Mr. Crosley's empire

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'Visionary' industrialist made his mark on media, sports, automaking and more

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For most of the 20th Century, you couldn't go anywhere in Greater Cincinnati without seeing or hearing the name "Crosley."

The Cincinnati Reds played at Crosley Field, named after industrialist Powel Crosley Jr., who bought the team in 1934.

Fans heard Reds games called by future Hall of Famer Red Barber on a Crosley radio set over Crosley Broadcasting's WLW-AM or WSAI-AM. Crosley himself even did a little play-by-play on Opening Day in 1926-28, according to the 1995 book "Crosley Field" written by John Erardi and Greg Rhodes.

Or people tuned in Crosley stations to hear the first soap opera ("Ma Perkins"), jazz great Fats Waller, comedian Red Skelton or singers Andy Williams, Doris Day and Rosemary Clooney.

Many had a Crosley stove, washing machine, record player, space heater, ironing board or a Shelvdor, the first refrigerator (in 1933) with door shelves.

In 1947, very few saw the city's first television programs from Crosley Broadcasting. Viewers in the 1950s watched Ruth Lyons' "50-50 Club," "Midwestern Hayride" and the Reds, perhaps on a Crosley TV set. WLWT-TV's aggressive promotion of color TV, and NBC's "Living Color," earned Cincinnati the nickname "Colortown U.S.A." by 1962.

Some bought the first mass-produced compact car, the Crosley.

All came from the empire built by Crosley (1886-1961), a University of Cincinnati drop-out from College Hill best known as the founder of WLW-AM (700).

Crosley, inducted last month into the National Radio Hall of Fame at Chicago's Museum of Broadcast Communications, was "very visionary," said Clyde Haehnle 91, of Finneytown, who met Crosley several times.

"He wasn't a technical guy. He always wanted the best, always wanted the most powerful – the best (radio) station and the most powerful station," said Haehnle, who started at Crosley in 1941 as a University of Cincinnati co-op and rose to vice president of administration and engineering before leaving broadcasting in 1980.

Crosley engineers built the world's most powerful transmitter, an unprecedented 500,000 watts, under WLW-AM's distinctive diamond-shaped tower on Tylersville Road in West Chester Township. It broadcast on an experimental basis 1934-39, before the U.S. ordered it shut down.

When President Franklin Roosevelt flipped a switch in the White House to activate the transmitter on May 2, 1934, Crosley spoke briefly in Italian,

hoping radio inventor Guglielmo Marconi would hear him halfway around the world. There was no evidence he did.

But "The Nation's Station" could be heard from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mississippi River and beyond – not to mention picked up on vibrating oven racks, rain gutters, fences and telephone lines in the Mason area.

Crosley got into radio in 1921, after refusing to pay $130 for a radio for his son. He decided to build an affordable radio for the masses – the Harko for $7 – which made him "the Henry Ford of radio."

To sell more radios, Crosley began broadcasting in 1922 on WLW-AM from his Mount Airy Pinecroft mansion, now owned by the Cincinnati Preservation Association. The station soon broadcast from his Northside radio plant, and his Arlington Street factory (near the I-75/I-74 merge in Camp Washington), before moving into an old Elks lodge at Ninth and Elm Streets Downtown.

From 1942 to 1999, his Downtown "Crosley Square" studios beamed shows to NBC radio and TV networks; Mutual Broadcasting; sister TV stations in Dayton, Columbus and Indianapolis; and nationally syndicated "Jerry Springer," "Bob Braun," "Midwestern Hayride" and "Young People's Specials." The TV station helped launch the careers of writer Rod Serling ("The Twilight Zone"), sportscaster Bob Trumpy and newsmen Bill Hemmer and Gene Randall.

Not only did Crosley make radio sets and shows, his engineers designed and manufactured all the electronics for the studios and transmitters.

WLW-AM "Doodlesockers" star Sydney Ten Eyck told The Enquirer that when he went to New York in the 1930s, he was surprised that NBC equipment was inferior to Crosley's here.

Dave Stull, a WLWT-TV performer and announcer (1960-72) as "Dave Manning," remembers engineers repeating Crosley's credo: "If we can buy it better than we can build it, then buy it. If we can build it better than we can buy it, then build it."

Stull, Channel 5's "Mr. Hop" children's show star, said the main TV studio audio boards in the 1960s "were the same ones from the radio days. They were hand-built and still in great working order after many years of service." The master control board "still had markings for the Red and Blue networks, the two original National Broadcasting Company (NBC) radio networks, and the first two commercial radio networks in the United States."

