

St. Norbert College

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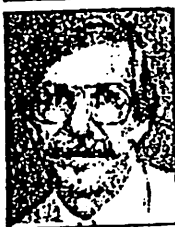
### Green Bay's first radio station is 65 years old

Warren Gerds

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Saturday, March 31, 1990



**Warren Gerds**  
Critic-at-Large

## Green Bay's first radio station is 65 years old

Not many people can remember Green Bay's first radio station, WHBY, which went on the air April 5, 1925.

Cletus Collom can.

"I built it," Collom, 91, said by telephone Friday from his home near Detroit.

What started as a little, 100-watt operation that transmitted from St. Norbert College is today's sturdy, 5,000-watt WGEE.

Though the WGEE call letters are only 15 years old, the station is marking the 65th anniversary of its frequency — 1360 AM — next Thursday.

Collom provides some fascinating insight into early Green Bay radio, as does Wally Stangel, whose 47-year association with WHBY and its successors started in 1932.

"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 from being a radio whiz from kid on up. He would later start an electronics company in Detroit and become a millionaire.

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

The transmitter was located on the fourth floor of Boyle Hall, and the studio was in the nearby Main Hall.

Some books say 1925 was the start of the "golden age" of radio. Don't believe them.

"It wasn't the golden age yet," said John Zucker, WGEE station manager. "It was the dawn of radio."

Collom, Stangel and *Green Bay Press-Gazette* articles from the time can confirm that

Green Bay's first-ever radio broadcast was a Sunday morning sermon. "The Divinity of Christ." That evening, 12 musical selections were played by a St. Norbert orchestra. The next scheduled broadcast was the following Wednesday.

WHBY broadcast only a few hours at a time.

"Nobody back in those days knew how to run a broadcast station anyway," Collom said. "Everybody was just feeling their way as they went along."

There many other differences with today. First, few people owned radio sets. Commercials and networks were a thing of the future.

Collom remembers WHBY as the first station to broadcast a Green Bay Packers game. A few years ago, Milwaukee's WTMJ Radio said it was the first.

"We used to run a telephone line from the transmitter down to the Green Bay Packers (at Old City Stadium)," Collom said. "I know we were the first."

Judging by what Stangel said, WHBY grew slowly. By the time he came aboard seven years after the start, the station was still only on a few hours a day in the afternoon and evening.

Programming was music, lectures and an occasional St. Norbert basketball game.

"Everything that we put on was local," Stangel said. "We had Isaac Duprey and His Northern Lumberjacks (a fiddle band). We had a couple of lectures from the college, from the biology department especially."

Stangel said it wasn't until 1936 or '37 that the station aligned with a network, CBS. "At first they supplied us only with an hour or two of programming at night," he said.

There weren't any disc jockeys as such in the beginning. Many of the announcers were St. Norbert students.

"We played a lot of records, all 78 (rpm) records at that time," Stangel said.

Though an engineer, Stangel got in some airtime, too, from 7-7:30 a.m. "I put on the records, and that's about it — looked outside to see if it was raining."

That was the weather report?

"That was it."

■ Too many numbers blurred my brain when writing last Saturday's column on local TV ratings. Two corrections are in order.

In overall, all-week numbers Channel 5 had a 8 rating and 24, which would give it a slight edge over Channel 11.

In local newscast ratings, the paragraph should have read: Channel 2 led at 5 p.m. in both "Metro" and "Designated Market Area" categories. Channel 5 led the DMA at 6 and 10 and Metro at 10. Channel 11 led the DMA and Metro at 6:30 a.m. and the Metro at 6.

*Gerds writes about broadcasting for the Press-Gazette.*