

R&R AC/HOT AC



Like a phoenix, WHOM's tower rises from the ashes. Part two of a two-part series

The Tall Tale Of The Most Powerful FM Stick

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When we left PD Tim Moore and his merry band of jocks at Citadel AC WHOM/Portland, Maine, in last week's column, we'd established that the station's history is a pretty entertaining story on its own. But there's more, and who would've thought that information on a station's transmitter would make for its own compelling saga?

You may recall that WHOM's stick is high atop Mount Washington in New Hampshire, giving the station the biggest geographic footprint of any FM in North America. You may also remember that the mountain's summit has been dubbed "the home of the worst weather on Earth" and is the location of the highest recorded wind speed on the planet. The Mount Washington Observatory has a program where Joe Average can go up and live there for a week, and it's so popular that there's a long waiting list. "On a clear day, you can see forever up there," Moore says. "People say it's like a religious experience being up there, even when the weather is bad."

WHOM has a Snowcat—which is basically like a truck cab on treads—that it uses to reach its transmitter facilities. Given the distance up to the transmitter, there actually wasn't commercial electricity available at the stick—or the Mount Washington Observatory—until Thanksgiving 2007. "We were completely and totally running on generators, so there's a tank farm that holds 30,000 gallons of diesel. We had to physically have a presence up there," Moore says. "Our transmitter engineers basically lived on the premises, and they switched out every week."

Until a few years ago, WHOM shared facilities with the local ABC-TV affiliate, so their personnel would trade off time in the outpost, which Moore describes as looking like a factory from the outside but like a house on the inside . . . except it was built so people wouldn't have to leave often. "You'd walk into the pantry, and there'd be seven refrigerators lined up and half a dozen freezers because they had to stock up on food in case they had to stay up there for a while without being resupplied," Moore says.

Alone On The Peak

Thanks to the weather outside being literally frightful, there were times when the employees living at the transmitter couldn't go to the other buildings. "You could literally be blown off the summit of the mountain," he says. "The engineer said even if you were on your hands and knees, the wind would still blow you off, so they'd literally lie down perpendicular to where they were going and try to roll themselves to the other building. That would be under extreme circumstances when they had to get from building to building. I guess they tried running a rope or chain between the buildings, but the wind was so strong that it'd get disconnected and start whipping back and forth . . . Up there, it's just unlike anything else on Earth."



Moore

The tower itself isn't all that tall due to the fact that it's built on the highest peak in the Northeastern United States, but it's tall enough that the RF wouldn't affect the people living in the factory-house at its base and everyone else walking around on the summit. However, a few years ago, the TV station decided to move its transmitter off the mountain to put a city-grade signal over Portland, so Moore and Citadel management made the nerve-racking decision to automate their operation high atop the peak.

"We were nervous as cats since there wouldn't be anyone up there except for the State of New Hampshire Parks & Recreation Department and the Mount Washington Observatory," Moore says. "The weather station up there is manned year-round, and it's part of the New Hampshire park system, so there is a physical presence of people who still live up there. As it turns out, the guy who's basically the facility

An up-close look at the transmitter, post-fire



manager is a jack of all trades, and he's our right-hand guy. He's technically savvy and fearless and has learned many things, so our engineers have been able to talk him through basic functions. We do a lot of it by telephone, but if there's a serious problem, that's not going to work."

Getting up there is a hassle as well, since the road hugs the side of the mountain and has a steep dropoff, so it's a treacherous drive even when the road is fully open during the summer. When you're in a Snowcat and you can't even see the road beneath you, it gets even more hairy.



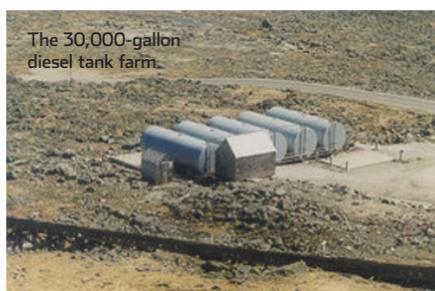
Burn, Baby, Burn

One Sunday in February 2003, Moore was listening to WHOM and was puzzled to hear the station slowly start to fade away. He called the engineer, who told him the entire transmitter site was spectacularly burning. "The place basically burned to the ground," Moore says. "The fire was catastrophic, and no one knows to this day how it started. Our engineer said that all they could do was evacuate people and let it burn."

Thankfully, the giant diesel engines and tank farm were in a different location, and the only facility that burned was the factory-house at the base of the tower—which, unfortunately, contained all of the transmitter equipment. "The tower itself didn't burn, but the backup and main transmitters completely melted, and the building was a total loss," Moore says. "We were off the air for a while and did a lot of jury-rigging to go from other locations since we had other stations in the market, so we used their backup towers and did a whole bunch of different things to stay on the air. We ended up rebuilding a new building on the site."

The insurance company didn't understand why WHOM kept putting in insanely high quotes to replace the equipment, so to justify the costs, Moore schlepped the adjusters up the mount via Snowcat. "All it took was one trip to the summit, and they stopped asking those questions and fighting and arguing over every little thing because they realized

that we had to take the normal costs and multiply them by four or five or even more," he says. Thankfully, the transmitter was eventually rebuilt, and WHOM has since reclaimed its glory as North America's most powerful FM radio station. **R&R**



The 30,000-gallon diesel tank farm