

## CFCN's W.W. Grant □

Excerpt by Jack Peach - Days Gone By

### *Radio's "Voice of the Prairies"*

When Calgary was very young a community called Rouleauville abutted its southern edge beyond Seventeenth Avenue, then called Notre Dame. At the southwest corner of the area, by the foot of Hillcrest Avenue that winds down from Mount Royal to Mission, stands an old house that today is the Scottish Nursing Home.

A few of us remember it as having been a radio station, the home of the "Voice of the Prairies," CFCN, owned and run by a local electronics genius, W.W. Grant. An ex-navy man, inventor of a submarine detection device, and a veteran of World War I, Grant had operated an air force radio receiving station at the patrol base on the eastern outskirts of High River.

Then, having designed and built his own transmitting equipment, Grant began broadcasting words and music. His station's voice, next heard briefly from Morley, then from Calgary, became known among the continent's small but growing band of local and distant listeners.

Those were the days of negligible electronic clutter, so the Calgary station was heard with considerable clarity and regularity as far away as New York City, where one of our local programmes achieved unexpected notoriety.

A New York newspaper cartoonist by the name of Payne began picking up broadcasts in the deep of night that really tickled his funny bone. It was cowboy music from some very far-off place named Calgary, Canada, played by some whooping and hollering musicians calling themselves the Bronco Busters.

Here at home we knew who they were and who we were, but little did we know Payne was cashing in on his amusement by cartooning in the daily press the imaginary capers of the Bronco Busters away out west on the TS Ranch. He didn't know it but the letters T.S. were said to mean "The Stampede" and, in their weekly shows, the musicians made sure every listener to their broadcasts believed the music actually originated in a ranch house.

The Bronco Busters's theme was "Turkey in the Straw" played and sung with these words:

O I come from the country where the Chinook winds blow,  
From the foothills city in the valley of the Bow,  
Where the clear, cool waters from the mountains flow,  
And the handsome women and the big men grow.

And down at the end of the rather raucous theme that went on from there, were words like this:

Ride 'em cowboy, let 'er buck!  
We're the Bronco Busters from the valley of the Bow,  
Rum tiddle tum, tum,  
Yip! Yip!

Jack Bullough, a pianist and the musical director at the Grand Theatre, wrote the theme and many other numbers in the orchestra's original range music repertoire. He was nicknamed "The Badger" on the broadcasts. Harry Hutchcroft, another composer and performer, was known to the audiences as Bridle Bill. Shorty, who was Wally Braley, and Josh Henthorn, whose foghorn



*W.W. Grant was a self-taught electronics genius. After serving during World War I in U.S. submarines, he was placed in charge of wireless services for Alberta's forestry air patrol, based in High River and Morley. Besides building and operating commercial radio stations, Bill Grant mass-produced a small, simple radio receiver under the trade name "Voice of the Prairies," soon found in nearly every farmhouse. In his later years he supervised construction of the CBC's Alberta super transmitter at Lacombe, then was engaged in the design and construction of the CBC international service's short-wave multistation array on the Tantramar Marshes in New Brunswick. CBC International Service, W.A. Nichols, "Canada's Loudest Voice," *New World Illustrated*, 1945*

voice used to amuse and inform the grandstand crowd at the Stampede, were two more members of the Bronco Busters along with Tom Smith, who carried the name Cy Ebenezer. Many of the names, such as Curley Nixon and Slim McMurray, stuck even after the group's show was changed to "Cy Ebenezer and the Kid," then to "The Old Timers Show" that also arose from the same spirited heiferdust of the original series that ended in 1924.

Those were maverick days in radio, for it was a new medium, almost unfettered by those eager to regulate it as soon as they could manage to fathom its potential.

Somewhere along the way the Bronco Busters performed from under the roof of the King George, later the Carleton, Hotel opposite the Palliser. As part of the atmosphere the musicians had one of those noisemakers that would imitate the mooing of a cow.

On one occasion their exuberance spawned a stunt that sort of backfired. They spirited a live cow by elevator to the studio atop the hotel, where she added the most authentic atmosphere including an editorial comment on the quality of the show. She left her personal opinion embedded in the carpet!

Bill Grant, realizing the station's own originations were reaching across the continent, devised an ingenious scheme to enrich his shoestring operation's efforts to entice listeners. He installed a powerful radio receiver of his own design down in the Lethbridge area. Then, relying upon the naiveté of the telephone company's personnel, who also were groping in the new wilderness of tele-electronics, he "piped" the shows pulled in off the air in the quiet countryside, by telephone line to Calgary. Here, he rebroadcast them on his beloved CFCN. Those were Depression years, when entertainment was too costly for most people and radio offered a salvation during the days and evenings of discouraging boredom.

To ensure that people heard the broadcasts Grant designed and marketed very successful, simple, small, and cheap "Voice of the Prairies" receiving sets. The whole venture, so typical of Bill Grant's enterprise and imagination, included the excising of U.S. sponsor's commercial messages from the programs he picked up from network transmitters in Denver and Salt Lake City. Listeners to the Calgary station heard such famous pioneer radio programmes as "Lum and Abner," "Amos and Andy," "Myrt and Marge," and the singing duo Billy Jones and Ernie Hare, all sponsored by Calgary merchants! It was not until federal authorities caught up with the caper that we early Calgary listeners had to return to searching the dial for the shows we'd come to follow faithfully as local presentations.

The self-effacing local radio wizard, W.W. Grant, had set a pattern whetting our international listening appetite that persists to this day.