

SIGN-ON

The First 50 Years of
WREC Radio



SIGN-ON

The First 50 Years of WREC Radio

*Published September 22, 1972, in Memphis, Tennessee,
on the 50th anniversary of the founding of WREC's parent
station, KFNG, in Coldwater, Mississippi.*



HOYT B. WOOTEN
1893-1969

WREC CHRONOLOGY

1922

On Sept. 22, KFNG begins broadcasting from S. D. Wooten Sr. home in Coldwater, Miss., on 10-watt battery-powered transmitter under license issued to Hoyt B. Wooten for first commercial radio station in state.

1925

New Hotel Peabody opened in Memphis, with Wooten's Radio-Electric Company, retail radio shop, as one of first lobby tenants.

1926

In September, KFNG moves to Whitehaven and incorporates as WREC, increasing power to 200 watts on frequency of 600 kilocycles, sharing frequency with WOAN in Lawrenceburg, Tenn., established in 1921 as first commercial station in Tennessee.

1928

On July 19, Hoyt Wooten granted permit, one of first six in U.S., to build and operate closed-circuit experimental Composite V. T. television transmitter.

1929

April 23, WREC opens new \$25,000 studios in basement of Hotel Peabody; increases power to 500, then 1000 watts; buys out WOAN, becoming WREC-WOAN until permission granted a year later to drop WOAN call letters. Becomes basic affiliate of CBS on Oct. 15.

1935

Construction begun on new transmitter at Payne Ave. and Hindman Ferry Road.

1936

New transmitter with twin 420-foot towers dedicated on April 26; power increased in June to 5000 watts daytime and 1000 watts night.

1937

From Jan. 24 to Feb. 13, WREC cancels all regular programming to remain on air constantly with flood reports and flood relief messages.

1940

Remodeled and enlarged \$60,000 studios dedicated in Hotel Peabody in November.

1941

On Aug. 28, power increased to 5000 watts night as well as day.

1952

WREC applies for TV Channel 3; so does Plough's WMPS.

1955

On May 27, FCC unanimously grants Channel 3 to WREC.

1956

On Jan. 1, WREC-TV begins regular programming.

1962

On Dec. 31, sale of WREC stations to Cowles Communications, Inc., is announced.

1967

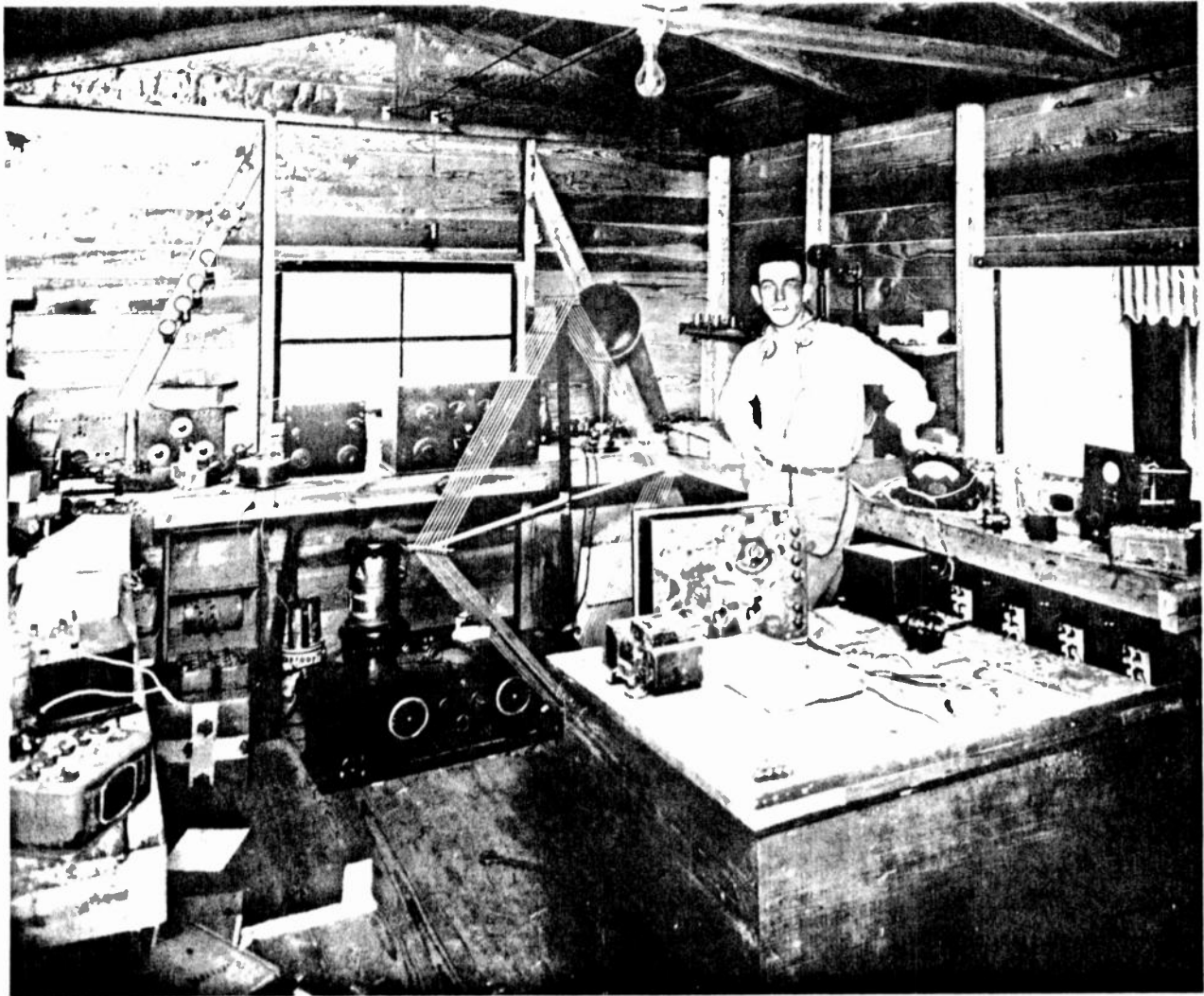
On March 1, WREC-FM goes on air with stereo music.

1969

On Dec. 6, Hoyt Wooten dies at home at age of 76.

1971

On Oct. 15, sale of WREC-TV to New York Times is approved by FCC. Cowles devotes full attention to WREC AM and FM.



In the transmitter section of the KFNG studio building, pioneer broadcaster Hoyt Wooten stands with earphones resting around his neck, amid the primitive paraphernalia which led to the founding and development of today's WREC Radio.

WREC 'ON THE MAP'—HOW IT GOT, AND STAYS, THERE

Radio Station WREC-AM, which marked its 50th birthday on September 22, 1972, and WREC-FM, are uniquely the children of the late Hoyt B. Wooten, one of America's most visionary and single-minded radio pioneers.

Beginning with a home-made 10-watt transmitter powered by Willard storage batteries in Coldwater, Miss., in 1922, Wooten carved a communications kingdom out of thin air, creating radio and television stations whose voices were, a half-century later, as familiar as nextdoor neighbors'. To hundreds of thousands in the 63-county area it serves, it is hard to remember when WREC-AM wasn't there. But like all living things, WREC had to be born and had to grow to its present stature.

The chapters that follow tell the story of the station's birth and development, a story inextricably linked with the life of Hoyt Wooten, because for 47 years WREC WAS his life. But in order to understand how far WREC has come, let us first see where it is today.

WREC rose to its preeminent position in Mid-South radio by investing audaciously and imaginatively in two things—the growth of radio as a means of mass communication, and the growth of Memphis as the communications, marketing and cultural capital of the Mid-South, that amorphous area on both sides of the Mississippi River which includes West Tennessee, northwestern Alabama, northern Mississippi, eastern Arkansas, southeastern Missouri, the southern tip of Illinois, and southwestern Kentucky.

In both investments, WREC put its mouth where its money was—dynamically demonstrating the value of radio communication, and giving voice to the virtues and needs of Mid-South people, to the quality and value of their products, and to the events and essences of the world outside.

It was, as no less biased observer than the then editor of its communications competitor, The Memphis Press-Scimitar, declared, the station's extraordinary public service during the cataclysmic 1937 flood of the Ohio and Mississippi river valleys that "put WREC on

the map." And it is the same kind of vision and enterprise on the part of the station's management that have kept it there.

By 1972, news and information had made WREC the station "where people who want to know come first." WREC's emphasis on news and information began even before the deluge of 1937. In September of 1935, it became the first radio station in Memphis and the third in the entire United States to subscribe to the full wire news service of the United Press Associations.

WREC's remarkable record of service during the 1937 flood, when it remained on the air continuously for 572 hours, cancelling all regular commercial programming, is dealt with more fully in a later chapter. Not only beaming flood coverage to the nation via the Columbia Broadcasting System and to the world via the British Broadcasting Corporation, the station quickly and efficiently set up a shortwave network which gave the Red Cross and other relief agencies their only contact with many isolated areas in the flood's path for days. Afterward, WREC was hailed for its accomplishments by certificates of appreciation from both the Memphis Junior Chamber of Commerce and the National Jaycees.



Chief engineer S. D. Wooten Jr. of WREC handles controls for a remote broadcast by a British Broadcasting Company correspondent from London (at microphone) on Memphis levee being sandbagged by emergency workers.

The station's leadership in disseminating news was further solidified during World War II when it devoted countless hours to the broadcast reports of the great CBS news team, beginning with the late Edward R. Murrow's memorable transmissions from London, signaled by the tolling of Big Ben, during the dark days and nights of 1939-40, before the United States entered the war.

An early example of public affairs programming, for which WREC was rewarded with a certificate of merit for community service from the National Research Bureau in 1940, was its series of broadcasts directly from the State Penitentiary in Nashville, in which prisoners told their own crime-doesn't-pay stories.

The 1960s were important in the development of WREC's adult-oriented programming, successfully implemented in the face of competing formats framed for the rock-and-roll generation. One of the most successful of the station's talk shows was conceived in crisis on the day Col. John Glenn made the first U.S. earth-orbiting space flight, Feb. 20, 1962. A fire in the Hotel Peabody caused a power outage which knocked the station off the air. Engineers were able to rig up batteries to power the microphones—but not the record turntables—and get the station back on the air. For the next three and a half hours, John Powell, the announcer on duty, and Fred Cook, who normally followed him with an afternoon record show, sat in the darkened, below-ground-level studio and talked, reporting on the fire and interviewing firemen and hotel employees. Later, the program, dubbed the Zero Hour and spiced with interviews and light-hearted commentary on events both trenchant and trivial, became a cornerstone of the station's daily programming. In 1972, although Cook had become first program director and then station manager of WREC, the Zero Hour remained one of the station's programming plusses.

Local news coverage was expanded in 1965, when WREC launched its RECAP news, sports and weather program from 5 to 6 p.m. daily. RECAP went to a full 90 minutes in 1968 and to a solid two hours in 1972. In February, 1966, a similar information segment, SURVEY, with rush-hour traffic reports added, debuted in the 6:45 to 8:15 morning slot. Rostrum, a weekly

program of interviews with "people who have something to say to the people of Memphis and the Mid-South," began in July, 1968, expanding later from 25 minutes to a half-hour.

Typical of WREC's public affairs programming was its installation in 1968 of direct lines into the City Council and County Court chambers to permit direct taping of their meetings, and its cancellation of regular programming to broadcast, live and in their entirety, public meetings of the Board of Education and of black groups responsible for "Black Monday" school boycotts in the fall of 1969. More informal discussion of public issues is provided on the Tynes Line, telephone-talk show launched in the spring of 1972 with Allen Tynes as host.

Of course, WREC's role in the community is not merely that of conscientious informant; it has also been the Mid-South's pleasant companion for 18 hours every day since 1929 and for 24 hours a day since September, 1965. From soon after it moved into the hotel in 1929 until the end of the big band era, late evening orchestra pick-ups from the Hotel Peabody Skyway and Plantation Roof were popular traditions, making the station, the hotel and Memphis all household words across the Mid-South and, via CBS, the nation. WREC's Junior Theater of the Air, with its skillful and engrossing dramatizations of children's stories under the direction of Julia Marie Ries, had a 10-year run. The Peabody Concert Orchestra, conducted by Noel Gilbert, brightened the Sunday dinner hour for a number of years, and the Saturday afternoon Metropolitan Opera broadcasts are a continuing tradition on the station. Other live music shows produced by WREC spurred the careers of Dale Evans, Kay Starr, Anita Kerr and William Ching, and nurtured the Mid-South affinity for country and Western music for decades before the rest of the country started doing its own twang.

Just as WREC has reflected the changing life styles and values of the citizens it serves, so it has led them in important social change. It was the first non-ethnic station in the city to employ a black announcer (Hank Lockhart, hired in April, 1966) and in 1972 was engaged in one of the most extensive minority employment programs among Mid-South stations.

In the 43 years between WREC's move to Memphis and its 50th anniversary, it contributed significantly to the impressive strides made by the city and its trade area. WREC's constant promotion of Memphis as the hub of the seven-spoked Mid-South wheel helped it grow from a population of 253,143 in the 1930 census to 623,530 in 1970, and helped increase its annual bank deposits from \$106-million in 1929 to \$2.1-billion in 1970.

Hoyt B. Wooten, founder of the WREC



Hoyt's daughters, Betty Mae (left) and Arabia, pose in front of the S. D. Wooten Sr., home in Coldwater, Miss., where KFNG, first Mississippi commercial station and parent of WREC, began broadcasting from the front parlor in 1922.

stations, lived to see them far outstrip his first modest dream, which was simply to send his voice from Coldwater, Miss., to Senatobia, six miles away, without poles or wires. To a young man whose father had installed the first telephones in Coldwater, this seemed a remarkable accomplishment indeed. Yet his much more far-reaching success, which brought him a personal fortune of several million dollars, was no surprise to Hoyt Wooten. As one of his oldest living associates in the enterprise said in 1972: "He saw the end from the beginning."

