

Celebrate the centennial of historic radio broadcasts

February 5 2009, By Mike Cassidy

Charles Herrold isn't going to be forgotten this year. What do you mean, "Who's Charles Herrold?" This is just the sort of thing San Jose, Calif., boosters and radio fans - two in particular - have been fighting against for decades.

Herrold, man. Charles Herrold. A.k.a. Doc. The father of radio broadcasting. The man who brought you what brought you AM, FM, Top 40, all news, Car Talk, Rush Limbaugh. (Hey, nobody's perfect.)

This is his year. Well, actually, 1909 was his year - the year Herrold established the world's first radio station in a building at the downtown corner of First and San Fernando streets in San Jose.

Don't believe me? Go look at the historic plaques there.

Or go talk to Mike Adams, interim associate dean of humanities and arts at San Jose State University, or journalism Professor Emeritus Gordon Greb, who's credited with bringing the story of Doc Herrold's century-old broadcasts to prominence.

"I was not there," says Greb, who's 87. "Just let me say that."

But he's talked to people who were. Adams and Greb, who first wrote about Herrold in 1959, share a Herrold fascination. In 2003, they published "Charles Herrold, Inventor of Radio Broadcasting." The book is a start in the tribute department, says Greb, who lives in Chico, Calif.,

but really, people. This is a 100-year anniversary.

"I don't have the time or the energy," says Greb, "to stand on the soap box and say, 'Hey everybody! It's the centennial of broadcasting and this is how it happened.'" And besides, Greb says, people would likely say, "Another nut on a soap box."

So let me be the nut. This is a cool story. A real Silicon Valley story that happened before there was silicon in the valley. Charles Herrold was an inventor and teacher who opened the Herrold College of Wireless and Engineering in 1909. As Herrold and his students noodled with the emerging technology, they would play phonograph records into microphones so they could test their radio signals.

Turns out the noise was a hit among crystal set hobbyists, who were suddenly picking up music and voices on their contraptions.

"They'd call up Doc Herrold," Greb says, "and say, 'Hey, could you play some more songs?'" No word on whether the requests came with dedications.

Herrold kept up the broadcasts until the United States entered World War I, at which time the government commandeered the air waves. By the war's end, newfangled vacuum tubes rendered obsolete Herrold's system, which relied on arcing electrical currents.

Herrold struggled financially after the war and gave his KQW to a church in return for a job at the station. The church eventually laid him off and sold the station to a company that renamed it KCBS, of which you've perhaps heard.

It's a genuine Silicon Valley story: An innovator makes a bet on technology and comes to market before the market is ready. Disruptive

technology throws him off his game. He fails, but his original concept changes the world.

Of course, we like to end our Silicon Valley failure stories with a comeback. Herrold's story didn't work out that way. He finished his working years as a janitor at the shipyards in Oakland, Calif. He died alone in 1948 in a nursing home in Hayward, Calif., not far from where Greb was enjoying a budding radio career.

"I didn't know the founder of radio was dying in a rest home five miles from where I was," Greb says. "I always felt sad about that because he died alone in that rest home."

There's still time to honor Doc Herrold. Check out the KCBS Centennial section on the radio station's Web site. (The station is working on a commemorative dinner later this year and on displaying some Herrold artifacts stored at History San Jose.) Or browse Greb's and Adam's Web site, www.charlesherrold.org .

Do it for Doc Herrold.

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