

# Reporting the '51 Flood: An Oral History of the Impact of a Natural Disaster on Local Broadcast News<sup>1</sup>

by  
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*That was what television was designed to do—to show people what was happening.*  
—Harold DeGood, reflecting on the 1951 Flood.<sup>2</sup>

No three years in Kansas City broadcast history have seen so much upheaval and disruption, followed by realignment and renewal, as the years 1951 through 1953. There was disruption in all of American broadcasting during this time, and national events had their impact on Kansas City. But, because of unique natural and commercial circumstances, Kansas City's experience was much more dramatic. Events of 1951 through 1953 set the stage for changes to come and influenced how broadcast news would develop in the next three decades. The first, the Flood of 1951, established the importance of local broadcast news as no single local event had done to date, and taught news departments how to cover disasters. The lesson would prove useful.

Unlike in print and film media, historical research in broadcasting finds little evidence of how the mass communicators saw their work. Consequently, broadcasting history relies heavily on court cases, legislative documents and technical data about broadcasting. George Lipsitz<sup>3</sup> puts historical studies of mass communication into three frames of inquiry, namely: (1) apparatus-centered, (2) socially based, and (3) textually oriented. What is missing is one which is communicator-oriented, i.e., one which asks about broadcasters themselves, how they perceived their work and how their working in teams shaped station operations. Short of a few autobiographies and biographies of national figures, these perspectives are scarce.

Oral historians are quick to note that oral history is one way to gather information about people who are otherwise not well-documented for historical research.<sup>4</sup> Local

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is derived from a presentation to the American Journalism Historians Association Annual Meeting, Lawrence, Kansas, October 1-3, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Harold DeGood, Interview, July 1, 1985 in *William James Ryan (1940- ) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.

<sup>3</sup> George Lipsitz, "'This Ain't No Sideshow': Historians and Media Studies." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 5 (June 1988): 147ff.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Allen and Lynwood Montell, *From Memory to Using Oral Sources in Local Historical Research*, 14.

broadcasters are among those little-documented groups. As one Kansas City broadcaster said about the passing of his own popularity, “We build castles in the air.”<sup>5</sup>

This is a study of how Kansas City broadcast journalists remembered covering the first major natural disaster in the city’s history of commercial broadcasting—the 1951 Flood. This coverage set precedents for future disaster coverage by Kansas City broadcasters. Hence, the significance of this study is the identification of broadcasters’ roles and stations’ practices during disaster coverage—something none of them had done before.

This study is based primarily on oral history interviews with broadcasters who covered the disaster. Taped interviews are from the author’s Kansas City Broadcasting Oral History Project (KCBOHP), which comprises most of the Kansas City Broadcasting Oral History Collection (KCBOHC).<sup>6</sup> Photographic records, newspaper and periodical accounts and other reports complement these interviews. Conclusions about individual roles and station practices are drawn from these sources.

## BACKGROUND

Kansas City broadcasting began with amateur and experimental licenses as early as 1913.<sup>7</sup> Kansas City engineers, talent, writers and owners were among the nation’s pioneer broadcasters. Commercial broadcasting began with experimental stations licensed in 1921 and their first four commercial progeny on air by June, 1922.<sup>8</sup> Weather reports were a part of Kansas City radio from the beginning and natural disasters were reported from time to time as they occurred. The most devastating disaster in the Kansas City region was the 1930s draught.<sup>9</sup>

From 1936 to 1951, five commercial AM stations dominated Kansas City broadcasting. In chronological order of their licenses, these were KMBC, WHB, WDAF, KCMO, and KCKN. By 1951, the first four were network affiliates and are the primary stations described in this study. KCKN remained independent, as were three others broadcasting in 1951, KPRS, KIMO, and KOZY-FM.

KMBC had cooperated with the daily *Kansas City Journal-Post* for reports direct from the newsroom in the 1920s and 1930s. Still, the station’s founder and president, Arthur

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<sup>5</sup> Milton C. Dickey, Interview, July 30, 1985 in *William James Ryan (1940- ) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.

<sup>6</sup> The Kansas City Broadcasting Oral History Collection (KCBOHC) and the Kansas City Broadcasting Oral History Project (KCBOHP) created by William James Ryan, then Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at Rockhurst University, may now be found in the *William James Ryan (1940- ) Papers* (KC0457), at the Western Historical Manuscript Collection-Kansas City (WHMC-KC).

<sup>7</sup> United States Bureau of the Navy, *Radio Stations in the United States*, Supplement No. 2, Additions. Washington: GPO, 1 January 1914.

<sup>8</sup> United States Department of Commerce. *Radio Service Bulletins*, #59 through #62.; William J. Ryan, “Which Came First?—65 Years of Kansas City Broadcasting,” *Missouri Historical Review* LXXXII [82] (July 1988): 408-423.

<sup>9</sup> A Kansas dust storm report during that time was dubbed “the dirtiest broadcast ever made” (Ray Poindexter, *Golden and Silent Tongues*).

B. Church, ran the station like a network, with an enormous staff of writers and talent. In the late '30s, KMBC became the first Kansas City station to have its own separate news department, organized by former newspaper journalist Erle Smith, and staffed thereafter with professional journalists.<sup>10</sup> By 1951, KMBC had had its own news department for more than a decade, longer than any other station, and was no longer associated with any daily newspaper.

WHB also had cooperated with the *Journal-Post* in the 1920s and 1930s, and, like KMBC, used the paper's radio editor, John Cameron Swayze, as a news announcer.<sup>11</sup> WHB was a day-time only station until 1947. In 1951, the program director was also the chief news announcer and relied on announcers to read news. The station was the only one using all three wire services: Associated Press, United Press, and International News Service.