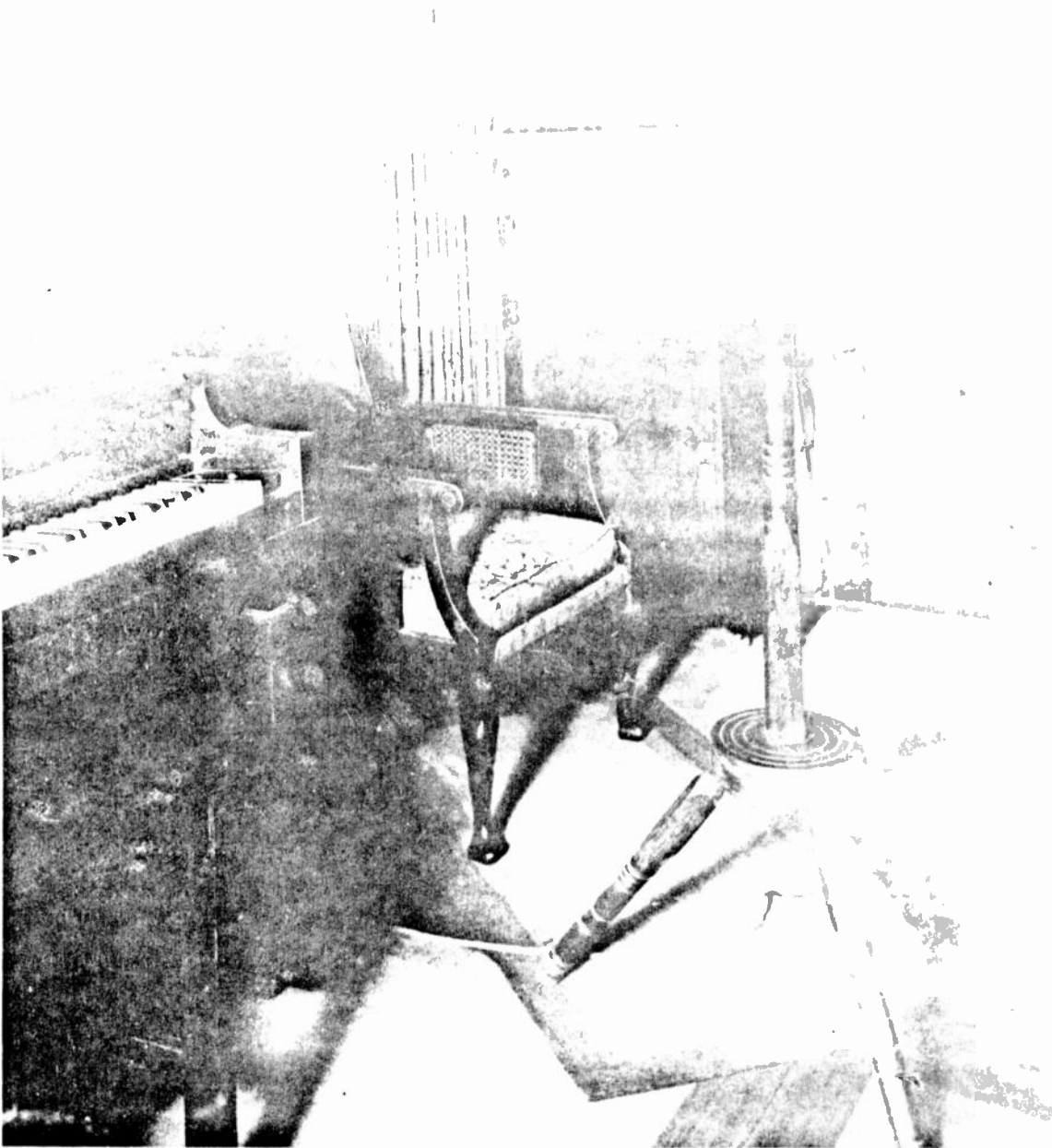
His success was, however, a surprise to almost everybody else in his old home town. Like most visionaries, Wooten was considered somewhat eccentric by his neighbors when he first started fiddling with radio in 1919—so

much so that his father, the late S. D. Wooten Sr., begged him not to go around talking about his new hobby. No doubt the elder Wooten still smarted from the remarks which had greeted Hoyt's boyhood experiment with a home-made glider, fashioned from cane poles and old bed-sheets. The townsfolk had had a good laugh when the 15-year-old boy took off in 1908 from the town water tank, fluttered momentarily, then crashed ignominiously to the ground below.



Hoyt B. Wooten in his cadet's uniform at Mississippi Agricultural and Mechanical College (now Mississippi State University) in 1915. A young man in a hurry, Hoyt got his electrical engineering degree in three years.

But Hoyt Wooten was to have the last laugh. He would soar across the airwaves, on the wings of magically transmitted sounds—sounds which would continue to challenge and fascinate him to the end of his days. And when his own personal sign-off should come in his beautiful Greenlawn estate in Whitehaven, within easy and impressive view of the Highway 51 which his former Coldwater neighbors had to travel in and out of Memphis, he would leave a fitting memorial. Most radio call letters have no real significance, but WREC is an exception to the rule. Its call letters came from the name of the retail radio store Hoyt and his brothers operated in Hotel Peabody in Memphis in the mid-1920s. And to those who know, the Wooten name is forever recalled in the call letters WREC—Wooten's Radio-Electric Company.



Player piano, gramophone, and microphone on a wooden stand are outstanding features of the frame studio built by the Wooten brothers in 1924 in the front yard of the Sneed residence, across the street from their parents' home in Coldwater.



Player piano, gramophone, and microphone on a wooden stand are outstanding features of the frame studio built by the Wooten brothers in 1924 in the front yard of the Sneed residence, across the street from their parents' home in Coldwater.

THE STUDIO IN THE PARLOR

The Coldwater, Miss., in which S. D. Wooten Sr., reared his family of 10 children now lies beneath the waters of Arkabutla Lake. The whole town, water tower and all, moved a mile to higher ground in 1942 as the government reservoir rose to inundate the lowlands between Beartrail and Hicaholahala Creeks. But in the fall of 1920, the shady lanes and comfortable homes of old Coldwater still clustered around the Illinois Central Railroad tracks as they had since 1856.

In the attic of the S. D. Wooten home late one evening, S. D. Jr. huddled over the radio receiving set he and his brother Hoyt had made with their own hands. Deftly and determinedly, he twisted simultaneously the three tuning dials, wishing for an extra hand. Across the street in the room they rented in the Sneed residence, Hoyt and his wife Floy Mae had already retired. For several weeks now, S. D. and Hoyt had been trying without success to bring in a new radio station they had read about in Pittsburgh, Pa., KDKA. There were no assigned frequencies for radio stations in those days, and signals drifted all across the dial.

On this particular night, although Hoyt had given up and gone across the street to bed, S. D. still sat in pajamas and bare feet, pressing the earphones tighter against his head and slowly turning the knobs, almost feeling the mysterious, exciting radio waves with his fingers.

SCREEEEEECH! SQUAWK! EEEEE-
eeeeorrrriiP! AAAAHorrruu!

And then suddenly the words came through: "... is KDKA, the Westinghouse Station in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. ..."

S. D. dropped the headphones and ran downstairs and across the street in his bare feet, yelling as he pounded on the Sneeds' door: "Hoyt! Hoyt! I got it! I got it!"

By the time Hoyt pulled on his pants and rushed back to the Wootens' attic with his brother, the signal was lost, but they brought it in again the next night and Hoyt B. Wooten, at 27, heard his first radio voice transmission.

That was the beginning of the dream.

Hoyt had already been operating his own amateur radio transmitter with the call of 5RK

for a year when he first experienced the thrill of hearing the human voice carried on the airwaves. The electrically tingling dots and dashes of the Morse Code, which he had first heard in the U. S. Army Aviation Service, as it was then called, in 1917 and '18, had an excitement all their own. They carried information, urgently. Even before he and S. D. built their own receiver and transmitter in the attic, they had gone down to the railroad station on summer nights and written out Morse Code dispatches covering Jess Willard and Jack Dempsey heavyweight boxing championship fights, and read them to their buddies.

But the human voice coming over the air from far away—that was something else. There was the sound of the future in that.



S. D. Wooten Sr., about 1940.

In the meantime, Hoyt, with a wife, had a living to earn. With 10 children in the S. D. Wooten family, everybody had to pull an oar to keep the clan financially afloat. S. D. Sr. was involved in as many as 20 different jobs and enterprises at a time. He was alternately mayor and alderman and president of the school board. He installed the first telephone in Coldwater in 1907, and became general manager of Southern Bell's Coldwater, Hernando and Senatobia exchanges. He established Coldwater's first electric

light system, ran the town barbershop, sold insurance, and was the town undertaker. By his first wife, the widowed Mrs. Lorena Lewis (who brought two sons, Sam and Jim, to their union), he had three children of his own—Hoyt, the oldest, Hollis, and Zenie. When Lorena died, S. D. married her sister, Mrs. Betty Cooper, also widowed, and welcomed her son Eldon into the family, making a total of six children. To these, the father added four more of his own—Odessa, S. D. Jr., Foster (Bud) and Roy—making a grand total of 10 children to provide for.

The boys of the family cut hair, took their turns on the Coldwater telephone switchboard at night, and strung wire during the day to help out, but other enterprises were necessary, too. Hoyt, who had got his electrical engineering degree from Mississippi Agricultural and Mechanical College at Starkville (now Mississippi State University) in three years by persuading the Dean to let him skip the freshman year, did some electrical contracting and, with his father, operated small motion picture theaters in Coldwater, Hernando, Senatobia and Como, Miss. Thus Hoyt early became involved with what were to become the staples of radio and television: communications, through his father's telephone business, and entertainment, through motion pictures.

Hoyt's first involvement with motion pictures had come at Mississippi A. & M., where, besides running the YMCA barbershop, he had had the foresight to acquire the motion pictures rights for the campus, selecting and showing movies to the 1200 students enrolled there between 1912 and his graduation in 1915. And for a year after graduation, he had managed the road company of a mixed-media spectacular called "The Crisis," which combined a silent movie with live orchestra, speech and sound effects behind the screen that were, as Hoyt later explained modestly, "partially synchronized" with the on-screen action.

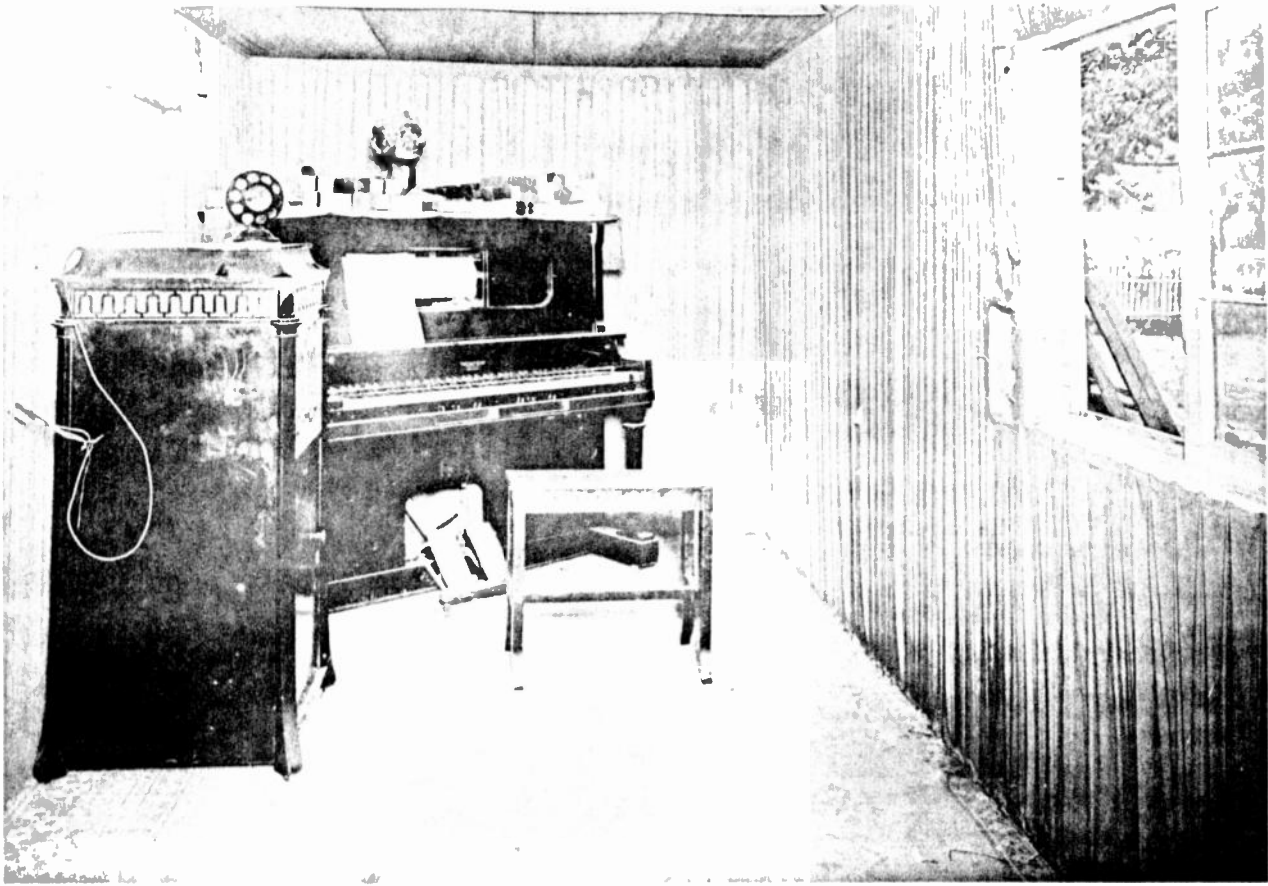
After his two years' voluntary duty with the Aviation Service during World War I, it was natural that Hoyt should get back into the movie business, though he could not have known then that he would one day be one of those responsible for bringing the movie theater into the home through television or that he

would acquire for his station one of the country's finest film libraries with more than 4000 titles.

