



Walker Sisson - Carl E. Lee Radio Nomination – Nominated 2021 and 2020

Contract Engineer (deceased); Communication Resource / (“damn near every radio station in southwestern Michigan”)

Nominated by Peter Tanz, Senior Vice-President, Midwest Communications (2021)

Nominated by Antony (Andy) Low, Regional Engineer, Midwest Communications (2020)

Nomination #1 (2021)

Walker Sisson devoted over four decades of his life to serving the radio listeners of southwestern Michigan by vigilantly ensuring their favorite station was always on the air.

Although hundreds of thousands of radio listeners would never know the name Walker Sisson, hundreds of broadcasters not only knew him, but continuously depended upon him; not just to keep their station up to date and on the air, but to be a teacher, counselor, inventor, program advisor and friend.

Walker, a Kalamazoo native, worked with and for this honor's namesake and for Carl's boss John Fetzer. Walker learned the engineering trade directly from the early AM, FM and TV pioneers like Lee and Fetzer.

They instilled in Walker a love and devotion to AM and FM radio. His decades of experience and understanding were freely shared with other engineers, managers, on air talent and even salespeople.

Few broadcasting professionals in southwestern Michigan were not positively affected by having known Walker Sisson.

Leading his own engineering company, Walker designed, constructed and maintained many radio stations. He gave of his time to help non-profit broadcasters and he was always at the ready to go to work, not just for his "client" stations but also for the owners and engineers of non-client stations.

The Carl E. Lee award's list of extraordinary broadcast engineers will not be complete without the inclusion of southwestern Michigan's dean of the trade, Walker Sisson.

Ask Walker how he was doing, and he'd reply, "better than I deserve". Your decision to bestow this honor to Walker Sisson would be a well-deserved tribute to a lifetime dedicated to providing superior service to Michigan broadcasters and listeners.

The MAB shared the news that southwest Michigan contract engineer Walker Sisson passed away September 2, 2019 at the age of 71.

Walker was an engineer for dozens of stations in southwest Michigan and northwest Indiana. He had the engineering bug early. At age six, he had managed to build his first transistor radio with his dad. By the age of eight, he had designed his own way of electrocuting flies with a metal window screen, wires and a battery! His parents became accustomed to the array of materials that surrounded them as Walker was known to always be working on a project. Many of his young adolescent years, Walker spent in his basement working on his HAM radio and his vast collection of electronics. He often stayed up all night as there was better radio reception at night. He graduated with the Class of 1966 from Loy Norrix High School. He attended Michigan Technological University and Western Michigan University. During his early years, he worked at Radio Shack, WTPS in Portage, Kal Equip in Otsego and Al-tronics near Battle Creek in addition to side jobs installing radio antennas.

Members of his family include his two daughters: Jenny Sisson and Andrea Sisson; three cherished grandchildren: Emma, Andrew, and Elijah; two sisters; Joan (Rick) Cooper and Emily (Rich) Earle; nieces and nephews; Matt Cooper, Karen (Mike) Echery, Laura (K.C.) Cronin and Tom Earle; special pal, Karen Doubleday, and his former-wife, Nikki Sisson.

Former MAB Chair and Midwest Communications Senior Vice-President Peter Tanz wrote and shared a heartwarming tribute to Walker:

If you listen to radio, please read.

“She” sits quietly in a Holland, Michigan basement. Large, with a gray finish and a small glass window on the front to see inside. From another age, she might have been carted away to a scrap heap if not for someone who understood her importance.

A decade ago, she was replaced with one younger, smaller and more technically sophisticated. But, just a few weeks ago this young one, suddenly stopped working. The airwaves went to static. What to do? The old, quiet one was turned on, the comforting orange glow of the tubes coming through her glass window. Holland’s radio station, WHTC, returned to the airwaves.

Before this writing, fewer than a dozen people knew about the hours of work and care by one man that went into making this seamless transition possible.

Countless (even by Nielsen ratings service standards) radio listeners across Michigan and Indiana have enjoyed the sound coming out of their radios thanks to the talents of a man they’ve never heard of, Walker Sisson.

