

**XERA:
THE INSIDE STORY OF ONE OF MEXICO'S FAMOUS BORDER BLASTER AM
RADIO STATIONS.**

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John Brinkley was a name well known in the 1930's in regards to radio. His stations became famous not only all over the country, but eventually all over the world.

No one is sure where John Brinkley was born. His Connecticut medical license application says it was Tennessee, however his Arkansas Medical License claims it was in Kentucky. His Texas application says it was in North Carolina.¹

Historians' best guess is probably Beta, North Carolina, a town that no longer exists. His beginning and childhood were poor, probably in a log cabin with a dirt floor. An uncle and aunt raised him, and he attended school in another log building either in East LaPorte or in Tuckasiegee, neither of which exist today. Brinkley later became a telegrapher for the Southern Railroad in Sylva and also worked as a mail carrier.

Earning enough money to pursue his dream of becoming a doctor, Brinkley tried to get into Johns Hopkins University. He met with the dean of the medical department, who took one look at his overalls and torn shirt, and advised him, "You're probably a good mail carrier. I advise you to stick to that."²

Brinkley then attempted to earn a degree at Bennett Eclectic Medical School in Chicago. By this time he was married and had three young daughters. After going through a nasty divorce, he remarried, this time to Minnie Telitha Jones in the home of her father, Doctor Tiberius Gracchus Jones in Memphis. He went on to acquire a certificate from the National University of Arts and Sciences in St. Louis. Brinkley then enrolled in Eclectic Medical University in Kansas City and earned his diploma on May 7, 1915.

¹ John D. Price, "Superpowers and Borderblasters," *Broadcast Programming and Production* 1979, 15.

Historians disagree on whether the diplomas were granted to the students actually finishing the work, or whether they just bought them.³ One reporter wrote that the medical diplomas were going for two hundred dollars. The professor retorted that he never sold a diploma for less than five hundred dollars.

From all evidence, John Brinkley didn't buy his diploma. He went through his studies, finished and graduated, as did most of the medical students there.

Brinkley was given a license to practice medicine in Tennessee, Kansas, Missouri, Texas, and Connecticut. He took a job in Kansas City stitching up cuts and studying animal diseases.

Dr. Brinkley settled down in Milford, Kansas, in October 1917, geographically near the center of the U.S. "Doctor," as he called himself, opened up his doctor's office and a small drugstore. He stocked it with medicines for the flu that was circling the area.

One day Mr. S., who was a local farmer, walked in and talked to Doctor. He had heard of Brinkley and wanted to describe the problem he was having. He had spent a lot of money on other doctors and remedies - all to no avail. Mr. S. wondered if the government had taught Brinkley "...something about it, that might be good for a man who was, what they call, sexually weak."⁴

Doctor told Mr. S. that he had treated cases like this before, but nothing had proven effective. There was just nothing in the medical science field that would remedy that problem. Doctor joked to Mr. S. that Mr. S. shouldn't have any problem if Doctor

² Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford, *Border Radio* (Austin, Texas: Texas Monthly Press Inc. 1987) 15.

³ Durell Roth, interviewed by author, 8 October 1999, Austin Texas.

⁴ Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford, *Border Radio* (Austin, Texas: Texas Monthly Press Inc. 1987), 16.

took the glands from a goat, and put them in him. The farmer then asked why not, and said he'd pay for Doctor to do that.

"The Doctor half closed his eyes and considered...And then he shook his head, slowly. The code of ethics his father had drilled into him forever forbade him from any conduct, especially with relation to healing, except the utterly honest and straightforward."⁵ Mr. S. grew more desperate. He begged Doctor to reconsider; he offered to pay any price, but Doctor still wouldn't agree. He finally threatened to ruin the physician's reputation, to tell everyone else in the community about him and try to drive away the patients. Doctor finally gave in to this request, but only if he could perform the operation in the middle of the night in secret for one hundred and fifty dollars. About a year later, Mrs. S. gave birth to a healthy baby boy appropriately nicknamed "Billy."

News of this feat spread far and wide, and people came from all over to have this surgery done. At first they were encouraged to bring their own goats, but after Doctor built his new hospital, he included pens out back that contained goats shipped in from Arkansas.

Newspapers carried all sorts of headlines about Doctor, and many notable Americans contacted him. He performed a goat gland operation on Senator Wesley Staley of Colorado and even traveled to China to perform his operations. Harry Chandler, owner of the Los Angeles Times, invited Brinkley to California. *The Los Angeles Times* heralded Brinkley's arrival with the headlines:

⁵ Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford, *Border Radio* (Austin, Texas: Texas Monthly Press Inc. 1987), 17.

