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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH
WILLARD S. WILSON, SR.
"RADIO PIONEER"
JULY 9, 1976

Transcribed by:

R. Herman

February 8, 1978

Interview with Willard S. Wilson, Sr.

Wilmington, Delaware

July 9, 1976

Interviewer: Rebecca Button

B = Rebecca Button

W = Willard Wilson

B: Mr. Wilson, when did you begin your first radio interest?

W: Well, my first radio interest was around 1909 or 1910. It was not called radio in those days. It was called wireless. There were several short-wave wireless stations by Wilmington boys, among which was myself and Mr. N Morgan who was the organist at Grace Church and several other people. Of course, there was a wireless station on top of the DuPont building for commercial purposes and to send messages to the ships at sea and as they were coming up the Delaware River to send messages to them and that's the time I became interested in learning what the so called wireless was all about.

B: Had you heard about it from someone who was working with it?

W: No, I don't believe so but they had large towers and the aerial on top of the DuPont building. The first section of the little DuPont building, then in comparison to what it is now, that was at the corner of 10th and Market. They had the high towers there. And I became interested I presume by seeing those wireless towers and my curiosity led me to take an interest in it and I learned the radio code and built myself my first wireless receiver which was in around 1909 or 1910 when I was going to Number Twenty-Eight Grammar School.

B: Did you have a group of boys with you then?

W: Well, there were several boys that were interested in wireless around that time or shortly after. Namely, the only one that is still living in Wilmington is Charlie Huber who has a sporting goods store on 9th. Street. And the other youngsters or boys that were with me as teenagers; I think they've all passed away by this time. So, there's no one left of the early boys except Charlie Huber and Fred Gooding also had a wireless spark set. It was made with a little Ford spark coil and we could communicate for several miles with it, with a spark.

B: What was the next step?

W: Well, the next step was enlarging the station and as the wireless grew in popularity, there were a number of other chaps that became interested in wireless and I have a book here, a directory of the wireless stations in Wilmington or in Delaware, 1912 and 1913, which gives a list of all of the...this is all that were in the entire country and I've made a note of the ones that were in Wilmington, namely Charles Huber. And even the DuPont company had a wireless station showing on top of the DuPont building at 10th and Market Streets. And then Frederick R. Gooding, that was three in this area or in the state of Delaware that are in this particular government book, which is a first licensed amateurs' in 1913. But of...I had my wireless before that. When I first built my wireless set, there were no regulations. We didn't need a license. It was purely experimental and there were no rules or regulations. You can see that my call was W3IV, Willard S. Wilson and I lived at 705 Adams Street in Wilmington. This was in 1913. And that's the list of licensed wireless or so

called wireless. Although now it is called radio, which I believe is the earliest of any activity in the state of Delaware.

B: When did you decide to try to have a sending rather than receiving?

W: Oh, I was sending at all times from 1909 and 10 until today. I'm still sending and receiving.

B: You have your own ah set?

W: I have my own transmitting and receiving station at my home now. But of course I can talk all over the world now. The art has progressed to such a point where...when I started we could only talk a few miles, now we talk around the world.

B: When did you change from the amateur status to your first radio station?

W: Well I didn't build WDEL or as far as the commercial activity was concerned until I was out of the Navy in World War One. Previous to that when I got out of high school in the class of 1914, I went to sea as a wireless operator aboard ships for the Marconi Company as a commercial wireless operator. And I did that for several years before I joined the Navy from World War One.

B: So when you came back from the first war, did you think about radio stations?

W: Oh very much so and I also thought of that and was very active in my radio or wireless activities then and I built a very amateur type transmitting station that could send out some voices, music, which is as early as anyone did. But I had no government license at that time. My government license came after I built

a more sophisticated station in 1922, I believe. You can see the date on my first station was...

B: August 1, 1922

W: Yes, that's when I was first licensed and there was no one licensed previous to that.

B: What was that like?

Where was it located?

W: It was built, located and operated right in my home at 705 Adams Street. I was the chief engineer, the builder, the announcer, the piano player and studio operator and everything. It was a one man radio station.

