



The
Broadcasters' Desktop Resource

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... edited by Barry Mishkind – the Eclectic Engineer

Paul Schafer

1925 – 2016

Automation icon Paul Schafer succumbed at home in Bonita, CA to pancreatic cancer on February 23rd at the age of 90.



Paul C. Schafer
October 1925 – February 23, 2016

Often called the “Father of Automation,” Paul Schafer grew up in Hammond, IN, qualifying for an FCC Radiotelephone License as a teenager. That led to his first job at WJOB in Hammond. The following year he moved to the engineer department of WOWO in Fort Wayne, IN.

World War II intervened, as it did for many of Paul’s generation, and he served in the US Army’s Signal Corps. While stationed in Italy, he met and married his wife, Angie. After the war, he returned to broadcasting in Indiana and Virginia, before heading to Los Angeles to work in NBC’s radio operations center in Hollywood.

SCHAFER CUSTOM ENGINEERING

The next move proved to be the one that defined Paul Schafer’s legacy. Schafer Custom Engineering, on 3rd Street in Burbank, was not originally directed at automation but another place Paul saw as a good opening: the remote control of transmitter sites. His work led to the FCC allowing all stations to operate remotely.

This gave Paul visibility in the industry, and the owner of KGEE in Bakersfield was said to have asked for a way to provide programming overnight on his station.



The staff of Schafer Custom Engineering



Shortly after the company was renamed Schafer Electronics. After experimentations with Seeberg 50 record players, open reel tape decks, and control options, the first automation systems emerged, eventually leading to over 1,000 systems being sold.

THE FATHER OF AUTOMATION

Several models were designed, leading to the famous 903 in the 1970s.

Schafer continued to develop systems using different platforms until his retirement. From early systems using wires to numbered selectors to computer operation, radio automation improved to where a good operator could make it sound live. One example of this was the “Hit Parade” series in the late 1960s, where two tape reels would run simultaneously, putting a dry voice over the music.

Although other companies sought to develop automation systems (like IGM, Sparta, or Harris), the Schafer system was considered the best – and Paul the Father of Automation.

Among other awards, Schafer received the NAB’s 2002 Engineering Achievement Award. Over the years he also wrote about remote control for the NAB Handbook. Additionally, he also owned several radio stations.

RECOLLECTIONS

Among Paul employees over the years, Marvin Collins and Harvey Smith remember him well. Marvin was one of Paul’s first employees. Now retired as Chief Engineer for KFI-KOST, Marvin remembers:



The Schafer garage - the original factory site

“It was late in the summer of 1953, when a high school friend told me he had gone to work for a small company that was making remote control systems for radio stations.

He suggested I call the company and inquire about a job because he was quitting soon. Schafer Custom Engineering was located in Paul’s garage at his residence at 2617 Ivan Hill Terrace, near Glendale Blvd. in Los Angeles, where it went into business only a few months before.

“Paul hired me to take care of the parts inventory. After working for Paul a short time I became interested in the remote control systems being manufactured and it was not long before I added doing the final check out of the remote control systems to my job description. Automation systems were still a few years in the future.

STAYING ALIVE DURING THE HARD TIMES

“However, there were some tough times for Schafer Custom Engineering. There were times when business slowed down and Paul would ask me to take the paperwork for incoming orders to a factor office (loan office) in order to get an advance on pending orders. There was a brief period when all the employees except me were furloughed while waiting for orders for remote control systems to be placed. During those days, I had to finish the construction of a remote control system, then test it, and then box it up for shipping.

“Paul Schafer always remained optimistic during these difficult times. His sales efforts would include making cross country driving trips, demonstrating the remote control system. Soon the orders came in again and the staff was brought back to continue working.

“While Paul was on the road I, W6OQI, would communicate with Paul (W6KWW) him via ham radio on occasion. Additionally, Paul had a big car in which he installed one of the earlier mobile telephone systems. This was the main method for Paul to maintain contact with his office while on the road.

“As the company grew, Paul purchased an airplane with the intent of flying around the country on his sales trips. I don’t believe Paul ever obtained a pilot license. But he did hire a pilot as I recall. Paul did make a number of sales trips via the airplane. But winter weather was a problem. On one trip Paul could not return home due to bad weather. He had to leave the airplane and the pilot back east and fly home on a larger commercial airplane that could fly above the weather. I do not remember the airplane being used much after that experience.”

MOVING INTO AUTOMATION

“I think it was in 1954 that Schafer Custom Engineering moved to 235 South 3rd Street in Burbank, CA.

“I remember working at the Burbank location still making remote control systems. However, it was at this location where development of the first automation system took place. I recall two Seeburg 45 RPM juke boxes being experimented with. I did not work on the automation system because this was at the time I left Schafer Custom Engineering to start working at KCBH 98.7 Beverly Hills – which led to a long broadcast career at KPOL, KRLA, and finally KFI-KOST.

“I have fond memories of my days working for Paul Schafer and, thanks to him, I got my start in broadcasting.



Thank you, Paul Schafer.”

WORKING WITH THE AUTOMATION

Harvey Smith was hired specifically to work on the automation systems. Let him tell us more:

“I first met Paul Schafer when he made a visit to a radio station in Pueblo, CO., where I was the Chief Engineer of a 2-tower directional facility on 1480 kHz (from 1960 thru 1967). Paul came because the station owner wished to automate the weekends and certain day parts.

"I remember being on duty when Paul arrived at KPUB in his Winnebago, complete with a generator set, sleeping quarters, and a fully functional 5 or 6 rack Schafer Automation System. The system had two spotters, and a time machine, along with five Ampex 10" playback tape decks."



A QUICK SALE

"It took just one demonstration to convince the station owner Donald W. Reynolds, Jr. Several weeks later a shipment from Schafer Engineering arrived. I installed it and made the station sound live when, in fact, it was automated during the weekends from sign on to sign off thereby allowing me to actually do maintenance on the equipment at the station..."

"After finishing my college work back East I became the Chief Engineer at KGNS for the Reynolds Group, with another Schafer Automation system on their AM/FM side, furthering my credibility to Schafer Engineering. Eventually I was offered a job at the 9119 Desoto address, by Paul Schafer himself."

ON THE ROAD

"The first questions they asked me were: "Are you married, and do you like to fly and travel?"

"After answering 'No' and then 'Yes,' I was hired on the spot and for two years, followed the Schafer Automation Winnebago Demonstration Bus across the 48 states of the USA, doing "after install" follow up visits to make sure the station engineer installed the system properly and the owners were pleased with the performance of the system, etc."

GROUNDING IN LA

"Fast forward a bit – and I got hired out from under Schafer Engineering by KRLA, Radio Los Angeles' Chief Engineer by Jack Reeder. This station was the station who brought the Beatles to Los Angeles, owned at that time by Jack Kent Cook, Owner of the Los Angeles Lakers, and the Forum Basketball Stadium,

"KRLA, located at the Huntington Sheraton Hotel Annex in Pasadena, CA, was trying to automate certain time slots in their 24 hour broadcast day. They had purchased a full bang Schafer system.



I was ordered to make a "fix it" visit to KRLA studios doing studio maintenance while the automation ran.

“Apparently the Chief Engineer, and Studio Supervising Engineer were impressed with my work, and I became the studio fixit guy, for audio productions and general studio maintenance. I joined the IBEW local 45, as required and, over the years, built a residence on property I had purchased with the union wages provided by KRLA.

“However, above all, I have Paul Schafer to thank for the opportunities he put into my life.”

Our sincere thanks to Marvin Collins and Harvey Smith for providing their recollections of their experiences with Paul Schafer.

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