

**University of Maine**

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**From the Selected Works of Desiree Butterfield-Nagy**

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# Broadcasting in its Infancy in Maine: A Sound Engineer in the Archives

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Broadcasting in its Infancy in Maine: a Sound Engineer in the Archives,  
presented by Barry Darling as a part of the University of Maine Humanities  
Center's Digital Humanities Week, 2015.

## Lecture - University of Maine 9/24/15

### Introduction

Good afternoon, I'm Barry Darling. I guess you could say that I'm  
an Unofficial, Off the record, Volunteer, Amateur Archivist, here  
in Special Collections, with absolutely no academic credentials  
whatsoever!

For the past five years or so, I've been digitizing a large collection  
of over 200 12 and 16 inch electrical transcription...records in  
laypersons terms.

These electrical transcriptions contained locally produced  
programs, commercials; some of the material is mundane; some,  
quite funny.

They are snapshots of Radio in the 1940's and 50's. More  
recently, I've been archiving photographs and documents  
that were donated by WLBZ General Managers, over the years  
to Special Collections.

## Early Days of Broadcasting in Maine

Broadcasting had its humble beginnings in the 1920's, the age of flivvers, flappers, and bootleg hootch.

Broadcasting began as Amateur Radio Stations, operated by people who were interested in the magic of electricity, and became Amateur Radio Stations...eventually licensed by the Department of Commerce, later, the Federal Radio Commission, and then, in 1934, by the Federal Communications Commission.

I am an Amateur (Ham) Radio Operator, W1AGL, as was my father, from whom I inherited that same call sign.

He received his Amateur Radio License in 1928; mine in 1977.

Nearly all of the equipment used by Hams in those days was built by the operators themselves, as there was little available equipment that was manufactured.

This talk, and the displayed items in Special Collections are centered on Radio Station WLBZ, in Bangor, Maine, and its technology.

The reason that I have limited the scope of this presentation to WLBZ is...The wealth of information and resources about WLBZ available in Special Collections, which were donated by four former WLBZ General Managers—Edward Guernsey—Irving Hunter—Edward Owen and Barry Darling.

My personal involvement with WLBZ was through my father's many years as Chief Engineer of the station; for my years as announcer, advertising salesman, and General Manager.

WLBZ was born in 1921.

Thompson L. Guernsey, of Dover-Foxcroft, then 17 years old, was issued a license for Amateur Radio Station W1EE, and operated it until 1926. Thompson's W1EE was a good example, typical of radio equipment in those days...designed and constructed by the operators themselves.

He applied for a standard broadcast license that same year, upon his graduation from the University of Maine with a degree in Electrical Engineering.

The Department of Commerce granted the license, which was

signed by Herbert Hoover. The call letters issued were WLBZ.

Guernsey was just 22 at that time.

WLBZ signed on the air on December 31, 1926 from the harness room of a chicken coop in the Guernsey home in Dover Foxcroft.

With extensive modifications, the original W1EE transmitter became WLBZ's first transmitter.

There are pictures of Thompson Guernsey's original W1EE transmitter, as well as an array of other pictures of WLBZ's transmitting and other equipment and artifacts on display, here in Special Collections.

This concept of radio stations building their own equipment continued well into the 1950's and 60's, following the example of amateur radio stations.

In 1928, WLBZ moved to Bangor, with its studio at 100 Main Street; the transmitter on outer Broadway.

It operated with a power of 250 watts at 620Khz, its frequency to this day.

The station went through a series of power increases over the years: to 1,000 watts in December, 1936 and to the current 5,000 watts in September, 1943.

There were changes in the antenna systems.

In 1937, the original flat top horizontal antenna was replaced by a 400 foot tower which was far more versatile. Later, in 1941, there was a second tower installed for nighttime operation at 5,000 watts.

A side note: In AM Radio, the tower is the antenna.

How do radio stations get their call letters?

Some radio stations have call letters that might reflect a station owner's other businesses.

For instance, WCSH, Portland, was founded by hotelier Henry P. Rines, owner of the Congress Square Hotel.

Mr. Rines used the radio station, partly, to promote his new luxurious Eastland Hotel.

WLBZ was a random call letter assignment with no special meaning.

A radio story for you:

In 1946, when I was just 6 years old, my father, Louis (or “Lou”) Darling took me with him for a visit to the WLBZ transmitter site on outer Broadway in Bangor. He worked there as an engineer.

One of his fellow engineers, George Levenseller, was a genuine genius.

He could take a pile of junk--- design and build station equipment from the junk---that looked like something that came from the RCA broadcast equipment factory.

Like most broadcast engineers of that time, George was also a ham radio operator.

When we arrived there, we found George building a high voltage power supply for his new ham transmitter.

Lacking the money to buy an adequate high voltage transformer that would fit on the chassis of the power supply he was building...and to produce the required 3,000 volts, he put his very creative and clever mind to work....He noticed a transformer on a telephone pole. The transformer, called a “pole pig”,

is normally designed to step the 7200 volts on a power line down to the 220 volts, required for homes.

