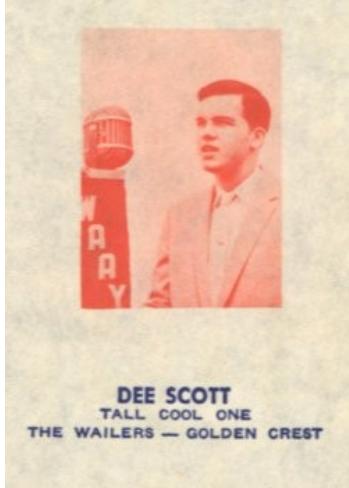


May 4, 2006

WAAY Radio Comes To Town
By
M.D. Smith, IV

The AM radio station on 1550 kcs (it was kilocycles in those days, not khz or kilohertz as frequencies are known today) was owned by The Huntsville Times. The call letters were WHBS. M.D. Smith, III bought the station in 1958. It was languishing near the bottom of the ratings playing EZ listening music and classical much of the time and he changed the call letters to WAAY so it could be coined into a name. "Your Radio WAAY in Huntsville" was one of the first phrases used. I was in high school and worked some during the summer months and in a few years, I even got to be a "WAAY Starlighter" (Disk Jockey to most people) known as Dee Scott.



I didn't have a great voice and was assigned the midnight to dawn shift. It didn't matter to me; I got to play the great popular songs of the day and a fair amount of real Rock and Roll which I loved.

A few months after MD III (he was MD III and I was MD IV) took over and changed the format, he said he got a petition from a number of previous listeners of WHBS that wanted him and his Rock & Roll music to leave town. He always said that he knew WAAY had made an impact when he got that petition.

Another feature of Top 40 Radio was the contest and promotions. A promotion was either something on the air or live at a public location

WAAY 1550-HUNTSVILLE Radio

WAYS OFFICIAL
FAMILY SURVEY NUMBER 31
WEEK OF AUGUST 3, 1959

1. A BIG HUNK OF LOVE/ MY WISH COME TRUE 18. I'M COMING HOME
ELTON JOHN — RCA MELISSA JOHNSON — UNITED ARTIST
2. TIGER 19. SINGER MAN
FABIAN — CHANCELLOR TOMMY SANDS — CAPITOL
3. CRACKIN' UP 20. THE WONDER OF YOU
BO DIDDLEY — CHECKER RAY PETERSON — RCA
4. JUST A LITTLE TOO MUCH/SWEETER THAN 21. PURE LOVE
YOU SONNY JAMES — CAPITAL
MICKEY NELSON — IMPERIAL
5. WHY IS LOVE 22. SMALL WORLD
THE PLAYMATES — ROULETTE JOHNNY MATHIS — COLUMBIA
6. SINCE YOU'VE BEEN GONE 23. CROONER
CLYDE McPATTER — ATLANTIC HARRYIRE THE HURRICANE — WARWICK
7. LONELY BOY 24. A LONG WAY FROM ST. LOUIS
PAUL ANKA — ABC PARAMOUNT PEGGY LEE — CAPITOL
8. SEA OF LOVE 25. PARTNERS
PHIL PHILLIPS — MERCURY JIM REEVES — RCA
9. RAGTIME COWBOY JOE 26. STAY
DAVE COOK & CHIPMONKS — LIBERTY DEE ARLEN — COLUMBIA
10. I'LL BE SATISFIED 27. YOU ARE IN LOVE
JACKIE WILSON — BRUNSWICK BOBBY SINGERS — RCA
11. LAVENDER BLUE 28. MY HEART IS AN OPEN BOOK
SAMMY TURNER — BIG TOP CARL DOBBIN JR. — DECCA
12. WHAT A DIFFERENCE A DAY MAKES 29. THIS I SWEAR
DIHAW WASHINGTON — MERCURY THE SKYLINERS — CALICO
13. DANNY BOY 30. SEE YOU IN SEPTEMBER
BILLY ELLIOTT — MERCURY THE TEMPOS
14. HIGH HOPPEALL THE TOMORROWS 31. SOFT SUMMER BREEZE
FRANK SINATRA — CAPITOL EDDY HEYWOOD — MERCURY
15. PERSONALITY 32. THE WAY I WANT
LLOYD PRICE — ABC PARAMOUNT JACK POTT & CARLTON
16. THERE GOES MY BABY 33. I'M GONNA BE A WHEEL SOMEDAY/I WANT
THE DRIFTERS — ATLANTIC FATS DOMINO — IMPERIAL
17. SWEET SUGAR LIPS 34. HUSH-A-BYE
THE KALIN TWINS — DECCA THE MYSTICS — LAURIE
18. WHAT' I SAY (PM 12) 35. THE MUMMY
RAY CHARLES — ATLANTIC BOB MCGREGOR AND DOR
19. LINDA LOU/RED SAILS IN THE SUNSET 36. CHECK-MATED AND BINGED
RAY SHARPE — JAMIE BILLY AND DON HEART — ROULETTE
20. JOHNNY ROB 37. THE THREE BELLS
JOHNNY HORTON — COLUMBIA THE BROWNS — RCA
21. I'VE COME OF AGE
BILLY STORM — COLUMBIA
22. WITH MY EYES WIDE OPEN
PATTI PAGE — MERCURY
23. WE BELONG (TOGETHER)
JIMMY FORD — STYLO
24. KISIN TIME
BOBBY RYDELL — MGM
25. THE SHAPE I'M IN/YAYA
JOHNNY RESTIVO — RCA
26. DICK ESSNER
WALKING ON AIR
JIMMY BOWEN — ROULETTE
27. JERRY LEE
I'M GONNA GET MARRIED
LLOYD PRICE — ABC PARAMOUNT
28. DEE SCOTT
TALL COOL ONE
THE WAILERS — GOLDEN CREST

