

Dashboard Detectives: Intrigue From a Minnesotan's Ford Falcon Radio

by Shannon Huniwell
melodyfm@yahoo.com

"Two push button positions on the old car's radio are the only pieces I've got to this puzzle," a self-described "low-budget, classic car nut" admitted to me in an email. He also noted that he'd just saved the sad little Ford *Falcon* from some disreputable auto recycler's crusher and, perhaps like an obsessed adopted teen searches for a birth parent, really needed to find out where the 1960 car came from.

His dilapidated vehicle barely escaped with its rust-ridden life, let alone the requisite paperwork needed to start the painstaking process of registration sans any previous registrations or title.

"All of the buttons, except the last one, tune the dial to the same left-hand station near that old Civil Defense triangle symbol," the fellow described.

"The one furthest right, moves the pointer approximately to the middle. Can you hazard a guess where those buttons might have been set?" He then apologized for his radio ignorance and the fact that, rather than being a regular *Pop Comm*

subscriber, he had thumbed-through our publication at a supermarket magazine rack and noticed one of my articles focusing on broadcast mystery. I hit my computer's reply button and emailed him a single-question homework assignment, "What do you hear when you push those buttons during the middle of the day?"

I don't think the guy had told me where he lived. When he got back to me with the following report, however, deducing suburban Richmond, Virginia represented a no-brainer for even the rustiest of AM DX'ers: "The right hand button brings in WRVA, but it sounds loud, sort of splashy, and distorted," he wrote. "The rest of the buttons go to a station called WMAL. It's not real strong, there's some static and a little interference in the background, but it's much clearer - toned and more tuned-in than WRVA."

After he completed my second assignment, the fellow indicated that fine-tuning did nothing to improve WMAL's signal, though twisting the dial just a tiny bit to the right, "sharpened-up WRVA like *Gangbusters!*" This told me that he was well within the city-grade footprint of Richmond's 50-kilowatt legacy facility on 1140 kHz (though the radio's presets were some 10 kHz south of 1140), revealed a steady fringe reception of a Washington, DC regional station at 630 kHz, and suggested that a previous owner of his late Eisenhower-era Ford was a top-40 music fan who called somewhere in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area home.

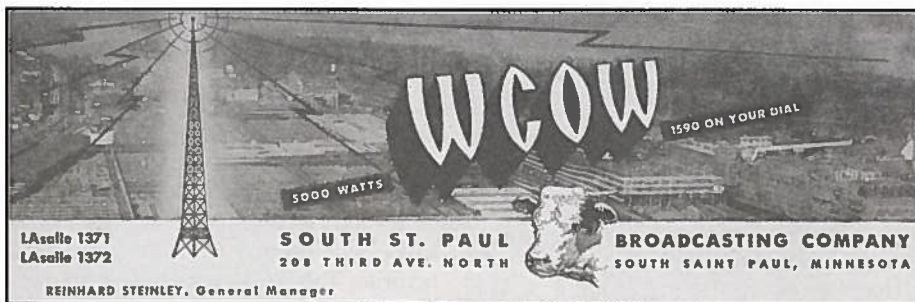
Long before GPS satellites pinpointed locales from space, radio-savvy individuals could identify specific broadcast marketplaces by simply hearing a teenager state two of his or her favorite AM "channels." From the fall of 1959 until about 1977, many young-at-heart in Minnesota's Twin Cities gave away their 10-20 by cheering for the frequencies 630 and 1130 kHz — RF domains of personality-driven music radio powerhouses, KDWB and WDRY respectively.

Does W-COW Ring A Bell?

Few Minneapolis-area kids catching the latest Beatles tune on a transistor radio locked on



Except for being white rather than red, this first year Falcon is just like the one that starts off our car radio button mystery. Then again, a close look at the 1960 catalog cover shot reveals another important, but inconspicuous dissimilarity. Perhaps for aesthetic reasons, the artist who rendered this picture omitted the compact car's antenna. Or, maybe the happy couple considering the thrifty vehicle didn't want to increase the price of their desired four-door by ordering any options.



The bovine motif on WCOW's early 1950s letterhead gives it more of a stockyard feel than the young, hip image the station's successor, KDWB, would relentlessly begin promoting during the final year in that decade.

