

THE BIRTH OF ABC RADIO AND 2CO STUDIOS ALBURY

Edited talk by June Shanahan (presented at A&DHS General Meeting, November 2005 and reprinted from A&DHS Bulletin No 453)

The radio manufacturing industry in Australia was led by George Fisk of Amalgamated Wireless Australasia (AWA). He lobbied the Government for the introduction of radio broadcasting in the early years. In May 1923 the Government called a conference of the main players. This led to the sealed set regulations where stations could be licensed to broadcast and then sell sets to "listeners in." The receiving device would be set to receive only that station. 2FC in Sydney was the first to be licensed on July 1, 1923, but its opponent 2SB (later called 2BL) was first to go to air officially starting on November 23 that year. 3AR and 3LO went to air on January 26 and October 13, 1924 in Melbourne.

However the sealed set scheme wasn't taken to by the listeners, only 1400 people took out sealed set licences in the first six months of 1924. It was quite easy to avoid the licence fee by building your own set or modifying one you had bought to receive more than one station. There were two types of licence – 'A' and 'B.' The 'B' stations had to generate their own revenue through advertising. 'A' class stations could advertise too but few did.

The Australian Broadcasting Company

In 1929 the Government did rationalise the transmission facilities and contracted the provision of programming to the Australian Broadcasting Company, a consortium of entertainment interests. This company was nationalised in 1932 by the Australian Broadcasting Commission Act. So in 1932 the two tier system was finalised: the national broadcaster, the ABC, with 12 stations and the commercial sector.

2CO Albury

The transmitter at Corowa was built for the Postmaster-General's Department by Standard Telephones and Cables (Australasia) Ltd. at a cost of £20,000. Electricity was laid on to the site by the Corowa Municipal Council from its local generating station. It was owned by the Post and Telecommunications Department, Canberra and it was manned by technicians employed by the Post Master General's department. The technician in charge was on call 24 hours a day, so an on-site residence was provided for the technician in charge next door to the transmitter.

At that time there were more than 300 thousand licence holders in Australia and the number was rapidly growing. 2CO was designed to serve several hundred thousand people, in the Riverina down west as far as Wentworth, North-Eastern and Northern Victoria who previously had been out of range or were plagued by interference and static. Because of the large area to be served, 2CO was at that time the most powerful radio transmitter in the Southern Hemisphere and more than twice as powerful as any other transmitter in Australia. It had an aerial power of seven and half kilowatts and broadcast with a wavelength of 536.7 metres.

2CO was linked to the national network, with programs provided mainly through 3AR or 3LO in Melbourne which in turn was on relay from Sydney in the earlier years, but to a much lesser extent now because of the great expansion over the years in the local program content. Why did they build the transmitter so far from Albury? Was it because of the hills that surround Albury? The advice from the Postmaster General's Department, later known as Post & Telecommunications was that each time they built a new transmitter they had to find suitable land as the soil played an important role where the transmitters would be built.

The official opening ceremony of the transmitter was held on December 16, 1931 at the Corowa Literary Institute. A variety of musical items and entertainment was broadcast throughout the network.

There was already a commercial station in Albury that opened up a year or two earlier. Cecil Rice held the licence for 2AY and later passed it over to AWA. As well as the Corowa transmitter station, 2CO was provided with a small broadcasting studio in the Albury Post Office. There was a local part time employee whose responsibility was to compile and broadcast important local service information. This consisted mainly of news items compiled by agreement with district newspapers, weather reports and marketing information. The studio was a small sound-proofed room with a microphone, gramophones for inserting some musical items into the local programme and a telephone for news gathering.

The first employee was Arthur Newnham an officer with the electricity section of Albury City Council and the earliest records show he was paid two guineas a week for his services to the Australian Broadcasting Company. Arthur Newnham continued on the payroll and the same system of obtaining news with the co-operation of newspapers continued.

Arthur Newnham was the principal actor in the rescue of the Uiver, the KLM (Dutch) aircraft which was running second in the London to Melbourne air race. Unfortunately they flew too far east and into a severe electrical storm on the night of October 23, 1934. Radio broadcasts had indicated that the DC2 aircraft was off course and lost, but its whereabouts were not known until the drone of an aircraft was heard over Henty and then later Albury. Arthur Newnham realised it was the missing "Uiver" and raced to the studio, but found there was no PMG mechanics on



Arthur Newnham in the Albury ABC Studio, 1932

duty to put the broadcasting equipment into operation. With the assistance of the engineer at the 2CO transmitter, Mr Jim Nichols, Arthur used an ordinary hand telephone as a microphone and Jim broadcast his voice over the transmitter, calling on car owners to go to the Albury racecourse ASAP to illuminate a makeshift landing strip with their headlights. At the same time street lights were being flashed on and off in Albury to transmit the town's name in Morse code. The aviators Parmentier and Moll with limited passengers on board saw the signals and the headlights. They dropped a couple of flares and landed the Uiver safely on the very rain drenched racecourse and became bogged. The next morning they off loaded all cargo and the Uiver was pulled out of the bog by about 300 residents. The aviators flew on to Melbourne to finish the race.

