

The low visibility of a highly involved broadcaster: Roger Berk

Throughout its history, broadcasting has had its share of headliners. Yet for every person who has carved a place in history through his association with the medium, there are scores of individuals, too preoccupied with the day-to-day business of keeping a station on the air, to seek out personal prominence. Roger Berk is one of them.

It would be inappropriate, however, to categorize Mr. Berk's lengthy broadcast career as stereotypical. While industry-wide recognition has evaded him—perhaps by his own choice—Mr. Berk might justifiably be noted by his peers as one whose efforts exemplify many of their collective frustrations and satisfactions over the years.

In his 34 years as a broadcaster, Mr. Berk has experienced the trauma of trying to introduce a new AM station in a two-station market. He has established an FM facility at a time when that service was in a stage of precarious adolescence. He has built a television station—and a UHF at that—during an era when his fellow radio operators looked on that medium as either an alien threat or a one-way ticket to bankruptcy. He has prevailed and prevailed well.

At 50, Mr. Berk heads Group One Broadcasting, a growing chain that presently has nine stations in its portfolio and is actively seeking further acquisitions. He still resides in his native Akron, Ohio, where the company has its headquarters. While others in similar executive levels may engage in extensive travel on behalf of less local broadcast interests, Mr. Berk prefers to remain in Akron, tending to the needs of that company. "I've really stayed out of the industry," he acknowledges. "I'm too busy here."

This is not to suggest that Roger Berk is aloof to the issues confronting the industry. He would like to see action in Congress on the license-renewal issue—"so we know where we stand"—as much as any other broadcaster. He finds the FCC's radio re-regulation effort proceeding an equally just cause. ("I think too many rules have just grown out of television into radio"). He remains concerned with the plight of UHF broadcasting—which is one issue in which he has not resisted becoming involved politically. (Mr. Berk was one of the organizers of the All Channel Television Society and served on the FCC task force that sought to rectify some of the problems faced by that medium.) He's also had a confrontation with a dissident citizen group—the result of a blanket renewal challenge filed against all Akron broadcast facilities—and has resolved it. He maintains that



Roger George Berk—president, Group One Broadcasting Co., Akron, Ohio; b. March 30, 1923, Akron; Harvard University, 1941-42; U.S. Air Force, 1942-46; discharged as sergeant; BA, Harvard, 1947; joined Summit Radio Corp. (current Group One subsidiary and licensee of WAKR-AM-TV and WAEZ[FM]) as vice president, general manager, 1947; president, Group One, 1964-present; m. Marilyn Miller, June 25, 1950; children: Roger Jr., 19; Ellen, 17; Robert, 15.

one of his biggest headaches is "trying to keep up with all the regulations." Yet, Mr. Berk does not regard any of those circumstances as his most pressing concern. That status, he says, is reserved for "keeping up with the trends, changing as things change and trying to give the people what they want."

It would not be inaccurate to say that broadcasting is in Roger Berk's blood. He is the son of the late S. Bernard Berk, who put WAKR(AM) Akron on the air in 1940. Group One remains essentially a family operation. The Berk clan holds a controlling interest in the firm (55%, the remainder being owned by the *Akron Beacon-Journal*). Mr. Berk's mother, Viola, still plays an active role in the operation. His son, Roger Jr., pulls duty at the firm's KLZ-FM Denver when he isn't busy with studies at that city's university.

"I really started in broadcasting from the ground up," chortles Mr. Berk, referring to his first real job in the medium—digging post holes for WAKR's antenna tower. It took the elder Berk three years to win federal authorization to construct the facility, due mainly to resistance from Akron's two existing radio stations. (A ruling by the U.S. Court of Appeals was required to finally get the project off the ground.) By the time Mr. Berk had completed studies at Harvard and a wartime stint in the Air Corps, WAKR was the top-rated station in the market. Returning to Akron in 1947, he was assigned to oversee the development of WAKR's sister FM station, WAEZ.

He also was personally involved in putting WAKR-TV on the air, again no trifling accomplishment. "In those days, if nobody filed a competing application against you in a month, you got it." Allen Simmons, then head of WADZ(AM) Akron, filed after 29 days. The commission's TV freeze kept WAKR-TV (for which ch. 7 had originally been requested) in limbo until 1953. By that time, the Cleveland stations had a lock on the available VHF frequencies. Messrs. Berk and Simmons were left to choose between channel 49 and 65, and only the lower frequency was considered operable. They flipped a coin; Mr. Berk won. WAKR-TV has since been moved to ch. 23.

WAKR(AM), still the flagship station of the Group One chain, has not gone without noteworthy achievements over the years. It was one of the first radio stations to implement a working news staff, in 1940. It was among the initial stations to break away from the network dominated concept of radio—it went top-40 in 1953, soon after the McLendon and Storz interests started tinkering with that format. Among its list of coveted alumni is a fast-talking announcer from the Ohio countryside named Alan Freed. The late Mr. Freed got his break at WAKR in 1947, six years before he moved to New York and gave a name to the music now known as rock and roll.

Mr. Berk's broadcast turf has expanded extensively since then. Since purchasing WONE-AM-FM (now WONE-WTUE) Dayton, Ohio, in 1964, the year in which Group One was founded, the firm has invested \$5.5 million in broadcast acquisitions and twice that amount in facilities improvements. It has subsequently added KBOX(AM)-KTLC(FM) Dallas (in 1966) and acquired KLZ-AM-FM Denver from Time-Life (in 1971).

Throughout the growth period, Mr. Berk has stressed community service as "the cornerstone of our operations." An ongoing campaign at the Dayton stations to inspire community pride verifies that proclamation.

A year ago, Mr. Berk recalls, Dayton was an archetype of public noninvolvement. "There was too much apathy and negativity in the city. People had just given up." In response to that situation, WONE-WTUE implemented a program called *Good Things Happen in the Miami Valley*. The stations set up community meetings. They implored residents to become active in civic projects. They encouraged citizens to come on the air with news of laudable happenings in the area. "It really got the city thinking positively," Mr. Berk maintains. "Now even our competitors have picked up on the project." For the Group One president, facilitating such developments is what broadcasting is all about.