The Flying Classroom

By Aline Click

Illustration by Scott Fleming

Probably one of the most interesting phenomena in the history of instructional technology was the Midwest Program on Airborne Television Instruction (MPATI) also known as the “*The Flying Classroom*.” The technology was unique in that in order to reach a larger geographic region than the traditional broadcast systems available at the time, MPATI equipped two DC6 airplanes with television broadcasting equipment, including a 24 foot antenna that extended from each plane’s belly. One airplane was sent up each day to fly six hours in a figure eight-pattern over northern Indiana, Ohio, Illinois, Michigan, Kentucky, and Wisconsin. The MPATI plane broadcast videotaped lessons, received on UHF channels, by schools equipped with antennas and classroom televisions to receive the programs (Gibson, 2001). Initially funded by the Ford Foundation, the MPATI project was launched in September of 1961 and lasted almost 7 years (Seattler, 1990).

Elementary school students located all over the Midwest, including rural communities, were taught by “master teachers” through MPATI on many topics including science, French, Spanish, music, and social studies. High school topics included Russian, advanced algebra, geometry, American history, American government, literature, and biology. MPATI was initially designed to broadcast classes to primary and secondary schools in the Midwest. However it also telecast professional development workshops for teachers who would be using the system to teach the courses, so several universities and colleges also took advantage of the programming. The MPATI pro-

gramming came with print materials called “source units” that provided classroom teachers with supplementary materials for each televised class, including a description of content, course objectives, preparatory and follow-up activities, and a vocabulary list (“The Midwest Program,” 1962).

Kraus Electronics was a television, radio, and antenna sales and repair shop located in Joliet, Illinois, from 1932 to 1987. Owned by Arthur Kraus and his son Arthur “Skip” Kraus, this shop was the regional MPATI service center for Joliet and the surrounding communities. In a personal interview with Skip, he said many of the area schools were using MPATI, including several private schools such as St. Joseph, St. Pats and St. Francis College. He recalls one afternoon as he went to check on the signal at St. Pats, he arrived at the school just as a televised Spanish class was ending, and he overheard two boys leaving the classroom speaking to each other in Spanish. Skip said he was impressed they had learned this from educational television, and he felt proud to be involved with getting this instruction to the area schools.

Unfortunately, due to a lack in funding, in May 1968 MPATI stopped broadcasting and made the course materials available as a video tape

library to member schools. Reports suggest failure was due in part to teacher resistance to instruction television (Reiser, 2001). It has also been speculated that the affordability and flexibility of videotape may have replaced the need for broadcast instructional television (Penland, 2001). A complete history and an information guide to the archives can be found on the University of Maryland, National Public Broadcasting Archives web site: <http://www.lib.umd.edu/NPBA/papers/mpati.html> (Boone, 1998; Butler, 1998).

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