



Cue the thirties.

Cue the Great Depression, the 1937 flood in the Ohio Valley, Roosevelt's Fireside Chats, the first streamlined passenger train, the repeal of Prohibition, Will Rogers ("We are the first nation in the history of the world to go to the poor house in an automobile!"), the Blue Eagle, Kate Smith coming over the mountain ("Hello, everybody!"), Fibber McGee's closet, Ma Perkins, people selling apples on street corners, the dust bowl, the Okies heading west to the Promised Land, Little Orphan Annie ("Leapin' Lizards!"), Tom Mix, Tarzan, Buck Rogers, Shirley Temple, John Dillinger, Machine Gun Kelly, the real Bonnie and Clyde (they were Mr. and Mrs. Clyde Barrow), Eleanor Roosevelt (and Anna and James and Elliott and Franklin, Jr., and John), the CCC, the PWA, the WPA, Brenda Frazier, Aly Khan, John L. Lewis ("Labor, like Israel, has many sorrows!"), the union sit-ins, Jane Withers, Clark Gable, Jean Harlow, Fred Astaire and

Ginger Rogers, the Marx Brothers, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, *Gone With the Wind*, Father Charles E. Coughlin, "Moon Over Miami," and—while you're at it—cue the organist to give us a little of "Caprice Viennoise," then hold under, and cue Peter Grant, who will say:

Down the valley of a thousand yesterdays

F'low the bright waters of Moon River,

On and on, forever waiting to carry you

Down to the land of forgetfulness,

To the kingdom of sleep.

To the realm of

Moon River,

A lazy stream of dreams

Where vain desires forget themselves

In the loveliness of sleep.

Moon River,

Enchanting white ribbon

"Twined in the hair of night

Where nothing is but sleep.

Dream on, sleep on

Care will not seek for thee,

F'loat on, drift on,

Moon River . . . to the sea.

Wow! The wow is mine, but the mood—and the memory—belongs strictly to WLW. Although Peter Grant went down to the sea a lot with Moon River, he was not the only announcer to recite its poetry. Harry Holcomb did. And so did Palmer Ward, Charles Woods, Don Dowd, Jay Jostyn, Jimmy Leonard, and Ken Linn. They say that once Ken Linn "broke" the sweet and romantic format by reciting *The Shooting of Dan McGrew* at the lovers out there in radioland. John Clark fired him fast, but hired him back

again just as fast when, according to the story, the poem had been requested via cable from the Duchess of Edinburgh. Moon River, at the time, was heard everywhere because that was in the thirties and WLW broadcast with 500,000 watts.

If anything, Moon River typifies the WLW of the thirties. The story of its origin shows how radio was back then. The Moon River program began in 1930. Its creator was Edward Byron. Or was its creator Powel Crosley, Junior? Each had a hand in it, so did a WLW violinist. Mary Wood, columnist for the *Cincinnati Post & Times-Star* who served her time as a WLW writer and got off with good behavior, tells of the start of Moon River.

"Eddie Byron told me himself," she recalls. "It seems that up on Court Street during those Prohibition Days there was this place you could get a beer or whatever might interest you from the waitresses because it is rumored the place was run by a madam. Every night, after WLW signed off, Eddie and some of the staff musicians would go there for beer. Well, one day Crosley called Eddie into his office and told Eddie he had just purchased a new organ for WLW. It was the organ he dedicated to his mother. Also he told Eddie, 'Beginning tomorrow night I'd like to have a nice program at midnight, featuring organ music and poetry. Nice soft music and poetry. You'll need a nice theme song and a poem to get the program going. Oh, and have it on the air tomorrow night.' That was the way Crosley was: he wanted things done yesterday. After Eddie closed up the station that night he went down to join his friends for a beer. The WLW staff violinist was with him, playing music to entertain the beer drinkers and the ladies in attendance. While the rest

of them relaxed and enjoyed themselves, Eddie drank beer and scribbled dozens of false starts on paper. After much beer, according to Eddie, what he wrote began to sound pretty good to him. So he recited it to the ladies while the violinist played "Caprice Viennoise" in the background. There the ladies were, all in their kimonos, weeping. That was when Eddie knew he had a winner. And that was where *Moon River* was conceived."

