

Since 1940

WISCONSIN ENERGY *Cooperative* NEWS

March 2023



**Richland Electric
Cooperative**

Your Touchstone Energy® Cooperative 

SPRING INTO ART WITH
**SCULPTURE TOUR
EAU CLAIRE**

COLLABORATION BEYOND
COOPERATION

ENERGY SAVING APPS

**RICHLAND ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE
ANNUAL MEETING SATURDAY,
MARCH 25**





LOOKING BACK ON A FRUITFUL CAREER



Beth and Ron Fruit

Longtime local broadcaster reflects on radio's role in the Richland Center community

Ron Fruit, well known in the greater Richland County community as the owner and on-air personality for Richland Center's WRCO radio station, made a deal with his Dad at a young age that set in motion a career in broadcasting. Garland Fruit, Ron's Dad and also a former board member at Richland Electric Cooperative, told the then-aspiring basketball player that in order to play basketball he would have to participate in forensics. "I turned out to be one of the worst basketball players that Richland Center High School ever saw, but I did like forensics and I did well," said Ron.

Ron's involvement in forensics led to his beginning broadcasting when WRCO called the high school and was looking for a boy who was also involved in forensics. A subsequent tour of the radio station and interview led to a part-time gig where his voice was first introduced on the airwaves in and around Richland County during his senior year. As an added benefit, the school arranged his schedule so he could be

...his voice was first introduced on the airwaves in and around Richland County during his senior year.

on-air in the afternoon and finish his day by reading the news at 5:30 p.m., which meant by the time he got home, the farm chores were typically done. "So, how could a guy lose with this type of arrangement," chuckled Ron.

What followed was a time when Ron, while attending UW-Richland, might have chosen another path. "Radio just happened—it wasn't a career choice—I was thinking I was going to be in ag-engineering," added Ron, but an opportunity to rent a farm from former Richland County Judge Kent Houck sent him back to his roots in farming. Throughout the next eight years he continued to work part-time for WRCO and farm at the same time and he cites his time farming as one of the best educational experiences he could have ever had.

In 1983, as life circumstances changed, he again found his way back to radio as the full-time farm director and morning personality at WRCO. This time he would remain for the next 40 years in a variety of roles.

Rural Broadcasting

As long as Ron remembers he listened to WRCO and early on his Dad would tell him to be quiet as the news, obituaries, birth news, weather, and more were aired. Unlike more urban

radio stations, rural radio is truly local. Often, areas served by small-town rural radio stations don't have a daily newspaper and almost never have a television station, so radio fills the need for timely, trusted information. Near real-time information about significant weather events, emergencies, and other disruptions to a community are vital information that radio can deliver. Vital statistics, such as obituaries, can inform community members who wish to express sympathy or attend a funeral, which often occurs before the next weekly newspaper is published. WRCO is one of the first contacts when REC has large outages and needs to get information to members quickly about what to expect in terms of restoral. Prior to the internet and text messages, nearly every person with school-aged children listened during inclement weather to learn of school closings.

News about agriculture, which is now considerably different than when Ron first started, focuses on far more than markets. Environmental, legislative, and technology issues are now a major part of what rural people want from farm news sources. WRCO, in partnership with Brownfield Ag Network, delivers a wide range of ag news. Ron was quick to point out, "Farm news may be



Ron Fruit in the early years, on location (above) and in the WRCO studio (below).

a misnomer; we'd be better off to call it rural news or food production and technology news."

Community Commitment

Anyone who is within earshot of WRCO knows that under the leadership, and ownership, of Ron and Beth Fruit, they served the community with their time and resources—including airtime on WRCO along with professional voice-overs, providing speakers and emcee services, and helping out with

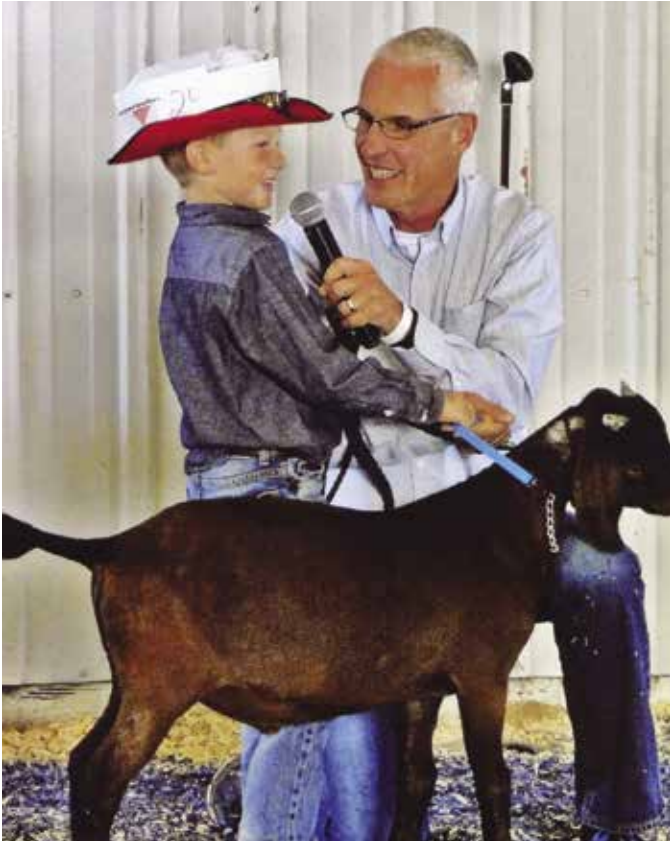
sound systems at community events and much more.

