

Now This...

It started in 2003. Les Myers suggested to Ross Hunter, "Why don't you develop a listserv that all three or four of us who are within e-mail contact could palaver?" So Ross set up one of those e-mail groups on Yahoo where people can message back and forth on a bulletin board, and it grew from there.

Today, 89 former full or part-time employees and friends regularly "palaver" in the group. In the beginning, as many as 50 messages would be posted daily. Now, of course, it's slacked off to half a dozen per week. But, at 4,000 total messages and counting, this has to be some kind of record, for these groups often go belly up due to lack of interest.

But the fact that the interest continued inspired Ross Hunter to begin his video project. He first went to Welford Sherman, who founded WJMA, recorded an interview, came back and videotaped it. During that interview, Welford mentioned that the original engineer in 1949, when the station first started broadcasting, was living in Harrisonburg. "So then I had two video interviews and I thought, well maybe we could do something with this."

All in all, he recorded 34 hours of interview with 31 people. He Googled people from all over the country, ran into some dead ends, made some incredible connections, such as the reuniting of two best friends who had not spoken to each for 50 years. He traveled as far as Atlanta, and he found some fascinating stuff.

For instance, did you know that Ron Landry,



Photo by Phil Audibert

In 2003, former program director, Ross Hunter started an Internet news group that grew to 89 permanent subscribers. All told he has contacted some 300-plus people who have had a connection at one time or another with WJMA. He has also produced the hour-long video documentary, "Now This..." which will debut to the public at the Orange County Historical Society this coming Monday evening at 7 p.m.

who first worked at WJMA in 1953 went on to become a big market radio announcer, a Grammy-nominated comedian, and a TV writer for shows like "Benson," "Gimme a Break," the "Redd Foxx Show?"

Or how about Talmadge England who was chief engineer in 1950. He went on to earn a PhD in nuclear engineering, worked at Los Alamos, authored 200 technical articles, "published the first predictions of parasitic absorption and decay power in nuclear reactors based on nuclide data," whatever that means, and wrote a computer code that is used to this day?

Then, of course, there's Chet Burgess who was an original hire by Ted Turner when starting CNN, or Red Shipley who for 25 years hosted Stained Glass Blue Grass and was voted the International Bluegrass Music Association Broadcaster of the Year in 2006. The list goes on.

Ross admits he's spent entirely too much time on the project. "Each hour-long interview ends up being about five hours...then you add another 100 hours of tweaking it and travel, and so, it's way too many hours." His wife Carol has been patient. "She has been very supportive and encouraging and very good about the time I've spent with it. And if that got in there, it would really help." (No problem, Ross)

Asked to respond that enough is enough already; let it go, Ross admits "There are people who have said, 'You know, why are you doing this? This is old history.'" He has the perfect response. "You don't throw away family photographs, do you? We were a family that was part of a community, and like anything that happens in a community, you need to preserve a history. And radio and TV and all the electronic publications, it's long gone. Once it's broadcast, poof, it's gone, and there isn't any record of it. It's not like the newspaper where you can go over and page through a paper from 50 years ago." He pauses. "That's why I wanted to collect it and figure out who these people were, where they came from and why they participated in it."

Written by Russ Roberts and narrated by Arch Harrison's daughter, Ann Ross Harrison, the hour-long "Now this..." debuts to the public at the Orange County Historical Society this coming Monday at 7 p.m. A 90-minute version will be made available to area branches of the Orange County Library. Hunter also has 50 hours of recordings of everything from newscasts to commercials to football games from those good old days. He plans to put these snippets of audio history on CD because "It bothered me that a lot of this was just going to be lost." He invites anyone to go to wjma.radiohistory.net. "It's there for anybody to look at."

And listen to.



Photo by Phil Audibert

"We're your radio station, not an iPod on shuffle," says afternoon jock, Lee Richards. WJMA is actually one of three stations: WVCV and WCVA simulcast on AM.

ing lot, your car radio in 1979 would pick up maybe 10 FM radio stations. That number is 30-plus today. And radio is not just up against other stations: there's cable; there's satellite TV, satellite radio, and, the 800-pound gorilla, the Internet, which ironically might be radio's future.