But the dream of making the toy called radio into a viable medium of communication persisted. "Somehow or another I know," he told his father one evening, "that if I can talk over this thing from here to Senatobia—six miles—then radio beats anything we have now, because you don't have to raise poles and string wire." In September of 1922, Hoyt applied for and received from the U. S. Department of Commerce (there was no Federal Communications Commission then) permission to operate Mississippi's first commercial broadcasting station, using the call letters, KFNG.

Since money was a problem and manufactured equipment was hard to get, Hoyt and S. D. Jr., who had also studied electrical engineering at Mississippi A. & M., built their own transmitter. As a studio, they used the front parlor of the Wooten home which, from their first broadcast on Sept. 22, became a gathering place for family and friends, Memphis musicians who went down to perform on the Sunday afternoon broadcasts, and Memphis and North Mississippi businessmen who had bought announcements on the station and wanted to SEE what they were getting for their money. Later, whenever KFNG was actually on the air, there were also crowds on the Wootens' front lawn. Few people had radio receivers in those days, so Hoyt and S. D. Jr. rigged up speakers in the front yard, and people came from miles around to hear the broadcast at one remove from the front parlor.

One of the first performers on KFNG was Hoyt's half-sister Odessa (later Mrs. George Boyce of Memphis), who played the piano and sang. Two Memphis violinists, Harry Kahn and Nino Ravarino, were frequently featured on the station's Sunday afternoon musicales. A Coldwater friend of the Wooten boys, Alvin (Mule) Strickland, was always ready to step into the breach when none of the more highly trained musicians was available. The announcer would say, "And now Prof. Strickland will favor us with a selection," and Mule would pump out "Man in the Moon" or "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" on the player piano. Hoyt used Edison cylinder gramophone records on the air, too. There were no rules to govern the use of



Another view of the 1924 studio of KFNG. Note foot pedals and music roll of the player piano.

music on radio in those days, however, and a record was usually announced as "a selection by the Coldwater Hotel Orchestra." Local folk enjoyed the joke, and listeners in Seattle and Kansas City had no way of knowing that little Coldwater had no hotel.

All the brothers took a turn at the Western Electric carbon button microphone, but the most popular announcer on KFNG, as his fan mail attested, was their father, who referred to himself on the air as "your 92-year-old radio announcer." (Actually, he was only 55 when KFNG went on the air in 1922, but lived to the age of 80.)

Early advertisers on the Coldwater station included Bry's Department Store and the late W. R. Herstein's Electrical Supply Co., both Memphis firms. There may not have been many radio receivers among their customers in the early '20s, but Malcolm (Mac) Todd, who was later to become WREC's chief announcer, remembers bending over a home-made cat's whisker crystal set in his boyhood home in South

Memphis and picking up the Sunday afternoon broadcasts of KFNG. Mail received by the station attested to a wide if not very deep coverage. Pouring over the 8000 to 10,000 letters they sometimes received in a week, Hoyt and S. D. Jr. excitedly discovered that their 10-watt signal had been received by someone in every one of the 48 states.

But if radio were to fulfill the promise Hoyt Wooten saw for it, something had to be done about getting more receivers into more homes. With that in mind, Hoyt and S. D. began building radio receivers themselves and, when the new Peabody Hotel opened in Memphis in 1925, opened their Wooten's Radio-Electric Company in a small shop off the spacious lobby. For the next year, they divided their time between building radio sets and selling radio equipment in Memphis during the week and broadcasting over KFNG in Coldwater on Sundays. The choice of the magnificent new hotel for their radio shop was more portentous than they knew.

MOVING UP—TO WHITEHAVEN AND MEMPHIS

Whitehaven, Tenn., began as an Indian trader's lean-to in 1819. By 1972, it had become Memphis' largest suburb with a population estimated at 87,000. When Oliver P. Cobb, Sr. began urging Hoyt Wooten to move his little Coldwater, Miss., radio station there in the mid-1920s, he described it as "the garden spot of America." When Wooten made the move in September, 1926, it was actually a little country town clustered around U. S. Highway 51. Along the highway were a few stores, a school, and the homes of Cobb, E. W. Hale, and a few other leading citizens. Off the highway, there were rutted roads, fields and pastures, scattered farm houses and tenant shacks.

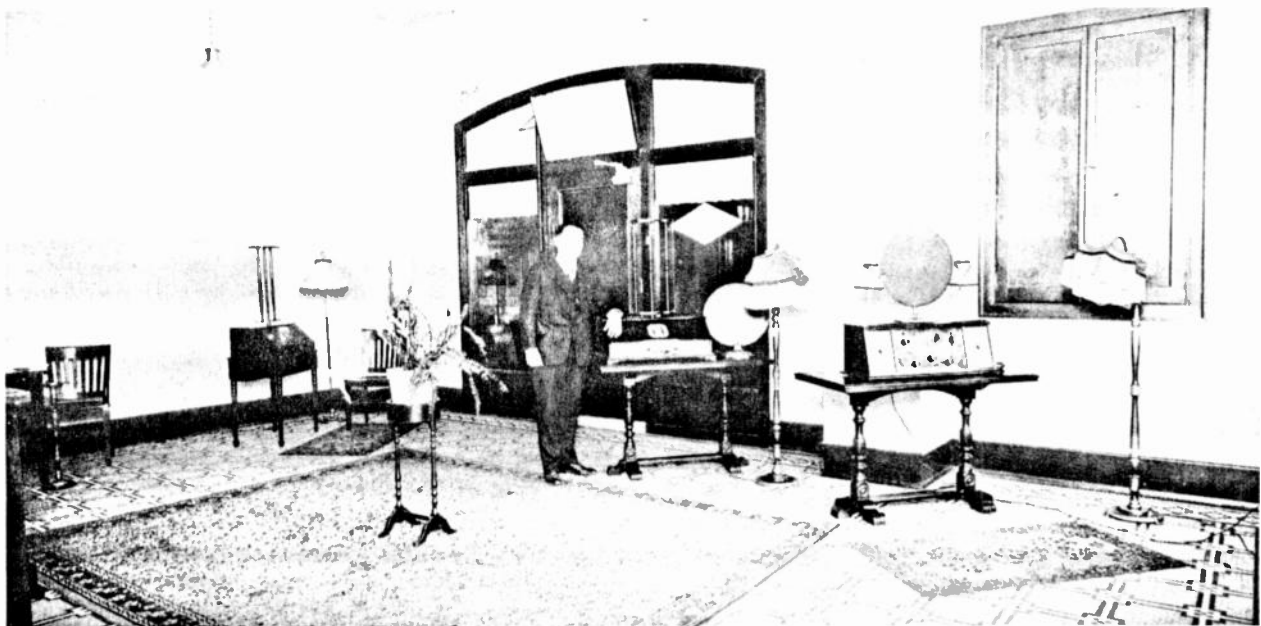
But Whitehaven was the doorstep leading up from Mississippi to Memphis, and Hoyt Wooten knew that it could become a garden spot, and decided he would like to be one of the gardeners. Besides, commuting back and forth between home and station in Coldwater and Wooten's Radio-Electric Company in Memphis was becoming a bother. He needed to get his businesses closer together.

Storekeeping was an honored occupation in Whitehaven. The area's first white settler, Benjamin Hilderbrand, a Vicksburg, Miss.,

trader who won the confidence and friendship of a Chickasaw tribe camped where Mill Branch and Raines Road now intersect, enlarged his lean-to into a trading-post. His son and grandson operated grocery stores near the original location after the town was founded and named for Col. White, an official of the Memphis & Tennessee Railroad, later absorbed by the Illinois Central. E. W. Hale Sr., later chairman of the Shelby County Commission and political partner of Memphis boss E. H. Crump, was also a storekeeper, and it was behind Hale's store that Hoyt Wooten erected his first radio transmitter on Tennessee soil.

A year before the move to Whitehaven, Dad Wooten, as part of his continuing effort to persuade Hoyt to "get out and go to work," had reclaimed the attic and front parlor of his home. The eviction had failed to knock KFNG off the air, however; Hoyt and S. D. Jr. had built a 12-by-15-foot frame building to house studio and transmitter in the yard of the Sneed residence across the street where Hoyt lived.

Dad Wooten's concern over his eldest son's livelihood was expressed in various ways. The radio station seemed to be taking more and more of Hoyt's time, but still seemed far from



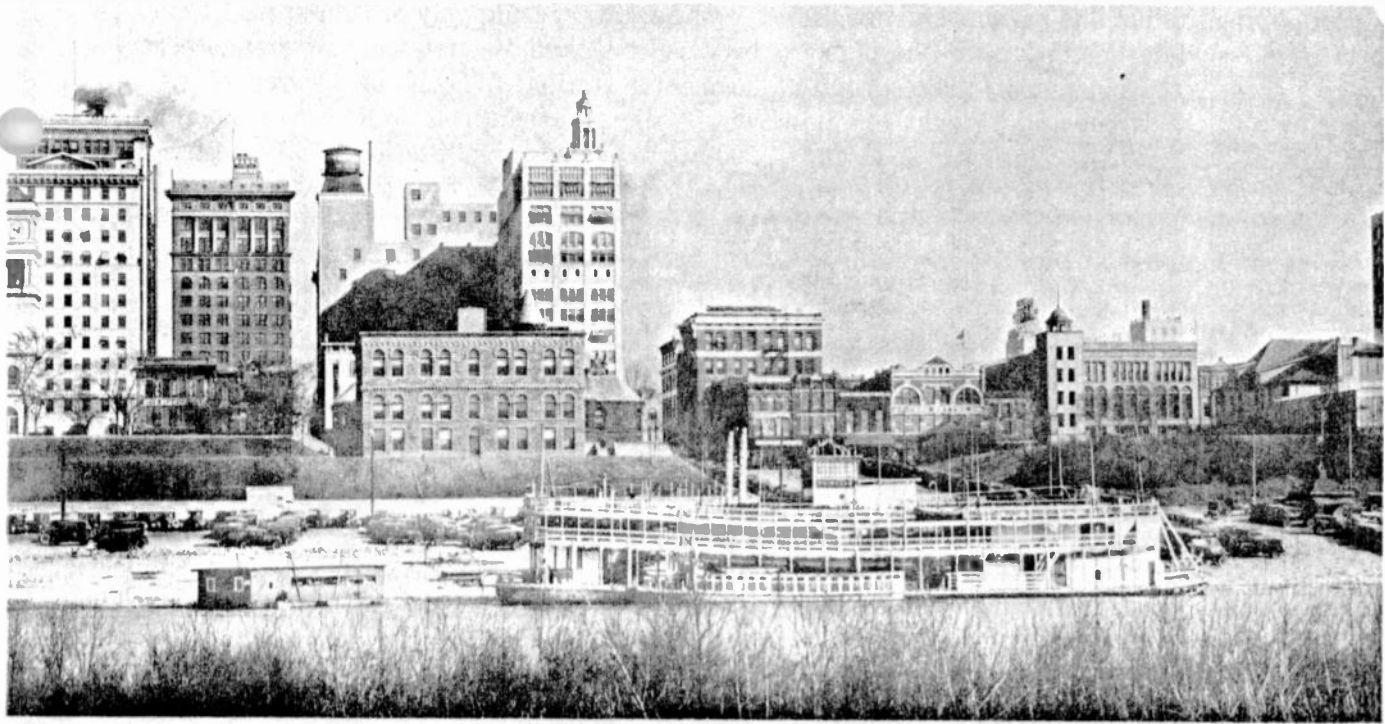
Wooten's Radio-Electric Company looked like this when Hoyt and S. D. Wooten Jr. opened it in 1925 off the lobby of the new Hotel Peabody. The Memphis Chamber of Commerce now occupies the former retail radio shop showroom. Note table model radio at right with lamp on either side of the separate, circular speaker. Salesman on the floor is unidentified.



