A HISTORICAL REVIEW OF BLACKS IN OKLAHOMA BROADCASTING

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IN OKLAHOMA BROADCASTING

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Few Americans are aware of the notable history and proud achievements of the Black race. Most standard sources of history have failed to include their contributions; a more complete account of the many outstanding roles Blacks have played in the mainstream of world culture is long overdue.

The same may be said regarding the pioneers in Oklahoma broadcasting such as Kenneth Johnson, Abram and Willa Ross, Ben Tipton and Herman Gower. Had it not been for them, Blacks in Oklahoma probably would not have the recognition they have today. Likewise, Blacks may not have gained their civil rights as soon across the state.

A Brief Historical Overview

Radio was born in 1896 when Guglielmo Marconi filed a British patent on a device for the wireless transmission of telegraph signals. Not until 1901 was the first radio signal sent across the Atlantic Ocean. Furthermore, radio was conceived as an information rather than entertainment medium.[1] When messages were sent and received, the only sound was the dots and dashes of the Morse code.

Broadcasting began with a memo written by David Sarnoff to the

general manager of the Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company of America. The idea expressed was to bring music into the home by wireless.[2]

As early as 1908, Lee DeForest, an American inventor and pioneer in radiotelephony, broadcast phonograph recordings from the Eiffel Tower in Paris, and in so doing, became the first "disc jockey."[3]

Within four years there were more than 1,000 amateur radio operators in the United States. Congress responded by the Radio Act of 1912, but this proved ineffective because it failed to provide enforcement. The United States Department of Commerce was given the authority to administer the Act. However, Commerce was limited to issuing licenses. It could not establish rules and regulations.[4]

By the mid 1920s, it was clear the Radio Act of 1912 was inadequate. In February 1927, a new Radio Act was passed. It established a five-member Federal Radio Commission appointed by the President of the United States.[5]

The Radio Act set forth the government's philosophy toward the radio industry. Both the philosophy and the structure of this Act were later incorporated into the Communication Act of 1934. This, later, was to be the Act that would regulate television as well.[6]

United States television development began in earnest in 1930, when a team of engineers headed by Vladimir Zworykin at the RCA laboratory produced an all-electronic system for television broadcasting.[7]

> During the 1930s the Camden team tackled and solved all the outstanding problems. They went from the 60-line system . . . to higher and higher frequencies. They increased image size and brightness, introduced interlace scanning, adapted equipment for use in the VLF band, and introduced sets into homes on an experimental basis. In 1939, at the World's Fair in New York City, this decade of intense, systematic developmental work culminated in a vital public demonstration of a 441 all-electronic

> system . . . Franklin Roosevelt, who opened the fair, became the first president of the United States to be televised. There, for the first time, the general public saw United States television in operation.[8]

It was not until 1948 that television, sidetracked in 1941 by World War II, began to invade American homes. In the meantime only scattered instances of technical monitoring by those conducting transmission experiments would be noted.

> During 1948, the number of stations on the air increased from 17 to 41, and the number of cities served went from 8 to 23. Set sales increased more than 500 percent over the 1947 level and by 1951 had already surpassed set sales.[9]

Need for the Study

Much of the history of blacks in broadcasting is left untold. Blacks as DJs were seen as early as the 1920s when Jack L. Cooper became the first black disc jockey in America. During the Golden Age of Radio in the 1930s and 1940s the beginning of programming for blacks can be traced to "race music" or "spiritual music" programs first done by white DJs and later broadcast by black DJs.

> Then, when black disc jockeys were heard, they added an extra soulful dimension to their formats as did Jack L. Cooper, the first Afro-American to air his own program. The former vaudeville artist was first heard over WCAP in Washington, D.C. in 1924, entertaining the masses with a musical variety show doing a four-character skit and playing each character himself . . . In 1928, his show moved to WMSC, Chicago, where he continued to perform until he was replaced by that station's installation of a turntable. Foreseeing the current trend, in 1929, Cooper became the first black disc jockey in America.[10]

The first black DJ in Oklahoma can be traced to 1947. He broadcast from Oklahoma City on the first station established west of the Mississippi River.

> . . . The year 1922 brought a new market for popular orchestras. WKY, the first radio station west of the Mississippi River, was established in the living room and garage of the Westwood Addition home of its founder, Earl Hull. It later moved to the Shrine Auditorium building and still later to the basement of the Huckins Hotel. Local bands provided much of the entertainment. WKY later moved to Plaza Court at Northwest Tenth and Walker, and still later to the Skirvin Tower Hotel. This station was purchased from Hull by Oklahoma Publishing Company in 1928.[11]

It was this Oklahoma City station that put the first black broadcaster, Kenneth Johnson, on the air in Oklahoma.

The inadequate history of blacks in Oklahoma broadcasting is typical of history in general. There is little record of their achievements except for a few special-interest volumes.

Before the advent of blacks in radio and television in Oklahoma City, there was only one mass medium through which blacks could express their views--the print medium.[12]

Little has been published on the subject of this thesis; therefore most of the information on black broadcasters is available only by interviews with individuals and a few articles in magazines and newspapers. The author also has drawn upon personal experience.

Chapters are devoted to blacks in radio in the forties and fifties and in the sixties and seventies. Other chapters discuss blacks in television and blacks in broadcast management. The final chapter summarizes the role of blacks in broadcasting since the forties and discusses their impact on broadcasting, including their effect on black broadcasters in Oklahoma today.

ENDNOTES

[1]Sydney W. Head, Broadcasting in America (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972), p. 90.

[2]Ibid., p. 107.

[3]Ibid., p. 96.

[4]Ibid., p. 127.

[5]Ibid., p. 131.

[6]Ibid., p. 132.

[7]Ibid., p. 160

[8]Ibid., p. 161.

[9]Ibid., p. 162

[10]James Wesley Brown, Blacks in the Mass Media (University of Washington, 1974), p. 51.

[11]Roy P. Steward, Born Grown: An Oklahoma City History (Oklahoma City: Fidelity Bank National Association, 1974), p. 102-103.