WDAF was owned and operated by The Kansas City Star Co., said to have been the second newspaper in the U.S. to receive a radio license.<sup>12</sup> The morning *Kansas City Times* and evening *Kansas City Star* were members of AP, so this was the only wire service WDAF used.

Although the radio station had its own news announcers, the newspapers traditionally had first claim on daily news. From the beginning and into the early television era, WDAF radio was only supposed to tease listeners into reading the newspapers, rarely reporting events before morning or evening editions were in readers' hands.<sup>13</sup> Because local broadcast news was gotten directly from the *Star's* city desk, WDAF news even sounded like it was written by print journalists until news announcer Walt Bodine broke that tradition in the late 1940s.<sup>14</sup> In 1951, radio studios still were housed in the Star Building as they had been since 1922.

KCKN originally was owned and operated by the *Kansas City (Kansas) Daily Kansan*, one of Senator Arthur Capper's papers. In its early years, KCKN used the paper's editorial staff as on-air news announcers. After World War II, it had its own news director, although other news announcers usually were disc jockeys.<sup>15</sup> KCKN used both AP and UP wires.<sup>16</sup>

KCMO was never attached to any newspaper and after World War II developed its own separate news department headed by a broadcaster who had been with the station

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Claude Dorsey, Interview, July 7, 1985 in *William James Ryan (1940- ) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC; Allen D. Smith, Interview, June 18, 1986 in *William James Ryan (1940- ) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC; Alvin Young, Interview, July 10, 1991 in *William James Ryan (1940- ) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.

<sup>11</sup> Donald Dwight Davis, "Salute to Ed Dennis," Tape recorded message, June 4, 1976 in *William James Ryan (1940- ) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.

<sup>12</sup> "A WDAF Milestone Chart," *Kansas City Star*, 14 February 1940.

<sup>13</sup> Walt Bodine, Interview, January 15, 1987 in *William James Ryan (1940- ) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.

<sup>14</sup> Walt Bodine, Interview, January 15, 1987; Earl Frank Feeley, Interview, July 1, 1987 in *William James Ryan (1940- ) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.

<sup>15</sup> "Radio and TV Aid," *Kansas City Star*, 13 July 1951: 3.

<sup>16</sup> *Broadcasting Yearbook*, 1951: 191ff.

since about 1939. He began to enlarge the news staff in about 1949; by 1951 there were five reporters. KCMO belonged to AP. The station also separately programmed a music-and-news format on KCMO-FM and on Transit Radio, a separate FM service broadcast on city mass transit vehicles.

The first commercial TV license in the city's modern electronic era went to the Kansas City Star Company in 1949, for Channel 4.<sup>17</sup> Unlike WDAF radio, WDAF-TV was in a new studio high on what they called Signal Hill, overlooking the confluence of the Kansas (Kaw) and Missouri Rivers. Because of the Federal Communications Commission's subsequent license freeze, WDAF-TV had a regional television monopoly until 1953. However, in 1951, Kansas City was not yet connected to the network's coaxial cable, so news photos from Kansas City were sent to NBC-TV on film.<sup>18</sup>

For a mobile news vehicle, WDAF-TV had a customized Packard hearse with a wooden platform on top to hold a studio camera. A microwave transmission from the vehicle to a receiving dish on the station's transmitter tower allowed some remote broadcasts. On location, cameras on long cables could be moved inside buildings if necessary. Still, the cumbersome cameras and heavy cables limited the frequency of such broadcasts.<sup>19</sup>

In 1951, all but KCKN were network affiliates. WDAF was a charter member of NBC,<sup>20</sup> KMBC was the sixth oldest basic member of William Paley's Columbia chain, KCMO was an ABC affiliate, and WHB was a member of the Mutual Broadcasting System. KCKN countered as a pioneer music-and-news station.

Since World War II, the public had come to expect verbally descriptive radio news coverage, but more from the networks than from local stations. Now, radio news departments looked for local angles.

All these radio stations had regular local newscasts. By 1951, the four affiliates had news directors and news reporters. KMBC's veteran news director Erle Smith had just retired and was replaced by Claude Dorsey, the first university journalism graduate on Kansas City radio.<sup>21</sup> Jim Monroe (Monroe Heying), also a university graduate (though not in journalism), was KCMO news director. Randall Jessee doubled as WDAF's radio and TV news director and carried announcing duties on Channel 4. Dick Smith was WHB program director and news director. By 1951, each of these men had ten or more years broadcasting experience.

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<sup>17</sup> A mechanical television station, W9XAL-TV, was licensed to First National Television School in 1932 (United States Department of Commerce, *Radio Service Bulletin* #183, 1932).

<sup>18</sup> Harold DeGood, Interview, July 1, 1985.

<sup>19</sup> Harold DeGood, Interview, July 1, 1985.

<sup>20</sup> WDAF was the station furthest west on the original WFAF-AT&T chain and became a charter member of both RCA's NBC Red and Blue networks (William Banning, *Commercial Broadcasting Pioneers: The WFAF Experiment, 1922-1926*).

<sup>21</sup> Allen D. Smith, Interview, June 18, 1986; Claude Dorsey, Interview, July 7, 1985.

The strongest independent, KCKN, had its own news director, Eric Tainter. Although there were other independent stations in the market, none of the others had news directors. The struggling KPRS, Olathe, Kansas, and KIMO, Independence, Missouri, both used regular announcers or disc jockeys as news readers. KOZY-FM had been a music-and-news station since 1942, but had neither a news director nor a wire service feed and was not a significant news station. KPRS, like KCKN, was a music-and-news station—more music than news—had an AP wire and relied on rip-and-read newscasts. KIMO's owner published the Independence *Daily News* but had no wire service. Little is known of KIMO's 1951 news operation.

