

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Radio Broadcasting Project

Disc Jockey Experience

O. H. 254

RALPH BELL

Interviewed

by

James Manross

on

November 24, 1975

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: RALPH BELL

INTERVIEWER: James Manross

SUBJECT: Radio Broadcasting, Early days of radio, program format

DATE: November 24, 1975

M: This is James Manross of the Oral History Program. The date is November 24, 1975. Today we are interviewing famous Youngstown radio personality Boots Bell.

Mr. Bell, what is your family background?

B: My family background?

M: Yes.

B: Oh, I think we are typically Americans. Dad was born in Europe and mom was born on a reservation. I think that makes us about as American as anybody. That's really about the only thing I can give you. We're as mongrelized as we can be. Dad was born in France and mom was a full-blooded Cree Indian. What's your next one then?

M: Where were you born?

B: I was born in Northern Michigan, Mackinac Island, which is as close to Canada as you can get without actually being a Canadian. As a matter of fact, I had my choice of citizenships because at that time anyone who was half or more Indian and whose reservation background spanned the border had a choice of citizenship.

M: What did your parents do?

B: Dad was a professional gamekeeper for the Michigan State Wildlife Bureau. Eventually he did a lot of other things, but that's what he still considers his trade. He's still

alive. He doesn't do that anymore. He's been retired for years. He was a gamekeeper.

M: Is that the island where they have no cars today?

B: Yes, they have some vehicles on the island now, but they are police cars and things like this. They still use horses. Of course, it is developed now. What else do you have?

M: What was your childhood like?

B: Oh, it was a childhood on an island and in the woods. I was pretty much left to my own resources. I had some playmates, but there was no school on the island as such. What we did was we crossed the ice. We actually went to school in another community. In the winter, you crossed the ice. In what we called warm season, we had boats. It was a back and forth thing. It was a kind of childhood where if you sought for culture you had to find it yourself. We learned to sustain ourselves easily. That was childhood as such. We farmed and trapped and took care of the deer herd. We had a battery-powered radio, I recall. It was a magical thing to a kid from the forest.

M: What were your goals and desires in high school?

B: I can't really recall that they were that solidified. I can remember wanting to be a forest ranger, because it was what daddy did, that kind of thing. But times were different. Things were pretty tough. You didn't set a goal as X or Y. What you normally set a goal as was, "Boy, I hope I get a job and get the hell out of debt and won't have to scramble as much as they did."

M: What did you do after you graduated from high school?

B: Well, after getting out of high school, there was no chance for college for awhile. Most of us got any kind of job we could. Now I started in radio actually when I was eleven or twelve. It was the early days of radio. This didn't mean steady work. What I did was do what everybody else did, I got a job. By this time we had moved to Chicago.

My first job was totally away from anything I've ever done since then. I helped somebody in a sporting goods store, because I knew sporting equipment and guns. It was hunting and fishing equipment actually. It was a buck. I was very happy to do it because it was money.

M: How long did you work in radio when you first got started?

B: Oh, on and off. Radio was what television is. It was made up of individual shows, block programming. I worked for a couple of years on a show on and off. The show was "Let's Pretend," which CBS sustained and regionally carried. Later on it did move to the full network and also started originating from New York steadily. At the time we worked it, it was Chicago and New York alternating. Mrs. Mack wouldn't even have a sponsor for the show, it was that high-classed, a children's operation.

They called you for open auditions when they had a part that might suit you. It was frightening, 200 or 300 people for one job. Of course, \$11.00 when your dad was making \$9.00 a week was good. YOU lived on \$9.00. A dollar was a real dollar. At eleven bucks for a show, the old man was more than happy to have me go down and take a day off work. I gave the money to my mom.

M: Did you eventually go to college then?

B: On and off. Universities, for me, took a long, long, long time. I didn't even get a degree until after the Korean War. I had had a lot of college, but I didn't finish up until then because it was a matter of in and out when you had a chance, and when the job permitted, and when you got out of debt, and when you weren't being called back into another war and this kind of thing. It took awhile.