NEW LIFE IN GLANDS-DR. BRINKLEY'S PATIENTS HERE SHOW
IMPROVEMENT-MANY VICTIMS OF "INCURABLE" DISEASES ARE
CURED-TWELVE HUNDRED OPERATIONS ARE ALL SUCCESSFUL.⁶

With a special California medical license, Doctor performed \$40,000 worth of operations.

While in California, Doctor was exposed to Harry Chandler's new radio station, KHJ, which was one of the first radio stations in the LA area. Doctor decided he wanted to build a radio station of his own back in Kansas. The Secretary of Commerce, Herbert Hoover, granted him a broadcasting license on September 20, 1923. Brinkley bought the equipment that he needed and setup his own radio station. A few months later, Brinkley began to preach his goat gland gospel electromagnetically over the first radio station in Kansas. The call letters were KFKB (known as either "Kansas First, Kansas Best" or "Kansas Folks Know Best") and nicknamed "The Sunshine Station in the Heart of the Nation."

Doctor located KFKB in Milford, Kansas. He hired James O. Weldon as the chief engineer. The studios and transmitter were located in a one-story brick building, with a multi-wire flat top antenna atop two three hundred-foot towers. The original transmitter was a modulated oscillator operating on a frequency of 1,050 kilocycles. It shared that frequency with full-time radio station KSL Salt Lake City (which was licensed to Radio

⁶ Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford, *Border Radio* (Austin, Texas: Texas Monthly Press Inc. 1987), 19.

Service Corporation of Utah). Weldon engineered the station into a class-B linear system and set its power to 5,000 watts.⁷

Brinkley didn't realize his medical and broadcasting business would become as successful as it did. In 1929, KFKB won a gold cup as the most popular radio station in the world.

The American Medical Association wasn't too keen on Brinkley's techniques of practicing medicine over-the-air. Dr. Morris Fishbein, representing the AMA, started a campaign to take back Brinkley's medical license. Brinkley fought back, calling the AMA "Amateur Meatcutters Association."

The U.S. Government finally got involved. The Federal Radio Commission informed Brinkley that unless he could show that the station was operating in the public interest, convenience and necessity, his license would be revoked. Brinkley continued his attempt to fight back. A few months later, the Kansas State Medical Board revoked his medical license, then when the KFKB license came up for renewal, the Federal Radio Commission refused to renew it. So Brinkley sold KFKB for \$90,000.

In 1931 Brinkley paid a visit to the Mexican government officials and asked them about the possibility of putting up a broadcasting station along the Rio Grande. The Mexican officials were agreeable with this plan, and let him proceed.

There has been some discussion as to why the Mexican government let Brinkley put up his station. Some believe that the United States and Canada agreed on a series of rules to divide up the long-range radio wavelengths and didn't let Mexico have any. This theory has not been proved. From all evidence, the Mexican government was invited to

⁷ Durell M. Roth, "From the Birth to the Demise of Super-Power station XERA," *Proceedings of The Radio Club of America* Spring 1996, 5.

the discussion regarding the wavelengths; they refused (for some unknown reason) to sign the rules agreed upon. Why they were seemingly so upset at the United States and Canada regarding the wavelengths is a question which remains unanswered.

In late spring of 1931, ground was broken and construction started on the 50,000 watt "Sunshine Station Between the Nations" in Villa Acuna, Mexico. Brinkley contracted a firm from Kansas to build a \$30,000 broadcasting building. He hired Will Branch, an engineer who built the first WBAP transmitter in Fort Worth Texas, to draw up plans for a \$175,000 transmitter.

Brinkley's station was one of twelve of these border blaster radio stations either operating or under construction in 1934.⁸

On October 21, 1931, XER began regular broadcasting on the mid channel frequency of 735 kilocycles with programs originating from both Milford and Villa Acuna.⁹ At the time, the U.S. only allowed a maximum power of 50,000 watts. XER was very much a success. In a letter to Dr. Brinkley, station manager H.L. Munal attached a statement of income and expense for the first six months of operation. The profit was over \$48,000.¹⁰

In the middle of 1932, Weldon increased the transmitter output power to 65 kilowatts by adding two tubes of the class-B amplifier, and a parasitic reflector that increased the station's signal to the north by about three decibels. To do this, the

⁸ Christopher H. Sterling and John M. Kittross, *Stay Tuned* (Belmont, CA, Wadsworth Publishing Company. 1978) 134.

⁹ Durell M. Roth, "From the Birth to the Demise of Super-Power station XERA," *Proceedings of The Radio Club of America* Spring 1996, 5.

¹⁰ H. L. Munal, to Dr. Brinkley, 25 April 1932, Durell Roth's collection.

engineers erected another tower, bringing the total to three, formed an equilateral triangle with the other two, and installed messenger cables to support the reflector.