As summer 1951 approached, Kansas Citians still looked forward to live outdoor entertainment, away from radio and television. This summer was special, with the premiere opening of Starlight Theatre in sprawling Swope Park, bringing Broadway musicals with national talent to audiences under the stars. It could have been a pleasant summer.

#### TWIN DISASTERS

But, when summer arrived, twin disasters—one of water and one of fire—struck Kansas City, and the public turned to radio and television for local news as they had not done in the previous three decades. It perhaps reminded station managers of the importance of their licensing requirement to program “in the public interest, convenience and necessity.”

The first disaster hit ironically just after midnight on a Friday-the-13<sup>th</sup>; the second, caused by effects of the first, struck 12 hours later.

#### THE FLOOD

On July 13, 1951, the Kaw River, swollen by heavy rains in north central and eastern Kansas, crested in Kansas City five feet higher than its flood in 1903. This time, avoiding its natural path, the Kaw topped levees built after the 1903 flood, shoving through the Argentine district of Kansas City, Kansas, spilling disastrously over a levee in west Armourdale, where an estimated 15,000 residents were evacuated, and flooded the Bottoms—the heart of Kansas City's Central Industrial District and Stock Yards. There the Kaw met the rising Missouri and the flood reached disastrous proportions for both Kansas Citys, including the sites of two major airports and the major Kansas City municipal water station.<sup>22</sup>

Everyone knew the high waters were coming but no one guessed their impact. For two weeks, WDAF-TV had carried photos and news of the Kansas flood, beginning nightly on its 9:25 weather report and on “Heart of America Newsreel.”<sup>23</sup>

By Thursday, Kansas City newspaper readers knew cities from north central Kansas to Topeka were flooded, leaving thousands homeless. Radio stations in Salina and Topeka were flooded out. The *Kansas City Star* called it “the most devastating flood in

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<sup>22</sup> “Kaw Rolls into Argentine,” *Kansas City Times*, 13 July 1951.

<sup>23</sup> “Radio and TV Aid,” *Kansas City Star*, 13 July 1951: 3.

the history of Kansas."<sup>24</sup> That day also, the only working river gage in the Kansas City area noted the river stage at 39.9 feet at the 23rd Street Bridge on the Kansas side. On Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> it was at 41 feet. By Saturday it was at 51.28 feet.<sup>25</sup>

Volunteers built levees to save a water pumping station in the Fairfax district, but the principal water pumping station for Kansas City, Missouri, was flooded and the city's fresh water supply was polluted. Eventually, some 32,400 telephones would be out of service. Four fire stations were flooded. Fires raged unchecked. The City Council proclaimed an official emergency. Some roads and bridges were closed and fresh water was rationed. Railroad and commercial airline traffic stopped and the Board of Trade temporarily suspended trading.<sup>26</sup> Congress rushed to pass a \$25 million flood relief bill for the entire region.

### THE EXPLOSIONS

A second disaster struck at about 1:15 p.m. when flood waters dislodged an oil storage tank which apparently hit a high voltage line and exploded, igniting oil slick waters in the Roanoke area of Southwest Boulevard and State Line. The explosion was the first of several throughout the weekend. Flames eventually covered an oil slick estimated to be the length of six to eight city blocks near State Line.<sup>27</sup>

Eventually, fires fed by exploded storage tanks of six oil companies and two lumber yards burned unchecked into the next week. The estimated fire loss of \$5-million was added to flood damage, estimated as high as \$750-million.<sup>28</sup>

Both flood and fire happened directly below WDAF-TV, situated on Signal Hill.

### WDAF: RADIO AND TELEVISION COVERAGE

WDAF-TV in 1951 began daily programming at 1 p.m. Normally, all was entertainment until John Cameron Swayze's 15-minute "Camel Caravan" came from NBC at 5:45 p.m. The first local news was at 9:15 p.m. with Randall Jessee's ten-minute newscast followed by Shelby Storck's five-minute weather report. The day ended with a regional newscast, "Heart of America Newsreel," at 11:30 p.m.

The night before the flood hit Kansas City, WDAF-TV's 9:15 nightly newscast included first-hand reports obtained that day when the commander of the Olathe Naval Air base sent news director Jessee, program director Bill Bates, and station photographer Charles Ford on a flight over the flooded areas. Before WDAF-TV signed off that night, Jessee used "Heart of America Newsreel" to give a 20-minute up-date, using photos by

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<sup>24</sup> *Kansas City Star*, 12 July 1951: 1.

<sup>25</sup> National Board of Fire Underwriters. *The Flood Problem in Fire Protection*, 123.

<sup>26</sup> National Board of Fire Underwriters. *The Flood Problem in Fire Protection*, 123-126; *Kansas City Star* and *Kansas City Times*, 12-17 July 1951.

<sup>27</sup> National Board of Fire Underwriters. *The Flood Problem in Fire Protection*, 126.

<sup>28</sup> National Board of Fire Underwriters. *The Flood Problem in Fire Protection*, 123-126; *Kansas City Times*, 16 July 1951: 1.