"WAAY" STARLIGHTERS
SPOTLIGHT SONG HITS

DAN AKENS
THE SHAPE I'M IN/YAYA
JOHNNY RESTIVO — RCA

DICK ESSNER
WALKING ON AIR
JIMMY BOWEN — ROULETTE

JERRY LEE
I'M GONNA GET MARRIED
LLOYD PRICE — ABC PARAMOUNT

1550 YOUR RADIO "WAAY" IN HUNTSVILLE

designed to attract people and publicize the radio station during the event. "Promotions" was something MD III and my mother, Kirby Smith, really loved to do. They wanted them to be fun, sometimes silly, sometimes outrageous, sometimes a big prize that could be won or anything that would get talk among listeners and publicity for the Radio Station. One of the most memorable "promotions" my father and WAAY Radio ever did was a copy of something similar that a station had done in another city. Anyone who remembers this event will be "waay" ahead of me telling this story once I tell you the name of the promotion was "Dollar Drop."

The idea of dollar drop was that WAAY was giving away \$ 500.00 in CASH. That was a very large sum of money in 1959 when this event was cooked up. The cash would consist of one dollar bills and if someone was lucky enough, they might get all one of the bills, but that was not likely as the money was to be dropped off the top of the Russel Erskine Hotel, one bill at a time. MD III figured with enough talk on the radio before the event, it should attract a fair sized crowd and people should be talking about it both before and after the event. He certainly was right about the talk after, but more of that in a moment. (R. Erskine photo from <http://www.co.madison.al.us/about/history/> web page)

The big day arrives and between every record played, the WAAY Starlighter was announcing the count down to dollar drop. Then the broadcast switched to a live broadcast using a two-way radio from the hotel itself. As the moment arrived for the start of the dollar drop, people were walking and running from blocks away. Some people listening on their radio and seeing that traffic was not moving for blocks around the Russel Erskine were abandoning their cars and rushing up to the streets around the hotel so as to get their chance to grab money as it floated down from the sky.

The dollars begin to fall, and people were screaming with glee, and running to wherever bill would fall. Several people were pushed down and it was clear that the event might get out of hand due to the size of the crowd and the lack of any crowd control on the ground. It had never occurred to anyone that they might need police, lots of them, to keep the event orderly and traffic flowing through the city. As the crowd appeared to be getting totally out of control, and less than \$50 had been dropped, MD III realized it better end pretty quickly or there might be a major riot and fights about the falling money and he and WAAY Radio would be to blame. Plus, the City of Huntsville was grid-locked for blocks around. He ordered all



the rest of the money to be dropped as a single handful. It dispersed over a pretty wide area as the Starlighter on the top of the building hurled the remaining wad hard into the air. The money was quickly all scooped up and no one went to the hospital. The big promotion was over. MD III breathed a big sigh of relief and said he'd think twice before he'd ever do an event like that again.

But even if he had not concluded to abandon what he had thought might be an annual event, the Huntsville Police Department assured him that he would NEVER do something like that again or he and WAAY Radio would indeed be leaving town, probably on a rail or worse. The Mayor was not thrilled about this either. Mayor RB "Spec" Searcy, it seems, did not have much of a sense of humor either. It got major coverage in the Huntsville Times. The newspaper staff people knew that would never have happened under the old ownership.

M. D. Smith, III was an avid believer in what P.T. Barnum said and he quoted it often, "I don't care what they say about me as long as they spell my name right." He was certainly right about this event and they did spell WAAY correctly. The station got a ton of publicity and thankfully no major injuries or lawsuits. He had to promise Huntsville Police he'd never do another "promotion" like that again and that he'd have to get permission to stage any kind of promotion on city property. I believe the next big promotion might have been the arrival of Santa in a chopper at Parkway City (private property) and kids breaking thru the roped off area just as the chopper was landing . . . but . . . that's a story for another time. WAAY Radio had certainly come to town and created memories that few will ever forget if they were there.