KDWB would have ever guessed that their favorite hit music station debuted with the discordant notes of a cow bell clang. That's exactly how it happened, however, on August 12, 1951, when the 5,000-watt daytimer on 1590 kHz took to the air and announced its city-of-license as *South Saint Paul*.

AM/FM historian Jan Lowry says WCOW had bovine call letters to hitch it to the "western and old-time music and rural-oriented programming" offered between hourly local news and sportscasts. The bucolic AM in the Twin Cities market was founded by the three Tedesco brothers from a family that served that region's ether as the radio version of Johnny Appleseed.

According to the Museum of Broadcasting's site < <http://www.pavekmuseum.org> > the siblings, who were recently inducted into the museum's Hall of Fame, "have been three of the most colorful figures in the history of Minnesota broadcasting. Jointly or separately, they have owned (started or purchased) 14 radio stations."

No doubt this brand of initiative played a role in their ongoing consideration of possible facility upgrades. In 1955, the Tedescos convinced the FCC to shift WCOW's official ID to Saint Paul. Also in the works was engineering that sought FCC permission to take their Twin Cities station from 1590 to an enviably low 630 kHz dial position. Regulators gave their OK for a kilowatt of directional daytime-only power on 630 kHz in 1956.

With this coup scored, the Tedescos set about to give their station a more sophisticated image, so they put W-COW back in the FCC's call letter barn and began revamping their property (still on 1590) with a new name, WISK, and an easy listening flavor aimed at the female audience.

Before actualizing WISK's eventual ride down the band in early May 1959, its ownership secured another FCC grant modifying its 630 kHz, 1 kilowatt-daytime construction permit to a 5,000-watt day and 500-watts at night CP with different antenna patterns.

Also new was authorization to build this new dual directional array at "Hudson Road — U.S. Highway 12 — and Tower Road in St. Paul." Barely four months after this expensive change took place, the Tedescos sold WISK to a division of Crowell-Collier Publishing Co. for \$625,000. The buyers also owned Los Angeles' KFWB and KEWB in Oakland, California.

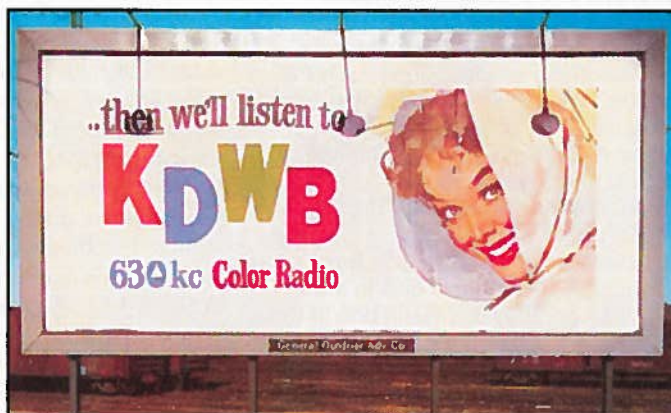
Formula 63 Is Coming!

Throughout the late summer of 1959, Twin Cities newspaper editors and radio announcers found themselves conveying messages about a new "product" called *Formula 63*. According to this stuff's sponsor, this secret 63 held promise of being a delightful cure. On September 19, 1959, stations carrying *Formula 63* commercials became sick with regret when they realized they'd been unwittingly plugging an impending com-

petitor, KDWB Channel 63, the new identity of the erstwhile gentle WISK.

Following the Top-40 music/dynamic air-personality and contest-driven successes of Crowell-Collier's California stations, pioneer contemporary radio programmer Chuck Blore, and right-hand man Don French, saw to it that their employer's Minneapolis area rollout hit the air running. KDWB's ratings soared, fueling a famous rivalry between Channel 63 and crosstown Top-40 veteran WDGY 1130. Battles in this 1959-1977 music radio war kept Twin Cities listeners entertained and rooting for their favorite station.