*Star* photographers; WDAF-TV weather announcer Shelby Storck reported weather conditions and river stages.<sup>29</sup>

Considering the impact of the flood, weather reporting took on increased importance for city-dwellers. Storck was Channel 4's first weather announcer. Describing Kansas City's first TV weather map, which stage hand Ray Maier made for Storck's weathercast, Maier remembered, "It was just nothing but a big map of the United States. It had Plexiglas in front of it so that they could use...lipstick to mark on the map, at the very beginning.... Later they used ink pens. They used carbon tetrachloride on the lipstick and ink pens—to get the stuff off." Maier didn't know why they used lipstick but he knew it looked good on television. "I think Shelby might have been the first one to use it," he recalled.<sup>30</sup>

When the flood hit Kansas City shortly after midnight, it was too dark for television but WDAF radio news reported it throughout the night. At 5:15 a.m., WDAF news announcer Walt Bodine interviewed three newspaper reporters who had covered the flood all night. As dawn broke, businesses called WDAF asking that special announcements be made regarding temporary office relocations, travel conditions for employees and related information. Such bulletins were announced throughout the day on WDAF and on all area stations, as were requests for boats and other emergency equipment. Regular WDAF programming was interrupted throughout the day to provide up-dated information. WDAF radio continued broadcasting 24 hours daily for three days.

NBC carried cut-ins from WDAF newscaster Bill Leeds and NBC-TV broadcast spot films, probably from veteran photographer Sammie Feedback, of one-minute and longer.<sup>31</sup>

Tired broadcasters felt a fresh rush of adrenaline when the oil fires began. Harold DeGood and other Channel 4 engineers set up a television camera on the studio roof and WDAF-TV interrupted 27 minutes of regular programming to televise the billowing black smoke which spread over the city. Before it was all over, WDAF-TV broadcast almost 12 hours of flood and fire coverage.<sup>32</sup>

By 5:30 p.m., WDAF-TV was ready to broadcast live flood coverage for a special 15-minute visual survey of the river's rampage.<sup>33</sup> Rival KMBC news reporter Allen D. Smith recalled, "WDAF-TV had the only television in town. And they were sitting up on the hill there at Southwest Trafficway and they were looking down over the flood plain.

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<sup>29</sup> "Radio and TV Aid," *Kansas City Star*, 13 July 1951: 3.

<sup>30</sup> Ray Maier, Interview, July 14, 1986 in *William James Ryan (1940- ) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.

<sup>31</sup> "Radio and TV Aid," *Kansas City Star*, 13 July 1951: 3; "Flood Coverage." *Broadcasting*, 23 July 1951: 17 and 28; Sammie G. Feedback, Interview, August 9, 1985 in *William James Ryan (1940- ) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.

<sup>32</sup> "Flood Coverage," *Broadcasting*, 23 July 1951: 17 and 28.

<sup>33</sup> "Radio and TV Aid," *Kansas City Star*, 13 July 1951: 3.

This was before mobile cameras so they hauled a camera up on the roof of the building and had a perfect view of that whole valley down beneath them of the flood.”<sup>34</sup>

As pictures of the flood flashed into Kansas City’s TV households, Randall Jessee described the flood’s advance. Not only could citizens look in the sky and see black smoke clouds rise from this part of the city, they could get a close-up view, as they could of the flood, from the safety of their own homes—on television.

Historic pictures of the flood include one of the WDAF-TV news team on the roof, which one team member described years later: “Here’s a close-up of the old fashioned camera we had. Here is Harry Thomas, cameraman; and here is me, Frank Feeley; and here is Randall Jessee, who did a magnificent job of covering the flood. He made a name for himself and television and he took many, many chances.”<sup>35</sup> KMBC’s Smith agreed: “Of course the Big Flood was the thing that made Randall Jessee a household name in Kansas City.”<sup>36</sup>

In response to the coverage, many TV viewers joined volunteers who had responded to earlier radio pleas to fight the flood and assist with Red Cross and other support services.<sup>37</sup> For the first time since TV had arrived, Kansas Citians discovered the value of television over and beyond its role as an entertainment medium. Along with radio newscasts, television brought live coverage of the disaster with the added dimension of visual images on an hourly basis. In addition to live video from Signal Hill, still photos and motion picture news film were provided by Feedback and Ford.

Not everyone appreciated the way Feedback, Jessee, et al. did their jobs. To get close to the ravaging flood, Jessee commandeered an Army amphibious vehicle to go out on the swollen river. “Of course Jessee would go in for everything, you know,” Feedback grinned. “We weren’t getting anything too good. And he went down and talked ‘em out of it and fired it up and away we went. Then they arrested us. We got a lot of pictures.”<sup>38</sup> Feeley remembered that Jessee also used a row boat; and Channel 4 projectionist David McKinstry remembered Jessee going out on the river with photographer Ford. Program director Bates also remembered a Duck ride and subsequent arrest.<sup>39</sup>

Feedback’s flood shots included: “Box cars, cattle floatin’—the whole damn West Bottoms was under water.” But during one river trip he dropped his camera trying to help rescue two people drifting perilously in a small boat. Afterward, he picked up his camera and kept on shooting, unaware that a crack now let light fog his film. The only good shot he got was a rooster floating down the river.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Allen D. Smith, Interview, June 18, 1986.

<sup>35</sup> Earl Frank Feeley, Interview, July 1, 1987; Warner J. Untersee, *Photographs of Kansas City Flood*.

<sup>36</sup> Allen D. Smith, Interview, June 18, 1986.

<sup>37</sup> “Radio and TV Aid,” *Kansas City Star*, 13 July 1951: 3.

<sup>38</sup> Sammie G. Feedback, Interview, August 9, 1985.

<sup>39</sup> William Bates, Interviews, July 18 and July 30, 1985 in *William James Ryan (1940- ) Papers (KC0457)*, WHMC-KC; Harold DeGood, Interview, July 1, 1985; Earl Frank Feeley, Interview, July 1, 1987; David McKinstry, Interview, July 22, 1985 in *William James Ryan (1940- ) Papers (KC0457)*, WHMC-KC.

<sup>40</sup> Sammie G. Feedback, Interview, August 9, 1985.

