

## **A History of Advertising in Hampton Roads (so far)**

### **By Thomas Bie and Warren Miller**

Until as late as 1945, advertising in Hampton Roads was largely limited to newspaper, with some local radio and a few outdoor boards owned by Consolvo & Cheshire.

The area had six daily newspapers: *The Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*, *The Norfolk Ledger-Dispatch*, *The Portsmouth Star*, *The Newport News Daily Press*, *The Newport News Times-Herald* and the *Suffolk News Herald*. Two weeklies: *The Virginia Beach Sun* and the black-oriented *Journal and Guide* rounded out the print media.

The rotary letterpress process produced newspapers. Custom illustrations were rare because of the high cost of photoengraving (creating a raised image on zinc through a process of etching with acid). Hofheimer's shoe stores, Willis Furniture and one or two department stores were about the only firms with ad budgets large enough to justify art staffs. Other advertisers had to be content with "mat services" or manufacturers' mats.

The matrixes, or "mats" were heat-resistant fiberboard into which an engraving had been pressed, thus creating a mold for hot metal. Newspapers subscribed to monthly catalogs illustrating timely merchandise and stock seasonal headings – each with its own mat. Newspaper color printing arrived in the 1950s, but the switch to offset printing didn't come until the late '70s. Those innovations paved the way to greater creativity and advertising agencies.

Stanley Gross, a former ad manager of Altschul's department store in Norfolk, started the first advertising agency in 1944. Its first big accounts were Fine's Men's Shops, Paramount Bedding (Quilt O' Dreams, Quilt O' Pedic), Air-A-Plane Corp., Cavalier Ford, Sutton Manufacturing, Tabet Manufacturing, Howard Cleaners, High Rock Bottling, and about a dozen resort hotels. Future partner Les Fry joined the agency in 1947.

A dog track had been established in Moyock, N.C., after that time, and the promoters advertised in nearly every newspaper and radio station in the state. Gross got the account, and his little shop took off, picking up Ashman Distributing (Motorola), Conformal Contact Lenses, Smithfield Ham and Products, Cherry Carpet, a number of smaller retailers and several real estate developers. Gross & Fry pioneered fast foods in the area with the Burger Chef account and the 10 cent burger.

Gross's agency was closely followed by The Jacobson Agency consisting of Al and Pauline Jacobson. Al had been ad manager of the L. Snyder department store in Norfolk.

Ad salesmen at the newspapers created ads for most clients then. They had been picking up some nice change on the side by taking over complete management of advertising and co-op funds for major stores and business firms – with the tacit blessing of the newspapers. (Didn't have to pay 'em so much, you see.) One morning the word came down from management: "No more free-lancing on the side!" And more ad agencies sprang up overnight.

Cavalier Advertising with Dan Goldman and Ira Davidoff was one of the early shops along with McCurry, Henderson Enright, Ferguson-Kennerly and Jack Lewis, who had the Mary Jane Bread account. Beverley Lawler started Public Relations Institute, but soon learned that prospective clients didn't really understand PR, so it became Atlantic National Advertising – and eventually, Lawler Ballard & Little.

In Portsmouth, former newspaper adman Moe Glazer set up shop with Pine Grove Dairy as his flagship client. Major & Bie, Inc, formed by two newspaper ad men, joined the group in 1957. It later became Seamark, Inc. Most clients then were retailers.

Over on the Peninsula, former department store marketing manager and NYC native Leonard Waters opened Waters Advertising Agency in 1960. Waters is currently the oldest agency in Hampton Roads that hasn't changed its name or ownership. Waters' son, Howard, joined the agency in '75 and took on management responsibility when Leonard passed away in 1979.

Advertising agencies had arrived in Hampton Roads!

Radio in the '40s and '50s was pretty much dominated by CBS affiliate WTAR at 790 on the AM dial and owned by Norfolk Newspapers. WGH in Newport News was also a contender. WRVA in Richmond also boomed into the area with a 50,000 watts clear channel signal. Morning drive time, as now, revolved around personalities. WTAR was strong with Trafton Robertson at the mike. WSAP ("We Solve Advertising Problems") in Portsmouth evolved into WAVY radio and made a bid for morning dominance with suave Kurt Webster at the mike. One could buy fixed position spots on most stations.

Many commercials were still read by live announcers and recording was only done on "electrical transcriptions" – old-fashioned records cut on a "record lathe." WTAR still had one in use well into the '60s. It was possible then to buy fixed position spots and Hofheimer's owned 8:59:30 a.m. on WTAR – adjacent to the CBS morning news. It was documented to be the longest-standing fixed position spot in America.

What commercial production there was in those days was entirely done by the stations. And it continued in that fashion until an enterprising promoter from WCMS named Warren Miller opened D'Arcy Studios – a second floor walkup on 21<sup>st</sup> Street. It was no coincidence that there was also a very successful ad agency in Chicago called D'Arcy. Now as Studio Center, the pioneer producer has studios in three cities and is one of the largest producers of radio commercials in the country.

But then as the mid '50s arrived, strange, youthful music was born in Memphis and Detroit and quickly exploded across Tidewater radio dials. "Top 40" replaced the "radio personality," and the war for listeners and ad budgets was under way at WNOR and WGH. On-air promotions – from bombing Norfolk with thousands of client-imprinted ping-pong balls to roller-coaster marathons and flagpole-sitting at Ocean View – were weekly happenings and sponsors wanted a piece of the action.

