

## Tune In Tonight “*Stories From Grandpa*”

### Introduction

Every life is a book worth reading, with stories longing to be told. These memoirs should prove to be an adventure worth exploring, recalling many old friends who once came into your own living room nightly. An intriguing and, at times, bizarre tale of life, family, faith and a career in local television.

There is something here for everyone. Those who want to reminisce and get a backstage pass shine a light behind the curtains on television's golden era,, they will find it here. Those friends and family members who would enjoy sharing the humor reflected in the struggles of success and failures in an uncommon career, they too will find that within these pages. Those who, for whatever reason, question how does that peculiar guy survive so long in this business? There's plenty for you too, with no attempt to change your opinion. Although, even my critics will have to admit, that these lifelong exploits have made for some pretty interesting times and travels, full of unique experiences.

One of the first practices taught at the University of Kansas, William Allen White School of Journalism is for writers to answer the 5 W's - Who, what, where, when and why. The chapters that follow will answer these questions and more.

- 1) **Who** were we watching when I was squeezed between Barbara Walters and Diane Sawyer for an hour in the dark?
- 2) **What** did I do that upset Heavy Weight Champion Mike Tyson so much?
- 3) **Where** was I with a little known Shania Twain, who was trying to start her career on our local morning TV show?
- 4) **When** was I assigned to be a Security Guard for Oprah Winfrey?
- 5) **Why** was a sweaty shirtless Michael Jordan on his knees letting my dog lick his face and bare chest?

Television news and entertainment is a non-stop, around the clock endeavor, always in search of an audience, waiting and hoping for the time when you will want or need them and tune in. An industry invited to arrive freely into every home. A routine family experience, shared by the average household, for better or worse, for approximately seven hours per day.

The book ***Three Blind Mice: How The TV Networks Lost Their Way*** was published in 1992. If in fact the major networks were at the time struggling to keep their original purpose and direction, they have since further strayed from being the once trusted standard bearer of truth and reliability, and lost not only their moral compass and much of their audience.

The Big 3 networks of my 1960s childhood, in an effort to not lose audience to new competitors, moved away from their core principles and viewers. Blown by whatever prevailing winds of the political spectrum, advertisers, activist organizations and billionaires, in an attempt to manipulate public opinion and from the wings offstage direct an intentional presentation with their desired outcomes. Efforts made to greatly influence the content of news and entertainment into each home to persuade the public views.

The confidence our nation once had when hearing Walter Cronkite's voice, (who was born in St. Joseph, Mo.) in his nightly sign-off, "And that's the way it is," left us all comforted, knowing that's was in fact the way it was, for Walter could be trusted. Today that confidence too often seems to be buried along with Cronkite, in Kansas City's Mount Moriah Cemetery. A cemetery located across the street from where my elementary school once stood. As one viewer once called and complained, a more accurate network news sign-off today would be: "That's the way we want you to think it is, believe us, vote how we say, now Good Night."

Entertainment programs, once a safe home to traditional family values, increasingly became written with subtle and not so subtle, agendas of the chosen "progressive" social issues of the day, that Andy Griffith would have never allowed in *Mayberry*. The networks of my 1960s childhood, in a misguided effort to maintain there previous dominance, attempted to adapt through the years to be more like the new competitors, including cable tv, tabloid news and social media to push the accepted proper boundaries of decency to where there parents knew not to go. Political activists began to sit behind desks and pretend to be journalists without any training, other than parroting the views of their chosen political party. Once Barbara Walters left *The View*, gone too was their only journalist, now they were free to employ former entertainers to deliver their chosen singular perspective.

A profession founded on journalistic news integrity and "*Happy Days*," entertainment values, increasingly became divisive long arms of political parties, while putting on a mask of unquestionable truth and a future, "unburdened by the past." The "Wonderful World of Disney," has become too old fashioned for this perceived enlightened generation. We can't have outdated shows like that on prime time television. Snow White needs to be more woke. What could go wrong with that. Even if it fails at the box office from rejection by the public. Walt Disney and Mickey would both be embarrassed by what has become of this once reliable family company, that also owns ABC. Leadership matters, and the media companies of the world, including Hollywood, is in need of looking "*Back to the Future*."