[12]Abram and Willa Ross, Personal Interview, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, July 9, 1979.

CHAPTER II

BLACKS IN RADIO IN THE FORTIES AND FIFTIES

Blacks in Oklahoma broadcasting got their start in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Before the advent of blacks in radio in Oklahoma City, there was only one mass medium through which blacks consistently could express their views. This was a weekly newspaper, The Black Dispatch, which often was outdated by the time it was distributed.[1]

Moreover, the inadequacy of white-dominated general circulation newspapers created a need for some daily form of news for blacks. This is why Abram Ross's show, "Negroes in the News," was originated in August of 1948.

Ross, a native Oklahoman, was the son of a minister. His father studied at Jarvis Christian College, Hawkins, Texas. Seeking his field of service in a different way, he was able to touch and educate the black community through his career in broadcasting.

Known as the "grandfather" of radio, Ross started his career in broadcasting when he kept a scheduled appointment with the white owner, Vern Ross of KLPR-Radio, Oklahoma City. As Vern Ross put it, "You are the only Negro I ever met in my life who was on time. You've got the job."[2]

Vern Ross wanted his Country and Western station to be different. He wanted to reach a larger listening audience and saw the need to

reach the black population. Abram Ross was inspired to do a show because of "poor Negro news reporting. Half of it was right; half of it was not."[3]

At this time Capitol Hill, where KLPR was located, was an all-white section of Oklahoma City. Abram Ross, who broke many barriers because of his charismatic appeal to all, stood outside a drugstore in the area where he could not get service inside. After two weeks of his dauntless efforts the drugstore was advertising on his show.[4]

In 1952, Willa, Abram's wife, was offered a job at KLPR so they could work together. "Negroes in the News" broadened its context, incorporating cooking tips by Willa Ross, features of live vocalists, and sometime live broadcasts of black church programs. Many artists who later gained national fame appeared on Abram Ross's show. Among them were the Mathis Brothers and Wanda Jackson. Ross also introduced other types of music, which differed from the Country and Western format of KLPR.

In 1955, Abram Ross set up a studio in his home. "Negroes in the News" was simulcast to both KLPR and KBYE Radio. As Ross expanded his audience, he saw a need to establish an advertising agency and opened the Abram Ross Advertising Agency.

He first encountered financial difficulties because his agency landed few black sponsors. They were not familiar with use of radio spots to reach advertising goals.

Ross set out to educate the black community about the value of the advertising dollar. Many businesses were invited to advertise free so they could experience the advantage of radio advertising.

This is primarily how the "Annual Abram Ross Birthday Party" originated.

During 1956, Ross solicited local business to finance the first Abram Ross Birthday Party. It started with a parade and a day of "fun events." Several prizes were awarded to winners in a drawing. Blacks never got to win anything on radio, so Ross gave away cars, baskets of food, suits of clothes and television sets. A telephone was set up to allow persons to call in and hear themselves on radio. The "Birthday Party" was one of numerous projects originated by Ross to enrich the community. One of the first remote broadcasts of a black sports event, a high school football game in Ardmore between Douglass High School, Oklahoma City, and Douglass High School, Ardmore, was carried by KLPR.[5]

Prayer bands[6] and "Women in the News" later were developed on the show. Abram Ross, with his wife, always worked on the philosophy of "reporting the truth. It is best to know it now when it happens, not later; it may be too late."[7]

When a prominent black woman in the community died and no one knew of her death until a week later, Ross's goal to report the news daily as it happened was reaffirmed.

Abram Ross gained national acclain when he received the "First Annual Disc Jockey Award" in 1951 from Colored magazine which is now Ebony magazine.

The First Black on Radio in Oklahoma

As related in Chapter I, Kenneth Johnson was the first black on the air waves in Oklahoma.

> In the summer of 1947, the powerful WKY radio station of Oklahoma City, and Kenneth Johnson, a gifted Langston senior, launched a Sunday morning program high-lighting instances of progress in race relations. The following February it received one of the ten citations for 'distinguished merit' awarded by the National Conference of Christians and Jews.[8]

In his program, "Creed, Color and Cooperation," Johnson wrote his own script and intended to refute the idea of discrimination based on creed or color. The highly intellectual program attracted much of the black community.

The Beginning of Black Radio in Oklahoma

Black radio in Oklahoma grew from religious programming. In the beginning it was not called black radio. In 1951, many black churches, locally and nationally, became involved in broadcasting church services and gospel shows. Among these programs was the Rev. William Tremmel's "Gospel Caravan Show," carried live. It gained wide attention when it came to KBYE-Radio.

KBYE-Radio developed as a black radio station because of its religious concept in programming. It started as a Country and Western station under the ownership of the State Broadcasting Corporation, but when white owner Frank J. Lynch bought the station in 1949, its format was soon changed to one that was primarily religious. Programming changed again when the first black disc jockey for the station, Clayborn White, was hired in 1952. At this time White's primarily jazz show, "Red, Hot and Blue," was introduced. Lynch added the Abram and Willa Ross show "Negroes in the News," as it was simulcast to KLPR and KBYE in 1955.[9]

On the national level, black religious personalities sought to broadcast programs because of black people's needs for identity in the local community; thus local religious programming evolved in its own right. Black churches were the first group to bring their programs to radio and thus set the trend for white churches. Bishop William E. Jeffries' program, the oldest program at KBYE-Radio, is still aired today.[10]

The Father of Black Broadcasters in Oklahoma

The fifties gave birth to another outstanding broadcaster, Ben Tipton. Tipton started his broadcasting career in the United States Navy. He was influenced by Jim Randolph, an announcer from Oklahoma who never broadcast in the state. Jim Randolph, a black man, saw no future for blacks in Oklahoma, so he went to Dallas, Texas, to begin his career.