Crowell-Collier decided to exit the radio business. To that end, KDWB was sold in early 1968 for an even million bucks to Valjon Inc., an investment group led by a New York advertising man. The following November the station's transmitter went up in flames, causing about \$100,000 damage and a 36-



Colorful billboards such as this one appeared throughout the Twin Cities, including northeast Minneapolis where Bob Caligiuri grew up dialing between KDWB and competitor WDGY. Which Top-40 outlet did he listen to more? Bob says he usually started with KDWB, but hit the button for WDGY whenever KDWB began playing a song he didn't like. He also remembers the stations representing a Beatles vs. Rolling Stones type of rivalry, with KDWB airing more Motown than WDGY. Though not sure where he read it, Bob recalls seeing a newspaper editorial complaining that KDWB represented itself as almost a religion. "It was something about their often long, self-reverent jingles," he mused. After decades, they still come to mind clearly, especially the slow ones meant to lead into a ballad: "*Kay Dee Double You Bee...*," he sings, "*Chan-nel Six-tee Threeeee.*" By the way, that *Color Radio* theme was a direct reference to the fact that the audio medium's theatre of the mind characteristics could be just as vivid as color TV. How about that stylized civil defense triangle in the "0" of the 630? In the days of slide-rule radio dials, the lower CD frequency of 640 kHz was close enough to KDWB's 630 kHz spot for anybody to find it.

KDWB

"MORE FUN THAN
POUNDING NAILS!"
THE HAL MURRAY PROGRAM



3 to 6 P.M. ON KDWB



Just one of the dozens of affable, gimmick-loving air-personalities associated with KDWB, Hal Murray, did afternoon drive there during the early 1960s. Ask a Twin Cities Baby-Boomer to name a DJ, however, and most will smile, True Don Bleu, the high-energy jock who enjoyed a decade-long tenure on KDWB starting in 1968. Bleu, who's real name is Rick Kelleher, is now a top-rated radio personality in San Francisco. See the two girls in the KDWB logo, they're smiling one of the station's initial mantras: *My mommy listens to KDWB 630*. To add a feminine touch to the "0," it has a diamond setting on its top.

hour period of silence until a new RF generating unit could be delivered, installed and quickly "fired-up." The transmitter building — which also housed the studios, but much to the satisfaction of air staff, hadn't included the KDWB business and sales offices — was revitalized for accommodating the "suits" when they made the move from quarters in downtown Minneapolis during 1971.

Such a consolidation is often seen by keen insiders as the brand of economy measure preceding a station sale. Those sages likely told someone, *I told you so*, when Valjon flipped KDWB just four years into its ownership for \$3,250,000. The buyer, Doubleday Broadcasting, operated AMs in several western states.



Here's a bumper sticker celebrating a good ratings book indicating KDWB as No. 1, probably in some youthful demographic otherwise considered to be "just a bunch of kids" by old-line adult radio market leader, WCCO.

Its improvement plan for the Midwest acquisition included "FCC authorization to identify KDWB as (hailing from) Minneapolis-St. Paul," instead of simply from the less-*tony* latter.

"In late 1976," Jan Lowry notes, "Doubleday bought an FM station (KYOO-FM) in the Minneapolis market to supplement the poor (500-watt directional) nighttime signal provided by KDWB." This acquisition got recast as simulcaster KDWB-FM and eventually became the tail that wagged the dog.

During the rest of the 1970s, the duo's format was continually tweaked to capture 18-49 and then 25-54 year old audiences coveted by most advertisers. The old Channel 63's Top-40 offering morphed into a "Hot 100-hit contemporary music" playlist.

When radio's largest listener base had really heated up the FM band during the 1980s, Doubleday made a killing on its Minneapolis market properties by selling KDWB-FM (licensed to Richfield, Minnesota) and — by this time — its tag-along, AM KDWB, for \$27 million. This May 1986 acquisition by Legacy Broadcasting Inc. returned the AM side to separate programming, albeit the budget-minded *The Oldies Channel* format from syndicator *Transtar*, pulled directly off satellite and piped into KDWB's autopilot control board.

A couple of years later this unit was among the gear relocated to new offices/studios in downtown Minneapolis. And as the '80s ended, Legacy sold KDWB and its more profitable FM sister to Midcontinent Radio Inc., for \$17,950,000 — a steal when one considers Legacy's original Minnesota investment.

Unspeakable Broadcast Blasphemy!

Jan Lowry reports that during the fall of 1991 Midcontinent instituted a change

in its Minneapolis AM property that struck a discordant note among the market's radio industry enthusiasts.

After getting FCC approval for a call-sign modification, Midcontinent dropped oldies (on KDWB) and adopted a 24-hour country music format.

