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Wiregrass Country Hears the Growl of WOOF

AM/FM combo carries on the local focus and legacy of Agnes Dowling Simpson

The WOOF Wolf visits Northview High School Career Day.



STATIONPROFILE

BY DONNA L. HALPER

One in a series about successful stations in all market sizes.

Licensed to Dothan, Ala. — market #192 for Nielsen — WOOF(AM) and

WOOF(FM) have announcers who reside in the community and regularly interact with their audience. According to management, both stations are profitable.

“The Ball” airs sports-talk on AM; it is live and local from 6 to 9 a.m. and noon to 2 p.m., and it broadcasts play-

by-play of area high school games. The Ball is heard at 560 kHz, with 5,000 watts days and 118 watts nights; it has a translator at 100.1 on the FM dial.

Meanwhile WOOF(FM), an adult contemporary station, plays “continuous soft rock,” live and local 24/7, except for one syndicated show on Saturday night. It is heard at 99.7 MHz on a 100 kW Class C1 signal.

Both also can be heard almost anywhere, thanks to live-streaming from www.997wooffm.com.

TRUMAN-ERA ROOTS

Much of WOOF Radio’s success is credited to Agnes Dowling Simpson, who owned and managed the stations for many years.

If you grew up in Dothan, chances are you knew her. She had an outgoing personality and was said to love meeting people. In addition to being one of the few female radio station owners, she was active in nearly every charitable and civic organization in the area, and received numerous awards for community service. In 1987, she became the first woman to receive the Alabama Broadcaster of the Year award; in 2008 she was named to the Alabama Broadcasters Association Hall of Fame.

Agnes and her husband R. A. Dowling put WOOF(AM) on the air in 1947. As you might guess from the call letters, she loved animals; WOOF’s stationery even had a little dog on it. Raising four children kept her busy, but when R.A. died suddenly in 1960, she went back to work full-time, taking on the role of

(continued on page 6)

Get With the Program: A Chat With Doug Vernier

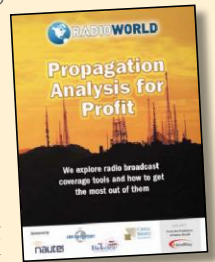
How can you maximize prediction methods and determine where your signal goes?

BY MICHAEL LECLAIR

The following interview appeared in the recent Radio World eBook “Propagation Analysis for Profit.”

Doug Vernier is president and owner of V-Soft Communications, a provider of RF propagation software programs that assist engineers in evaluating interference and coverage for radio and television stations, such as FM Commander, AM-Pro and Probe. We asked him about choosing software, using Longley-Rice for coverage evalu-

(continued on page 10)



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WOOF

(continued from page 1)

station manager.

WOOF was losing money, according to a station history, but she helped turn it around; and even after marrying long-time friend Dr. Sam Simpson in 1962, she continued to manage the AM. In 1964, she took a chance on putting an FM station on the air.

At that time, the FM dial was still something of a gamble, but her decision turned out well; WOOF(FM) began to attract a loyal following, and more than five decades years later, this hasn't changed. The station is consistently top in the 12+ ratings.

Over the years, the stations have remained community-focused, and both are still family-owned. Agnes Dowling Simpson died in 2012; her daughter Leigh Simpson now is president and general manager. Like her siblings, Leigh grew up around her mom's radio station, learning to run the equipment and helping around the office. After studying political science in college, Leigh joined the stations full-time in 1982. Thirty-five years later, she is as devoted to the two stations as her mother was.

RELIABLE AIR CHAIN

In this series of articles, we have discovered that once people are hired at successful stations, they tend to stay. Whether this is cause or effect may be a matter of opinion, but the phenomenon is evident at WOOF Radio.

For example, Sales Manager Hal Edwards has been there for 25 years; he was a deejay before he got into sales. These days, he has three full-time and two part-time sales reps.

Edwards acknowledges that national business isn't what it used to be, but he says local revenue has remained strong: Houston County in the Wiregrass region is home to a military base, and the regional hub for two major hospitals (the Wiregrass region, including southeastern Alabama, is so named for a native grass). There is a flourishing local business community, which has a good relationship with both stations.



Station founder Agnes Simpson in her official warm weather WOOF Radio uniform. A video about her life can be found on the station's history page.

During drive time, there are typically 12 to 14 minutes of commercials, with rates ranging from \$25 for a 30-second spot to \$40 for a 60-second spot; there are also various packages for remotes, and live broadcasts of local sports consistently generate revenue. And one other thing that helps the station's bottom line is a lack of debt: "We own the land, the building and the transmitter," says Edwards.

