

RADIO DAYS

By John S. Halbert

During the first weeks of our freshman Fall semester, as I was doing radio work mostly on the weekends, between classes I joined the Student Union Snack Bar crowd around the big table, where the sessions were always going full blast.

Although freshmen were on the lowest rung of the college social totem pole, just being part of the student body allowed us some important privileges, including, for example, free admission to all the home football and basketball games, and to other events. At the football games, all we had to do was present our student ID at the stadium gate. Naturally, the student section offered grand opportunities to meet new people and to strengthen new relationships formed in class and in the Student Union. Many times, I invited a new coed friend to a game, as the free admittance for both of us made football and basketball games a very inexpensive date.

If the home team won, the "Victory Torch" was lighted in front of the Student Union. This was a squat, natural gas flame that looked like a smudge pot in a wading pool. The torch bubbled and hissed in its pond of water for a day or so after each home-team victory. There, my date and I oftentimes joined an enthusiastic crowd that always gathered around the flame after a home (and away) win. For most of the time I was in school, we had very good football and basketball teams, which made for many happy torch lightings.

Afterwards, we sometimes dropped by the radio station for a tour of the place. These were wonderful, matchless opportunities to impress young ladies with my radio career. A disc jockey who had once tipped me off to the social advantages of being on the radio was proved absolutely right, again . . . and . . . again . . . and, again.

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In addition to the free spectator sporting events, the college also offered cultural entertainments that were free to the students---with some strings attached. For these events, the school had a limited number of tickets to give out on a first-come basis. Usually, these passes were handed out early on the day of the event. (Like, say, at five o'clock in the morning---ugh!). On one of those occasions, the school gave out free tickets to a performance at Coffee High School's auditorium, the largest music hall in the area, of the famous pianist, Van Cliburn. Unfortunately, after all the pre-dawn waiting, I was number 151 in a line of 150 free tickets, which left me very disappointed. As Van Cliburn was, at the time, at the peak of his popularity, I decided to put to the test the theory that "necessity is the mother of invention". I contrived a plan with a friend, that, if it worked, would enable me to see most of the performance. At the first intermission, my classmate and a couple of others walked outside, ostensibly for fresh air. From the shadowy darkness, I stepped forward and joined them. After some minutes of mingling with the sizable sidewalk society, all four of us sauntered through the glassed doorway into the lobby.

But a security guard caught on to what we were doing. "Hey, you!" he pointed at me. "You! Stop! Stay right there!" He pulled out his billy club and rushed, elbows swinging, past other

patrons at us. In the crowded hubbub of hundreds of concert-goers milling about in the spacious foyer, I dashed up the back balcony stairwell. Just as I reached the far upper row and took an empty seat among a crowd of others, the lights dimmed and the renowned pianist returned to the stage. In the darkness the officer paced back-and-forth, staring up at the crowd of hundreds of patrons, looking for my face. But he never found me---I had given the frustrated guard the slip.

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Other notables spoke at the college, including Barry Goldwater, who gave a ringing speech to the students not long after the 1964 Presidential campaign in which he detailed his disappointing loss to Lyndon Johnson in the election. Not long afterward, an NBC-TV political correspondent named "Sander Vanocur" also spoke to a student gathering and refuted Goldwater's contentions, claiming that, in his opinion, the Republican candidate had never seriously wanted to win.

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Al Capp, the popular and sometimes controversial creator of the "Lil Abner" comic strip, once entertained us at a packed assembly. At the time, his comic-page characters satirized without ceasing the Lyndon Johnson Administration's Vietnam War policies, thereby incurring much publicized wrath from the White House.

Speaking with a deep, distinctive drawl and using sweeping gestures, the famous cartoonist spent much of his address-time describing his personal life that involved an accident at age twelve when he lost his right leg underneath a streetcar. He claimed there were certain advantages, believe it or not, to having an artificial leg. For example, he said he had a perfect excuse at dances to grab his partner tightly, with the logical explanation that should something happen to his wooden leg, she could prevent him from falling! Capp said he had successfully used this gambit many times, particularly with (always good-looking) female dance partners.

From time-to-time, the college brought free (to the students) performances to Florence by such currently-popular musicians as "Jay and the Americans"; "Gary Puckett and the Union Gap"; pianists "Ferrante and Teicher"; "The Brothers Four: "The Lettermen", and "The Four Seasons". The latter group had the most dynamic drummer I ever saw perform. The fellow was a slightly-built, homely-looking young guy, with glasses and slicked-down hair---quite "nerd-like. But, could he *ever* play the drums! During the show, he had two solo drum performances that literally brought down the house. The main attractions onstage, were, of course, the singers, led by Frankie Valli. It was a brilliant performance for the three-thousand or so at the coliseum.

On the other hand, another very popular group had the absolute *worst* onstage sound system there probably ever was. Their familiar songs were mostly blurred-out in a distorted jumble of electronic growls, groans and squeals from the speakers that went on all during the performance. It was so bad, that one guy in our crowd suggested that the singing group must have borrowed their loudspeakers from the principal's office of a local elementary school!

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In those days, along with my natural bent toward soft-rock music, I developed an interest in classical masterworks, thanks in large part to my father, who had a big collection of classical

music records. So, when the "Royal Philharmonic" came from London, England to Florence, I was first in line to get the free tickets. I actually managed to wangle *two* of the passes, as I had asked Nan, a new friend, to go with me to the classical concert.

