

The Paul F. Thomas was an Ohio River ferry boat which was the site of the WUMS transmitter during floods.

WUMS: The Unknown Mysterious Station

***On The Air For More Than 20 Years, Nobody
Could Get WUMS To Shut Down!***

BY TOM KNEITEL, K2AES, EDITOR

You've probably never heard of Proctorville, Ohio, a tiny community of about 975 souls located on the banks of the Ohio River at the southernmost point of Ohio. It's just across the river from Huntington, West Virginia. If you're driving along State Route 8 and you reach the intersection of State Route 775, look around for Proctorville—it's there, somewhere. There's no plaque there to indicate that it's the home of the world's very first pirate broadcaster, WUMS, despite the fact that WUMS was about as bold and brassy an outlaw as ever took to the airwaves. For decades, federal files in Washington literally bulged with paperwork relating to futile efforts to get its owner, David F. Thomas, to shut down the station.

The Ohio River, it should be observed, is famous as an inland shipping route. It may be equally well known for its long record of seasonal floods which have caused extensive hardship for area residents over the years.

The father of Dave Thomas, Capt. Paul

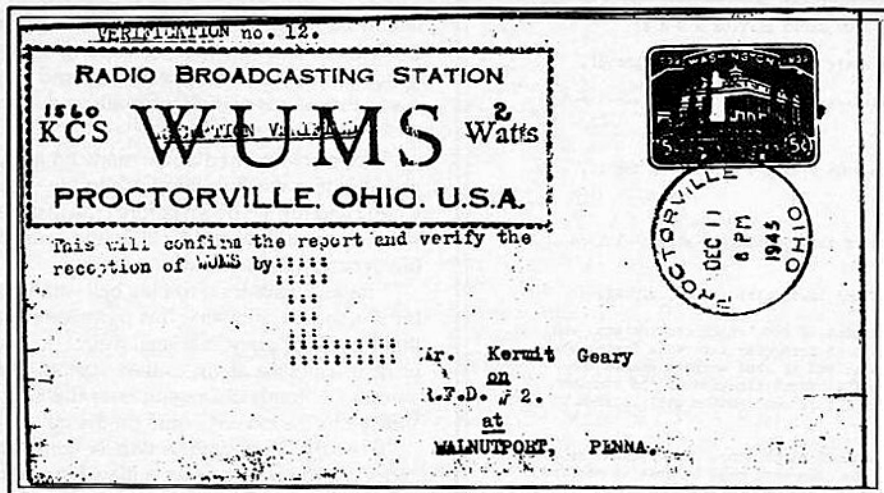
F. Thomas, was known as the best ferryman on the Ohio River, and he operated a thriving ferry business between Proctorville and Huntington for many years. His three ferries, the *Champion No. 3*, *Oweva*, and *Paul F. Thomas*, were regular fixtures along the river. Floods, of course, disrupted the regular service of the ferries, and when the water level rose so high that the roads were blocked, the boats would move up and down the river picking up food, milk, medical supplies, and other necessary items for Huntington, as well as deliver items from Huntington to other communities.

It was during 1925 that Capt. Thomas's 16-year-old son, Dave, came up with the idea of utilizing radio during the floods. His station, using the self-assigned call letters WUMS, first took to the air 16 November 1925 transmitting flood information, music, news, and advice to area residents about where and when the boats would be docking with the emergency supplies. In fact, Dave installed WUMS right on one of the boats!

The station ran only a few watts and provided a very definite community service during perilous times when there were relatively few other broadcasters on the air, and Dave really got a feeling for operating the station. He claimed the callsign stood for "We're Unknown Mysterious Station" (many years later this was reported as "We're Unlicensed Marine Station").

The station's exact location and the identity of its operator remained a secret for a few years, although from time to time there were references made to the fact that the government might have, at one point, issued Dave Thomas an operating permit of some sort to allow him to provide his radio services during floods. Correspondence from Dave Thomas in later years, and his operational secrecy in the early years of WUMS, makes it hard to believe that there ever was an authorization given to WUMS, even for emergency purposes.