Never aspiring to be a radio disc jockey, Tipton was lured into the field in 1953 because he had a large record collection. Seeking to change the trend of black "stuff talkers" in the forties, he emulated the concept of professionalism in his field.[11] "Stuff talkers" is probably best defined by James Wesley Brown in his study, Blacks in the Media (1974), when he makes reference to the negative stereotypes imposed on black DJs. He says

> The men behind the dials, The DJs have traditionally been stereotyped as a fast-talking, rhyme-making ignoramus capable of performing few other tasks besides playing records, running his mouth and answering the phone.[12]

Rather than going along with the trend of black DJs at the time,

Tipton wanted to break the barriers which barred blacks from doing other kinds of radio except for black radio.

> Perhaps this was the concept which sparked the goals established at the 10th Annual National convention of the National Association of Radio Announcers (NSRA) . . . in 1964. The ideals of that meeting still, by and large, hold true today. The disc jockeys who made up the predominantly black organization said they did not want to be limited to just soul stations but, on the contrary, they wanted to be considered par for par with the white DJs when competing for jobs in general appeal with stations. They were also concerned about the stereotypes of soul radio and the image of its DJ. They listed their goals as wanting to be judged solely on the basis of one's professional qualifications (i.e. not necessarily wanting to be hired because it is fashionable to be black) . . . [13]

This was basically the difference between disc jockeys and announcers. Black disc jockeys of the forties were hired to spin records and talk. During the fifties the trend changed because styles of music and people's interests changed. Blacks had to learn how to read over the air, developing non-regional enunciation and conducting intelligent on-air discussion; they had to learn to be announcers.[14]

Ben Tipton was hired in 1957 at KBYE. His fifteen-minute program gradually developed into an hour show.

The First Black Broadcaster In Guthrie.

Another black announcer, Herman Gower, got his start in 1954 at KWRW-Guthrie. Gower was inspired by the Rosses.

Gower had to go out and sell his program. They (the white owners) didn't give him a salary. He had a half-hour program, but within one month, the time was increased to one hour. Gower's listeners were students at Langston University. He had to try to

create an audience other than the students at the University so the advertiser would buy his program. He went to a blues format in the morning for the older set and in the evening to a R & B (rhythm and blues) format for the students at Langston. Management was happy with his program so they put him on salary. He was bringing in the money.[15]

Gower became the local promoter for the Logan County area and began booking bands in the area clubs. He had a band called "Little Braggs and the All Stars."[16] They were popular entertainers among blacks in Guthrie and surrounding territory.

ENDNOTES

[1]Abram and Willa Ross, Personal Interview, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, July 9, 1979.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Members of the listening audience called or wrote to the program soliciting prayers for various deeds. Their requests for prayer were honored on air during the featured program.

[7]Abram and Willa Ross, Personal Interview, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, July 9, 1979.

[8]Angie Debo, Oklahoma: Foot-loose and Fancy-Free (Norman University Press, 1949), p. 118.

[9]Jerry Lynch, Personal Interview, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, June 21, 1979,

[10]Ibid.

[11]Ben Tipton, Personal Interview, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, May 28, 1980.

[12]James Wesley Brown, Blacks in the Media (University of Washington, 1974), p. 55.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Ben Tipton, Personal Interview, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, May 28, 1980.

[15]Herman Gower, Personal Interview, Guthrie, Oklahoma, June 20, 1979.

[16]Ibid.

CHAPTER III

BLACK IN RADIO IN THE SIXTIES AND SEVENTIES

By the early sixties, black radio finally was accomplishing Abram Ross's original intent of the forties "to entertain, educate and serve the community." It had become a prime means of entertainment for the black community. Many preferred listening to the personalities rather than to the music. Groups such as the Soul Motivators, a group formed by Ben Tipton and other disc jockeys to entertain the community, the Soul Board, Tipton's informal school for aspiring blacks, and the Rosses provided a variety of education and service to the community.

By the early sixties, KBYE Radio, although a white-owned station, had developed an "Ebony"[1] concept, programming which had attracted much of the black populous of Oklahoma City and the surrounding area.[2]

Started by Frank J. Lynch in 1949 under Great Empire Broadcasting Corporation and later bought by his sons Jerry and Steve in 1960 under F. J. L. Broadcasting, Inc., KBYE provided a start for many blacks in radio. Even though its involvement in primarily black programming was accidental, it recognized the value of a black listening audience. KBYE was a prime competitor with the pop stations of the sixties and added an FM outlet in 1969.[3]

Ben Tipton's Role as a Leader

As the "father" of black radio in Oklahoma City, Ben Tipton came back to KBYE in 1962 after a short stay in Detroit, Michigan, at WCHD-Radio. Tipton started a radio school at KBYE to train youth and would-be professionals in radio broadcasting. This school was known as the "Soul Board." Its students, who trained on weekends, were Don McKneely, Phil Jones, Tom Roberts, Alvah Boyd, Raymond Jackson, Linda Howard, Tobi Cox, Ernest L. James, Toni and Phyllis Bernard, Alfred Smith, Lester V. LeSure and Johnny Jordan.[4]

Many of these individuals trained by Tipton became on-air "DJ's" on both KBYE-AM and KBYE-FM. If Tipton was the father of black radio in Oklahoma, it might be said that the sons were McKneely, Jones, Boyd, Roberts, Daniels, Ellis Meeks, Jackson, Gower and LeSure.

In 1969, these "DJ's" formed a group known as the "Soul Motivators." They went across the state doing "hops"[5] in numerous towns, among them Shawnee, Stillwater, Weatherford, Clinton, Boley, El Reno, Lawton, Norman and Chickasha. Weekly performances were given in Oklahoma City and Guthrie. These performers helped raise funds for the various communities by producing teen hops, much like the "discos" of the seventies. Prizes were awarded to the best dancers. Among the prizes were dates with the "DJ's." Sometimes they would give away records and free tickets from the upcoming concert in town. The Motivators, respected by the black community and followed by many, travelled together across the state.

They considered themselves a unit--a family. They inspired the

black community as Abram Ross had, involved youth in positive endeavors, and helped to elevate self-esteem.