Nan was a petite, very pretty girl who had the fairest, silkiest, most platinum-blond hair I had ever seen (and have yet to again see). At one time a majorette in the marching band of one of Sheffield's biggest high school football rivals, we had met around the table in the Student Union Snack Bar.

For the date, she arranged for her older brother to drop her off at our house at High Point. From there, we drove over to Coffee High School's big, impressive auditorium for the concert. A musician herself, Nan enjoyed the performance, and I enjoyed her company. (I hoped she enjoyed *my* company.) Afterwards, we made the now-standard visit to the radio station, where she was predictably impressed

When we weren't digging into delicatessens or sampling other fast-food fare around town, Nan and I spent a lot of time together in the college library, studying, reading and comparing notes, since we had several classes together. She was a great study companion.

Although I liked Nan, our relationship never became anything close to a full-fledged romance. As she was quieter and more introspective than I was, she probably found me boisterous a lot of times. Nevertheless, she was a wonderful companion wherever we went. I even treated the Nan to her first airplane ride---an airborne jaunt to Huntsville and back in a Piper Cherokee four-seater, arranged by the Flight Service. She and I continued to see each other for a while longer, but early in the following spring semester, an upperclassman in a white Corvette arrived on the scene, whereupon Nan made a quick exit from my life.

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From my very first days as a freshman, I realized that Sheffield High School had done a marvelous job of preparing us for college. Mr. Robinson's long-remembered, "Take out fourteen sheets of paper---" was right in line with what we were now experiencing at Florence State. Still, the lecture-oriented classes took a bit of getting used to. The back-and-forth discourse of high school was now replaced by non-standard lecture styles where we only listened and took notes.

One History professor actually told us in advance what would be his upcoming test questions. He usually gave us four questions to study and would ask three of them on the test. However, we wouldn't know beforehand which three questions were the actual ones he would ask---therefore we had to prepare all four answers. The professor expected us to write extremely thorough, well-thought-out essays, with accurate punctuation and proper grammar (he would deduct points for construction errors), as well as covering the lesson material. All this made for quite difficult quizzes, very much along the lines of Mr. Robinson's high school test questions. To prevent anyone from smuggling completed test answers into class, the professor always devised some sort of whimsical treatment of the test papers, such as instructing us to write the word "Peasant" down the middle of each line; or having us turn the paper upside down or sideways and writing the test answers all the way out to the edge of each page. These offbeat treatments of our test essays served their purpose of checkmating anyone with ideas of cheating.

What *was* remarkable about this approach was how well I remembered the material, which meant his unorthodox methods were effective. Decades later, from having memorized it for one of those tests, I could still recite more than anyone would probably ever want to know about the unification of Germany, for example.

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All first-year students had to take Freshman English, also known as Freshman Composition, or "Freshman Comp", for short. Basically a grammar course, it placed heavy emphasis on reading and writing. During our first term, shortly before the Kennedy assassination, we read T.S. Stribling's *THE STORE*, which, in addition to having its plot set in the Florence area, had won the "Pulitzer Prize for Fiction" in 1931. The author was a graduate of "Florence Normal School", an earlier name of Florence State. (The name change probably didn't imply that the institution was now an "abnormal school", although I knew some fellow students who thought that it did.)

Stribling addressed us Freshman English students at an assembly in Kilby Auditorium and discussed his famous book. The prize-winning author, by now probably in his eighties, with a full head of tousled white hair, in a strong voice told us how he had majored in English at Florence Normal, where he had done well by writing themes for his fellow students. "But," as he put it, laughing, "after I graduated, I discovered there was no market for themes!" So, Stribling took up professional writing instead, and did extremely well.

THE STORE, the first in a trilogy of works by Stribling, was a fictionalized tale set in Florence around 1885 about the founding of a department store in the aftermath of the Civil War. The novel created a local *bruhaha*, as some of the more controversial storylines seemed to many townspeople to run uncomfortably close to an actual department store in town. All this might have had something to do with the fact that about the time the book was published, Stribling moved to Clifton, Tennessee, a sleepy town about a two-hour drive northwest of Florence. There, he completed the two other works of the trilogy: *THE FORGE* and *UNFINISHED CATHEDRAL*.

Thereafter, the now-famous author visited Florence only infrequently---for example, to speak to English classes at Florence State, such as ours'. I found Stribling to be a fascinating, articulate old gentleman, who had lots of interesting ideas about writing and the literary world in general. (Unfortunately, he died not long after speaking to us.)

As we were required to take a test on the book and write a theme about it (Stribling would have loved it!), we had to read for details. Some of the questions were based on fleeting events in the story, which meant that we had to pay *very* careful attention to what we read. As it turned out, even though I did fine, overall, I made a higher grade writing the theme than I did on the book-test.

However, this new-found writing ability had to undergo a period of refining. For example, an instructor in a Poetry class told me that I used too many adjectives in a particular report. In the margin he penned (in red) the caustic comment, "*This is literary diarrhea!*" Another time, the same teacher remarked to me, "Mister Halbert, you write in brilliant fragments!"

As he allowed us to take "open-book" tests, several of us in the class hit on the idea of *taking our notes in the book*, and the teacher never said anything about it. (Either he hadn't caught on to what we were doing, or else didn't care.) In any case, I came away from the course with a better understanding and appreciation of poetry (not to mention a better grade) than would have otherwise been the case.