Bob Brown was the first to send the listeners down to the sea, but because he wasn't at his best with poetry, he was quickly replaced—in less than a week of getting in the hair of night—by Harry Holcomb. Eddie Byron, having originated *Famous Jury Trials* while in the writing bullpen at WLW, moved onto New York where he created Mr. *District Attorney*. Other writers on WLW's *Famous Jury Trials* were Milton Kramer, Len Finger, Daisy Amoury, Lawrence Menkin, Bill Rafael, Martin Young, Stedman Coles, Paul Monash, Ameal Fisher, Jerry McGill, and Joseph Greene. The announcers were Peter Grant and Hugh James. Jean Paul King was one of the actors. So was True Boardman.

The thirties were heady—and cramped—days for the WLW writers. As writers are when collected together for a common purpose (to write an ad for mouthwash, to write a speech for the President, or to write another chapter for *Ma Perkins*) they are unattended free spirits that had better not be left unattended for too long. Many writers have passed through the WLW stables. Some have passed through more quickly than others. The aforementioned Mary Wood was in that collection of writers for the thirties. She says she was first there in 1934. She

has given up trying to recall all the program directors that WLW had in those days. "At one time," she said, "a program director lasted two months which made us proud of him because he had set some kind of record. We had a staff of writers then that sounded like the Notre Dame starting lineup. One of them, who later wrote for *Ma Perkins*, was our leading communist. He was like our guru. Every Saturday night all the writers would gather in an apartment, drink gin, and talk each other into enlisting in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade fighting in Spain. But none of us did. Monday morning would find all of us back in the WLW bullpen, writing drama that would tear your heart out. Our motto was: 'Nothing is so bad today that it can't get worse tomorrow.'"

One writer, who later went on to produce *Captain Video* on television, had the chore of writing a fifteen minute monster serial for the WLW children listeners. He would show up at the Arlington Street studios in the morning, write that afternoon's episode, and then wander off somewhere to drink and talk of poetry. Unfortunately, one Thursday he got so enthused with poetry—or drink—that he failed to appear at the studio on Friday morning to create that day's episode. When the Thursday episode had ended, a demented woods monster—a woodsman who had gone back to nature, snarled a lot, and didn't think too straight—had been pounding on the cabin door behind which huddled the lovely young heroine. When the cast gathered for Friday's episode, there were no scripts and there was no time to write one. So they all muddled through as best they could. The Friday episode consisted of the girl, trapped in the cabin, screaming during the

whole broadcast, plus the snarls of the demented woods monster, plus the soundman, making door-pounding noises.

Did the writer get fired? It is not known. But what is known is that at WLW people got fired a lot. Singer Barbara Cameron claims to hold the record. She was fired four different times. But talent in those days was always available. It was the moment of stock companies—traveling actors and actresses—and it was the moment of the tight dollar. Road shows used to get stranded in Cincinnati, the actors would hire out at WLW to get enough cash to get back home, and some of them, liking the idea of radio, stayed around.

You can't blame Powel Crosley, Jr., for the revolving door policy at WLW. Few of the employees did. To them, for the most part, he was the tall and balding fellow who seemed more interested in the mechanical aspects of radio—and building cars—than he was in the broadcast side of the business. He left programming to those whom he felt knew programming—and if they didn't prove themselves, he fired them. Life was that simple. He had such an abiding faith—and perhaps awe—of creative artists that he was wise enough to let them alone. But he was forever discovering talent. Jane Froman was one of his discoveries. She had been studying at the Conservatory of Music. Since she was a friend of his daughter, he had heard her sing in his home. He got her on the air. And the rest is history, like for instance, the demented woods creature pounding on the cabin door.

To be a businessman, as Crosley was, and to be surrounded by hypersensitive artists, some with and some without talent, did pose a problem now and then. There

was the bewildering moment for Mr. Crosley when he brought several male and female dinner guests to visit his pride and joy, the WLW studios on Arlington Street. Trouble is, for weeks prior, both announcers and engineers had been trying their best to "break" Peter Grant on the air and to make him laugh. Couldn't be done, but they kept trying, getting more far-fetched each try. Each night, when Peter Grant read the ten o'clock news over WLW, the others stood before him, doing a striptease complete with bumps and grinds. No reaction from Peter Grant. He just kept on reading. One night they went all out. They did a strip for real. And there they were, down to their socks, grinding away; and there Peter Grant was, unperturbed, reading the news; and *there* through the studio door came Crosley and his entourage of dinner guests . . .

