Chapter 1

The History of Farm Broadcasting

Learning Objectives:
- Describe how farm broadcasting got its start.
- Identify important figures in farm broadcasting, such as the first farm broadcaster.
- Describe how the NAFB grew into its present state.
- Explain the functions of the NAFB.

The Beginning of Farm Radio

Broadcasting information to farmers started just after the invention of the AM radio. WHA in Madison, Wisconsin began broadcasting weather reports in January 1921. Two months later, James A. Bush, a Tuscola, Illinois grain dealer, put WDZ on the air to bring five minute grain market reports to his grain dealers and farmers. A few months later, KDKA in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania put Nelson Gilpin, assistant editor of the National Stockman & Farmer, on the air to report markets. By 1922, the USDA reported that 36 stations had been licensed by the Commerce Department, and 35 of the 36 had been approved to broadcast USDA markets. In the 1920s, numerous stations were licensed and built to broadcast to the farm and rural areas of the country.

An example of the desire to initiate farm broadcasting is KFEQ, which was first licensed in 1923 to broadcast from Oak, Nebraska and later relocated to St. Joseph, Missouri in 1926. This move was facilitated and encouraged by the St. Joseph Stockyards and the St. Joseph Grain Exchange. KFEQ was one of the first stations to initiate live remote broadcasts three times daily directly from the St. Joseph Stockyards and four times daily from the St. Joseph Grain Exchange. Farm radio was much more efficient and reliable than the telegraph or the telephone to distribute the market information to the area grain elevators and farmers.

Roots of the NAFB

The first full-time farm broadcaster was Frank Mullen with KDKA. He started after graduating from college in 1923. Mullen extended his broadcasting career in 1926 to NBC to found the first network farm program, “The National Farm Service Home Hour.” Mullen eventually retired as
executive vice president of NBC.

The 1930s saw more stations hiring full-time farm reporters. The USDA and land-grant college extension personnel were on the air with farm information. The idea for a national association for farm broadcasters grew out of a 1943 meeting of the Institute for Education by Radio in Columbus, Ohio. Farm broadcaster Larry Haeg called a meeting of 35 who attended the show and the idea for a national association was born. World War II interrupted the process, but in May 1944, the organization was officially formed and named the National Association of Radio Farm Directors (NARFD). The 1950’s brought awareness that members must generate advertising revenue for their stations to insure their employment, commercials started to be accepted in farm programs, and the farm broadcast service improved. In the 1950s, television stations were being built in increasing numbers and farm broadcasting took to the television screen. In 1955, NARFD became the National Association of Television and Radio Farm Directors (NATRFD) and 137 new farm broadcasters joined to bring the total membership to 500. The name changed in 1964 to the National Association of Farm Broadcasters, or NAFB. In 2005, the name was adjusted to National Association of Farm Broadcasting to be more inclusive of its diverse members. The NAFB has evolved into a dynamic trade organization with the following functions:

1. Market and promote farm broadcasting to the agricultural advertising community. Farm advertising revenue is the only economic support to provide this service to agriculture. NAFB has a sustaining effort to commission research to measure media use among farmers and ranchers as the total agricultural communications industry continues to evolve.

2. Provide a structure for farm broadcasting news distribution through the National Farm Broadcast News Service as well as other professional farm broadcast special events and services.

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**Activities/Discussion Questions**

Divide into small groups:
- Have each group research and come up with a farm broadcasting timeline starting in 1920.
- As a class, make a large timeline and have each group contribute.
- Discuss the importance and impact of each event on the timeline.