At the local level, most TV newsrooms, in cities across the country, can still be, for the most part, a trusted source to provide accuracy, in fact-based presentations, for public evaluation, for the good of the community. Even so, it is common to see a local story that you see there is another side to that story that isn't being represented transparently.

There may be no better example of how the national networks have let their political activism lead their entertainment program decisions as evidenced by late night comedy shows. The nation's daily anticipation of ending the day with Johnny Carson, Ed McMahon and Doc Severson engaging in humorous banter with legendary guests, has been replaced with the daily political party talking points. Carson himself once warned, "When a comic becomes enamored with their own views and foists them upon the public, they lose not only their sense of humor, but their value as a humorist."

For TV employees to survive and advance in what many would call, this once noble profession, they learn that in TV news and management, you've entered a real-life version of *The Hunger Games*. Better yet, "You are about to enter into another dimension, not only of sight and sound, but of mind. A journey into the wondrous land of imagination. Next stop, "*The Twilight Zone*."

In this parallel universe, whether in front or behind the cameras, this game is played with a set of unpublished rules. Advancement, most likely will require entering into the nomadic life of a broadcasting gypsy. I had hoped for an occupation that would be interesting and exciting, and it was. Credentials to enter and advance in this broadcasting maze are earned with the willingness to start at the bottom, which I definitely fulfilled. Moving forward requires a passing

grade earned with the consent to relocate as needed from coast to coast. This too, I am my family completed more time than I'd choose to relive.

Ultimately, my goal was to lead a team to serve and help make a local community better, and I did my best. Warren Buffett's advice for a life well lived to the young is: "Write the obituary you would like, then figure out how to live up to it." Speaking of Warren Buffett, I did have a photo opportunity with him, when a furniture company Berkshire Hathaway owns opened a store in Las Vegas. What a genuinely pleasant gentleman. My wife, Linda, took my photo with Buffett, who upon meeting asked, "How would you like us to pose," I responded, "Well, I'd like a picture of you handing me your wallet." The jovial Buffett said, "That sounds great, I've never done that before. Let's do that."

Pursuing broadcasting opportunities, in reality, was a much more arduous climb than I ever expected. Demanding, not only for me, but for my family. Abrupt, unanticipated, continuous life transitions. Moving your family to a new town, new schools, new church, new barber, new neighbors, new co-workers. If this happens a few times in a lifetime, it is a challenge. Now imagine the personal sacrifices placed on my wife Linda and our son, Travis, after well over 40 years and double-digit unplanned relocations. Their sacrifice cannot be overstated. This career is a family commitment, whether you ever intended it to be or not. You and your family pay a heavy price. In local television management, this is what is expected.

From college graduation to retirement, the cities and moves required read like a really bad travel itinerary: Garden City, Ks., St. Joseph, Mo., Kansas City, North Carolina, California, Wichita, Cincinnati, Las Vegas, Kansas City again, Michigan, and back to Wichita to end at the very station I began with in Wichita and Garden City, Ks.

In 1979, following working several disc jockey positions, I began my TV station career, at KGLD-TV who at the time had 13 employees. Shortly after leaving KGLD, the station was automated and run out of Wichita, 218 miles away. There has been no employees working at that Garden City station since. My responsibility at that station was to shoot news and commercials on 16mm film and process the film in time for the evening newscast, and then produce, edit and voice commercials as well.

A comparable nomadic career course would be in the military, where you go where you are told, or a college coach moving from school to school, if they have continued success. If there isn't a quick turnaround from where the team was, you are replaced and you take a step back, while most grow weary of that grind and quit to do something more stable.

There is no shortage of opinions shared with you from those wanting to tell that coach what they are doing wrong and could do different to improve their team and programs. Most don't realize that you have no say in what the network on your station does. You best learn to politely accept the outside views and do what you feel is right, where you can. Better to fail following your own vision than zig zagging aimlessly to winds of public opinions.

In addition to the frequent moves, one should expect constant headwinds from members of the press, hoping to break a story at your expense. Constant viewer complaints, each with their own news coverage and programming plans, and competitors trying to make you fail and looking for reasons, co-workers who don't want any boss, all emboldened with the world of social media. From supporters to saboteurs your own determination, patience and anger management will be put to the test. Human nature at its best and worst is on full display in the local broadcast stations across the country. Those vast critics with opinions of what you should be doing differently, increase exponentially with each step up the career ladder.