If such a shift wasn't shock enough for folks who'd grown up hearing their favorite Top-40 tunes on KDWB and fondly remembered how Channel 63 fought the good fight against similarly-programmed enemy WDGY 1130, imagine their disbelief when the following station identification emanated from Twin Cities radios tuned to 630 kHz: "*This is AM 630, W-D-G-Y.*" Metaphorically, this was as sacrilegious as if Ford had replaced its classic "F" script logo with a Chevy bow-tie emblem.

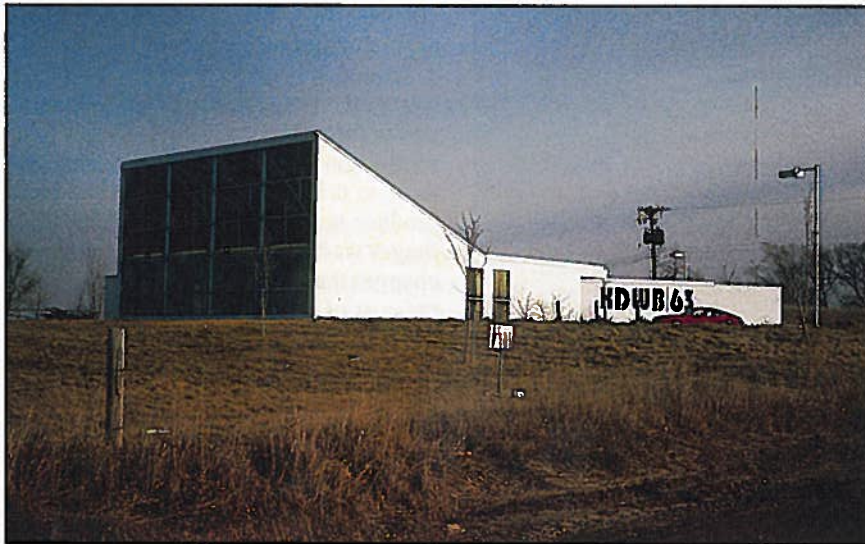
Admittedly, the WDGY calls were grabbed for Midcontinent's new country-and-western venture because the former WDGY had made a significant run with country fare after exiting the Top-40 game in 1977. WDGY 1130 ditched its historic name in 1991 when becoming sports-oriented KFAN. Still, the irony of the ID, say some radio diehards, was enough to jinx whatever was subsequently tried on the Minneapolis 630.

The country experiment hardly lasted a year. The "little" WDGY became a conduit to simulcast KDWB-FM in 1992 and then, by May 1993, flipped to a non-rock/adult standards simulcast of Hudson, Wisconsin's WMIN. From these also-ran scenarios, WDGY 630 was dry-docked and taken dark by Midcontinent, as the company was in the process of selling off KDWB-FM for \$22 million.

With this 1995 sale complete, Midcontinent accepted an offer on the 630 AM transmitter site and then received FCC permission to reactivate WDGY 630 with 900-watts during the day and 130 watts at night via two towers in the vicinity of the WMIN site.

When WDGY 630 went back on the air (with another satellite-delivered oldies format) in January 1997, the reduced coverage barred it from being a Minneapolis or St. Paul-licensed facility, so was given a Hudson, Wisconsin identity. This reduced revamp of the once-mighty Channel 63 continued spawning these changes:

Midcontinent sold WDGY 630 to WMIN in 1997. The new owner moved it to Lakeland, Minnesota and installed a satellite talk format on it. This quickly evolved to talk and sports, and then sole-



Here's the KDWB transmitter/studio facility on Radio Road in Woodbury, Minnesota circa 1976. This image, courtesy of Dave Senechal and a wonderful Top-40-era aircheck site < <http://www.radiotapes.com> >, is about the only way one can now picture the legendary station's physical presence, as the building and towers are long gone.

ly sports (One-On-One Sports *a.k.a.* Sporting News Radio) during 2000.

A third tower was added to allow for a tweak in night power (from 130-watts) to 200-watts. Sports gave way to "Regional Mexican" music by the summer of 2001 when WDGY came under a local marketing agreement with operator, Radio Rey Inc.

Studios were moved to Minneapolis and a new transmitter site (shared with WCTS Maplewood, Minnesota) became FCC approved so that WDGY 630 could use a full kilowatt for day-times and a jump to 2.5-kilowatts at night.