President Truman flew out to see the flood first-hand. This was more than side bar news for Feedback, who had known Truman since the thirties. Truman arrived from Washington, D.C., July 17 with Charles E. Wilson, director of the Office of Defense Mobilization.<sup>41</sup> Feedback scooped everyone on this, hiring a light plane in Sioux City, Iowa, and, through his personal acquaintance with Truman, was allowed to fly above fighter escorts to get exclusive photos of the president's plane flying over the flood.

*We're sittin' in this little airport and I get on the phone and call Washington. And the people looked at me. And I said, "Don't worry about it." I could see 'em gettin' uneasy. "I'll pay for the phone call, don't worry about it." I said, "You call the president and you tell him Sammie Feedback will be in an airplane (and I gave them the wing number) as they come up the river. We want some pictures. We'll be above you." (They thought, "This sonofabitch's crazy.") [Laughs] I said, "Tell Mr. Truman: don't let those fighter planes take a shot at us when we're up there shootin' pictures." My God.... So we got in the air. I said, "Now is this clear for you?" This pilot he was so goddamned nervous he didn't know whether to go through with it or not....*

*So pretty soon we saw this "sacred cow" [Truman's plane] comin' and we was up over it.... We made it way up high, flood water and the "cow." Then combo'd up with the inside shot that [Frank] Cancellero was shooting while we were up here. So that's how we got the picture. You know what it cost me? Eighteen bucks for the telephone call.... Oh, God. Some of the crazy things I've done!<sup>42</sup>*

Live TV pictures also came from a vantage point at FCC offices in the downtown Federal Building, where DeGood and others installed a microwave feed to WDAF. "We must have been about 20 stories high," DeGood recalled, noting that with the camera on a dolly they could shoot from windows on three sides of the building and shoot practically the entire flood. "We could overlook the [Municipal] airport; we could overlook Fairfax airport. We could overlook almost all of downtown. It was frantic."<sup>43</sup> Feeley remembered the camera on the 32<sup>nd</sup> floor of the Federal Building and said,

*I was sent down there to cover that, a cameraman, a microphone...it was a vantage point from which they could observe the potential flooding of Municipal Airport. You could see the trucks like little ants loaded with automobile bodies, sand, rocks, anything they could get a hold of, night and day, 24-hours around the clock, filling in big holes which had burst through dikes at the airport. The Phillips refinery and the Fairfax airport were already flooded on the Fairfax side, in Kansas. The two rivers converged and made a more menacing story. [But] they beat it.<sup>44</sup>*

Television coverage continued through the weekend. According to popular memory, this coverage, more than any single broadcast to that date, boosted WDAF-TV's news reputation among Kansas City viewers. Oral history interviews verify, as already noted,

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<sup>41</sup> "Wilson Here with Truman," *Kansas City Times*, 17 July 1951: 1.

<sup>42</sup> Sammie G. Feedback, Interview, August 9, 1985.

<sup>43</sup> Harold DeGood, Interview, July 1, 1985.

<sup>44</sup> Earl Frank Feeley, Interview, July 1, 1987; cf. Harold DeGood, Interview, July 1, 1985.

that Jesse became a popular figure of star proportions as a result of his coverage and consequently became known as Kansas City's "Mr. Television."

After the flood, the sale of television receivers and the number of homes using television in Kansas City are said to have increased dramatically. Although it is difficult to prove a correlation with the flood, records indicate that from January 1 to December 31, 1951, TV sets in use in Kansas City increased from 93,000 to 170,000, a 54.7% increase.<sup>45</sup>

#### KCMO AM and FM

All the city's radio news departments covered the flood. None had a more complicated time of it than Monroe's news team at KCMO. For, it was on the very day of the flood that owner Tom Evans had scheduled to move the entire KCMO broadcast operation from downtown to the new site, a former Crown Drug warehouse. Reporter Harold Mack Grove (known on air as Harold Mack) recalled:

*By the time of the 1951 flood I think our staff was probably up to maybe five people. The reason I remember the flood specifically as far as KCMO is concerned is because we had picked that day, the day of the flood...to move from the Commerce Building to our new quarters out at 125 East 31st street (where KCPT is now). And we couldn't change the move, so those of us on the news staff—and of course in a situation like that everyone in the entire staff was involved in the operation, announcers and secretaries, and station managers were doing something—so those of us on the news staff knew we would be going out and doing some remote broadcasting. I remember specifically I left that place one morning and I didn't come back until a day later. But I didn't come back to the same place! I came to the new quarters.<sup>46</sup>*

As rains fell and moving trucks rolled, Monroe and his staff kept listeners informed of the rising Missouri and its tragic consequences throughout the weekend. KCMO never left the air and Monroe's news coverage was never interrupted by either nature or moving operations. Monroe later was honored by the national Radio News Directors Association for his direction of KCMO's coverage of the flood during this hectic time. And, Sigma Delta Chi gave him the prestigious Distinguished Service Award for the coverage.<sup>47</sup>

As a news story, the flood was not based on a single dramatic event. "It was a unique disaster. It caused only property damage," Grove explained. "If you recall, no one was ever able to prove that there was a single loss of life in the Kansas City area from this devastating flood." Television could cover the flood visually. But what about

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<sup>45</sup> See NBC-TV estimate in "Daytime TV Times of Sign-on and Sign-Off for 107 U.S. Stations," *Sponsor*, 29 January 1951: 54 and 56; and "America's Top 101 Markets: Their TV Set Status as of December 1951," *Sponsor*, 14 January 1952: 32.

<sup>46</sup> Harold Mack Grove, Interview, June 20, 1986 in *William James Ryan (1940- ) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC; cf. Allen D. Smith, Interview, June 18, 1986.