Another veteran is Chief Engineer Michael "Mike" Holderfield, who has been with WOOF Radio for 34 years. Like Leigh Simpson, he comes from a radio family; his father owned a small station in Elba, Ala. But while other kids dreamed of being deejays, Mike was interested in electronics. "I'm a hands-on engineer."

He believes in getting the most out of the equipment, and he is proud that the stations are seldom if ever off the air. That's because he believes in having backups.

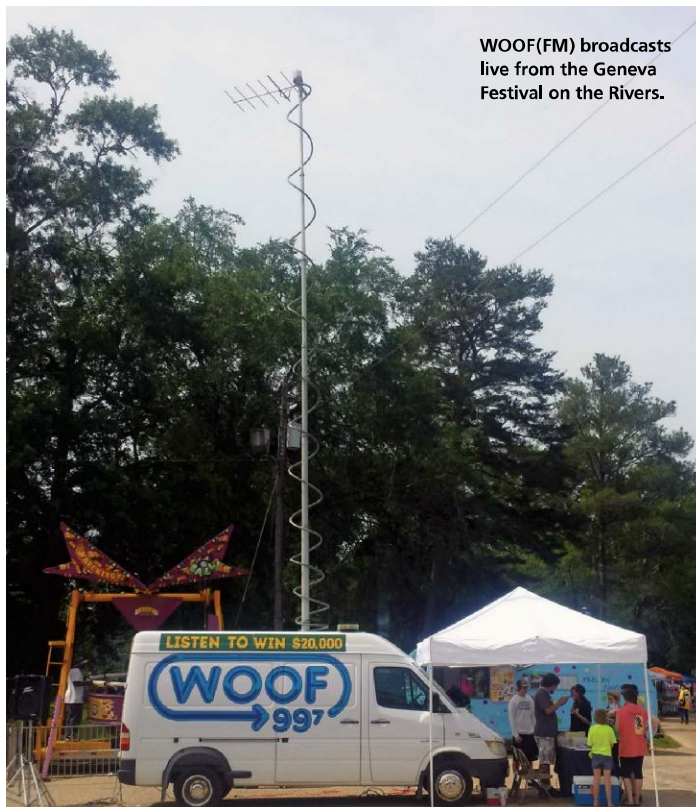
"Redundancy is very important to us. [Being] consistent in all we do is a big factor in our success." The AM air chain includes a Broadcast Electronics AM 6A transmitter, a 70-year-old Wind-charger tower — "It still works," says Holderfield, "we've replaced the guy wires, but nothing else" — Omnia processing, Wheatstone console, Maestro automation and XDS satellite receivers. The AM's translator, W261AT, includes a BW Broadcast TX1000 transmitter, Orban processing and a Jampro antenna sitting 256 meters HAAT.

In the FM air chain is a Harris HT-25CD Transmitter, ERI antenna at 299 meters HAAT, Orban processing, Moseley Starlink STL, Radio Systems Millennium console, EV mics, Maestro automation and an Adobe Audition DAW. There are also Onan backup generators for all sites, and a Marti that dates to 1985 and to which Edwards refers as an "old reliable" for its ongoing role in remotes.

WOOF WEAR

The broadcaster seeks to be visible in the community, whether raising money for local charities or making appearances at area festivals and fairs. In a tradition begun by Agnes Simpson, announcers wear uniforms when they do remotes, matching clothes for special occasions, Leigh Simpson said.

"The rule is as long as you are out on location, you must wear WOOF wear." Staff are free to adapt it to the occasion or the season; they can purchase a comfortable sleeveless shirt for hot weather,



WOOF(FM) broadcasts live from the Geneva Festival on the Rivers.

for example, and the station logo will be embroidered on it.

Another popular promotional concept is the WOOF Wolf, the station mascot for the FM. The station began using this costumed character in the late 1970s; he continues to be popular at remotes (kids love to have their picture taken with him).

Nearly everyone on staff, as well as interns and even Leigh herself, has taken a turn dressing up as the WOOF Wolf; during the period from Thanksgiving to Christmas he becomes Santa WOOF Wolf, and marches in Christmas parades. There also is a plush toy version called Baby WOOF Wolf; when people win a prize, he's included as a bonus.