This 2006 boost allowed for 10 times the night power afforded the classic KDWB 630! And further erasing the facility from its rock 'n roll roots, WDGY 630's callsign was dumped in favor of the more regally Spanish-relevant WREY (Rey in Spanish means "king.")

A Little Bit About The Big WDGY . . . Wee-Gee

WDGY was named by and for its founder Doctor George Young, who raised the funds to start the then 5-watt broadcast outlet via dual vocations of optometry and jewelry store proprietor. Actually, WDGY was the fourth set of calls Young used for his Minneapolis station, previously known as KFMT, WHAT and WGYY.

According to his fascinating 1970 college thesis about WDGY's history, author Jerry Verne Haines offers the following account of how Young happened to get into radio:

"One Sunday while (flamboyantly) riding in his (Rolls Royce), Dr. Young noticed the antenna tower of Gordon Volkenant, a high school student and holder of an amateur radio license. Volkenant operated his station at the home of his parents . . . Young (inquired) as to the name of the (85-foot) tower's owner . . . and telephoned him.

"How much do you want for it?" asked Dr. Young.

"Oh, about \$30, muttered Volkenant, anxious to get rid of the old antenna (that he was about to replace with a taller one)"

"Did you say \$90? I'll take it!" declared Dr. Young, and soon the tower was standing behind (Young's) house in Minneapolis."

To enliven the stick, Young scrounged a surplus Navy transmitter — with a penchant for drifting all over the band — meant to be mounted in a submarine chaser.

Shortly after securing a broadcast license, Dr. Young got the high school kid who'd sold him the tower to serve as engineer for his modest station's (government sequentially call-lettered KFMT) January 13, 1924 debut.

By late 1926, the facility became WDGY and sported 500-watts. When George Young died of cancer in 1945, WDGY had enjoyed several power increases, frequency shifts (finally to 1130 kHz in 1941), an experimental mechanically-scanned television



A page from WDGY's early 1950s promotional booklet prominently featured its new transmitter facility.



My guess is that this shot of the WDGY sign, towers and speck of a transmitter building was snapped when the Bloomington, Minnesota-based facility had just been completed in 1948. After Todd Storz bought the station eight years later, he found the area's dirt roads so unfriendly to station personnel's cars that he moved the studios to Minneapolis until the thoroughfares were improved in 1961. This and the other vintage WDGY photos are hosted on radio aircheck archivist, Tom Gavaras' neat Web site: < <http://www.radiotapes.com> >.



One of the houses in the Bloomington development adjacent to those nine WDGY self-supporting towers was home to the teenage owner of the Ford Falcon in our story. Those beautiful sticks (originally directing 50-kW days/25-kW nights, before the FCC granted WDGY a 50,000 unlimited time status) were dismantled circa 1986 when the transmitter site relocated so that developers could move in. After WDGY's most notable "formula radio" owners, StorzBroadcasting, sold it in 1984, the station went through several other companies, as well as format changes to country music, and then sports under new call KFAN.

dalliance (W9XAT) and a colorful history of program offerings.

Young's electronic legacy was then sold to the Stuart family, which owned a pair of Nebraska stations. Unfortunately for this clan, the 1946 transaction served more to drain their bank account than to produce profits. Chief among the hemorrhages was a staff resistant to any format changes that the Stuart's anticipated, and the cost of a complex, nine-tower directional antenna system that the family commissioned in then-rural Bloomington, Minnesota, in order to activate a 50-kilowatt days/25-kilowatt nights construction permit.

Even the least RF-savvy of WDGY's staff could predict that the huge power increase via the Bloomington CP looked a whole lot better on paper than it would in actual population coverage vis-a-vis construction/maintenance costs.

To attract *sophisticated* listeners who would give WDGY a high-profile/advertiser-friendly audience, the Stuarts dumped the station's long profitable religious "sold airtime" programs and introduced secular "good music" shows, man-on-the-street news and lots of sports. No matter making these pricey wattage and format "improvements," the Stuarts continually lost money with WDGY.