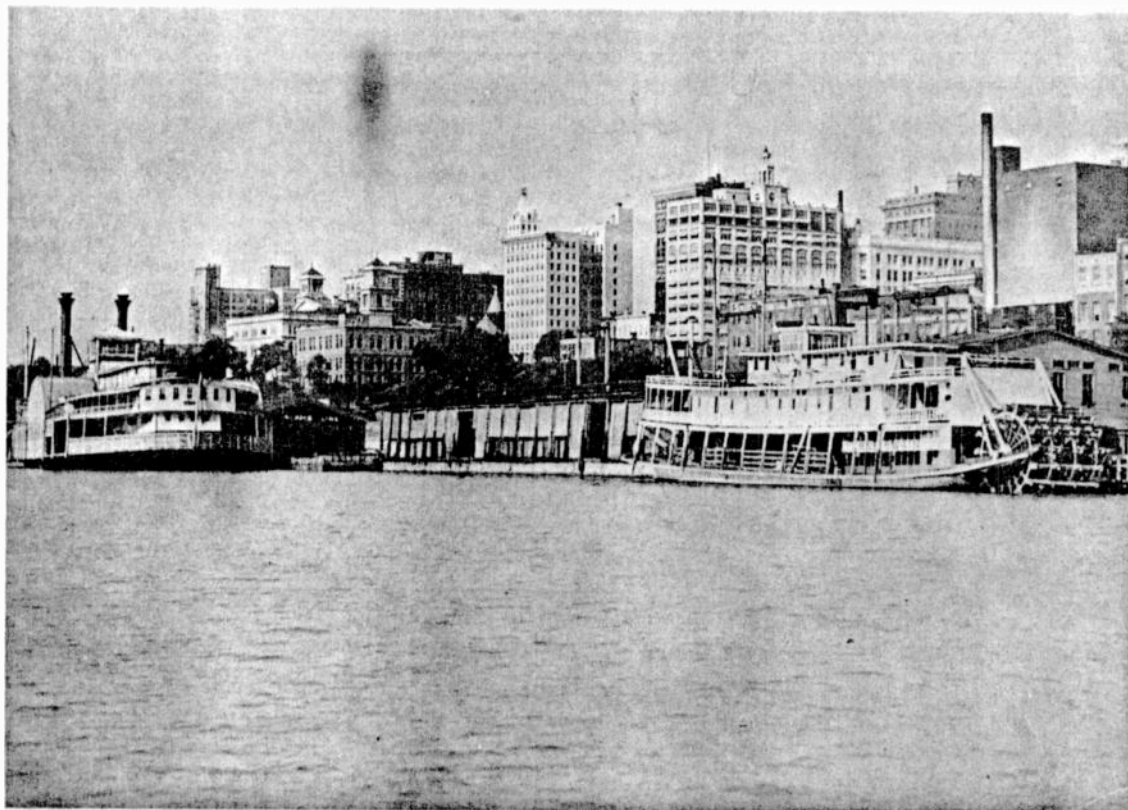
The Memphis skyline looked like this from Mud Island when WREC moved to Memphis in 1929.



Hotel Peabody and Wooten's Radio-Electric Company, a small retail radio store off the lobby, opened in Memphis in 1925. All those T-model Fords lining Union (right) and Third may have been borrowed from Hull-Dobbs, at left behind hotel, to make an impressive display for this grand opening photo.



Photo, showing the sternwheeler Princess tied up at the foot of Monroe was made three or four years earlier.



When WREC moved to Whitehaven in 1926, Memphis was still a river town. Tied up on the waterfront in this old photo are the famous sidewheeler, Kate Adams (left), which burned shortly afterward, in January, 1927, and the small sternwheeler, Verne Swain. The Kate was the third boat with that name to be destroyed by fire.

making a living for him and his wife and daughters. One day, while bustling from one of his jobs to another, the older gentleman encountered Hoyt on the street and brought up the usual subject. "I saw Mr. Durley over at the drug store," he said, "and he mentioned your bill. Now I think you're going to have to. . ."

Hoyt interrupted. "Don't worry, Dad," he said confidently. "I'm going to make plenty of money out of radio one of these days and pay everybody off."

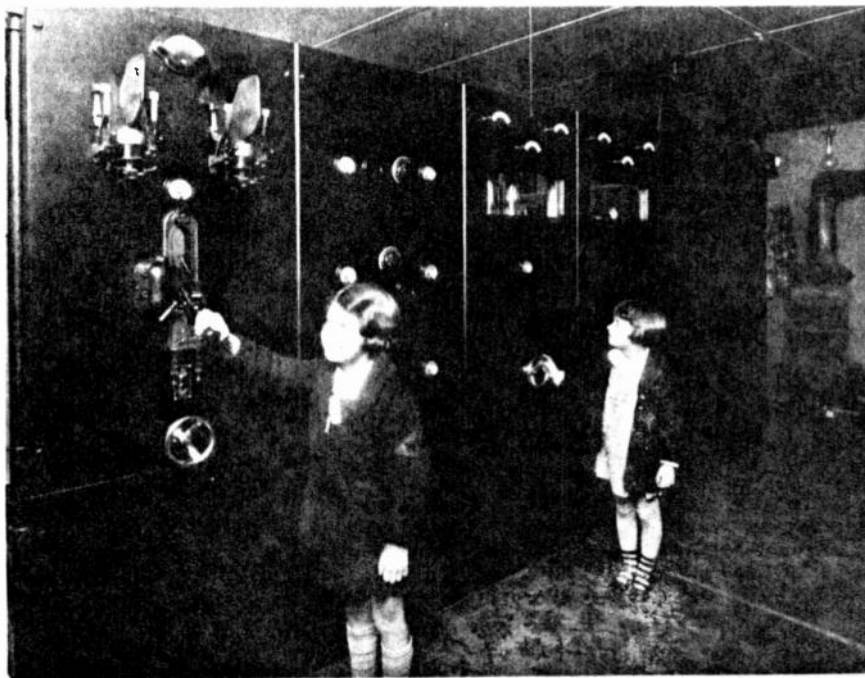
Moving the station to Whitehaven seemed a good first step in that direction. Whitehaven wanted a radio station, and being located there would open up the Memphis market. With no money to build, buy or rent studio space, Hoyt and S. D. simply dismantled their building on the Sneed lawn, loaded it onto a truck, and reassembled it on vacant ground between Will Hale's store and cotton gin. For their transmitter antenna they erected two telephone poles nearby, and they were back on the air.

The move from Mississippi into Tennessee required new incorporation, a new license and frequency, and new call letters. Thus it was that, as of September, 1926, WREC was incorporated and licensed to broadcast from 4 to 8 p.m. daily on 600 kilocycles (one of the lowest and, therefore, most efficient and desirable broadcast frequencies) from its little frame studio behind Hale's store.

The station could only broadcast part-time because it shared its frequency with another Tennessee station, WOAN, in Lawrenceburg, whose signal overlapped WREC's expanded 200-watt coverage area. Station WOAN, established in 1921, was the oldest commercial broadcasting station in Tennessee, as KFNG had been first in Mississippi, but it was a thorn in Wooten's side which was to limit WREC's growth for the next several years.



Transmitter technician Hank Schroeder makes a delicate adjustment on WREC's Whitehaven transmitter in the late '20s or early '30s.



Hoyt Wooten's daughters, Arabia (left) and Betty Mae, ceremonially throw the switches at WREC's original Whitehaven transmitter in 1927. Note the old iron stove at far right.

In 1928, the radio retail store in Hotel Peabody was foundering and Wooten found himself unable to continue paying the high hotel rent. He had begun discussing with James K. (Jimmy) Dobbs less desirable but more affordable space for the shop in a building the Ford dealer owned on Third Street, when he got a call from A. L. Parker, president of Memphis Hotel Company, which owned the Peabody. Parker was just back from a business trip to New York City, where he had stayed at the Hotel Taft. A forerunner of WCBS had its studios in the Taft, and Vincent Lopez's orchestra was broadcasting regularly from the hotel's Grill Room. Parker got into a conversation with the hotel manager, who asked him if he had a radio station in the new Peabody in Memphis. "Greatest thing in the world for business," he enthused to Parker. "People from all over the country come to the Taft because they know it from our Vincent Lopez broadcasts."

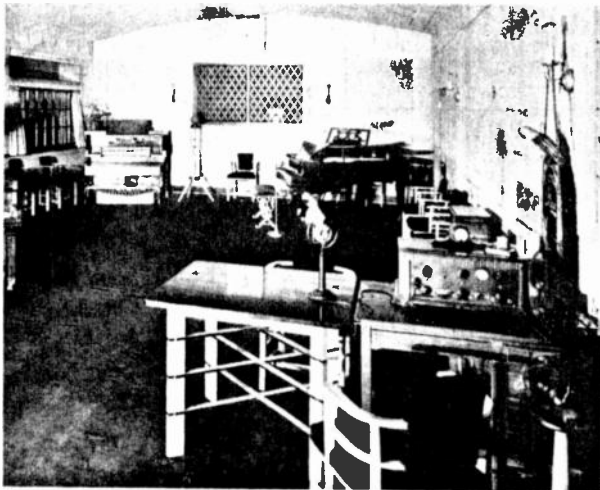
That was what Parker wanted to talk to Wooten about. "How would you like to move your studio from Whitehaven into the hotel?" he asked. "I'd like it fine," said Wooten, "but I can't afford it. Heck, I can't even afford to keep my Radio-Electric Company here. Can't pay the rent anymore."

"Oh, don't worry about that," the hotel man reassured him. "We'd like to have you, and I'm sure we can work something out." What he worked out was the \$25,000 conver-

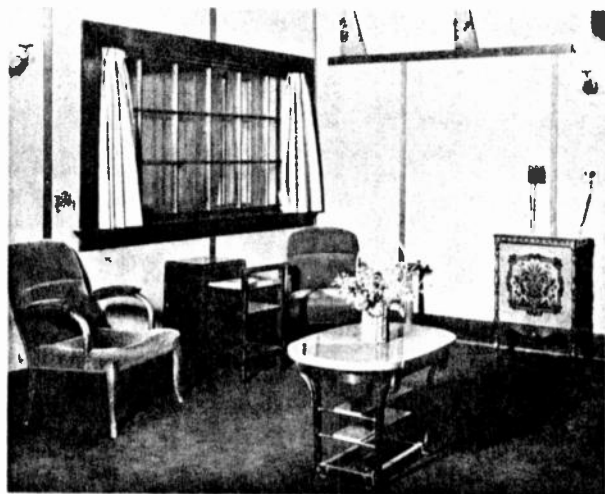
sion of a portion of the huge hotel basement into studios built to Wooten's specifications, but at no cost to him or the station, and a lease guaranteeing the station five years' free rent!

To make the most of his new opportunity, Wooten applied to the Federal Radio Commission for permission to increase WREC's power to 500 watts. At the same time, he spoke to the commissioner, Judge E. O. Sykes, about the problem of sharing the 600-kilocycle frequency with WOAN. With studios in Memphis' newest and finest hotel, he wanted to be able to broadcast more than the four hours a day allotted the station. Judge Sykes said, "Why don't you buy out the man in Lawrenceburg? He's just playing, anyway."

After his return from Washington, Wooten went to Lawrenceburg and negotiated the purchase of WOAN for \$9000—which, however, he did not have. When he got back to Memphis, he sought out his friend, the late J. W. Dilworth, a prominent businessman, and found him in the hospital. At Dilworth's bedside, Wooten urgently explained his need for a loan of \$9000. Could Mr. Dilworth possibly accommodate him? Quietly, the ailing gentleman opened the drawer of the bedside cabinet, withdrew his checkbook, and wrote out a personal check for the \$9000. Wooten was delighted. He would immediately get an attorney to write up a note for the loan. How long would Mr. Dilworth give him to repay it? How much interest would he charge?



View of WREC main studio in mid-'30s. In addition to two grand pianos, it contains radio organ, especially designed by Mrs. Frances Benden and Harry O. Nichols, studio control board and, alongside it, announcer's desk.



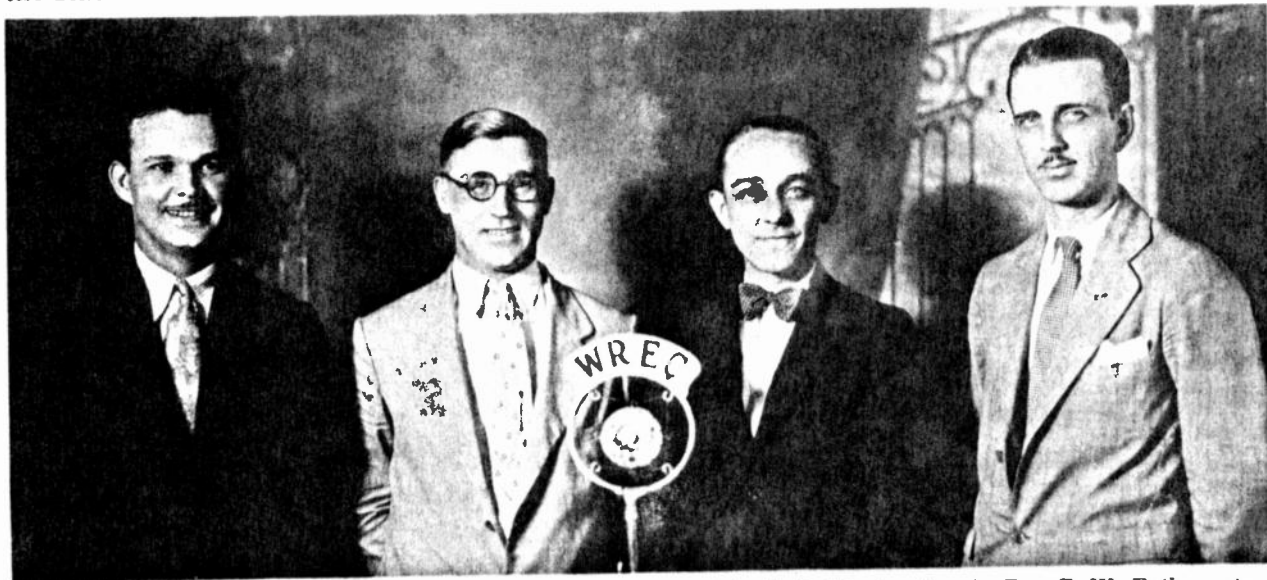
The reception room of WREC's new Hotel Peabody studios in 1929, which The Press-Scimitar described as "a study in modern interior decorating." The window at left looked into the main studio.

