

DON WIER

Interview 169A

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Jonathan Gerland, Interviewer

Patsy Colbert, Transcriber

ABSTRACT: In this interview with Jonathan Gerland, Don Wier recalls the early days of Diboll's KSPL radio station. Mr. Wier worked at the station from its beginnings in 1957 until 1960, when he left to pursue a career in the insurance business. He talks about the music he played, the station's schedule and his differences with Arthur Temple, Jr. concerning music choices. Mr. Wier had the first, and for a while, the only afternoon request show that featured the popular music favored by Deep East Texas' teenagers and young people, and eventually Mr. Temple let him play that music during that show if he played the music he preferred for the rest of the day. He mentions Tommy Ward Lanyon, Delores Camp, Owen McMullen, and Ruth Ruby.

Jonathan Gerland (hereafter JG): Today's date is Wednesday April 25, 2007. My name is Jonathan Gerland. We are here at The History Center in Diboll, and I'm going to interview Mr. Don Wier. That is spelled W-I-E-R. And we are going to talk today about KSPL radio station. Mr. Wier if you could just start with telling where and where you were born?

Don Weir (hereafter DW): Born in Austin, but moved to Lufkin after six weeks. And then at 18 months my father was killed and I lived in Groveton with my grandparents.

JG: What did your father do?

DW: Well he was a CCC worker and a prize fighter. He was really young when he got killed so he never got really started on a career.

JG: Okay. How did you come to be involved with KSPL radio? I know there is a lot connected with that, but just how did you come there?

DW: In junior high in Lufkin, I was introduced to speech, by Tom Jack Lucas, the speech teacher who affected many people. Mr. Lucas saw in me something that no one else had seen and that was the ability to express myself I guess. And when I went to Brazosport high school in Freeport, I was moderately successful in state finals and debate and extemporaneous speech and drama. And the local radio station there came to the high school to select a kid to do a Sunday afternoon request show. And I won the tryout and was hired. So the last two years in high school I was an announcer at the local station.

JG: In Freeport?

DW: In Brazosport.

JG: Brazosport.

DW: And so I, and I stayed in that. That is how I got to college, following radio station jobs.

JG: And then that took you to what college?

DW: Well my first year right out of high school, I went to Stephen F. Austin, and then the second year to Kilgore Jr. College. And came to Diboll at the age of 19 and had two years of college behind me and had worked two stations full time.

JG: Okay, now I think the newspapers had mentioned you worked for a station in Henderson?

DW: Yes, I was with a radio station in Henderson while I went to Kilgore College.

JG: Kilgore College, okay. Was it KRWD?

DW: KWRD.

JG: KWRD, okay. But you had worked for another radio station also?

DW: There were several. I worked for KSFA in Nacogdoches and for the station back in Brazosport, Freeport.

JG: And tell how you came to KSPL? Who hired you, did Mr. Lanyon or Mr. Temple?

DW: Mr. Temple actually hired me and I don't, you know I'm not sure and he's not either, whether he heard me or heard about me. But I had a teenage afternoon request show, in Henderson just like the one I had here. The one I brought here. And he either hired me or through my connections with my mother, who has lived in Lufkin for years, heard about me and looked into me and gave me a shot at this.

JG: Okay. Do you remember that first meeting you had with him?

DW: Really didn't have a meeting with him until he walked in the station one day and let me know he was the boss and didn't like my music. (laughter)

JG: Oh, okay. So if you can, just describe, I mentioned Mr. Lanyon, and I believe that is Tommy Ward Lanyon, can you tell a little bit about him? What was his...

DW: He was a piece of work. He was Mrs. Davis's son-in-law.

JG: That would be Byrd Davis?

DW: Byrd Davis's son-in-law. And he was a California theater type and he was a cut different from those of us here in East Texas. However, I think he probably did a good job as manager of the radio station. I was sort of Program Director and afternoon personality. And we had a real love-hate relationship. And I think probably though he did a good job.

JG: Okay.

DW: Dee Dee Groom, or Delores Camp as she was then, and I were his staff. Dee Dee really ran things and I was kind of the voice on the air.

JG: And that was pretty much the radio station in those early days?

DW: Just about, that was in '57 when we signed the station on fifty years ago, believe it or not. Shortly after then Owen McMullen came aboard. He had been, was a teacher here and we brought him in part time and he wound up doing this full time, subsequently retired in Bryan doing the same thing for a TV station. And Ruth Ruby came as assistant manager and we had a long and fine relationship with her. She did a good job as did Dee Dee.

JG: And you mentioned Mr. Temple not liking the type of music that you may have played. Explain, what type of music did you play? From some stuff I read, it looks like you played kind of popular music at the time.

DW: I did. Mr. Temple built KSPL because there wasn't a station in this area that played the kind of music he personally wanted to see so, hear, so he built a station. Most of the stations here carried gospel or country and western or the spoken network stations. And he wanted his own station and he wanted it to play the kind of music he wanted to hear. But...

