



Maine's earliest local television broadcast came from WABI in Bangor, which began broadcasting January 25, 1953. Scenes like this 1962 election coverage suggest the make-do approach that made early production both harrowing and exhilarating. *All photographs in this article courtesy George Gonyar.*

TELEVISION COMES TO BANGOR: A CONVERSATION WITH INDUSTRY PIONEERS

BY JUDITH ROUND

Today, almost every household—98 percent of U.S. homes—has at least one television. There are hundreds of broadcast, cable, and satellite television channels sending out programming to viewers across the world. Yet only forty-seven years ago, television was in its infancy. What was it like to be part of this new form of information technology? George Gonyar and Margo Cobb, interviewed in March 1997, were part of a small group that pioneered television in greater Bangor. They not only brought television to the area, but they guided its development over the next forty years. Judith Round earned her Bachelor of University Studies degree with a minor in history in 1999. She is a native of Orono, Maine, and is Communications Coordinator and Assistant to the Dean for the College of Natural Sciences, Forestry, and Agriculture at the University of Maine. Her most recent history project was a commemorative calendar highlighting 115 years of research in the Maine Agricultural and Forest Experiment Station. She would like to thank Mr. Gonyar of Orono and Mrs. Cobb of Bangor, for their interviews and insights.

It is difficult today to imagine a world without television. Like radio in the 1930s, television in the 1940s made dramatic changes in everyday life—politics, business, news reporting, entertainment, and family life. Like radio, it brought the world into the living room; it broadened our horizons immeasurably, bridging the distance between regions, states, and nations.¹ In order to understand television's impact on the people of Maine, it is helpful to turn to the early years of this revolution in mass communications, and to Bangor, the city that served in many ways as midwife to the new and exciting world of television broadcasting in the 1950s.

The first modern television transmission was sent by Philo T. Farnsworth in San Francisco in 1927. The Olympic Games in Berlin



Studios and tower for WABI-TV, atop Copland “Mountain” in 1953. Early broadcasts were entirely local, although stations like Bangor’s might receive films mailed from producers around the country. Early microwave signals, when they finally arrived in Bangor, traveled by line-of-sight from one mountain tower to the next.

were telecast in 1936, and there was a demonstration of television at the New York World’s Fair in 1939. A few television stations went on the air in large cities immediately after World War II. Mainers got their first taste of television as early as 1949: Southern Maine as far north as Portland fell within the “fringe area” of WBZ (Channel 4) and WNAC (Channel 7) in Boston and WJAR (Channel 11) in Providence—if weather conditions were right and viewers had good sets and antennae.²

In order to stem the proliferation of television stations as the new medium caught on, the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) stopped issuing new licenses between 1948 and 1953.³ During the freeze, existing stations became profitable, the potential of TV became clear, and the backlog of applications grew larger. Realizing that there were not enough channels available for nationwide service, the FCC added 80 UHF channels to the existing 12 VHF channels and adopted a table of more than 2,000 channel assignments. These included 242 channels for non-commercial use. When the freeze was lifted, the competition for allocations was intense. As the government had encouraged newspaper owners to move into radio broadcasting in the 1920s, it encouraged ra-

dio operators to pioneer television broadcasting in the 1950s. It is not surprising, then, that some familiar radio names appeared on television applications.⁴

Bangor, the birthplace of WABI-AM, Maine's oldest radio station still on the air, was also the first city in Maine to host a television station. WABI-TV, Channel 5, went on the air January 25, 1953, having been one of the first stations in the country to receive a license when the FCC freeze was lifted.⁵ Who were the people who pioneered the television industry in greater Bangor? What was television like in the early days? How did Mainers feel about this new form of information technology, and what impact did television have on their lives? Answers to these and other questions were supplied by George Gonyar, retired general manager of WABI-TV, and Margo Cobb, retired general manager of WLBZ-TV (Channel 2) in an oral history interview conducted March 12, 1997, at the home of George Gonyar.⁶ Cobb and Gonyar were part of a small group that pioneered television in greater Bangor. They not only brought television to the area, but they guided its development over the next forty years, from "local live" broadcasting to microwave intercon-



Margo Cobb and George Gonyar met at the University of Maine during the late 1940s. Gonyar (left) is pictured here with Richard Brown working live remote on the roof of the Bangor raceway grandstand. Early broadcasting, Gonyar recalls, was "terrible . . . just awful."

nection; from still pictures to motion pictures; from motion pictures to video, and from black-and-white reception to color.

