

In 1945 the Buffalo Evening News applied for FCC permission to build a television station. A year earlier crosstown newspaper, The Courier Express, applied for a license but soon dropped the ideas as infeasible. Many at the time were convinced that television was only a passing fad...an expensive novelty. Buffalo Evening News Editor-in-Chief and WBEN President Alfred Kirchhofer had a reputation for innovation in the newspaper industry.

Originally skeptical about the new medium, the two were sold on the idea by Bob Thompson. Thompson, who had a big hand in crafting WBEN radio wrote a memo that said, "The Buffalo Evening News is the communications leader of the community, The Butler family and you, Mr. Kirchhofer have no choice. It may lose money forever, but Buffalo must have a TV station."

In 1946 the OK was granted and the WBEN-TV call-letters were assigned to the new Channel 4. Soon Buffalo households would start adding a strange-looking piece of furniture with tubes, wires and an oddball window that could shrink the world enough to make it fit in your living room. Life at home would never be the same.

Broadcasters and decorated World War II veteran Fred Keller was one of four employees chosen by WBEN in 1947 to gather information about how to program and operate a TV station. The other employees chosen to explore the new technology were Ed Wegman, Ed Reimers and Woody Magnuson. They were sent to various experimental stations around the country to monitor their operations and to bring home briefcases with pertinent materials. Out of these volumes of information came the blueprints for Buffalo's first TV station.

Seasoned radio broadcasters worked with young World War II veterans to build the transmitter, control room and studio that brought television into the homes of Western New York and Southern Ontario for the first time. Toronto would not sign on with its own television station until 1952. And TV viewers from Rochester and Erie, Pennsylvania also had to point their roof antennas towards Buffalo.

WBEN-TV's first studio on the 18th floor of the Statler Hotel. The city's first continuous demonstration of the technology was seen at the Midwest Sports Show in the Maston Avenue Armory, where WBEN-TV set up a booth on Washington's Birthday, February 22, 1947. The first live telecast of a variety show from the new Hotel Statler studios followed the next day. Test patterns were telecast starting on February 27th.

May 13, 1948, WBEN TV broadcasts the consecration of Rev. Lauriston Scaife as the Episcopal Bishop of Western New York. This scene was shot from the choir loft and shows one of the WBEN remote cameras. On May 13, 1948, Channel 4 demonstrated the profound potential of the new medium with a live telecast of the consecration of Episcopal Bishop Lauriston Scaife. Regular daily programming signed on the next night, featuring ventriloquist Jimmy Nelson and live wrestling from Memorial Auditorium.

During those early days the station shared space on the 18th floor of the Hotel Statler with WBEN Radio where the fledgling operations were merely a department of the radio station. News on Channel 4 consisted of someone running over to The Buffalo Evening News, located on Main Street, picking up a copy of the latest edition, bringing it back to the station and sitting in

front of a desk and reading it. Announcers just sat on camera and read The News. The announcing staff consisted of Ed Dinsmore, the first news anchor, Ward Fenton, the first weatherman, Jack Ogilvie and Harry Webb.

The majority of programming was live during the 1940's. Fred Keller, who was given the title of Program Director for the new station, collaborated with Ray Wander to write the first weekly dramatic series ever seen on U.S. television. The Clue starred Buffalo Evening News Radio/TV columnist Jim Tranter, who played Steve Malice, Private Eye. The Clue started in 1948 and aired on Tuesday nights at 7:30 for five years.

Meet Bill and Mildred Miller, hosts of WBEN's "Meet the Millers"; a favorite of viewers for 20 years. On January 17, 1950 "Meet the Millers" began its 20 year run on local airwaves. Bill and Mildred Miller had been dancers in vaudeville before settling down at their turkey farm in Colden. After a positive response to a guest-appearance on Channel 4, station management asked the couple to return on a regular basis. For two decades on weekday afternoons, "Meet the Millers" offered a mix of cooking tips and personality interviews along with cornball humor. The Millers retired to their farm in 1970, and Bill served several terms as the Colden town supervisor.

