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Green Bay Press-Gazette

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Packers hit the air, reluctantly, in 1932

By Warren Gerds
Press-Gazette

The first time a local radio station tried to broadcast a Green Bay Packers game, Wally Stangel almost got arrested.

"We decided we were going to carry the Packer games, without any previous arrangements with anybody," says Stangel, 84, who was one of the first engineers for the St. Norbert College radio station, WHBY.

"I was sent up to the broadcast booth at East High School with the equipment. When the Packers organization found out that we were going to broadcast the game, they sent a policeman up there. He told me, 'Stangel, if you turn on that equipment, I'm going to pick you up and put you in jail.'"

There was no WHBY broadcast that day, possibly Sept. 18, 1932.

The team resisted for the same reason there is a TV blackout rule today.

"The Packers figured we would be taking away from attendance at the games by carrying them on our radio station," Stangel says.

Priest made first call

Somehow, WHBY got approval and, according to the book *History of WHBY*, broadcast the game the next week:

"The first professional football game broadcast over the local station was between the National Champion Green Bay Packers and their deadly rivals, the Chicago Bears, direct from City Stadium in Green Bay, Wisconsin."

Calling his one and only play-by-play was the Rev. James Wagner.

"He was very excited about what was going on, of course," recalls the Rev. Dennis Burke, 92, a colleague who heard the broadcast. "He said, 'There that halfback goes around end, he's going, he's going for a big gain. Oh, for a loss of five yards.'"

Just as that call, dates and events surrounding the Packers' first years on the air are a bit blurred. Time does that.

Still, people today who flip on their TV or radio and expect Packers games to be on would be surprised about the team's early years.

When the Packers started, no games were televised. There was no TV.

When the Packers started, no games were broadcast on radio. There was no radio to speak of.

The team was started in 1919, when radio was in its infancy. Radio didn't become popular until the 1920s.

TV was another 30 years away.

Milwaukee's WTMJ was the first radio station to broadcast a Packers game. That was Nov. 24, 1929. The Packers beat the New

York Giants, 20-6, in New York.

The Packers won their first National Football League championship that year.

The victory celebration was broadcast by WHBY, which arrived on the air four years earlier.

About 400 fans packed the dining room of the Beaumont Hotel (the predecessor to today's downtown-Days Inn) for the event.

WHBY led the party

"As the WHBY studio orchestra, under the direction of Rudy Sebranek, played the famous college song *On Wisconsin* in the background, (announcer) Harold Shannon presented a vivid description of the proceedings as the championship team entered the dining room," according to *History of WHBY*.

Flash forward 68 years to a chilly victory parade and a statewide TV broadcast of the Super Bowl XXXI victory celebration at a crammed Lambeau Field, and the picture is quite different.

WHBY helped the Packers become popular, says Leo Wagner, 85, the brother of Father James Wagner.

"The big thing I believe is WHBY is not getting the credit for getting people interested in football," he says.

Broadcasting was much different back then, say Leo Wagner, Stangel and Burke, who all played a role in early stages of the station.

WHBY was the first radio station in Northeastern Wisconsin.

Imagine: One station.

It initially broadcast at only 100 watts, but the signal flew.

"There wasn't the interference than we have now," Wagner says.

A vast audience

With no other local radio stations, fewer appliances, fewer motor vehicles and fewer other electrical barriers, WHBY's signal could reach from Fond du Lac to Iron Mountain, Mich. (In its first four years, somebody somewhere at some time heard WHBY in all 48 states).

"Green Bay was the proud owner of a professional football team, which had a phenomenal following of loyal fans," *History of WHBY* says.

"To make it possible for all the Packer fans to follow their team, even though not being able to attend the games, a new program, the *Remier's Sport Report*, was scheduled."

That was the name of the play-by-play broadcast. Even then, advertising played a prominent role.

Folks gathered around radio sets at home and in taverns. Interest bloomed.

The station also broadcast "football interviews every Tuesday and Saturday evenings from 7:45 until 8

p.m." the history book says. Even then, fans couldn't get enough of the Packers.

WHBY broadcast home games and road games in Chicago for only a few years. They became too costly, Wagner says.

WTMJ picked up the ball and formed the Packer Radio Network, which carries on to this day.

Eventually, through a lot of steps, WHBY would become today's WGEE.



Press-Gazette photo by Ken Behrend

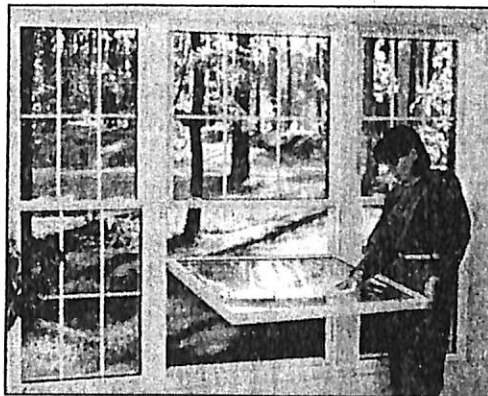
Making the call: Leo Wagner, left, and the Rev. Dennis Burke reminisce about the early days of Packers radio.

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