



Photo provided by the National Park Service.

This 1947 photograph shows a sampling of the equipment and experiments that surrounded Armstrong in youth. The house in Yonkers, N.Y. eventually became a National Historic Landmark in January 1976. It was demolished in February 1983 and was removed the National Register of Historic Places three years later.

# WILA's original programming, creativity and signal strength were key as it made history

By KURT BEGALKA

If you are like most folks, you probably never heard of Edwin H. Armstrong, but this New York engineer and inventor was responsible for the technology that brought McHenry County its first radio station.

Years after inventing the super heterodyne, which enabled headphones to be replaced by speakers, Armstrong solved radio's biggest problem: static. In 1933 he successfully tested frequency modulation, or FM, which enabled stations with the same frequency to not interfere with other.

"Radios simply pick up whichever FM station is the strongest," notes the Economic History Association of La Crosse, Wis. "This means that low-power FM stations can operate in close proximity."

On June 17, 1936, FM radio was demonstrated to the Federal Communications Commission for the first time.

In September 1948, what is purported to be McHenry County's first radio station began broadcasting. Station 92.1 FM, operated by the Northern Illinois Broadcasting Co., christened a 316-foot tower on Howard Benton's farm with a bottle of champagne a month earlier. Investment partners were Benton, who served as the station's general manager,

influential attorney David Joslyn and George Huffman, owner of McHenry County Land Co. in Woodstock.

The tower, christened as a "monument" to broadcasting, was located 3 miles west of Woodstock on Franklinville Road. It allowed the signal to extend 50 miles – into parts of Lake, Kane and Boone counties, as well as across the Wisconsin line.

*The Crystal Lake Herald* reported that, "Telegrams and telephone calls are pouring in to congratulate WILA on its clarity. One man phoned from Chicago to say that it was the best FM station he has every heard. 'My radio hasn't even got an antenna,' he declared, 'and yet your music and speaking comes in beautifully.'"

The studio for "The Voice of McHenry County," was located at 122 ½ Benton St. in town. The entire cost of the station was \$45,000.

According to a Benton family history, Howard originally wanted the call letters WILL as a homage to Woodstock, Ill., only to learn that the University of Illinois had beaten him to the punch. The FCC assigned the call letters WILA.

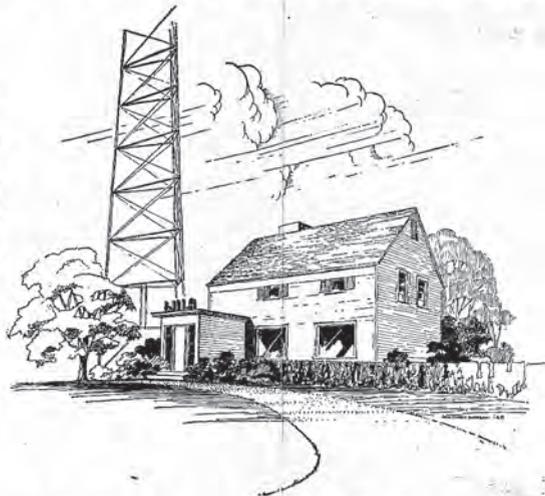
The station was on the air for 18 1/2 hours daily and for

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# CHANNEL NO. 221 **WILA-FM** 92.1 MEGACYCLES - ONE KILOWATT (FREQUENCY MODULATION)

McHENRY COUNTY'S FULL TIME STATIC AND MAN MADE NOISE FREE COMMUNITY RADIO STATION NOW UNDER CONSTRUCTION ON FRANKLINVILLE ROAD TWO MILES WEST OF WOODSTOCK.

A full complement of music, drama, news, market, farm news and public service broadcasts. You can now listen to them with a clarity on tone quality not possible with AM (amplitude modulation) system of broadcasting.



The finest equipment for transmitter and studio is being installed for your listening enjoyment. Antenna tower will rise 300 feet high to give full coverage to all of McHenry and neighboring counties, delivering the same signal strength day and night.

WATCH THIS NEWSPAPER FOR INAUGURAL BROADCAST PROGRAM.

## **NORTHERN ILLINOIS BROADCASTING CO.** WOODSTOCK, ILLINOIS

10 hours on Sunday. Firsts included airing a special program simultaneously with station WBNB in Beloit and hosting the first teletype, direct wire news service – provided by United Press International.

Programs included "All Star Western Theatre" with Roy Willing and His Rider of the Purple Sage. But there also was a

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*"I love radio – its immediacy and especially its intimacy ... it is part of your life, whispering into your ear. You can't see it but, equally importantly, it can't see you."*  
~ Malcom Turnbull, former prime minister of Australia

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great deal of original, local programming. It included special, at-the-scene reports dubbed "Town Salute," as well as local basketball and football games; the children's program, "Alice in Animal Wonderland;" "Hi-Neighbor Girl," singer Darlene Adams, and a women's talk show hosted by Alice McConnell, wife of local politician A.B. McConnell.

There also was a great deal of religious programming, including "Chapel By The Side of the Road" – presented by the Rev. Earl Olsen, preacher at the Marengo and Riley Methodist churches. Ironically, the McHenry County Historical Society took charge of the 1898 Riley Methodist Church in 2009.

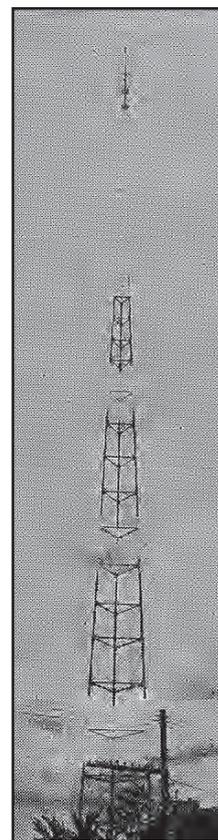
John Russell Ghrist, in his 1996 book, "Valley Voices – A History of Radio Broadcasting in Northern Illinois and Northwest Indiana from 1910-1992," noted the "hype and aesthetic enthusiasm" of WILA wore away by its third year. It closed with little fanfare in 1951.

Station engineer Bruce Steinke attributed its demise

to changing tastes and an expensive lawsuit filed by three employees who had been hurt in a serious car accident while doing a remote. By the time Ken Marunde bought the Benton farm in 1957, most of the tower had been dismantled.

Benton's son, Jim, recalled the station's end this way:

"Unfortunately for radio, even FM radio, television was coming into its own. Although the station enjoyed a substantial following of loyal sports fans and country music devotees, the inevitable change in the style of home entertainment forecast the 'Voice of McHenry County's' eventual demise. By the time the decade of the '50s arrived, the station had run its course and the equipment, the office furnishings, and the vast collection of records and transcribed programs were sold off at a loss. ... Many folks in the Woodstock area still remember WILA, as it left a trail of fond memories for the ones it tried to serve. The station was just too early for its time." ♦



*The transmission tower off Franklinville Road proved quite the topic of conversation during its construction. The tower weighed more than 85,000 pounds and was anchored by 60 tons of concrete. A beacon at the top served as a warning for airplanes.*