This isn't to say that Dave Thomas preferred that WUMS be an outlaw station. In-



There were only a handful of WUMS QSLs ever issued. This is one of them.



David F. Thomas, who kept WUMS on the air over the decades.



As late as 1959, the state of Ohio was issuing broadcaster's license plates to WUMS.

as's little station was becoming quite famous.

One of the factors that made WUMS better known was the increase in its scope of operation. During times of flood, WUMS operated on 2004 kHz (self-assigned), but Dave had come to enjoy broadcasting so much that he opened up broadcasts on yet another frequency when there were no floods! Now WUMS could also be heard on 1560 kHz with anywhere from 1/2 to 3 1/4 watts.

These new broadcasts originated from area churches, schools, and theatres. Thomas would set up a portable transmitter and present local talent. This isn't what made him really famous, however. It was the special DX broadcasts and frequency test checks which WUMS had embarked upon (running 2 watts on voice and 5 to 10 watts on CW) for the benefit of hobbyists from coast to coast. In 1963, Thomas wrote to me and recalled, "WUMS was like walking on the tracks of a railroad; be doing emergency work and in a few days be on for a DX test as far off the track as one could get. One day be semi-legal and the next time illegal." As you can see, despite the lack of a transmitting license, Dave Thomas insisted upon considering his flood transmissions to be, at least, "semi-legal." It was this argument which he repeatedly used to defend himself every time they came around to give him a hard time.

Thomas claimed, in his 1963 letter, "It was these DX programs that always kept us in trouble. Regardless of the marine broadcasts (which never caused us much trouble)

... these DX tests were the real trouble between the FCC and WUMS for they were not connected with the special work WUMS was doing so they could not be declared legal. Even with the FCC monitoring station across the river in Huntington we kept on with our monthly frequency checks and the DX programs. These DX programs were put on without telling them about it; they'd have to stay awake to pick us up."

Actually, it was probably the DX programs and also the QSLs that were the problem. Dave Thomas was a very active DX listener and had received more than 2500 QSLs from 123 countries (65 countries on the broadcast band). He knew the appeal and attraction of a QSL from a rare low-power station, and WUMS fit those criteria. It was then that he decided to commence offering QSLs from WUMS, establishing what still remains as perhaps the most stringent QSLing policies ever instituted by a broadcaster, legal or illegal, anywhere in the world. It made WUMS an instant sensation within the DX community, somewhat of an "ultimate DX catch," and a real challenge to listeners.

For starters, one had to know when his special DX tests were going to take place. That meant it helped to get on his mailing list to receive the notices he mailed out. While clubs were on his list, not all of them printed the information, and some who did couldn't get it into print fast enough.

Next, the listener had to try to actually hear WUMS; not an easy stunt considering its low power—although it did use a very efficient long wire antenna system. Each special DX broadcast featured regular program material plus the transmission of two letters of the alphabet in CW. These letters were changed for each special DX broadcast, and sometimes even within individual broadcasts. The DXer had to copy these letters as well as all other program material and then get the reception report into the mail within 24 hours. No mail-drop addresses were used; a letter sent to *Radio Station WUMS, Proctorville, Ohio*, would promptly be delivered by the Proctorville post office.

When Thomas received a report, he would go over it word by word, line by line. Unless it was 100% accurate, down to the very last minute detail, no prized WUMS verification would be issued. Although, over the years, many hundreds of reception reports were received at WUMS, only 30 actual QSLs were ever issued! What's worse, those who sent in reception reports that couldn't make it past Thomas's close scrutiny were sent a special non-QSL acknowledging the report but refusing to verify the reception. Although these non-QSLs, today, are themselves prized DX memorabilia, those who received them in the mail were often extremely put out about the situation. It is said that, in 1931, one DXer got a non-QSL and was so angry that he complained about WUMS to the Federal Radio Commission. The FRC was already fully aware of the station and was no more pleased with its operation in 1931 than they had been for the

deed not. It's just that the government kept refusing to issue him a broadcasting license. He never could understand why they wouldn't license WUMS when it was obviously providing a vital service to his community. Of course, the fact that he couldn't agree with, or even understand, the government's thinking didn't stop him from operating the station to provide what he felt was a vital service.