B: Who was your first additional help?

W: Well, I can't remember now. I had a number of local chaps that helped me but I don't remember who they may have been.

B: Did you start having regular news or anything of the kind we have today?

W: No, that didn't come until several years later. We first started broadcast the church services on Sunday from several local churches in the community including West Presbyterian Church of which I was a member. And, then we gradually built it up to news broadcasts and I moved the station from my home to the top floor of the Mullin building down at Sixth and Market Streets. And, we used to broadcast there and then I hired ah somebody to operate the station while I announced and played the piano and did the other activities.

B: What kind of a piano did you buy for yourself?

W: We didn't buy it. There was an old piano up on the top floor of the Mullin building and we ah. I don't know how it got there

but that's the one we used and we used that to play to give some live music. But of course then we also later on used phonograph records. And when we used to do that, we always had to announce that this is a phonograph record. You had to identify the music that it was not live and in those days, we would say that this is a phonograph record. Let to be... not to... not to deceive the people thinking that we had an orchestra of our own.

B: Well, did you have amateur musicians coming in?

W: Oh yes. In my own home, when I first started out in my own home, we had local orchestras. We had George Kelly's orchestra, many orchestras right in our own living room. That was our studio. And we had local orchestras and uh singers and entertainers operating right from my home. We'd wake up the whole neighborhood. But that was the way it was done in the beginning.

B: So you went to Mullin's when?

W: Well, we went to Mullin's several years after uh in maybe in 1924. I think I was operating from my home for a year or two.

B: Well, were the call letters WDEL at that time?

W: No, no. The call letters were WHAV. That was the original call assigned to the station. And then later on in order to identify the station more to it's geographical location, we uh I requested the call letters be changed to WDEL which were... would signify the location much better, Wilmington, Delaware. WDEL is very appropriate and that's what happened. They changed my call letters from WHAV to WDEL of which it has been ever since.

B: And what was the original power that you went on?

W: Well, the original power of my station that I built in its beginning was fifty watts.

B: And now the station is five thousand watts.

W: I think it's five thousand...at least five thousand now. And the FM station is much greater. There was not such a thing in those days as FM or frequency modulation. It was all so called AM or amplitude modulation.

B: What were the commercial problems as you began to grow? Did you get a salesman to sell?

W: Oh yes. We'd finally got a salesman and, and then in the late twenties, we moved up to 922 Shipley Street. That was uh on the uh east side of Shipley Street on the on the second floor. We leased a space up there and moved the station to that location. And previous to that though, I think after uh being at home in 1922, we went to the uh top of the DuPont building and put the station up there because it was high in the air and we figured it could send out better in those days by getting up high in the air. And I think if my memory serves me correctly, that we moved from the top of the DuPont building. Mr. duPont, one of the duPonts, gave me permission to use a little space up in a little room on the top of the roof to put the equipment up there. And we moved from there down to the Mullin building where we had more room.

B: Oh, you mean you went back down to Mullin building?

W: No, no. We didn't go back. We went there...I think we went to the DuPont building from my home.

B: Oh

W: And then from the DuPont building down to Mullin's and then from the Mullin building; we kept the transmitting station there but we moved the studios from the Mullin building, which was not a

studio. It was just an empty third or fourth floor I believe. And we opened up a regular so called studio a 922 Shipley Street, which we used for several years until... and then we were beginning to sell announcements and do more commercial business. So that we then leased the studio space in the Odd Fellows building at 10th and King Streets. That was around 1927 or '28.

B: And that was a long time, that tenancy.

W: Oh yes. That tenancy lasted there for many years, until after I had sold the station in '31...I believe. And they still used the studios there that I had originally built and installed until WDEL moved to their present buildings outside of the city of Wilmington. So that was a sort of a wind up of the commercial radio activity as far as public broadcasting was concerned.

B: Did you have any kind of feeling of competition at all with the newspapers?

