

Gordon McLendon and the Liberty Broadcasting System

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Gordon McLendon, famous for his radio programming innovations, achieved earliest recognition as founder of the Liberty Broadcasting System (LBS). The Liberty Network became America's second largest radio network in terms of local station affiliate count. The network's chief attraction was sports coverage that consisted of, among other things, live and recreated baseball and football games. The LBS life span stretched for less than four years, but in that time the network attracted an enormous following. The Liberty Network's demise ironically resulted from refusal of major league baseball owners to allow the network coverage rights to their games.

The Liberty Network originated with Gordon McLendon's construction of Dallas radio station KLIF in 1947. Formidable market competition forced McLendon to provide listeners unique programming. What he provided was daytime baseball games—something unavailable to that portion of the country outside the major league baseball territories of the Northeast and Midwest. Due to limited financial resources, the KLIF "Game-of-the-Day" was a re-created version of an actual ballgame.

The popularity of Gordon McLendon's re-creations attracted stations elsewhere seeking to affiliate with KLIF in order to carry its daily baseball games. These affiliates gradually spread nationwide and by 1948 were incorporated into the Liberty Broadcasting System—a radio network comprised of 458 affiliates by 1951.

Gordon McLendon's initial efforts to broadcast baseball games live from major league ballparks were at first blocked by baseball officials who claimed territorial exclusivity for their own club radio networks. McLendon's threat of anti-trust action against baseball officials proved successful in finally opening ballparks to Liberty Network microphones. Baseball coverage rights, however, again were denied for the 1952 season when major league officials determined that the popularity of the LBS baseball broadcasts were hurting attendance at minor league baseball games.

The denial of coverage rights compelled the Liberty Network to file a \$12 million anti-trust suit against major league baseball officials in 1952. In the meantime the network, faced with the loss of its most popular programming and strapped with financial woes, declared bankruptcy. An effort to keep LBS afloat failed, and on May 15, 1952, Gordon McLendon broadcast what would be his final appearance on the Liberty Network. He told his listeners that the suspension of LBS operations had been forced by a "conspiracy" perpetrated by the "monopolists" of organized baseball.

Although McLendon vowed to LBS listeners that the network would return, he was unable to revive it. Two of his attempts to build radio networks modeled on the LBS design soon after Liberty's demise met with no success. A formal end to the Liberty Broadcasting System came when the network's \$12 million anti-trust suit was dropped in February 1955 after baseball officials agreed to pay LBS a \$200,000 out-of-court settlement.

Gordon McLendon quickly overcame the blow dealt him by the LBS failure and gained enormous successes in radio. But his creation of the Liberty Broadcasting System never would be equalled. McLendon transformed a small radio station into a major broadcasting force in America in less than three years and did it with a style and purpose of mind that forever after would endear him to baseball fans and radio listeners throughout the land.