



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 Wilksburg.

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 think that Pittsburgh would be making a pretty big deal of its role in the history of a business that now embraces FM, broadcast TV, cable TV and satellite TV.

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.

For the past 15 years, a local preservationist, Rick Harris, has been working hard to save the Conrad site and turn it into a broadcasting-technology museum of some kind. He tried to raise money to buy the property from the local Elks lodge but came up short. Although sympathetic to Harris, the Elks had to take the best offer: Wendy's, for \$240,000. Harris expects the deal to close late this month. After that, the bulldozers roll.

Harris says he has gone everywhere for help—the city, local historical groups and museums and local and nation-

al broadcasters. What has really hurt is Viacom's lack of interest, he says. Due to a series of mergers in the 1990s, Viacom is now the owner of KDKA and its legacy, but it dismissed Harris' plea for help with a terse note.

Whenever he makes an appeal for money, Harris says, he is asked what Viacom is doing. "I say nothing, and that usually ends the conversation. 'A museum is going to promote their history,' they say. 'If

pioneering work on radio while at the University of Pittsburgh in the 1890s, and Vladimir Zworykin, one of Conrad's neighbors and Westinghouse co-workers, who demonstrated a complete TV system in the city in 1929.

Harris ultimately needs millions of dollars. It should be the city that provides it, and some of it should come from the TV and radio industries. If you're interested in donating or helping, call Harris at 412-241-4508.

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they're not interested, why should we be?"

But Harris' efforts haven't been a total bust. One industry bigwig has come forward with help. Interrep's Ralph Guild gave Harris \$50,000 to dismantle the garage (not the house) earlier this year and put in it storage.

Having given up hope of saving the house and original site, Harris now hopes to make the restored garage the centerpiece of a museum somewhere else in Pittsburgh. As Harris likes to point out, Pittsburgh's claims on broadcasting's origins go beyond Conrad and Davis. There's Reginald Fessenden, who did important

The best spot for a museum is the original site. 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? ■

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