They probably were better known by their talent names than by their legal names. Tipton was the "Tall Man," McKneely was "Dandy Don," Roberts was known as "Tiny T," and Jones as "Li'l Black Jetway," but they were considered as personalities during these times, so popular they could be identified readily when riding through the black community.[6]

Tipton was criticized by the white owners for bringing so many black broadcasters into the field. His goal was to share the knowledge he had acquired with aspiring black broadcasters, but the white owners thought he was trying to build a force for him and blacks in the broadcast industry. The opportunities for blacks in broadcasting were at this time very few, and the white power structure didn't want to see the industry taken over by blacks.

Tipton left for a period to pursue a broadcasting opportunity in Detroit. After his return in the early sixties, he had an opportunity to write a proposal to develop KBYE-FM.[7]

When KBYE-FM was developed in 1969, he simulcast for both the AM and FM stations. The AM programming was primarily religious, so there was a need to develop new FM programming to cater to the minority audience the station had acquired as listeners.

Many long hours were spent in preparation for shows, writing commercials and jingles, and developing community bulletin boards.

As a result, KBYE-FM was rated the top Oklahoma station in one year. That was what the white power structure was afraid would

happen--that Tipton would create a place in the industry for blacks. Then, the white owners began to complain about the lack of professionalism of new blacks in the industry and that they were losing revenue because of this. So, Tipton began to train the new broadcasters about advertising and professionalism.[8]

Tipton left radio to enter television at KOCO-TV in 1972 and later turned to politics. He earned several awards. He was named the top "DJ" in the nation by Movie Mirror Magazine in 1969, and received the "Outstanding Young Man Award" from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). During his career in radio he was known as one of the top broadcasters in the nation.[9]

Other Black Radio Pioneers

Herman Gower in 1962 was hired at KIOO-Oklahoma City as an announcer. The station's format was "good listening" music that provided soft background music for many offices.[10]

Gower introduced a new format at KIOO; it was jazz. Later his format changed to blues and jazz. Again Gower was faced with the problem of creating an audience so the advertisers would buy his program. Gower did a live show from Bryant Center bowling alley in Oklahoma City and on the weekend he broadcast live from the Holiday Inn motel with a local talent night.[11]

KIOO was not a black-owned station nor did it have a black programming format until Gower changed it. But it did provide training for many blacks, among them E. L. James, J. J. Jordan, Carl Holmes, Bobbie Moon, Jimmy Miller and Wendell Gorden.[12]

Not only was he known as the "Master Blaster" because he possessed a knack for talking on-air, he was also known for the special way he said "shugah" (sugar), inspired by Aretha Franklin's recording of "Dr. Feelgood." Gower had the ability to relate to all age groups.[13]

In June of 1969, after playfully battling back and forth on-air with disc jockey Ben Tipton at KBYE-FM, Gower joined KBYE-Radio as an announcer and became one of the "Soul Motivators."[14]

Another broadcaster developed his skills at KIOO in 1963. Jimmy Miller was first interested in entertainment. His family had brought many well-known entertainers to the state. At the age of eight he was a proficient dancer and had received many awards for his talent.[15]

In 1957 he was approached by Billy Taylor, a program manager for Channel 25, KTVQ a UFH television station in Oklahoma City, to co-host a variety show.[16]

Steve Bushman, owner of KIOO, later brought Miller to KIOO because he liked his voice. Starting in 1963, Miller worked for three years as an on-air announcer without salary to gain experience. His dream to own a radio station began during this period.[17]

In 1966, Jimmy Miller filed with the Federal Communications Commission for an FM frequency in Oklahoma City. There was one other company, KBYE, competing, and Miller lost. He filed later for another frequency with six others competing. After approximately ten years of traveling between Washington, D.C., and Oklahoma City, he realized his dream. The All-American Broadcasting Company signed station KAEZ-Radio on the air October 6, 1976, as a 24-hour FM operation.[18]

Miller encountered problems as a black radio station owner. One was that it was difficult to borrow money because agencies were reluctant to loan money for black stations. However, after winning the ten-year battle with the FCC, he became the sole black radio station owner in the state.

The programming format he set for KAEZ was "great music"--all types of music to meet the trends of the late seventies. While KAEZ attracted a majority of the black listening audience, the station did not program strictly to a minority audience.

Aided by the community, KAEZ has developed rapidly, according to owner Jimmy Miller, during the past five years to rank in the top ten in Oklahoma.[19]

The concept of black radio had gone from "Negroes in the News" to "Ebony" to "Black Radio" and now had lost its standing to a "Middle of the Road" programming format. Those days of the forties to early seventies had made way for modern times when it is not popular to program for blacks only.

Today, there are only two black radio stations operated and managed by blacks in Oklahoma--KAEZ-FM, Oklahoma City, owned by Jimmy Miller, and educational station KALU-FM, Langston University, Langston, Oklahoma, with Lester LeSure as general manager.

ENDNOTES

[1]Ebony was a term for black music during the sixties, but the lable was a white term chosen by whites rather than blacks.

[2]Jerry Lynch, Personal Interview, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, June 21, 1979.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ben Tipton, Personal Interview, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, May 28, 1980.

[5]Hops were dances that were sponsored by "DJ's" who would go to the community and provide entertainment by spinning records. It came from the term "sock hop," a dance that usually took place in a gym.

[6]Ben Tipton, Personal Interview, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, May 28, 1980.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Herman Gower, Personal Interview, Guthrie, Oklahoma, June 20, 1979.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Jimmy Miller, Personal Interview, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, June 3, 1980.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Ibid.

[19]Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

BLACKS IN BROADCAST MANAGEMENT

Since the advent of radio and later television, the record of blacks in broadcast management has been dismal. Because of the struggle for civil rights and equal opportunities in various career fields, blacks were latecomers to broadcasting. They often were seen as entertainers, but rarely entered the ranks of broadcast employment until the 1940s.

Only after a careful examination of efforts to provide opportunities for black ownership, case studies of black managers across the nation, views of local managers, and current trends of broadcasting in schools and universities can one understand the present status of blacks in broadcast management.

