Early Commercial Radio Broadcasting in Canada, 1918-1932

Commercial radio in Canada began with Montréal station XWA. From its first broadcasts until the creation of a public system in 1932, a radio craze swept the country, establishing a new mass communication industry that would dramatically alter the way in which Canadians consumed news and entertainment. With new French and English-language stations going on the air and thousands of radio receivers sold across the country, private broadcasting in Canada quickly became a dominant cultural and economic force. French and English-language private radio stations established during this period provided the initial infrastructure for national radio in Canada, and greatly influenced Canada’s public broadcasting system, starting with the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission in 1932.

By transmitting in both French and English, radio brought social and political discussion and debate into Canadian homes, merging public and private spheres to engage a wide cross-section of Canadians. From that single station grew an industry that over the course of the next 12 years ushered in the modern era of mass communication. By 1922, there were 39 radio stations in Canada. This ‘radio craze’ captured Canadians attention, as radio shifted from a medium dominated by hobbyists to one with a significant commercial presence. Between 1922 and 1932, the number of commercial radio stations nearly doubled to 77. That growth was matched with radio sales, as 52,500 radio sets were sold in Canada in 1928. By 1931, that number had jumped to 173,200. Even in the midst of the Great Depression, the radio industry was growing.

Commercial radio in Canada got its start with the Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company of Canada in 1918. From its Montréal facility, this company experimented with wireless broadcasting and received a licence for station XWA in December 1919. A year later, the station started a regular schedule of transmissions.

The station that would become CFCF by Government of Canada

Year 2020 marks the 100th anniversary of radio broadcasting in Canada. To celebrate this occasion, we would like to do a virtual Show and Tell in the next bulletin. Please submit photos of a radio and a brief description of how you obtain the radio. Thank you.
a combination of its own stations and ‘phantom’ stations to provide entertainment to passengers on board its trains. The network used telegraph and telephone lines along the railway to connect its stations. With that as a model, commercial stations connected to provide national coverage of major events. The most prominent of these occurred in July 1927 when CFCF (formerly XWA) served as the anchor station for the coast to coast broadcast that marked Canada’s Diamond Jubilee.

The Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission, Canada’s first public broadcaster, was established in 1932 and with it the era of exclusively private radio came to an end, but it was a period that would establish the basis of Canadian broadcasting for the 20th century. In a little over a decade, radio had gone from a niche hobby to a major cultural industry.
of activities to mark the 100th anniversary of radio broadcasting in Canada.

In 1919, XWA — for experimental wireless apparatus — began transmitting from a studio in the Marconi Wireless Telegraph Co. factory in Griffintown, according to media historian Mary Vipond in Listening In: The First Decade of Canadian Broadcasting, 1922-1932 (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992).

That makes the station — which became CFCF in 1922 — the first in Canada, and possibly the first in the world, says Alain Dufour, a member of the Société québécoise des collectionneurs de radios anciens.

“The Americans will say they had the first,” said Dufour, a retired economist who became fascinated by early radio after falling in love with art-deco consoles.

Pittsburgh, Detroit and San Jose are among cities that have laid claim to the title.

KDKA in Pittsburgh went on the air on Nov. 2, 1920, transmitting results of the landslide victory by President Warren Harding. It evolved from an experimental station founded by Frank Conrad, an electrical engineer at Westinghouse, in the garage of his home in 1919.

However, some say the radio era started earlier, on Christmas Eve 1906, when Reginald Fessenden, a native of East Bolton, Que., broadcast carols and Bible verses from the Massachusetts coast to ships at sea. (The date has been disputed.)

Others date the first broadcast to January 1910, when inventor Lee de Forest transmitted the Metropolitan Opera to various locations in New York City.

But Vipond and others note that the May 20, 1920 demonstration was the first regularly scheduled broadcast, making XWA possibly the world’s first broadcasting station.

In 1919, Montreal ragtime pianist Willie Eckstein — also known as the Boy Paderewski and Mr. Fingers — made history by giving the first live radio performance in North America on XWA.

The groundwork for the radio era was laid by the invention of the telegraph in the 1830s, telephone in the 1870s and wireless telegraph in the 1890s. In the early 1900s, Guglielmo Marconi sent the first radio message across the Atlantic and built coastal stations for ship-to-shore communication by Morse code.

