

PAUL HEDBERG (1939-2021)



PAUL HEDBERG, 81

Paul Clifford Hedberg passed away on May 27, 2021, at his home in Southlake, TX; he was born on May 28, 1939, in Cokato, MN, the eldest child and only son of Florence (Erenberg) and Clifford Hedberg.

The foundation for Paul's future business successes was laid early in his life, when he spent long summer stretches at his maternal grandfather's bottling company. While he enjoyed riding along on delivery routes and working on the production line, his favorite task was using the PA system to make announcements. Once he heard his 12-year-old voice amplified throughout the plant, Paul was hooked on the power of the microphone.

Fueled by this experience, when he was 15 Paul bought a modest amateur radio set-up, he and his father strung a wire antenna between two light poles in front of their house, and he began to study for his HAM radio license. Paul's father, who

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was co-publisher of Cokato's weekly newspaper, was fascinated by the potential of his son's hobby. Inspired by the relaxation of FCC licensing regulations and energized by Paul's enthusiasm, in 1956 Cliff Hedberg left the newspaper business to establish a new AM radio station (KMRS) in Morris, MN.

Moving the 100 miles to Morris meant that Paul would spend his senior year at a different high school. Naturally gregarious, he quickly made new friends and became well-known for his after-school shifts and live record store remotes on KMRS. He was popular, and he was loving it; the caption under his photo in the 1957 Morris yearbook said it all: "Just call me 'Doc' – I operate anywhere."

With his father's encouragement that it would be valuable to get experience working at bigger radio stations, early in 1958 Paul moved to Mason City, IA, to become program director of the new Top 40 format at KRIB (which included a side gig as emcee at the legendary Surf Ballroom in Clear Lake). There he adopted a new moniker, "The Swinging Swede" (ever proud of his ancestry, Paul was a single Norwegian great-grandparent short of being 100% Swedish).

Six months later, at his mother's insistence that he give college a try, Paul moved to the Twin Cities. With the help of KRIB's manager, he secured a job on-air at WMIN before the fall semester started. Over the next four years he was a deejay at a succession of increasingly powerful metro radio stations: WTCN, WLOL, and KDWB. Paul was fortunate to have discovered what he wanted to do in life at an early age and – through talent and hard work – to have earned multiple opportunities to advance in the radio industry before he turned 22. But college was not for him – no classroom or curriculum could offer him the education he was getting on the job (and he was right).

At KDWB Paul found himself part of an extraordinary team of announcers who were in daily battle for the ears of the under-30 crowd. While this kept his workdays full of excitement, something much more consequential happened to him at the same time: one of his new colleagues introduced him to Juliet Schubert, and he was smitten. Two events loomed on the horizon, however: Paul was going to enter the Coast Guard Reserve for six months of active duty, and he and his father had secured a license to build a new AM station in southern Minnesota. With all of these things happening, he and Julie were married on December 30, 1962, in Minneapolis. Paul would tell you that if marriage is life's greatest gamble, he hit the jackpot when he tied the knot with Julie!

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In August 1963 KBEW went on the air in Blue Earth, MN, as the second of what by the end of the 1990s would grow to a total of 21 radio stations, spread among 10 communities in Minnesota and Iowa. Paul put a premium on his stations' commitment to live and local content, and their success was built on being in tune with the rhythms of small rural communities; what mattered most wasn't the programming format, but what was broadcast around the music.

Paul was often told that his stations took on his personality, and that gratified him. His resonant voice and smooth delivery stood out, as did his fondness for wordplay, imaginative promotions, and creative programming. He was a superb interviewer and developed a much-loved program on KBEW, "Welcome Travellers," that put his skills to the test: in the summers he would visit local gas stations and a nearby rest stop in search of out-of-state license plates; not all guests were naturally talkative, so he had to listen with great care so he could ask questions that drew people out and put them at ease.

Paul's business and community interests outside of radio were many. In the early 1970s he brought cable television to Blue Earth, and also – a full generation before the arrival of the internet – devised a service that streamed up-to-the-minute commodity prices to individual farm and elevator subscribers. He was instrumental in the activities of Blue Earth's Industrial Service Corporation, which included a successful appeal to the state department of transportation to reroute Interstate 90 further south. This resulted in untold revenue to local businesses, but also gave Paul the impetus for the greatest public display of his promotional ingenuity: the installation of a 55-foot-tall fiberglass Jolly Green Giant just south of I-90's Blue Earth exit. At the time this was the fifth tallest free-standing statue in the United States; to this day it still entices thousands of passing travellers to pull off the freeway for a closer look. In the late 1980s Paul was crucially involved in the revival of the historic amusement park in Arnold's Park, IA, and in the establishment of the Pavek Museum of Broadcasting in St. Louis Park, MN.

Paul received many honors over his four-decade career in radio: he was elected president of the Minnesota Association of Broadcasters; he served three terms on the National Association of Broadcasters board of directors; KUOO in Spirit Lake won the NAB's Marconi Award as the nation's small market station of the year in 1994; and in 1998 he was named broadcaster of the year by the Iowa Broadcasters Association. Paul's lifetime commitment to local radio culminated with his induction to the Minnesota Broadcasting Hall of Fame in 2001. As testimony to his influence and impact on the industry, a number of Paul's former employees have subsequently joined him in the Hall of Fame.

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Paul is survived by his wife of 58 years; his son, Mark (Kristi) Hedberg, and daughter, Ann (Paul) Kieffaber; grandchildren Sydney Hedberg, Natalie Hedberg, and Jack Kieffaber; and his sister, Alice Hedberg. Paul was preceded in death by his parents; his sister, Kathy Hedberg; his in-laws, Don and Helen Schubert; and many aunts and uncles.

A celebration of Paul's well-lived life will be held at Spirit Lake, IA, later in the summer. Memorials may be addressed to the Pavek Museum of Broadcasting, 3517 Raleigh Avenue, St. Louis Park, MN 55416.