<sup>47</sup> "SDX Awards," *Broadcasting*, 12 May 1952: 78; "Journalism Awards Made by Fraternity," *New York Times*, 20 May 1952: 23.

radio? "We did have mobile units at that time," Grove said. "The only thing that we could do was to dash around in our mobile units. I had a field assignment [and] Jim Monroe coordinated this whole thing from the studio, and did an excellent job ...."<sup>48</sup>

They worked with fire and police departments of both Kansas Citys. "Jim [Monroe] was very good at this sort of thing. Whoever was either in news or working for him on an ad hoc basis, they were advised and just did pretty much what needed to be done—whether it was working with the fire departments, working with the police departments of both cities.... If he heard of something through the police radio that maybe we in the field hadn't heard about, maybe some disaster such as a fire in the middle of the flood—and that happened, you know—then he would direct us." Otherwise it was left to reporters in the field to find events and give ad lib reports.<sup>49</sup>

"You know," Grove said, "the dramatic parts occurred during the night. The flood just welled up early in the morning so that by early dawn the flood—it was the type of thing that just crept up, it wasn't like a tidal wave where the waves come crashing in. People were slowly and methodically moving out." The only drama Grove remembered centered around "those die-hards who refused to admit that the water was going to get to that level." He also remembered that after the new day did dawn, "it was hotter than hell on a couple of those days, which is ironic because the days leading up to the flood the sun hadn't shown for a week at least, with constant rain.... I remember standing in that extremely hot sun, without a cloud in the sky, looking at what the clouds had wrought down below."<sup>50</sup>

KCMO kept a 24-hour vigil with flood warnings broadcast live telephone reports from its news staff located at various vantage points along the flood route. And, when warnings came about flooded traffic routes in the downtown area, KCMO-FM worked with Civil Defense administrators to direct city bus traffic and to provide evacuation news fed directly to bus drivers over the station's Transit Radio.<sup>51</sup>

KCMO also broadcast messages from members of families separated by the flood.<sup>52</sup>

Reporters from most stations worked long hours. At KCMO, they got some rest thanks to the benevolence of station owner Tom Evans. "He [owned] a piece of the President Hotel and it was obvious that first night that some of us were not going to be able to get back home, first of all because we were needed there next day," Grove remembered, "but they didn't want us to do it all night, so what he did was take out a whole suite of rooms there. I think on the first night I got about three or four hours sleep

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<sup>48</sup> Harold Mack Grove, Interview, June 20, 1986.

<sup>49</sup> Harold Mack Grove, Interview, June 20, 1986.

<sup>50</sup> Harold Mack Grove, Interview, June 20, 1986. Temperatures between 90 and 95 degrees were forecast for July 16, in *Kansas City Times*, 16 July 1951.

<sup>51</sup> "Flood Coverage," *Broadcasting*, 23 July 1951: 28.

<sup>52</sup> "Flood Coverage," *Broadcasting*, 23 July 1951: 17 and 28.

and the others did too. Then, the next morning, out bright and early, doing the same thing."<sup>53</sup>

As at most other stations, practically everyone at KCMO pitched in for the emergency. Photographs, including one of Evans bringing five-gallon bottles of boiled drinking water to the newsroom, confirm Grove's recollection of a number of non-news staff assisting in the operation. Program Director Sid Tremble, Production Director Ken Heady, Promotions Director Mike Strawn, and Assistant Farm Director Bruce Davies all are shown with newsman Larry Whyte in the studio.<sup>54</sup>

#### KMBC

Reverdy Mullins and Allen Smith at KMBC remembered less comfortable rests. "We were on duty for three days around the clock," Smith said, "catching what naps we could either down at the station or out in a car someplace." Mullins agreed: "I suppose we got maybe two hours sleep a night. I didn't change clothes for two and a half, maybe three days. It was incredible to see such devastation! Of course we were on; we just interrupted all [regular programming]. The programming just went to hell at that time. We were cutting in and cutting in and cutting in."<sup>55</sup>

Smith recalled normal programming at KMBC "was just shot." And, as news director Dorsey exclaimed when asked if there was an increase in news coverage during the flood, "Oh my yes, yes, because you had—especially in the very early hours of the flood—some real danger, plus the necessity of where they [citizens] could go and what they couldn't do, where water was being shut off and where they were losing power and all these other things that were happening."<sup>56</sup>

At 2 a.m. on the first night of the flood, KMBC's special events director Jim Burke broadcast an appeal for volunteers and trucks to help fight the flood. With similar appeals from other stations (see WDAF, above), 3,000 volunteers responded.<sup>57</sup>

The five-member KMBC news staff logged more than 450 working hours during the twin disasters.<sup>58</sup>

Radio reports of the flood were not without imagery, as Smith explained:

*I think that was one of the arts of radio broadcasting. The Edward R. Murrow approach, with the visual word picture, a word picture of what's going on. Bill Griffith [KMBC] won a*

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<sup>53</sup> Harold Mack Grove, Interview, June 20, 1986.

<sup>54</sup> "Flood Coverage," *Broadcasting*, 23 July 1951: 17 and 28.

<sup>55</sup> Reverdy Mullins, Interview, July 29, 1987 in *William James Ryan (1940- ) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.

<sup>56</sup> Claude Dorsey, Interview, July 7, 1985.

<sup>57</sup> "Radio-TV Flood Coverage," *Broadcasting*, 30 July 1951.

<sup>58</sup> "Radio-TV Flood Coverage," *Broadcasting*, 30 July 1951. Claude Dorsey, Reverdy Mullins, Jack Benton, Hal Harvey, Allen D. Smith and William E. Griffith, Jr. Dorsey was a University of Kansas School of Journalism graduate who was hired from Transradio News Service in 1939. On air, Dorsey was known as John Farmer, and Mullins was Henry Wheat, names Arthur Church owned and thought would have credibility with rural listeners.