500,000-watt transmitter reached isolated places

Crosley employees also built the 500,000-watt transmitter in the 1930s, and the nearby Voice of America shortwave transmitters in the 1940s which sent broadcasts to South America and Europe, Haehnle said.

At the peak of its power, WLW-AM received many letters from awestruck rural listeners, engineers told Stull. "After WLW went to 500,000 watts, there was a sense that for the first time people in isolated parts of the Earth were in touch with the outside world. That's hard to comprehend today," he said.

Three months before WLW-AM's "superpower" started, Crosley bailed out the financially struggling Reds. He paid $240,000 in Feb. 4, 1934, for controlling interest of the club, changing the name of Redland Field to Crosley Field. In six seasons, his Reds played the New York Yankees in the 1939 World Series, then won the 1940 World Championship against the Detroit Tigers.

Unfortunately, Crosley died on March, 28, 1961, before the season that brought another World Series to Cincinnati.

But Crosley was much more than broadcasting and baseball.

His companies manufactured everything from the first facsimile machines to cars, car radios, snowmobiles and the Moonbeam airplane. Crosley Broadcasting conducted the first TV demonstration here on the Carew Tower roof in 1939 (then delayed debuting TV here until 1947, two years after World War II ended). Crosley also owned a regional airline, and a 193-acre airport in Sharonville on Sharon Road.

By World War II, he was Bill Gates rich. He owned eight mansions, six yachts, 14 airplanes, countless cars and an island in South Carolina, according to "Crosley: Two Brothers and a Business Empire That Transformed the Nation" about Powel and Lewis Crosley, published in 2006.

Shortly before the war ended in 1945, Crosley sold his broadcasting interests to

AVCO to concentrate on making compact automobiles.

The country, alas, was not ready yet for Crosley's small cars. Crosley Motors produced models from 1947 through 1952. He sold the company to General Tire & Rubber Co. on July 17, 1952, and retired.

"Powel would have been happiest if the car had succeeded," according to the "Crosley" brothers book by Rusty McClure, Michael A. Banks and David Stern.

"But he wouldn't have been satisfied. Satisfaction for Powel was fleeting. Something different burned inside of him – it was his blessing, and his curse. He couldn't sit still. He couldn't help but get up and look around the corner, take a peek at what was coming, and see how he might make a place for himself in it," they wrote.

"He's perhaps one of the most significant people ever to come out of Cincinnati, certainly as a broadcaster," said Bruce Dumont, chairman of the National Radio Hall of Fame at Chicago's Museum of Broadcast Communications.

Powel Crosley Jr.'s legacy can be seen around Greater Cincinnati:

His 1928 Pinecroft mansion, 2366 Kipling Ave., Mount Airy, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2008. Owned by the Cincinnati Preservation Association, it is available for tours, weddings, corporate meetings and social events.

The words "Crosley Square" still exist over the entrance to the former TV and radio studios of Ruth Lyons, Bob Braun, Paul Dixon and Jerry Springer at Ninth and Elm streets, Downtown, now the Cincinnati Hills Christian Academy Armleder Campus (preschool to eighth grade).

The National Voice of America Museum, 8070 Tylersville Road, West Chester Township, is located in the VOA's Bethany Relay Station built by Crosley employees in 1943. It includes Crosley displays in the Cincinnati Museum of Broadcasting History and antique Crosley radios in the Gray History of the Wireless Museum. The museum is open 1-4 p.m. this Saturday (and every third Saturday of the month).

The red brick building for WLW-AM's unprecedented 500,000-watt transmitter sits under WLW-AM's distinctive diamond-shaped tower on Tylersville Road east of the VOA.

Public stations WCET-TV, WGUC-FM and WVXU-FM broadcast from the Crosley Telecommunications Center on Central Parkway, across from Music Hall.

The Springfield Township Powel Crosley Jr. YMCA, which opened in 1963 at 9601 Winton Road, was built with a $250,000 donation from the Crosley Foundation.

The state of Indiana operates the 4,200-acre Crosley State Fish and Wildlife Area, owned by Crosley 1931-58, on Ind. 3 near North Vernon, Ind., about 75 miles west of Cincinnati.

The Crosley nameplate exists today on turntables, jukeboxes, headphones and replica radios and telephones produced for Crosley Radio (www.crosleyradio.com) in Louisville.