During the late 1940s, Minneapolis' WLOL (1330 kHz) featured an early version of the Top-40 format, albeit pre-rock 'n roll. WLOL owner Ralph Atlas had seen the ratings successes of the personality disc jockey-driven music, news and weather programmed WNEW in New York, so adapted the then-novel, non-network/non-long-form format on his Twin Cities AM. When WDGY was sold (for \$425,000) by the Stuarts in April 1952, buyer Twin Cities Broadcasting Corp. decided to give Top-40 — or so called "formula radio" — a try. Unfortunately for this venture, however, the program style was completely embraced. Consequently, the flow of music/DJ patter was interrupted by blocks of religious shows or a farm hour that came on the air each day at noon.

The only time WDGY enjoyed any notable audience during the Twin Cities Broadcasting tenure was in the evenings when "symphonic music" was offered. But by the mid-1950s, radio advertisers were becoming most interested in daytime listeners, as that's when the lion's share of adults were tuned to radio — as opposed to TV — stations, and the youth radio audience wasn't yet a real factor.

With WDGY dead last in the seven-station Minneapolis market radio ratings, its ownership was happy to accept a purchase offer from “formula radio” wunderkind, Todd Storz. The fact that Twin Cities Broadcasting took \$212,000 for WDGY — less than half of what it paid for it — speaks to the desire to wash their hands of the highly directional/costly to operate 50,000-watt also ran.

No matter its “basement” audience status at the time of Storz’ January 1956 acquisition of WDGY, he considered it a great buy and immediately reformatted the facility with best practices from his other three Top-40 outlets (such as Kansas City’s WHB).

Besides giving his station a cute callsign-mnemonic name (*Wee-Gee*) and a relatively short musical playlist, these tactics included frequent contests with cash prizes. Under this banner, WDGY’s ratings jumped to the point where the station was nipping at the RF heels of perennial market leader WCCO.

When pop music began taking on a rock ‘n roll and rockabilly tone, WDGY started growing up with the Minneapolis market’s burgeoning baby-boomer listenership, a lucrative niche it held almost all by itself until Crowell-Collier hit the Twin Cities ether with KDWB.

From 1959 through the remainder of AM Top-40/DJ personality radio’s approximately 20-year heyday, the competitive pair blasted out hundreds of thousands of hours of hit music-oriented companionship through about a dozen collective towers.

First Rate Stations – Second Rate Signals

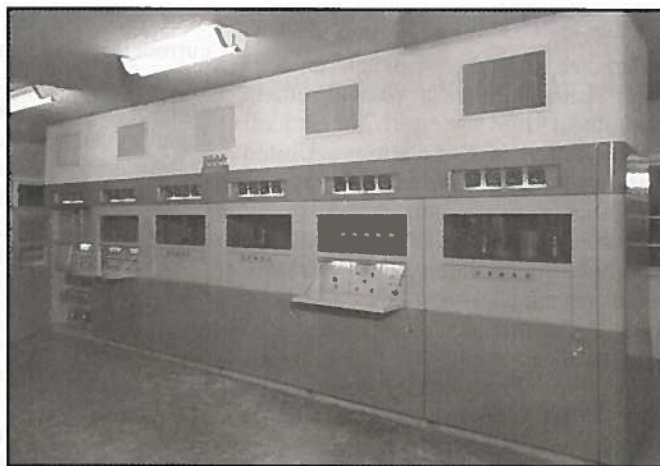
Those nine self-supporting towers that highly directionalized the “real” WDGY’s 50-kilowatts represented a vision of beauty for radio lovers, but squeezed that impressive power level into an almond-shaped footprint with minimal coverage south, east or west of the Bloomington transmitter site. In fact, three 50,000-watt facilities, WDGY Minneapolis, one in Milwaukee and another in Detroit, had all been authorized to occupy 1130 kHz. In order to accomplish this sandwiching *and* protect what was arguably the original music/news/weather station WNEW-New York also at 1130 kHz, the Midwest 1130 trio were nominal “flame-throwers” with significant nighttime coverage (though these stations throttled back their RF after sunset) over at least one of the Great Lakes or in Canada.

Even so, WDGY rival, KDWB, would have killed for a moonlight signal with anything resembling a mere 10 percent of WDGY’s (then 25-kilowatt night) power. When the moon rose over Channel 63-land, KDWB was only authorized to transmit with 500-watts, primarily directed to the west of its St. Paul site.

