area, and provided a complete CBS program schedule seventeen hours each day “loud and clear.” Today the emphasis might be more properly placed on the “seventeen hours each day.” Silence, quite literally radio silence, was had for the remainder of the day. Well, more likely the night.

In addition to the national programs, RadiOasis featured special broadcasts of purely local nature, sponsored in most cases by Palm Springs merchants. One of the most popular daily presentations was a full hour of request transcriptions called “Music for the Party,” in which the listeners requested their favorite musical recordings by telephone and then hoped their selection would be played on air (these were the days before Spotify, Pandora and Sirius, and the idea of being able to request a song was a novelty).

Dick Joy and Don McBain, the owners of the station, were two veteran radio men, both having had extensive experience with major radio networks. McBain came to the conclusion that radio announcing was a bit dull, and having a keen interest in aviation, became a pilot. Along with owning the station and guiding its operation, he held down a



Detroit radio magnate G.A. Richards had a winter home at Smoke Tree Ranch.



George Strebe and Milt Hicks at KCMJ.

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PHOTOS/SPECIAL TO THE DESERT SUN

full-time position as a flight captain at United Air Lines. Dick Joy, the co-owner of RadiOasis, was a well-known, full-time announcer on many of the popular network programs, including “Sam Spade, Detective,” “Vox Pop” and “The Telephone Hour” and appeared on “Big Town” and the “Danny Kaye Show.” Serialized radio shows then being the Netflix of their time.

The advertisement touted the staff as an “unusually well-qualified group of announcers and technicians, which can easily be noticed when watching the flawless precision that takes place at all times during the seventeen hours of

broadcasting each day.”

RadiOasis was a welcome addition to the resort’s many famous entertainment facilities and was integral to the desert way of life. It greatly improved the listening enjoyment of residents by being local and broadcasting on the air for so many hours.

Prior to RadiOasis, The Desert Sun ran an article in 1937 with the headline, “Radio Stations That Can Be Heard Here” to help listeners searching for signal. Listeners were advised to tune into far away stations, for example Salt Lake City’s station KSL, which could be heard more consistently than those emanating from Los Angeles.

For the “convenience of radio listeners in Palm Springs and vicinity, the Simpson Radio and Frigidaire Shop, exclusive local representative for Philco, R.C.A., and Zenith radio receivers, is publishing a list of radio stations which can be received in Palm Springs under normal conditions with a good receiver and a good aerial.”

The list detailed stations from Los Angeles, Spokane, San Diego, San Francisco, Cincinnati, Oakland, Dallas, Tia Juana (sic), Denver, Hollywood, Albuquerque, San Antonio, and Salt Lake City with specifics about the time of day,

and if they would hear the NBC or Columbia network. And any customer was welcome to drop by the Simpson Radio and Frigidaire Shop to pick up a list.

RadiOasis wasn’t the only station available in the desert. There were other outlets and efforts, especially in the 1940s and ’50s. The Desert Sun would even start KDES following the success of earlier stations. KDES pioneered the mobile transmission, outfitting minibuses able to rush to the scene of news, or broadcast remotely for fun.

But a little article, on a seemingly random subject appeared in The Desert Sun in 1939, and presaged some of the biggest things to come for radio in the desert.

The article announced that Jack Schurch, a Palm Springs artist known for his murals and other drawings of rural life in Mexico, “received confirmation by mail this week that this summer he is to paint murals and do other decorative work in the broadcasting rooms and offices of station WJR, Detroit, Michigan. WJR, which is in the Fisher Building in Detroit, is owned by G.A. Richards, who winters here at Smoke Tree. Mr. Richards engaged artist Schurch for the extensive redecorating work of his radio station after he had seen the artist’s work in the Algiers cocktail lounge, the Chi-Chi Bar and in other local establishments.”

The presence of G.A. Richards in the desert was auspicious. His daughter Rozene, accompanying her father, would land on the desert in 1940 and attend Palm Springs High School, auguring great things for the community. Richards was a major force in radio, owned Detroit’s professional football team, the Lions, and circulated in the highest echelons of business. Rozene learned the business being around her father’s radio stations. Decades later, she would return to Smoke Tree and take up the radio business in a big way while simultaneously becoming one of the desert’s most active philanthropists.

But that’s a story for another broadcast.