

# The Voice of WIBA

Bob King reflects on the local news business.

BY GEORGE VUKELICH

**B**ob King is retiring from WIBA radio after 36 years, serving as its news director since 1968. A graduate of Madison's old Central High, he enrolled in the UW Journalism School, then served four years in the Navy—1946-1950—as a journalist.

When he returned, he entered the UW School of Commerce, and earned his degree there. "I thought I'd get into public relations," he says. Dennis Crabtree, a high school buddy then working in WIBA's newsroom, hired him for a part-time job. "When Dennis left in 1968 for a news job in Florida, I took over his job here."

King wrote newscasts for announcers to read on the air, anchored a daily sports show and did football and basketball play-by-play. He was part of the drollest comedy tandem in local radio when he and the late Jim Mader exchanged pleasantries on the air from 1968 to 1981.

King is married to Marilyn, a teaching assistant at West High. They have three grown children, Judy, Laurie and David. King says if he takes up golf now, he might need lessons from his old boss, Fred Gage. "He'll probably charge me," King says.

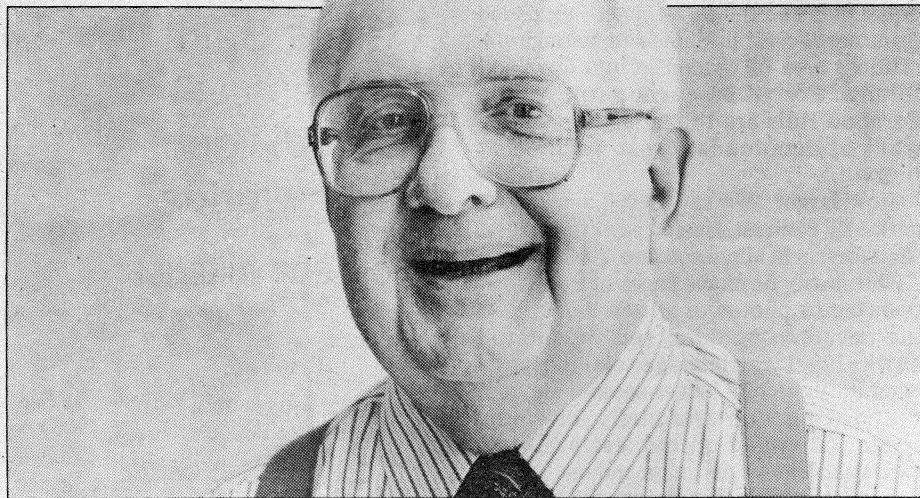
"It was a gentler time back then. Our newsroom was two and a half people. We broadcast obituaries in the noon news—actually at 12:30. We broadcast lost pets on the Pet Department during the 10 o'clock news at night.

"We didn't have a lot of crime stories back then. Crime is a big part of the news now. Drug-related stuff. Fifteen, 20 years ago, we didn't have a lot of that in the city. We had some, but nothing like now. A lot of media consultants say that's what the people are interested in—crime.

"This operation was a lot different back then. We were owned by *The Capital Times*, and their reporters were stringers for us and furnished us copies of their stories before they were printed. We paid them, but we didn't go out and 'break' stories. Actually, *The Cap Times* didn't spend a lot of money on us because they were all newspaper-oriented.

"When the *Des Moines Register* bought WIBA in 1978, they really put a lot of money into this place. They fixed up the studios, expanded the news operation, improved our technology.

"I've gone through four owners now—I should say I've worked for four owners—and every one of them has been committed to a news and information format. The station has always been committed to a strong local news operation, and a lot of stations don't do that anymore, especially since Reagan deregulated the broadcast industry in the 1980s, and they started buying and selling radio stations like used cars.



BRENT NICASTRO

**King: 'A lot of radio stations just won't spend the money on people, and that's what news and information gathering requires.'**

"The country wound up with a glut of stations, and the competition led to fragmented formats, automation and whatever. A lot of radio stations just won't spend the money on people, and that's what news and information gathering requires. Live people. We have five and a half people in our newsroom, and most stations don't want to spend that kind of money on local news. But that's what it takes.

"I think it's true that most people get their news from TV these days, except in the morning. A lot of people when they wake up—5:30 a.m., 6 a.m.—still get the

news from the radio.

"I also think radio can outdo TV on certain things. If TV has a failing on local news, it's that TV doesn't get out and cover a lot of the news at night. They don't do the bread-and-butter stories. A lot of things that don't get covered are meetings that just aren't good video.

"As a matter of fact, the newspapers cover fewer meetings than they used to. Radio still does it. Granted, a lot of it is 'boring' news. But a lot of it is important, I think, because it affects so many people. Government meetings. State government.



City government. County government. Councils. Boards. You name it. Sure, a lot of it is 'boring.'

"So TV won't spend a lot of time doing school board stories. During the teacher negotiations, I don't think TV did as good a job as we did. I also think TV spends an inordinate amount of time on feature-type stories—soft news. They make good video, but they aren't hard news.

"Having said that, to be honest with you, I've always liked competing with TV. TV news has the technology. I'm not trying to put down the other radio stations—some of them do a good job. But they don't do it consistently because they don't have the people to get out and cover things. You can't do it all by phone." ■