Dilworth raised a hand. "None of that is necessary," he said. "You're a man of your word. You'll repay me when you can." Within days, Wooten had sent a truck to Lawrenceburg to dismantle WOAN's equipment, load it up and bring it back to Memphis, some of it to be used in the new studios and in remodeling the Whitehaven transmitter. Now WREC-WOAN, as the FRC required that it be identified for the next year, could be on the air from its new Hotel Peabody studios as often and as long as it liked, and Wooten announced an immediate increase to six hours a day.

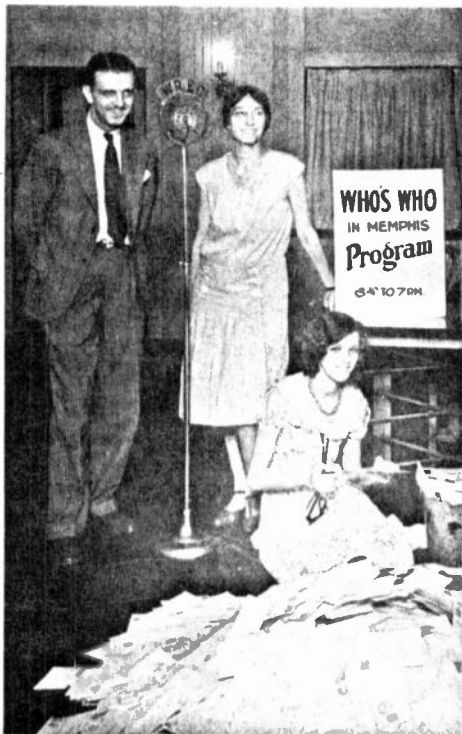
When WREC moved into its new Memphis studios from Whitehaven, there were already three radio stations in operation in the city. The oldest, WMC, the Commercial Appeal station, had opened on Jan. 20, 1923, and in 1927 had begun broadcasting a few National Broadcasting Company network programs on Tuesday and Sunday nights. The other two stations—WHBQ and WGBC (which later became WNBR and finally, when The Memphis Press-Scimitar bought it in 1937, WMPS)—were both launched in March of 1925. WGBC was owned and operated by First Baptist Church from the church building for two years, then as a combined operation with the Episcopal Church's WNBR until 1931 when the Chamberlin brothers, Francis and Mallory, bought the stations and consolidated them as WNBR.

WHBQ was founded by a Memphis dance man Thomas Thompson, a radio hobbyist who in 1930 turned over control of the station to the Wooten brothers, Hoyt and S. D. Jr. Although Thompson retained the presidency of the corporation, S. D. as vice president and Hoyt as secretary and treasurer set station policy and in 1931 named E. A. (Bob) Alburty, who had worked for Hoyt at WREC for three years, as general manager. Later, when the Federal Communications Commission made its duopoly rule, forbidding anyone from owning more than one station in a market, Hoyt sold his interest in the station to Alburty. At the time WREC moved into Memphis, neither WHBQ nor WNBR-WGBC had network service.

Thus on April 23, 1929, when the new Hotel Peabody studios opened, WREC's chief rival was WMC, with its intermittent NBC network shows. In anticipation of the station's new role in Memphis, Wooten arranged in December of 1928 to carry several Columbia Broadcasting System programs, but what he wanted was full-time network service. Full network affiliation was an expensive proposition, however, and Wooten didn't have the money to pay for the many unsponsored sustaining programs and for the station's share of telephone line leases to bring the programs into Memphis.



Studio portrait of WREC's announcing staff circa 1928. From left: S. D. Wooten Jr.; the Rev. F. W. Roth, pastor of Whitehaven Baptist Church, who broadcast an early morning devotional program under the name, "Doc Sunshine;" Buddy Hebert, and E. A. (Bob) Alburty. (Photo appears to have been made in front of a painted backdrop in a photographic studio.)



WREC's Who's Who in Memphis program, on the air from 6:30 to 7 p.m. in the early '30s with interviews of prominent people, drew a lot of fan mail. Office secretary Mildred Hughes goes through a pile of it as E. A. (Bob) Alburty and Mollie Dumas, program personalities, look on.



Dot & Dash, two singing cuties on WREC circa 1930, were really Margaret Bass (left) and Mildred Waddy. Miss Bass later married English announcer Jack Dormer.



WREC salesman Ernest Cummings (seated right) takes applications from a bevy of Mid-South beauties (carefully arranged by photographer Harry Gerstel with cloche hats on the left and snap-brims on the right) for the station's Hollywood Hotel Audition Contest in the early '30s.

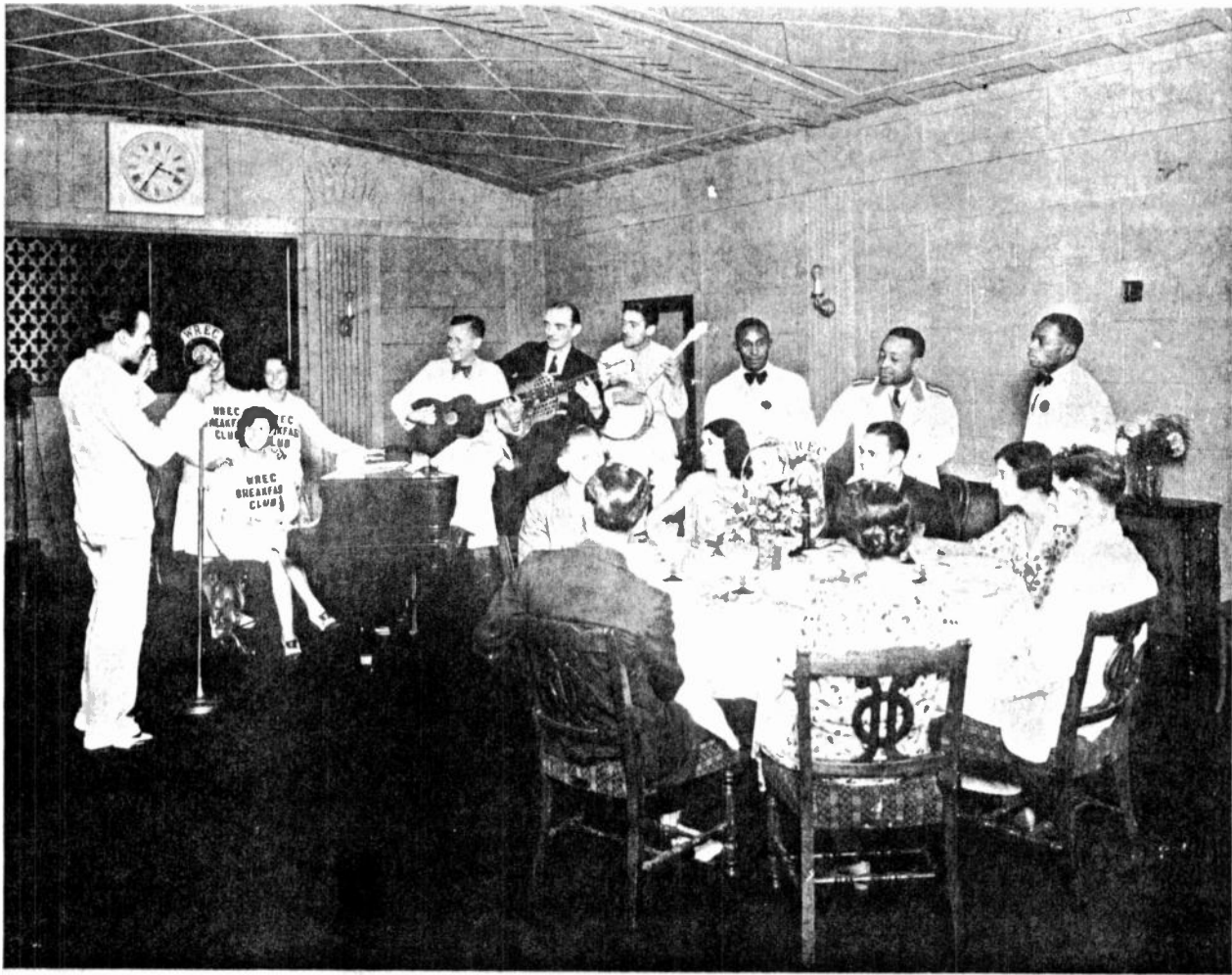
But lack of funds had never stopped Hoyt Wooten before, and he wasn't going to let it stop him now. He knew that the future of radio lay in network service, and was determined to find a way to acquire the full CBS program budget for WREC.

With CBS chief William Paley holding contracts ready for signing, Wooten invited the chief wholesalers of radio receiving sets in Memphis—Reichman-Crosby, Orgill Brothers,

and others—to lunch at Lowenstein's Department Store and explained to them how they would sell radios “beyond your wildest dreams” if WREC could only bring full-time network service to Memphis. The station would immediately jump, he said, from six hours a day to 18 hours a day broadcasting time. (WMC was on the air only 56 hours a week at that time.) The great names in American entertainment—Amos 'n' Andy, Stoopnagle and Bud, Connee Bos-



Fan mail for WREC's Breakfast Club (forerunner of WREC-TV's "Good Morning from Memphis" program) confirmed owner Hoyt Wooten's judgment in hiring George Ellis (stooping left) as program consultant in 1931. Ellis's \$150 a week salary demand, met by Wooten, outraged the station's \$25-a-week salesmen, but Ellis's ideas paid off in listenership. From left behind him are: Announcer Jack Dormer, a former vaudeville cyclist from London who left his act at Loew's State to join the station staff; "Miss Frances" Benden, Hoyt Wooten's secretary; the postman, and office secretary Mildred Hughes.



Three Hotel Peabody waiters serve a WREC Breakfast Club gathering in the main studio. Among the identifiable performers and guests are singers Dot & Dash (Margaret Bass and Mildred Waddy) in the Breakfast Club sweaters, string players Pete Dix, Chuck Green and Jack Dormer (from left on the grand piano), and with their backs to the camera, Hoyt Woolen and his secretary, Frances Benden. The studio clock reveals that this was not an actual broadcast, but a publicity photo made at 3:35 p.m.

well, Little Jack Little, and the orchestras of Nathaniel Shilkret, Andre Kostelanetz, Isham Jones and Gus Arnheim—and important public events all over the nation would be brought into the homes of Memphis and the Mid-South—or at least into those homes which had radios. Soon no home could afford to be without one. And it was they, the wholesalers, who would reap the profit. Wooten was a persuasive man. With the dessert course, he got their guarantee of the \$17,000 he needed to sign with CBS for full network service—got it in exchange for future commercial announcements on WREC advertising the radio receiving sets distributed by Reichman-Crosby, Orgill Brothers, et al. And they did sell radios, as Wooten promised, “beyond their wildest dreams.”

Full CBS service on WREC began on Oct. 15, 1929. At the same time, the station increased its broadcast schedule to 18 hours a day. Within less than a year, the boy from Coldwater, Miss., had, without investing a penny of his own money, of which he didn't have any anyway, moved his station into the finest studios in Memphis, gained full-time use of the 600-kilocycle frequency, and stolen a march on his Memphis competition by securing the full network service of the Columbia Broadcasting System. A short time later, he got permission to increase the station's power to 1000 watts and it began to look as if Hoyt Wooten would soon be able to “pay everybody off” as he had so confidently predicted to his father five years before.

Then came the Depression.

HARD TIMES—AND “REMARKABLE, UNSELFISH PUBLIC SERVICE”

By 1930, five of the Wooten brothers were on the payroll at WREC. In addition to owner Hoyt and chief engineer S. D., Hollis had worked up from salesman to sales manager, Roy was senior announcer, and Foster had joined the sales staff. But it was a tiny woman who had first come to the station as organist who saw to it during the lean Depression years that there WAS a payroll.

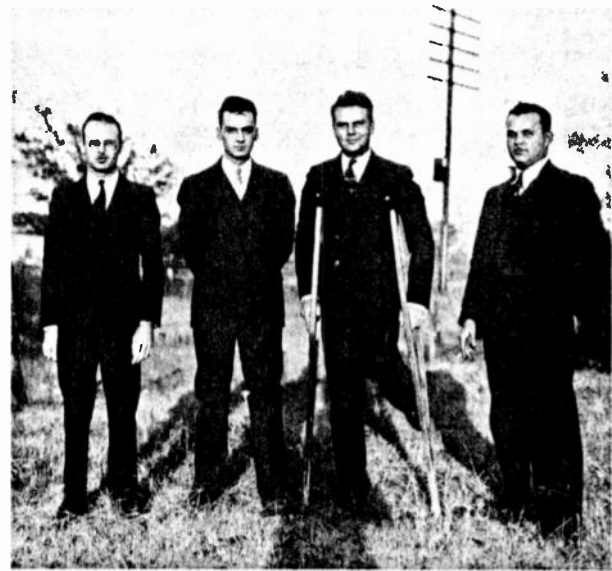
Frances Benden was organist for the Redeemer Lutheran Church when WREC moved to Hotel Peabody. She and Harry O. Nichols, organist at First Church of Christ, Scientist, were engaged by the station to design a radio organ (perhaps the first in the country) which would be compatible with the comparatively low fidelity of 1929 radio, and then to play that organ on local “novelty” programs.

“I thought I would play a few programs and that would be it,” Miss Frances recalled more than four decades later. “But Mr. Wooten saw me coming and going and one day told me he needed someone to handle his paper work. Would I like to do it?” She remained his secretary until his death in December, 1969, and kept his office open until her retirement in October, 1970. Throughout the Depression and beyond, she was also the station’s bookkeeper. (“I always wished I had had time to take training as a bookkeeper; I just had to learn as I went along.” She also took his dictation in long-hand.)