Margo Cobb and George Gonyar met as fellow actors in the Maine Masque theater at the University of Maine during the late 1940s. Margo was a speech and theater major, and George a history and government major with aspirations toward a career in law. He fell in love with radio after joining the university's Radio Guild, where he was given an opportunity to direct and announce a twenty-five-minute radio program every Sunday evening on WLBZ radio in Bangor. While still in college, George decided he'd like to get a part-time job in radio:

I had reached the pinnacle of the Radio Guild. They called me Mr. University. . . . WGUY radio in Bangor had a brand new radio station . . . and I decided to apply for a job. . . . The radio station was on Mt. Hope Avenue in Bangor and I needed a bus transfer to get there. [En route] I discovered I'd lost my transfer and didn't know what to do. Well, actually I did know what to do. In those days you could . . . hitch a ride. . . . It was simple. Anyone would pick you up. So I started to walk up the hill . . . [on State Street] and I saw a sign that said WABI radio. I walked in and Harold Dorr, the station manager, was giving piano lessons. Yes, giving piano lessons on company time. He asked me what I could do and I said, "I can read." He ripped off about three feet of AP [Associated Press] wire service paper and said, "Go in there and read." I read for about three or four minutes. He said, "Come back on Sunday at 6 p.m. I pay \$1.00 an hour." Wow, that was something else! I figured I could earn ten or fifteen bucks a week to help me get by and that's how I got started.

George dropped the history and government major and studied voice and diction. By the fall of his junior year, he was working forty hours a week at WABI. After graduating from the University of Maine in 1950, he continued to work for the station. Margo Cobb, too, chose radio as her first entry into the broadcasting business. She went to work at WLBZ radio as a copy writer and announcer following her graduation from the University of Maine in 1952. Her position evolved into advertising sales, an entre that served her well as she moved into television.

The Advent of Television in Bangor

By the 1950s, radio had worked its way into the daily lives of all Americans. Radio listeners, station owners, and station employees were

loyal to radio, and initially skeptical about the long-term potential of television. Station owners and advertisers wondered who would buy television sets. According to Margo, they soon found out: "People bought televisions in droves, even before WABI-TV went on the air, and television sets weren't cheap. Then they'd sit and watch the test patterns. The stations didn't go on the air until 4 p.m." Even though early television broadcasting was "terrible . . . just awful," according to George, "people were crazy about it. If so, why did people spend their time watching test patterns and amateur programming? "People used to line up to go to the movies . . . once or twice a week [before television]. And miracle of miracles, a movie came right into our own living room. People would watch anything. They loved it." George recalled that his father and uncle "sat in their living room [watching the test pattern] and took turns sleeping for a whole week in 1953 before we [George and Margo] came on the air."

When WABI-TV broadcast its first transmission on January 25, 1953, a new adventure began for both the citizens of Bangor and the people who worked to bring the signal in their living rooms. Equipment was unsophisticated, as were many of the local television personalities who peopled the airwaves. Since there were no microwave links to larger metropolitan stations, everything broadcast from Bangor was local. "We



Between 1957 and 1962 WABI-TV studios were located in a small building in Hampden. The sign in this 1962 photo reads: "Moved to 35 Hildreth St."—the new Bangor "Studio City."

did it live or we did it on what they called kinescopes, which were films that were mailed in to us by producers around the country.” Microwave links were difficult to establish as far north as Bangor because early signals traveled by line-of-sight. “If you had a mountain, you had to put a tower on that mountain to get over to the next link. . . . The . . . connecting was tower to tower, mountain to mountain.” Line-of-sight connections were limited to sixty or seventy miles. Channel 5, a small station in an isolated part of New England, had no microwave linkages. “So we were just sitting out there in the tundra on our own.”

