

— HISTORY —

Radio man Herbert Rice: a man of vision and action

Part two of three

An Englishman, Herbert C. Rice (1904-91), purchased Willimantic's first radio station in 1959. As a young program director in Buffalo, N.Y., he demonstrated a flair for spotting new talent and introducing innovative program ideas. Rice had an instinctive feel for American popular culture, and gave a young Buffalo musician named Robert Schmidt his first job in radio.

Schmidt is perhaps better known as Buffalo Bob Smith of Howdy Doody fame. Rice also first brought together the famous 1930s comedy duo Stoopnagle and Budd, but his most outstanding achievement was the creation in 1932 of a Western series called "The H-Bar-O Rangers."

A Buffalo-based breakfast cereal company sponsored this new children's show, which featured the adventures of an orphan named Bobby Benson who had inherited a Texas ranch. Rice convinced CBS to give his show a network slot, and "The H-Bar-O Rangers" became an

instant hit, spawning a merchandising craze that resulted in Bobby Benson code books, cereal bowls, drinking glasses and card games.

The series was so popular that CBS moved production to New York city and hired 12-year-old Billy Halop to play Bobby Benson. Halop achieved further fame when starring in "The Dead End Kids" series of movies. Over 700 episodes of "The H-Bar-O Rangers" aired before it was cancelled in December 1936.

Herb Rice left Buffalo for New York in 1945 and became the assistant to NBC's president. He resurrected "The H-Bar-O Rangers" show in 1949. Renaming it the "B-Bar-B," Rice hired a young actor, Don Knotts, to play a character in the show. This version of the radio Western lasted until 1955 and inspired two



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Bobby Benson TV shows, and a Bobby Benson comic book. The English-born director thus arrived in eastern Connecticut in 1959 with a broadcasting pedigree.

The Thread City's new radio station became a Rice family affair. Herb's brother Robert was sales manager. Herb Rice was WILI's general manager, and his wife Ethel ran the office and handled billing. However, 1950s office technology was somewhat different than today. Mechanical typewriters rattled out documents, and copying was undertaken with the aid of carbon paper. Things were also different in the broadcasting studios. Not all productions relied upon tape, and WILI had a grand piano for special occasions.

Herbert C. Rice put into action a range of innovative new ideas. They were needed. The station's North Windham studio was air-conditioned by a window-mounted unit high on the wall behind the air chair, and when the microphone was on, the air conditioning was shut off to lower back-

ground noise. The summer heat was probably one reason why the station conducted its first outside, or remote, broadcast in 1960.

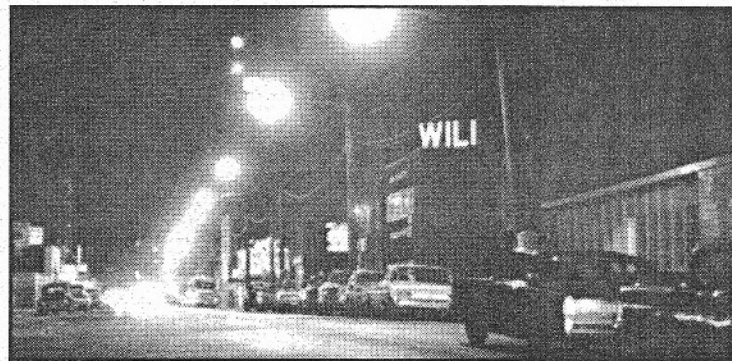
It took place at Lefty's Playmore Park to celebrate the opening of the summer season. The park was located on the site occupied today by Windham Heights, and Playmore's main attractions were a golf driving range, and stands selling Roessler's Yellow Tag hot dogs, and Hosmer Mountain Soda. Remote broadcasting was

an inventive idea for a small provincial radio station existing beyond the major markets.

But this was only one of a series of improvements Rice would introduce for the benefit of eastern Connecticut's listening audience over the forthcoming years.

(Continued next week)

The author wishes to thanks Wayne Norman, WILI program director, for help with this series.



The WILI building shines in the night in this 1965 photograph.

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