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The radio station manager called me into his office one day in early-April, 1964 with a new

proposition: Would I be interested in doing some technical work, in addition to my week-end on-air gig? Would I, indeed! Late that afternoon, I drove to the transmitter building for a training session. The AM station employed a transmitter that generated the power and the audio signal that was fed as a high voltage, high-frequency current through buried cables to the four 339-foot-tall towers arranged in a big rectangle in an open field. The engineer gave me some instructions as to what everything was all about.

The station was on what was called a "Regional" channel, and radiated a five-thousand-watt signal during the daytime and switched to one-thousand-watts of power after dark. The station broadcast with different powers in every direction at nighttime, which protected from interference other stations hundreds of miles away on the same channel. To accomplish this required a huge and technical electronics setup. The station's transmitter was located several miles from the downtown studio in a sizable concrete block building. This was necessary because the antennas took up about fifteen+ acres of land. To operate all this, the transmitter was connected to the control room by special telephone lines. Voice and music signals flowed down one line; another circuit was the "studio-transmitter link," known as the "*S-T-L*." By utilizing special electronic equipment, the announcer in the studio could operate the transmitter by remote control. The arrangement was duplicated for both the AM and the FM stations. However, an on-site operator was required to oversee the AM transmitter and the other equipment while the station was on the nighttime directional pattern. This was where I came in---the station wanted me to operate and oversee the transmitter at night.

The first time I saw it, I was awestruck by the massive, complex-looking equipment. The main transmitter that developed the power to put the station on the air was a white, upright metal-encased unit about three times the size of a very large refrigerator, with a row of dials and meters across the top. Next to it was an even more hefty-looking "phasor" that divided the power and fed each antenna tower through heavy cables that ran out to the base of each of the four vertical pylons several hundred feet distant. Both the transmitter and the phasor had blower motors that cooled the units with large fans that made a continuous whirring sound. Through a glass window in the front of the transmitter one could see the three reddish-glowing transmitting tubes, each about the size of a football, that generated the final power output and the sound portion of the signal that was in turn fed at thousands of volts to the towers. The control equipment connected to the studio was in an upright rack next to the transmitter.

During the day, while the station was on daytime five-thousand-watt power, only one antenna, called the "base tower", operated. On nighttime power, all four towers carried the signal current, that was routed through the phasor. It was all very impressive. (And, I am sure, expensive.)

At sunset, I hit a button that caused a loud "*KA-CHING!*" as the system dropped the power and engaged the phasor. Then, I made a series of adjustments to trim the antenna array to its most efficient settings. Thereafter, all I had to do was take readings off dials and record them on a log-sheet every half hour. At the midnight sign-off, I switched off the equipment and reset it for the remote-controlled start from the control room the next morning.

For several nights, everything went just fine. But on about the fifth night, when I turned off the transmitter, there was a loud "*BANG!*" from somewhere inside the cabinet. A thin stream of acrid, gray-like smoke started coming out, and a bank of red warning lights came on! Gasping in fear and dismay, I backed away, wide-eyed, from the stricken transmitter. What could have happened? It was obvious that something had gone terribly wrong inside it, and, as I was in charge of the equipment, no doubt I would be held responsible.

Hands trembling I dialed the Chief Engineer's home telephone number. When his sleepy voice came on the line (it was after midnight), I explained what had happened, expecting the worst. Yet, the man seemed almost casual about it. He told me he would come out later and see about it and that I should just turn off everything and go home.

All night long, I tossed and turned, worried about the broken transmitter, and didn't get any sleep. I had unhappy visions of being fired during my first week on the new job because I had destroyed the transmitter. But, wonder of wonders---the next morning the station signed-on right on schedule. Later, the engineer told me he had been expecting a certain breakdown in the transmitter, and, in fact, already had the replacement parts on hand to repair it! It was just a coincidence, he said, that the equipment failure had happened on my watch. He said he had driven over there in the wee hours of the morning and installed some sort of module that had solved the problem.

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The next day, the boss called me into his office with yet another proposition: he wanted me to work the baseball games from the FM control room. I guessed he had decided I was better suited for studio work rather than running (*ruining?*) the transmitting equipment.

In those days, the FM station was the local outlet of the Chicago White Sox, and the baseball games were very popular. The sports network audio feed was routed into the FM studio upstairs, where it was "mixed" through a control board. The studio operator ran the "board," as it was called, and cued tapes to run in the breaks between the half-innings. Once you got the hang of it, the whole process was actually pretty easy, although at times tedious, especially on Sundays, when the White Sox typically played two games back-to-back in what were called "double-headers." Such shifts usually started about noon and sometimes ran into the evening.

The commander of the White Sox announcers in those days was Bob Elson, an elderly veteran of the airwaves who had been on the radio with baseball for decades. His colleague in the broadcast booth was a young Milo Hamilton, who would eventually be inducted into the '*Baseball Hall of Fame*' as a broadcaster. That summer, while I was operating the board for the White Sox broadcasts, on one occasion Hamilton had to miss a game because his wife had a baby. (Decades later, at a party in Houston, I finally caught up with Milo Hamilton and told him about that along with some other anecdotes of his days at the White Sox and later at Atlanta and, finally, in Houston, where the station at which I worked at the time carried Hamilton's broadcasts of the Astros. He was amazed that I remembered all this and confirmed it was true.)