W: Oh no. I don't think so. But during the depression uh business was rather difficult for everyone, so this uh the newspapers, the owners of the newspapers, in Lancaster, Pennsylvania approached me to sell the station. They owned a station in Lancaster and I didn't want to sell because if I did I'd rather sell it to a local. The local newspaper should have been interested in getting this station but no one of local... no one local seemed to be interested in it... acquiring this station. So the Lancaster station bought the other. There was another little station, WILM, that had been built and they purchased that station and more or less did that to coerce me into selling my station which was the number one main station. So I finally

agreed to sell to them. Now then, they owned both stations. But... they were and it's still owned and controlled by out of state people. The uh my station is... although later on, some years ago, the government required the owners to dispose of WILM because they could not own legally... control both stations in the city of Wilmington. So they were ... they had sold the uh WILM the smaller station which a one hundred watts station and my station at the time it was sold was classified as a five hundred watt station.

B: So you had moved it from one hundred watts to five hundred watts in about ten years or under ten years.

W: Yeah. And from then on it grew. It gradually grew up to its present status.

B: An interesting comment about the early station, recorded in the Sunday Star for 1925. "Radio station WHAV owned and operated by Wilmington Electrical Specialty Company, Willard S. Wilson, a one hundred watts station operating on two hundred and sixty six meter wave length, was discontinued. Baltimore and Wilmington were both without radio stations. We signed off for the summer."

W: I thought that was quite interesting.

B: When did your broadcast day begin?

W: Well, I don't know. I'd have to get some of the old newspapers to see how early. We started quite early in the mornings after we got established in a more commercial way. We would start off with early morning news and go right through... or in morning right up until perhaps midnight with news and local radio. There was more local talent then. It wasn't...we had network...

We had a network connection with New York and we would take some programs from Chinatown Rescue Mission in New York which was very popular at that time in the twenties.

B: What was that? What was the Chinese Rescue Mission?

W: Well, that was a religious ah type of program similar to they have now on Sundays and uh it was the Reverend Tom Newnan. He was called the Bishop of Chinatown and he had a very large audience. I remember I had him come to Wilmington to address the people in Wilmington and we had West Church overflowing with people. They couldn't get in. We had so many people there to hear Reverend Tom Newnan, the Bishop of Chinatown.

B: Well, how did he land in Chinatown with a name like Newnan?

W: The Bishop of Chinatown is in New York City...Chinatown is in New York and he was...he had... he had been more or less the superintendent of a rescue mission that took care of people like the Salvation Army there. It was a sort of a religious ah charitable unit that operated similar to other organizations to help the derelict and the poor people.

B: Were people more interested in that kind of program then do you think?

W: Well, they were very much...it was a very, very interesting program because he was a good speaker and uh that's been over fifty years ago. But it was very popular. It was on every Sunday and we uh as I say we had the Reverend come down and make an un to come to Wilmington in person and we had the church overflowing. We must've had a thousand people there.

B: What about children's programing? Did you have early children programing?

W: Yes. We had some but not of any great extent. We had a lot of local talent. But it was mostly local talent...local orchestras, local vocalists and then a lot of phonograph records. I remember one time we had Amos 'n Andy program which became the most top rated program in the country on radio. Before it became so well known and so well accepted, we had big phonograph discs of the program which we tried to sell the Amos 'N Andy program uh. It was sent out to the stations on phonograph, on big long playing phonograph records you know. And I remember taking that around trying to get the local merchants to sponsor Amos 'n Andy and we couldn't find any merchants in Wilmington to sponsor the program. And it turned out to be the greatest radio program in its time.

B: Well, was that the first serialized type of program?

W: Yes. That was one of the first... yes.

B: And that then became the best selling program.

W: Oh, they...they became the top radio program of the whole country. Everybody would be home in time to listen to Amos 'n Andy. Of course, you don't remember it.

B: I see you were interviewing Lindbergh on WDEL's call letters when he arrived at Baynard Stadium in 1927. That was a kind of first wasn't it?

W: Well, that was one of the first of Lindbergh naturally here in Wilmington. Prior to approximately 1920, the term wireless was used in radio communication but after 1920 it became...radio became the word that was used for electronic communication.