M: Weren't you an All-American hockey player in college?

B: Yes, I made AA twice, 2nd or 3rd mention, but I made it. Now, this was an awful lot different than it is now. There wasn't as nearly as much competition. First of all, hockey wasn't played except for about eight schools in all of the United States. This was in graduate school as a matter of fact. I had all of my hockey eligibility left because there had been no hockey teams in most of the other schools I went to. We had played hockey since we were kids the way most people in this section play basketball, because we had ice five months out of the year. Yes, I made All-American goaltender twice.

M: What university was this?

B: This was Columbia. This was Columbia's last great Lion's Hockey Team. We took the national championships. Then I co-captained the NCAA hockey teams. Naturally, we didn't have much of a squad considering there were eleven colleges and junior colleges to choose from when Canada had over sixteen just in any one province to choose from, including the bad ones.

M: Did you ever consider trying professional hockey?

B: Well, I was being scouted by the Canadians as a matter of fact. But by this time, the legs were pretty battered because they'd been to war. I was pretty bashed in. We didn't really have much choice, the old legs and me. We retired gracefully. As a matter of fact, I did get two scouting reply letters from the Canadians about a year after I graduated. There was no way the legs would have taken the pounding of the professional season, because they would barely make it through a regular college season without really giving in. I'm talking about a lot of pain and tape and stuff. It was a matter of crippling myself.

M: What prompted you to finally go into radio as a career?

B: I think it was one of these things you fall in to. It wasn't one of these things where you say, "I'll now go into radio forever!" It was a matter of finding out it was what I really liked. This was after I had gotten an engineering degree and a lot of other things. It suddenly dawned on me that it was where I had been making more money . . . and I loved it. There were a great many engineers anyway. Eventually, we were going to have so many that they were going to be out of work, which came to pass. Also, the fact that it's what I did most easily and most equitably with myself. I could live with myself because radio isn't a business for me, it's a mistress. It's a life. It's really the only part of my life that has really been a steady influence because it's something I love. I love broadcasting.

M: What are all the different shows that you acted on?

B: Are you talking about as a child actor now?

M: As both.

B: Oh gee, I'd use your tape up here there were so many. Oh, we did things like--there was an old show called "Grand Central Station" I did. I did some stuff with Edward G. Robinson on radio once or twice, Orson Welles. I can go back as far as some of the early disc jockey shows where I would kind of bounce in and out on major shows as a substitute, never using my own name. You didn't have a name in those days. It was the so and so show and you didn't mention who you were. He was on vacation. The credits could go on and on and on. They wouldn't be valid now because anybody hearing this

tape with the exception of senior citizens who wandered in--my apologies to your instructor or instructors who would be the exception--wouldn't recognize the names of any of the shows.

M: What was it like putting on a radio show back then?

B: Oh, we rehearsed it the way you do a television show now. You went through the series of rehearsals, and a series of auditions. It was closer to theatre than it was to what we know to be radio right now. Let's give you about six more questions and then I have to teach a class, so shoot your best shots, Jimmy.

M: Okay, would you appear in more than one show a day?

B: Oh, certainly. There were times you'd do one at CBS and have to get a taxi very, very quickly from 53rd over to 57th and do a show on NBC and back and forth, especially in the days of the soap operas. It wasn't at all unusual to have cabs waiting and an elevator ready on your floor, captained by a well-tipped operator. Now, this was something that was just done. If you were in a hurry in New York, you didn't take a cab, you walked. That's the way the traffic was. The same was true of Chicago.

