

CUTTING YOUR TEETH IN “LIVE TV” by Ted Sodergren

"I started working at WCHU-TV as a cameraman in early 1963. I was a student at the University of Illinois pursuing a degree in Radio/Television. I was hired (after an “audition” of my camerawork) by Bob Lumpp, Program Manager (he also did our weather show “Window on the Weather”). I was subsequently engaged in “other duties as assigned” which included shooting and processing news film, building sets, driving the station VW bus in the (July 4) parade, etc. WCHU-TV was owned by Plains Television Inc. which also operated WICS-TV in Springfield and WICD-TV in Danville. WCHU-TV operated on UHF channel 33.

"The production studio, control room and offices were located on the north end of the second floor of the Inman Hotel in downtown Champaign. The production studio was unique because of the column in the exact center of the studio. That meant that the studio was divided into four “production” areas. One for news, one for weather, one for interviews and live cut-in commercials, usually done by Keith Page during the “Tonight Show”. (This space was subsequently used for the set of “Uncle Otto’s General Store” with my school buddy, Dave Otto). The last quadrant of the studio was for other uses like panel discussions at the “counter” that was there. The center column was used as a live-card stand, hanging space for mics and other gear and a place for the studio clock.

"WCHU-TV was a one-camera station (yes, one camera). The camera was one of the very earliest Image Orthicon units, a RCA TK 10-A. Being a cameraman there produced several situations involving quick moves to cards and sets like News to Weather. If the time had not been sold, these were masked by quick dips to black then on to the next set. Lightning camera moves became pretty normal. Another interesting move was to the “Window on the Weather” intro which started as a shot out the open window of the studio and then a smooth (kind of) dolly back and pan to the set and weather person. Also within the studio was an announce booth where Keith Page recorded the break copy and local commercials. There was also a bench with a Dage vidicon camera at one end and a bulletin-type board at the other on which we posted the closing prices for the stock markets (these pictures were pretty bad).

"Looking into the studio through a (cluttered) glass window was the control room. Access to the control room was through a door from the hall into the room that housed the transmitter. The antenna was on the roof of the Inman Hotel, as I recall. Through the next door you entered into the control room. To the immediate left was a rudimentary video switcher and director’s position. Next to that, was the main control area which consisted of camera control units for the studio and film chain cameras (CCU’s). This console was topped by a Gates audio board with a slide projector positioned above it. The projector was used to display images through the window and onto a screen in the news set. It usually worked pretty well. Past the control area and through another door was the projection room. It had slide and film projectors running into a kinescope (!) camera. Harry Eskew, Chief Engineer claimed to have enough negative news film, the kinescope polarity was switched to show a positive image from the negative film. It was switched back for film spots and break slides. To the right of the projection room was the (tiny) darkroom. Here we manually processed negative news film (DuPont 931A which was a reversal film that could be stopped at negative) since we did not have the equipment or chemistry to do the full reversal. We manually loaded the film on stainless steel wire racks that were about 2 feet by 3 feet with wire dividers at each end to keep the film from overlapping. Once loaded, the racks were immersed in standard negative

film chemistry in deep narrow tanks built to accommodate the racks. It was not unusual to see Deke Kurtz run into the studio and hold a handful of film in front of the air conditioner there to dry it for editing and insertion into the newscast. There was a small editing area to the right of the chemistry tanks. That is pretty much the description of the technical areas of the station. "At the corner of the floor were the station offices: Station Manager, Sales, Traffic, Program Manager, Reception, and across the hall ...News. The newsroom had teletype machines from UPI and AP. A good deal of our news was "rip and read" with local stories interspersed. On the day Kennedy was shot, the bells on the machines rang constantly with breaking "flash" updates. I can still hear those bells. We stayed on the air 24 hours during the Kennedy coverage, doing local impact coverage cut-ins and sleeping, when we could, in a hotel room next door. These were exciting times to be in live TV that was sadly underlined by tragedy. We felt that, somehow, in a very small way, we were part of history.

"That's a thumbnail sketch of WCHU-TV and my times there. By the way, we always referred to the station as "Television 33" and our phones were answered accordingly. Bob Lumpp, Program Manager, hated TV stations being referred to as "Channel 9", etc. We signed off each night with the national anthem followed by Leroy Anderson's "Trumpeter's Lullaby".

"This was considered to be a "shoestring" operation but I loved cutting my TV teeth there and I loved the people! I've included a set of photos of the facilities with captions as I remember. I'm also providing a (from memory) personnel roster. I hope you enjoy this story as much as I did living it."

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Ted also included a number of rare valuable pictures which are included below. I thank Ted so much for his valuable contribution to the history of WCHU.....when there is in fact so little of it being documented.

--Doug Quick