

The Establishment of Television in Texas

All eyes were focused on a small panel of ground glass. There was a flicker of light—orange and black—and then a face appeared. “This is television station W5AGO,” announced an unknown voice. W5AGO, *the Southwest’s first television station*, was on the air. Its builder and owner, Truett Kimzey, engineer for KFJZ, had spent two months building the transmitting station. His experiment was featured in the 1934 Southwestern Exposition and Fat Stock Show in Fort Worth.⁴⁷

Kimzey was on a trip to New York when he made an investment in the future. “I thought television was just around the corner,” said Kimzey, “and sunk all my savings—\$1,500—in the equipment.” The equipment was very crude because the television camera as it is known today had not yet been invented. Performers stood in a darkened room before a battery of ten photoelectric cells while dozens of tiny shafts of light were thrown over their features through a revolving scanner disc. The performer’s image was reflected into the bank of cells. The receiver had a similar disc revolving at the same rate of speed, and the picture was projected on a ground-glass panel. “The performer sang or talked into a microphone of another radio station,” explained Kimzey, “but since electricity has no loss of motion, the sound and picture reach the receiver at the same time and there is perfect synchronization.”

Some of the first television performers were Cecil Gill, the yodeling country boy; Nancy Jo Nolte; and Helen and Ellen Prestidge.⁴⁸ Gill was a well-known radio performer in Texas. The Prestidge sisters were friends of Kimzey. They were known as “The Harmony Twins” and had sung on KTAT, KRLD, WRR, and KFJZ in the Fort Worth–Dallas area. “Mr. Kimzey was instrumental in having us perform on the first remote broadcast on television from the studio downtown to the Exposition and Fat Stock Show,” stated Ellen Prestidge. “That was quite a day.”⁴⁹

Kimzey installed his television transmitter atop the Commercial Standard

Building at Seventh and Main Streets in downtown Fort Worth, the studios of KFJZ. Earlier television experiments had operated over telephone lines, but never over the air. "The pictures weren't perfect by any means. They were clear enough to recognize people on the screen," said Kimzey. The "Televisor" would successfully transmit the head and shoulders of a subject or two or more persons standing close together. Kimzey was working on developments that he hoped would televise a larger area.⁵⁰ Johnny Smith, an engineer at KFJZ, remembered seeing one of Kimzey's demonstrations: "I saw the transmissions from the Trinity Life Building downtown out to the North Side Stock Show. I can just vaguely remember being there and a sign saying, "Come In and See Television." I thought it was a picture on film. It was actually on the air. . . . I saw a screen with a flying spot scanner of some sort. It was just somebody talking; it might have been Truett."⁵¹

J. R. (Buddy) Cruse, an engineer at KFJZ, remembered a different television demonstration: "It was an exhibition at the Fat Stock Show, and it created a lot of interest. Everybody wanted to see it and see themselves on television. . . . It was the closest thing to television at that time. It was a rotating disc. You could see details pretty well. It was black and white, and the focus and sharpness was not there, but you could see this lady . . . up on the screen. It was in a darkened room almost like a movie theater. When someone would get on there, everybody would laugh."⁵²

Winston O. Sparks of Fort Worth observed one of Kimzey's demonstrations:

[It was] in the exhibit building during the Fort Worth Stock Show. I was just a bare faced kid running around eating all the free samples of fresh biscuits. . . . On one particular display—something was moving like a fan; a slow-moving fan. . . . Then about twenty-five feet away there was another screen showing what was being transmitted over here. It [the television camera] was a wheel. . . . The sign explained, "What you're seeing here is being transferred through a wire over to this other screen." It talked about what would be available in the future. Someday you would be able to see people from whatever contraption this was, from somewhere else, and look at it on the screen. Lot of people would not believe it. They would say "It's not coming from across town. That's just an old movie they got running up there."⁵³

Kimzey was wrong; television was not just around the corner; it was fourteen years away.⁵⁴ Lawrence Birdsong of Longview saw a demonstration in Dallas "where the telephone exhibit was . . . of the State Fair of Texas, probably the centennial. We paid two bits and went in. This screen had lights around all four sides just like a dressing room mirror. . . . Right around the side, we could look over and see them projected on the screen. That was my first television."⁵⁵

George Ing, of KONO in San Antonio, attended a demonstration in the late 1930s. "Someone came to San Antonio and demonstrated a flying spot scanner right across the street from KONO at the Central Catholic School. I read about it in the newspaper," stated Ing. "It was just a whirling disc in a darkened room. He was not transmitting a picture over wire or over the air. He was picking up cartoons. It did not impress me that much."⁵⁶

As a teenager in 1929, Jack McGrew, future general manager of KPRC in Houston, wanted to build a television. He and a friend, "Ribs" Good, both tinkered in radio. Together they built "the best radios that either one of us every owned," said McGrew. "We used what was called 'peanut tubes'—a small vacuum tube—very small, but quite efficient for their day." The two friends started reading articles in *Popular Mechanics* and *Popular Science* about transmitting pictures through the air. "We were aware of scanning discs, and we even considered building such a device, but we could not figure out what we would watch if we built it. Where are you going to see a program?"⁵⁷

From the book "Texas Signs On, The Early Days of Radio and Television", by Richard Schroder