Not far behind was a little station that became the first in America (including Nashville) to play country music exclusively. Using flatbed tractor-trailer trucks as rolling stages, WCMS barnstormed shopping centers with Nashville artists spreading the gospel of country music. And within two years, WCMS joined WNOR and WGH for the fight for supremacy in ratings and ad dollars.

It would be years before stations on the FM radio band were able to compete for dollars with the pioneer AM radio powerhouses.

In September 1950, WTAR-TV (now WTKR-TV) signed on as Hampton Roads' first television station on channel 4 as an NBC affiliate. WTAR later aligned with CBS and moved to channel 3. WAVY-TV took the NBC affiliation and came on the scene in September 1957 from the second floor of a farmers market on Middle Street in Portsmouth. Crates of squawking chickens and the pungent aroma of a fish market greeted visitors to Portsmouth's channel 10.

In November 1959, WVEC-TV, with the NBC "Basic" affiliation, signed on channel 15 on the UHF band from administrative offices in Hampton. The station later moved to channel 13 as WVEC switched to ABC. In 1961, Pat Robertson took the defunct Portsmouth channel 27 and signed it on as WYAH-TV (now WGNT), launching the Christian Broadcasting Network. WTVZ-TV signed on as an independent in 1980.

Moving through the '60s, television realized what record companies had already found – young people controlled the phonograph record market and the radio airwaves. Led by upstart Fred Silverman, the TV networks replaced Andy Williams and Liberace with variety shows featuring rock 'n' roll and folk artists (not to mention Dick Clark). The local TV scene grasped the trend as WAVY-TV signed radio DJs Gene Loving and Dick Lamb to host "Disco Ten."

The production of television commercials in Hampton Roads was quite primitive in the '60s and '70s. Nobody locally really knew how to write for this new medium and commercials were largely radio copy with live pictures or a spokesperson holding up and showing a product at the camera lens.

Until 2-inch videotape, recorded on piano crate size machines, appeared about 1960, it was a matter of rehearsing and rehearsing in the studio until the clock struck airtime. It was live television, so if you blew it – you blew it! A popular WAVY-TV weather girl, Carol Knock, once did a live Pine Grove Dairy commercial, reached in the prop refrigerator and showed the camera a carton of Birtcherd's milk.

Many an ad agency executive was drafted into running the TelePrompter® or holding up "idiot cards" for the talent. In 1963, WVEC-TV put a monstrous 2-inch videotape machine in a large van to cover on-location news events and eventually, produce commercials. The other stations soon followed suit, and

commercial production finally moved out of the constraints of the studio. Filmed commercials were rare because of the expense – and because few had any experience with the medium.

In the early years it was the custom for agencies to buy 26 weeks of 30-minute programs for their clients from national producers, then negotiate with stations to place the series in prime access time. Sometimes two clients would alternate weekly sponsorship to hold down costs. There has probably never been more high-pressure selling in the industry than that practiced by the snake oil salesmen who were sent into town by producers with orders to stay there until the series was sold.

In the '70s, the huge diversity of radio programming on the 44 stations serving the market, plus the growth in television stations, the introduction of over a dozen local magazines and many niche media made advertising far more splintered and complex. Gross rating points, demographics, shared circulation, psychographics, traffic count and such made the creation and dissemination of advertising in Hampton Roads far more sophisticated. And that, in turn, fostered enormous growth in the number of area agencies that peaked at 66 in the mid '80s.

While the development of new media such as cable advertising, the proliferation of shopping malls, the shift of population to the suburbs and the redevelopment of urban pockets all altered marketing strategy, other factors caused a virtual facelift in the local ad community.

First, area old-line department stores such as Rice's, Nachman's, Miller & Rhoads, Smith & Welton, Thalheimer's, Altschul's and other major retailers such as Hofheimer's, Giant Open Air Markets, Master Auto, Burger Chef, Center Shops, and Price's Appliances merged, failed or closed in the face of discount and mall competition. As many as 15 savings and loans disappeared, and every significant bank was sold to an out-of-town interest. The accounts that could support an ad agency were leaving. And so went the huge majority of the early ad agencies.

Today, following mass mergers of ad firms, radio stations, broadcast and cable TV operations and print media, Hampton Roads is left with a thriving, though much different, marketing industry. Like the media, agencies are mean and lean – and far more sophisticated. Free-lancers and independents prevail. Most profitable accounts come from outside Hampton Roads, as the area has evolved into a "branch" market with precious few home offices and corporate headquarters.

But in the wake of people like Al Jacobson, Stan Gross, Les Fry, Jerry Paliser, Dan Goldman and Tom Chisman, and in the shadow of Lawler Ballard, Arthur Polizos & Associates, Seamark, Inc. and Cavalier Advertising, there's a new community of bright thinkers and innovators. They use computers, creativity, the Internet, and fascinating software instead of typewriters, rubber cement and chutzpah. They create and communicate nationally and internationally with skill and ease.

Most importantly, they use their minds and imagination in building an advertising industry for the 21st century. A much different industry. A much more dynamic industry. An industry where on-line "hits" has nothing to do with "Top 40" and ping-pong balls. And the best is yet to come.