*national Sigma Delta Chi award for his work on the flood. You had to work a hell of a lot harder than you do now because you did have to keep the listener in mind and actually describe what was going on at that time.... The flood had so many ramifications. People driven out of their homes, the pollution down in the stock yards area with dead animals floating around in the back waters, a potential for some real disease manifestations. A tie-up of traffic; all the trafficways were snarled.<sup>59</sup>*

KMBC news reporters and writers claimed to have checked details so carefully that no report needed a retraction. Col. L.J. Lincoln, District Engineer, U.S. Corps of Engineers commended KMBC's responsible reporting, crediting reporters with making frequent calls to his office "to verify reports and refute unfounded rumors."<sup>60</sup> KMBC's Griffith (hired in 1944 to replace John Cameron Swayze), won his SDX, Distinguished Service Award for Radio Newswriting.<sup>61</sup>

In spite of WDAF's close proximity to the fires and WDAF-TV's attempt to televise it, KMBC's Mullins scooped all the other stations on this one.

*Bill Griffith knew Kansas City like the back of his hand. And the morning of Friday, June the 13<sup>th</sup>, when everything cut loose, that morning I was over on Quality Hill watching and I was calling in. I think I was probably down there at 6 o'clock in the morning. Bill had his maps and he says, "If that levee goes, here's where that water will go." Like an engineer, he says "It's gonna this and that and that and that [pointing to the map]." So I set up a watch from this place and about late [morning] before noon, all of a sudden there were two big explosions. That was the oil tanks down by WDAF. I stepped right inside to a phone inside the Quality Hill Towers and they patched me in and I described it. It was right in WDAF's backyard and we beat them!<sup>62</sup>*

After receiving phone calls from suburban listeners reporting falling water pressure, KMBC also took credit for influencing Kansas City, Missouri, city officials to re-impose restrictions on the household use of water after an initial ban had been lifted.<sup>63</sup>

Smith believed KMBC radio reporters did an excellent job reporting the flood and explained why: "This related back to the professionalism of the staff at that time. All of us at KMBC were trained journalists and all of us had cut our eye-teeth on radio news, word news rather than visual news and did a bang-up job."<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Allen D. Smith, Interview, June 18, 1986. KCMO reporter Harold Mack Grove, one of the first broadcast journalism graduates of the University of Missouri School of Journalism, also acknowledged the influence of the "Ed Murrow syndrome" on radio journalists in those days. (Harold Mack Grove, Interview, June 20, 1986.)

<sup>60</sup> "Radio-TV Flood Coverage," *Broadcasting*, 30 July 1951.

<sup>61</sup> "SDX Awards," *Broadcasting*, 12 May 1952: 78; "Journalism Awards Made by Fraternity," *New York Times*, 20 May 1952: 23; Barry Garron, "Broadcasters recall reporter Bill Griffith," *Kansas City Star*, 21 January 1988: 2D; KMBC advertisement. *Sponsor*, 5 May 1952: 89.

<sup>62</sup> Reverdy Mullins, Interview, July 29, 1987.

<sup>63</sup> "Radio-TV Flood Coverage," *Broadcasting*, 30 July 1951.

<sup>64</sup> Allen D. Smith, Interview, June 18, 1986.

## WHB

Although visual coverage of the flood is often credited with giving television a boost in Kansas City, and straight news reporting gave important timely information, reporting with a slightly different slant boosted the broadcasting career of an individual whose most enduring claim to fame was not as a broadcaster but as director of the Boys' Clubs of Kansas City (later renamed the Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Kansas City). Originally brought to Kansas City from Joplin by Mayor H. Roe Bartle to help work with socially disadvantaged youth, John Thornberry was a part-time WHB news reporter while working for the Boys' Club.

Like the other major stations, WHB went on an emergency schedule throughout the '51 flood emergency.<sup>65</sup>

A Yale-educated lawyer and a post-war penal reform activist in Missouri, Thornberry was a compassionate man moved by memories of his own unhappy childhood. "[As a child], I was experiencing relationships in life which were miserable and unhappy and I think that this made me recognize it in other people. I would see it going on and I would think, 'I wonder if there is anything I can do to relieve that pain.' That's the only way I can explain it to you."<sup>66</sup>

His news coverage of the human side of the flood reflected this same concern, allowing his reports to touch his listeners' feelings.

*I was doing news so I just went down to see what was going on. And when I got down there and saw how many homes had been wrecked and how many people were in a swamp situation and what was happening, why I hurried back to the radio microphone and told the story. Well, so much was happening and the tragedy that was going on I couldn't leave it and I had to stay with it and went right on through the night. And the next morning, a little after day light, I was plumb pooped and worn out; but the flood wasn't and I said I just have to go home to get some food and rest. And then coming home, coming around the park there, I saw these mothers, Mexicans and Negroes, sitting along there, holding babies; they were the remnants of the flood. So I get home bawlin' and I come in and [my wife] says, "What in the world is the matter with you?" and I said, "It was more than I could stand seeing what had happened to these people."<sup>67</sup>*

He rested and returned to report more, as did reporters from other stations. WHB had no remote facility for him, so he had to go to the studio for each broadcast, and then return to the scene.

Thornberry's flood reports described the human side of the tragedy, especially, as he later recalled, loss of property and housing for low income families living in the "Bottoms," the flood plain of the two rivers.

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<sup>65</sup> "Flood Coverage," *Broadcasting*, 23 July 1951: 17 and 28.

<sup>66</sup> John Thornberry, Interview, July 10, 1989 in *William James Ryan (1940- ) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.