It was touch and go maintaining during the Depression what Hoyt had built during the years immediately preceding it. “On Saturday mornings,” Miss Frances (everyone called her that instead of the more formal Mrs. Benden or the perhaps too familiar Frances) recalled, “I would make out statements for the Main Street shops. I’d say, ‘Hollis, collect what you can and be back by 11 o’clock so I can pay these salaries.’ The banks stayed open till noon on Saturdays in those days. Hollis would go out and collect what he could. Most of the accounts only came to \$15 a week—\$2.50 per announcement. We never had enough to pay everybody all they had coming each week, but we kept it on the books and they got it all eventually.

“The transmitter men always got the full amount, because if you weren’t on the air you were out of business. Then the salesmen and announcers got a pro rata share of whatever was left. Finally, I would go to Hoyt and say, ‘Can you get by on \$5 this week?’ He’d say, ‘Oh, all right, give it to me.’ Then I’d give the brothers \$5 each, too, and I’d take the same amount. You could buy a lot of groceries for \$5 in those days.

“But sometimes I look back and wonder how we made it. One day I heard there was a run on the National Bank of Commerce where the station had every penny it owned. Excitedly, I asked Mr. Wooten what he wanted me to do. He thought a minute and said, ‘Don’t do anything. I’ll chance it.’ A few days later, Roosevelt closed the banks, which helped, and we made it through.



Transmitter men pictured at the Whitehaven transmitter station in 1933 are (from left); Hank Schroeder, Wendell Phillips, Wilson Raney, and S. D. Wooten Jr.

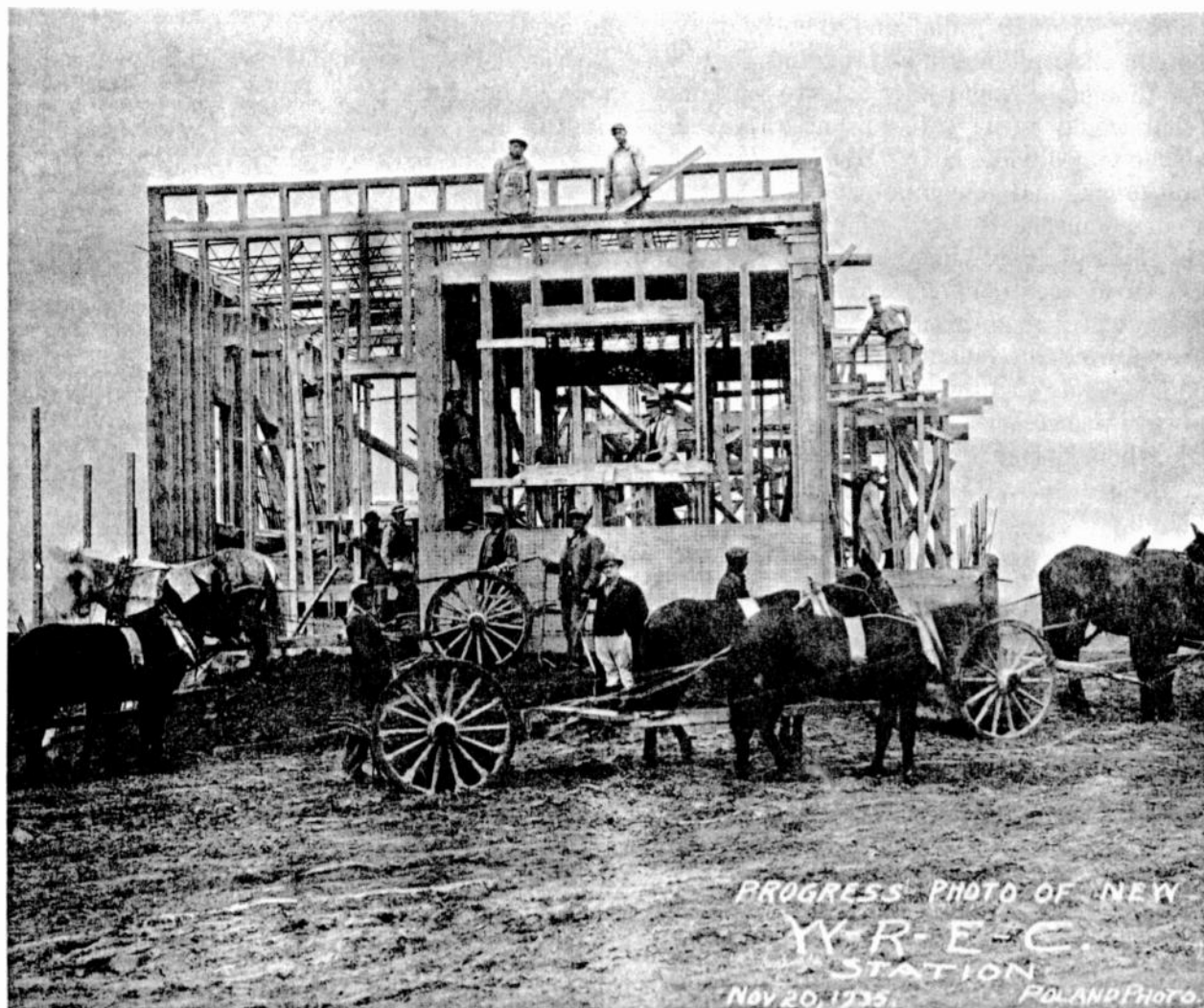
“One day in 1935 Hoyt said, ‘Well, I think we can go ahead and build the new transmitter station,’ and I knew the worst was over. We were beginning to get good checks back from the network, and one day I said, ‘Don’t you want to put some of this aside in your own name?’ He said, ‘No, we’ve got some more we need to do. We’ll keep it all together. When we do come into it, I’ll be around.’ ”

Wooten bought 31 acres at the intersection of Payne Ave. and Hindman Ferry Road, on the north side of the city, and began construction of the new transmitter with an eight-room station building and a two-element directional antenna with twin 420-foot towers. But a perhaps more important event in the development of WREC as a communications center for the Mid-South occurred later in 1935. In September of that year, WREC became the first radio station in Memphis and the third in the United States to acquire the full telegraphic news service of the United Press.

Recalling the event in September, 1953, Leroy Keller, vice president of United Press Associations, wrote Wooten: "This is a long time, Hoyt, in the business of broadcasting news. I think you are to be congratulated upon

your early vision. You saw the presentation of news bulletins as a public service long before many others. Today, the broadcasting of news is regarded as one of the very greatest of the many services of radio. . . ."

The new transmitter was completed at a total cost of \$100,000 and dedicated on April 26, 1936. Besides what Wooten even then described as a "new high fidelity sound" for The Voice of Memphis, as the station was called, it provided WREC with the widest and most favorable coverage pattern of any Memphis station. In less than a year, WREC was also to become the voice of hope and reassurance for a wide area of Arkansas and Missouri through valiant and invaluable public service far beyond the call of duty.



WREC's new transmitter station rises north of the city with the help of mule teams in late November, 1935. The station, designed by architect Raymond Spencer, was still in use in 1972. Checks to "feed those mules" were a big item in the late Depression, recalled secretary-bookkeeper Frances Benden.

A gigantic rush of water down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers in late January and early February, 1937, flooded millions of acres in 12 states, darkening cities, contaminating water systems, crippling transportation, and imperiling hundreds of thousands of families. To rescue and rehabilitate the more than one million refugees required the prodigious, co-operative efforts of the Red Cross, the Army, Coast Guard, and countless federal, state and local agencies. The key to their success was communications.

Radio stations proved to be a direct link between the disaster and the public. Radio was everywhere—on the water, in automobiles and airplanes, on the backs of operators and in isolated studios running on emergency generators.

In the flood-ravaged Mid-South, sitting high and comparatively dry on the Chickasaw Bluffs, Memphis opened its doors and hearts to more than 20,000 refugees who streamed across the Memphis bridges by auto, train, cart, mule, and on foot from the flooded flatlands of Arkansas and Missouri.

From its Hotel Peabody studios and from a shortwave station set up in the livingroom of Hoyt Wooten's then modest Whitehaven home, WREC remained on the air continuously for more than 23 days—a total of 572 consecutive hours—linking the Red Cross and other rescue agencies with the public and, via 30 to 40 ham operators, with areas isolated by the rising waters.

A newspaper competitor of the radio station, not likely to overestimate WREC's role



The Wooten brothers confer on WREC's 1937 flood coverage in the station's Hotel Peabody studios. From left, standing: Foster (Bud), Hollis, S. D. Jr., and (seated) Hoyt and Roy.



WREC's extraordinary 1937 flood coverage began when Roy Wooten, who announced the station's farm program, learned from rural Arkansas contacts that a major catastrophe was in the making, and persuaded Hoyt to send him out into the territory to see how the station could help. Here Roy (second from right) and S. D. Jr. (second from left) help two unidentified ham radio operators unload equipment preparatory to setting up an amateur station at Blytheville, Ark.



In the main Studio at Hotel Peabody, WREC staffers and volunteer helpers broadcast messages to the flood zones and the general public under the fascinated and concerned eyes of scores of people who crowded into the studio, some merely to watch and listen, others hoping to get messages to, or hear from, relatives in the stricken areas. Pictured around the flood desk are, from left: Mrs. Frances Benden, the owner's secretary, with a fresh batch of telegrams; Jim Sanders (in sleeveless sweater), leader of the Jewel Cowboys, who pitched in; Hoyt Wooten (standing, center); announcer Hugh Murphy (seated, facing camera); announcer Bill Trotter, back to camera; an unidentified volunteer, and announcer Mac Todd at the control board (back to camera).



In sales staff room of WREC's studios, telephone company volunteers take flood relief donations for the Red Cross. Standing right is Alice Lawrence, member of the station's sales staff. Standing with phone, rear, is Hollis Woolen, WREC sales manager.



As the flood emergency began to ease, Hoyt Woolen proudly showed off WREC's new transmitter, opened just the year before, to some of the visiting firemen. From left: S. D. Woolen Jr., transmitter technician Hank Schroeder, three Columbia Broadcasting System engineers, unidentified man, Hoyt Woolen (seated), and a British Broadcasting Corporation correspondent.

in the crisis, painted a more glowing picture of its accomplishments than anything in the station's own records. Reporting later in the year to Scripps-Howard Newspaper Alliance executive editor John Sorrells in New York, the late Edward J. Meeman, editor of The Memphis Press-Scimitar, wrote:

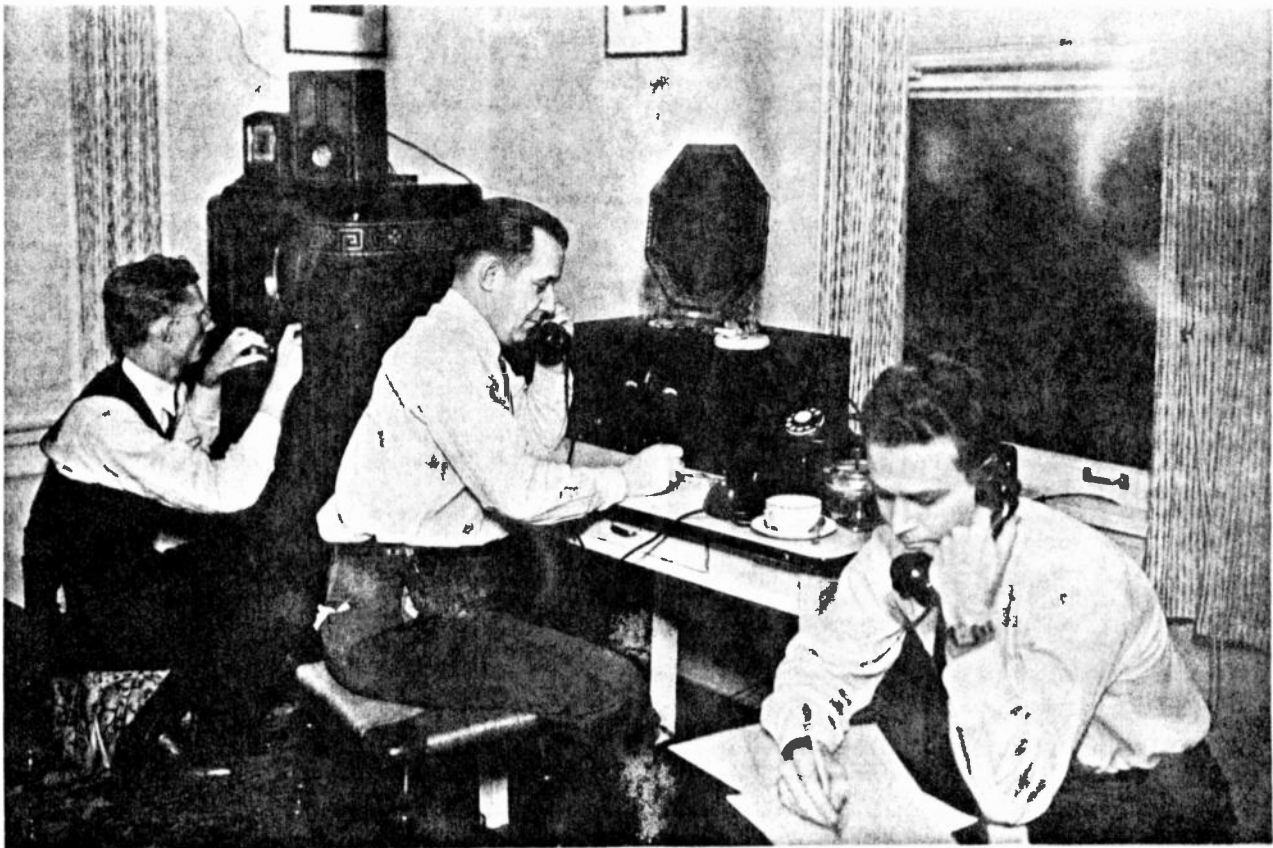
"Our flood coverage was well underway when we got a spur to take even more interest in the flood. That was radio competition. WREC on Sunday, Jan. 24, went on the air with a most extraordinary piece of showmanship. They abandoned their regular programs to pour stories of refugees and rescue workers, and communications from and to them, on the air.

