

Broadcaster's book a thrilling read on dawn of local TV



Local TV personality Doug Quick published in 2019 an exhaustive history of the dawn of TV broadcasting in central Illinois. I recently read his 511-page tome and suggest he should have collaborated with the late John Le Carre.

This tale of television in our area contains as many betrayals, connivances and skullduggery as a good spy novel. That doesn't even include the FCC playing roulette with TV channel allocations.

I grew up in the Chicago area, where channels and their networks were carved in stone. In central Illinois, channels and their affiliations came and went like the weather. WCIA, Channel 3, once carried both CBS and NBC programming.

At the beginning of TV, it made a major difference whether a station was VHF (2-13) or UHF (14-84). A VHF channel was golden, while UHF channels were mere silver or sometimes tin.

For the first 15 years of TV, most sets lacked UHF tuners, and those with UHF were difficult to tune. Thus, it was truly amazing that Champaign-Urbana scored two VHF channels, while the FCC stripped VHF channels from Springfield and Peoria.

We should thank the late August "Augie" Meyer for keeping Channel 3 (WCIA) in Champaign and the University of Illinois for clinging to channel 12 (WILL) when various wheeler-dealers tried to move the stations to different markets for commercial broadcasting.

Once upon a time, Danville and Bloomington had their own UHF TV stations, both of which failed.

In the age of digital TV, nearly all stations are now UHF (except, ironically, WILL Channel 12, which now actually broadcasts on channel 9).

Advanced technology eliminates disparities in coverage between VHF and UHF, and since the mid-1960s, all TVs include equal VHF and UHF tuners.

One little-known facet of history that Quick reveals concerned Champaign-Urbana lacking connectivity to the AT&T main coaxial cables that carried network programming. The channels in this area required special splices onto the cables and custom microwave links in order to carry live

network shows.

Thus, many programs appeared here a week or two after their New York and Chicago airings via 16mm film or a primitive TV-to-film process known as a kinescope.

Quick's encyclopedic book, "Pictures on the Prairie," from Founders House Publishing, contains far more information than of interest to the average reader, but it's engrossing to skim and read selected chapters. The photos and program guides from the 1950s and 1960s certainly bring back memories. I never knew "Romper Room" was a franchise.

You can order the \$20 book from Quick at dougquick.com.

Tangentially, the book provides great perspective on how far we've advanced and the ever-declining price of televisions. The book reproduces advertisements for early 1953-54 black-and-white TVs costing \$249 for table-top models and \$300 for consoles, plus \$50 for a UHF tuner. Since the inflation rate from 1953 to today is approximately a factor of 10, this would mean that a 21-inch black-and-white console TV would cost about \$3,000 in 2022 dollars.

Currently, Good Vibes advertises a widescreen, 4K premium LG OLED 55-inch TV for \$1,300 and a standard LCD-LED model LG 43-inch for \$399. There are 43-inch models available for less from Chinese brands. All come with UHF tuners! Then again, the current UHF TV band is only 23 channels from channel 14-36.

There's no comparison between the best TV set from 1990 and the most ordinary TV set today in video and audio quality.

One other aside: UHF channel 37 permanently is reserved for radio astronomy, thanks to the early efforts of astronomers at the University of Illinois with its Vermilion River Radio Observatory, which was decommissioned in 1984. Nonetheless, Channel 37 remains reserved for radio astronomy.

If you wonder where all those other UHF channels went, pick up your smartphone. The government auctioned most of the bandwidth to the cellular carriers.

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