It is easy to see why Mr. Crosley, chose to leave the creative matters to creative people, isn't it?

Barbara Cameron, the wonderful singer who holds the record of being fired the most from WLW, also holds another kind of record: collecting cash for staying home and listening to herself on radio. This began in the days of *Moon River* when the DeVore Sisters were the vocalists. Actually, most girl singers at WLW took turns getting into the hair of night and sloshing to the sea. Doris Day used to sing on *Moon River*. So did the Clooney sisters, Betty and Rosemary. So did Janette Davis, Lucille Norman, Anita Ellis, Ruby Wright, Bonnie Lou and—to get a male voice in there—Phil Brito. Point is, when one of the DeVore sisters got married and left the hair of night to others, Barbara Cameron was elected to fill out the musical group. This was a moment in time when *Moon River* was recorded and peddled to other cities, one of them being

a southern city, its sponsor there a mattress manufacturer. Later, after Barbara Cameron had left WLW one of her several times, she was sitting at home, cranked into the station, and heard herself still on Moon River. She listened patiently to herself perform for nearly a year, realizing the station was rerunning some of the old transcriptions of former Moon River programs. Finally, she sent WLW a bill for her services. Poor WLW had to pay, because—simply put—that is the way the union things are: performers are to be paid for their efforts whenever the station uses those efforts, whether “live” or from the library of yesteryear.

Crosley had problems with another performer, Fats Waller. According to *Cincinnati Magazine*, March 1968, “(Crosley’s) temper once cost him the greatest of all WLW stars, Fats Waller. Waller, who had a predilection for black derbies, cigars, and gin, also happened to be one of the greatest jazz pianists of all times. He particularly coveted an organ in the main studio of the radio station which Crosley had dedicated to his late mother. One night Crosley walked into the station and found Waller, in derby and cigar, playing one of his own compositions, ‘Ain’t Misbehavin’ on the organ. Enraged, Crosley accused Waller of desecrating his mother’s memory and fired him on the spot. Waller went on to greater things, but the organ never played right until one day a cleaning lady moved it out to dust and was deluged by empty gin bottles which rolled out across the floor.”

Ah, but those were great days. In the thirties WLW used, as we suggest, 500,000 watts of power, got Moon River requests from Europe, and—as Mary Wood recalls—WLW blanketed the world. Around here, you didn’t

even need a radio to hear it. Turn on a faucet and out came WLW!”

Heady days! On May 2, 1934, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt pushed a gold key on his White House desk (the same key President Wilson had used to open the Panama Canal twenty years before) and that was the moment, exactly at 9:30 P.M., the 500,000 watts of WLW were to activate themselves. Didn’t quite work out that way, though. As the President was saying:

“I have just pressed the key to formally open Station WLW. It has been a pleasure to do this . . .”

Well, the 500,000 watt transmitter tubes were still warming up. But no matter, it is the thought that counts. WLW was then the most powerful radio station in the world, coming out of radios and water faucets everywhere.

Said Powel Crosley, Jr., that evening that meant so much to him, “It has been our ambition to increase WLW’s power from time to time as rapidly as technical obstacles could be overcome in order to bring the voice of this station to those in remote parts of the country who might experience difficulty in getting good reception because of interference of static and other atmospheric disturbances. With each increase in power a large number of people have come to rely on WLW for the things that only radio can bring into their homes. With this greater and greater audience has come greater and greater responsibilities. The programs of this station must be built to please the greatest number of people possible. It must be regarded as a public service and always operate as such. We feel fully this responsibility to our listeners and I pledge again that we shall continue the operation of WLW for the good of the listening public.”

