

AMERICA Through the CBS Eye from the photo archives of



The CBS Story & The CBS News 20th Century Roundup

by Michael Freedman

On the evening of September 18, 1927, the United Independent Broadcasters (UIB) and the new Columbia Phonograph Broadcasting System presented an American opera entitled "The King's Henchmen" on a 'network' of 16 radio stations. The sole sponsor pulled out just before the opera was broadcast.

Within two months, the fledgling network was in financial trouble and it struggled for the next year. Then, on September 26, 1928, a young man working for his father's cigar company in Philadelphia became president of the network, two days shy of his 27th birthday. The young man who bought controlling interest with a loan from his father, combined UIB and Columbia into one company and renamed it the Columbia Broadcasting System.

His name was William S. Paley and he would lead CBS to unparalleled success in radio and television for the next half century.

Paley spent the first decade of his tenure building a network that would be competitive with arch rival David Sarnoff's industry giant, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC). Paley brought aboard solid managers such as Ed Klauber and Dr. Frank Stanton, and he nurtured young talent including Kate Smith, Bing Crosby, and his enterprising European Director of Talks, Edward R. Murrow.

With the Depression deepening, Paley came up with a plan that would alter the business of radio. He offered affiliates free programming in exchange for the option of running national sponsorships. Paley was making progress, but NBC remained the network leader.

On Sunday evening, March 13, 1938, CBS presented a program that would again change the course of the company, American broadcasting and, in this case, journalism:

"Tonight the world trembles, torn by conflicting forces. The outside world, gravely shaken by the Austrian crisis, moves cautiously through a maze of diplomatic perils ... To bring you the picture of Europe tonight, Columbia now presents a special broadcast which will include pickups from London, Paris and other European capitals ... This is Bob Trout speaking to you from New York ..."

With those words, announcer Robert Trout brought listeners firsthand reports of Hitler's invasion of Austria and its consequences around the world. It marked the first time in broadcasting that a group of correspondents was linked by a central anchor. Thus was born the "CBS World News Roundup" and with it, the era of broadcast journalism.

For the next seven years Edward R. Murrow and his magnificent team of colleagues including William L. Shirer, Eric Sevareid, Charles Collingwood, Howard K. Smith, Richard C. Hottelet, Larry LeSueur, Mary Marvin Breckenridge, Winston Burdett, Bill Downs, Thomas Grandin, and Cecil Brown brought the drama and tragedy of World War II into American living rooms.

And they brought Bill Paley the success and stature he needed to overtake NBC.

After the war, CBS successfully lured away many of the top names at rival networks including Jack Benny, Bing Crosby, Edgar Bergen, Burns and Allen, and Red Skelton. They joined a stable of talent and programs that already included Orson Welles and his "Mercury Theatre of the Air," Major Bowes and his "Amateur Hour," Eddie Cantor, and the great writer, producer, director Norman Corwin.

The end of World War II also marked the resumption of development in a new medium—television. Now armed with a galaxy of entertainment stars and the most respected news department in broadcasting, Paley set about to establish what would become known as the "Tiffany Network."

Over the next three decades CBS was the television home of a steady stream of legendary shows and stars including "I Love Lucy," Jackie Gleason, "Playhouse 90," Jack Benny, Carol Burnett, Red Skelton, Ed Sullivan, "Gunsmoke," "All in the Family," "See it Now," Mary Tyler Moore, Dick Van Dyke, and "M*A*S*H."

In 1950, a young, yet seasoned war correspondent from United Press—named Walter Cronkite—joined as anchorman for the network's political convention and election coverage. But Cronkite's place in history—and in the hearts of Americans—would be firmly established during his remarkable tenure as anchor and managing editor for the "CBS Evening News" from 1962 to 1981. His reporting of such events as the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the first Apollo Moon landing, the Vietnam War, and the Watergate scandal provided a steadying influence in times of confusion, joy, and sorrow. National surveys showed him to be "the most trusted man in America."

Over the years, the leadership baton has been passed, through generations, from Frank Stanton to Leslie Moonves; from Ed Klauber and Paul White to Richard Salant and Andrew Heyward; from Douglas Edwards to Walter Cronkite to Dan Rather. And the legacy of Edward R. Murrow has lived on through the work of correspondents such as Bob Schieffer, Marvin Kalb, George Herman, Mike Wallace, Ed Bradley, Leslie Stahl, Morley Safer, Bill Plante, John Roberts, and Mark Knoller.

CBS continues to lead and break new ground in journalism and entertainment as evidenced by the successes of news and entertainment programs ranging from "60 Minutes" to "Everybody Loves Raymond." Under the direction of Harvey Nagler, CBS Radio Network News is the industry leader in its medium and has been honored with the Radio Television News Directors Association's Edward R. Murrow Award for overall excellence, and perhaps more so than any other network, CBS remains true to its great traditions.

That was evident on the afternoon of November 12, 1999, when Robert Trout, still dapper at 90, entered the CBS Radio Network newsroom in New York to participate in "The CBS News 20th Century Roundup," a three-hour retrospective anchored by Dan Rather and created and directed by Michael Freedman. Among others, Trout was joined on the broadcast by Richard C. Hottelet, Howard K. Smith, Larry LeSueur, and the first woman broadcast correspondent, Mary Marvin Breckenridge Patterson. Murrow/Cronkite editor Ed Bliss also participated along with Director Norman Corwin.

The Murrow Boys had come together one more time, to close the book on the 20th Century and to offer their thoughts on the future.

And each weekday at 8 am and 7 pm Eastern Time, their mark continues to be felt as millions of radio listeners across the nation still tune in to hear "The CBS World News Roundup."

—Michael Freedman, on the 75th anniversary of CBS

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