

**History of Radio Station WBBP
Petoskey's Forgotten Broadcast Pioneers
1923 -- 1928**

Petoskey, Emmet County, Michigan

WBBP Petoskey History

Petoskey's Forgotten Broadcast Pioneers: A History of Radio Station WBBP, 1923-1928

By: George Bednarik

In 1920, WWJ in Detroit, then still known by its experimental call sign, 8MK, and KDKA in Pittsburgh, became the first commercial radio stations in America. By 1923, there were just 16 full or part time radio stations operating in Michigan, none in Northern Lower Michigan. However, events of 1923 were to establish Petoskey as a pioneering city in the development of radio with Northern Lower Michigan's first radio station. Sadly, memories of these events have been largely forgotten and Petoskey's contributions to very early broadcast history have been lost. General belief has it that WTCM in Traverse City was Northern Michigan's first station and that WMBN was the first regular broadcast station in Petoskey. However, Petoskey was home to a licensed, operating radio station just 3 1/2 years after the first commercial broadcasts were made in Detroit and Pittsburgh.

In 1923, Petoskey High School (PHS) science teacher Frank Jacobs decided to install an amateur transmitter at PHS to help teach radio theory to students and to benefit the 35 student PHS Radi received funding from the Petoskey Board of Education to order the parts that would be assembled transmitter by faculty, radio enthusiasts and students. However, strong community interest in Mr. Jacobs, on behalf of the Petoskey Schools, to request a government license in early 1923 to a regular radio broadcasting station. The transmitter was reconfigured for standard broadcast and January 1924, the station received its government license to operate with just 10 watts. By comparison stations at that time broadcast with 5-500 watts with 1,000 watts generally being the upper limit was WBBP, which stood for Wonderful Bay, Beautiful Petoskey. An article in the February 9, 1924 *Evening News* called attention to the station and announced the start of test transmissions. The article that listeners contact Mr. Jacobs with reception reports. On March 1, 1924, WBBP began regular a broadcast of Cole's Merry Midnight Serenaders from the PHS stage. Over two dozen calls were listeners all reporting excellent reception. The newspaper article describing this broadcast stated next move of those interested in the station is to be an effort to interest the public in increasing as to increase the distance at which the station can be heard." And interest the public they did!

Almost at once, the business community raised over \$1,000 to upgrade the transmitter's power. In 1924, the station carried its last program at 10 watts. In the next few weeks, WBBP installed additional equipment and the station returned to the air with 100 watts making it a fully licensed, full power station. Government records indicate the station eventually applied for 200 watts but it is unclear actually used that much power.

The PHS yearbook, *The Petosegan*, stated that in 1924, WBBP was one of only 6 or 8 radio stations operated by a school system. Since there were no provisions that governed public or educational broadcasting at the time, a committee of local businessmen determined programming. The station appears to have carried some commercial sponsorship. McCabe Hardware, for example, sponsored a musical show. Charles F. Henika assisted Mr. Jacobs in operating the station. The 1926 Petoskey Directory showed that Mr. Henika operated a store that sold radio equipment on Mitchell Street.

Because of a lack of interference due to so few stations, WBBP's 100-watt signal sometimes carried throughout Michigan and well beyond when conditions were right. The PHS 1926 Yearbook mentioned that it was heard as far away as New York state and a December 1926 program from the Petoskey American delighted a Chicago listener who was able to get it and who called the station according to the *Petoskey Evening News*. "The broadcasting is bringing Petoskey into greater prominence than ever before in a most favorable light" said a 1925 article. The 1925 issue of *The Petosegan Yearbook* stated that the original 10-watt signal sometimes carried several hundred miles and that "the station stands as an excellent advertising means for Northern Michigan, in addition to providing the home people with entertainment."

WBBP, Petoskey began operations during a time known as the "first age" of broadcasting. This was years before national networks like NBC were fully organized; NBC's first broadcast wasn't until 1926 and 50 stations and regular programming didn't commence until the early 1930s. And because of live records were generally not played on radio during this time so programs were offered live with live orchestras commonplace. WBBP carried live popular and light classical music, bands, singers, sermons, meetings, debates and discussions, services from four Petoskey churches on a rotating basis, and basketball games. Unlike stations that existed for some commercial or political purpose, like WOAI in St. Paul proclaimed the "Wonders of Chiropractic" from Davenport, Iowa, or WEVD in New York City which was operated by socialist Eugene V. Debs, WBBP carried programs similar to "legitimate" big city stations. The *Petoskey Evening News* radio listing of February 7, 1925, displayed WBBP right along side well known stations like WLS in Chicago and WNYC in New York and the programs were comparable.