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On days that the White Sox had the day off, usually for traveling, "WCFL", the station in Chicago that anchored the broadcasts, produced what were called "re-created" games. This involved an announcer in a studio surrounded by sound-effects devices and a ticker-tape machine connected to an operator at the stadium in the distant city who tapped-out what was happening. The announcer read the "ticker-tape" as it fed out of the machine and carried on as if he were in the actual stadium's broadcast booth calling the game. A studio engineer at the Chicago station raised and lowered the volume of a long-playing record of crowd noise that matched what was going on at the real ballpark. If someone hit the ball, for example, the crowd noise rose accordingly and the sportscaster got all excited. Bob Finnegan, the Chicago studio announcer

who specialized in these "re-creations," was a genius at improvisation, and, his broadcasts sounded just as realistic as actual ball games.

The White Sox broadcasts were usually carried on the FM channel from the upstairs studio, but I also knew that the AM station on the first floor occasionally carried the games. One day when I arrived to run the board, the manager motioned to me as I walked past his office. "Well, today's the big day for you!" he smiled, switching his ever-present cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. "You're on AM today!"

I gulped. "AM---?" As I had never before operated from the main control room, the prospect of sitting behind the enormous Gates "Dualux" control board that was several times the size and complexity of the upstairs board was intimidating.

The boss ushered me into Master Control and introduced me to the announcer on duty. "John, here, is going to work the baseball game from down here, today," he told the man. "Show him the works!" With that, he switched his cigar to the other side of his mouth, stepped back out into the corridor and closed the door.

Sweaty palms and all, I shook hands with the guy, who grinned at me. "Bossman said you'd be working the 'Sox game from here. But, not to worry, it only *looks* complicated---you'll get the hang of it in no time."

He went on to describe the procedures to follow, that turned out to be much the same as I was used to with the FM control board, only on a much larger scale. As I would also be responsible for the transmitters from this control room, he demonstrated how to read the meters and operate the heavy units at the transmitter site from the remote-control panels. "Any questions?" he asked, pausing at the door.

I shook my head, but inwardly quaked with uncertainty. *I was alone with all the control room equipment!* Taking a deep breath, I dropped into the chair and studied the big board in front of me. The commercial tapes for the ballgame were already in the room---that much was familiar to me---so I arranged them on the counter. Trying to remember everything the previous operator had told me, I played a few records before the game started. The turntables---although huge in comparison with the rather average-sized pair upstairs---at least worked the same way as the ones with which I was familiar. I managed to join the CBS newscast on the hour without mishap, and as soon as the news was finished, the pre-game show from the White Sox Network began.

Before long, I realized that the main AM control room, for all its complex appearance, was actually no more difficult to master than had been the smaller one upstairs. For one thing, both control boards were made by the same manufacturer, so the switches and dials were mostly alike, except that they were arranged differently, and the "Dualux" had, of course, many more of them.. Otherwise, all the equipment operated in a pretty straightforward manner.

The trickiest part was to cue the tapes. In those days, all commercials were on small reels of pre-recorded tapes that had to be cued on a bank of playback machines; a continuous task. I discovered that cueing the tapes and phonograph records were the most ongoing part of running the control room. You always had to be at least two steps ahead of things---the worst thing in broadcasting is dead air.

By the time the game was over, I had everything in the station's nerve center pretty much figured out. There was an exhilaration about controlling all the activities of a radio station, and its effect on the listening audience. For example, I could raise the audio volume on the control board, and *everybody's* volume out there in Radioland went up! Or, I could likewise lower the volume on the board, and the loudness of everyone's radio dropped. Heh! Heh! Radio control,

indeed!

I finished the game that day with a surge of confidence; I believed I was now ready for just about anything radio broadcasting could throw at me.

As the game was wrapping-up, the station manager walked into the control room, looking casual. "Ready to keep going?"

My jaw dropped. "Really?" was the only thing I could think of to say.

The boss switched his cigar to the other corner of his mouth. "The regular guy'll be late, today, so---if you think you can handle it---you can stay on 'til he gets here!"

I felt like jumping up and pumping his hand, I was so elated, although I answered him in an outwardly composed tone of voice. "Of course, sir, I'm sure I can handle it all right."

That was the true beginning of a radio career at that station that lasted eight more years.

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One day not long afterward, the boss called me into his office with yet another proposition: "How would you like to fill-in on the AM station for vacationing announcers? You can keep your current duties with the White Sox games---more money, more responsibility." He switched his cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other.

As before, I had to resist the impulse to leap out of my chair. "Of course," I answered, in my most restrained tone of voice. "I'm sure I can handle it." Inwardly, I was about to do handsprings---obviously, it meant the manager believed I was ready for more responsibility, and on the biggest, most prestigious station in the region!

My first fill-in was on the late-morning weekday shift that consisted mostly of CBS Radio Network feeds, including "Arthur Godfrey" and "Art Linkletter's House Party," two very popular radio programs in those days. After the network shows, I played records and produced a half-hour news block called, "The Noon Newsreel."

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The most consistent part of running a control room is to *always* watch the clock---carefully and continuously. The big time-piece became the "Great Arbiter of Operations", around which our lives revolved---ruling everything from joining the network on time; airing the commercials in their proper time-slots, to keeping the program and technical logs up-to-date.

The control room clock was a bulky circular instrument that hung on the wall by the glass picture window to the adjoining studio. Every hour, the U.S. Naval Observatory in Washington, D.C. corrected the big timepiece by a direct synchronization signal via Western Union telegraph. At the exact top of the hour, a little red light flashed under the "12" on the clock face, signifying when the correction took place. Usually, there was no noticeable change in the rhythm of the sweep-hand, although sometimes it would jump slightly if it was off a half-second or so. It was an impressive system that we promoted endlessly on the air. The CBS network, then as now, had a tone that sounded like a single note on a harp at the top of the hour immediately before the news signature signal, or "sunder," as it was called. The tone always coincided with our little red light as evidently CBS also used the Naval Observatory signal to set *their* clocks in New York.