Margo Cobb’s early experience with TV broadcasting was colored by political and commercial rivalries. While WABI-TV was struggling to launch a television station in Bangor, a battle was taking place in Portland over licensing. Murray Carpenter, formerly a co-owner of WABI TV with Horace Hildreth (then Governor of Maine), applied for a license in Portland. Guy Gannett, another newspaper and radio station owner, convinced Carpenter to pull out of the Portland market, in exchange for licensing preference for a second station in Bangor—WGUY (Channel 2). Carpenter, who had relinquished his ownership of WABI, was now back in Bangor competing against his former partner, Horace Hildreth. As a result, the first years at Channel 2 were rough. “We got the channel hooked up and then found out that WABI-TV had made arrangements with all four networks.’ So, for a year, we couldn’t get any of the networks’ programming. Any programming we had was poor quality. . . . We did a lot of local stuff.”

In the early days, television was, as Margo put it, “a young person’s career.” The hours were long in the new industry, and the people involved were energetic, enthusiastic, and willing to take risks; it was an experimental business. “We worked tremendous hours, had a great time, and put on a show like it was Saturday morning in our father’s garage.” As a result, programming was unpredictable and the shows amateurish—“very unprofessional,” according to Margo. “As I recall back then, we sort of had a rough idea that this show would go from 6:00 p.m. to 6:15 p.m. but if it went to 6:25 p.m., nobody cared.” A 9:00 PM program seldom began before 9:30 or 9:45.

No programming was aired before 4:00 PM. The assumption was that the potential audience, primarily women home during the day, was “too busy watching the children and doing the house work to watch television during the day.” Margo’s Channel 2 experimented with an early-morning variety show that aired from 7:00 to 9:00, but the morning programming was even rougher than the evening fare. “We wanted

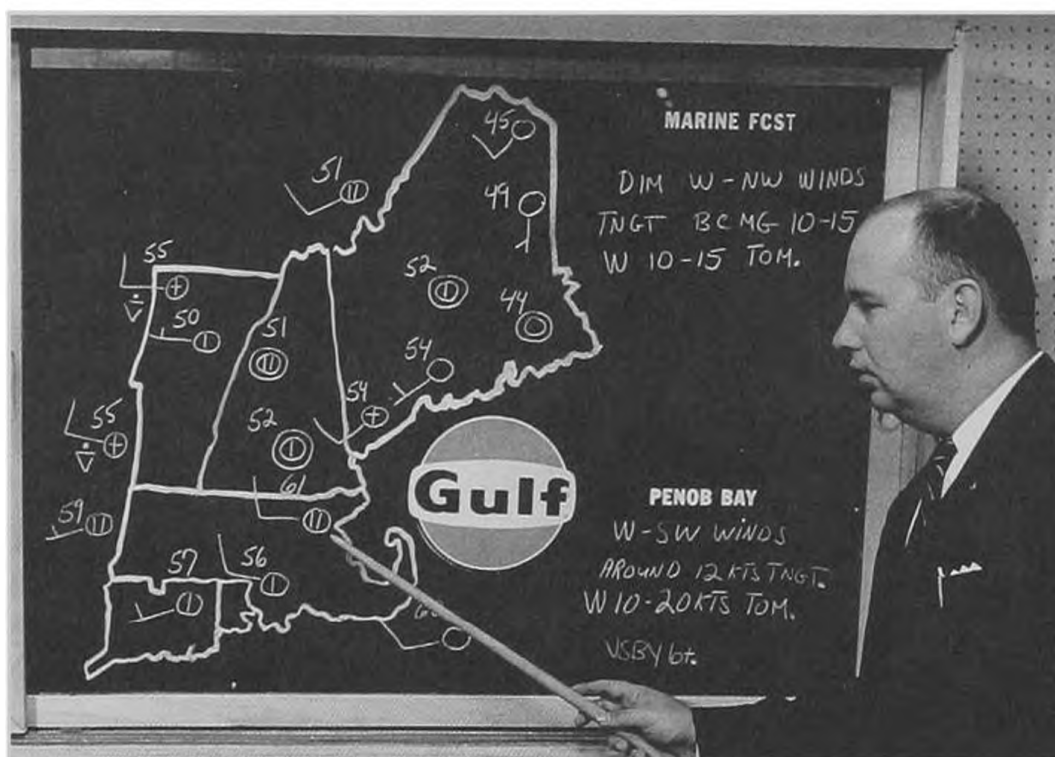
somebody who could sort of MC [master of ceremony] the show and rip and read news and interview people. Murray [Carpenter] found this guy who was an MC for night-club shows . . . at the . . . Anchorage [a restaurant in Old Town]. He didn't last long. I think he was just a transient. [Carpenter] . . . brought in somebody called the Swamp Lady who did a "hootchy kootchy" dance on the early morning show."

