

Pioneer made leap of faith

Former general manager Bill McKenzie signed on at the start, and never looked back.

Bill McKenzie says his father could never understand why, as a callow 19-year-old, he abandoned his secure-job-with-prospects at the ANZ Bank and headed into the unknown world of television. A fair response, really, since his son had never so much as seen a television screen at the time.

But then, neither had most of the 12 people who signed on at TVW Channel Seven when he did, right after the licence was granted in 1958.

They all learnt on the job, doing anything that needed doing, and worked every day preparing for the October 16, 1959, launch.

"Then it occurred to us that we'd have to do it again the next day and the next . . ." he said.

That was when Channel 7 was housed in the basement of Newspaper House and the present site in Tuart Hill was at the end of a dirt track, and then-antenna installer Kerry Stokes complained about the poor reception from the Bickley transmitter.

It was a steep learning curve but one he wouldn't have missed for the world. It was

the start of 49 years in the television industry, becoming general manager of TVW and later joining Ten in Melbourne, and becoming foundation general manager of Ten in Perth and finally with the pay-TV Disney channel.

They were the days when television was live, videotape was still three years away and news footage had to be flown in from Melbourne and Sydney. The airport run was one of his jobs, too, and if they were running late with the film, a quick telephone call was all it took to hold the flight.

There were moments, inevitably, when it all went so horribly wrong. One day he'd been showing a group of visitors around the building and missed the rehearsal for the live, Phillip Edgley-presented *Spotlight*.

"I was in charge of the applause button," he recalled. "I thought the singer had finished, but she hadn't." The resulting applause ruined her segment and she never spoke to Mr McKenzie again.

Mr McKenzie credits the late Jim Macartney with the vision which brought television to Perth. As chairman of WA



Above: Bill McKenzie started on the studio floor and became general manager.

Newspapers Ltd, it was Mr Macartney, he said, who had recognised the benefit of being the first to own a television station in WA and who had been prepared to do the groundwork in seeking the licence.

Mr McKenzie can tell endless stories about the early days of Channel 7, about the things that went wrong and what went surprisingly right. An early programming deal set the scene, he thinks, for Seven's later success.

Jim Cruthers and Brian Treasure were in the US trying to buy programs for their fledgling station but were met with scant interest and high prices from the studio bosses there. By accident they met an executive from the tiny country of Guam

who, in conversation, told them what he'd paid for his programs.

Armed with this information, it was much easier to negotiate successfully with the Americans. So much easier, in fact, that the pair had money left over in their program budget.

"That money," Mr McKenzie said, was invested in local programming. Of the 35 hours of television put to air in Perth in the 60s, 10 were made in Perth. It was the start of a commitment to localism which included events like a Pet Parade (which saw 20,000 cats and dogs descend on Langley Park), the Birdman rally (in which, fortunately, no one died), the milk carton regatta, Telethon, the Christmas Pageant and many others. 7