Clockwatching was (and still is) a critical matter in broadcasting, and one of the most important requirements of a radio announcer was the ability to carefully "watch the clock." The really good announcers could "talk their way to the top of the hour" and come out exactly as the

CBS tone sounded at the start of the network news.

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As our studios were connected to the across-town transmitters by special telephone lines, any interruption was a very serious matter. One morning, we suddenly lost our audio feed to the transmitter and went silent over the air. Some workmen, digging a sewer line up the street, had accidentally cut the buried cable that carried our signals and knocked us off the air. We couldn't control anything at the transmitter site, so the AM and the FM equipment just sat out there, speechless, until the engineer could drive over and turn them off. As it turned out, we were off the air for several hours due to the cut telephone lines.

That was the same day, incidently, that a *mouse* died in a ceiling air conditioning duct to the control room and the odor that blew in would have driven us out of there in any case. Life is never dull at a radio station.

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One day, not long after I started on the morning show, the door opened and into the control room stepped a tiny barefoot girl, not quite yet a teenager. "Hi!" she said. "I'm Katie! My mother works nearby, and they told me I could come in here and watch you do your radio show!"

The little girl sat down and looked about the room. "I rode my bicycle all the way here from Colbert Mountain!" she added, obviously trying to impress me. If true, it was indeed an accomplishment, as it would have entailed a ride of several miles through heavy traffic in order to reach the station. She came by a number of times over the next several weeks "just to watch," as she put it.

A few days before school started, she came in and asked me to someday marry her! Taken aback, I had to tell her she was far too young to even be thinking about such a thing, and, as I was only nineteen, I had a long way to go, myself, before doing anything like *that!* But she was persistent. "Well, then, could you wait for me to grow up?" Of course, such an idea was, at the time, out of the question, and I had to gently let her down.

Several years later, I ran into Katie in a restaurant, and she remembered me. We went for a ride in an antique car I then owned. By that time, she was a winsome, very pretty girl in her late 'teens, and I laughingly reminded her of the time she had wanted me to wait for her to grow up so she could marry me. Was she now old enough? To my surprise, she started crying! Through her tears she told me she was pregnant! I drove the old car back to the restaurant and we had a long talk. Then, I took her home, and didn't see her again for a long time.

One day, a number of years later, Katie, by now a very attractive woman nearing thirty, came to apply for a job at the television station where I then worked and I had the opportunity to interview her. But there were no openings at the time, and, as it turned out, that was the last time I ever saw her.

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Bob, another announcer, bustled into the control room with a grin on his face. "Let's call 'Burt Reynolds!'" He had a paper with a telephone number on it in his hand.

"*Burt Reynolds?*" I knew of the actor, who had recently achieved notoriety for posing in his birthday suit in a well-known women's magazine.

"He and I were roommates in college," Bob went on. After Bob dialed the number. I switched the telephone to a studio loudspeaker.

"Bob!" came a male voice from the telephone speaker. "Whatcha doin' these days?"

As I readied the next program, I listened as Bob and Burt went on with their conversation.

A staffer stuck his head around the door. "Bob, they want you upstairs."

My colleague handed me the receiver. "Here . . . talk to Burt 'till I get back!"

I blinked, uncertain what to say to the actor. "Ah, Burt . . . ah, hello---?"

"Who is this?"

I told him I was another announcer.

"Well, I was a radio announcer while I was at Florida State."

There followed a conversation---more like chit-chat---that lasted maybe five minutes.

Then Bob came back. Burt and I wrapped up our conversation.

In radio, you never know who you'll be talking to.

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One morning that summer while I was on the air with the back door open, I heard a "Meow!" Looking around, I spotted a gray alley cat cringing by the door. Having no idea where he came from, and since he seemed OK, I asked the office manager about adopting him. "Sure!" she said. "Just buy his food and don't let him get too attached to this place."

And so, we adopted "Irving," as we called him.

But as the summer went on, we noticed that Irving seemed to be gaining weight. It occurred to me to check "Irving," more thoroughly. To my astonishment, I discovered that not only was Irving a *female*, but he (she?) was very pregnant! "Irving" became "Irvina," and a few days later she had a pair of jet-black little ones. One of the station engineers moved Irvina and her "family" to the transmitter building, where the cat could better take care of the babies.

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As a radio announcer's stock-in-trade is his or her voice; proper speech is essential, and an announcer expecting to advance in the profession must continually study and practice, as broadcasting jobs are competitive. A radio person must avoid on-air gaffes at all costs, although every announcer has had forgettable moments behind the mike. One time, while introducing a preacher's program, instead of saying, "Our Featured Speaker," what actually came out was "Our Speecherd Feaker---" What made that particular mistake *really* awful was that I reacted with, "Oh, mercy!" forgetting that the microphone was still on---and which promptly broadcast my impulsive words right out into Radioland!