Apple recently announced its Nano iPod would include an FM receiver. This is good news to Schick. Young people, he says, "want everything on one device." So having a radio on your iPod can only be a plus. "A large part of our future is on-line," says Schick. The challenge is how to meet the growing trend for everyone to customize their own programming. But he adds, "People like local and they like free, and we're both."

Although the commitment to local news is not what it used to be; it's still there. Phil Goodwin who has worked there "on and off since 1976," prepares numerous local newscasts daily; it's just that they are spread out over a larger area.

Advertisers are different too. "Trying to find a business that's being run today like it was 30 years ago is impossible," continues Schick. He estimates 70 to 80 percent of the businesses that advertised in 1979 no longer exist. Also, car dealerships, which are the holy grail of radio advertising, making up a third of a radio station's revenue, have been sent reeling in the recession.

Yet, Schick claims, "We're intensely local, still doing local sports and still doing local news...We are always looking for ways to serve our community better and serve our shareholders better."

WJMA just turned 60 years old. The anniversary may not have even been mentioned on the air. If the old crew were still there, we would have had a remote, and a birthday cake in the shape and color of an orange, and Jay Keirnan would have come up with something fiendishly clever, and Bill Little would have sold dozens of spots.

But would he? Would the average listener in Culpeper or Spotsylvania or Albemarle or Louisa care? Probably not.

WJMA has adapted with the times and moved on. But for a small group of us, it remains a fond and enduring memory. Perhaps Clint Estes said it best. "I don't know if it was the time period or how that culture was created but I haven't found it since." He pauses, a figurative tear forming in his eye, "So yeah, I'd like to go back to Brigadoon."



Photo courtesy Ross Hunter and wjma.radiohistory.net.

Too numerous to name, this photo of WJMA employees and their families was snapped at a staff picnic at Graves Mountain Lodge in 1983, during the height of the radio station's golden era.

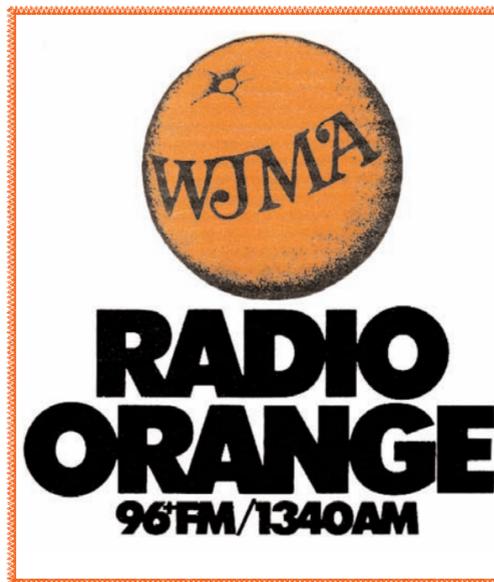


Photo courtesy Ross Hunter and wjma.radiohistory.net

The Radio Orange campaign hit its stride during the golden era in the late 1970s and early 1980s. But in those days, you could only receive 10 stations on an average car radio around here. That number is 30 today. Now, radio stations have to expand into larger regions to make up for a shrinking slice of the programming pie.

WJMA the golden era

It was a golden era. It lasted 10 years or better, from the early 1970s through the early 1980s. During that time, if you were working at WJMA radio, you were truly a lucky soul.

The pay was awful; I never made more than a wet-behind-the-ears, fresh-out-of-college, first-year school teacher in the Orange County Public School system. The days were long; 50-plus-hour work weeks were common; no vacation of any kind the first entire year. Many of those hours were spent going to interminable governmental meetings at night, filing stories from home over the phone, and arising early the next morning to do it all over again.

And I wouldn't have had it any other way.

I was the news director, hired on faith alone. I had zero experience, other than filing a few stories as a stringer.