If you are the sort that goes around putting a penny in the fuse box, you will not be terribly interested in the technical side of cranking up a transmitter so it sends out 500,000 watts. But bear with us. We weren't either until we looked into the matter. For instance, the new transmitter used twenty 100,000-watt tubes, not the sort you'd find in the tube-rack at your local drug store. These tubes got hot so they were cooled by water, five hundred gallons of water each minute to be exact. This was distilled water as in your electric steam iron. This water in turn got hot and had to be cooled by seven hundred gallons of tap water each minute. So the city itself would not run out of water, WLW built a pond seventy-five feet square near the transmitter to re-cool the tap water and use it over and over again. The pond, as noted elsewhere, never froze over in the winter and small wonder! Radio hams will be pleased to note that six mercury vapor rectifier tubes rated at 450 amperes were used in the transmitter, the modulation transformers weighed in at near fifty tons and contained fourteen hundred gallons of oil. The 500,000-watt transmitter used each year nearly 15,500,000 kilowatt hours of electricity, enough—they say—to light a hundred thousand-person city based on 1934 rates of consumption. The antenna was new, too. Most broadcast stations started out with horizontal antennae, a line swaying in the air between two towers. By the time WLW came on the air with 500,000 watts, only four or five other radios were using vertical antennae: a tower, that is, straight up in the sky, from which the broadcast signal was radiated. The new antenna at WLW stood 831 feet tall, cost \$46,243 to build, and changed forever the flight of sparrows. More than two hundred tons of downward pressure from the

guy wires support it from the pushing and shoving of the wind. On a hot day, the tower "grows." It grows as much as six inches. The tower itself weighed 136 tons. All of this tower weight rested on a piece of porcelain shaped like a cup.

But the new power posed nasty engineering problems, as has been suggested. So much power radiated from the tower that in some homes in nearby Mason the house lights would not turn off. It was also learned, though it was no surprise to the non-technical gaping at the thing, that the high tower was a dandy lightning rod. A special relay—or cut-off—was rigged. Operated by an electric eye, it managed to turn off the transmitter's plate voltage to the final amplifier—whenever lightning decided to have an electric go at the tower. So much for beginning electricity.

For those who attended the dedicatory program that caused the Mason householders to have nonstop electric lighting, note that the toastmaster for the evening was Charles Sawyer, then Lieutenant Governor of Ohio. Shrimp cocktail Louisiana was served, so was music by the Crosley Symphony under the direction of William Stoess. Grace Claude Raine directed the Crosley Glee Club, guests ate filet of beef, and along came Henry Thies and his Purool (sic) Orchestra and Virginio Marucci and his South Americans, he being the fiddle player who, along with Ed Byron, created the Moon River mood that long-ago night, causing the maidens in attendance to weep.

The sheer power of WLW then created problems, other than in Mason, Ohio. By the autumn of 1934, CFRB in Toronto, Canada, but right next door to WLW on the dial (WLW at 700, CFRB at 690) complained that WLW was causing interference, mostly at night. So four

days before Christmas of that year, the Federal Communication Commission ruled that WLW could still broadcast 500,000 during the daylight hours, every direction, but at night it would have to be more directional, or stop playing. WLW went directional at night. In doing so, its engineering staff created another broadcasting first: the first *directional* antenna ever created for vertical angle suppression. Thus, the antenna as modified, protected the Canadian station from nighttime interference while at the same time did not change dramatically its basic groundwave service. Engineers will be glad to explain this to you. Other stations complained a little, too. WOR in New York was one of them. WOR then being in Newark, New Jersey. And down in Louisiana there was a broadcaster named Henderson who used to complain on the air about WLW's new power and, some suggest, that now and then he used strong language on the air to register his complaints, but we have no record of this.

Even before WLW became a super power in the thirties, it branched out into another area: that of commercial broadcasting. The first year WLW itself ever made a profit was in 1930. In the period ending March 31, 1931 WLW had made a net profit of \$43,464. A year later, it made a net profit of \$145,868. *Merchandising* was one of the reasons for WLW's early success and present success in broadcasting, at least insofar as its continuing amiable relationship with advertisers goes. According to *Broadcasting Magazine*, May 15, 1932, "The first successful merchandising service for clients of a broadcasting station is claimed by J. L. Clark, general manager of WLW, Cincinnati. The service is provided through J. Ralph Corbett, Inc., Cincinnati, which has field men in Indianapolis,

Columbus, and Wheeling. The service is provided both national and local sponsors within the primary zone of WLW. It includes the contacting of jobbers and dealers and merchandising the radio programs. Dealers are encouraged to identify themselves with the broadcasts."