B: Ah, what about the time you had the radio in the car and, or it caused a sensation on Market Street?

W: Oh, oh yes. Now where is that? Now, shut it off for a second.

I have a note here from the Delmarva Star dated June the 18th, 1922. The headline in the paper states that "A radio flivver caused a Market Street sensation. 'Receiving and sending on local radio phones were both good last week and is reported. Perhaps the most striking event of the week was the appearance of a flivver converted into a radio station on Market Street and the giving of free concerts to a group of radio enthusiasts on the street. The car was sent out by the Wilmington Specialty Corporation as a... and was in charge of John Mertz and Willard Wilson. This is the first time that a radio bus has appeared in.....' "

B: Ah, in Delaware it grew immensely from 1913 to 1922. You pointed out ah looking at the records in the directory.....

W: The government call book or ah radio directory in April of 1922, lists all the radio amateur radio stations in the country and the number of amateur radio stations in the Wilmington and Delaware area has grown to nineteen from about three or four in 1910-12. It has grown to almost twenty by 1922.

B: When did you start needing a license? When did the government require a license?

W: The government required a license in nineteen....The radio licenses were started in 1912. My uh between 1909 and 1912 I signed my first initials as my call letters. I used WS which were the first two letters of my initials W.S.W. and I used WS because the government issued no licenses or call letters until the Radio Act of 1912.

B: How did HAV happen? Why would that be a call letter?

W: Because that's what the government assigned you. When you applied for a license, the government automatically picked out four letters for radio stations...commercial radio stations. And that's what happened to come up that they gave me, WHAV. Of course they had issued licenses to ships many years before that. The ships at sea when I went to sea as a commercial wireless operator for the Marconi Company, I was assigned to a ship on the Merchants and Miners line which uh was a combination of freight and passenger liner that ran from Philadelphia to Savannah and Jacksonville. And my...the call letters on that...on that boat what was the steamship Dorchester...the call letters was KQD. And I'm a life member in the Society of Wireless Pioneers and I'm a Sparket Pioneer. And I believe, uh there are no one...there's no...no one left in Delaware. There were several of us here but I...they have passed away and I'm the only Pioneer remaining at this...at the present time.

B: What was the first electric radio that you brought to Wilmington?

W: Well, the first electric radio that we brought to Wilmington... Previous to that time they would all operate on batteries. And I flew out to Michigan with Mr. Shirley Shourd who was a pilot for the Bilanca Company and we stopped at the Spartan Radio plant in Jackson, Michigan and brought back a console radio receiving uh unit which was all electric. Which was the first all electric radio brought into the state of Delaware. And that was on March the 1st, 1929. Previous to that time, they had all used uh wet batteries or dry batteries.

B: And ah, it points out that WDEL was licensed in 1926 or rather it received its call letters in 1926.

W: Yeah. I think perhaps they were changed to DEL in '26 according to this story here which may be correct but....

B: And you requested those call letters?

W: Oh yes.

B: In other words, people could request a change.

W: Oh yes. If uh if it was...if the call letters hadn't been assigned to someone else and they were more appropriate for this location. The government would be very...were always willing to change the letters which would be more suitable for the location. And that's the reason because WHAV did have no...had no local meaning.

B: In the pictures that you have shown here including the listing of programing from KDKA in Pittsburgh, for example, must mean that there were some very important early stations that other stations got their programs from. Was KDKA one of those?

W: Oh yes. Well they had...most of their programs were locally sponsored and locally obtained by local talent. The so called networks were come...were developed later on, not in the beginning. It was all done by local talent.

B: But you did use some KDKA programs.

W: We may have later on, similar programs, yes. That was...would be later on of course. Then later on when the NBC was formed and the...they began to have networks tied in through the telephone lines all over the country.

B: Do you remember when NBC was formed?

W: No.

B: When WDEL joined that?

W: No.

B: Was that under you?

W: No. I forget...No, they joined right after I think...right after I sold the station in the...around 1930 or '31. When WDEL was sold to the present Lancaster, Pennsylvania owners, it was sold for fifty thousand dollars.

B: Ah, is that the Steinman group?