In the same way that few people realized 30 years ago how cellphones and the internet would transform daily life, almost no one in the experimental radio era foresaw its future as mass media, Dufour said.
Musée des ondes Emile Berliner director Anja Borck gives Alain Dufour a look at a vintage 1960s stereo system. The museum and Dufour’s association of antique radio aficionados are presenting a series of exhibitions and activities to mark the centenary of Canadian radio broadcasting. Pierre Obendrauf/Montreal Gazette

“They didn’t know they were writing a page of history,” he said in an interview at the Musée des ondes Emile Berliner, dedicated to the history of sound recording and transmission.

A 1941 report on the early days of radio features a 1919 photo from XWA’s Griffintown studio, upper left. City of Montreal Archives

“They knew they had this new technology, but they didn’t know what it was going to be used for.”

Radio was conceived for two-way communication, where both parties could transmit and receive messages, Dufour noted.

The fact that anybody with a receiver could listen in was initially seen as a liability, rather than the opportunity to reach millions of listeners it turned out to be, he added.

“In the beginning, the concept of broadcasting didn’t exist,” Dufour said. “It was more like the cellphone you have today.”

Aside from the merchant marine and navy, most of the people communicating on the airwaves in the early days were ham radio operators — many in their teens — who built their wireless sets from kits.

Experimental stations like XWA allowed manufacturers to demonstrate wireless sets to potential customers. Initially, broadcasters recited the alphabet or counted to 100. To break the monotony, announcers at XWA started borrowing gramophone records from the Layton Brothers music store on Ste-Catherine St., which then got free publicity on the air.

In 1920, Marconi opened a shop on McGill College Ave. to sell radio sets. By the winter of 1921-22, the radio craze was in full swing. Newspapers — including La Presse, which founded CKAC in 1922 — and department stores got in on the act, setting up radio stations in their buildings.

Anja Borck and Alain Dufour chat about vinyl records from the early days of radio. Pierre Obendrauf/Montreal Gazette
Because U.S. stations took up so much bandwidth, early Montreal stations had to share the same frequency, by occupying different time slots, Dufour said.

In April 1922, the federal government issued 21 licences to stations for “private commercial broadcasting” — a number that grew to 58 by year’s end (not all of which actually went into operation). By 1932, Canada had 77 commercial stations.

By 1928, 400,000 receiving sets were in operation across the country. Sales of radios jumped from 52,500 that year to 173,200 in 1931.

The first radios were utilitarian objects that looked a bit like a safe, Dufour said. “It was a dark, rectangular box with three dials. You had to adjust all three dials at the same time to tune in to a frequency.”

Marconi’s Model C, issued in 1921, retailed for $195 — about $3,000 in today’s currency, he said.

CFCF — “Canada’s first, Canada’s finest,” as one of its slogans went — was among the most popular destinations on Montreal’s radio dial for decades. It moved to the Canada Cement building in Phillips Square in 1922, to the penthouse of the Mount Royal Hotel in 1927, and many other locations, including its longtime home at 405 Ogilvy Ave., where it was based from 1963 to 1989. It switched to 600 AM in 1933, and stayed there until 2000. CFCF-TV was licensed in 1960.

CFCF Radio featured top talents like Gord Sinclair, Ted Blackman and Dave Boxer, who introduced Top 40 radio to Montreal in the 1960s. It also broadcast games by the Expos and Canadiens. However, it declined in the 1990s, becoming CIQC in 1991, then CINW in 1999, and trying out country music, talk radio, all-news and oldies formats. Owner Corus Entertainment closed the station in 2010.

While some say radio is a dying medium, Dufour says it’s just undergoing a transformation. “Radio made today’s smartphones possible,” he said.

It also led to radar, television, air traffic control, microwaves and Wi-Fi.

Radio shows were the model for podcasts, which make it possible to listen whenever you want, Dufour noted.

“Montrealers should be proud, because the city was the first in Canada (to have a radio station) and also because radio changed the way we live and the way we get information,” he said.

“It democratized information. It democratized the arts.”

Alain Dufour is a retired economist who became fascinated by early radio after falling in love with art-deco consoles. Pierre Obendrauf/Montreal Gazette
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