

Greg Buser – Hiawatha radio

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

“Many signals.” That describes today’s radio airwaves which have multiple sources and stations. Today we’ll meet a radio industry leader who has enhanced his stations’ service to the region and earned the Boy Scout honor camping society nickname, Many Signals. It’s today’s Kansas Profile.

Greg Buser is co-owner of KNZA FM radio in Hiawatha and other stations serving northeast Kansas, western Missouri, and southeast Nebraska. The Kansas stations are sometimes called Kanzaland radio from the name of the Native American Indian tribe, the Kansa Indians.

Greg grew up in rural Kanzaland between the towns of Whiting, population 187, and Muscotah, population 176. Now, that’s rural.

He began in a one-room school where he was the only student in his grade level for the first three years. “It was the only time I was head of my class,” he said with a smile. Greg attended Atchison County High School, graduated from K-State in Radio-Television and then heard about a new radio station in his home area.

Two employees of KMBZ radio in Kansas City, Mike Carter and Bill Bilyeu, decided that northeast Kansas needed a local radio station. They got an FCC license and built a radio station. In August 1977, they began operating KNZA FM radio from a site five miles south of Hiawatha with 3,000 watts of power. It was later upgraded to a 50,000 watt station.

At that time, most FM stations were part of AM station operations. KNZA FM is believed to be the very first stand-alone FM station in Kansas.

Greg Buser first visited the station when he was home on Christmas break from college. He started on weekends and then worked full-time, eventually buying into ownership. Robert Hilton, an original on-air employee at the station, joined Greg as an owner before retiring in 2012.

In 1992, they built 92.1 FM in Seneca where they were already broadcasting high school sports. In 1996 they purchased KAIR AM and FM in Atchison. That station was originally called KARE but those call letters were purchased by a Minnesota television station. The new call letters, K-AIR, seem appropriate for a station on the air in Kansas. In 1998, the owners built an FM station in Falls City, Nebraska and later bought the AM station there.

The key to the success of these stations is local coverage. The stations focus intently on local news, sports, and weather. “If it wasn’t for that, nothing else would matter,” Greg said. Obituaries and community announcements can be heard on these stations. Station staff attend 14 county fairs.

The stations produce two printed publications: A biannual shopper with customized covers for the relevant radio stations, and a high school football and basketball preview magazine featuring some 47 high schools and area colleges.

One challenge was how to operate multiple stations serving three different states. “We put together a website, www.mscnews.net, which covers news, sports, weather, and community announcements covering the whole area,” Greg said. Each station, in whatever state, can direct listeners to this site for more information. The site even

features live streaming of high school football games for many area schools. “That site is getting a million clicks a month,” Greg said.

What does MSC stand for? When Greg’s kids got into Boy Scouts, he was asked what he does for a living so he could be identified by an honorary camping society native American name as is customary. When he replied that he worked in radio, the name he was assigned was Many Signals. From that it was fitting to name the website Many Signals Communications.

“Together, Greg Buser and Robert Hilton have made KNZA a dominant force in a market with numerous competing signals, including stations in St. Joseph and Kansas City,” said K-State journalism professor Steve Smethers. “KNZA became successful because Greg and Robert never lost sight of the importance of good local service, a tradition that continues to this day.”

Many signals. It’s an appropriate name and description for these radio stations. We salute Greg Buser and Robert Hilton for making a difference with outstanding local coverage. For the communities they serve, that sends many positive signals.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.