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Area's 'Marconi' is dead at 96

Warren Gerds

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Warren Gerds
Critic-at-Large

Area's 'Marconi' is dead at 96

■ Cletus Collom built the first radio station here in 1925

Digging around in 1990 for information about the station that was the nucleus of all broadcasting in this area, I stumbled on a neat moment.

It had been 65 years since radio was born here, and I hardly expected what I heard on the line from a fellow in Detroit when he was asked if he knew anything about the first station.

"I built it," Cletus Collom said.

It was like talking to Marconi, the father of radio.

In a sense, Collom was the local father of radio. He did all sorts of other inventive stuff, too.

He also qualifies for the Green Bay Packers annals.

Collom was buried this week in the Detroit area. He lived 96 fruitful years.

His grandson remembers him as a sharp guy. "He was always asking very detailed questions," says Michael Collom, a Michigan native who lives in Green Bay.



Collom
Pioneer in radio

The first station has a winding history. The short version: The station that began as WHBY on April 6, 1925 at St. Norbert College can be traced to WGEE-AM.

Michael Collom says his grandfather liked to talk about early radio.

"The story he always related was the money he borrowed from a candy store to build the transmitter," he says. "I guess the idea was to broadcast Packer games way back."

Here's how the inventor recalled it in 1990:

"Father (I.F.) Van Dyke (a Norbertine priest who was on Collom's engineering staff) had a candy store, and he had a little extra cash. We used that money to buy parts and put the transmitter together."

The transmitter was located in Boyle Hall at St. Norbert.

"We built the whole thing right from scratch," Collom said. "Back in those days, you built things yourself. You could buy the parts and put them together if you knew how to do it."

Collom knew how to set up Packers broadcasts.

"We used to run a telephone line from the transmitter down to the Green Bay Packers (at Old City Stadium, today's East High Stadium)," he said. A few years ago, Milwaukee's WJMJ claimed it broadcast the first Packers game, but Collom said, "I know, we were the first."

The feisty Collom had a lot of know-how. Left fatherless at age 9, the eldest of six children was inspired by a book on Thomas Edison to collect "batteries, wires, door bells and anything I could find that required electricity to operate."

Green Bay radio aside, Collom left a bigger legacy when he established businesses in the Detroit area. Collom and/or his companies were key in developing the first walkie-talkie for the U.S. Army during World War II, radio-controlled garage door openers and amateur radio transmitters.

He was quite the whiz.

Gerds writes about television and radio for the Press-Gazette.

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