

— HISTORY —

WILI puts Willimantic on the air

Part One of Three

Gerald E. Loiselle (1902-68) worked for many years as a reporter and manager at the Norwich Bulletin's Willimantic offices, and was conscious of the Thread City's commercial potential. When he discovered that Norwich radio station WICH planned to abandon its local 1400 kHz frequency, Loiselle put plans in motion to form a Willimantic-based radio station. He successfully approached the owners of station WPCT at Putnam for financial backing, and in 1957 the group organized the Windham Broadcasting Co. However, this new company had competition for the newly vacated frequency slot.

Robert Mensel was proposing a daytime-only station for the Willimantic market at 1430 kHz, and in order to persuade the Federal Communications Commission that its 1400 frequency was more suitable than Mensel's, the Windham Broadcasting Co. hired Donald Howe, an electric engineering



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expert at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, to build a test antenna site at the oxbow bend on the Natchaug River. Howe fixed a wire to a gas-filled balloon, and raised it 200 feet into the air. The resulting signal was proof that the 1400 frequency was clear of interference. The FCC was duly convinced, and station WILI was born.

Willimantic's new radio station was launched on Oct. 5, 1957, with a party at the Capitol Theatre, attended by such local luminaries as Mayor Florimond Bergeron and Mildred Potter of Potter's Oil.

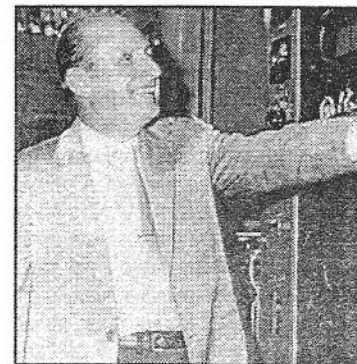
Station engineer Bob Chasse had a day to remember. His son was born as WILI first went on to the air, and newsman Les Douglas featured the event on news broad-

casts throughout the day. The new station broadcast a mix of local news, music, weather and commercials from 6 a.m. to 11:15 p.m. It operated from studios located on Route 6, in the building later occupied by the Lewis Insurance Agency at the corner of Airport Road in North Windham. However, it was not long before this new station changed its location and ownership.

Herbert C. Rice, a past vice president of network programs for NBC, an ex-director of film and program development for RKO-Tele-Radio, and the owner and manager of KVNI in Coeur-d'Alene, Idaho, purchased WILI in May 1959, and gave the Thread City an immediate link with America's Golden Age of Radio.

Rice emigrated from England to Canada in the early 1920s, and later found employment as a house painter in Boston. The young Englishman was keenly interested in drama and theater, and while visiting the Cape Cod music theater, he walked into a tent where a young actress was rehearsing lines. After offering constructive criticism, the play's director hired Rice as an assistant director. The young actress was Bette Davis.

In 1928 the Buffalo Broadcasting Corp. hired Rice as a radio director. It was a corporation consisting of four radio stations transmitting from one building, and Rice always referred to it as the "American BBC." He had arrived on this stage at the onset



Herbert C. Rice, owner of WILI, puts the station's transmitter at 1000 watts on July 17, 1961.

of radio's golden age, and the young program director was soon to demonstrate his programming and talent spotting abilities.

Continued Next Week

Thanks to Wayne Norman for his assistance in compiling this brief history of WILI.

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