One of the initial problems of blacks in a management role was blacks were latecomers to the industry. Radio advanced in the 1920s but programs were not devoted to blacks until 1947, when WDIA-AM in Memphis, Tennessee, became the first radio station to devote all its time to black programs.[1] It was during the late 1940s that Washington, D.C., station WOOK-AM aired Hal Jackson, the country's first black full-time radio announcer.[2] "Until Jesse B. Blayton bought station WERD in Atlanta, Georgia in 1949, blacks had been on radio as performers but not as owners."[3]

One of the major problems contributing to the growth of black ownership and management is financial. Because blacks have been latecomers to broadcasting and have had menial assignments and low pay, lenders are reluctant to finance a black-owned broadcasting facility. "Money lenders point out that blacks don't come to the bargaining table with enough equity capital to leverage the large sums of money needed to buy stations in major broadcasting markets."[4] "One thing to keep in mind," said Herbert Wilkins, president of Syndicated Communications (SYNCOM), a venture capital-firm in Washington, D.C., "is that investment companies are in business to make money, not to put blacks in business . . . SYNCOM was formed . . . by the Opportunity Funding Corporation to help minorities get a toehold in the broadcasting business."[5]

Another reason creditors are reluctant to lend the necessary capital to blacks is FCC licensing. Because of the large amounts of revenue needed to finance broadcast facilities, long-term loans generally range from ten to fifteen years. Many lenders are hesitant to finance stations that might not be in existence after three years because of license-renewal risks.[6]

This related to another problem, that of black stations being poor risks as advertising media. "Media buyers at ad agencies place ads with stations that are rated highest. Consequently, the black-owned stations are the ones most often overlooked."[7]

> 'The upper-level management people at the ad agencies want to advertise on black radio . . . .,' says Skip Finley, vice-president, Sheridan Broadcasting. 'But the middle level has blacklashed against the ideas. In their eyes there's no justification for buying black radio. They don't see

> the economic sense in buying time on a black radio station that's ranked number two. It's not so much a matter of racism as economics.'[8]

Moreover, the power struggle for executive leadership must be considered. The feminist movement probably has been the largest contributor to this power struggle. It is not solely the black male vs. the white male executive. The competition also is between black male vs. white female and black male vs. black female in the climb to the executive positions.

> Even though the federal government has not fully or consistently monitored affirmative action gains, some statistics are persuasive enough to support the contention that white women are winning the race into the corporate executive suite. According to the latest figures compiled by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), white women increased their share of managerial positions 3.6 percentage points to 15.5 percent between 1974 and 1978, while blacks increased their share only eight-tenths of a point to 3.7 percent during the same period. These figures suggest trends that continue today.[9]

Another argument is that the black woman is moving up the ranks in a more expeditious manner than the black male for several reasons. Among these are: 1) the black female is able to enter more easily because she is viewed by whites as a lesser threat; 2) she serves a two-fold need by being a double minority--black and female; and 3) she is easier to appease after reaching the management level (after which oftentimes she does not further progress), with high salary and responsibility.[10]

There were efforts to minimize the problems of black ownership by the Carter administration.

> For the first time in history the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has adopted a policy to increase minority ownership in the broadcasting industry. To carry out this policy, the Commission will take two initial steps: It

> will issue tax certificates and authorize distress sales on an ad hoc basis to increase minority interests in broadcasting stations. Currently, minorities own or control less then one percent of the country's stations. The tax certificate proposal was made by the National Association of Broadcasters and the distress sales proposal was made by the Congressional Black Caucus. Both proposals had been supported by the Carter Administration.[11]

This proposal was adopted in 1978.

The NAB foresaw problems for those who supported this proposal.

> The NAB didn't support the proposal because it thought the concept could be too easily abused. Unscrupulous members of minority groups, the association feared, might blackmail station owners into selling at 'distress sale' prices by threatening to force them into costly license-renewal litigation.[12]

> In addition to the aforementioned 1978 proposal, it was suggested that the Carter Administration 'urge the FCC to allocate a certain percentage of newly available broadcasting frequencies to minorities . . . Because minorities were excluded from getting in on the ground floor in radio, perhaps they should get first crack at getting any new frequencies the FCC will make available.'[13]

There was much opposition to this idea, but some proponents argued that blacks had been excluded for so long it seemed to be a necessary step to help them gain a foothold in the broadcast management ranks.

The efforts to facilitate black ownership by the FCC can be attributed partly to Martha (Bunny) Mitchell, a black woman who worked in the Carter Administration with Frank Washington, both of whom reportedly were dedicated to seeing that blacks have a better opportunity for station ownership.[14]

Another move that has aided blacks in their climb up the ladder of broadcasting ownership was made in February of 1978.

> . . . the Small Business Administration (SBA) chipped away at the financial barrier that has closed major cities to

> black broadcasters by changing its policy against making broadcast loans. In the 50 largest cities, blacks own only about 20 radio stations, despite the fact that they account for nearly 40 percent of the population in 10 of these cities. The agency will now make direct loans up to $500,000 for the purchase or construction of broadcasting stations.[15]

While this action has offered some relief, many black broadcasters are not content with the idea, because the $500,000 limit is too restrictive in many cases to meet the cost of buying a station.

> To help channel more national ad revenue to black-owned stations, the American Association of Advertising Agencies (AAAA) has formed a task force to improve the way its member agencies buy (advertising time on) black-owned stations. This is particularly encouraging because AAAA represents 443 agencies, who, together, place about 75 percent of agency ads. Media buyers at ad agencies place ads with stations that are rated highest. Consequently, the black-owned stations are the ones most often overlooked.[16]

Despite this recital of trends and problems, there are blacks who have joined the ranks of owners and managers across the nations. The first black-owned station, WERD in Atlanta, was started by Jesse B. Blayton in 1949. Shortly afterward, KPRS in Olatha, Kansas, was purchased by Andrew Carter and moved to Kansas City, Missouri. The first black to build a radio station was Haley Bell, who started WCHB-AM in Inkster, Michigan, in 1956. After Bell's death in 1973, Mary (Ma) Bell succeeded her husband to become the country's first black female radio station head.[17]

Another black entrepreneur in radio is Percy Sutton.

