

Remembering the early days of KWTX-AM

Waco's second oldest radio station recently turned 75.

By Michael Braun

An application for a new 250-watt radio station at 1230 kilocycles in Waco, Texas, was filed with the Federal Communications Commission by Beauford Jester in April 1941.

Beauford Halbert Jester (1893-1949) was an attorney from Corsicana, Texas, about 55 miles northeast of Waco. Jester had political ambitions and connections. His father had served as a Texas state representative, state senator and lieutenant governor. Beauford was a member of the Texas Railroad Commission when he applied for the Waco radio license. He would be elected governor in 1946 and again in 1948. He died during his second term – the only Texas governor to die while in office.

Waco had been a one radio station town since 1922 when Frank Jackson began operating 15-watt WJAD for about three hours a day. It was common in those early years for radio stations to be granted frequency and power changes to accommodate the growing radio industry. This allowed Jackson to make significant operational and programming improvements to his station during the next several years. Jackson's partners took over ownership of the station in 1929 and changed the call letters to WACO. The station enjoyed its broadcast monopoly. However, Jester believed Waco shouldn't be the only city in Texas with a population of more than 50,000 with just one radio station.

After submitting his FCC application, Jester realized he would need strong local support and financial backing to improve his chances of getting the Waco station. He recruited seven prominent Waco businessmen as investors. A corporation was formed that included: W.W. Callan, president of Central Texas Freight Lines; DeWitt T. Hicks, president of Hicks Rubber Company; Hilton E. Howell, an attorney; Robert E. Levy, owner of an investor security business; Wilford W. Naman, an attorney; Ross M. Sams, president of Sams Manufacturing Company; and Davis Stribling, owner of Stribling Insurance Agency. Jester retained 50 percent ownership, and the remaining stock was divided among the other men based on their investment.

The company began acquiring the necessary equipment to build and operate the station in anticipation of the FCC's approval. However, an event on December 7, 1941, would change Jester's plans dramatically. Japanese naval and air forces attacked the U.S. navy base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and the United States and its allies were soon in a world war with Japan in the Pacific and Germany in Europe.

War blocked station approval

The FCC stopped approving new broadcast station licenses soon after the war began. This was in an effort to help conserve raw materials, manufactured goods and skilled labor needed for the war effort. Jester appealed the FCC's decision, noting that he had acquired equipment not considered war-related before his application was suspended. He reasoned that these acquisitions should not prevent him from moving forward with station construction.

Hearings on Jester's petition were held during 1942. The next year the FCC ruled against Jester stating its policy prohibited the acquisition and use of radio equipment. All Jester and his investors could do now was wait until wartime equipment and construction restrictions were lifted.

The end of the Second World War brought the news Jester had waited nearly five years to hear. The FCC reinstated his original application, and in January 1946, granted a license for the new Waco radio station. With broadcast license in hand, Jester and associates turned their attention to getting the station on the air as quickly as possible. But first they needed someone to oversee construction and management.

KWTX radio is born

The credit for selecting the call letters KWTX may go to the first employee hired, station manager M.N. "Buddy" Bostick (1918-2017). Twenty-eight year old Bostick was the youngest radio station manager in Texas at the time. The call letters **K Waco TeXas** were selected not only for the station's locale, but also to let Wacoans know they now had a new station at 1230 kc on the radio dial to listen to besides the one with the city's namesake – WACO at 1460 kc.

Bostick's radio career actually began years earlier. He was only 11 when listeners tuned to WACO radio to hear "Little Buddy Bostick" play his guitar and yodel. The nickname "Buddy" stuck with him the rest of his life.

Bostick grew up in Moody, Texas, a small community near Waco. "I knew radio was going to be my life," Bostick told this author during several interviews between 2010 and 2012. "I went through Baylor University in Waco studying to be a radio announcer." While in college, Bostick began his own radio program, and became Baylor's publicity man, scheduling broadcasts on Texas radio stations to promote the university's professors, musical groups and sporting events. "I was ready for radio when I got out of school," Bostick said.

After graduating in 1939, he worked at radio stations in Little Rock, Ark., Memphis, Tenn., and Dallas, Texas. During the Second World War, Bostick trained as a fighter pilot, but the war ended before he saw action. Bostick dreamt for years of starting his own radio station in Waco, and after learning that Jester had applied for the license, Bostick contacted him many times in hopes he would be considered for a position once the license was granted.

"[Jester] called me, and said he'd taken on people in Waco to have local ownership, and he wanted me to make my presentation [to the investors]," Bostick said. "I told them how good I was, and what a big operation we were going to have, and how it was going to be highly successful. They believed me, gave me the job, and said go to work. I was thrilled to death."

The Early Years

Bostick recalled details about the station's first location – including an odd feature of the building no one expected. "We had our first office and studio upstairs at 108-1/2 South 6th Street," Bostick said. "The people who built the building, built a second floor, but didn't plan a staircase. We didn't have anyway to get in. So we put in a staircase on the outside of the building."