W: That's correct. Yes. My lawyer told me that perhaps I could sell it and maybe buy it back. But he turned out to give me uh poor advice because it was not for sale and if I had tried to buy it back, it would cost millions instead of the small sum that I received for the station at the time it was sold. But of course during the depression fifty thousand dollars sounded like a fortune.

B: It was. Especially because the income tax was low then.

W: Oh sure, but uh a lot of people tell me ever since then for many, many years, they say "Willard, aren't you sorry you sold your radio station?" I said "I don't think so." I had my electronic business. I was very busy in the early days. I had my... I started the first radio store in Wilmington. I started the first radio broadcasting station. I had one of the first dance orchestras because I played piano and organ.

B: What was your dance orchestra?

W: It was called Billy Wilson's orchestra. And...but of course before I had my dance orchestra after I got out of high school and when I would come home, when I was not doing wireless operating back in the ah 1916, I played the organ for the silent movies at the Grand Opera House...for the movies in the summertime. And I also played the piano when the DuPont company ran silent

movies in the playhouse. I think I did that for a month or two one summer in the...around 1916 and I think I got fifteen dollars a week for playing the piano everyday for the silent movies in the playhouse in the DuPont building.

B: That was a step up from the Grand.

W: Yes. They were the two places where I played. The Grand...I played the organ at the Grand Opera House and I played the piano at the playhouse.

B: Is that when the Grand Opera House had vaudeville?

W: Oh no, no. This was silent movies at the Grand Opera House.

B: The Queen had vaudeville.

W: I think so and D had vaudeville.

B: What was that? Where was that?

W: D was north of...right up on Market Street towards 9th Street. D vaudeville was a famous vaudeville house. That was before your time.

B: And where is that? Where would that have been? Like the block before ah...

W: Just before...

B: Rodney Square?

W: you get to the Wilmington Saving fund on Market Street between 8th and 9th.

B: Well, were you and George Kelly major orchestras at that time?

W: Yes. Myself and George Kelly and Lloyd Shorter. They were... we were the three orchestra operators at that time.

B: Did you go right into ah you had your specialty company. Did you start in electronics immediately after selling the station?

W: Oh no. I started my radio store in 1920 before I...before I

built WDEL. I started my radio station when I er I built... started my radio store right after I got out of the service in World War One in the Navy.

B: So you just continued that after you sold the station.

W: Oh the store was continued. Yes. We moved from 912 Orange Street up to Delaware Avenue at 405 where we remained for over fifty years. We recently sold that or er accepted a transfer because the DuPont Company had been after me for several years to obtain the land because they wanted...Mr. H.B. duPont...a foundation wanted to tear down the buildings that were there to build a park which has just been completed.

B: And where is that exactly in relation to the Brandywine building for instance?

W: It's right directly west of the Brandywine building in that whole triangle...Sure the new park...

B: That's where the Fire House was wasn't it?

W: It was. The Fire House and my three buildings were there. It's all gone. Haven't you seen the new park?

B: Yes, but I wasn't think...I didn't realize that that was the same place.

W: Oh absolutely. Surely. And now we're out in the suburbs in the Fairfax Shopping Center which was acquired by DuPont and given to us for our buildings in town. So that's the reason we're here.

Two years prior to my uh finishing high school in 1914, I went to Philadelphia and passed the examination and received a.. a wireless operator's license which gave me authority to act as a wireless operator aboard any passenger ship. That was in 1912.

But I didn't go to sea until I got out of school in 1914.

B: Did the guys who shared your interest in starting their own wireless sets live in your neighborhood?

W: Not...

B: Fred Gooding?

W: Well, they didn't...They lived somewhat in my neighborhood.

Now Fred lived up on Broom Street. Charlie Huber lived in uh down on West Street I believe or someplace and N Morgan, the organist, he lived down on Washington Street I think between 8th and 9th on Washington and then there was a Bill Erickson who lived over around 12th and West Street and several others that I cannot remember.

B: Did you send and receive to each other then?

W: Oh yes. We could talk all around town with our little spark coils.