John Clark had been moved by Mr. Crosley over from other portions of the Crosley business to the radio end. He came in when radio—and especially WLW—had room for innovators. He innovated a lot. He fired some people, too. No matter. So did everybody else.

Meanwhile, back in front of the microphones, drama was. It was actually in 1930 that Edward Armour Byron, whom we have met several times earlier in this chapter, operating as WLW production manager, helped create a stock company of actors at WLW. He was practical, too. Why, he thought, waste time and money by doing a drama on the radio only once? So, when the *Crosley Theater of the Air* started in the fall of 1930, the plays were broadcast first late Thursday evening, repeated early Saturday evening, and then one more time on Sunday afternoons. In the first two years the *Crosley Theater of the Air* was in existence, it broadcast eighty original dramas, light and heavy and those reworked somehow from the classics. Also the same crew cranked out two rural dramas a week, entitled *Centerville Sketches*. And for one wonderful season, late at night, those who tuned in heard wonderful Sidney Ten Eyck and his *Doodlesockers* program. He wrote it himself. He was the forerunner of Bob and Ray, Henry Morgan, Ransom Sherman, and just about every good radio humorist who ever lighted the airwaves. He was good. He didn't last too long, though.

It was also in the thirties that WLW went up into the

skies—almost. Crosley, who had a secret love for airplanes as well as automobiles, bought a Lockheed-Vega racing plane, equipped it with broadcast gear that was a 150-watt radio station and announcer Robert Brown, and sent the whole shooting match up in the sky with a pilot to fly around Cincinnati, look down, and say how pretty things were below. Mr. Crosley also entered the plane called *New Cincinnati* in the National Air Races but the plane, having the added weight of the broadcast equipment plus announcer Robert Brown, came in fourth. In case you're keeping score, Wiley Post won. Broadcasts from the plane were picked up by stations along the race path from the West Coast to Chicago. But the radio transmitter went out, the announcer burned himself trying to fix it, and to make a long story short, it wasn't a roaring success. Mr. Brown returned to earth and stayed, a much happier man.

And there was that charming little old lady who owned the lumberyard in Rushville Center standing around waiting in the wings. Her name? Well, her real name was Virginia Payne. Her other name—and just as real—was *Ma Perkins*.

In 1934 you could have heard an hour and a half of soap operas on WLW. In 1937, three years later, you could have heard four and a half hours of soap operas on WLW. This is each and every day, Monday through Friday, of course. During the period of World War II, WLW carried seven hours of soap operas a day. As time went on, of course, most of the "soaps" were originated by the networks from Chicago and New York. But in the thirties, WLW originated some of its own, as well, perhaps, as originating the art-form itself. The would-be revolutionists in the WLW writing bull pen turned out daily episodes for the WLW

serials: *Ma Perkins*, *The Life of Mary Sothern*, and *The Mad Hatterfields*. *Ma Perkins* had a staying power. She stuck around until November 25, 1960, when after twenty-seven years and 7,065 broadcasts of slow-motion but compelling life in Rushville Center, she wasn't any more. *The Life of Mary Sothern* was written mostly by Don Becker and it featured Minabelle Abbott. A WLW origination, it was the first "soap" ever to be carried on the Mutual network. *The Mad Hatterfields* was cranked out by Pauline Hopkins. Among those taking the roles were Allen Franklin, Betty Lee Arnold, Bess McCammon, Harry Causdale, and William Green.

There are those spoilsports who say that *Ma Perkins* was not the first soap opera and in reality, the spoilsports are right. The first five-day-a-week drama aimed at the housewife was probably NBC's *Clara, Lu and Em*, but one researcher goes back further to note that in 1928, in August to be exact, *Real Folks*, ran on the NBC-Blue network.

Ah, but say those who would give WLW more firsts than it could reasonably claim credit for, if not first with soaps, WLW was at least first with the dramatic program of the crime-detective type. They point with reasonable pride to *Dr. Konrad's Unsolved Mysteries* WLW writers and players created in 1933. But, others suggest, the first radio thriller of this sort was *Sherlock Holmes* which went on the air in or before 1931. And, others say, what about *The Shadow* which was broadcast in 1929? Only Lamont Cranston knows and he ain't talking. But it is interesting to note that Orson Wells once played the role of the *Shadow* on radio. And note that Agnes Moorehead once played the role of Margot Lane. Kenny Delmar was once Commissioner

Weston. And Keenan Wynn played Shrevie. So did Everett Sloan, Alan Reed, Mandel Kramer, and Bob Maxwell.