But the absolute worst such performance for me came not long after I started the White Sox studio job, when I had one of those experiences that those who heard it talked about it for years afterward. One of our long-standing sponsors was "Weaver Mobile Homes", who ran a live commercial right before the start of each baseball game. That day, somehow, I got everything tangled and instead of "Weaver Mobile Homes," what actually came out was something like, "Weevee Mober Homes---"

When there is a "fluff," as it is called, the announcer---without thinking, since it is natural to

do so---tries to correct the error, which almost always results in a worse mistake than the first one. At that point, things can go downhill in a hurry and make him sound totally ridiculous. In my case, "Weevie Mober Homes" was followed by,"Woavvie Meeber Homes---" (pause) "Wyyvee Murrber Homes---" (another pause) "Wivvie Myyber Homes---" (sound of door opening as another announcer, having heard my agony on a hallway speaker, came into the room to see what was happening.)

At that point, red-faced, I gave up, started a recorded commercial and tried to recuperate. I learned the hard way that time that when an announcer gets tongue-tied on the air, the best thing to do is to stop speaking, take a deep breath, and try to continue slowly. But that didn't help me that day with "Weaver Mobile Homes," to whom I hereby belatedly and sincerely apologize.

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Jerry Hargett, another announcer at the station, and one of my very best friends ever, was a practical jokester who knew no bounds when it came to pulling pranks. One day, he stepped into the control room while I was playing a record, reached down and lifted the tone arm off the turntable, leaving me with dead air! I whirled around as he grinned, "I don't like that song . . ." and airily walked out the door!

My friend reserved some of his most outrageous ploys for Leo, a transplanted announcer from Boston, Massachusetts, who considered himself to be far more cultured and sophisticated than the the rest of us and who condescendingly reminded us at every opportunity that *he* had once worked at one of the biggest radio stations in the country. Jerry took it upon himself to bring the fellow "down to our level," as he put it. His bag of tricks included turning off the studio lights just as Leo was about to deliver the news (one of his favorites, and repeated several times); re-arranging news stories so that they didn't make any sense; and other gambits, some of which were too outlandish even to repeat here.

One day while Leo was doing a newscast, Jerry tiptoed into the control room and changed the speed of every recorder and turntable. When Leo finished his news broadcast, he started a tape player. What came out of the speaker, and on the air, was a rumbling, half-speed commercial. Leo, frowning, started another tape, that screeched out the next commercial at *double-speed!* Leo, by now thoroughly rattled, turned on his microphone and announced that the next musical selection would be "The popular and talented pianist, Roger Williams, with his latest recording, 'Autumn Leaves,'" and flipped the switch to start the turntable. At once, the speakers shrieked out a tinkling piano piece at a supersonic 78-RPM! Just then, I came down the hallway and found Jerry doubled-over in laughter outside the control room door, gasping with glee at the discomfited, discombobulated New England disc jockey. Peeking through the small window in the door, I saw the foppish Leo dashing about, furiously trying to get everything back in order, and vowing dire consequences to whoever was responsible for the speed switcheroos.

* * *

April Fool's Day was a made-to-order occasion for practical jokes. One year, the nighttime announcer typed a realistic-looking fake program log for the next day that was loaded with commercials for local stores long-gone and products that were no longer made. The next morning, the hapless announcer literally turned the radio station upside-down looking for commercial tapes and scripts for non-existent advertisers.

Another time, the nighttime announcer typed some fake, but authentic-looking, news stories for the morning man to deliver. The joke worked better than the perpetrator could have ever wished---the first news item was real, but a couple of lines into second story, reading aloud, he began to describe the supposed seizure by the county sheriff of a Volkswagen with a 500-gallon moonshine whiskey--still welded into the glove compartment! At that point, the announcer, realizing he had been duped by an April Fool's joke---and on live radio at that---stopped and said, "John Halbert wrote this---I'm sure of it!!" I wished it *had* been my creation, but I had to give "credit" for the fake story to someone else.

Then there was the April Fool's when the sign-off announcer moved the clock up one hour. When the morning-man arrived and saw the time on the studio clock, he thought he had overslept and signed-on right away, not realizing he was an hour ahead of himself. For the first half-hour, he gave out the wrong times on the air. until someone called wondering why his time-checks were wrong. It was a wonder those pranks didn't get us into trouble with the boss (or the government), as some of the practical jokes we played on each other were truly outrageous, and right out in front of our indulgent listening audience, who, thank goodness, usually played along with our shenanigans with aplomb and good grace.

At the other end of the behavioral spectrum, our station was noted for its very high-quality, original commercials. After concluding his morning show, Jack Voorhies spent most of the rest of his workday creating very funny and clever advertisements that were so good some were syndicated in other markets. It was quite common for listeners to call-in with requests for us to play certain commercials!

* * *

In the spring of 1964, about the time I was getting my start with the White Sox games, the Federal Communications Commission (known as "The FCC," or "The Commission") passed a rule that required all control room operators to be tested and licensed. We were told that the examination, given in Atlanta, was an extremely difficult deal loaded with tough questions about electronics, broadcast station operations and the Commission's Rules.

As the boss allowed me only one day off to take the test, it was obvious that I would have to *fly* to Atlanta and return the same day. On a late-spring Friday morning, I boarded a Southern Airways "DC-3". After all those years of watching those planes land and take off on Sunday afternoons, I was finally flying in one. Settling into an aisle seat near the rear, the first thing I observed was, that, as the airplane was a "tail-dragger", the center aisle rose "uphill". Furthermore, the airplane's cabin was smaller than I had imagined it would be. As we rolled down the runway on takeoff, I felt my seat pitch forward when the tail lifted off the pavement, and in a few more seconds, we were airborne.