Announcer John Corbett offered local viewers one of television's first talk shows. "Speaker of the House" aired during weekday afternoons in the early years, and John would take calls from the audience as the technology evolved. Corbett interviewed celebrities and prominent political figures on that program, and a successor called "Contact."

Channel 4 established the gold standard in television sports with four men who composed an extraordinary team: Ralph Hubbell, Chuck Healy, Van Miller and Dick Rifenburg. Hubbell began his sports career with WGR radio in 1939 and anchored his first sportscast on Channel 4 in 1948. Healy, a college boxer, came to Channel 4 in 1949 as a staff announcer. He hosted the Monday night "Canandaigua Quiz Show" and Saturday's "Meet the People." Chuck joined Ralph Hubbell in hosting live wrestling matches from War Memorial Auditorium in 1949. Healy also hosted the granddaddy of all bowling shows, "Beat the Champ," beginning in October 1957. Rifenburg arrived at Channel 4 after an injury ended his pro-football hopes with the Detroit Lions.

Van Miller worked at his hometown radio station WFCB (WDOE) in Dunkirk before he was hired as a summer relief announcer for Channel 4 in 1955. Miller's incomparable play-by-play skills put him in the booth for Buffalo Bills games, beginning in 1960. Ralph Hubbell provided color commentary and Dick Rifenburg manned the sidelines during the early Bills years. Miller was also the voice of the Buffalo Braves and Niagara University Basketball. Miller took over as host of "Beat the Champ" and companion show for women bowlers, "Strikes, Spares and Misses" after Healy retired in October of 1978. Van was also Buffalo's quizmaster for "It's Academic," a weekly tournament of knowledge among scholars launched by General Manager Les Arries in the late 60's.

One of the most memorable shows on WBEN-TV was "A Visit to Santa Claus." Program Director Fred Keller wrote, produced and directed one of the first TV series specifically designed for the children of Western New York when the program debuted just after Thanksgiving Day 1948. Ed Dinsmore became Buffalo's first television Santa. He tapped Johnny Eisenberger from the Channel 4 operations desk and transformed him into Forgetful the Elf. Gene

Brooks and Bud Hagman played Grumbles the Elf, and Warren Jacober filled a role as Freezy the Polar Bear. The popular show received over 50,000 letters a year to Santa. Santa became Channel 4's first local color program on December 6, 1954. That same year, Ed Dinsmore suffered a heart attack during the Santa season and was replaced by producer-director Bill Peters. The final WBEN Santa program aired in 1973.

"Uncle Jerry's Club" began in 1955 with host Jerry Brick, but the real stars were the children who showed off for this on-air talent show. They'd troop up to the 18th floor of the Statler and sing or dance their hearts out to win top honors. The show ended in 1960.

Other children's programs on WBEN-TV included "Fun to Learn" which began in 1952 and "Your Museum of Science." Virgil Booth was a gentle and knowledgeable host of the shows who alongside Museum Curator Ellsworth Jaeger, would demonstrate simple principles of science or host animals from the Buffalo Zoo. The youngest of the TV viewers found another hero in "Uncle Mike" Mearian who was joined each weekday afternoon his sidekick puppet Buttons. Mearian shifted to a nautical setting and became Captain Mike with Buttons as the cabin boy when the show presented "Popeye's Playhouse." Mearian hosted the show from 1952 till he left Buffalo in 1966.

WBEN-TV moved its transmitter from the Statler rooftop and began transmitting from a new site on a Colden Hilltop on November 24, 1952. The tower was a "triumph of modern engineering" according to the Buffalo Evening News. The tower's tip was placed 1,057 feet above the ground, making it even taller than the Eiffel Tower in Paris. Channel 4 now had the highest transmitter in North America, some 2599 feet above sea level. By 1957, nearly 600,000 TV sets were in use in Western New York. Another 744,000 TV's were just across the border in Southern Ontario. In 1960 Channel 4 and WBEN radio left their cozy confines of the Hotel Statler and moved to a newly renovated broadcast center at 2077 Elmwood. The facilities were originally build by NBC for their locally owned and operated UHF station, WBUF-TV (Channel 17) which went dark in 1958.

