

'Polish dee-jay' R. Whitcomb, 70, dies

The Grand Rapids Press

When disc jockey Robert Whitcomb played his first polka on a local radio station, "his phone started ringing off the hook with people wanting more," said Whitcomb's daughter, Robin Choals.

"The result was his radio show, 'The Original Polkatime,'" Choals recalled. "He had a lot of fans; the entire West Side was pretty much Polish in those days, you know, and his show was always well-received because he had such a good sense of humor and did so much ad-libbing."

Whitcomb, known to his radio fans at "Jasiu," died Friday in Cape Coral, Fla., after contracting an infection following surgery. He was 70.

Services will be held at 2 p.m. Tuesday in the Metcalf & Jonkhoff chapel, 4500 Kalamazoo Ave. SE, Kentwood.

A native of Evansville, Ind., the man who was to become known as Grand Rapids' "Polish dee-jay," was the German-English son of a Presbyterian minister. He attended Notre Dame University, started his radio career in South Bend in 1945, then moved to Grand Rapids to join the WGRD-AM staff in 1948.

Whitcomb got the nickname "Jasiu" — "John" in Polish — during a radio contest that promoted his daily three-hour polka show. It stuck throughout his 27 years on the local radio scene, which included stints on WGRD, WOOD-AM and WJPW-AM in Rockford as well as WOOD-TV 8.

In 1961, a handful of Whitcomb's sponsors put on a 39th birthday party for him at the Civic Auditorium. "Hundreds of people came," Choals said. "He got a key to the city and a plaque from the mayor's office, 'for promoting fellowships and good will for all nationalities,'" she said.

Additionally, the radio star also was named to the Michigan Polka

Hall of Fame, his daughter said.

Whitcomb and his wife, Carol, owned the L & M Party Store on Plainfield toward the end of his radio career. He retired in 1980 to become director-manager of the new Sandy Pines Campground in Dorr, then moved to Cape Coral three years later.

While in Grand Rapids, Whitcomb was a member of Bella Vista Church in Rockford and the Grand Rapids Elks Club.

He is survived by his wife; his daughters, Choals and Linda Forsythe, both of Grand Rapids; a brother, Leslie Whitcomb of Cape Coral; and two grandchildren, Wayne and Melissa Forsythe, both of Grand Rapids.



Robert Whitcomb: In his early days on radio.