More than once, whether from ownership change or business politics, I found myself, out of work and feeling, for a time, like I had been kicked to the curb, in a city where our family didn't necessarily want to be. You learn to appreciate those who celebrate your successes and encourage you through your failures, as your true friends. Those who contribute to casting the constant shade or take silent pleasure in your defeats, you wish them the best. Cliches and quotes often reveal profound truth. "Stay on the high road, it's far less crowded," and "You either get bitter or you get better," are two of my favorites. It was Zig Ziglar who pointed out, "They've never erected a statue yet for a critic." And it was Winston Churchill who said, "Success is going from failure to failure without the loss of enthusiasm." Quotes often have profound meaning.

This life is only the practice game for our eternal life that waits ahead. We've all been blessed and we all have been loved more than we realize. We all fall short of any glory to be obtained, on our own. I'm thankful for the joys of others and sympathize with their defeats, as I share mine here. It is not a competition, except with yourself. I believed I had two strikes early in the count through my youth. I knew I didn't put my maximum effort into my schoolwork or in whatever athletic gifts I was given. I didn't want to look back and say my career was strike three.

It won't come as a surprise to some, but I seemed to have my share of critics. The prominent management style of the day was micromanagement through fear and intimidation. I chose to lean into the personality I had and those who inspired me were more positive and empowering. This is what I feel most people appreciate and recognize as a better work environment for skilled individuals. The Midwest proved to be more receptive to this management style. If lasting in a career couldn't be done with that mindset and approach, then I preferred to do something else and remain true to myself. Even so, I was counseled, some people will see kindness as weakness. Let them.

Most people have had some interesting encounters with the famous. At the risk of seeming like a name dropper, I plan to share some of my favorite celebrity meetings, knowing that a brief brush with the famous, is of interest to most people. In almost every instance, it was simply a case that I was at the right place and the right time.

Some of the encounters I'll share include Oprah, Michael Jordan, Mike Tyson and Robin Givens. KC Royals like Ewing Kauffman, Buck O'Neil, and most of the players from the 1980s. K.C. Chiefs like Lamar Hunt, Len Dawson, Joe Montana, and Marcus Allen. Dinner with the likes of Judge Judy and Regis Philbin. Lunch beside Steve Martin. The hour literally rubbing shoulders with Barbara Walters on one side and Diane Sawyer on the other. Hugh Downs, Jerry Springer, Walter Payton, Stevie Wonder, Shania Twain, broadcast executives, the original ladies from The View. Ellen Degeneres, the cast from Friends. Also Presidents, Senators, Congressmen, and a Secretary of State. Enjoyable meetings with a wide array of American icons.

At the risk that some may see these stories as bragging, I relate these events for those who may find them interesting, and for my grandsons. There is no embellishment or need to exaggerate. Including the interactions with the famous, does tend to make for more interesting storytelling. This element of show business is part of what differentiates this industry from the routine and monotonous jobs. So I share these stories, unless one would prefer to spend time reading revenue reports, expense budgets and Nielsen program ratings, which consumed much of the days.

Through college I worked six nights a week at Shenanigans Disco in Lawrence Ks., and that is still one of my favorite positions I held. To take advantage of the disco craze, this new, dynamic, and even elegant college student night club opened in the Fall of 1976 in Lawrence,

and I, along with Bill Pfeifer, was the club DJ. I had little prior experience, other than some time at the KU student radio station KJHK, where fellow 1979 Journalism Graduate, Steve Doocy, now on Fox and Friends, gave me a brief overview of the antiquated facility. After that you were on your own, in a room by yourself, playing records, wondering if anyone was listening. But Shenanigans, that was an entirely different nightly experience.

The Shenanigans nights are deserving of their own chapter, and I really enjoyed reliving those nights as I wrote the Shenanigans in Lawrence chapter. Bill joined me at Shenanigans shortly after we opened, and he and I had a good time leading the party each evening, while unknowingly, and never confirmed, we were working for the Kansas City Mob. More on that later. Disco was a short lived phenomenon which coincided exactly with my years at KU. There was a nightly student celebration of dance and music that occurred at Shenanigans, and it was a blessing to be able to lead it. It was however difficult to date when you are working six nights a week.