Chuck Healy and Van Miller were the two most popular figures in Buffalo television, even after competition signed on from WGR-TV (Channel 2) in 1954 and WKBW-TV (Channel 7) in 1958. But audience research surveys showed that Channel 4's news programs were dead last in audience share during the mid 60s. In a dramatic change, Bill McKibben who was a newly hired assistant to Kirchhofer, took Healy off the sports desk and made him the weeknight news anchor. Miller took over as the sports anchor, a position that he held until he retired in 1998. Ward Fenton shifted to weekend weather announcing and the young, energetic Ken Phillips became the station's primary weatherman. The change was made in late August of 1965, with startling results. Channel 4's audience share grew from a paltry 11%, to a staggering 48%. The "First Team" of Healy, Miller and Phillips would remain on top for about 6 years.

In 1967 Les Arries became Channel 4's new General Manager after a pioneering career at the Dumont Network and Westinghouse Broadcasting. Arries expanded the 6 p.m. news to an hour in 1971 and hired CBS Pentagon Correspondent Steve Rowan to fill the anchor chair. Healy returned to sports duties. Arries dropped his bold experiment in 1976 and "First Team News" at 6p.m. returned to a 30 min. format. Rowan left the station in early 80's and a succession of anchors included Jim Mitchell, Chuck Lampklin, Channel 4

veteran John Corbett, Dunkirk native Allen Contantini, Rich Newberg, Gary Gunter and John Beard. Buffalo disc jockey Kevin O'Connell replaced weatherman Ken Philips.

WBEN-TV became WIVB-TV in 1977 after the death of Buffalo News owner Katherine Butler forces the newspaper to divest of its broadcast holdings. The station was sold for \$25.5 million dollars to newspaper publisher Robert Howard, of Oceanside, California. WIVB was chosen for "We're Four (roman numerals) Buffalo." "First Team News" became know as "News 4 Buffalo" in 1978. Electronic news gathering entered the picture in 1978 when video tape began to replace film as the preferred medium. In the 80s, Channel 4 built the region's first satellite station.

Carol Crissey arrived from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania in 1979 and joined John Beard on the anchor desk after a brief reporting stint on the late newscast. In 1980, Crissey picked up a new name when she married Buffalo attorney Peter Jasen.

The new Carol Jasen also picked up a new co-anchor when John Beard left for an anchor job at KNBC in Los Angeles, and Long Island native Bob Koop came to town from a post in Salt Lake City. The station also hired Jacquie Walker from WROC in Rochester to anchor the noon news. She eventually moved to the 11pm newscast alongside Koop. Rich Newberg pulled in top ratings as a weekend anchor and later joined Walker as co-anchor of the 5 p.m and 11 p.m. newscasts. Meteorologist Don Paul came aboard in the early 1980's. He teamed up with fellow meteorologists Mike Cejka and Chuck Gurney and brought science into the Channel 4 forecast.

In 1993, Koop disclosed that he was battling leukemia. He struggled through excruciating pain to anchor "5:30 Live" for about seven months until he was too ill to continue. His last broadcast was on Good Friday in 1994. The cover story and Koop's finally interview was about the death and resurrection of Christ. After a heroic fight, he passed away on New Year's day 1995. In 1998 St. Bonaventure University named its broadcast journalism lab in Koop's memory.

The station was sold in the late 80's to King World for more than \$100 million dollars and again changed hands several years later to LIN Television of Providence, Rhode Island. Dallas investors Hick, Muse, Tate and Furst bought LIN Television in 1998 for the price of \$1.4 billion..... a far cry from those early days.