There were three origination points: New York, Chicago, and LA [Los Angeles]. Most of the stuff came out of New York, but because of the time differential thing, Chicago was a preferred site for some producers. There was a great, big fund of talent available in Chicago. Guys like William Conrad, who was the first Matt Dillon on "Gunsmoke" on radio in about 1952, I believe. I've got the first show by the way. I collect old radio. Bill Conrad came out of Chicago radio as did Steve Allen and lots of the great ones. Chicago had a great school of radio too. Chicago could do one show for the east coast, then wait an hour and do a second performance that could be picked up by all of the mountain states and all of the west coast. That's how we did it. Recordings couldn't be used. The quality wasn't available; you lost too much fidelity when you "canned" shows.

M: Are there any few actors that were really dear to you that you performed with?

B: Oh, later on, later on. I worked on the old Frank Sinatra tv show. I was a technician. All of us, performers and crew, became very, very close just because he was a really nice person to his technicians. For a big man and for a guy with a lot of clout in the business, he was very, very kind to us. I don't know

about in his personal life or people he hit or anything, because I can only remember that he made sure we had coffee and sandwiches during long rehearsals and things like that. He was one of the people. I still get Christmas cards from him and people like that.

M: When did you start becoming a disc jockey?

B: Well, disc jockeys didn't exist until the 1950's. I got my first disc jockey job in 1953 after the Korean War. I was at Fort Riley and I was still in the service being mustered out for the second time. I had a few months to go and I was working at KJCK in Junction City, which is just a stone's throw down the road from Fort Riley. That's what most people do at Fort Riley, throw stones.

M: What did you enjoy doing more, acting or being an announcer?

B: I enjoyed the acting part more and I still do. Those days were gone. You have to make up your mind that certain phases of your life are gone. Radio had changed-- it had to when tv came in. You have to do what you're going to be able to make a buck at. The disc jockey thing was a new challenge. Nobody knew how to do it.

M: Have there been a lot of changes in the role of a disc jockey?

B: Oh, certainly. We're getting away from personality. They'll be back, they'll be back. Every ten years people discover people in radio and it's a whole new cycle. Right now we're into the machines. If you tune around, you'll hear--this is, that was, the time is, my name is--and bang, back into the record. The more music idea. Well, that's fine as far as it goes. I think you'll find in a few years we'll be right back to where we were and they'll be hiring people who say things, who do things, who mean something, who breathe and walk and make love and belch. They'll be right back. The personality thing really is the biggest in and out thing that radio does.

M: What part of your life was the most satisfying looking back?

B: Oh gosh, Jim, I don't know. I live day to day really, and savor every adventure. I really can't answer that to be very honest with you. I can think of times when there was an awful lot of influence. I can remember a few years ago as an example, there were two beautiful

young kids. He was an on-the-road trucker. She was a girl who had had some terrible bad luck, a bad marriage, and some other things, and ended up in Youngstown, stranded. Her baby had died and her husband had deserted her. It sounds like a soap opera. One Christmas morning I was on the air and she called me. She said, "You're the only friendly voice I can get ahold of. Let's talk." I talked to her between records. I said, "Look, I have a radio show to do. I'll call you back or you call me." I live alone. I don't keep Christmas. My children aren't with me ever, so I knew where she was coming from. I talked to her for awhile on the phone afterwards. We talked on the phone on and off. She'd occasionally write a letter to her only friend in Youngstown--me! Come spring this girl who I had nicknamed "Sloe-Eyed Slim" came out to see me for the first time in person in a place in Mill Creek Park where a great many people happen to know I sit around and grade papers. The same day this over-the-road truck driver showed up. They met each other--last I heard I'd gotten him a pretty fair job in the Carolinas. They moved away. They are happy together. They have a baby, which I held when it was christened. It was a pretty satisfying thing. I became an uncle, great, huh? Every day is good. Any day you're alive is a good one.

M: If you could start it all over again knowing what you know now, would you go through the same thing again?