<sup>67</sup> John Thornberry, Interview, July 10, 1989.

A former Yale classmate at Mutual Broadcasting, which carried Thornberry's WHB news feeds, offered him a higher paying network job as a result of his reports. Instead, WHB President Donald Dwight Davis hired Thornberry full-time.<sup>68</sup>

### KPRS

There is little extant evidence of how independent music-and-news stations covered the flood.

Murray Nolte, who had just graduated from the University of Kansas City, was a disc jockey at KPRS during its short life in suburban Olathe.<sup>69</sup> KPRS was his first full-time job in commercial radio. "KPRS was a small radio station in Olathe ... owned by some local merchants and people who were in the Olathe area. It was one of the few radio stations at that time [that operated] as a music station," Nolte explained. "That was in 1951."<sup>70</sup>

"Bill Sutherland was station manager at that time. A fellow named Berry Ross was an announcer. The three of us really did most of the air work.... They [also] had an announcer named Jim Ware." Nolte worked two shifts at KPRS, seven days a week, 12-hours a day. It wasn't until the flood that Nolte even realized KPRS had a Johnson County audience. "I always got the feeling, working in the mornings, that no one was listening," Nolte confessed.<sup>71</sup>

*But when the '51 floods came, we felt being not a part of the metropolitan area but still being very much affected by that, that we were a little bit frustrated by that because we didn't think we could help. But when the call went out from the sheriff's office in Johnson County that they needed boats—they were doing some evacuating in the Merriam area, I think—we just made an announcement on the air and we had forty calls within a very short time of people offering boats for use! Which made us feel a little better.<sup>72</sup>*

### SUMMARY

With the 1951 Flood came a disruption of regular radio and television programming in Kansas City as broadcasters performed surveillance and public service roles for the community. Station operation procedures and news reporting roles developed during this news event which taught broadcasters how to perform these duties for similar future events.

Oral history interviews and other reports help describe how communicators, collectively as broadcast organizations and individually as news reporters, operated

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<sup>68</sup> John Thornberry, Interview, July 10, 1989.

<sup>69</sup> KPRS was soon sold to a partnership consisting of husband-and-wife Ed and Psyche Pate, and Andrew R. "Skip" Carter, and moved to Kansas City, MO as Missouri's first station licensed to African American owners.

<sup>70</sup> Murray Nolte, Interview, May 29, 1986 in *William James Ryan (1940- ) Papers* (KC0457), WHMC-KC.

<sup>71</sup> Murray Nolte, Interview, May 29, 1986.

<sup>72</sup> Murray Nolte, Interview, May 29, 1986.

under these emergency conditions. From these sources we can identify (a) procedures by which stations responded to the emergency, (b) news reporting roles and activities, and (c) some miscellaneous consequences beneficial to stations. Here is a summary of these:

- A. Stations adapted to the emergency for the good and welfare of the community while entertainment programs became secondary:
- combined non-news staff with news reporters to provide more complete coverage;
  - interrupted regular programming with news bulletins;
  - cooperated with Civil Defense and Army Corps of Engineers issuing warnings and requests for volunteers and equipment;
  - cooperated with city governments, providing information about traffic and escape routes, polluted water supplies;
  - cooperated with the private sector, announcing business closings and emergency commuter routes;
  - served as a feedback link from citizens to city officials, resulting in official re-imposition of water pollution warnings;
  - Radio scooped TV with its ability to provide verbal descriptions of scenes at night and in heavy smoke which could not be televised or filmed due to darkness.
- B. Local newscasters emphasized first-hand coverage:
- used direct telephone reports, broadcast live;
  - flew in airplanes to film and survey the disaster;
  - risked danger and arrest to report directly from the flooding river itself;
  - when darkness of night and heavy smoke hindered good video communication, verbally skillful radio newscasters provided accurate, descriptive coverage;
  - reported human interest aspects of the flood;
  - worked long, exhausting hours around the clock until the emergency ended;
  - set up surveillance posts along the flood route;
  - predicted where the next news events would occur and moved to these spots;
  - covered the President's visit to the disaster;
  - fed wire services and networks with disaster news, broadening national awareness of the emergency and helping make Congress and the White

House aware of the disaster's scope and seriousness, hastening disaster relief;

- C. Miscellaneous consequences were self-enhancing:
- helped verify audience;
  - established the lead television reporter as the city's first TV star;
  - taught lessons and set precedents for future disaster coverage;
  - earned individual newscasters national journalism awards and prestige for their stations;
  - may have contributed to increase in local sales of home television receivers.

### CONCLUSION

Kansas City broadcasters adapted to their first major natural disaster by programming for the good and welfare of the community. Radio listeners heard regular bulletins advising them of emergency procedures. TV viewers saw a new dimension of this medium in their communal lives—it was not just for fun anymore. As Harold DeGood said of WDAF-TV's flood coverage, "That was the thing that television was designed to do—to show people what was happening."<sup>73</sup>

Oral history interviews and other reports indicate that no station followed business-as-usual but spent considerable effort devising and implementing ways to cover the twin disasters of July 1951. Although they had few precedents to guide them, years of general broadcasting experience and, in some cases, professional journalism education and experience allowed procedures to be developed which would become standard in gathering and reporting future disaster news.

Live and timely broadcast coverage of these events heightened public awareness of broadcast journalists' value in the rapid diffusion of vital information throughout the metropolitan community. It was the maturing of local electronic news. Kansas City broadcast journalists, engineers and photographers would be showing people more tragedies in this decade, including an even more violent conflagration in the same vicinity and a killer tornado in suburban Ruskin Heights. The 1951 Flood was their initiation ceremony.

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<sup>73</sup> Harold DeGood, Interview, July 1, 1985.

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