By 1931, despite several run-ins with the government about the continuing operation of WUMS, Dave decided to dub his station "World's Best Known Outlaw Station." By that time he seemed to be wearing the title "outlaw" as some sort of merit badge, for he had been able to keep WUMS on the air for a full six years, far longer than the dozens of other broadcasting pirates that had been silenced. Fact was that WUMS, by 1931, had even outlived a number of fully licensed but unsuccessful broadcast stations. And, of course, WUMS had "come out of the closet" and was no longer being operated as a secret station. Not only did the government know where it was and who operated the station, they could read about it in many radio publications of the day inasmuch as Dave Thom-

NOTICE OF SPECIAL TEST FROM RADIO STATION W U M S

1560 kc/s. 5 watts (c.w.) 2 watts (phone).

There will be a special test held onfrom E.S.T.

The test will be divided into these sections:-

- 1) From a series of two letters will be sent over and over again for minutes.

This will be in type A1 c.w. and power used on this tuning in signal will be approx 10 watts.

- 2) Actual test will commence at EST and last until EST.

A new code word will be used, which will consist of two letter combination, and will be sent in c.w. for identification only, at irregular intervals during the test. The power of this c.w. will be 5 watts; and is sent only to enable the listener to verify the test, should QRM prohibit identification of the station by call-letters and code word identification. This combination will be sent slowly over and over.

Phone, voice announcement, records, music and all other types of A3 transmission will be transmitted on output of 2 watts. The code-word must be sent to confirm this reception, and records heard identified.

- 3) From a final set of c.w. code combination letters will be sent to show end of the test. The power be 10 watts and will last for a 5 minute period. After which all transmission will cease.

Requirements necessary for verification: The code-word must be sent for the 2 watt verification, or definite information otherwise. The two-letter code-word will be enough to verify this station if they are both accurate. For example: The code letter combination maybe KG on one part of the test, JL on the next part of the test and JT on another, and these change with each test (or change in power or type transmission. Also all reports must be postmarked) within 24 hours of the date and time heard and test reported. NO POSTAGE IS REQUIRED FOR VERIFICATION.

The c.w. code-letter combination will be sent very slow, at about rate of 3 words per minute, so as to permit any DXer, who is not able to read code to be able to copy this with ease. Sent slowly, over and over for several minutes at each identification.

SPECIAL ATTENTION SHOULD BE PAID TO THE FACT THAT THERE MAYBE A 2 or 3 kc/s. DRIFT BETWEEN THE C.W. TRANSMISSION AND THE VOICE TRANSMISSION. THIS DRIFT MAY ALSO BE NOTICED BETWEEN POWER CHANGE FROM 10 to 5 watts also.

Reports appreciated, and desire data of specific value, like volume, fading, which part of the test was the best, AND WHICH SET OF C.W. CODE LETTERS WAS THE BEST HEARD as these are the key to the power and aeriels used here.

This is a real chance for you DXers to try your ability on a low-power DX, so lets hear from you and good luck.

WUMS 1560 kc/s.

Don't forget the Date! The time: and the code-letters used.

ALL TIME QUOTED IS EASTERN STANDARD TIME.

If you were on the WUMS mailing list, you would have gotten a notice in the mail telling you when to listen.

previous six years. Still, several arrests (and subsequent acquittals) had been wholly ineffective in silencing WUMS as Thomas insisted that the station's services were vital during times of Ohio River flooding.

Nevertheless, in 1937, Thomas announced that WUMS would henceforth be utilized only for flood work and that the DX broadcasts had ended for good. This would have been an accurate statement only if Thomas had commenced to consider the former 1560 kHz DX tests to have somehow become connected to flood uses. Despite the announcement, broadcasting of one sort or another (virtually identical to the earlier special DX tests) continued on 1560 kHz. Of course, during actual flood conditions, operations shifted to 2004 kHz.