As soon as we leveled off, the peripatetic young brunette stewardess bounded out of her seat and bustled about the cabin, continually asking us if we were all right. I got the impression there really wasn't much for her to do, except to be seen by the passengers. As we droned along, I also noticed that we didn't seem to be flying particularly fast. (I later found out that the 1930's-vintage DC-3's were, indeed, slow, compared to most other airliners. Their chief advantage was the fact they had been built in huge numbers---over10,000 in all---and in the mid-'sixties, due to their availability, were still the workhorse of many airlines, including Southern Airways)

Taking the FCC test turned out to be quicker than I had expected it to be, and by mid-afternoon, I was back at the Atlanta Airport. For the return flight, the plane was a bigger,

upright, twin-engine aircraft with a nosewheel---no tail-dragger this time. For this flight, I sat in the rear, next to the window. This airliner seemed to have a lot more speed and power than the older DC-3 had had on the morning flight, and before long we were once again stopping-over at the Huntsville airport. As we taxied up to the terminal, looking out the window, I spotted a line of hefty-looking men at the gate ready to board, each of whom was wearing an expensive-looking suit and holding a briefcase. By the time the three-dozen or so portly men had settled into their seats and their luggage (that included several big steamer-trunk-like cases) thumped into the lower hold, I guessed that the plane had become a great deal heavier. I then watched as clouds of blue-gray smoke shot back past my window when the pilots re-started the twin engines. From the chatter of the newcomers (some of whom had German accents), I concluded they were NASA scientists from the *'Marshall Space Flight Center'* on their way to test a "Saturn" moon-rocket engine somewhere down on the Gulf Coast.

The airliner turned onto the runway and the captain gave the big engines full throttle. As we began our ponderous takeoff roll, we could hear their thunder and feel the vibrations inside the cabin. We rolled . . . and rolled . . . and rolled . . .and . . . rolled. I felt myself tensing as the pavement raced past and the thought crossed my mind, "We're not going to make it!" I saw several of the NASA men grip their armrests with white knuckles, and when one of them made the sign of the cross, I realized for certain this was not an ordinary takeoff run.

Finally, thankfully, I looked out the window and saw the top of a house flash by underneath the plane's wing. With a sigh of relief, I relaxed, along with the others in the cabin who had the same reaction as mine to the harrowing takeoff.

A few minutes later, I looked out the window again, and saw the top of *another* house scoot by just underneath us! We were still only barely above the treetops! My earlier observation that the plane seemed to be overweight must have been correct---why else would we be flying this low? More white knuckles. Just then, the pilot came on the intercom and (tensely, I thought) announced we were going to land in Decatur. After a quick stop to let a half-dozen passengers off the plane, we were again on our way to Muscle Shoals, this time at a more reasonable (and safer) altitude. The pilot told us on the loudspeaker to keep our seat belts fastened, as we were about to fly through a storm. Sure enough, right after the stewardess served Cokes, the plane gave a big lurch---and for a split-second there was the amazing sight of the contents of my paper cup hanging in midair in front of my nose---then the syrupy mass *splashed* into my lap, giving me a good soaking! Before I had a chance to react, all at once, there was a dazzling flash and an earsplitting *BANG!* as a bolt of lightning struck the end of the airplane's wing! Another bolt flashed nearby and the plane rocked madly. The final leg of our flight had turned into a scary, heart-thumping ride. In a few minutes, thankfully, we flew out of the worst of the storm, and by the time we landed, the weather was pretty much back to normal.

But it was a heckuva way to go about getting that FCC license.

* * *

One evening not long afterward, Jerry and I were in the control room when there was a knock at the front door. Standing on the porch was an angular, middle-aged man who flashed a very official-looking badge and identified himself as the FCC's Chief Inspector for the whole Southeastern United States! In a stentorian voice he told us it was not an "official," un-announced inspection (For which the FCC inspectors were notorious), but by an incredible coincidence, as it turned out, his mother lived right next door to the station! He added he was in

town to visit her, as she was elderly, and merely wanted to drop by and pay us a "friendly" visit. For us, such a development was about the same as would have been a "friendly" visit to our homes by the Chief Inspector for the Internal Revenue Service! Even though his position gave him almost unlimited authority to do practically anything he wanted to do to us, but, true to his word, he was cordial, didn't look at our paperwork or anything else, and after a short stay he was still smiling as he left us, although Jerry and I were both nervous wrecks.

* * *

Sunday mornings featured a parade of preachers, gospel disc jockeys and church services, all of whom paid the station to appear on the air. As all I had to do was to update the program and transmitter logs and make sure we were on the air, it was a convenient time to read the Sunday papers and otherwise hang around doing little of importance while one after the other of the programs ran on.

One of the pay-to-play disc jockey's theme songs was a worn-out record he played at the start and at the finish of his program. Even though I volunteered many times to tape his record, for some reason he always preferred to spin his grating, scratchy '45, even though the grooves were just about worn away.

Another of the programs opened with a minister proudly proclaiming, "For The Next Thirty Minutes---It's The Methodist Men's Hour!" When I reminded him that an hour was actually *sixty* minutes instead of thirty, he explained that, although the program had originally been an hour long, when it was shortened to half of that, they had liked so much the way "The Methodist Men's Hour" had sounded, they kept the title, although, to me, it sounded *really* strange to hear---week after week---the program begin with, "For the Next Thirty Minutes---it's . . ."