The second floor included a control room, 78 RPM record library, offices for sales, copy and book-keeping, a reception lobby, and studio. "The large, wood-paneled studio had no parallel walls. They were cylindrical," Bostick said.

Bostick recalled that Jester, who had served on the University of Texas Board of Regents, asked UT professor Dr. Paul Boner to design the studio. The professor was an expert in architectural acoustics, and had planned similar studios at several Texas radio stations. Dr. Boner had developed a thin soft plywood panel that could be curved into half-circle shapes. These rounded shapes resembled long pipes of different diameters stacked one on top of the other and attached to the studio walls. The design helped eliminate echo and evenly absorb low and high pitch tones. "The acoustics were wonderful," Bostick said.

KWTX-AM's inaugural broadcast occurred at 11 a.m., May 1, 1946, at "1-2-3 on the dial." The station broadcast from 6 a.m. to midnight, seven days a week. Bostick interviewed more than 150 announcers – many of them with network experience – and chose four to represent KWTX on the air and spin records of popular tunes.

The station presented numerous shows using local talent. "There are plenty of talented musicians and entertainers in Waco and Central Texas who have never had a chance to get on the air. We intend to use them as much as possible," said program director William Close in a 1946 *Waco News-Tribune* story. In addition to live in-studio entertainment, news and sports, KWTX was an affiliate of the Mutual Broadcasting System and carried many of the network's nationally known orchestras, drama shows and commentators.

Dave South, KWTX announcer, program director and salesman during 1968-1981, recalled that back in the day Bostick could be spotted in a Willys Jeep station wagon equipped with a public address system and loud-speakers. "He would drive around Waco talking on the speakers and telling everyone what was coming up that day or night on the station," South said. When Bostick took a break, he placed the PA microphone next to the Jeep's radio speaker to pick up the live KWTX broadcast and amplify it throughout the neighborhood.

The station's transmitter building and 200-foot-tall tower are still at the original location near South 17th Street and Primrose Drive in Waco. The 1946 *Waco News-Tribune* story reported the tower's ground system is made up of more than five miles of copper wire, laid 6 inches underground around the tower to insure a strong signal averaging over 40 miles in all directions from Waco.

KWTX moved to 4520 Bosque Blvd. in 1952. This new facility was designed specifically for radio operations. After the building was expanded a couple of years later, it was known as Broadcast Center with AM radio sharing space with KWTX-TV (Channel 10) in 1955 and KWTX-FM (97.5 MHz) in 1970.

Reporting tornado destruction

A devastating F5 tornado struck downtown Waco on the afternoon of May 11, 1953, leaving in its path 114 dead and \$53 million in property damage (equivalent to \$525 million in 2021). Bostick and the station's chief engineer devised a way for Bostick to broadcast live as he piloted an airplane over Waco describing the vast destruction to KWTX listeners. For several days after the tornado, KWTX canceled commercial broadcasts and aired emergency messages around the clock for families seeking information about their friends and loved ones.

Dave South remembered how the Waco tornado changed KWTX radio's storm reporting. "[Bostick] demanded full attention to the weather from the radio staff anytime the weather started acting up," South said. The station would later install its own weather radar equipment. Although primitive by today's standards, the radar was capable of showing the location and size of approaching storms. Radar capability gave the station an advantage in weather coverage according to Roy Cook, who started as a KWTX radio announcer in 1970, and was KWTX chief weather forecaster from 1972 to 1989. "The other stations in town didn't have their own [radar coverage]," Cook said.

Power, format and ownership changes

KWTX has undergone several changes through the years. The station operated at 250 watts day and night until the FCC granted a daytime power increase to 1000 watts in 1962. Today the station broadcasts 24 hours at 1000 watts.

Beginning in 1946 KWTX targeted its audience with a daily program of music, news and live announcers before national syndicated programming became the norm at many radio stations. KWTX music formats through the years varied from middle-of-the-road (mainstream pop songs of 1940s and '50s) to adult contemporary (popular 1960's vocals and '70's light rock). Around 1981 the station went with a mainstream country format (current and older hits), then switched back to middle-of-the-road tunes in 1985. Two years later, it was nostalgia/big band music of the 1940s and '50s. Golden oldie pop hits of the '50s to the '70s came along in 1994. News/talk became the present format in 1996.

KWTX AM/FM/TV moved to a new facility at 6700 American Plaza in 1986. The former location on Bosque Blvd. later became Oakcrest Funeral Home. Both radio stations were sold to GulfStar Communications in 1996 – ending Bostick's 50-year association with KWTX radio. Today, KWTX (AM) "Newstalk 1230," KWTX-FM "97.5 FM #1 Hit Music" and other Waco iHeartMedia stations are located at 314 West State Hwy. 6. KWTX-TV was sold to Gray Communications in 1999 and remains at American Plaza.

