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Mort Watters: Broadcasting pioneer jump-started television

By Barry M. Horstman, Post staff reporter

Mort Watters could not sing, tell jokes or mellifluously read the news aloud - at least not well enough for anyone to sit in front of a television screen to watch him.



But Watters knew how to spot people who could entertain and inform, parlaying a keen eye for talent into a pioneering broadcast career that produced some of Cincinnati's best-known TV personalities and a style of local programming copied across the nation.

When TV was in its infancy, Watters was one of the few executives in the country who seemed to know how to make it move. From the moment he launched WCPO-TV (Channel 9) in 1949 - signing on by televising a Cincinnati Reds night game - Watters relied on his instincts and a willingness to experiment to become one of TV's first great impresarios.

Paul Dixon, Al Schottelkotte, "Uncle Al" and Wanda Lewis, Bob Braun, Skipper Ryle and Bob Shreve were among those hired by Watters for WCPO radio and television. And while early TV competitors - wary of the new medium because of its small audience and advertisers' disinterest - ran only a few hours of programming daily, Watters went the other way, expanding WCPO's broadcast day in the early 1950s to the unheard-of length of 12 hours.

"I said to myself, 'Television has got to be like radio,' " Watters said of the latter's round-the-clock programming. "I've got to put something on the air, even if it's just a guy reading a phone book - and that's just about what I did."

WCPO's programming ideas never got that thin. But if the late 1940s and early '50s were the Golden Age of television, Watters would be the first to admit that some of his early ideas ranked no higher than tin on the broadcast metallurgy chart.

In those days, you could get a TV audience simply by playing records and having someone pantomime to the music - which is how Dixon, whom Watters hired away from a Chicago radio station in 1945, got his start toward becoming one of Cincinnati's most beloved entertainers. Or you could televise a live cooking show, all ad-libbed, hire a guy to dance at night to a record just to give people something to watch when they

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came home late, or put the zany Shreve on overnight with a bunch of B-movies, a rubber chicken and equally rubbery wisecracks.

Watters did all those things and more during WCPO-TV's early years - hitting on enough successes to enhance Cincinnati's national reputation as a broadcasting center then rivaling New York City. A number of WCPO shows produced under Watters even "went network," and a contract that he signed with 20th Century Fox in the mid-1950s was the first authorizing major studio films to be shown on television.

"He was a very creative, imaginative, impulsive, off-the-wall kind of guy," said Lawrence A. Leser, chairman of the board for the E.W. Scripps Co., which owns WCPO and The Post.

Born in 1909 in Rochester, N.Y., Watters graduated from Georgetown University in 1932 with a bachelor of philosophy degree. While in college, he was an unpaid office boy at NBC's Washington radio station, WRC - and learned enough about the business to get a salaried job after graduation as the radio director of a small advertising agency in Washington.

After a year, he returned to Rochester to become sales manager of a radio station, and then, at 25, became head of a chain of three radio stations in West Virginia - making him the youngest general manager of a broadcasting organization in the nation.

In 1938, Scripps Howard Broadcasting hired Watters to run a radio station that it bought here, changing its call letters to WCPO to reflect its close ties with The Post. Watters moved his radio news staff into the newspaper's city room, where all WCPO newscasts originated as it became the first local station to broadcast news hourly, with headlines on the half hour.

When WCPO-TV started in 1949, Watters - by then a vice president of Scripps Howard Broadcasting - eagerly took on the new task, convinced that the success of local TV stations hinged on the quality of local programming and news shows. "People here can relate more to Mary Jones of Price Hill than Mary Jones of Chicago," he said.

At its outset, Channel 9 was affiliated with the old Dumont network, the weakest of the three networks then in existence - giving Watters the green light to take chances on new talent and ideas in WCPO's crowded studios on Symmes Street in Walnut Hills. He offered on-air talent advice as simple as it was blunt: "Do what you want to do, and if you get an audience, you'll stay on. If you flop, you're out."

A decade later, Watters again had little to lose when he hired Schottelkotte, then an Enquirer columnist and news reader on WSAI-FM, to reverse Channel 9's embarrassingly low local TV news ratings - a measly 1, compared to a 15 for Channel 5 and a 13 for Channel 12.

Within hours of being hired, Schottelkotte was on the air, sent into the studio with this pep talk from Watters: "Don't worry about the audience - you won't have one." Schottelkotte soon enough had an audience,

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however, rising to No. 1 in the ratings within two years - a position he retained for an astonishing 22 consecutive years.

As in hiring Schottelkotte, Watters - named "TV's Man of the Year" by the broadcast trade publication Variety in 1950 - was a master at combining talent, concept and opportunity to maximum advantage.

Undeterred that another station already was televising Reds games, Watters simply put Channel 9's cameras in better spots to catch the action and quickly gained the most viewers. When a weather segment was added to newscasts, Watters decided to "glamorize" it by hiring one of the nation's first beautiful "weather-girls." (That proved to be an offscreen success as well, as Watters married her.) And when Channel 5 initially chose not to carry "The Tonight Show" - which, as an NBC outlet, it was entitled to - Watters quickly snapped up the popular late-night program, giving Channel 9 a ratings windfall.

Watters retired as executive vice president of Scripps Howard Broadcasting in 1981 and finally could devote more time to his other passion - boating on the Ohio River, in a succession of gradually larger vessels named "Muddy Watters." He died in 1997 at his Indian Hill home, days short of his 88th birthday.

Watters often said he had no particular talent in programming, describing his philosophy as simply "hiring people willing to take a chance (and) who seemed to know what they were talking about."

That not only was the formula that built WCPO into a powerhouse, it also described the man who made it one: Mort Watters.

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