WOOF(FM) has two vans; the bigger one is the WOOF Mobile, the smaller is the Howler. Both have the station logo prominently displayed. If there is a local event, chances are the van (and the WOOF Wolf) will be there.

Since listeners love giveaways, the stations offer plenty of prizes. The AM gives sports fans golf gear, gas grills, or "The Ball" logo jackets, complete with a \$100 in the pocket. When college football season is about to start, the station hosts a big party at a local restaurant. There are door prizes, and the grand prize is a huge flat-screen TV. WOOF(FM) is known for giving away cash. There are prizes of \$100 and a few all the way up to \$20,000. People wait

to hear the wolf howl sounder, and they can call in for their chance to win.

FAMILY CONNECTIONS

Although WOOF(FM) has been around for five decades, it continues to reinvent itself.

"Entire families have grown up listening to the station," says Leigh Simpson, who notes that some of the contest winners are kids who have become fans.

A six-year-old boy won \$100 recently; a 16-year-old girl won \$100 the same day. Interestingly, as Leigh was looking through a box of photographs, she found an old Polaroid picture of that same girl when she was about three, standing with her mother and grandmother. "The mom had won the Mother's Day grand prize for her mom. Three generations of listeners!"

While sports debates on the AM can sometimes get intense, WOOF(FM) was designed to be family-friendly. Aimed at a predominantly female audience, the station avoids on-air political argument and doesn't accept local political ads. The announcers are perceived as family members: morning host Amydee, who has been with the station for 18 years, is more than a friendly voice playing the music.

She tries to be provide information her audience wants. "Women listeners are always telling us they're worried

(continued on page 8)

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WOOF

(continued from page 6)

about losing weight," she says, "so, every day, I give them some helpful hints."

And listeners care deeply about their favorite announcers. Recently, long-time 2–7 pm host Laura Pate, a 29-year veteran whom Amydee refers to as "the calm voice in their busy afternoon," has been battling cancer. Daily, listeners visit the station to drop off cards for her and send email messages to say they are praying for her. Hosts like Rick Patrick in mid-days and Stephano in the evening are also popular; the fact that the station has live personalities matters to the audience. Sales Manager Hal Edwards says it matters to advertisers, too, based on interest from advertisers in store appearances and remotes.

a win-win for him. While the FM gets higher ratings, the AM has a passionate fan base of men 25–54 who love talking sports.

"College football is like a religion here," Griffin said, noting the intense rivalry between the Auburn University Tigers and the University of Alabama Crimson Tide.

Everyone at WOOF Radio wears many hats. They might pitch in at the reception desk, produce a talk show, do production, appear at a remote, or dress up as the WOOF Wolf. Some work on both stations; John Daniel is not only the news director but also co-host of



FM morning hosts Amydee and John Houston.

For news coverage, John Daniel works mornings and serves as news director (he and morning show host Amydee are married). In the afternoon, the anchor is Deborah Pearson, who first worked at WOOF as a college intern at Alabama State University in the 1980s. She had grown up listening and long wanted to be in radio news. These days, in addition to reporting, she helps to train college interns, many of whom come from nearby Troy University.

When asked about the station's news philosophy, Daniel said, "People know they can trust us ... By having Deborah here in the afternoon and me in the morning, [there is] always someone in the building [with] the knowledge and experience to handle breaking news, or to deliver important information accurately."

WOOF Radio News has won the AP's highest state award, "Most Outstanding News Operation," for eight years in a row, and both Daniel and Pearson have won numerous awards for excellence in reporting.

Lance Griffin, morning host of "The Game Plan" on the AM, is the editor of the local newspaper, the Dothan Eagle. He was a sports reporter for the newspaper, so talking sports in the morning and covering news the rest of the day is



"The Huddle" on the AM. Co-host Gary Gibson also does overnights on FM.

Undoubtedly, Agnes Simpson would be proud of how her stations have maintained their reputation for so many years. As her daughter Leigh says, "We've tried to keep the best of radio. We're here to serve the community. And I think we do a good job of it."

Donna Halper recently has profiled WATD(FM) in Marshfield, Mass., and WSVX(AM) in Shelbyville, Ind. Find those articles at radioworld.com, keyword Halper.

Got a suggestion for this series? Tell us why you think a station or group is noteworthy as an example of radio success. Email radioworld@nbmedia.com with "Station Profile" in the subject line.



News Director John Daniel, Chief Engineer Michael Holderfield and "Love Zone" host and sales rep Brad Bailey inspect a new transmitter.