I was petrified. Me???? Read aloud over the radio???? And what's this you say? I'm supposed to write concise intelligible local news stories right off the bat? No first and second drafts? No cut and paste? No back-

space, no delete; just clack it out on a Royal typewriter, perfect, first time, every time?

This is radio, son. You've got one, two, three, four, five, six, deadlines a day! I was used to working with one deadline per WEEK!

I had come from an alternative local newspaper, named *The Patriot*, that put a pro-conservation, limited-growth spin on local matters. And yes, folks the old no-growth/pro-growth argument was alive and kicking, even back then.

When I interviewed for the job with station owner, Arch Harrison, he made it abundantly clear to me that I was not to let any personal bias get in the way of objectivity in the news. Valuable lesson. Even more important: the establishment in my mind of a fundamental principle of journalism.

My predecessor was a taciturn chap named Chet Burgess. He had been lured to Orange by Arch Harrison with the challenge (bait?) of setting up a news operation in a tiny radio station in the middle of nowhere, just to see if it would work. "So I turned down \$165

a week with a company car and an expense account with a landmark newspaper and packed up and headed toward Orange," reminisces Burgess in a recently completed video about WJMA's history, called "Now This..."

It only took a couple of years for Burgess to catch the eye of bigger fish. He was lured away by WTAR-TV in Norfolk; then eventually to a fledgling national all-news network in Atlanta, called...CNN.



Photo courtesy Ross Hunter and the Woody Purcell collection
A photo from 1953 shows announcers Dan Bell and Ron Landry (right) at the WJMA studios when they were located at Devivi's Restaurant and Hotel.

Chet dropped in my lap a turn-key operation. And after stumbling through my first lengthy newscast at 5 p.m. one sultry summer afternoon, he strode into the studio and said, with that curious little smile of his, "That was good." And I knew I would be okay. Then he was gone. But not really.

Phil Goodwin and I started the same week in 1976. Phil, quite understandably, was going around the station addressing his new boss, as "Mr. Harrison, this, and Mr. Harrison

that." Finally "Mr. Harrison" turned to Phil and said, and this is almost a direct quote, for I have never forgotten it: "Phil, please call me Arch. Anybody who calls me Mr. Harrison, either I owe him money or he owes me money."

It was at that moment that I knew I was in a special place and in the presence of a special person, a person whom I could address in the first person, and who in turn could beckon me likewise, as an equal, not an underling. When people say nice things to me about my writing style being easy to read, I just smile and point to Arch Harrison, for he was my number one mentor. He taught me to write for the ear, not the eye.

And he gave unlikely people, such as myself, a chance. "In no other job that I've had, have I found anybody who was quite as inspiring or as well-regarded as Arch was," says Cathy Wills Christovich, who worked as the first fulltime female announcer from 1970 to 1971. Bob Wade (aka J.D. Slade) got his start there when he was in high school. He just walked in and asked for a job. To his amazement he was hired. "Nobody had ever asked!" he exclaims.

Arch just shrugs, "Here were these perfectly competent, intelligent people. Why shouldn't they, if they wanted to do some broadcasting, come on in."

Patricia McArver came out of her first interview with Arch Harrison and said to herself, "This is a man that I want to be associated with...Everybody wanted to do the best they could and really didn't want to let anybody else down. And it was a magical working situation."

Arch could be something of a stickler. He called McArver, who hailed from Georgia, into his office and gently chided her for dropping "g's" in words ending in "ing." And he patiently coached, it was not radio "Awreng," it was radio "Ah-rinj." It was not "Rowt" 33, it was "Root" 33. And "W" is most decidedly not dub-yah; it's double-you.

