

— HISTORY —

The polka lady and the weatherman at WILI

Part three of three

Herbert C. Rice's innovative ideas in radio broadcasting greatly benefited Windham County's listening audience throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Rice was well aware of the city's central European heritage, and introduced programming to appeal to them. Polish and Russian Jewish immigrants had first arrived in Willimantic in the 1890s, and their numbers were bolstered by an influx of displaced persons or DPs after World War II, consisting of Czech, Latvian and Polish immigrants.

In September 1960 Rice invited Virginia Seretny (1923-2000) to host a polka program on Sunday mornings, despite the fact that she he had no previous radio or musical experience.

Virginia accepted the invitation, and her show went out on WILI for the next 40 years. She built a loyal audience even in towns where the WILI signal was weak, and was honored by Polish organ-

izations from Jewett City to Chicago. Virginia will be long remembered by those who hear the polka classic "Whoopie-Shoopie," her long-time signature tune.

In 1961 WILI moved into the new Lonergan Building at 948 Main St., and increased its transmitter strength to 1,000 watts.

The station introduced live weather forecasts in the late 1960s to accompany its news, sports and music programming, and a University of Connecticut student from the West Coast named Wayne Norman became one of WILI's first on-air forecasters. Wayne had served his apprenticeship with the Southern New England Weather Service, a club of UConn students that offered its services to local radio stations.

WILI's weather forecasts were



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soon reaching a larger audience, thanks to the doubling of the station's antenna height to 404 feet in 1972. The following year, WILI was allowed to broadcast at 1,000 watts for 24 hours a day.

At this time the station began to target the region's university students, and broadcast cuts from albums by artists such as Paul McCartney, Boz Scaggs, Carole King and Fleetwood Mac. Station announcers from this era included Terry Ley, William J. Naughton, Tom Watts, Frank Walker, Paul Christopher, Dan Hayden and Denise Bellamy.

Of the many personalities in WILI's history, few were more popular than Scotsman Norm 'Uncle Normie' MacDonald, who shared an entertaining repartee with morning host Wayne Norman.

MacDonald had been a TV meteorologist in the '60s and '70s at WBZ-TV before moving to radio. He became WILI's first staff meteorologist in 1977, and correctly forecast the strength of

the Blizzard of '78.

On the days when weather was less newsworthy, MacDonald introduced his "brothers" to weather forecasting. They included Donald MacDonald, a stodgy Englishman, the Russian brother Igor MacDonald — who took time off from his work at the vodka factory, and Irishman Mac MacDonald who greeted listeners with a cheery "Top of the mahnning ta yah."

Long time listeners will also recall WILI's numerous newsreaders such as Steve Kotchko, Bill Bruneau, and Jay Johnson who co-wrote the Elvis classic, "Blue Christmas," as well as Richard Hoffman, Mark Roy, Danny Chun and Mike Morrissette, who has been news director since 1987.

In 1985, WILI changed to a full-service adult contemporary format, featuring the "today's hits and yesterday's favorites."

The next two years also proved to be landmarks. In 1986 the station became the central pillar of

Willimantic's first ever July 4th Boom Box Parade, and on Columbus Day 1987, it moved to its present location next to the footbridge, at 720 Main St. WILI is now the largest AM station in eastern Connecticut, and an affiliate of the ABC radio network.

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



Virginia Seretny in action

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