July 15, 2013 will mark KAIT-TV, Channel 8, in Jonesboro’s 50th anniversary. July 15, 1963 is also an important date to this writer, because I had the good fortune of having a front-row seat for the historic sign-on—and enjoy the even greater good fortune to still be around to remember some of the details and to continue using some of the skills I started acquiring at KAIT-TV fifty years ago.

To have a complete picture of KAIT-TV’s status today, however, requires going back a few million years to the early milllenia of what became Crowley’s Ridge. Gravel, untold tons of gravel, influenced KAIT-TV’s inception and may impact its future.

KAIT-TV’s original owner chose the station’s 40-acre site five miles north of Jonesboro because the land was cheap and 200 feet or so higher than the Arkansas Delta land to the east and west of Crowley’s ridge. The area had once been the bottom of a shallow bay of what is now the Gulf of Mexico. Once the land lifted and left deposits of marline sand and gravel exposed, the ancient Mississippi and Ohio Rivers thundered past of either side of what became Crowley’s Ridge and deposited even more gravel that had been created by the grinding glacial action further north.

Finally, the wind-blown loess that added height to Crowley’s Ridge was more prevalent in the southern part of the ridge than around Jonesboro. The gravel deposits around the KAIT-TV studio are near the surface and more-easily extracted than deposits further south.

This is why KAIT-TV will celebrate its 50th anniversary this July while being surrounded by dormant or thriving gravel mining operations. Since one of my specialties is helicopter-mount aerial photography, I can attest that KAIT-TV would not be a candidate for any of my visually-arrestiong Arkansas Parks & Tourism fly-overs. Active gravel operations—while a wonderful and necessary contributor to a region’s economy—do not provide tourist-inspiring scenery. Except to owners and stockholders, gravel pits are unsightly. KAIT-TV neighbors are no exception.

In November of 1971, over twenty million readers of TV GUIDE magazine were introduced to Jonesboro and Channel 8 in an article of mine, which the snarky Back East editors had retitled: **“Horatio Alger in the Sticks--Or, how I rose from tractor driver to TV director in just seven panic-stricken months.”** Now the Horatio Alger dig did not register with many readers, who were much too young to remember Alger’s clichéd “rags-to-riches” books for boys. However, everyone realized that “in the sticks” was a mild insult—everyone except the Jonesboro Chamber of Commerce, which considered the title a *major* insult. The article began:

When I was 16, my family became neighbors with a television station. This event was a bit miraculous, since our "neighborhood" was the wooded hills near the town of Jonesboro, Ark. I immediately turned in my ax and entered the glorious, show-biz world of television as a $20-per-week photographer’s assistant.

Men’s fortunes rise and fall quickly in the television industry, but nowhere with more frequency and unexpectedness than in small-market TV stations. This explains why I found myself promoted to Channel 8's chief photographer with my television career only four

days old.

The article went on to recount my early days of “fumbling ineptitude” as a tried to learn the KAIT-TV darkroom. This was when black-and-white slide transparencies were the norm. Fifty years later, of course, KAIT-TV news and commercial photographers use fancy high-definition digital camcorders and computers. Channel 8 has not had a film processor on premises for years.

Back in 1971—while remembering 1963, I continued:

One day the station's only director failed to report for work. As a result, I got another on-the-spot promotion. From tractor driver to television director in seven months--it could only have happened in Arkansas, a state which, after all, does claim to be the "Land of Opportunity.”

Arkansas is now “The Natural State,” but since over half of KAIT-TV new director Hatton Weeks’ 43-person staff are Arkansas State University students or graduates, Channel 8 remains a “Land of (Local) Opportunity.”

The “AIT” in KAIT meant “Arkansas Independent Television”—not “Ain’t It Terrible”, as some early viewers claimed. The initial lack of a network affiliation meant lots of local programming. While a senior at Jonesboro High School, I often directed each week ten newscasts, a 90-minute, Saturday country music program, a live wresting (‘rasslin’) show and an hour-long “dance party”. Some weeks I directed another hour of country music on Sunday.

 All programming in the early days was live, because KAIT-TV started out without even owning a videotape recorder (VTR). In its 50th anniversary year, KAIT-TV has fourteen satellite dishes, a couple of microwave vans, and a dozen news vehicles. Videotape itself is on its way to obsolescence. Recording at Channel 8 now is more often accomplished on computer drives and solid-state devices. News dominates Channel 8 programming now, but back in the day:

On Saturday and Sunday nights, pick-up trucks from throughout the Ozark foothills would converge on Channel 8. Kids, grandmothers, well-to-do doctors, $40-per-week waitresses and would-be performers from all walks of life would come to audition for a chance to appear on *Hillbilly Hootcnanny*, *Country Junction* and other equally memorable programs. From the opening hoedown the closing hymn. Channel 8's brand of country-music show was unrehearsed, unpredictable and packed with hard-sell, "down-home” commercial pitches.

The TV GUIDE article continued with a litany of the on-air miscues that characterized understaffed no-budget local television.

…the Channel 8 concept of set designing was to figure out today how to rearrange the same background flats, curtains and set pieces we had used yesterday and the day before. One particularly unkempt plastic potted plant--affectionately dubbed "Matilda"—was shown so many times on different sets that it began to draw fan mail.