"They had amateur radio operators all over the territory sending in reports. The city was grieved and stirred to the depths and everybody wanted to do something. The radio station started the Red Cross appeal for funds. People thronged their studio. A few questioned whether some of the activities of the station were not exaggerated, but there is no question

that the great majority of people did not look upon it as showmanship, but as remarkable, unselfish public service. That it was successful and served to put WREC on the map in a spectacular way is unquestioned. . . .

"Radio loomed so large in the picture that we assigned a man to do nothing but listen in and take notes. Of course we used no radio reports except as tips to be investigated. Some of them led to stories, but many of them proved false. . . ."

When it was all over, WREC had collected \$75,616.02 for the Red Cross, plus several freightcar-loads of clothing, food, and other things needed by destitute people in the stricken area. (Mrs. Charles Brakefield and Mrs. Jack Michael, daughters of the station owner, remembered the whole family's moving into the Peabody to help collect and list contributions and to sort and box clothing. Said Mrs. Brakefield: "We were glad to get out of the house, what with (engineer) Wilson Raney sitting in the middle of our livingroom day and night, repeating 'Calling CQ, Calling CQ' over and



Relay station in WREC's flood network is set up in the livingroom of Hoyt Wooten's modest home on Hale Boulevard in Whitehaven, with engineer Wilson Raney (right) in charge. Other two men are unidentified.

over again, and relaying ham messages to the studio downtown.")

Thousands of instructions and messages were relayed in this way for the Red Cross that could not have been delivered otherwise. And the communication went both ways. People all over the United States heard WREC's flood reports through CBS, and others around the world heard accounts beamed by the station directly to the BBC in London.

In the calm that followed the great flood, Wooten began planning the expansion and remodeling of the station's studios in Hotel Peabody, now known far and wide, as hotelman A. L. Parker had expected, through the familiar station identification: "This is W-Rrrr-E-C (as announcer Mac Todd rolled it off his nimble tongue), the Voice of Memphis in Hotel Peabody, the South's finest and one of America's best hotels." New York's Taft Hotel with its Grill Room no longer had anything on the Peabody Skyway in the way of network orchestra pick-ups. In the late '30s, the Peabody's line-up included Les Brown and His Duke Blue Devils, Clyde McCoy (who was to become a Memphis fixture and, finally, resident), Rudolph Friml Jr., Ted Fio Rito, Buddy Rogers (married to America's sweetheart, Mary Pickford), Ted Weems (whose vocalists were Perry Como and Marilyn Maxwell), Jan Garber, Freddy Martin, and Ozzie Nelson with a pretty young vocalist named Harriet Hilliard.

During the studio remodeling, broadcasting activities were moved temporarily across Second Street from the hotel to second-floor quarters over a wholesale clothing house. The new studios opened in November, 1940, in a \$60,000 layout that included a new 200-seat main studio, new "high fidelity" (words that were beginning to mean something) RCA recording equipment, and new executive offices.

With its power increased in 1936 to 5000 watts daytime, the station was reaching into hundreds of thousands of Mid-South homes when, shortly after noon on Dec. 7, 1941, announcer Todd ripped a shocking bulletin off the United Press teletype and broke into the regular programming with the first report of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor.

A local singer named William Ching, who was later to become a successful Hollywood film actor, had a 15-minute program every Sunday afternoon at 12:45. Todd made the station break, then announced Ching, who broke into his theme, "A Wand'ring Minstrel, I," from—of all things—"The Mikado."

"The significance of that particular theme didn't hit me till a couple of days later," Todd recalled years afterward with a laugh. What did hit him immediately was the necessity of putting the station on a 24-hour alert which, as chief announcer, he did immediately, an action confirmed and applauded when Wooten finally got a call through to the station two hours later from Washington.



In 1940, three of the Wooten brothers show Dad Wooten around area of Hotel Peabody basement into which station was expanding. From left: Hoyt, Dad Wooten, S. D. Jr., and Roy.

TV OR NOT TV—AND THE COMEBACK OF RADIO

In 1928, few people had even heard of, much less recognized the potential of, television. Hoyt Wooten was already excited about it. In that year, while still trying to make a go of WREC in its tiny frame studio in Whitehaven, he had applied for, and on July 19 received from the Federal Radio Commission, one of the first six television station construction permits granted in the United States. Hoyt and S. D. did some experimenting with Composite V. T. television, a mechanical scanning system utilizing a spinning, perforated disc, which had first been demonstrated publicly by John Logie Baird in 1926. But television remained a kind of science-fiction fantasy in the U. S. until after World War II.

As the war drew to a close, radio was a potpourri of musical, dramatic, and news programs, spiced with the beginnings of what would become the game show craze. A typical evening on WREC would include The Aldrich Family and The Thin Man or, on another night,

The Saint, Dr. Christian, and Corliss Archer. In the afternoons, one could keep up with the crises and triumphs of Ma Perkins and Young Dr. Malone, and on the weekend there were the variety shows. Network programming was, in fact, a sort of pictureless preview of the television to come.

The Federal Communications Commission's first proposed television allocation for Memphis included VHF Channel 7. Eager to add sight to its long established sound, WREC applied for the channel unopposed in November, 1947. But the application was not acted upon before the September, 1948, freeze on channel allocations.

During the freeze, VHF Channels 5 and 13, commercial, and Channel 10, educational, were proposed for Memphis and, with the proposal, WMCT, already operating on Channel 4, was ordered to move to Channel 5. This left Channel 13 the only available commercial channel for all remaining applicants.

POSTAL TELEGRAPH - COMMERCIAL CABLES													
CLARENCE H. MACKAY, PRESIDENT													
TELEGRAMS TO ALL AMERICA	CABLEGRAMS TO ALL THE WORLD												
<p>STANDARD TIME INDICATED ON THIS MESSAGE</p> <p>1931</p>													
<p>This is a full-rate Telegram or Cablegram unless otherwise indicated by signal in the check or in the address.</p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td>BLUE</td> <td>DAY LETTER</td> </tr> <tr> <td>NL</td> <td>NIGHT LETTER</td> </tr> <tr> <td>NITE</td> <td>NIGHT TELEGRAM</td> </tr> <tr> <td>LCO</td> <td>DEFERRED</td> </tr> <tr> <td>NLY</td> <td>CABLE LETTER</td> </tr> <tr> <td>WLY</td> <td>WEEK END LETTER</td> </tr> </table>		BLUE	DAY LETTER	NL	NIGHT LETTER	NITE	NIGHT TELEGRAM	LCO	DEFERRED	NLY	CABLE LETTER	WLY	WEEK END LETTER
BLUE	DAY LETTER												
NL	NIGHT LETTER												
NITE	NIGHT TELEGRAM												
LCO	DEFERRED												
NLY	CABLE LETTER												
WLY	WEEK END LETTER												

BMA350 39 COLLECT

DX WASHINGTON DC 26

RADIO STATION W R E C

MEMPHIS TENN

YOU ARE AUTHORIZED TO CONDUCT EXPERIMENTAL TELEVISION COMMUNICATION IN BAND OF FREQUENCIES FORTY SEVEN HUNDRED TO FORTY NINE HUNDRED KILOCYCLES TEMPORARILY NOT TO EXCEED NINETY DAYS PENDING ACTION YOUR TELEVISION APPLICATION SIX APPLICATIONS HAVE BEEN GRANTED THIS PERMISSION FEDERAL RADIO COMMISSION.

This telegram, dated June 26, 1928, authorized WREC to conduct television experiments pending action on Hoyt Wooten's application to construct a Composite V. T. television transmitter. The application was approved by letter dated July 19 of the same year.



Swift and Company's Jewel Cowboys were a popular feature on WREC for years. Among them are: Kokomo (far left with accordion), and leader Jim Sanders at the microphone.

By this time, Memphis was the 11th largest wholesale market in the United States, and Wooten was convinced that it could support at least three VHF commercial assignments. Channel 3 having been assigned to Blytheville, Ark., Wooten asked Abe Plough, president of Plough Inc., owner of WMPS, to join him in petitioning the FCC to delete Channel 3 in Blytheville and assign it to Memphis. Wooten offered to do all the detail work with Plough sharing the cost. The FCC approved the petition and assigned Channel 3 to Memphis.

On April 16, 1952, two days after the freeze was lifted, WREC applied for Channel 3. About May 1, WMCT, the Memphis Publishing Company station which had been operating on Channel 4 and had previously been ordered to move to Channel 5, petitioned for permission to move instead to Channel 3. WREC alone, and at considerable expense, opposed the WMCT petition which, after six

months of litigation, was denied. Meanwhile, WMPS had applied for Channel 13. But when WHBQ, now the Harding College station, shortly thereafter applied for the same channel, WMPS amended its application to request Channel 3, giving WHBQ Channel 13 unopposed, and bringing Wooten and Plough into a head-on confrontation which was to last three years and cost each side more than \$100,000.

The two self-made Memphis millionaires—Wooten in radio, Plough in patent medicines—battled tooth and nail for the most desirable of the TV channels assigned to Memphis (because its low frequency offered the widest coverage), yet emerged from the fight closer friends than ever. In his application, Wooten mentioned that his proposed TV studios would be in the “magnificent” Hotel Peabody. When Plough’s attorneys challenged the adjective, Wooten’s attorneys noted wryly that the word had been used to describe Plough’s own resi-

dence, since he lived in the Peabody. The FCC examiner overruled the objection.

Wooten and Plough spent six weeks in Washington putting their respective cases into the record of the FCC. At recesses, Plough would walk smilingly up to Wooten, pull a (then) dime box of his own company's St. Joseph's Aspirin out of his vest pocket and offer a tablet to him, to which Wooten would always reply: "Better keep it, Abe. You're going to need it."



Frank Stanton, Vice Chairman of the Board of the Columbia Broadcasting System, stood by WREC, one of the network's first radio affiliates, during owner Hoyt Wooten's three-year fight for the station's television license. When the TV station finally went on the air on Jan. 1, 1956, it was as a CBS affiliate.

On May 26, 1955, Wooten and WREC were granted the right to operate a television station on VHF Channel 3 by a seven-to-nothing vote of the FCC. During the protracted hearings, WHBQ-TV, on Channel 13, had been carrying some CBS shows under an interim agreement with the network. WHBQ tried to outbid WREC for a permanent affiliation with CBS, but in his office files, Wooten had a letter from network chief Frank Stanton, dated 1950, assuring him of WREC's CBS affiliation whenever the station's channel was assigned. A second letter to Wooten, written by Stanton during WHBQ's temporary affiliation, reassured him: "I will live up to our letter of agreement."

On Dec. 31, 1955, WREC-TV went on the air with the Gator Bowl football game—a day ahead of the formal opening and the beginning of full local and CBS network service at 2:30 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 1, 1956. Now sight had been added to sound, and the WREC stations, which had started in an attic in Coldwater, Miss., occupied almost the entire block-long basement of Hotel Peabody.

Once the television station was on the air, one might have expected Hoyt Wooten to sit back and simply enjoy the fruits of his labors, the fulfillment of his youthful dream. But Wooten was a perfectionist, and the drive to build and to improve on what he had built never left him. The control panels in his stations and transmitters, for example, had to be kept spotless and dustless. One observer even noted that the screw heads on a control panel were all aligned vertically. At first glance, it seemed a mere crotchet, but upon consideration, the observer realized that screw heads would collect less dust running vertically than horizontally, and that dust is an enemy of good sound transmission.

Sound remained Hoyt Wooten's obsession. Radio, his first baby, never lost his interest and affection—or his faith in its importance and endurance. When his brother Hollis expressed doubts as to radio's future during the videotisc late '40s, when everybody seemed glued to a television receiver, Hoyt scoffed and growled: "Aw, it'll come back. People aren't going to want to sit in front of that tube all day."

In 1960, Hoyt set about making WREC Radio better than ever. At the age of 68, he decided to do something about the quality of AM sound, which he felt was not keeping pace with developments in sound recording. With records more important than ever in radio programming, he determined to broaden the station's sound spectrum to accommodate the recordings' greater range.

The first thing he did was to install a new \$60,000 radio transmitter at the old site. The next thing he did was spend several weeks out there himself, "tinkering around," as he put it. Prior to 1960, the official broadcast range of most stations was from a low of 100 cycles to a high of 5000 cycles. An adventurous engineer

could boost the highs and lows by "riding the gain," and on the rock and roll stations they did so regularly. Although he hated rock and roll and never allowed it on his stations, Wooten was quick to admit that the rock and roll stations performed a real service for broadcast sound by stretching its outer limits.

But Wooten, with his new transmitter and his tinkering, stretched them much further. Within a few months, he had WREC broadcasting from 20 cycles up to 15,000, which is about all the human ear can register. The range he achieved was well beyond what most radio receivers could reproduce—especially the cheap transistor sets gaining popularity then—but Wooten felt he owed the highest possible fidelity to those with good sets, particularly those with radios attached to their hi-fi record players.

The next step in Hoyt Wooten's never-ending quest for perfect sound reproduction was the complete re-designing of the radio studios in 1965. Wooten, program director Fred Cook, and the station engineers re-did the whole studio set-up to take maximum advantage of the new transmitter capabilities. Part of the project was the installation of new turntables cushioned to absorb all outside vibration. Long before such equipment was available—during the major 1940 studio remodeling, in fact — Wooten had ingeniously overcome the problem of vibration from heavy trucks on Second Street, almost directly above the underground studios, by mounting all the turntables on inflated automobile tire inner-tubes.

