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Most Schuylkill County residents have heard about Mahanoy City's claim to being home of the first cable television system in the country. It was 1948 when John Walson Sr. first connected homes in borough with a cable to deliver the television signals that were being blocked by the surrounding mountains.

"It's a story everyone in Pennsylvania should know because it was started right here," Brian Lockman, president and CEO of the Pennsylvania Cable Network, said Thursday evening during a presentation titled "History of Cable Television and Pennsylvania's Cable Television Pioneers."

"He was a tinkerer who lived in Mahanoy City and worked for PPL," Lockman said. "He called the company Service Electric because he said service was the most important thing. He would provide the best service anyone could get."

Walson also owned a store in the borough selling General Electric appliances including televisions. When customers said they were not able to get a signal, Lockman said, Walson put up an antenna on top of the mountain and ran a cable to their homes with amplifiers set up about every 100 feet along the way.

Lockman said the first customers were wired in 1948 and Walson originally charged a \$300 hookup fee. There were no monthly fees and television sets at that time cost between \$400 and \$600.

“He was the biggest cable operator in the country for a long time and the family still runs the company,” Lockman said. “Service Electric had a lot of firsts in its history. In 1972, Service Electric was the first cable system to show HBO and the first program shown on HBO was the Pennsylvania Polka Festival. It also carried Muhammad Ali fights you could not see anywhere else.”

Lockman said he actually started his career in broadcast television under Walson at Service Electric in 1975. After 15 years with C-SPAN as one of the network’s original four employees, Lockman joined the Pennsylvania Cable Network in 1994 as vice president and chief operating officer. He was named president and chief executive officer in 1999.

Lockman also wrote “Pioneers of Cable Television: The Pennsylvania Founders of an Industry” in 2005.

“This is the great American story,” Lockman said. “These guys were entrepreneurs. They came back from World War II and wanted to innovate and do something to make a mark and worked really hard to start a business that changed the world and their story really needs to be told.”

Another Schuylkill County resident contributing to the early days of cable television was Pottsville’s Martin Malarkey. Lockman said Malarkey also owned an appliance store and at one time had the largest cable subscriber base in the country.

“He started in 1953 and for a time had the largest cable system in the country,” Lockman said. “In 1953, he had 2,900 subs and bought the systems in Minersville and Schuylkill Haven.”

Lockman said he charged \$135 for installation and \$3.75 a month for three channels based out of Philadelphia. Malarkey would later become the founding president of the National Cable and Telecommunications Association.

“One of his biggest innovations was in 1951. He put a camera in his office and would have somebody from the newspaper come down and sit in his office and read the news. It might have been the first cable news anywhere,” Lockman said. – **Republican Herald**

