William B. Smullin (1907-1995)

William Brothers Smullin pioneered the first television stations in southern Oregon and northern California, building them into a broad, regional media presence that helped shape numerous communities.

Born in Kane, Pennsylvania, on May 6, 1907, Smullin moved with his family to Hood River in 1909. The family name is preserved in the name of Smullin Road in Hood River County. A 1929 Willamette University journalism graduate, Smullin was serving as managing editor of Coos Bay's *Southwest Oregon Daily News* when he encountered a small radio station, KOOS. After exploring a partnership with its owner, Harold Hanseth, Smullin moved to Salem and then Portland before the two men established a new radio station, KIEM, in Eureka, California, in 1933.

Believing in the economic vitality of what he called the "Redwood Empire," Smullin then partnered with Amos Voorhies, the publisher of the *Grants Pass Daily Courier*, to launch radio station KUIN (now KAGI) in Grants Pass in 1939. Their "handshake" relationship was enduring and led to their founding Oregon's first VHF television station, Medford's channel 5 KBES-TV (now KOBI-TV) in 1953. The same year, Smullin launched KIEM-TV in Eureka.

Pursuing his vision of being a strong presence in regional media, Smullin added television stations in Klamath Falls, Roseburg, and Eugene, and in Ft. Bragg, Ukiah, and Redding, California. He also owned radio stations in San Jose, Eureka, Corvallis, and Redmond. After watching the founding of America's cable television industry in Astoria in 1948, he launched or purchased cable television systems in Eureka, Grants Pass, Klamath Falls, Medford, Redding, and Roseburg.

Smullin—who signed his name "WmB"—also founded Pacific Teletronics, an early microwave private carrier to relay television programming from San Francisco, Sacramento, and Portland for carriage on his cable systems.

Throughout his career, Smullin won the respect of both colleagues and competitors for his vision, determination, and ingenuity in maximizing the effectiveness of small market stations. Serving on the board of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), he received the NAB's Distinguished Service Award in 1990. As a civic leader, he championed community development and significantly assisted in establishing public television in Medford, Eureka, and Redding. Through the Smullin Foundation, he focused his charitable giving by supporting education and health care.

In the midst of growing government concern over the concentration of media control in the 1970s, the scope of Smullin's holdings attracted federal attention. Under pressure, he was forced to choose between selling either his broadcast or cable businesses. "You leave the dance with the one who brought you," he said, and sold the cable systems in 1982 for the largest per-subscriber cost paid at that time.

In 1984, Smullin turned over the presidency of his company, California Oregon Broadcasting, to his daughter, Patricia C. (Patsy) Smullin. He died in Medford on January 5, 1995. The broadcasting chain he built remains the second oldest family-owned enterprise of its type in the nation.

Written by Ron Kramer

Further Reading:

"Broadcasting Company Founder, Philanthropist Smullin Dies." *Medford Mail Tribune*, January 6, 1995, p. 1.

"Pioneering Medford Broadcaster Wins NAB Award." *Medford Mail Tribune*, January 18, 1990, p. 1.

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