George's ingenious solution to his problem was to hook up the transformer backward, and feed it with 110 volts, rather than 220, thus, giving him the required 3,000 volts.

George visited the Bangor Hydro Electric's workshop and supply center and bought a pole pig for next to nothing!

Now, George Levensselaar was unflappable...nothing phased him. He always placidly, puffed on the remnants of his cigar, which he was never without.

He had just finished wiring the "pole pig" transformer into the power supply, when he looked over at my father, and , said,

"Lou, it's time to check it out....throw the switch!"

George was standing inches from the front panel of the power supply, looking intently at it. Father threw the switch...



there was a blinding flash, a very loud BANG!...and thick smoke rolled out from the bottom of the power supply.

It scared the living Hell out of me!!!, and, I'd dare say, my father as well.

George's sole reaction, while leisurely puffing on his cigar was..."Hmm!... 'might warm in there, ain't it, Lou...."

I want to turn now another aspect of the life of Thompson L. Guernsey.

Tom, as he was known to his friends and some of the employees at WLBZ, was a genius in the best definition of that word.

He was far ahead of the curve in nearly everything he did, especially in electronics.

In 1934, he became deeply interested in television, which would fascinate him for the rest of his life. In that same year, he founded and became General Manager and the major stockholder in the General Television Corporation, of Boston, Massachusetts.

Guernsey then began designing and building much of the equipment for the station. He then obtained the license from the

FCC in 1940, and began operating W1XG-TV, Boston, one of only three TV stations licensed in the United States at that time.

He ran the station, profitless and losing money, until 1946, when he totally ran out of resources, both his own, and possibly some he had borrowed.

He surrendered the W1XG-TV license back to the FCC.

In the meantime he lost WLBZ through a court ordered involuntary transfer of ownership to the Rines family in Portland, owners of WCSH Radio.

Thompson returned to Dover-Foxcroft where he lived much of the rest of his life as a recluse in penury. He died in 1979.

An interesting note, if Tom could have held on for another few months, he would have been granted Channel 4 in Boston, now WBZ-TV which would later be worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

Instead, the license was granted to the Westinghouse Corporation.

Thompson L. Guernsey would have been fabulously wealthy.

What a sad ending for such a genius...such an innovator.

I met Tom on a number of occasions when I was manager of WLBZ Radio in the late 70's. Without a word spoken to anyone, he would infrequently come into the station, pick up a copy of the BDN; read it for perhaps 20 minutes or so, walk out the door and get into his 1949 Chevrolet 2 door sedan and drive away.

An interesting note, Even in poverty, Thompson was always well dressed, with suit, top coat and Fedora, and shoes well shined.

I once asked him if he could tell me something about the early days of WLBZ. His response was, "I really don't remember much at all about that."...end of subject.

I suspect it was a bitter subject for him, as had lost so much.

There are superb articles about Thompson Guernsey by my friend Fred Thompson, grandson of WCSH Radio founder, Henry P. Rines.

These articles can be found in two publications,

"The History of Broadcasting in Maine ", published in 1990, by the Maine Association of Broadcasters, and "The Rines Family Legacy", by Frederic L Thompson in 2005....

On a lighter note: Another friend, Dan Everett, was on duty at WLBZ Radio one evening, back in the mid 60's.

For some unknown reason, he had left a tape recorder running on the NBC Radio Network feed, which recorded the 10PM news that night.

Now, most newscasts are pretty mundane...one sounds very much like any another...Not this one!

There was, at that time a famous NBC Radio newscaster named Robert McCormack. Robert had been at a social event in Washington earlier that evening.

In fact, I'd say he'd been to several of them.

Please note that the subject matter of the news story was serious, the delivery... Another matter entirely!

[Played CD recording for audience, :59]

In 1950, at the age of ten, I walked into the Radio Control Room at WABM in Houlton, Maine, and instantly, from that magic moment onward, I knew exactly what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

I've been a broadcaster for over 50 years....and have loved every nanosecond of it.

By the way, my passion for Radio was inculcated very early on by my father, Lou Darling.

I've never been able to determine whether I should have thanked him for a lifetime in this profession...

or. should I have asked him, "Why did you do this to me?..."

I could have been your son, the doctor, your son the lawyer...

....even your son the bank robber!!"

What did I ever do to deserve 50 years of this??

Close

I asked Richard Hollinger, recently if he had something I could do once the WLBZ project is finished...if it ever is!!

His response was, "I have enough here to keep you busy 'til you die!"

I have thoroughly enjoyed every moment of my volunteer work in Special Collections. It has opened up a new world for me.

I'm very grateful to be here!

While preparing this short talk, which seemed to take me forever to complete, I gained a great deal of respect for professors who have to prepare 50 minute lectures three times every week.

My hat is off to you all!

Thank You!