 A visit to today’s KAIT-TV reveals a much more sophisticated operation. The news sets are “slick” and would do credit to any television program anywhere. The control room is all high-tech, flat plasma screens with dozens of incoming images. Five people now do the work I used to do by myself, and there are no slides to drop or film projectors to jam or contrary behemoth two-inch tape machines with massive reels of videotape to load. And current KAIT-TV employees will never have a true anecdote like this to tell:

One year we received permission from CBS to carry a Sugar Bowl game in which the University of Arkansas Razorbacks were playing. Since we had no AT&T microwave or coaxial television transmission lines, the only way for Channel 8 to telecast the game was to pick up the signal from the Memphis CBS affiliate and rebroadcast the picture. Electronic interference was very bad near the studio and transmitter. Our intrepid engineering department solved the problem by fastening a home TV antenna to the top of a Volkswagen bus, driving the vehicle far out into the woods, and running a cable back to our control room. This Rube Goldberg arrangement might have worked if it had not rained in Jonesboro New Year's Day and if a passing hunter had not gotten his car stuck in the mud close to our bus. The ignition noise from the car’s engine ruined our reception. And thousands of Channel 8 viewers cursed and fumed until our two trusty cameramen sloshed through the woods to help push out the floundering automobile.

That is a true story. There are many others. Before our “official” July 15, 1963 sign-on, Channel 8 sent out a test signal consisting of booth announcer simply playing solitaire on camera. Curt had a mischievous streak and would sometimes get bored and start cheating at his card game. The phones—I kid you not—would start ringing off the phone with sharp-eyed viewers with apparently nothing better to do than watch a guy play solitaire.

Many other reminisces of the first four years of KAIT-TV would, unfortunately, fall into the PENTHOUSE FORUM category. Even more unfortunately, none of the early KAIT-TV Mature Audience anecdotes involved the skinny kid with the crew cut who claimed that he was the director. More than a few of my cameramen, musicians, entertainers, and sundry unnamed individuals associated with the TV station may have occasional availed themselves of the opportunities to impress a “new acquaintance” with a private nocturnal studio tour and provided a shy photographer with a secondary education in human nature. In addition, the old logging road to KAIT-TV had been a popular place for *serious* “submarine races”. The sudden appearance of a television station along the road did little to damper the enthusiasm of the local lovebirds.

Nowadays, the road past Channel 8 is well paved and since 1974 has continued on to the Holy Angels Convent a few miles to the east. And I am assured by current news director Hatton, marketing director Jeremy Shirley, news operations manager Ronnie Weston, and former KAIT-TV general manager Dr. Darrel Cunningham that there has been absolutely no sexual impropriety associated with KAIT-TV employees—or with anyone in the Channel 8 vicinity--since my departure in 1967. Or perhaps those distinguished gentlemen misunderstood my questions.

All trips down memory lanes must reach a stopping point—even ones that celebrate 50th anniversaries. The final story I wsnt to share involves the original owner of Channel 8\_ George T. Hernreich. He was a larger-than-life-wheeler-dealer who made his first small fortune selling wristwatches to soldiers at Fort Chaffee. That success led to a successful jewelry store in Fort Smith, which led to radio stations and eventual to the forty acres of gravel hills north of Jonesboro. George was a man who knew the value of a dollar. He never bought new equipment for KAIT-TV if he could find a “deal” of used equipment. On some paydays early on when Channel 8 was still losing money, there would be a race down the gravel road to Highway 141 and on into town to cash those checks before…well, you get the picture.

I started at two-dollars per hour and four years later as chief director I was still only making minimum wage. So near the end of my employment and subsequent departure for grad school, when I was notified that I was a finalist for an International Radio and Television Society (IRTS) scholarship to be presented in New York City, I was too broke to even consider a trip to attend the event. Therefore, it came as a pleasant shock when “Mr. Hernreich” stepped up and offered to pay my expenses. After all, I was leaving for grad school in Illinois and was never planning to set foot in KAIT-TV again in my life. The gesture was generous and greatly appreciated.

 To make a short story even more brief, thanks to George I enjoyed my first ride in an airplane and my first visit to what was then known as The Big Apple. I stayed in a nice hotel courtesy of Mr. Hernreich. I won the $500 scholarship and had a great time spending every last cent of the money of my first real vacation. George died at age 97 in 2000. I think…I hope…I thanked him for his kindness back in 1967. If I did not, then I am doing it now.

Back to the exciting conclusion of the 1971 TV Guide article—which paid $450 and which I also immediately spent:

My memories of this type of rustic television are a mixture of chagrin, smiles and tremendous pride. During my four-year apprenticeship in Arkansas television. I became an authority on Wallace Beery movies, Roller Derby, Veg-a-Matics, *Highway Patrol* re-runs, and chinchilla-ranch promotions. Much more importantly, I discovered that television in even its most backward, gosh-awful state exerts a powerful communications force.

The TV studio back in Jonesboro is still out in the woods, but civilization has begun to encroach in the form of paved roads and real-estate subdivisions. Channel 8 is now a prosperous, progressive ABC-affiliate station which no longer has that quaint, anachronistic charm. And I suppose beginners there are no longer allowed all the mistakes I once made.

Today--almost eight years after fouling up my first batch of slides for Channel 8--I am still in the "glorious, show-biz world of television." But although my position as a film/videotape producer for WFAA Productions in Dallas affords me the opportunity to use millions of dollars' worth of the latest equipment, to travel throughout the world and to work alongside some of the top professionals in the industry, I sometimes miss the simple satisfactions and insanities of my first job back in Jonesboro.

 Today, nearly fifty years after the “insanities” of my first job, I still work with expensive equipment and along side top professionals. Although I am a much better and experienced cinematographer now than I was in Jonesboro, I, alas, am probably no better writer than I was in Mrs. Melma Ashton’s Jonesboro High School English Grammar and Composition class. I peaked too early with my writing skills.

So I cannot think of any more literary way to say “Happy 50th Anniversary, KAIT-TV”. I sincerely hope within the next fifty years that the gravel pits are reclaimed and turned to proper setting for a uniquely scrappy and successful television station filled with wonderful memories.

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