> Organized seven years ago by former Manhattan Borough President Percy Sutton, Inner City now owns radio station WLIB-FM, which is not only the country's premier black-owned station, but it's the top FM station, too.[18]

Women, too, can be seen in broadcast management, as noted before,

but one of the youngest owners of a black station is Mutter Evans. In 1979,

> . . . after the FCC granted approval, Evans bought Triple A . . . and its 55,000 shares, from Media Broadcasting Corp. (MBC) for $1.04 million. She missed being the first black woman to buy a station in the country because two weeks earlier Dorothy Brunson received FCC approval to take over WEEB in Baltimore, Maryland.[19]

After working at the station as an intern in her junior year of college and gaining employment after graduation, Ms. Evans worked her way up the corporate ladder to executive vice-president and general manager of Triple A. This appointment gave her an option to buy the radio station.[20]

> Triple A, a 1,000-watt AM radio station located in northwest Winston-Salem, has a 30-year history of service to the black community. Operated by a black staff, the station has a morning gospel program, obituary announcements, and news, interwoven with its rhythm and blues format.[21]

As of 1975, there were 35 black-owned stations in the United States.[22] By 1976, with 7,000 AM and FM stations, only 42 were black-owned.[23] And in 1978, "only 57 of the country's 7,571 commercial radio stations" were black-owned. Viewed in another light, however, since 1970 their number has grown by nearly 500 percent.[24]

Another aspect of black broadcasting is the news network.

> The country's first black-owned news network, the National Black Network (NBN) . . . was formed in 1973. NBN, headquartered in New York City, sells black oriented news programs to more than 80 affiliated radio stations. The network's programs are broadcast to about 17 million blacks a week. Insiders say (NBN's) president, Eugene Jackson, is one of the most powerful blacks in the broadcast industry.
>
> Also, in 1973, the Mutual Broadcasting Company in New York City, formed the Mutual Black Network. The network, now half-owned by Pittsburgh's Sheridan Broadcasting Company, comprises about 90 affiliates.[25]

Looking at blacks in broadcasting as of 1978:

> Minorities make up over 15 percent of the total population in 31 of the top 50 television markets. Yet they own less than one percent of the nations 9,000 stations. Only one television station on the continent, a UHF station in Detroit Michigan, is owned by blacks. (The only other black-owned station is in the United States Virgin Islands).[26]

Looking at Oklahoma, some insights into blacks in management can be gained through interviews with two general managers of Oklahoma City television stations.

Jack DeLier, former general manager of KWTV-Channel 9, says the development of blacks has been somewhat slow because blacks came into the broadcasting industry late, resulting in their slow acceptance by white executives. As a result of entering the field late, blacks, in many cases, lack the experience necessary for managerial positions. At KWTV, however, there have been several blacks who held first-rank supervisory positions. Another problem, DeLier says, is that few blacks, if any, are qualified to step into the management market after college. They need on-the-job training. DeLier attributed part of this problem to educators who concentrate too much on theory rather than the practical aspects of broadcasting.[27]

This view also was expressed by Lee Allan Smith, vice president and general manager of KTVY-Channel 4. He believes that universities focus too much on theory rather than practice. He states that there is more potential now for blacks in management because of education and ownership opportunities and blacks already in management positions outside broadcasting should become interested in broadcasting. This would be a much easier avenue than working up through the ranks.

The key issue is managerial positions require persons who are skilled in management as well as broadcasting. Smith does not foresee any problems for black managers who are "suresighted of their goals and possess a good attitude."[28]

The writer now turns to some schools and universities and their attitudes toward preparing blacks in broadcasting. At Clark University in Atlanta, Georgia, "a student majoring in mass communications can concentrate his or her studies in one of the three basic areas: News-editorial, broadcast management or public relations."[29]

Jim Williams, the University's station manager, says

> I am concerned that here at Clark, students are urged to get the (undergraduate) degree along with the professional skills to become owners, directors and technical workers in the field. Too often Blacks are limited to the dee-jay (disc jockey) end of the field. However, dee-jays don't make any money and they don't make decisions. Owners make both.[30]

Unfortunately, another program that has been successful in training a large number of blacks for the media industry has been abolished.

> . . . The three major networks and the Ford Foundation discontinued their support of the 7-year-old Michele Clark Program at New York's Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, which trained about 20 percent of the minority people who are presently employed in the media. Among the reasons for terminating the program was the high cost of maintaining a student in the program for a 3-month period, which was $12,000.[31]

In Oklahoma, Langston University, a predominantly black institution, has one of the formally designed internship programs for broadcast journalism majors. Somewhat like the student teaching practicum, the students have attended block courses[32] for eight weeks and

were assigned to work in a media facility for the remainder of the semester. The internship program has now been modified to permit students to intern eight or fourteen weeks for six or twelve hours' credit. It is the only Broadcast Journalism program in Oklahoma in which every student does an internship, emphasizing the importance of experiential education. Meeting the need for experiential training, this internship is set up during the student's junior or senior year.

ENDNOTES

[1]Roland Alston, "Black Owned Radio: Taking to the Airwaves in a Hurry." Black Enterprise (July 1978), p. 22.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid., p. 23.

[4]Ibid., p. 25.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Ibid., p. 23.

[8]Ibid., p. 23.

[9]Judy Simmons, "Struggle for the Executive Suite: Black vs. White Women." Black Enterprise (September 1980), p. 24.

[10]Michael E. Jones, "Black vs. the News Media." Encore American and Worldwide News (May 19, 1975), p. 48.

[11]Alston, p. 24.

[12]Ibid., p. 25.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Earl E. Graves, "Black in Communications." Black Enterprise (July 1978), p. 7.

[15]Alston, p. 25.

[16]Ibid., p. 23.

[17]Ibid., p. 20-22.

[18]Ibid., p. 20.

[19]Mark R. Moss, "The Rapid Ascent of Mutter Evans." Black Enterprise (December 1980), p. 67.