A trio of preachers had a live half-hour Sunday-morning program that featured what would later be called "Charismatic" services. They arrived an hour before airtime in a caravan of colossal Cadillacs and spent most of that hour laughingly opening their mail and counting the money that listeners had sent them during the previous week. When they had divided the "offerings" among themselves, they set up their musical instruments in the studio. After a rousing service, they made their weekly plea for money. The pitch invariably involved a "revelation" that "offerings" from the listeners were slow; that the station was raising the charges for them to be on the radio; that they didn't know if they would be able to stay on the air much longer and the only way they could continue their broadcasts was for people to dig down deeply into their pockets and mail their "offerings" to them, in care of the station. Even as I would observe their Cadillacs parked outside, every week, the preachers pushed the same imploring plea for money that went on for years, to the tune of untold tens of thousands of dollars---a lot of dough in those days, particularly considering that one of those mid-'sixties Cadillacs cost about six-thousand dollars. (Today, a comparable new Cadillac would have a sticker-price of about sixty-thousand dollars.)

* * *

An oasis of culture was the weekly broadcast of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. We taped the performance during the live preachers's programs and replayed it Sunday evenings. The broadcasts were part of a long-running series that CBS Radio had carried ever since the late-1920's, and which, by the late-'sixties, numbered into the thousands of continuous

broadcasts. "From Temple Square . . . in Salt Lake City, Utah---" the announcer intoned, ". . . The Crossroads of the West---" The Mormon Tabernacle broadcasts were works of art by the renowned musical organization. (Years later, while visiting in Salt Lake City, I had the opportunity to attend several of their Sunday morning live broadcasts---very impressive.)

* * *

One day in early-August, 1964, while waiting for a daytime White Sox game to begin, as I was talking with one of the other announcers in "Studio A," the sound-proofed room we used for live broadcasts (such as the preachers), a secretary knocked on the picture window that faced the hallway and motioned at us. Wondering what was happening, I opened the door and started to ask a question but she shut me off. "They want you in the control room, quick!" the girl burst out.

Mystified, we stepped into the master control room where the operator on duty pointed at the loudspeaker on the wall. "Listen!" he said, and turned up the studio volume. "What do you make of this?" The three of us cocked our ears and listened. A special news report was coming down the CBS Radio Network---there had supposedly been an attack on some U.S. Navy ships in the Tonkin Gulf, off the coast of Vietnam.

"*Tonkin Gulf?*" What . . . where . . . was Tonkin Gulf? For that matter, *Where was "Vietnam"?*

The unsettling broadcast went on. President Johnson came on the air from the White House and declared that aggression against American naval ships would face a reply in kind, and that he would seek a resolution in Congress to increase United States military protection of South Vietnam against a Communist threat.

"Vietnam!" There was that word, again!

As soon as the President finished his address, we pored over an Atlas in the office, trying to find out where this place called "Vietnam" was. We finally found it on the southeast tip of the Asian Continent. I had an uncomfortable feeling that we would soon be hearing a lot about Vietnam. Little did we know that that day would later be recognized as the starting point of a war that would become the longest in U.S. history.

But for now, at least *I* didn't have to worry about any war in Southeast Asia---after all, I had my "Selective Service" student deferment! Getting drafted was the among least of my worries.

* * *

The next day, at Florence State, Vietnam was the hot topic with the summertime crowd around the table in the Student Union Snack Bar. Over Cokes, we decided that a war over there probably wouldn't affect any of us unless it dragged-on for a long time, and nobody could see that happening. One of the girls laughingly suggested it would be a good chance for us to "put all that military stuff you get at ROTC to practical use." The guys glared at her and she mumbled an embarrassed apology.

Indeed, there *was* something about the "Tonkin Gulf Incident", as it came to be known, that seemed to put us all on edge. ROTC assumed a new importance. Even though our lives and routines continued much as before, this was a new and important development. How long would it take for the happenings in Southeast Asia to affect us here in Florence, Alabama? As it turned out, we would soon learn forcefully enough.

In My second year at Florence State, ROTC picked right up where it had left off, and as our training progressed, we underclassmen were in close proximity to those in Advanced ROTC. Upperclassmen in the Advanced Course took their training seriously, as the Army paid for their tuition and books as well as providing a spending allowance---all leading at graduation to a commission as a Second Lieutenant in the U.S. Army. Lots of gung-ho stuff, but serious, too---especially when considering what was in store for some of them.

* * *

One day, one of the regulars at the Student Union Snack Bar table introduced us to a slightly-built young Oriental student from Laos, a country in Southeast Asia, that, at the time, was heavily involved in the conflict. His first name was "Bounmy"---we called him "Boomy." He said his family had sent him to the 'States in order to get him as far as possible from the warfare that was starting to rage in his country.

Over the next semester, as we talked with him around the table, he told us of the problems his country was having with the invasion from North Vietnam. He said he feared for his relatives' safety, as he came from a leading Laotian family. Bounmy described how marauding Communist soldiers were always searching for his family and his friends in order to rob, torture and kill them.

After the next school year was over, Bounmy returned to Laos and we never saw him again. But I often wondered what became of him and his relatives---especially in light of the terrible fighting that later took place in and around the area where they lived.

* * *

War concerns aside, for the most part, things were definitely looking up for me. My grades, while not getting me invited to the White House for intellectual awards, were good enough. I had an interesting radio job, and with some money I had saved, I decided to do something I had wanted to do all my life: take flying lessons.