In later years just in case of emergencies like the Uiver, there were standby diesel generators which came on automatically in case of power failure and also systems for relaying ABC programmes off air from the other transmitters in case of failure in the land lines. Later the ABC leased two rooms upstairs in Temple Court Chambers in Dean Street Albury and these were fitted out as a rather more elaborate studio and a newsroom. The original transmitters were replaced with more modern equipment in the 1960's but the original buildings and masts remain [2005]. The original serial wires strung between the masts remained in service until a severe wind storm in November 1980 caused damage which led to their replacement.

With the increasing work Mr Newnham was joined by another part time staff member, Mr Cleaver Bunton who was an accountant, Alderman on the Albury City Council and later Mayor for a record term. Mr Bunton was also Albury news correspondent and part time announcer until 1975 when he was appointed to fill a casual vacancy in the Australian Senate and was precluded from holding any other position with the Commonwealth. Cleaver Bunton read the

6.53 pm regional news every night - Monday to Friday and he would come in on a Saturday evening to do the sporting results.

Arthur Newnham continued his association with 2CO until 1949 when he retired after 18 years service. In that time he had seen and contributed to a great expansion in radio broadcasting in Australia and had become a household name to many thousands of people through daily local news broadcasts. In 1949 the ABC appointed its first regional officer, Mr. Don Lassam, who became station announcer and interviewer and represented the BBC's interests in the area.

The first full time recruitment to the staff of 2CO was made with the appointment of Basil Patman as Regional Journalist. He had been formerly employed on the highly respected rural newspaper, the *Albury Banner* and before that had a varied career embracing service in the British Army during the Boxer Rebellion in China and in France during the First World War. When he joined the ABC he was occupied initially in setting up the network of contract correspondents and organising news gathering for the vast region that was his responsibility.

Despite the difficulties of communications and the quite primitive conditions in the new office and studio in Temple Court, overlooking Dean Street, Basil successfully laid the foundation on which later advances in news gathering rebuilt. In July, 1960 Basil retired and was succeeded by Arthur Moffat, who began a new career in radio journalism following a distinguished record in newspapers in the area.

There were evening and morning news bulletins every day, and a rural breakfast session at 7am from the Wagga Wagga Studios. In the earlier years ABC radio serials were broadcast live from the studios at Newcastle and Sydney. "Blue Hills" was broadcast on the ABC for 27 years, from February 1949 to September 1976. It ran for a total of 5,795 episodes, and was at one time the world's longest-running radio serial. It certainly had a great following. The ABC Country Hour, broadcast every lunch hour Monday to Friday, was a favourite with the farmers. The rural program and markets reports each morning from our Wagga Rural office was also very popular.

Early in the 1950s the studios were transferred to a two story house opposite the Botanic gardens on the corner of Thurgoona and Dean Streets, Albury which served as newsroom, general office, studio and residence for the regional Manager. When emergencies occurred the full resources of the station were thrown into serving the community. Over the years the story has been the same on many occasions usually with emergencies such as bush fires and floods. Staff were willing to work long hours to keep the public informed of any crisis.

With all the demands the premises in Dean Street were stretched beyond endurance and new leased premises were obtained in the former Sammons Edward Building in Townsend Street and converted into a modern studio, offices and news centre.

At the same time the ABC was starting its television services throughout the country and transmitters were installed at Shepparton, Albury, Wagga and Griffith. Soon afterwards production of regional television news bulletins began for the Albury and Shepparton transmitters. Television from Shepparton (GMV6) was launched on December 23, 1961, and from Albury (AMV4 and ABCTV) on September 7, 1964. In December 1964 there was a joint celebration with the opening of 2CO's new premises in Townsend Street and ABCTV2.

The radio studios in Townsend Street were equipped with the most modern type of programme making equipment, including tape recording and editing machines which were a far cry from the wire recorders which had been used only a few years previously for outside recording expeditions. A larger news office was provided, extra facilities, including modern teleprinters and telephones installed to handle the increased work load and more news operations assistants joined the staff.