



Brother Powel Crosley, Jr. Queen City Entrepreneur, Industrialist, and Sportsman ©

by Dr. Ivan M. Tribe, KCT, KYCH, 33 Degree

Some people are born innovators although it may take some time for them to find their proper niche, so to speak. The subject of this sketch made his mark in life as an inventor, a businessman, a radio pioneer, and as owner of a major league baseball team, all in the city of Cincinnati, Ohio. Brother Powel Crosley wore a number of hats in his varied career, and while he had his share of disappointments, by and large he demonstrated a considerable degree of success. Today, his name is probably best remembered for the ball park that bore his name during what many consider the Golden Age of the National Game, but he was much more than that.

Powel Crosley, Jr., was born in Cincinnati on September 18, 1886, the son of Charlotte Utz and Powel Crosley, Sr., an attorney who had moved his practice to the Queen City area of Cincinnati, Ohio, from Warren County. As a youth, he attended public schools in the College Hill section and then attended the Ohio Military Institute from which he was graduated in 1905. From childhood, he demonstrated a great deal of energy in gadgets and new technological developments. At the age of twelve, he built a four-wheeled wagon powered with an electric motor and sold it to his father, who had promised him he would buy it for ten dollars if it worked. To his father's surprise it did work! The proud youngster repaid his eight dollar expense, gave his investor-brother Lewis a dollar, and "gloatingly pocketed" a ten percent profit. Over the next sixty years, he would pocket several million more.



Brother Crosley in the 1920s

The youngster entered the University of Cincinnati's engineering school and then switched to law, but he was too restless to stick with either. Automobiles were his first love, and it was said that he dropped out of college to take a chauffeur's job just so he could drive one. He worked at a variety of other jobs and built his first car, called the "Marathon Six" in 1907, but the financial Panic of 1907 ended his hopes to put it into production. Powel planned to enter a car in the Indianapolis 500 but had to drop out when he broke his arm. Starting a firm called the American Automobile Accessories Company, he made and marketed a number of byproducts and accessories that included a gasoline fortifier called "gastronic," a radiator cap that doubled as a flag holder (very popular during World War I), and a device to help keep the car back in line after it had hit a rock in a bumpy road that he termed "the litl shofur." By 1920 the company was also making phonograph cabinets, canoes, and printed advertising. Meanwhile in 1910, Crosley married Gwendolyn Aiken on October 17, and the couple had two children, Powel III and Martha. Mrs. Crosley died in 1939, and the widower eventually married two more times and was widowed once more.

Powel Crosley began his Masonic journey in 1917 in College Hill Lodge No. 641. He was initiated on September 27, passed on November 15, and raised to the Sublime degree of Master Mason on December 20, 1917. Powel Crosley, Sr., had previously been a member of Kilwinning Lodge No. 356 in Cincinnati but had demitted and affiliated with College Hill Lodge about the same time the son was taking his degree work. The father remained a member until his death in 1932 and the son until his death in 1961. He also joined the Valley of Cincinnati, A.A.S.R., completing his work on May 22, 1919, and became a member of Syrian Shrine Temple on May 24, 1919.

Meanwhile, Powel Crosley found a new interest, one that would provide him with his greatest fame, success, and wealth. Radio became a new fad, and young Powel III wanted one. The father shopped around a bit but found that they cost at least one hundred dollars. Thrifty by nature, he spent 25 cents on a booklet called *The ABCs of Radio*, then bought some parts, and built one for less than twenty-five dollars. As Henry Ford was then doing for the automobile, Powel Crosley soon did the same for radio. He built and marketed a radio that the masses could afford and made himself a multimillionaire in the process.

By the beginning of 1922, Crosley was selling many radios, and in March 1922, so his buyers would have something to hear, he started station WLW. Within a decade this station became known as "the Nation's Station," and, with 500,000 watts of power, 700 on your AM radio dial had become the most powerful broadcasting outlet in the world. It was said you could hear the station over barbed wire fences and the metal fillings in your teeth! While Crosley himself did the first broadcasts from his home, once the station really took off, Crosley left most of the day-to-day management to others. Many programs that originated from there eventually made it big on the networks: including Moon River, Midwestern Hayride (first known as Boone County Jamboree, Plantation Party, and the long running soap opera, Ma Perkins. Under Crosley Broadcasting and its successor Avco Corporation (after 1945), such regional and national stars developed as Doris Day, Rosemary and Barbara Clooney, Red Skelton, Ruth Lyons, Paul Dixon, Bob Braun, and Phil Donohue.

In addition to radio manufacturing and broadcasting, Crosley's corporation turned out other products. Perhaps the most successful was the refrigerator known as the "Shelvador," the first refrigerator to contain shelves on the inside of the door. Powel Crosley offered the inventor a twenty-five cent royalty for each one sold, but the man insisted on a \$15,000 cash payment instead. Crosley paid the \$15,000 and came out ahead on the deal. Other products in the Crosley line included the "Roamio," the first car radio in 1930; "Koolrest," an air conditioner; "Icyball," a portable refrigerator; "Tredkote," a tire patch; "Driklenit," an auto polish; and "X-ervac," a scalp massage. Some of the products were a bit ahead of their time and not really successful until later, but they demonstrated the man's love for innovation and tinkering. Some of these products were his own, and some were bought from others.