Anyway, by 1932, WLW had collected quite a bunch of people to entertain over the airwaves. In 1932 WLW had nearly a hundred musicians on the pay roll, half of them full-time. Every out-of-work or stranded actor or actress usually wandered into the Arlington Street studios, looking for a job. And out in the boondocks, at work on 250-watt coffeepots as little backwoods broadcast stations are sometimes called, a thousand announcers looked upon WLW as Mecca—and WLW was. To work as a staff announcer at WLW these days has value, to be sure, but to be hired as a staff announcer at WLW radio in those days was the same as having your tonsils beatified. To those who said they had worked at WLW, every door of opportunity was open. To be an announcer at WLW was to be equal to or better than any network announcer ever to open his yap. They call this place the birthplace of the stars. The gang at WLW—now Avco—will recite you lists of names of the greats who had once appeared before the WLW microphones. Most of this list is correct. But even the WLW people, wonderful as they are, get carried away at times. *Did Amos and Andy ever work here? Is this where they got their start? Our hearts say yes but our minds say no. They were heard over WLW, but they originated, some suggest, from WMAQ in Chicago. Is this where Red Skelton got his start in radio? Some say yes, some say no, and they are both right.*

In the late thirties the wonderful Mr. Skelton used to travel to Cincinnati once a week to the WLW studios out on Arlington Street where he would rehearse and put on, for the network, a show called *Avalon Time*, named

[52]

after a cigarette. I know because I used to steal out to the studios, press my nose against the glass, and watch with awe as he—soundlessly—went through the rehearsal. The glass was too thick for me to hear. Peter Grant was his announcer. Peter Grant had, in the thirties, come to WLW from St. Louis. Recalls Mr. Skelton, "Peter Grant sounded exactly like Franklin Roosevelt. We were told we had to take him off the air and I said, 'You can't take a man's livelihood away from him just because he sounds like the President.' Anyway, he changed his delivery and he stayed on with us."

I remember, I remember. . .

So Red Skelton did—and *didn't*—start here. He was never in the hire of WLW. He only came here to use its facilities to originate his show for the network. On the other hand, "Singing Sam" did originate at WLW. First he was "Singing Sam the Lawn-Mower Man." He went onto New York, they took his lawn-mower away, and he became "Singing Sam, the Barbasol Man." The Mills Brothers started here. So did Little Jack Little. So did a group who called themselves "The King, The Jack, and The Jester." You probably know them better as the "Inkspots." Red Barber started here as sportscaster, didn't he? And wasn't Durwood Kirby his announcer here? Some suggest that Crosley and WLW did the first quiz show, *Doctor I.Q.*, but the less said about that the better. "Smiling Ed McConnell" started here. And to more modern times, so did Rod Serling and—well, we were going to say Walt Phillips, but Walt got fired a lot. He might have started somewhere else. All that can be said is that he can be considered Mr. Radio in Chicago. Bill Nimmo started here, went on to New York, and came back again to marry Marian Spelman

[53]

who also got started on WLW—and don't they make a wonderful couple? The McGuire Sisters might have started here. Add Eddie Albert. Add Dick Noel. And in the next chapter, we'll get Andy Williams into the act. Also, there's Frank Lovejoy. He got started here, they say, as a stranded actor who sought WLW comfort in the form of work.

Peter Grant didn't start here, but he lasted so long and so well it seems as if he had always been here, doesn't it?

Also in the thirties—and even in the twenties—another group came to WLW and made their mark. I'm speaking of those who bring rosin, guitar picks, good cheer, rube jokes, and country music. I'm speaking of the gang from the present *Midwestern Hayride*—and from *all* the shows WLW sent out over the wind to the folks back home. They call themselves country music people now. Call them what you will, country music people, hillbillies, or you name it. Just call me when they start to play.

And . . . a . . . one . . . and . . . a . . . two . . .