[20]Ibid., p. 68.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Lynn Sharpe, "Advances and Setbacks in Communication," Encore American and Worldwide News (January 20, 1975), p. 31.

[23]Donald Adderton, "Blacks May Make Gains in Broadcasting, Say Nation Communicators," Jet (January 15, 1976), p. 12.

[24]Alston, p. 20.

[25]Ibid., p. 22.

[26]Ernest Holsendolph, Bob Mynard and Grayson Mitchell, "Radio and TV Ownership: A Change in the Air," Black Enterprise (June 1978), p. 36.

[27]Jack DeLier, Personal Interview, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, October 16, 1980.

[28]Lee Allan Smith, Personal Interview, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, October 17, 1980.

[29]Osker Spicer, "Communications: At Clark University," The Black Collegian (November/December 1978), p. 18.

[30]Ibid.

[31]Sharpe, p. 31.

[32]Block courses are special courses designed for student to take for eight weeks before they go on internship.

CHAPTER V

BLACKS IN TELEVISION

In Oklahoma, blacks moved into television when radio changed from black radio to middle of the road. In the 1960s and 1970s, television in Oklahoma opened up for blacks. Prior to this, the only blacks in television were those in menial jobs. Ben Tipton, Tom Daniels, Paul Lehman and Lester LeSure are some of the blacks who left radio and went to television. Joyce Jackson-Combs has been in television longer than any other black in Oklahoma.

First Blacks in Television in Oklahoma

Just as he was a pioneer in radio, Abram Ross was most certainly a pioneer in television in Oklahoma. He did a nightly television show in 1954 with KLPR-TV, Channel 19, a UHF station. Ross took his radio show, "Negroes in the News," and broadcast it nightly for television audiences. He was also broadcasting the show on radio in the morning. The show accidentally turned into a dance show when the featured guest did not appear on a given night. He play records and invited the audience to dance. The viewers liked it and the dance show resulted.[1]

Abram Ross and Jimmy Miller were the first blacks to appear on television in Oklahoma. Both got their start on UHF-television.

The first blacks on VHF were Ozell Littleton and Paul Lehman, who got their start on KWTV-television, Channel 9, in Oklahoma City. While Tipton, the Rosses, Daniels, Gower and LeSure were putting a dent in radio, Littleton was fighting the white management to stay on television in Oklahoma.

Littleton started a half-hour show "Soul Talk" in August, 1969, on KWTV, Channel 9. "Soul Talk" started from a news format that disseminated stories about the black community to the news department. Littleton's primary concern was for management to accept the stories as he relayed them and not edit them to satisfy management.[2]

Because television broadcasting is essentially a group of many small businesses serving local markets and depending upon community or area acceptance for economic success, a broadcaster is primarily concerned with the needs and desires of his or her particular audience.[3]

Littleton faced many problems in television because blacks who appeared on his show were not familiar with the strange new medium. After many bouts of stagefright and on-air anxiety by his guests, Littleton's talk show was branded "poor" by management. It was a losing battle, not only for blacks trying to get on television, but for blacks who already had gained a foothold in this challenging field. After this difficult struggle, Littleton's goal was to educate blacks about the medium and persuade them to gain their place in the TV ranks.[4]

When "Soul Talk" went from a news format to a magazine show, Littleton's problems multipled. It was during this time management

started receiving letters about having a "nigger on television." Viewers called in with threats saying they would not watch the station's program if they were going to put "niggers" on the air.[5]

After Littleton's dispute with management, he wanted to take cameras into the black community and let the white community see the real story. Management said "no" to going on remote in the community, that it was too costly and management did not see a need for that kind of thing.[6]

Littleton's show was aired for one year on KWTV in Oklahoma City until he accepted a job with the governor's office. "Soul Talk" was never revived.

Other Black Television Pioneers in Oklahoma

Joyce Jackson-Combs started in television at KOCO-Television, Channel 5, Oklahoma City, in 1970. She went through the ranks of clerical assistant, public service director and host of a public affairs program. She now is in the news department as a reporter. Her weekly show, "Black Review," a talk show featuring guests and news spots about the affairs of the black community, is still aired.

At the same television station, Ben Tipton appeared in 1973 as one of the first black anchormen for the news. After leaving radio, Tipton accepted a position in television in Chicago in 1970. Two years later he returned to Oklahoma and developed a career in television, leaving that eventually for politics. As a former city councilman for Oklahoma City, he had a television show, "Talk With Tipton," on KWTV-Television Channel 9, which ended in 1981. He also

has his own advertising agency, "Roots," which he has owned since 1978.[7]

Another black who has made a significant contribution to Oklahoma television, is George Wesley, who first worked in TV in 1968 while he was doing graduate work at the University of Oklahoma. Wesley, on leave as a speech and theatre teacher at Grambling State University, was preparing to develop a curriculum in radio and television at Grambling. During this time he worked on the stage crew at KTVY-Channel 4 to satisfy an internship requirement for one of his courses. Afterwards, he was asked to stay at KTVY and work part-time. In August, 1969, he returned to G.S.U. to develop the broadcasting curriculum.[8]

Between 1969 and 1973 he had many job offers from KTVY. Finally, given an opportunity he could not refuse, he came to KTVY in 1973 as public affairs producer. His main task was to co-produce a documentary on black heritage, "Through the Looking Glass Darkly," that won an Emmy in 1974.[9]

The chief producer, Bob Dodson, chief photographer Oliver Murray, a black, and Wesley captured the subtle nuances of racism and the fight for civil rights that existed in Oklahoma since early settlement.[10]

George Wesley produced and hosted the show "Saturday Magazine." He was the first black to appear on television as talent at KTVY. Since 1976, he has been community relations director.[11]

He said "blacks were tokens" during the period when he started in television; they were used to satisfy equal employment require-

ments. They were tolerated by management and there was some cooperation from management on behalf of their work-related desires and needs.[12]