Production in the Early Years

In the years before videotape recording, nearly all local programming was produced in the studio. Film required intense lighting that was not always available outside the studio. Studio technicians developed the black-and-white film by hand, which required several hours. "We'd have to take a picture of a train wreck before noon and bring it back to the station and let it sit in that soup to develop." Nor was in-studio production problem-free; Margo's account of news broadcasting illustrates the point:

Eddie Driscoll would do five minutes of Captain Salty with the weather, and he knew as much about the weather as I did.⁸ Then we'd have the straight news with a guy reading and, if we were lucky enough to have the train wreck before noon we'd have a picture of that. And behind the reader, we'd have a rear screen projector that would show a picture of the Capitol building or some other scene. One night a pin in the rear screen projector came loose and that thing started going around and pictures of the Eiffel Tower, among others, came up, then it [the projector] started to smoke. We had a real timid guy reading the news that night, and he was sitting there and this black smoke began to come around and he shouted, "My God, there's a fire," and he ran off. These things just happened.

Because film productions were so limited, the staff experimented with Polaroid photos, hoping to simulate moving pictures. Channel 5's first woman anchor, according to George, was Pauline Callahan: "We gave her a Polaroid camera and she'd take photos. We'd take these photo stills and put them on a flip board, lock a camera into frame, then . . . place the pictures within penciled lines—the lines had to be exact. We'd flip the cards with the photos and they'd fall into place." In the 1960s small film processing machines improved motion film delivery. Film arriving at the station by 2:00 PM could be aired on the 6:00 o'clock news. The prospect of processing film by machine, rather than by hand in the



Top photo: The film room in Hampden, August 1961; bottom photo: Jack Hamilton, WABI-TV weatherman, circa 1958-1959. Before the era of videotaping, almost all local programming was done in studio, since filming and film processing required carefully controlled conditions.

station's darkroom, was a technological breakthrough: "We thought we'd died and gone to heaven," Margo added.

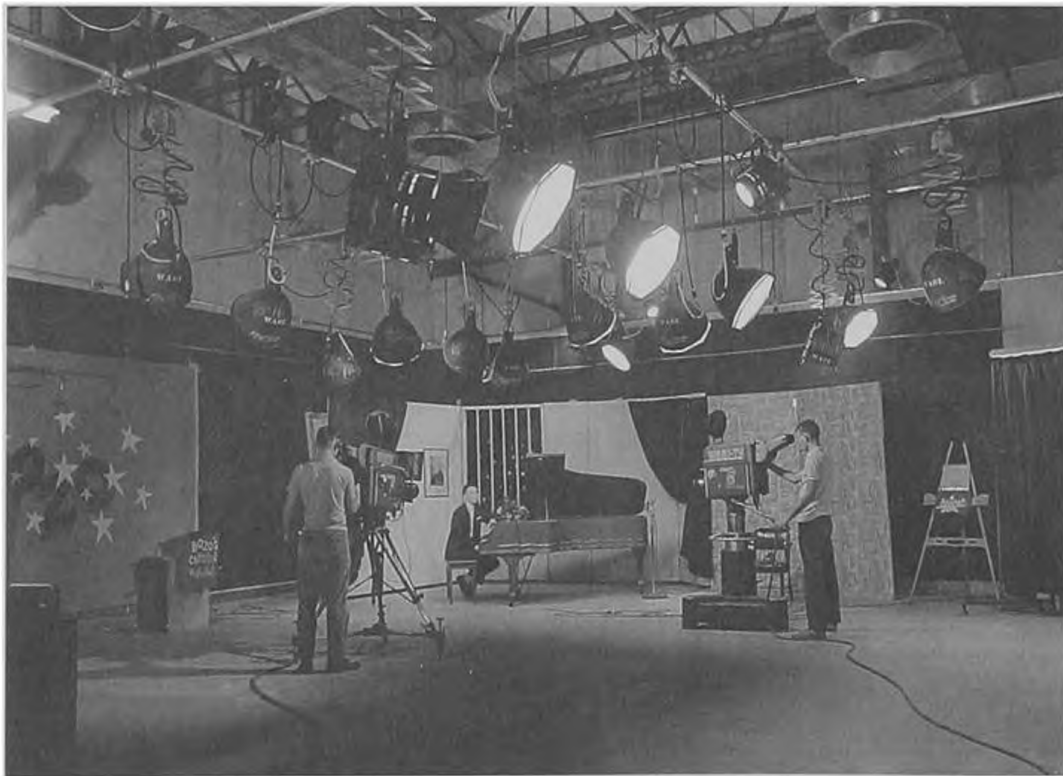
In these early years, television was the engineer's domain, since the were the only ones who knew how to make it work. George recalled directing programs at the station on "the mountain"—Copeland Hill in Holden: "When I would say, 'take two' and the engineer wanted to take two, he'd push the button. If he didn't want to take two, . . . he'd look over at me and laugh. . . . We depended entirely on him."