Though nobody was murdered in the process, someone at KDWB apparently gave the order *not* to hit the switches that facilitated such power reduction and antenna change. Apparently, this accidentally-on-purpose practice was judged to be sufficiently long-running and flagrant that the FCC fined KDWB \$10,000 for repeated violations of observing licensed night power level.

In its 1961 admonishment, the FCC noted that the *round-the-clock at full power* situation had been taking place for about three years. The reason why broadcasters embroiled in a Top-40 war rued a thinly focused and/or sub-kilowatt nighttime signal is clear as day — kids listened to their AM transistor radios most vociferously while doing their homework or cruising with friends in \$600 cars.

In most media markets, big AMs with the best and least-directionally restrictive coverage were the so-called “legacy” or grown-up stations that usually wouldn’t muddy their good



New for 1948, here’s the 50-kilowatt Westinghouse transmitter with top-mounted, contractor-fabricated ductwork that could double as heating vents in winter. It was just one piece of the expensive RF generating plant that drained the famous station’s second owners’ bank account and aimed big amounts of the electronically-compressed, 1130-kHz signal northward towards Minnesota’s smallest towns.

names with rock and roll music and related shenanigans. Consequently, such youthful fare often became the province of the second string outlets. That’s why many a baby-boomer with a bit of radio savvy fondly recalls having to turn his or her pocket portable this way and that in order to catch whatever remaining RF was available after pattern/power change time. In some cases, stations several states distant tuned in more reliably after sunset than did the local purveyors of hit music.

So Close, Yet Almost Overlooked

Remember the Ford Falcon owner who provided the initial drive for our Twin Cities story? He recently contacted me with words of serendipitous closure for this edition of *Shannon’s Broadcast Classics* and for his registration quest at the local Department of Motor Vehicles office.

During the process of restoring his compact car, the fellow removed its rear seat and discovered a long-forgotten spiral-bound notebook cover jammed between the seat back and bottom sections. As he started to chuck this bent piece of cardboard and assorted stash of *Teaberry* chewing gum wrappers also snatched from over four decades of under-seat seclusion, the guy noticed some doodling that successfully linked to my Minneapolis radio market assumption.

“Go B’ton BEARS!” was artfully scribed on the notebook cover. Right below it were the boasts, “B’ton High Seniors Rule! ’64’s Are #1!” And more carefully scripted on the inside of the cover was a girl’s name.

All of these clues, several hours on the Internet, and the kind assistance from a school librarian who admitted to enjoying detective work more than shelving books, led to putting together a puzzle about one of the Falcon’s early owners. To make a long story short, it was ascertained that “B’ton,” was kid code for Bloomington, the Minneapolis suburb that used to host WDGY’s RF plant and once home to Bloomington High School (which, in 1965 was renamed Lincoln High and years later torn down) with sports teams called the Bears.

The notebook had been the property of a teenager who was looking forward to graduating from “B’ton” in June of 1964, a



The circled triangular Civil Defense logo was a common sight during the Cold War era, appearing in many places, including in design variations on car radio dials.

date used by the helpful librarian to find the girl's information in an old yearbook and then match it with an alumni database.

Now in her mid 60s, the Bloomington grad happily consented to be contacted by the Ford restorer. She reported that the little car was purchased used by her old high school boyfriend, "a guy," she laughed, "who is now senior enough to be considered (her) *old* husband." Reportedly, she then put him on the line and he gave the Falcon buff more than enough detail to satisfy the DMV.

I wondered why only one of the Ford radio's push buttons was set to WDGY, while the rest went to rival KDWB.

Perhaps as sort of a finder's fee, the car restorer emailed me a digital image of a Kodak snapshot he had received from the Minnesota couple. Appearing full screen on my computer, a good explanation was instantly evident.

The photo showed a pretty girl with a pageboy haircut, smiling next to the red Falcon. Hers had been the notebook discovered some 45 years later in that same vehicle. By the way, the car was proudly parked in the driveway of a modest tract home with three rows of towers evident about a couple football field lengths behind it.

"Back then, we lived next door to each other in a development that bordered on the WDGY transmitter property," the Minnesotan woman noted. "The darn station could literally be received on our kitchen toaster, so whenever we drove far enough out of the neighborhood to get a clear sound from KDWB, it was no puzzle why we enthusiastically pushed those KDWB buttons!"