

Bob Schmidt – Eagle Communications 1

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

“We have songs old and new, bright and blue. Here’s a song just for you.” Does that sound like something an old-time disc jockey would say on the radio? Today we’ll meet a man who began as a disc jockey but who had the vision and hard work to develop a successful communications enterprise. It’s today’s Kansas Profile.

Bob Schmidt is Chairman and retired President and CEO of Eagle Communications in Hays, Kansas. Bob has small-town roots, having grown up at the rural community of La Crosse, population 1,346 people. Now, that’s rural.

Bob went to college at Fort Hays State. While a student, he got a job on a new local radio station, KAYS, as a play-by-play announcer in 1949.

“I didn’t want to be a manager or a salesman,” Bob said. “I wanted to be a disc jockey, to spin the records and call the ballgames,” he said. Yes, on-air broadcasting is fun. Bob worked at perfecting his craft.

After graduation, he did become a manager for KAYS. He partnered with visionary entrepreneur Ross Beach to expand the business. In 1958, Bob was promoted to CEO of what is now known as Eagle Communications.

During the next 40 years, Eagle Communications of Hays would become a leader in the broadcast and telecommunications industry. “We built or purchased 20 radio stations, four television stations, and twelve cable systems in Kansas, Nebraska, Missouri and Texas,” Bob said. He eventually acquired the business from Ross Beach.

Bob Schmidt gave lots of leadership and expanded this communications business in a time of remarkable change. He saw a time when radio was declared dead, and then he saw its resurgence. He saw changes in the regulatory environment with less government interference from the FCC. He saw the growth of television and then the Internet.

“I’d like to say I envisioned all this, but I can’t,” Bob said. “When you were in radio, you didn’t want to embrace television. It was a competitor, and the same for TV versus cable. But I had a partner who encouraged me. Perhaps I had a knack for looking for the opportunities that were just around the corner.”

Today, Eagle owns and operates 28 radio stations in Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska and 30 cable systems in Kansas and Colorado. In 1998, Bob Schmidt retired as President and CEO and began transferring ownership of the company to his faithful employees through an Employee Stock Ownership Plan.

Bob remains Chairman of Eagle Communications. “That means I work for the employees,” he said. Bob also provides management of his 6,000 acre ranch northeast of Hays.

This remarkable individual is 86 years young. “I’ve been married for 64 years and in broadcasting for 65 years,” he said. “It’s been a very rewarding life.” His personal foundation supports many worthy causes in Hays and other communities, including scholarships and support for students.

One year while chairman of the CBS TV affiliate group, Bob was at a meeting in California and went to the set of hit TV show WKRP in Cincinnati. “You’re Bob Schmidt, aren’t you?” someone said. “I heard you give a talk at K-State.” It was none other than star of the show Gordon Jump who had heard him speak back in Kansas.

“Communication is the bond that holds communities together, something that Bob Schmidt has always keenly understood,” said Steve Smethers, associate director of the A.Q. Miller School of Journalism and Mass Communications at K-State. “Through his pioneering leadership in developing radio, television, cable TV, telephone and internet services, Bob has provided communication channels that have kept information and interpersonal communications flowing for thousands of people in the rural Midwestern states.”

“We have songs old and new, bright and blue. Here’s a song just for you.” Yes, that’s a phrase like Bob Schmidt might have used when he was a disc jockey playing vinyl records on an old turntable. That personal touch to his customers has helped build this remarkable communications business. We commend Bob Schmidt for making a difference with visionary communication.

And that's not all. We'll learn more about this company's innovative ownership model next week.

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