Once the technical aspects were smoothed out and the staff became more knowledgeable, the owners began to ask more questions and to look more intently at the quality of the programming. Who was watching the programs? How well did they appeal? Low-quality productions were no longer sufficient to hold an audience. Local news with Polaroid stills? Not enough. Power in the studio began to shift away from engineering to production. Competition increased; stations hired more staff, and with larger staff producing more expensive programs, managers began to look to the bottom line. Power shifted again—from programming to sales: "We had to have viewers." Sales personnel, according to Margo, "could walk into a studio any time and say, 'we're going to do this or that tonight' and they'd get the support of management because they were bringing in the dollars." Working on commission, sales personnel were probably the highest paid staff in the business. Although the shift in power was a "natural evolution," according to George, it was not a smooth one. "The engineers never forgave us for taking the[ir] power away. For many years . . . there was a great competitive line between engineering and programming. Then programming and sales. And how we hated the salesmen because they strutted around in their black suits and their ties and . . . got all the big bucks and met all the big clients, and there we were in the sweat shop."

It was about this time that Margo Cobb decided to get out of writing and producing and into sales. "I was the first woman salesperson in television, or radio for that matter." Given the late-1950s assumptions that women were supposed to be home raising families, or in the office typing, Margo's role was a pioneering one. Most managers, according to Margo, doubted that clients would take a woman seriously: "Buy time from a woman? Come on." Margo's experience as a copy writer doing commercials for Bangor businesses meant that her talents were known and respected throughout the local business community. "The biggest fight I had was from other women," she recalled. Although professional women accepted her, those in her own circumstances—a married

woman and mother whose husband could support the family without a second income—did not. “My husband was a professional man in the real estate business, and it was thought by women that my husband was damned well able to support me, and why would I think about working outside with a family? It never occurred to them that I simply wanted to work, and that I enjoyed a career, and [that] maybe I wanted it all—a home, a family, and a career.” Margo was, as George put it, “eons ahead of her time.” She eventually became the first woman general manager of a broadcast station in Maine, and possibly among the first in the country. “There were six of us [nationwide]. The other five all inherited the job—husbands or family ownership.” Margo also became the first woman vice president of the National Association of Broadcasters, but here, too, she encountered gender stereotypes: “All those good old boys, all from the South, killing me with politeness but not listening to me.” Despite the tokenism, according to George, Margo “had the smarts to . . . do it.”

Margo’s acceptance into the ranks of management was due in good



Once the technical aspects of broadcasting were smoothed out, station owners turned to the matter of audience appeal. Power in the studio shifted from engineering to production, and then—as managers looked to the bottom line—to sales and marketing. In the photo above, cameramen record a live piano concert in WABI’s new Studio City, while “Bozo’s Cartoon Machine” (left) waits in the wings.

part to the fluid situation in early television broadcasting. “We were young people, and this was a young business, and the industry itself hadn’t had enough time to develop its own [patterns of] discrimination like the newspapers had. So young men and women were all working together. . . . I just didn’t see it. If it was there, I didn’t see it.” There were a number of women with talent working in the industry. Sales was the last department to accept them, “but I don’t think women really had problems.”