B: Yes, I would. I'd love to be able to start over. To be very honest with you, it has been a hell of a life. I think I've lived about six guys' lives. I've had six guys' pains in the neck, but also had six guys' fun. I can't think of anything I would really do differently--not to amount to anything. Oh, maybe I'd put all of the stuff in my name so she wouldn't clean me when the divorce came. Except for that, it has been a ball. It really has.

M: You're really satisfied with it?

B: Oh, you've got to be satisfied Jim. What the hell can you really change? You know, when you're crying, you're wasting time. Some of us don't have a lot left. No, I don't believe I would change much.

M: What does the future hold for Boots Bell?

B: I don't know. I would like to get my children through college. I'm due for an appointment here at the universtiy if they ever get that damn T and C building finished and get a roof on it that doesn't turn the first few floors into a swimming pool. If I can cut

it, I'll take it. I'll always be in radio some way. I believe in being in it so that you can teach it equitably. I don't think that if a person wants to teach this particular subject and gets out of it he can be very effective. Oh, there are times if I have a particularly insane day I just want to chuck it all and pick up my rifle and hire out as a mercenary again or something. But it's just the reaction to the rat race. It gets to where the pressure is kind of stupid sometimes. As for the future, I don't look too far ahead. I don't really give a damn to be honest with you, except that it end on an upnote. As long as they're applauding at the end, why, what the hell, that's what we're geared to. Too much security isn't good for guys like me.

M: What is your role in switching from WHOT to WNIO?

B: I'm kind of a station builder, Jim. It's been this way for some time. What I do is go to work for a guy who has a small station that he wants to make a big station, a station that has much more influence. Now, WHOT didn't need my services anymore. They didn't feel they had to pay this much money for a morning man. It was their feeling that they had gotten what they needed from me. They were probably right. There were some things that they wanted to do that I didn't. They wanted to dehumanize their broadcast, I felt. My opinion now. They're making a great deal of money and have a big audience, so I could be totally wrong. There were things they wanted to do that I didn't want to do, including wanting to program from the front office. Nobody on the air is picking his own music to amount to anything at that station just now. I have no ill will about this.

At the same time, there were things that I wanted to do that the bosses didn't want; it was getting a little personal. We finally just agreed by handshake to say goodbye--no hassles--like gentlemen. We're still very friendly. I still cut recordings that are on their station as far as the commercials go.

At the same time, the guy at WNIO knew my contract was up. He called and said, "I can't pay you as much. I will eventually. You did it for them, can you do it for me? I'm country." I said, "Yes, I can cut it. I'm a pro. I can cut anything you've got." I went to work for WNIO. It's in Niles, but that doesn't

matter. WHOT's call is actually licensed to Campbell. It's start all over again and build a man a station. Besides, I get to do a lot more of what I want to do. I get to write a lot of commercials for them . . . for extra loot. I hasten to add. It's a good gig. The ratings are way up . . . and I love country audiences too.

You ask one question. pick one good question to close this, because I have to go and teach my kids.

M: Do you think if you went back into acting today you could do it?

B: Oh, the radio acting, yes. I still do an occasional shot for some charity thing or other. There is no longer a market for radio actors as there was. The question is academic. On the stage, no, not on these three legs. But, that's looking backwards. That's "If." It's "What if I'd done something else instead of gone off to war? Would I now be the Bobby Hull of the AHL or the HCU? Would I be playing hockey for Houston?" You know, who knows? I don't think about it much.

Yes, I can still cut it. I can do everything I've done on the air in the past, except children's voices, and probably do it better.

M: If you could summarize your life in one sentence with everything you've done, how would you do it?

B: I've made a couple of mistakes. I enjoyed it so much that I wouldn't change an awful lot, though. I've had so damned much fun that all I can say is it has probably been worth most of the tears. The only guy who is poor is the guy who hasn't taken some chances. I took them and it has been great. That's about it really. Thank you.

M: This has been Boots Bell: disc jockey, actor, war veteran, hockey player, and just about everything you can name. Thank you Mr. Bell.

END OF INTERVIEW