

Growing Up in Boylston

The Crosley

By Gordon Hastings

The Crosley was an essential part of life growing up in Boylston in the 1940s and early 1950s. No, it wasn't the Crosley Automobile but rather the Crosley Radio first manufactured in 1921 by the Crosley Corporation of Louisville, Kentucky. Our Boylston home was graced with a wood cabinet table model made in 1940, just before WWII. This vintage Crosley, with its illuminated dial was our ear on the outside world.

Those of us who qualify as Octogenarians developed our imaginations and our fantasies alongside a radio. My brother Cal, sister Marianna, and I grew up with ears glued to two old Crosley's, one with a prominent place in the kitchen the other in the living room. The kitchen radio provided news, the living room entertainment.

Boylston did not have its own radio station; it was a town much too small to support one. However, there were three AM stations located in the adjacent City of Worcester that covered our town with their signal. WTAG-AM 580 KC, WORC-AM 1310 KC AND WAAB-AM 1440KC. WTAG was the oldest among the

stations and the most powerful due to its low 580 frequency. It was originally put on the air by the C.T. Sherer Department Store as WDBH in 1924. WDBH stood for Sherer's motto "We Do Business Honestly." A year later Sherer's sold the station to Theodore Ellis, who then owned the Worcester Telegram and Gazette and the call letters were changed to WTAG to accompany the newspaper's names.

So why was the radio so important to life in Boylston? Well, I can remember my dad coming home from work at night bursting through the back door and saying, "Elsa (my mother) there is a big storm coming tonight, the wind's picking up, there's a new moon and I can smell it in the air". That was the level of weather forecasting in those days in our home but those very words "big storm" brought great anticipation.

In the dead of night in January I could not see anything from my bedroom window but I could listen and when the wind whistled and rattled the loose window panes you hoped that the morning would bring the highly anticipated snowstorm!

Dawn broke. Yes, it's snowing! I could barely make out the old Maplewood Farmhouse across the open field. Snow was already piling up along the red snow fence put in place along Central Street by Connie Altstaber's Highway Department back in October. In a flash I ran downstairs to the kitchen where Dad had already tuned the Crosley to WTAG. First came the NBC Radio News, then WTAG News Director Dick Wright announcing the local news and then at last the no-school announcements.

Unlike kids in Ware, Warren and West Boylston, Boylston Kids were lucky because the no school announcements came in alphabetical order. I can remember listening intently. "Auburn, Berlin,



Barre, Brookfield.” Wait, no Boylston. How could that be? The next reading of the no school announcements would not come over the Crosley until 6:30.

Now, in most towns the no-school decision was made by school authorities. In Boylston, however, that decision was made exclusively by Loring Fuller and his wife Gertrude who owned and drove Boylston’s two school busses, the Cheese Box (Gertrude’s bus) and the brand new REO Bread Box (driven by Loring). The busses were nicknamed by those that rode them. Only the Fuller’s themselves would decide if it were safe to bring the Boylston children to school and to get them back home safely.

A bowl of oatmeal helped pass what seemed like hours until the Crosley would sound out the updated no school announcements after the 6:30 news. “Due to the storm, there will be no school in the following communities. First, all Worcester Public Schools closed. No school in Auburn, Barre, Berlin, Boylston! The Crosley had delivered a message of joy.

It was not unusual to be home for a couple of days after a big storm. I can remember once when school was closed for a week because after the storm the wind kept drifting the snow blocking the roads again and again.

The Crosley delivered much more than the good news of “no school”. Many an imagination was stimulated by the great radio dramas of the 1940s.

For those who grew up with radio, here’s a quiz for you. Fill in the blanks (Answers will be in next week’s FFF)

1. *The* _____ *Precinct?*
2. *Arthur Godfrey’s* _____?
3. *Inner* _____?
4. *The Adventures of* _____?
5. _____ *Radio Theater?*

There were so many others, *The FBI in Peace and War*, *Gangbusters*, *Suspense*, *Our Miss Brooks*, *The Shadow*, *Mr. and Mrs. North*. My favorite was *Yours Truly Johnny Dollar* and of course the *Lone Ranger*. What were your favorites? E-mail me at ghhbcast@gmail.com

Many great talents were heard in Boylston on the radio in the 1940s and 1950s. John Woods Morning Show, Don Stevens Car and Kitchen Club, Dick Wright, Mike Whorf, Tom Sawyer, Paul Larsen. Remember *Ida Flanders Home Kitchen* at 10AM on WTAG?

In the early 1950s TV arrived and radio drama went away and Rock & Roll replaced drama on much of the AM broadcast band. For Boylston teens at the time, Dick “The Derby” Smith on WORC All Request Radio, held the early rock mantle until WAAB changed format to Rock and Roll with Bill Garcia, Stevie “Boom Boom” Cannon, Dave McNamee, and Paul Coss.

My aunt and uncle, Agnes and Ernest Brandt, got the first TV in our family in 1950 at their home on Diamond Hill. We used to gather there on Saturday Nights to watch of all things the wrestling matches. TV came to my home in 1952 with a 12-inch FADA. I can remember our neighbors Ralph, Mildred and Carol Garfield joining us to watch Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca and *Your Show of Shows*. The living room Crosley radio went silent but the good news was that my 1956 Chevy had a radio, AM only. The world had changed but a lifelong career in radio and television had only just begun.