Film to Video

The most dramatic technical watershed in early broadcasting, according to both George and Margo, was the shift from film to videotape. Film—“getting the pictures done . . . and getting it in on time to get it developed”—limited production possibilities severely. “If anything happened after 2 p.m. you couldn’t get it on the evening news,” Margo recalled. In addition, film complicated the process of reviewing a production or a commercial: “You never knew what it looked like until you processed the film. On video, within thirty seconds of rewind, you could look at it and see how well you did. . . . You could easily do it over. With the film, you had to wait, and it was much more costly.” Video taping, according to Margo, gave the Bangor news staff much more freedom—“to go to Green Lake, or Mt. Katahdin, or Ellsworth.” Video tape also facilitated sound production. Earlier, it was “too difficult to go into the field and do sound. . . . You had to take the film and come back to the studio



Over 10,000 people turned out for the grand opening of WABI-TV's Studio City in 1963.

to put an audio track with it. For a long time you couldn't meld audio track on film—you had to do it separately. If the film started a little too soon or the audio tape was a little late, you would get a commercial off sync. You spent a lot of time, and money, doing 'make-goods' and doing commercials over.' Video could be taped over and over again until it was perfect. "You could do a program . . . at 10:00 AM. . . . If you didn't like it, you could do it again at . . . noon, and have it ready by 7:00 PM."¹⁰ By comparison, both Margo and George saw the advent of color television as "merely cosmetic." The industry's way of operating remained unchanged.

Progress: Speculating on the Future of Television

Although George Gonyar and Margo Cobb are now retired, they still pay a great deal of attention to the technical changes in the industry. Both feel that the "biggest changes are yet to come"—500 channels on a television set, digital channels, TV evolving into a "sophisticated [interactive] video computer." Margo and George hold different opinions about the way new technology will affect local community programming. While George remains doubtful, Margo felt that community-based television will remain viable: "We'll be able to produce more locally than ever before. . . . Digital channeling means we will get a lot more channels on a single foot of space. They [channels] won't need the broad band width. . . . We'll be able to put on a knitting show on one channel and draw a small audience; on another, we'll have all news; another, a soap opera; another, sports." Viewers, according to Margo, "will have more choices."

Their opinions on Maine's place in the new age of television differed as well. According to George, in northern New England, broadcasting is not expected to grow, but Margo pointed out that New England stations were "fully depreciated," giving them more flexibility." Smaller markets like Bangor could continue to grow through new strategies like Low-Power Market affiliates—smaller channels under control of a parent station. Still, after forty years in the business, George and Margo admitted they would have "a difficult time predicting what will happen in the future."

Had they any kind of vision of what the industry would become when they launched the television age in Bangor forty years ago? "You don't know when you are planting a seed, just how its going to grow," according to Margo. "We were pleased to be part of a glamorous new

business, but I don't think most of us saw beyond what we were doing. Gradually, as things happened, there was talk about video and color television. The big cities got the new fangled things and we wondered when Bangor was going to get it." Did George consider himself a pioneer? "Now I do, at the time no." According to Margo, it was "thrilling to realize that we were part of this powerful event."

NOTES

1. Ellie Thompson, *The History of Broadcasting in Maine: The First Fifty Years* (Augusta: Whitman Press for the Maine Association of Broadcasters, 1990), p. 69.

2. Thompson, *History of Broadcasting*, p. 69.

3. The licensing process started in 1946 after World War II. The FCC issued so many licenses things got out of control. The FCC began to run out of channels and declared a freeze in 1948.

4. The Rines Family, Guy Gannett, Murray Carpenter, Carleton Brown, and the Hoy Family had been involved in Maine radio since the mid 1940s. See Thompson, *History of Broadcasting*, p. 69.

5. Judith Round. Interview with George Gonyar, retired General Manager of WABI-TV, Channel 5, March 12, 1997.

6. Tapes of this interview are archived at the Maine Folklife Center, South Stevens Hall, University of Maine, Orono, Maine. This paper was reviewed by members of the Maine Association of Broadcasters and portions of this paper were reprinted in the commemorative program for the Maine Association of Broadcasters' Fiftieth Anniversary Convention, September 26-28, 1997.

7. At the time, the networks were ABC, NBC, CBS, and Dumont which disappeared in the early 1950s.

8. Eddie Driscoll was one of the area's pioneer TV personalities and a character of some note. Driscoll was one of Bangor's most endearing on-air talents.

9. "Make-goods" are additional air time owed to the buyer when a commercial is not run or the quality is not up to standard.

10. The Bangor stations began to use videotape in the late 1960s.