Garage sale

Pittsburgh, industry permit Wendy's to pirate broadcast history

Where I come from (Pittsburgh), there is no discussion about where commercial broadcasting got its start. It was in Frank Conrad's garage on Penn Avenue, actually just over the Pittsburgh line in Wilkinsburg.

In the years after World War I, Conrad was an electrical engineer at Westinghouse. But on evenings and weekends, he would head out back to his two-story brick garage to tinker with his radio transmitter and broadcast music. Other enthusiasts would drop by with their ideas and their gear. Think of Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak playing around with computers in their San Jose, Calif., garage in the 1970s.

When Westinghouse's Harry Davis saw a local department store advertising crystal sets to receive Conrad's programs, he called in the engineer and ordered him to build a bigger transmitter at the company's East Pittsburgh plant. Davis figured, if Conrad could produce programming, he could sell radios. On Nov. 2, 1920, the newly licensed KDKA broadcast the results of the Harding-Cox presidential election and has been a powerful force in Pittsburgh ever since.

Other cities and stations claim to be the birthplace of commercial broadcasting. WWJ Detroit makes a good argument. But all Pittsburghers know (and most radio historians agree) that it was KDKA. That's where all the pieces—transmission, programming and receivers—came together and somebody (Westinghouse) started making money through the sale of receivers. A direct and unbroken line stretches from Conrad's garage to the paycheck of every reader of Broadcasting & Cable.

So you would be wrong. The city couldn't care less. In fact, bulldozers are now on the way to knock down Conrad's home to make way for a Wendy's.

But unless somebody (Mel?) steps up with some big bucks in the next 30 days or so, Conrad's house will fall, and the new Wendy's will rise.

I have a solution. Surely, Dave Thomas would swap Wendy's lot in Pittsburgh for, say, a couple commercials in one of Les Moonves' new series this fall. Think of it: The deal itself would also honor the radio business. What's more of a radio tradition than a trade-out?

Jessell may be reached at jessell@cahners.com or 212-337-6964.