The engineering staff was already making plans to increase the station's power to 500,000 watts. They started considering the cost of parts, and size of the filament transformers, which alone would cost about \$15,000 each. They came to an estimated potential cost of around \$150,000. This system was never built, but Weldon modified some of the equipment to accommodate some type of power increase in the future.

The next spring, Weldon made some extensive modifications in the power supply. He replaced the original rectifiers with a pair of rectifiers made by Brown-Boveri Company of Switzerland. He made the power supply output voltage continuously variable from 9,000 to 18,000 volts. After this, Weldon modified the transmitter to increase its output power to 180 kilowatts. He also changed the original final amplifier from class-B to class-C and built a new modulator for the system.¹¹

While the power was being increased on the station, more and more people were able to pick up the station from their homes. The Chamber of Commerce in Del Rio welcomed the "Sunshine Station Between the Nations" with a large advertisement. Most of the other businesses did too, such as Marathon Oil, Piggly Wiggly, De Los Santos Music Store, Electric Bakery, the Border Grocery and the Roswell Hotel and Café. Businesses in Villa Acuna got into the welcoming act as well. The leaders of commerce in Villa Acuna recognized the opportunity in the airwaves.

Many of the Doctor's entertainers and radio personalities from his defunct Kansas station went down to Mexico to perform on XER. Singing Cowboy Roy Faulkner came

¹¹ Durell M. Roth, "From the Birth to the Demise of Super-Power station XERA," *Proceedings of The Radio Club of America* Spring 1996, 7.

to entertain listeners with western tunes. Uncle Bob, champion fiddler of Arkansas, played in the new “border blaster” studios as well. The Bluebird Trio, a female singing group, also stopped in to sing for the station.

Most of the citizens of Val Verde County had faith in Doctor’s enterprise. “He is the smartest businessman we have ever seen,” said one admirer. “He is too big for them. His station is too valuable a concession for Mexico to refuse to cooperate with him,” another listener added.¹²

Shortly after New Year’s Day in 1932, a report came in on XER showing that the station received 27,717 pieces of mail in one week. According to the postmarks, XER was being enjoyed in every state of the United States and at least fifteen other countries.

Brinkley heard about some of his employees at his Milford, Kansas hospital, offering their own treatment on the side, which they claimed, was Brinkley’s, but at a greatly reduced price. Brinkley then decided to move the hospital down to Del Rio. His reason for moving was that it cost too much to broadcast from Kansas. He claimed he had nothing but the kindest feelings toward the people of Kansas.

It took a whole caravan of trucks to bring all of his hospital and office equipment down to the border. Doctor leased several floors of the Roswell Hotel in downtown Del Rio to house this new facility. Villa Acuna welcomed Brinkley’s presence down to their area. The Acuna Chamber of Commerce passed a resolution to show Doctor a warm welcome when he came down there again.

But not all of the Mexicans felt the same way about Doctor. The Mexican Health Department fined Brinkley for broadcasting by remote facility in English and for

¹² Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford, *Border Radio* (Austin, Texas: Texas Monthly Press Inc. 1987) 27.

breaching health department regulations in the content of *las transmisiones*. Brinkley appeared not to think anything of the threats and continued transmitting. The Mexican officials didn't back down. On Feb 24, 1932 representatives from the Department of Communications along with Mexican troops took over XER and stopped its transmission.

Doctor gave a report that said, "Conditions became so acute Friday night that I ordered the station closed until legal procedures could iron out all the conditions. We don't anticipate being off the air long; business will be carried out in the usual manner. Patients will be received at the Roswell Hotel; all advertisers of XER will remain in Del Rio and their mail will be received and taken care of as usual."¹³ But in less than a week, the Villa Acuna Broadcasting Company was dissolved.

Brinkley would not be silenced so he bought time on various other radio stations, including KVOD in Denver, KVOR in Colorado Springs, KFEQ in St Joseph, Missouri, and KFBI in Milford, Kansas (formerly Doctor's own KFKB).

Christmas season of 1935 came around, and Doctor Brinkley got his employees together to make holiday baskets for some of the needy around Val Verde County. He then began broadcasting again from XER, now reborn as XERA. James Weldon, the engineer, had repaired the sleeping behemoth and added a directional antenna that pointed the signal towards the north. With an effective radiated power (ERP) of 1,000,000 watts—"The world's most powerful broadcasting station," according to Doctor's literature.¹⁴

¹³ Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford, *Border Radio* (Austin, Texas: Texas Monthly Press Inc. 1987) 32.

¹⁴ Durell Roth, interviewed by author, 8 October 1999, Austin Texas.