But he was also hands-off. "I was given a totally free rein," continues McArver. "Let the crazies run the asylum," counters the immensely talented producer, Jay Kiernan. "The far-



Photo courtesy Ross Hunter and wjma.radiohistory.net
This is the WJMA studio set up of 1982. Note closed loop eight track-like cart machines on the middle right; these were used to play commercials or actualities. At the right edge of the picture, two Revox reel to reel tape recorders flank the cart machines. To the far left are the turntables, and the whole mess was mixed through the control board at center.

ther I get away from it the more I realize it was a special time and place," says Ross Hunter, who has spent countless hours putting together this retrospective of WJMA's history, with particular emphasis on this golden era. "The place really hit its stride. He had a really good compatible group of people there. Everybody was pretty focused on what was going on. It was a very special place to work."

Just look at the amount of local content the station had in those days. Hunter refers to an air check that dates back to 1976 or 1977. It was 8:30 at night! "There are seven local stories. SEVEN local stories," he exclaims, adding that these were stories voiced by not just the announcer but by reporters in the field. They even had "actualities," which is radio's answer to the photograph, the actual sound of the newsmaker speaking or the event happening. "You don't get



Photo by Phil Audibert
This is what a control room at WJMA looks like today: no tapes, no turntables, no cart machines; everything is programmed on a video touch screen such as you would find at a chain restaurant.

a newscast that good in morning drive anymore," he continues. "It's just amazing the amount of work that went into it."

In those days the news department at WJMA consisted of two full-timers and two part-timers, plus a summer intern or two. That's just the news department! NPR-style newscasts ran a half-hour at noon and 5 p.m., complete with features, documentaries, and of course, Arch Harrison's midday postscript where local folks would actually interrupt their lunch to listen to this friend of the community whisper in their ear. "Audio art," is how Patricia McArver characterized those noon day chat sessions.

"I tried from the beginning to have something that was of local interest all of the time," says Harrison in the video. He may have been the originator of the phrase, "We don't just bring you news from around the world, but from around the

corner."

It wasn't just news, of course. And it certainly wasn't the music, which in those days was called MOR, which stands for Middle of the Road. Ross Hunter sheepishly explains that the format was not designed to attract people as much as it was to not run them off. But people didn't listen for the music; they listened for the news, the sports, Swap Shop, which was "the Craig'slist of today." Or, if you lost a pet, you could call the radio station and they'd help you find it; or you could win something by being the sixth caller; or you could listen to a crazy spur-of-the-moment live remote when we all went out into the parking lot on a sweltering July day to fry an egg on Bill Little's car. "It never felt like work," says Jay Kiernan. "It was radio you don't hear anymore."

Clint Estes remembers broadcasting Orange County High School football games for free! Then, two announcers split \$7.50. They knew they were in the high cotton when they divided \$15!

During its heyday, the Sports Broadcaster's Club had 90 members...that's 90 businesses and enterprises paying \$3 a day to have their ads shuffled through all the sportscasts throughout the week. Bill Little, who started there in 1958, explains it worked out well two ways: it spread advertising dollars throughout the various sports programs, both successful and not so successful. And it gave institutions that don't have anything to actually sell, a chance to show their support for local teams. Brilliant!

"We were the hub of the community," says Ross Hunter, adding, that like today's Internet, "information would flow into the radio station; we would disperse it." During its heyday, "JMA had a huge cumulative audience. In a week's time at one point we were reaching 52 percent of the households in the market. That's pretty good. If a station gets four or five percent now, that's good." That's not all day, mind you, but at some point or another during that day, more than half of the households were tuned in. "It was all the elements, the news, the sports, the weather, the community announce-

ments, the lost and found, the Swap Shop, all that sort of stuff that got people to listen."

Could that golden era ever return? "That's a good question," ponders Ross. "I've thought about that a lot. I don't know. The competition is so much different now. My gut tells me, yeah, it would work, but the competition is so different."

That sentiment is heartily confirmed by WJMA's current station manager, John Schick, who has been at the helm



Photo courtesy Ross Hunter and wjma.radiohistory.net
A photographic outtake that symbolizes the spirit at WJMA during its heyday, this candid shot was taken for an ad that ran in local newspapers celebrating WJMA News Department's winning several awards in 1979. From left to right: Mitzi Clark, Patricia McArver, Phil Audibert, and Barbara Potter Drinkwater.

there 16 years. "It's a very competitive business. There are many many choices out there." Yet, he adds, "It's still a heckuva fun business to work in."