I was willing to start my post-college career at the bottom, filming news and commercials with a 16mm camera that weighed about 50 pounds and a large wooden tripod that weighed equally as much, was a Garden City, Kansas grind, but I was in TV. The film had to be back at the station at 3pm and processed in our station darkroom, then spliced and edited to be ready for broadcast that evening. The job was remote and paid minimum wage, about 25% of what I was making as a disco disc jockey. Starting a career in this role, in a small Western Kansas town, was the bottom of the broadcast industry, and where I began my TV experiences.

I married Linda, the Business Manager at KQTV in St. Joseph, where I got my first job in Advertising Sales. She walked into my office, shortly after I started, in a beautiful green slit dress, wearing white pearls and white high heels, that clicked on the linoleum as she came down the hall. She was stunning. She came in and sat on my desk and said, "Take out your calendar." So I did. Then she said, "Now you pick a date and put me down for the day." She sold me, and I did as she said. She's been telling me what to do ever since, and I'm thankful for that. Well, most of the time.

I enjoyed working for five years in the 80s for WDAF-TV in Kansas City, along with our sister radio stations 61 Country and KY102. The radio stations had an outdoor keg party every Friday afternoon at 4pm. The end of the week was always something to look forward to thanks to the radio stations that were there to insure Signal Hill was the place to start your weekend. The TV guys weren't officially suppose to go, but no one ever said we had to leave.

WDAF-TV reporter, Gayle King, and I worked together at the station in KC. She of course hosts the CBS Morning Show these days. She wouldn't remember me by name today, but I'm sure she remembers the guy who she would consistently see every day at 9:15 a.m., like clockwork, on her way to the restroom, so much we had a laugh daily about our synchronized routines. I'd go each day at 9:15 if only to make her laugh. Through Gayle King, I was asked to serve as a bodyguard for her friend, the first ever female talk show host, who was coming to Kansas City as part of the promotional tour to launch The *"Oprah Winfrey Show."*

At WDAF-TV at the time, we were the flagship station for the Kansas City Royals, where we televised and sold the games which were distributed to 17 broadcast cities across the Midwest. I was fortunate to handle the Royals account for the station and ultimately became a Royal Lancer Ambassador. A non-payd position, while still at WDAF for my day job. The benefit was you received two season tickets and a trip to Spring Training for you and your wife, with the team if you met your season ticket sales goals. Working for the Royals was especially exciting during the 1985 World Series, and also with the arrival of Bo Jackson. I'd stop by the stadium on the way home frequently just to watch Bo Jackson take batting practice. In

addition, Rush Limbaugh was the Promotion Director for the Royals, around that time, before he then went to some other career, or so I heard.

Then came the needed moves for management experience to North Carolina, California, Wichita, Cincinnati, Las Vegas, Kansas City, Michigan and finally returning to the same NBC station for Wichita and Garden city where I began my career out of college. That is what you call full-circle. Counting my college disc jockey experience, I've now reached 50 years in broadcasting, with relocations, occurring on average, every 4 years.

So here we are, 50 years since graduating high school and following a dream of being in the media. I want to share my most interesting experiences and life lessons, and offer them to my family and friends who might find this journey interesting. My primary motivation for writing this book is a "Love Letter" for my grandsons. They are still young enough that they think grandpa and grandma are somewhat fun. Well, at least we don't embarrass them too much yet. Someday, I hope they will read these stories intended for them, and learn from my mistakes and values I picked up along the way. In reality, we do everything for them.

This career required a concentrated dose of fortitude and perseverance to walk a path that is clearly in the world, while staying true to your beliefs and convictions. I discovered you won't find perfection in this fallen world, but if you endeavor to represent and further the Christian faith; to be in the world but not of it, you will be left with a certain level of pride, knowing that you did your best to run the good race and fight the good fight. If you believe this world has always been in shrouded spiritual warfare, that is now reaching culmination, as do I, then undeniably, a career in broadcast television is choosing a life on the frontlines of the battle.