

The Voice of Martin County-KFVN Radio

“The voice of Martin County,” as reported in the July 3, 1925, edition of the Martin County Sentinel, was Martin County’s first radio station, KFVN. The radio station, called a sending station at that time, was established in 1924 and was located in Welcome, Minnesota. It was said to put Welcome more prominently on the map than she ever dreamed of being, while at the same time making the world a smaller place.

The radio station was the dream of Carl Bagley, known then as Welcome’s electrical wizard, with the help of Fairmont resident C. F. Gaarenstroom. Bagley first consulted then attorney Gaarenstroom to join him in operating a radio station. Gaarenstroom agreed, although somewhat apprehensively, and soon the project moved forward.

Bagley built a 60 foot wooden tower all by himself and installed the heart of the station in his own living room, which also served as both studio A and studio B. A Dunwoody Institute broadcasting set was purchased for the station at an estimated cost of \$3,400. It was rated a very high powered sending set that was said to have been heard by every state in the union. Bagley was known to play Bach and Beethoven on his piano as he didn’t have any phonograph records in the early days of the station.

KFVN was dedicated by noted speakers of the time and local entertainment. The dedication ceremony of the station included speeches and music lasting for more than two hours. Some of the speakers present included former St. Paul Mayor Larry Hodson, Hennepin County Attorney Floyd B. Olson, Larry Ho of Minneapolis, attorney C. F. Gaarenstroom, and Sentinel Publisher Frank A. Day. It was reported that Pete Corey, the announcer, had to chase Mr. Day around the living room as he paced like a caged lion addressing his remarks to everyone in the room except the microphone.

The station proved interesting in many ways. At 9:00 p.m., KFVN’s operator would hold the single microphone outside Bagley’s living room window and broadcast to listeners the screech of the village curfew. The first test program resulted in more than 75 telephone reports bringing words of both encouragement and criticism to the station. Test programs included local speakers and musical talent from throughout the county. Criticism was solicited, as the station acknowledged, because, “A slight adjustment to the

microphone or some other of the thousand and one mysterious parts around a broadcasting station may double the entertainment value of the selection given.” The goal of the station was to provide listeners with the best broadcast quality, talent, and entertainment in the county. All the artists were Martin County residents. Advertisers could buy time for \$25.00, and sometimes heard their product plugged all night. Prizes were awarded to the first to call in that received the program, and to those receiving the program from the longest distance away. Callers to the station commented on the good reception. They also voiced complaints of too much talking by the announcers and not enough entertainment. During its heyday, the station once drew 1,500 people to the Fairmont armory for a hog calling contest. However, much to the dismay of the station operators, something went wrong with the wiring, and the broadcast never went out over the airwaves.

It was reported in an article paying tribute to the station in the March 5, 1952, edition of the Fairmont Daily Sentinel that Mr. Bagley eventually became restless and couldn't stay put. He was upset when a \$27.50 tube blew out and the replacement was more than KFVN had in the treasury. Gaarenstroom concluded in the article, that “Bagley was a genius with a dream which he made come true. We never understood where the money came from, or how he lived. Now we know. He rented his own house and used the money for the station. During it all, he lived on crackers and milk.”

The station eventually moved to Fairmont and became known as KFVN, The Royal Penn Station of the Southern Minnesota Oil Company. The station's goal and purpose was primarily for the improvement of the community spirit of Martin County. In 1926 Bagley and Gaarenstroom were offered \$5,000.00 to sell the station as authorized wave lengths were in short supply at that time, however, they refused, stating that “We are going to keep our station for Martin County.” Shortly thereafter, the station owners soon began to drift away, and the KFVN went out of existence.

Visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont to learn more about KFVN.

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