

Brian Mackey: Rich Bradley retires after nearly 50 years on city's airwaves

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When Springfield's public radio station first went on the air on Jan. 3, 1975, the first thing listeners heard was a pre-recorded sign-on with a government-mandated script.

The next thing on the air was the voice of Rich Bradley, delivering the station's first newscast.

Since then, the station — originally WSSR-FM, then WSSU-FM and now WUIS-FM (91.9) — has had only one news director, and public radio listeners in and around Springfield have woken up to Bradley's voice for more than three decades.

But that era is about to end. This week, Bradley, 69, announced he would retire from the station at the end of September.

"I was always so crazy about being a news jockey and working in public radio news. The opportunity to work with college students in the university environment has kept me young, but let's face it, 35 years is long enough," Bradley said.

"It's a young person's game, and I'm more than happy to let them have it."

WUIS is based at the University of Illinois Springfield, in one of the so-called temporary buildings on the east end of campus.

Bradley still uses the office he started in when he was hired in 1974, though he spent about a decade in another room at the station until it was given over to computer and audio equipment. It's emblematic of other changes in the radio business that have marked his tenure.

The newsroom used to have Teletype machines from Reuters and United Press International. Bradley would arrive at the station at 4 a.m. — still does — gather the reams of paper and begin tearing off the stories he'd use on the air. He worked at a wide, angled standing desk that university carpenters built to his specifications, and probably 80 percent of the paper used to print stories went right into the trash, Bradley said.

He remembers how revolutionary it seemed when they began receiving wire stories on computers — glowing amber text on a black background.

"That was a big deal — you could sit at a computer, look at the wire story and if you didn't like how it appeared, you could rewrite it right on the screen, and then print it out," Bradley said.

Now the station uses computers to edit audio, too.

While Bradley has kept up with the changes thus far, he said he's gone about as far as he wants to with the technology.

"I'm getting too old to stay ahead of the curve — all the digital stuff, the Web stuff," he said.

In the corner of Bradley's office, a black metal, state-issue bookcase holds nearly two decades worth of reel-to-reel tapes.

Somewhere on one of the first reels is a 1975 interview with Otto Kerner, the former Illinois governor who had just been released from prison. Kerner had terminal cancer and would die in 1976, but Bradley caught up with him on a visit to Springfield.

That would not be the first Illinois scandal Bradley would cover. The savings-and-loan fraud of Dan Walker and corruption of George Ryan — and the impeachment and indictment of Rod Blagojevich — were still years in the future.

Bradley also covered several presidents: Richard Nixon signing the law making the Lincoln Home a federal park, Gerald Ford dedicating a cornerstone when the Lincoln Home was renovated and Jimmy Carter campaigning at the Statehouse in 1976.

Bradley's voice stands out from those of the National Public Radio news anchors with whom he shares the air. There's an easygoing quality to his baritone — familiar without being too folksy — that one could imagine owes something to his upbringing on a Champaign County farm. His family raised corn, soybeans and Angus cattle, and one of Bradley's youthful chores was milking their Jersey cow.

He attended the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, majoring in engineering, geology and accounting. Those didn't work out, so he transferred to Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, where he earned a degree in television and radio.

After radio jobs in Herrin, Carbondale and Danville, Bradley moved to Springfield in 1965, as news director of Top-40 station WCVS-AM 1450 (now a sports station, WFMB-AM). He co-founded a statewide news network and worked there for two years before accepting the news director position at WSSR in 1974, three months before the station went on-air.

Since then, he has been instrumental in the creation of Illinois Public Radio, which distributes state government news to other public radio stations. He also created the longest-running program at WUIS, "State Week in Review," which he has hosted throughout his tenure.

"He's a local legend for public radio listeners," said Bill Wheelhouse, now the general manager of WUIS. Bradley hired Wheelhouse in the 1990s as Statehouse bureau chief.

He described Bradley as easygoing, but said he could always hear a flaw in a sound clip from a million miles away.

Former Illinois Issues editor Peggy Boyer Long, who was WSSR's first Statehouse reporter, said her course in life was set by Bradley's decision to hire her when she was a recent college grad with no radio experience.

She said Bradley offered a blend of instruction and independence that was great for a new reporter in the new medium of public radio: "He stood back and let you do your own thing."

She added that Bradley's greatest contribution to Springfield was his commitment to letting listeners hear firsthand what goes on in state government.

During Long's tenure, that meant votes on the Equal Rights Amendment and the death penalty. More recently, it's meant gavel-to-gavel coverage of Blagojevich's impeachment proceedings.

In 2005, Public Radio News Directors Incorporated awarded Bradley the Leo C. Lee award for significant contributions to public radio news. The importance of the award can be seen in some of the other recipients, many of whom have nationally known public radio voices: Ira Glass, Susan Stamberg, Jay Allison and Linda Wertheimer, among others.

Bradley said he has no immediate plans for his retirement, except to stop setting his alarm clock for 3:15 a.m.

He also doesn't expect a big to-do for his last day on air, scheduled for Sept. 30.

"My preference is to go quietly into the night."

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