In 1934 Powel Crosley purchased the controlling interest in the virtually bankrupt Cincinnati Baseball Club Company at the urging of General Manager Larry McPhail. He was not a dedicated fan, but he did want the franchise to remain in the Queen City area. With McPhail's guidance he made improvements to Redland Field, renaming it Crosley Field, and installed lights. On May 24, 1935, more than 20,000 fans watched the Reds defeat the Phillies in the Major League night game. That contest and six others helped boost team attendance. Four more years elapsed before the Reds, under the management of Brother Bill McKechnie, brought home league pennants in 1939 and 1940, with a World Series win over Detroit in the latter year. The authors of the authoritative team history, *Redleg Journal*, described the club's longtime owner: "a private man, Crosley preferred to remain behind the scenes as club owner and gave his general managers control of personnel decisions." He did, however, inaugurate Shrine Night at Crosley Field.

Brother Crosley still dreamed of bringing an inexpensive, compact automobile to the masses. In 1939 he was ready to launch his Crosley car through department store outlets. His original plan for the Crosley auto was for it to sell for \$325 and get fifty miles to a gallon of gasoline. World War II intervened before he could have much success. By September 1944, it appeared that the War would soon be winding

down, and as WLW historian Dick Perry phrased it, "Mr. Crosley dusted off his dream and started all over again." Accordingly, in 1945 he sold WLW for sixteen million dollars to Aviation Corporation (which ironically had once manufactured another legendary car, the Cord). In 1947 this company became Avco Broadcasting. Powel Crosley still owned the Reds, but for six years he turned over the presidency to Warren Giles. He then could concentrate virtually all of his efforts on Crosley Motors.

The auto manufacturing plant was located in Marion, Indiana. Initially, things started off well enough. To again quote Dick Perry's *Not Just a Sound*, "at the end of the first official sales year (July 31, 1947), more than sixteen thousand of the little cars had been sold at \$888 each, and Crosley Motors showed a profit of \$476,065. The next year thirty thousand of the little things were sold." Crosley Motors had two more good years. Then came the Korean War and a scarcity of material which increased steel prices along with a sharp jump in labor costs.

Sales dropped to 4,000 in 1951 and to just under 2,000 in 1952. After three straight years of annual million dollar losses, the Crosley auto died. The Marion plant closed and was sold to General Tire for \$60,000. Ironically, before the fifties ended, the German import Volkswagen made a hit with American consumers, suggesting that the Crosley may have been just a decade ahead of its time.



After Warren Giles became National League President, Brother Powel Crosley resumed the executive position with the Cincinnati Baseball Club Company, a position he retained for the rest of his life. The Reds had fallen into the second division in 1945, where they remained for a decade although they did provide their fans with some exciting moments. One came in 1947 when long, lanky sidearm pitcher, Ewell "the Whip" Blackwell (a Mason) had his phenomenal 22-8 season. In the mid-fifties the team produced a number of powerful hitters typified by the muscular Ted Kluzewski, and also including such long ball hitters as Gus Bell, Wally Post, and future Hall of Famer, Frank Robinson. In 1956 the Reds proved to be not only a strong contender but also amassed a team record with 221 home runs. They also became the first Reds team to draw over a million fans at home. Crosley continued to remain in the background in that era with Gabe Paul as General Manager and Birdie Tebbetts as the most successful field manager in that period. One of Crosley's last acts as club president and principal owner was to hire William

O. "Bill" DeWitt (33° in the Valley of Cincinnati, 1972) as general manager on November 8, 1960. Brother Crosley died unexpectedly four months later, but the leadership of DeWitt and manager Fred Hutchison brought the Reds the league pennant in 1961, their first in twenty-one years.

Crosley's daughter and heir, Mrs. Stanley Kess, subsequently sold her stock to DeWitt. After Crosley Motors died in 1952, Powel Crosley lived on for another nine years. Although of retirement age, he remained active as Reds' president and as a member of the board of directors of the Fifth Third Union Trust and of the Cincinnati Enquirer.

Some years after Gwendolyn's death, he married again to Eva Brokaw, but she died in 1954. Two years later, at seventy, he wed a third time to Charlotte Wilson, who would survive him. He also served on hospital boards and spent time on his two farms, in Indiana and Georgia, and owned other homes in Canada and South Carolina in addition to his residence on Kipling Avenue in Queen City; he maintained an office in the Carew Tower. An avid yachtsman, he also kept close tabs on the Reds. Powel Crosley III preceded his father in death, so daughter, Mrs. Stanley Kess, was his only surviving child when he passed on March 28, 1961, just as the team was ready to go north. Later a mural was unveiled at Crosley Field, highlighting major events in the life of the forty-three year member of College Hill Lodge who had contributed so much to the Queen City of the West. Crosley Field was replaced by a new park in 1970, but forty-five years after his death his legacy continues. WLW remains as a major radio station and the Reds still take the field for 162 games each season.

NOTE: The major source for the life of Powel Crosley is Dick Perry's Not Just a Sound: The Story of WLW (Prentice-Hall, 1973), along with several books on the Cincinnati Reds. Ill. Brother George Braatz, Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Ohio, supplied his Blue Lodge records, Harry Carpenter of the Valley of Cincinnati his Scottish Rite records, and the staff of Syrian Shrine Temple for the AAONMS.

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