B: Did your father encourage you?

W: No. My father was a...He was the organist at West Presbyterian Church. He was a music teacher. That's where I inherited my organ and piano ability I presume because he taught me a little bit but nothing regularly.

B: O.K. Now...

W: To speak of the continued growth of the amateur radio or wireless, of course it's called radio now, as of June 30, 1931, the United States Department of Commerce Amateur Radio Station Call Book shows a total of thirty one from 1931...there were say...no...thirty one stations in Delaware. Now in 1975, the Call Book shows between six and seven hundred. So it shows how it has mushroomed during the last twenty or thirty years.

B: Do you have meetings with the people with their....

W: Oh yes. There are several local radio clubs that meet to discuss the technical aspects of the art and have social activities because they're all interested like camera clubs and boat clubs and these radio clubs are all interested in radio and then the electronics which er the company...the radio apparatus.

B: Were you sorry to see WDEL TV disappear?

W: Yes. Well, WDEL TV was started during the television boom but there was not enough local support to carry it so it had to be discontinued and finally dissolved and then it became the...the license which the government allocated to the state of Delaware was given to ah Public Broadcasting Service which is now being used on Channel 12.

B: Is there any hope that an additional television license could be given?

W: No, I don't think so, not in the state of Delaware. It's not necessary. We are so well covered and we are so close to the Philadelphia and Baltimore and New Jersey stations that there's no need as far as I can see of there ever being another commercial broadcasting station because they couldn't receive enough support to carry it along financially. But the radio spectrum... There's not enough channels available so they...there's no channel to be given another station if they applied for it. The government has no channel to give them. They're all used up by this time. The city tried...they uh they built a commercial UHF station which was ah they received a license but they couldn't obtain enough business to operate it financially and ran it at such a loss that it was washed out. And I think the

same thing would happen to Delaware. There's nobody in Delaware... and there's not enough business in locally and the costs of maintaining and operating and building and the initial investment of a television station is so great now and the operating costs so high that the state couldn't afford it.

B: What about the new technology like the glass fiber or filament that is now coming in in television?

W: Well, that is for...that's for the transmission of television signals by glass filament. But that...that is many years off. They're still using the cables or microwave where they need no...no filaments or no cables or no wires or anything. Most of the future in television will be by microwave and satellite. The glass...the glass filaments transmit laser signals is many years away in my opinion. And it may replace the underground cables. But that will only be supplementary to the...to the microwave and satellite systems. They will be the... the satellite systems is the big...big coming way.

B: Well, in other words, the glass filament or the laser transmission may not be needed then.

W: Maybe not. Although it's still being...it's still being handling experimentally. But whether it'll become...it'll cost so much money to place laser transmission underground instead of the cables that by that time we may not need it because everything perhaps...everything will be handled by satellite. Oh, I don't know what to talk about now...Since the call letters were changed from WHAV to WDEL on March the 28th, 1928.

B: You had your radio store. You were as much a pioneer in radio equipment and sales as you were owner and operator of a radio

station. Was the sale of radio sets growing very rapidly as soon as the all electric radio came in?

W: Oh yes indeed. After...people had been using batteries and earphones and crystal sets and all of the pioneer type of the equipment.

B: What was a crystal set?

W: Well, a crystal set composed of a little piece of galena or a similar crystal which would rectify ah the wound of the radio waves which you could hear in earphones. It rectified the radio signal into a sound signal.

B: And it ran on batteries?

W: Yeah, it ran on batteries. Some of them uh would mostly use batteries. The crystal sets would use a dry cell or something to furnish the amount, a very small amount of voltage or current necessary. But then later on in the late twenties, the vacuum tube was developed and became prominent in later on in the twenties. From the crystal set we got into the one tube set and then three or four tubes and then we got into the all electric set. They developed tubes that would work right off... off the house current...the electricity...

B: And was that when the radio boom in sales happened?

W: Oh yes. The boom was on just before the 1929 crash. The radio boom was on and people were buying them by the millions. So it was... it was the thing in those days.

B: Thank you very much Mr. Wilson.