It was Walker Sisson who understood, when he installed that new solid-state transmitter, the old tube equipment was worth restoring and saving. As with everything he touched, Walker carefully and meticulously restored the “old girl”, making sure she was ready when needed in an emergency. Like the modern restoration of a fine Detroit muscle car documented on cable TV, Walker made the finished product better than the original.

“Town to town, up and down the dial”, goes the opening tune for the TV show WKRP in Cincinnati.

Across Michigan and Indiana, Walker Sisson went from radio station to radio station, keeping the electronic equipment working. More than likely, the audio emanating from your favorite southwest Michigan radio station reached your ears because of Walker Sisson's quiet, behind the scenes work. Even if Walker was not your favorite station's Engineer, he was everybody's extra set of hands and the man other Engineers could turn to when a problem needed more than one brain to solve.

It is somehow strangely appropriate that we learn of Walker's unexpected passing this day; Labor Day. Walker loved the work of broadcasting and Walker was always on duty, working. Whether to put a station back on the air when broken or to build out something new. Today, Walker has been called home to take a rest from his decades of dedicated labor.

The ultimate twenty-four-hour, seven day a week 'sentinel', Walker calmly took the phone calls in the middle of the night, "we're off the air, help!"

More than likely, your favorite air personality has turned to Walker when things went wrong. And every time he was called, Walker would calmly and (most often) humorously guide his troubled caller through the process of fixing whatever was keeping the station from working properly.

Often the call for help wouldn't even come from a human but from the broadcast equipment itself and Walker would faithfully go to the equipment, many times miles away, to make the fix.

From the smallest transistor to the largest tower, where there was trouble, you'd find Walker. In stormy weather, Walker Sisson was in the elements, making sure listeners could get the news and lifesaving information they needed by keeping stations on the air.

When equipment designers would create new technology, Walker would be the first to learn how it worked so he could keep it running. A craftsman, an inventor and a philosopher, Walker was never 'bettered' by an electronics problem.

With a brilliant mind, a kind heart and the understanding disposition of a kindergarten teacher watching over a room of youngsters with no real understanding of what's around them, Walker Sisson positively touched every Broadcaster he worked with... and as said earlier, hundreds of thousands of radio listeners he never met.

Walker had a down to earth, sincere way of explaining the complex and technical in a manner that everyone could understand and appreciate. He liked to say, with a smile on his face, that all electronic equipment runs on "smoke". Because, he'd explain, when the smoke gets out, things stop working. Obviously, he was referencing the small electrical fire and subsequent bad smell that occurs when a piece of equipment 'fries'. Yup, the smoke got out and now it does not work.

A joke and a story always went a long way toward calming frustrated on-air people and station managers.

His sense of humor wasn't always appreciated. When a township's ordinances required him to build a

paved road to a transmitter site including a large round a bout at the end of it, "so the fire truck can turn around", Walker implored the township to purchase fire trucks with "a reverse gear". "Why can't the fire truck just back up?" The law prevailed and a paved road was built with an appropriate fire truck turn around. But Walker spent a few extra dollars on the expensive project and erected an official looking street sign, naming this beautiful new road to nowhere, "Oshtemo's Way".

It is impossible to share four decades of stories and memories here. We have lost a great man, a mentor, a true friend and a loving father. Walker's quiet work made people's lives better.

Radio touches almost everyone and in southwest Michigan, Kalamazoo's Walker Sisson was one of the greatest "behind the scenes" Broadcasters, ensuring the correct sound always came out of the radio.

Today's passing of Walker Sisson should be noted with a moment of appreciation by all radio listeners. Offer a prayer up for his wonderful family, who shared him every day. Shared him with everyone who turns on the radio... for a song, a ballgame, to hear the latest news or learn which way the tornado is heading.

A wise man said, "there are only two people who can do your job... you and the person they hire to replace you." Walker Sisson is the exception and he will never be "replaced".

Nomination #2 (2020)

Walker Sisson was a contract engineer for dozens of stations in Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio over many decades. Any time, day or night, Walker was willing and able to fix any problem that was keeping the station off the air. If the solution didn't already exist, Walker would build it. He was also always willing to give a helping hand to other engineers when they needed it, even if that engineer worked for the competitor. And, after the problem has been fixed, he would try and turn it into a teachable moment for those involved. He would clearly document what happened and what he did to fix it, and he would do so in a way that everybody could understand.