

From Springfield, Missouri

Ralph Foster—He challenged Nashville as the nation's country music capital

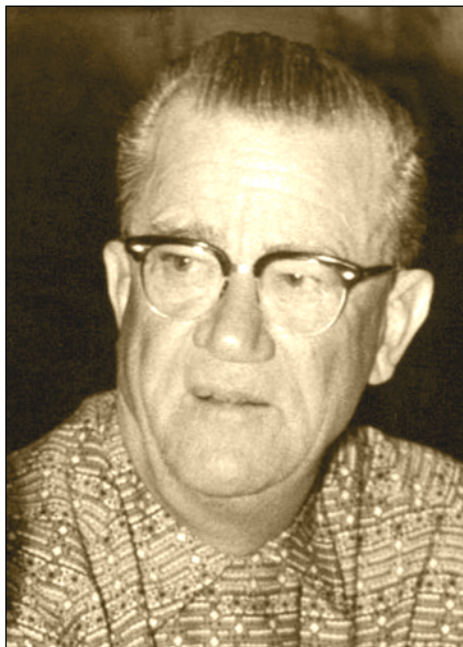
Ralph David Foster (1893-1984), was an American broadcasting executive and philanthropist who created the framework for Springfield, Missouri, to challenge Nashville, Tennessee as the nation's country music capital during the 1950s. His KWTO was a stepping-stone for many top country artists; and with his music businesses, led to creation of *Ozark Jubilee*, the first U.S. network television program to feature country's top stars.

Foster was born April 25, 1893 in St. Joseph, Missouri. In 1924, at age 31, he set up a low-power AM radio station with his partner, Jerry Hall, in a corner of their Firestone dealership, Foster Hall Tire Co., in St. Joseph. It began as a hobby, but as local businesses increasingly sought to advertise on the station, it became a full-time occupation. He increased its power and in 1926, it was licensed as KGBX on 1040 kHz.

In 1932 Hall moved to California, and Foster and his brother-in-law, Art Johnson, relocated the station to Springfield (KGBX-AM was licensed for 1310 kHz on November 3). Unable to get its transmitting power increased, the next year he bought the license of a station in Grant City and moved it to Springfield, signing on December 25, 1933 on 560 kHz. He requested and received the call letters KWTO and used the on-air slogan, "Keep Watching the Ozarks." As president and general manager, Foster made KWTO-AM the dominant station in the region.

Mr. Foster started building his "ideal radio station." His theory about the industry was that if a station was going to survive, it must be built with local talent and with a definite personality of its own—not just another chain station. Also the station had to have coverage—that could reach "every deer lick, rabbit warren, and 'hawg waller' in the Ozarks."

Foster began to realize radio's full potential after World War II. The Gen-



Foster believed an ideal radio station would reach every "deer lick, rabbit warren, and 'hawg waller'" in the Ozarks.

eral Council of the Assemblies of God, with national headquarters in Springfield, sponsored a thirty-minute program on KWTO called *Sermons in Song*. He began transcribing the show for other stations, and eventually 200 carried the program. To expand into country music, Foster started RadiOzark Enterprises, Inc. with Si Siman as vice president and local businessman Lester E. Cox as a financial backer. They produced transcription disks of programs starring Smiley Burnette, George Morgan, Bill Ring, and Tennessee Ernie Ford. Eventually, more than 1,200 U.S. and Canadian stations aired their programs.

Live broadcasts dominated KWTO's programming. Many country music stars either got their start or performed on the station, including Porter Wagoner, Chet Atkins, the Carter Family, The Browns, Wynn Stewart, Les Paul, Homer and Jethro, and Slim Wilson. Mr. Foster's pet program was *Korn's-A Krackin'*, a weekly "hillbilly variety" program, that was carried nationally by the Mutual radio network.

Foster believed Springfield might overtake Nashville, Tennessee to become the "crossroads of country music," and knew his best opportunity would be to put his local TV show, *Ozark Jubilee*, on national television.

In April 1954, Siman lured Red Foley, considered America's top country music star, from Nashville with the promise of hosting a national TV program. Foster leased the Jewell Theatre and spent nearly \$100,000 to outfit it for live TV production. On January 22, 1955, *Ozark Jubilee* debuted on ABC-TV, the first network television series featuring national country music stars, which ran for almost six years.

Foster was an avid hunter and fisherman and a strong conservationist. He collected Native American and Western artifacts and firearms for many years, and in the 1960s donated a large collection to The School of the Ozarks museum in Point Lookout, Missouri near Branson. In 1969, Foster's financial donations saw to the addition of a new wing, a new entrance, and a new name: the Ralph Foster Museum.



The museum's focus is the history and culture of the Ozarks region. Exhibits include the original vehicle used in the television series *The Beverly Hillbillies*, antiques, weapons, dolls, circus toys and miniature model circus, metal banks and toys, furniture and household items, glassware, natural history, mounted animal displays, personal hobby collections and a display on Ozark music personalities.

Ralph Foster Museum, 1 Cultural Court,
Point Lookout, MO 65726,
417-690-3407
www.rfostermuseum.com

Foster died August 11, 1984 in Springfield and was buried in St. Joseph Memorial Park Cemetery. His widow, Harriett, died December 5, 1986.

Text and photo by Wikipedia



Serving those who have served our country.

Missouri Veterans Home

1600 S. Hickory • Mt. Vernon, MO • (417) 466-7103

Call for Admission Criteria and Employment Opportunities