When asked about how WRCO could provide so much information related to community issues on their station, mostly at little or often no cost, Ron replied, "I always have felt... where we were the owner and lived in the community, I had to face people every single day who had important investments in the community and their business, in their church, in their school, in their project, in their charity work, and the list could go on and on. That I would look face to face or they would look at me and I just think that gave us an accountability, and a responsibility and an initiative to be able to do the things that we did. And I think in many ways we felt it was important to our business model. It was the best way to entrust loyalty from advertisers and the community, if the community is listening the advertisers are well served, if the advertisers are well served we stay in business, and so it was kind of a circle for good, and so ultimately I'm not sure who benefited more from our community service. Many days I think it might have been us."

Family Ownership

While Ron may be the radio personality most well-known, his wife





Ron Fruit broadcasting live from a Little Britches Rodeo.

Beth also played a vital role in the operation of the station. Beth says, “I just let him do all the talking. I was more than happy to be in the office and shuffle papers.”

With a strong background in bookkeeping, having previously worked at Hardee’s and the White House Supper Club, she was a perfect fit to manage the day-to-day office requirements at WRCO. As Ron and Beth ran WRCO, they also balanced raising a family with the requirement of making sure that there was no “dead air” on the station. She reminisced about times when severe weather was impacting the community and Ron would leave to go be on the air: “When the kids were little

we’d pack up sleeping bags and everything else,” and off they would go with Ron to the station.

In today’s world where work-life balance is an often heard term, Beth will tell you there was no such thing. When asked whether they ever turned off the business life in their personal life, she quickly replied, “Never, even when you’re in the car and there is that radio you can turn on and start channel

surfing to see what everyone else is doing,” to which Ron laughingly agreed.

As Ron and Beth looked forward they knew eventually their ownership run would have to end and they stressed over how to keep WRCO a resource for their friends and community. Ron told of how they wished they had an exit plan, but it just wasn’t possible—there was no crystal ball. They relied heavily on advice they had received from previous owner Peter Athenas, a man they clearly appreciated and respected deeply who helped them on their journey. Ron repeated advice he received from Pete: “Pete said, you will be lucky if you know it’s time for you to step back and do something different, and you have the opportunity. If you have that opportunity, when that time comes you’ll be wise to take it.”

New Ownership

Ron and Beth found the opportunity, after 28 years of ownership, to move on when Civic Media of Madison reached terms to buy the station. Civic Media owns a group of radio stations across Wisconsin, mostly in small towns or rural markets. Their mission statement indicates their commitment to the communities they serve.

“I would salute Civic Media for a desire to have local hometown radio preserved, and I hope in their mission that they can make that happen. It’s not unlike what we see with some of our dairy farms today...with consolidation, more cow—obviously they can do things with a larger staff and a larger footprint...I’m hoping that they can do things we couldn’t do and continue to serve,” said Ron.



Ron Fruit has been a regular presence at Richland Electric Cooperative’s annual meetings for many years. Here he is interviewing longtime director Judy Murphy at a past meeting.



Richland Electric
Cooperative

ANNUAL MEETING & OPEN HOUSE

Saturday, March 25

Richland Electric Cooperative Headquarters
30 E. Robb Rd., Richland Center
Business Meeting begins at 9 a.m.



Come see our new headquarters facility!

Doors will be open at 8 a.m. for the Open House until the start of the business meeting, and will open again after the meeting until 10:30 a.m.

Amy Martin, Manager/CEO

30 E. Robb Rd., P.O. Box 439, Richland Center, WI 53581


608-647-3173

www.rec.coop

Find us on Facebook 



**Richland Electric
Cooperative**

Your Touchstone Energy® Cooperative 

Board of Directors

Calvin Sebranek, President • Daniel Hillberry, Vice President • Judy Murphy, Secretary • Tim Tiller, Treasurer
Don Huffman, Jim Goplin, Steven Fuller, Jeff Monson, Kevin Kepler