The First TV Station In Town
(That's Incredible)

By LLOYD B. WALTON

Jerry D. Smith

A ham radio operator transmitted the
city's first pictures
across his family's
living room to
Indy's only receiver.

When Jerry D. Smith started
the first television sta-
tion in Indianapolis in
1938, he captured the city's en-
tire viewing audience — he also
owned the only TV receiver in
town.

Now 60 and senior engineer
for Carson Manufacturing Com-
pany, Smith is still kicking him-
sel for not finding a way to
keep the station operating. The
channel (he was operating ex-
perimentally on a wave length
that would now be Channel 2)
might be worth a minimum of
$16 million if it had not been
given up.

"I got disgusted with the fact
that nobody was interested in
television," he says. "I talked to
radio stations and businessmen
all over the state about buying
it, but everybody had decided
there was no future in television
and we let it drop. There were
so many disappointments. So I
walked out and got into the heat
pump business and divorced
myself from electronics for sev-
eral years."

But between 1938 and 1947,
Smith lived a young experiment-
er's dream of seeing his brain-
child come to life, become a
research tool for an electronic
parts manufacturer and broad-
cast fairly regularly two nights a
week before being discarded as
a "temporary fad."

Smith was 11 when he "start-
ed messing with electronics".
Smith's family living room (facing page) was the studio in the mid-1940s. Smith (left) built more elaborate transmission equipment after Walter's takeover.

But the bug really bit him when he visited the 1953 World's Fair at Chicago with his dad and saw a television demonstration. It took a few more years before he got involved with electronic pictures.

"I had been building radio sets and had a ham license," Smith says. "But I was fascinated with televisions and let Santa tape two on Next Page.

Free Inform

CARS FOR LESS MONEY

GUARANTEED!

SAVE HUNDREDS, EVEN THOUSANDS ON YOUR NEXT CAR...NEW OR USED!

Without Hagglng.

FREE DETAILS COUPON

Send today for all the facts on this amazing new guide. Act now or your dealer will have a new car...new or used. It's just incredible...without haggling...

NAME
ADDRESS
CITY & STATE

YOUR PRESENT FAMILY CAR...MAKE

CONSUMER INFORMATION SERVICE

MAIL THE COUPON TODAY FOR FREE DETAILS...YOU'LL BE SURPRISED

CONSUMER INFORMATION SERVICE

MAIL TODAY TO...

CONSUMER INFORMATION SERVICE

MAIL TODAY TO...
Claus knew I'd like a TV receiver kit for Christmas. The kit was under his Christmas tree in the late 30s.

Smith built the receiver and then discovered he had nothing to look at on it. There were no commercial television stations and the closest experimental transmitter was in Chicago.

"So I built a television camera," Smith says. There were no books detailing how the camera should be made. Experts in the field were close-mouthed about their knowledge. But Smith gradually assembled information and by the time he was an electrical engineering student at Purdue University, he started putting a camera together.

"Camera tubes and lenses cost several thousand dollars then," Smith says. "So I bought a small two-inch picture tube; took it up to the Purdue chem lab, cut the end off and made a silver plate for it and had me a camera tube."

A friend, the late Marion Stevenson, worked on the assembly with Smith. The first camera I made had a miserable picture," Smith recalls. "But it was legible on this receiver. And then Bill Lee, another friend of mine who was a ham operator and worked at a parts store, came in and we put together a ham radio station broadcasting television."

Since they had the only television receiver in town it was hard to tell how far the picture signals carried. But they turned Smith's family home at 2712 West 36th Street into a television studio and were on the air every Monday — sometimes sending only a test pattern, other times broadcasting movie trailers loaned to them by automotive firms.

By 1941 a few other receivers appeared in Indianapolis. "Most of them were owned by people who had been transferred here from the East Coast by RCA," Smith says. "There were 11 sets.

And sometimes when we'd have the camera pointed out on 36th Street, somebody with a receiver would call in and say they had just seen a Ford drive by — what a difference between then and today when if you don't have a billion dollar program, people won't even watch it."

In the early 40s the entrepreneur put together a Video Variety program on Monday nights and occasional Tuesday night broadcasts of the Butler University drama department. "Butler's Fred Winter put on shows such as Voice of the Turtle, Dickens' Christmas Carol and about four others," Smith says. "They used my folks' living room as a studio. It was a regular television show and it was very well received."

Smith says a neighbor girl, Dottie Smith, came to watch the operation and got interested in television. "Later, when we got Buller, she became our program director. She practically lived with the equipment, so in later years I figured with all that training I couldn't possibly let her go — so we got married," he quips.

Smith says W9XBE started in 1938 and given an experimental license in 1941, not only was the first TV station in Indiana, but the fifth station on the air in the world. It was bought by the P.B. Mallory Company in 1944 and the call letters changed to W9XMT. Smith says there were 23 television receivers in Indianapolis when the station went off the air in 1947.

Smith was given an option to buy or sell the station. "We kept playing in the field for about a year after Mallory dropped it, trying to get people interested in buying it," he says. "But no success. So the whole program was dropped."

WFMB TV, now WRTV, became the state's first commercial television when it went on the air May 30, 1949, with a broadcast of the 500 Mile Race. Since Jerry Smith first started putting around in his home workshop he says he has patented 31 inventions, including the world's first electronic siren. Many of his devices were manufactured by his own firm, Autoelecronics.

The Smiths live in Nortside Indianapolis and have a daughter Jennifer, 16, in high school. Son Steven, 28, heads Manutek Inc., an electronics firm in which his mother also is involved.

"At least I can come home and talk and show Dottie something I'm working on and she understands what I'm talking about," laughs Smith.

And when the Smiths hear debates about Nielsen ratings and network battles for viewers, they snugly recall the days they had the only show in town. 

When Jerry Smith built this television transmitter he had the only TV receiver in town — it later catered to some 23 viewers.