

LAX Radio and the Origin of the Travelers Information Service

By Richard W Burden of Richard W Burden Associates, 2012

"LAX Radio was the brainchild of Clifton Moore, then general manager of the Los Angeles Airports. He would look out of his sixth floor office in the tower and see the traffic congestion caused by the confusion of those unfamiliar with the airport. He thought, "If I could only talk to these people I could resolve the problem".

"He found William Halstead, who had installed an induction cable system on the George Washington Bridge that provided directions via the car radio to those headed to the New York World's Fair [circa 1964/65].

"Bill and I had worked together on the Halstead FM Stereo System as well as other projects of his, so he asked me to take on the responsibility of project engineer for the LAX installation.

"Some preliminary work began in 1971 with tests, but the actual installation commenced in May 1972. Halstead had developed an induction cable that was buried adjacent to the median on Century Boulevard leading into the airport. A second induction cable was installed in the terminal area loop with a different message. The transition between these two cable systems appeared on the Sepulveda Boulevard Overpass.

"One of the major problems we faced was providing a coherent message. The terminals were numbered on a tower above each terminal making it difficult for the motorist to locate easily the parking area associated with the terminal [that] was identified with a street address. I suggested two signs with different colors and a large terminal number. One color was to identify the terminal; the other color was to identify the associated parking facility – both with the associated airlines. They are still in use today. The problem Cliff Moore identified was when passengers were dropped at the terminal curb, the median would require the driver to exit the airport in order to return and park in the associated lot. These signs and their related messages provided the driver coherent instructions.

"Message content was recorded and stored on NAB Carts and played back on ITC Triple Deck Cartridge machines. Tape # 1 was the location of terminal for the various airlines. Tape # 2 was parking information with lot closures and a listing of alternative parking. Tape # 3 was traffic information, including such information on rainy days to turn your lights off as you exit your vehicle.

"The FCC authorized the proposed operation as a Developmental License on an assigned frequency of 830 kHz.

"Coverage on 830 kHz was as anticipated and reception was confined to Century Boulevard and the Terminal area. But there's always a catch. The car radios in 1972 employed the usual slide rule dial as an indicator of frequency when tuning a desired station. The requirement for tuning to a broadcast signal therefore required attention to the slide rule dial. Thus, during our testing, it became painfully obvious that, in the process of creating a useful new service to the motoring public, ...[there was] the co-creation of an unfortunate traffic hazard.

"A change in frequency to 540 kHz was requested, which being located at the bottom end of the dial, would be easy to tune without too much attention taken away from the attention of the driver. This was a 'no-go.' 540 kHz was classified as a Mexican Clear, and we were within 199 miles of the Mexican border.

"The 'What Now' turned into 'I Wonder If.' Are existing car radios capable of tuning below 540 and above 1600? Armed with transmitters operating at 530 and 1610 kHz and a length of radiating cable, we visited, Hertz, Avis and a few used car dealerships. The results of these tests indicated that 95% of those cars tested had the capability of tuning 530 kHz, and 92% had the capability of tuning 1610 kHz. We regarded this as very useful information.

"Now to find what was assigned to these frequencies. Here is where we found pay dirt. 530 kHz was assigned to airports [for aviation beacons, but] 530 kHz was not being used at LAX and appeared to be no longer used at airports.

"We got some assistance from the Federal Highway Administration on the potential traffic hazard of the slide rule tuning in congested traffic areas and filed that information along with a request for the use of 530 at LAX. The request was granted.

"The Slide Rule Dial was still the norm when the Traveler's Information Service was inaugurated in 1979; thus, the frequencies of 530 and 1610 from the original tests were assigned to this new service. To this day there are no broadcast stations in the United States assigned to either of these two frequencies."