Many people believed that all the border blaster stations transmitted millions of watts of power. In the case of XERA, that was untrue. The transmitter never did transmit a million watts. The new directional antenna that sat atop the tower had a great deal of gain. The effective radiated power equaled one million watts, but that was only for a short time. It was taking the gain of the antenna into consideration, not just the transmitter output. When XERA went on the air, it operated on a new frequency of 840 kilocycles. The regular nightly broadcasts had a 100 percent modulated carrier output power of 520,000 watts. With the 3-dB gain in the antenna, XERA had an ERP of just over 1,000,000 watts.

Soon after that, Weldon had accomplished a difficult task. He designed, constructed, tested and put into operation the 500,000-watt power amplifier.¹⁵

One of the rumors regarding XERA that still lives on today is that XERA sold “autographed pictures of Jesus Christ.” This is a myth that has gone on for decades. It all got started by a DJ at one of the border blaster stations, although not XERA. This DJ thought it would be funny if he got on the air and advertised an autographed picture of Jesus. What most of the U.S citizens failed to realize, however, was that Jesus was a very popular name in Mexico. The DJ had found someone with the name of Jesus, gotten his picture taken, and got him to autograph it. The news regarding this picture spread by word of mouth, and people made up details as they went along, claiming that it was Jesus Christ in the picture. Many people wrote wanting pictures, only to get them and find out what they really were. That didn’t stop the rumor from spreading around the country.

¹⁵ Durell M. Roth, “From the Birth to the Demise of Super-Power station XERA,” *Proceedings of The Radio Club of America* Spring 1996, 15.

Doctor opened up a clinic in the spring of 1938 in Mexico. That same year, Dr. Morris Fishbein from the American Medical Association, or “Amateur Meatcutters Association,” as Doctor called them, tried again to ruin Doctor’s reputation by writing articles in the AMA-sponsored journal. Dr. Brinkley was offended and sued “Fishy” for \$250,000 claiming that the libelous article had injured his reputation. The trial began in March 1939. Seven days after the trial began, the jury returned the verdict in favor of Dr. Fishbein. Disgruntled former patients crowded in to file more than \$1,000,000 in lawsuits with charges like “criminal negligence in permitting a patient to bleed to death on the operating table.”¹⁶

Doctor finally declared bankruptcy in the courts of Texas, hoping to save what was left of his crumbling empire. He then announced plans to move the Brinkley Hospital back to the Roswell Hotel in Del Rio. The move never took place. President Manuel Avila Camacho, newly elected leader of the Mexican republic, ordered the expropriation of XERA. According to the Mexican newspaper *Excelsior*, the President asserted that the station had transmitted “news broadcasts unsuitable to the new world,” and was controlled by “foreigners sympathetic to the Nazi cause.”¹⁷ Although there is no indication of Brinkley having anything at all to do with the Nazi’s, many still believed he was sending them secret messages. The *federales* closed in on the tall radio towers outside Villa Acuna and once again silenced Brinkley.

Not too long after that, Doctor suffered a severe heart attack. In August 1941, a blood clot formed in his leg. Gangrene set in, and it became necessary to amputate.

¹⁶ Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford, *Border Radio* (Austin, Texas: Texas Monthly Press Inc. 1987) 43.

¹⁷ Durell Roth, interviewed by author, 8 October 1999, Austin Texas.

While Doctor was in Kansas City, he was arrested by a U.S. marshal on a charge of using the U.S. mails to defraud. "I guess there isn't any danger of my running away," he joked. Brinkley never stood trial for mail fraud. He grew weaker while at a second family home in San Antonio, Texas. On May 26, 1942, John R. Brinkley, M.D., Ph.D., M.C., LL.D., D.P.H., Sc.D., and a member of the National Geographic Society passed away.

After the Mexican authorities removed the equipment from Brinkley's station, they installed the XERA transmitter at station XEX in Mexico City. It is not known if the transmitter was ever put on the air, or whether any of the station still exists. One of the Western Electric 320A final tubes, however, did find it's way to Weldon's company, Continental Electronics, in Dallas, and is currently on display in the lobby.¹⁸

Many folks today remember back when they could hear border blaster stations such as XERA transmitting from Mexico. If one were to bring up the name Dr. Brinkley, most likely they'd say, "Oh yes, the goat-gland man!" Even today, the joke is passed around: "What's the fastest thing on four legs? A goat running past Dr. Brinkley's hospital!"¹⁹

¹⁸Durell M. Roth, "From the Birth to the Demise of Super-Power station XERA," *Proceedings of The Radio Club of America* Spring 1996, 22.

¹⁹ Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford, *Border Radio* Austin, Texas.: Texas Monthly Press Inc. 1987 45.

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