



Don Levenson – *Business, Industry and Professions*

Donald W. Levenson was born on October 13, 1919, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a son of David and Eva (Wilkoff) Levenson. He attended Pittsburgh public schools and in 1942 graduated from Carnegie Institute of Technology with a degree in electrical engineering. That same year he married Ethyl Sapper and was hired by Radio Corporation of America (RCA) in the test and measuring equipment design department. During World War II, Levenson worked on radar, notably inventing the “Echo Box,” which became standard for pre-mission testing of airborne radar, used during the war to test a system that warned of attacking planes. For this work, Levenson received a presidential citation.

After moving to Wheeling in 1947, Levenson became vice president of his family’s business, Reichart Furniture Company. Maintaining an interest in engineering, he began experimenting with community antenna television (CATV) in 1951, running a cable from the hill above Oakmont to supply feeds of Pittsburgh stations to his brother and other neighbors. Later, he broadened that service as the Wheeling Antenna Company. After developing a group of investors, on May 6, 1952, Levenson incorporated the Wheeling Antenna Company (WACO), where he served as president and chief engineer. Having negotiated a contract with electric and telephone companies for use of their poles, on November 4, 1952, WACO broadcast the first cable television signal to downtown Wheeling, showing the election of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, and within one year was able to offer customers multiple channels. Levenson and WACO put Wheeling on the map as being among the first cities in the United States with cable television.

With WACO, Levenson developed a number of inventions, including a simultaneous summation sweep technique, which could accurately identify malfunctions within the cable system without interrupting customers’ services. For this invention, in 1973 he became the first person recognized by the National

Cable Television Association for outstanding engineering contributions to cable television. WACO expanded to St. Clairsville in 1970 and then to Wellsburg, eventually growing to more than 25,000 subscribers in Eastern Ohio and the Northern Panhandle of West Virginia.

A dedicated member of the Wheeling community, Levenson and WACO worked with the City of Wheeling to donate cameras and audio equipment in council chambers, radios and breathalyzers to the Wheeling Police Department, and video and tape decks for the Wheeling Fire Department, which allowed the department to record and study fire calls around the city. WACO also worked in original programming for the local area. Levenson personally interviewed local dignitaries and candidates running for public office.

He also was active in the Wheeling Civitan Club, the Wheeling Area Chamber of Commerce, Temple Shalom (where he sometimes taught ninth grade in the religious school) and was a member of B’nai B’rith, and a charter member of the Good Zoo at Oglebay Park. In addition to being a licensed Professional Engineer (P.E.) in both West Virginia and New Jersey, Levenson belonged to the National Society of Professional Engineers, the West Virginia Society of Professional Engineers, the Society of Broadcast Engineers, the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers, and the Society of Cable Television Engineers.

Levenson died on June 4, 1978, and was buried at Beth Shalom Cemetery in Pittsburgh. After his death, WACO was sold to Telecommunications (TCI) on August 4, 1980. Levenson’s work with WACO helped to revolutionize the cable television industry not only in Wheeling but throughout the United States as well.