Competition: If you sit in the Orange County Library park-

A brief history of WJMA

September 10, 1949, Welford Sherman and others launch WJMA from a rented room at Devivi's Restaurant and Hotel, with a whopping 250 watts of power. The station's call letters reflect Orange's most famous native son, James Madison.



Photo courtesy Ross Hunter and the Woody Purcell collection
It all began when General Manager Art Livick (left) and building owner, Al Devivi (right) cut this birthday cake September 10th, 1949.

Local banker, Woodbury Ober, buys the station in 1956.

The station merges with WINA in Charlottesville and moves to a four-room building on Spicer's Mill Road. The power is upped to 1,000 watts, daytime.

Arch Harrison buys the radio station in 1961, with the intent of staying four years, selling it, and moving on. He winds up staying 23. In 1971, he acquires an FM license and simulcasts on both AM and FM, greatly expanding the station's reach. In 1974, he adds onto the back of the existing building, more than doubling the space.

By the late 1970s, WJMA is employing as many as 25 people.

In 1984, Digby Solomon buys

WJMA, and Arch Harrison retires. In 1988, Solomon sells the station to Carl Hurlbaus, who turns it around, a mere shell of its former self, to Piedmont Communications in 1993.

Piedmont Communications is mostly a local group of investors. "No big corporate out-of-town own-

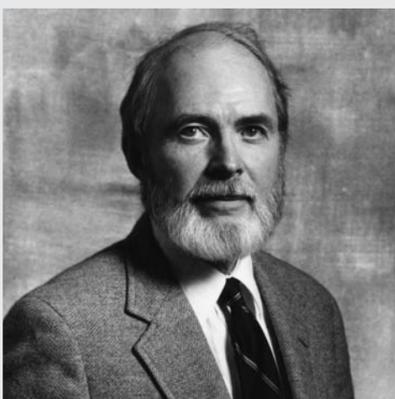


Photo courtesy Ross Hunter and Arch Harrison
Arch Harrison bought WJMA in 1961 with the intent of learning "how a radio station worked," and then moving on. He sold the station in 1984.

ership," says longtime General Manager, John Schick who, along with engineer Gary Harrison, is a shareholder himself. Schick says, the plan all along, was to expand and acquire competing radio stations in Louisa and Culpeper.

During the early 2000s, a complicated shell game involving trading of frequencies and shifting of license locations results in what we have today. WJMA

is technically four radio stations, although two of them are simulcast WVCV and WCVA. Those two stations play "America's Best Music," basically, senior oldies. WJMA, at 103.1 FM, with studios still in Orange, broadcasts now from a new tower in Culpeper County. It plays country music hits with local news, weather and sports, with remotes and public service announcements thrown in.

The fourth station, SAM-FM, plays "adult hits from the Beatles to today." This rather eclectic sounding station has the motto, "you never know what we'll play next."

The point is this: from one radio station playing MOR, to three stations that Schick says were "beating each



Photo courtesy Ross Hunter and the Woody Purcell collection
Does anybody know who this guy is? Ross Hunter has followed dead end leads and is still at a loss for a name to go with this 1959 WJMA studio photo. If you know who this is, contact Hunter at 672-2327.

other up with country," we now have three stations playing three totally different styles of music. That's more bang for your radio buck.

Not a quarter of a mile away from the studios on Spicer's Mill Road, Ross Hunter sits in his cluttered office at Dominion Market Research. Behind him are two old Revox reel-to-reel tape recorders. These were the draft horse of any radio station during the 1970's, used to record everything from news to ads to entire programs.

A visit to WJMA today boggles the mind. No cantankerous tape recorders, none of those antiquated continuous-loop eight-track-on-steroids cart machines, no turntables. It's all computerized, just like, well...everything else.