

## WOHN Radio

By Barbara Glakas

Yessiree, Herndon once had its own radio station! We did not know about this until someone made an inquiry to the Herndon Historical Society about it. And then the race was on to find information about it. We suspect that those of you who lived in Herndon during the 1960s and 1970s may know more about it than we do. We look forward to your comments.

Herndon's radio station was an AM station. Starting in 1965, the original call letters were WHRN that played a "Beautiful Music" (easy listening) format. But that format had a lot of local competition, so about a year later it changed over to country music.

One former employee said:

"The WHRN disc jockeys were upbeat and fun and, to their credit, talked a lot more about events and people in the Herndon, Sterling Leesburg areas than the artists. There was an ongoing fight to get the chief engineer to mow the lawn so the jocks began calling it Tall Grass Country. WHRN was a good sounding station but, as hard as it is to believe now, the area was so undeveloped that there wasn't enough of a retail sector to support the station."

In 1971, Jim Beattie bought WHRN. He appointed his son, Jay, General Manager and Program Director. The call letters were changed to WOHN and they switched to Top 40 music. It was also known as Radio 1440, Music 14, and WOHNderland. The peak of the station's popularity was in the mid-1970s.

One Herndon resident remembered that one of the station's advertising methods was to drive around an early 1960s Cadillac with big yellow lettering that said "WOHNderland" on the side. Sure enough, a former employee confirmed that Jay Beattie – who was a big car guy -- had found a black 1961 Cadillac limousine that he had emblazoned with huge yellow letters. Beattie would tell prospective clients that his station had "1,000 watts with three towers pointed straight to the Lord, just west of Tyson's Corner, VA."

Since the retail market still was not booming yet, Beattie started selling 30 blocks of time to religious broadcasters. But the 1970s ended up being the biggest development boom in Herndon's history, and so the retail sector started to explode. As a result, Beattie decided to consolidate all the religious programming into one 3-hour block between 9 AM and 12 noon; the rest of the day would be the Top 40 format. 1974 was the station's most profitable year.

The home to WOHN was in a little square, one-story building on the north side of Fox Mill Road, just west of the present-day Fairfax County Parkway. It was located less than a mile south of the town of Herndon's corporate limits. It had three towers in an adjacent field. To access the building, WOHN employees would drive down a long gravel driveway to the building which sat in an open area by itself, later surrounded by a small grove of trees. One employee said they were greeted by cows every morning which were on the adjacent farm. At that time the area was mostly woods and farmland, with just a small handful of homes dotting Fox Mill Road.

We found a letter dated 1976 from a WOHN engineer named Gary W. Blau, who was writing to a DX-er (a hobbyist who searches for distant radio signals). Blau explained:

"We operate on 1440 KHz with a daytime power of 1000 watts and a PSA power of 500 watts, both directional in what is essentially a cardioid pattern to the west... We operate a Gates BC-1G transmitter into a Gates matching phasor unit into our  $\frac{1}{4}$  wave towers... We are daytime only right now, but the new owners plan to apply for nighttime operation under the new relaxed FCC rules."

One former DJ in the late 1970s – Steven Lorenz, known as "Steve Michaels" on the radio – said many DJs came and went at the radio station. Some had very little experience while others had some experience or had parents who worked in radio or at the Voice of America. DJs generally ranged in age from 18 to 35 years old. As a teenager, Lorenz had no more experience than being the Vice President of the Student Council Association (SCA) at Herndon High School, who had the duty of booking entertainment for the school, or playing recorded music in the school cafeteria during the lunch hour, by playing the music over the school's PA system. Nevertheless, at 18 years old, he walked into WOHN and asked for a job. After completing his third-class license with the FCC – in which he learned how to work transmitters and the radio control board – Lorenz was in. He worked at WOHN for two years.

Lorenz recalled that WOHN opened at 6:00 AM and went off the air each night at 7:45 PM. He said religious music was played using reel-to-reel tapes, while other music was played with 45 RPM discs on a turntable, or music from cart players which were broadcast machines that would use cartridges to play pre-recorded music or commercials. The WOHN control room was very small.

Lorenz also recalled that sometimes WOHN would do "remotes," in which they would visit local businesses in Herndon, such as at the Penguin Feather Records and Tapes store (now American Carpet) on Monroe Street. They would conduct these remotes in a Chevy van which had turntables and microphones, which they would use to interview Penguin Feather customers.

Many local DJs got their start at WOHN. One caption that came with a photo of the old WOHN building said: "This little building started more successful broadcast careers than any school ever did!" Indeed, many DJs got their start at WOHN and then went on to other radio stations, such as WEAM, WPGC, WLPL and WRC. Blau said, "WOHN has had a record in the past two years or so of producing many fine on the air personnel... but many of our jocks have found work at other large stations."

An audio clip of WOHN with DJ David Tate can still be heard on YouTube here:

[WOHN-AM/Herndon, VA May, 1974, David Tate, DJ](#)

On the clip you can hear Tate mention many local Herndon businesses, as he encouraged people to shop local, such as Herndon Auto Parts, the First Virginia Bank in the Pines Shopping Center, the Community Cleaners on Elden Street, and Herndon Southern States. At one point he invited people to come down to the station to get a piece of leftover cake from a birthday party from the day before.

A comment that was found with this radio clip said:

"What is somewhat notable about this era of WOHN is that it was the first station programmed by Robert K. Norton, Jr, who went on to become a prominent radio station owner and programming and engineering executive at stations in the state of Iowa, most notably KRNA-FM/Iowa City IA and KZIA-FM/Cedar Rapids IA."

Blau later explained in his 1976 letter:

"We are in a state of limbo right now as the station has been sold to a new owner and at the time of this writing the final settlement has not been made."

Sure enough, a former employee explained that Beattie had sold the station to new owners who were attempting to change the station to an Adult Contemporary format. It is unclear how long that lasted. But by 1981, the station switched its format back to Country music and its new call letters were WVBK ("Virginia's Best Kountry"), which only lasted a year or so. He said by 1982 it switched to album-oriented rock. Toward the very end, the station featured news, religious programming, and Korean programming, until the station went off the air in 1983.

Lorenz said his experience at WOHN was lots of fun and the DJs at WOHN were like a band of gypsies. "We did not get paid much, but we would have been willing to work for nothing."

In 1990 the Fairfax County Park Authority bought the land where the old radio station building sat. The area is now home to Stratton Woods Park. The old radio station building can still be seen on the lot, right next to a park baseball field.

Author's Note: Many thanks to Tim Thomasberg who provided many sources for this story.