The amount of remote broadcasting that WBBP offered was quite remarkable given the technical challenges this must have posed at a time when even telephone service was rather new. These were made possible through the talents of Edson Lee who was the engineer in charge of remote broadcasting. Rotary Club meetings were broadcast from the Perry Hotel as were musical programs from the "Canary Club" which WBBP established at the hotel lobby. These delightful Sunday afternoon broadcasts included the canaries (believe it or not!) along with a light orchestra. Local talent abounded to include pianists, flutists, and vocalists; many were students and faculty from PHS. The station estimated that by 1925 as many as 1,000-2,000 homes in the area had radio sets tuned to WBBP. Petoskey had an immense appeal. In fact, the winter of 1925-1926 was very harsh. As the broadcast season started in October, Kauffman, announcer, commented for the *Evening News* that "...if the prevailing blizzard keeps up, he may suspend weekday broadcasting a little earlier, as snow, tying the cars up, will keep people at home and in a good mood for his programs."

By 1930, radio's first age began to give way to its golden age. Radio networks such as the NBC's and Columbia started to build their affiliate core. Stations began using high power, Crosley began using a 500,000 watt transmitter at WLW in Cincinnati while other stations like WJR in Detroit climbed to 100,000 watts. Eventually, the government assigned "clear channels" which were reserved for a single high power station. Government regulations began to set standards for hours of operation; many stations like WJR went seasonal while others only broadcast a few days a week and others, especially in Detroit and Grand Rapids, shared frequencies. Equipment was required to be of higher tolerances to avoid interference as the number of stations grew. As early as 1926, the government put a temporary moratorium on new stations; the 1926 yearbook that year mentioned how fortunate Petoskey was to have a licensed station before "the time was made for anymore broadcasting sets" {meaning licenses}. Interference started to be a real problem with the larger stations that were becoming part of the giant networks.

On Monday, May 28, 1928, readers of the *Petoskey Evening News* were greeted by a headline that read "Petoskey Loses Radio Station". On that date, the Federal Radio Commission notified 162 stations on the East Coast and in the Midwest that their licenses would not be renewed. Quoting a wire service agency "acted drastically... to clear the ether of interference..." WBBP had until August 1, 1928,

it had to cease all operations. While it could ask to appeal the action, it appears that it did not at the license and simply went silent almost immediately and without fanfare. This left Northern Lov without a radio station.

On April 30, 1947, almost a quarter century after WBBP's inaugural broadcast, the Petoskey Rotary banquet to introduce Traverse City businessman Les Biederman. Mr. Biederman that very day had switched to sign WMBN on the air for the first time; WMBN remains on the air today as part of the I Broadcasting Group. Biederman had built WTCM in Traverse City in 1940, which is often cited as Michigan's first radio station. Here is a quote from the May 3, 1947 *Petoskey Evening News* describing the Rotary banquet: "Master of ceremonies was Hugh Brenneman, public relations manager for the Michigan Medical Association, who traced the experiments of the first radio station here-WBBP-and interviewed F. Henika and Frank Jacobs, first operators of that station."

Imagine a cold, snowy night in 1924, as listeners carefully tuned their Atwater Kent or home made radios to hear something that would have sounded very much like this: "This is station WBBP, Petoskey, Michigan, calling at 246 meters. This evening's program of popular music is to be performed by F. Poor-Whills composed of Gus Parrish, piano, Louis Parrish, trombone, Eddie Smith, banjo, James cornet, R. Parks, saxophone, and Sylvester Faye, drums. Later we shall hear a delightful violin solo by Kneal with Miss Faye Otto at piano. This program is coming to you over station WBBP at 246 meters. Petoskey High School Stage...."

Timeline summary:

- 1/24: License for WBBP is granted - 10 watts
- 2/9/24: Announcement that testing was to begin
- 3/1/24: Regular programming begins
- 4/21/24: Station signs off at 10 watts to increase power
- 5/24: Station back on the air at 100 watts
- 5/28/28: FRC notifies station that license will not be renewed
- 1928: Station is silenced forever