With WREC's AM sound transmission as good as available equipment and Wooten's ingenuity permitted, the station next turned to frequency modulation — the higher fidelity sound band used with television — and to stereo. On March 1, 1967, WREC-FM went on the air in Memphis with all-stereo, adult, good-music programming.

By this time, Hoyt Wooten no longer owned the WREC stations. He had sold them as of Dec. 31, 1962, to Cowles Communications Inc., for \$8-million cash. Four years earlier, he had almost sold out to Cowles for \$6-million, but tax problems arose as a result of his having operated the stations as sole proprietor, and Cowles allowed him to call off the deal.

The thought of selling the stations had not occurred to Wooten at all until he got a telephone call in 1958 from a station broker, Phil Kelser, who said he had a prospective buyer. Wooten told him, "I don't know if I want to sell or not, but if I do, it will be net to me. I won't pay any broker's fee. You'll have to look to the buyer for that." Wooten wouldn't even let Kelser tell him who the interested party was, and didn't find out until the Cowles representative, Luther Hill, a former U. S. Army general and former publisher of the Des Moines Register and Tribune, came to Memphis to see him.



Gardner Cowles is chairman of the board of Cowles Communications, Inc., owner of WREC AM and FM.

After calling off the first deal, Wooten incorporated the stations and continued to operate them for four more years. During that time, he had larger offers from other interests—one for \$10-million—but felt a moral obligation to offer the stations to Cowles Communications when and if he did sell. Wooten's business ethics were as unique as his electronic ingenuity. When he finally sold the stations to Cowles for \$8-million cash, he included as "station prop-



*The Zero Hour scores high with Mid-South audiences on the amusing banter of co-hosts John Powell (left) and Fred Cook. Behind them are (from left) Charles Brakefield, consultant to Cowles Communications, Inc., on broadcast activities, engineer Milton Brame (standing), and announcer Alan Tynes, whose telephone-talk show, *The Tynes Line*, is another popular WREC feature.*



The staff that makes WREC "the station where people who want to know come first" is headed by radio news director Roger Cooper and includes (pictured from left in the newsroom) Ray Pohlman, Joe Pennington and Levi Frazier.

erty" a savings account worth \$1.7 million-which the stations had accumulated in profits during the four years, making the sale price approximately the same as had been negotiated four years earlier. He had put the money aside for future improvements to the stations and considered it just as much a part of them as the transmitters, switch panels and desks.

Although ownership of the stations passed on to outside hands, Hoyt Wooten continued at the helm as chairman of the board of Cowles Broadcasting Service until his death on Dec. 6, 1969. Death came at the end of a routine day of work and community service for the 76-year-old pioneer broadcaster. After a day at the office, he had gone to the Holiday Inn-Rivermont to serve as a judge in the Miss Liberty Bowl contest, then driven home and to bed at his Greenlawn estate in Whitehaven, never to get up again. During his last years he had found time for a few outside interests—yachting, and the last word in bomb shelters, which he designed and built for \$155,000 as an experimental prototype at his estate. But a boo-boo by an announcer or a brief disruption of broadcasting service would still bring a fast phone call from the boss, who seemed never to be out of ear-shot of the stations and always wanted to know why when anything went wrong.

Wooten's wife of 46 years, the former Floy Mae Moore of Love Station, Miss., had died six years before him. Their daughters, Mrs. Arabia Brakefield and Mrs. Betty Mae Michael, whose homes were adjacent to their father's estate, agreed that although their mother had been a silent partner, her contributions to the building of the communications kingdom had been vital. "It was she," they said, "who cut down her own coats to make coats for us when Daddy couldn't make ends meet in Coldwater, and she's the one who made \$5 a week feed a family of four during the Depression."

Hoyt was the last of the five Wooten brothers connected with the stations. Foster had moved on years before, S. D. Jr. had opened his own electronics firm, W. & W. Distributing, and Roy had retired, followed in 1965 by Hollis. But a number of nephews and cousins whom Hoyt had trained up in radio and television engineering and sales remained with the stations after his death to carry on the

proud Wooten tradition in broadcasting. With his passing, son-in-law Charles Brakefield, who had been named general manager in 1963, remained the station's chief executive, and son-in-law Jack Michael, with the stations since 1945, continued as program director of the stations.

On Oct. 15, 1971, Cowles Communications, Inc. transferred WREC-TV to The New York Times Company as part of a merger which also included three Florida newspapers, the Cambridge Book Company, Family Circle Magazine, and the Modern Medicine group of professional magazines. In the exchange, the Times Company transferred to Cowles 2,600,000 shares of its Class A stock, selling at the time of the merger for about \$20 per share, and assumed a \$15-million long-term debt. Brakefield and Michael went with the television station as chief executive officers, but Brakefield was retained as special consultant to Cowles Communications Inc., on broadcast activities.

In January of 1972, Fred Cook, a WREC announcer since 1950 and the radio station's program director since 1965, was named station manager, and Zack Hill, a 10-year veteran of the sales staff, was named general sales manager of WREC AM and FM. Both were also elevated to vice presidencies in Cowles Tennessee Radio Properties, Inc. Under their direction, the communications institution birthed and raised lovingly to maturity by Hoyt B. Wooten embarked on its second 50 years.

LOOKING BACK—AND AHEAD

One of the happiest events in my long and varied business career was getting to know Hoyt Wooten well. He was a truly remarkable man. He was a pioneer with vision and courage, but he was also a practical businessman with great good judgment. He was the soul of integrity and one of the most generous men I have ever known.

Hoyt loved broadcasting. He was one of the leaders who helped build the electronics industry from a struggling infant to the great and powerful force it is today.

Hoyt loved WREC. He wanted it by every standard to be as good as any radio station anywhere.

Hoyt loved Memphis. He wanted to see it become the great metropolis of the mid-South. He did much to help it grow and become a steadily more attractive and important city.

I hope all of the men and women charged with the responsibility for operating WREC in the years ahead will constantly remember what Hoyt Wooten stood for. I hope they will so conduct the affairs of the station that it will be a splendid tribute to his memory.

Gardner Cowles
Chairman of the Board
Cowles Communications, Inc.

Hoyt Wooten was a man of intensity, a man who insisted on perfection, and was never satisfied with less than the best. He was proud to have been one of the pioneer broadcasters in the United States, and was one of the few people in my experience who really understood the power of radio and television. Because of this, he felt a deep sense of responsibility to the audience.

Hoyt Wooten was, of course, a tremendously successful businessman. But he never forgot his heritage, and he always exhibited a great love for his fellow man—large and small alike. He lived by the very simple but sincere philosophy of “cast your bread upon the water and you will be rewarded many times over.”

Hoyt loved his family. I am a member of his family and had the great privilege of a close relationship with him for over 20 years, and was his business associate for 18 of those years. He was the most honest man I have ever known. He was more than my father-in-law, he was my friend.

Charles B. Brakefield
President, WREC-TV
The New York Times Broadcasting Service, Inc.

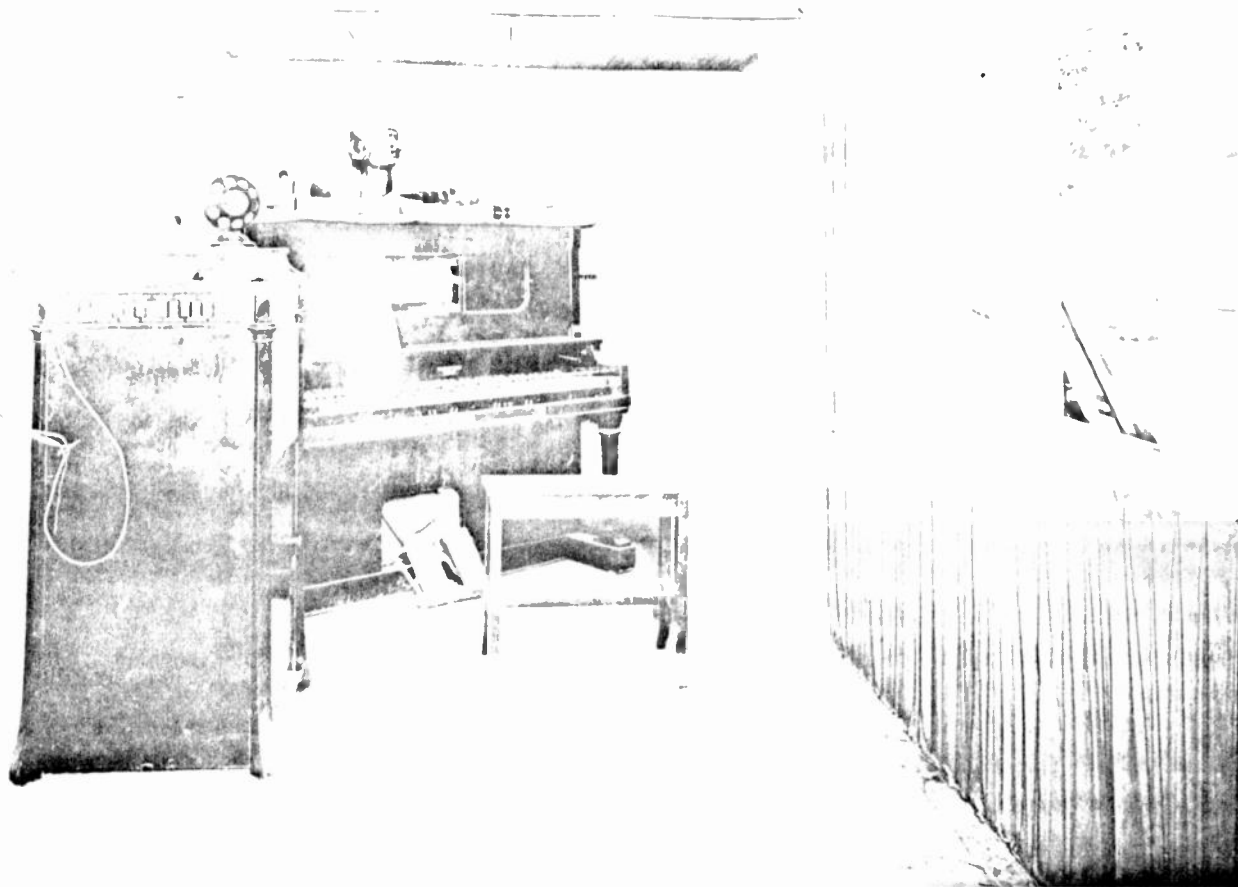
The beautiful thing about a radio station is that, no matter how many years it has been in existence, it can be just as young as it wants to be. Those of us entrusted with Hoyt Wooten's legacy know that we are really just beginning to understand and use this infinitely useful communication medium that he and the other broadcast pioneers created for us. And, as each new facet of radio is discovered and developed, the medium itself is reborn, in a sense, and begins to grow all over again.

The first fifty years of WREC have been wondrous ones, indeed. It's difficult to measure the impact the station has had, the good it has done, over this period. But we think of this great past only as a foundation upon which to build an even greater future. With new technology at our disposal and a determination to find even better ways to serve and entertain our audience, we will see to it that WREC will be a continuing realization of the dream of the man from Coldwater.

Fred Cook,
Station Manager and Vice President
WREC and WREC-FM
Cowles Tennessee Radio Properties, Inc.



MEMPHIS - 1972—The packet boats of 50 years ago have been replaced by Memphis Yacht Club sheds and the excursion boat, *Memphis Queen*, in the city's Wolf River harbor, sheltered from the Mississippi by Mud Island with its now abandoned landing strip. The skyline now stretches south from the new Civic Center to the new Commerce Square building, and reaches east to where downtown and the burgeoning medical center meet. Memphis itself reaches into the future as WREC AM and FM reach out to an ever larger audience.



Another view of the 1924 studio of KFNG. Note foot pedals and music roll of the player piano.

music on radio in those days, however, and a record was usually announced as "a selection by the Coldwater Hotel Orchestra." Local folk enjoyed the joke, and listeners in Seattle and Kansas City had no way of knowing that little Coldwater had no hotel.

All the brothers took a turn at the Western Electric carbon button microphone, but the most popular announcer on KFNG, as his fan mail attested, was their father, who referred to himself on the air as "your 92-year-old radio announcer." (Actually, he was only 55 when KFNG went on the air in 1922, but lived to the age of 80.)

Early advertisers on the Coldwater station included Bry's Department Store and the late W. R. Herstein's Electrical Supply Co., both Memphis firms. There may not have been many radio receivers among their customers in the early '20s, but Malcolm (Mac) Todd, who was later to become WREC's chief announcer, remembers bending over a home-made cat's whisker crystal set in his boyhood home in South

Memphis and picking up the Sunday afternoon broadcasts of KFNG. Mail received by the station attested to a wide if not very deep coverage. Pouring over the 8000 to 10,000 letters they sometimes received in a week, Hoyt and S. D. Jr. excitedly discovered that their 10-watt signal had been received by someone in every one of the 48 states.

But if radio were to fulfill the promise Hoyt Wooten saw for it, something had to be done about getting more receivers into more homes. With that in mind, Hoyt and S. D. began building radio receivers themselves and, when the new Peabody Hotel opened in Memphis in 1925, opened their Wooten's Radio-Electric Company in a small shop off the spacious lobby. For the next year, they divided their time between building radio sets and selling radio equipment in Memphis during the week and broadcasting over KFNG in Coldwater on Sundays. The choice of the magnificent new hotel for their radio shop was more portentous than they knew.

