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Celebrating 50

When television started in WA, not many of those involved knew how it worked — or had even seen it. An unforgettable ride into history was about to begin.

The more you think about the arrival of television in WA, the more remarkable the story becomes. Was it wonderfully audacious or simply foolhardy? Did the pioneers at TVW 50 years ago understand the enormity of what they were tackling or were they blissfully unaware of how many things could go wrong?

Anyone who wandered into TVW in 1959 would have found 92 people — 88 of whom had never seen a television picture — preparing for the adventure of their lives. The city would be changed for ever as those first flickering, black-and-white pictures went to air.

And it was such a grand, grand adventure. The ability to prerecord was not available so everything was live to air. There were no direct links with other cities and film; both news and overseas programs had to be flown in.

The most remarkable aspect of this was that there was no model to follow, no experience to call on. The men in charge, general manager Jim Cruthers, sales manager Brian Treasure and news editor Darcy Farrell, were flying blind. Mr Farrell, at least, had been living in London and knew what a television picture was. But, like the other two, he was a newspaper man who suddenly had to think moving pictures and how to put them on to a television screen.

But it was what they didn't know that served them so well. There were no boundaries. If it seemed a good idea, they did it. If it didn't work, well, the viewer probably didn't notice anyway.

The story actually began in 1958 when James Macartney, managing director of WA Newspapers Ltd, told Mr Cruthers, now Sir James, that the board of WAN had decided to apply for Perth's first television licence. He instructed Sir James to go to Melbourne, find out what he could about this thing called television and prepare a licence application. Eight months later, WA Newspapers won the bid, defeating a Western Television Services Ltd bid which was backed by the Sunday Times and believed to include Rupert Murdoch as a silent supporter.

The bid was won largely because it promised a local station representing the interests of WA and WA investors which would not be affiliated with any other station in the country. Such localism lasted until the lure of forming alliances with other stations, networking, became too great and TVW joined the big boys of the industry as part of the Seven Network.

Mr Macartney accurately predicted at the licence hearing that there would be no room for another commercial licence in Perth for up to five years. STW Channel 9 came on air in 1964 but TVW had used its competition-free period well.