He said one of the reasons management went out of state to recruit a black for the position was not because blacks in Oklahoma were not qualified, but they were not visible enough in strategic areas to be hired for the position. During this time he sensed an attitude of apathy in Oklahoma blacks. There was little dedication to quality, partially because they lacked experience in television.[13]

Blacks in radio were looked at by television management because of their experience in broadcasting. Wesley thought that black radio, even though a rewarding form of entertainment, had an adverse effect on black broadcasters because there was too much talking on-air and not enough attention given to the professional techniques of broadcasting (i.e. good enunciation, playing a variety of music, reporting news, features, etc.)[14]

However, this apathy is now changing. Blacks as a whole are more sophisticated and more responsive to broadcasting. They are now voicing their opinions about television and are writing and calling the television stations about their likes and dislikes as to what is being aired.[15]

As a result of the actions of blacks, management has changed. Blacks now are preparing for jobs in broadcasting and gaining experience through formal and informal education. In earlier years, this opportunity was not afforded to blacks and it was virtually impossible to get hands-on experience. Blacks generally were not accepted

in print media and broadcasting to gain free experience.[16]

Attitudes regarding the hiring of blacks in all areas of broadcasting are changing. Blacks are not employed only in visible areas but are working behind the scenes as account executives, in production, accounting and public relations.[17]

Groups such as The Black Media Association (Oklahoma City) are forming to help apprise blacks entering the field of what is happening in the television and radio industry.

These pioneers in television paved the future for blacks. The growing trend of Civil Rights made television management aware of blacks as consumers who no longer were satisfied watching programs that did not include them as role models.

Because of this breakthrough and the achievements of blacks in television and radio in the fifties, blacks in television today are news reporters, cinematographers, news anchormen, hosts of public affairs shows, and producers.

ENDNOTES

[1]Abram and Willa Ross, Personal Interview, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, July 9, 1979.

[2]Ozell Littleton, Personal Interview, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma July 28, 1981.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Ben Tipton, Personal Interview, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, May 28, 1980.

[8]George Wesley, Personal Interview, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, July 24, 1981.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY

It would seem from the published material that the history of blacks in Oklahoma broadcasting is sparse. However, this thesis, examining and reviewing the experiences of blacks in broadcasting as it does, can be considered a milestone. A few pioneer blacks have paved the way for others in radio and television broadcasting since the 1940s.

Black radio programming in Oklahoma stemmed from two basic trends--religious programming and a need for stations to gain identity with minorities.

In the 1940s and early 1950s a trend developed for black churches around the state to broadcast their programs. A similar national trend toward religious programming also was getting started. KBYE, which later developed a primarily black programming format, led the way in Oklahoma with Clayborn White as its first black disc jockey.[1] Programming other than religious was primarily jazz, which was introduced at this station with White's show "Red, Hot and Blue" in 1952.

Kenneth Johnson, thought to be the first black radio broadcaster in Oklahoma, developed a program, "Creed, Color and Cooperation," in 1947.

In 1948, Abram Ross was hired at KLPR-Radio, Oklahoma City,

because the owner saw a need to attract a larger listening audience. Through the endeavors of Abram Ross and his wife Willa, KLPR developed one of the first news shows for blacks, "Negroes in the News," which was later simulcast as KLPR and KBYE-AM.

The national trend of the forties to hire blacks who could keep dialogue going on-air was rejected by Ben Tipton in the late fifties. Tipton developed among blacks the concept of professionalism in radio announcing and later trained many prospective broadcasters (the Soul Board) at KBYE-AM and KBYE-FM to be announcers who were marketable for any region.

The Soul Motivators of KBYE evolved from this training. This group of radio announcers travelled weekly around the state serving the black community by producing record "hops" as well as working at the station.

Two radio stations in Oklahoma City are noted for the training and experience extended to blacks--KBYE-AM and FM and KIOO. Many blacks trained at KIOO including Jimmy Miller, the only black station owner in Oklahoma, and Herman Gower, an outstanding radio broadcaster of the sixties. Accidentally evolving into black programming stemming from the religious programming of the forties, KBYE-AM and FM promoted many black broadcasters including Clayborn White, Abram and Will Ross, Herman Gower, and Ben Tipton.

Oklahoma black radio thus stemmed from the religious programming of the forties, which later developed into "Negroes in the News." The rhythm and blues, jazz, and rock and roll of the forties and fifties, and the "Ebony (Soul)" of the sixties and seventies had

given way to changing times. By the late seventies, it was no longer fashionable to have programming primarily for blacks.

There are only two existing black-owned-and-managed stations in Oklahoma--KAEZ-FM, Oklahoma City, owned by Jimmy Miller, and KALU-FM, Langston University, under general manager Lester LeSure.

Many blacks left radio to go to television as Ben Tipton did in the seventies. Blacks could be seen as early as the fifties with Abram and Willa Ross and Jimmy Miller. Blacks evolved into television primarily the same way black radio developed--to meet the growing consumer demand for blacks on-air.

Joyce Jackson-Combs, a reporter for KOCO-TV, Channel 5, Oklahoma City, probably has been in Oklahoma television longer than any other black. She has been employed continuously with KOCO-TV since 1970.

Blacks have made numerous achievements in television, from reporters to producers to Emmy Award winners. The documentary, "Through the Looking Glass Darkly," won an Emmy Award with assistant producer George Wesley and cinematographer Oliver Murray, KTVY-TV, Channel 4, Oklahoma City. The proliferation of blacks in television can be seen in the seventies.

The problems of blacks in broadcast management are numerous, ranging from lack of financial backing to problems in obtaining advertising, but there have been many efforts made to eliminate and/or reduce the barriers to blacks in management. The government, some leaders in the private sector, and universities are doing their part to help the upward struggle. In spite of all the turmoil, blacks since the 1940s have been in executive positions progressively

increasing in numbers from roughly two in the 1940s to more than 57 in the late seventies--an increase of nearly 500 percent.

Because of the efforts and achievements of black pioneers in radio in the 1940s and television in the 1970s, there are blacks in numerous positions in television and radio station across the state.

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[1]Jerry Lynch, Personal Interview, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, June 21, 1979.

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