It was during a 1939 flood that two hams heard WUMS on 2004 kHz and thought it was a fellow Amateur Radio Operator who had drifted out of the 160 meter ham band. They decided to chat with WUMS. That caused the Dept. of Justice to embark upon

a major flap with Dave Thomas. A suit was filed in Federal Court in Cincinnati against Thomas for operating an unlicensed amateur station. Thomas sniffed—they were mistaken, he wasn't operating an unlicensed ham station; he was operating an unlicensed broadcasting station, he claimed. Somehow that curious revelation was sufficient to cause the entire federal case to unravel.

The feds did not seem inclined to go away quietly. They kept writing Dave Thomas a continuing string of nasty letters and threats. Thomas continued to request and even demand that they issue him a license if they didn't want him on the air illegally. It was a real Mexican standoff.

After one of his many license application rejections, on 18 March 1942, Thomas wrote to the FCC saying that he was sorry that they had again bounced his license application, commenting, "One of the first rules of the Commission is that radio is to be used for safety of life and property, and a

few more things which should/would grant a permit to anyone who is working emergency times for no personal gain and has saved thousands of dollars for others during past floods.

"I have been turned down many times by you, but it makes no difference to me—for when I was turned down before I ran just the same as an outlaw and I will do the same if the occasion demands it.

"I have always tried to play ball with you on the square and seek this permission so that I could operate in a legal way. I do not want to operate as an outlaw station, but when . . . floods are raging over the Ohio Valley this station will come on the air.

"I'm sorry that your action is going to cause me to operate as an outlaw but when communication with the outside world ends . . . word must be sent from this town. This station will take to the air.

"I wish you would reconsider your action, for there is no reason to stir up trouble, perhaps go to court again, you bringing charges against me in Federal Court in Cincinnati, having your men in Huntington assigned to check on me and waste of time and money while I am rendering a public service.

"I've asked for nothing impossible for you to grant and I've asked for nothing personal except to serve the people of this locality.

"Please grant this . . . permit so that I will not have to break the laws, for with the U.S. at war it is a bad thing to break the laws of the country . . ."

"I'll use the call WUMS, power 10 watts, and I'll tell the FCC in town here about it (should I have to operate without a license) as well as the FBI so they can see the service I render. So it's up to you now if I operate legal or illegal during the floods."

These comments, of course, were based upon Thomas's continuing contention that his DX test broadcasts had ceased in 1937. As you can see from Thomas's letter to the FCC, however, he was quite adamant about remaining on the air even without their sanction. And remain on the air he did.

By 1948, Thomas felt that he had racked up a sufficient amount of life experience to sit down and set some of his innermost feelings to paper. Thomas, who had majored in religion at Marshall College and Ohio Wesleyan, then issued his philosophical concepts in a privately printed 128-page volume he called *Mytheology* (which he said was to be pronounced "my theology"). The book, which delved deep into metaphysics and the meaning of life, was not intended for sale to the public. It was given out only to a few select personal friends and members of his family. To say the very least, *Mytheology* was a rather obtuse treatise which took virtually all of the world's major religions to task for a variety of reasons probably best understood by the author himself alone, although it did express the author's own personal deep religious faith and the fact that he had found peace with the world.

Unfortunately, 1948 was not to be a year in which the world gave Dave Thomas much peace. That was the year in which Thomas

This will acknowledge your communication of ^(Last Week)
_(Last month)

We are glad to send you this card but sorry to say we CANNOT VERIFY your reception due to ☐ Report too vague to check with station log. ☐ Lack of specific details on material heard and insufficient information submitted. ☐ Station not on air at time reported. ☐ Material submitted was not transmitted from this station.

The Transmitters of W U M S are as follows:-

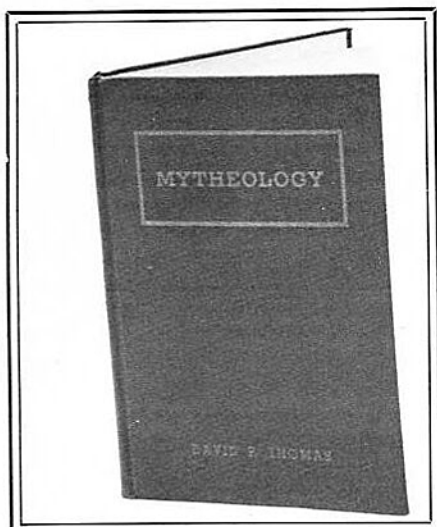
- No.1 2004 & 1560 kc's 1/2 - 3 1/2 watts A-3 fixed
- No.2 100 to 3000 kc's 75 - 125 watts A1, A2, A3 variable
- No.3 1750 to 60,000 kc's 20 - 30 watts A1, A2, A3 variable
- No.4 2 1/2 to 13 meters 14 watts A3 variable
- No.5 100 to 300 meters 75 watts Type B variable