The author worked at KWTX AM and FM during 1975-1979 as a board operator, announcer and DJ. He is a personal collector and preservationist of Central Texas broadcasting memorabilia.



Beauford Jester along with seven prominent Waco businessmen started KWTX radio in 1946. (Associated Press Photo 1946.)



M.N. "Buddy" Bostick was hired as KWTX-AM station manager in 1946. He was the youngest radio station manager in Texas at the time. (Photo date and location unknown.)



KWTX radio board of directors, circa 1946. Front row (second from left): Robert E. Levy, Beauford Jester (at microphone), Wilford W. Naman, and station manager M.N. Buddy Bostick. Back row (left to right): Hilton E. Howell, Ross M. Sams, W.W. Callan, and Davis Stribling. Not pictured: DeWitt T. Hicks. (Photo from *Waco – A Sesquicentennial History*, by Patricia Ward Wallace, The Donning Company Publishers, copyright 1999 Patricia Ward Wallace.)



Two-story building at 108 S. 6th Street in downtown Waco was the home of KWTX radio from 1946 to 1952. The radio studio and offices were upstairs. (2012 photo.)

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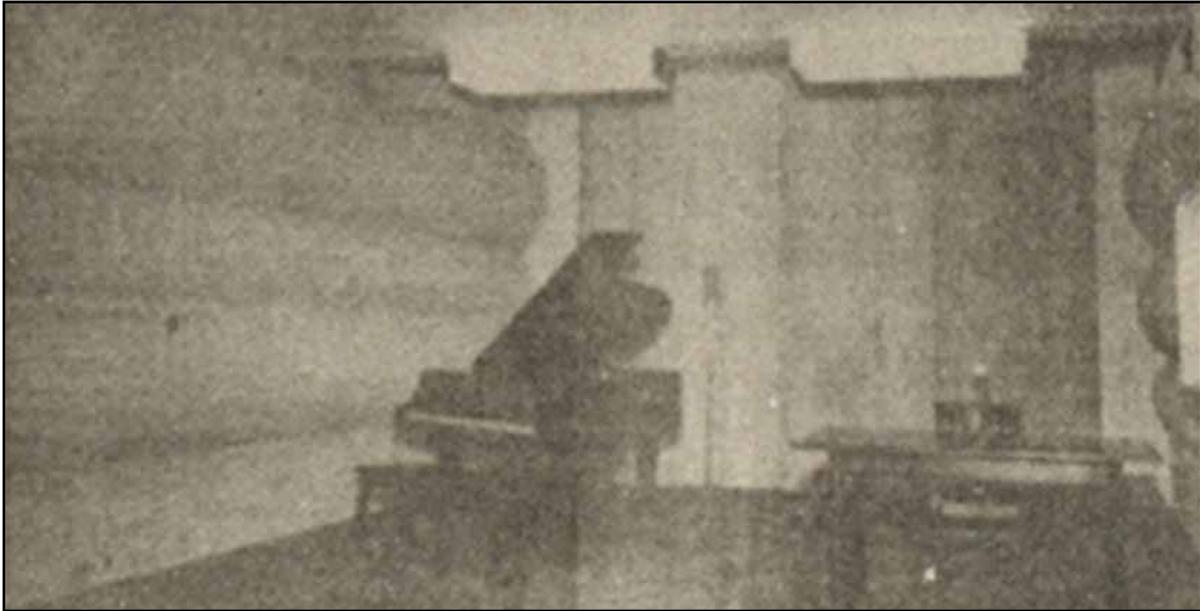
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KWTX radio newspaper advertisement announcing inaugural broadcast. Radio staff and investors are pictured. (*The Waco News-Tribune*, May 1, 1946.)



Curved walls to eliminate echo and evenly absorb sound, a piano and an announcer's desk can be seen inside the KWTX radio studio. (Scanned image from inaugural broadcast advertisement, *The Waco News-Tribune*, May 1, 1946.)



Station manager Buddy Bostick (shown) drove through Waco neighborhoods announcing the KWTX program schedule from this Willys Jeep equipped with a public address system and loudspeakers. (Photo circa 1946. Courtesy of Ellen Deaver.)



KWTX radio advertisement in the 1946 Waco City Directory.



Newly completed KWTX radio facility at 4520 Bosque Blvd. in Waco. The building was constructed specifically for radio operations, and later expanded to make room for KWTX-TV (Channel 10) in 1955 and KWTX-FM (97.5 MHz) in 1970. (Photo circa 1952.)



Popular KWTX radio/TV host Johnny Watkins in AM control room at 4520 Bosque Blvd. (Photo circa 1950s.)



KWTX radio announcer Joe McChesney in AM control room at 4520 Bosque Blvd. (Photo circa 1959. Courtesy of Mike McChesney.)



KWTX radio announcer Michael Braun (and author of this story) in AM control room at 4520 Bosque Blvd. (Photo circa 1979.)



KWTX-AM promotional card. (Circa 1979.)