WUMS started Broadcasting 10 P.M. EST, November 16th, 1925. The call stood for "We're Unknown Mysterious Station", as the station worked as outlaw and it's location remained a secret for several years. Located 1931 our slogan became "World's Oldest Known Outlaw Station". Since 1937 we use this equipment only for Ohio River Flood Broadcasting; or any special or temporary emergency work which may occur at irregular times. WE HAVE NO REGULAR SCHEDULE OF OPERATION.

Reports always welcome as we consider WUMS A REAL DX STATION and a DX catch extraordinary for the DX'ers and for this reason we are a friend to the DX'ing Fraternity

RADIO WUMS

A rare look at one of the non-QSLs.



Mytheology wasn't easy to understand, but neither was its author.

One version of the story alleges that he produced the special flood transmitting permit he had supposedly been issued many years earlier and somehow managed to, again, slip through the government's clutches with the well-worn river flooding excuse. In any event, his appeal created such a clamor in the courtroom that he narrowly missed being charged with contempt of court. Yet, Thomas did wriggle out of the illegal broadcasting conviction. At that point, however, he had undoubtedly come to the conclusion that WUMS had surely run its ball of string out about as far as it would stretch. While not totally dead, WUMS henceforth operated only infrequently and with considerable caution. Even so, more than 10 years after the 1948 incident, the state of Ohio was still issuing special broadcast station license plates reading "Radio WUMS" to Dave Thomas for his car—probably the only pirate station call letters to ever be issued on a license plate.

In 1966, Dave Thomas pulled up stakes in Proctorville and relocated to Tampa, Florida. He then turned his attention to eclipse expeditions around the world, acting as expedition leader.

In a letter I received from Dave Thomas in late 1980, he said, "WUMS is still around but seldom on the air. Last time WUMS was on the air was on an eclipse expedition. In the many years during which WUMS operated from Proctorville I received many re-

locked horns with some members of a DX club over some matter which, at this point, remains obscure. Club members retaliated by letting the FCC know when the next WUMS DX test was to take place and the feds were there waiting. Bingo! They caught WUMS and before long Thomas was convicted in Federal District Court at Portsmouth, Ohio for operating an unlicensed broadcasting station. Thomas appealed.

Dave Thomas inscribed a copy of his book in this manner to the author of this article.

To my friend
Tom Kneitel
from
David F. Thomas
Radio WUMS

ception reports, however I had established very strict qualifications for those who would receive QSLs. Many false reports were received from those who never heard WUMS but wanted a QSL."

Thomas told me that "the equipment used at WUMS was . . . given to the Ohio Historical Society, however when they moved to their new museum WUMS was 'lost.' There has been considerable fuss over the matter, they show it as 'misplaced when moved,' but the curator thinks it was stolen. The Smithsonian has asked me for the rest of my old time equipment, and also for my complete QSL files. I'm over 70 now and am going to have to start trying to find a place to give these things a new home."

Several readers were kind enough to send me copies of a short piece mentioning WUMS and Dave Thomas which appeared in the April 21 (1984) edition of *The Waterways Journal*, a newspaper devoted to shipping on inland waterways. Those who sent copies of the story asked me if I had ever heard of WUMS and knew any more about the station than had appeared in the newspaper clipping.

Sure, I've heard of WUMS—I've not only got a non-QSL from the station, but a lot of memories of its owner/operator, the feisty outlaw broadcaster who just wouldn't quit no matter how hard they pushed him. If there is ever an honor roll of unforgettable characters who have been involved in radio, David F. Thomas will surely be somewhere near the top of that list. **PC**

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