JG: But he didn't tell you. (laughter)

DW: Well, I had an afternoon show that he stayed clear of. The reason that I was able to keep the show on the air was Buddy and Chotsy, because he would threaten to take Wier off the air, or take this program off the air, not me personally. I think he always realized he was getting his money's worth with me. And Buddy and Chotsy would just raise hell, and say, "No you're not going to do that." So he would agree to leave the station alone for the time I was on and listen to other stations, or not listen.

JG: Excuse me just one moment. I need to stop the tape.

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JG: Okay we were talking about the types of music.

DW: Buddy has told me, on occasion, that after school all the kids would gather up, pull their cars around a tree, turn on KSPL and listen to the music. And I got, this was before television remember, or in the early years of television, KTRE had signed on in '55 and had a limited program. If you didn't want to watch, you watched about two channels and the music they played was Hank Huggins, which was either gospel or country.

[TAPE STOPPED DUE TO CELL PHONE RINGING]

[TAPE RESTARTED]

DW: In fact there was only one channel, channel 9. And all the music was Hank and the music was either gospel or country. I came to East Texas with music the youngsters wanted to hear. And was either popular or the first of rock and roll. The only places the kids around here could hear rock and roll, was either from Randy's Record Rack out of Nashville Tennessee, or a station out of Shreveport. And those signals weren't always good. So they really responded aggressively to having their own station and a disc jockey essentially their own age, because I was only about 19. I was 19. And most of them were 15 and older. And in the rural areas around here, I was the only teenage type personality they could relate to. And I would get 25 to 30 letters a week requesting songs. And I would go to the area high schools and MC sock hops and that sort of thing. We had a big time.

JG: Okay, and you played people like the Platters and...?

DW: Oh yes, started out with all the great songs of the mid 50's. The Platters and then moved into the Everley Brothers and Buddy Holley and of course Elvis. One of my friends, Connie Estes, laughs that I brought sin to East Texas because I brought Elvis's music in. (laughter)

JG: So approximately how long then, you mentioned this afternoon radio show where you played, if I heard you right, more the popular music, the pop music.

DW: That is all I did play.

JG: How long did that go on? Or let me back up, what did you play the other times of the day?

DW: Well I played, we had a gospel segment in the early afternoon and then we, the rest of the day we played older popular music. I played a lot of Sinatra, who is my favorite singer. I played a lot of Frank Sinatra and a lot of, played a lot of good orchestral stuff. And it was an easy music station. Mr. Temple was also ahead of his time with regards to his opinion of FM. He had an FM station that broadcast Musak, which was the pre-cursor to FM, or elevator music. But mostly I played upbeat stuff that was, the adults liked. And

I was always very careful to not play the kids, the rock and roll stuff at a time other than during my show because I'd get a phone call.

JG: Of course the stations signed on the air for the first time on Sunday, June 2, 1957. And I think the newspaper said that once it got into a regular routine, it would be from sunrise to sunset.

DW: Yes that was our license. We were authorized to, as a 500-watt daytime only station, we signed on at 5:30 in the morning and closed at sunset. And that was pretty early sometime and late in the summer time.

JG: Now what was your work schedule?

DW: Well I signed on the radio station at 5:30 in the morning and worked until 7:00. And then I raced to SFA and went to school from 8:00 until 12:00. And then I worked from 1:00 until 7:00 at night when we closed.

JG: Okay. What, while you were gone to class, what did, who, did Mr. Lanyon...?

DW: Tommy Ward.

JG: ...Tommy Ward Lanyon.

DW: Yes, Mr. Lanyon worked and always would keep at least one other announcer.

JG: What did they play music during then or was it news, talk?

DW: Yes music and news, some talk but mostly music. It was mostly a music station.

JG: How did you get your news?

DW: Uh, the Associated Press Wire. Now the morning we signed on, I went by the Pine Bough, as was my custom. And the Lufkin News had a front page story on it which I think was written by Rick Fesgerd who worked for the news at the time, about the unfortunate and tragic death of three young children, youngsters, the night before. And I opened KSPL with that story. I had just read it out of the Lufkin news. And I'll never forget.

JG: And you were 19 years old.

DW: Yes. And I will never forget saying, "This is the first broadcast of KSPL and our first news story is a real tragedy." And it was.

JG: Tell me about, cause I've heard stories too about Mr. Temple's taste in music, talking about Arthur Temple, Jr. of course. And stories about a young DJ, who he came in

one night and said “You like that song you just played a while ago.” And he said, “Yes sir.” He said, “Good, you take it home tonight.”

DW: Yes, he would do things like that. But he would always promise me that he would leave me alone if I would do what he said the rest of the day.

JG: Okay. Can you describe any more, some of those early days. You know you signed on in '57. I think we kind of covered a little bit the routine of the day. Did you work week ends as well?

DW: Yes, when you work at a small radio station that is understaffed to begin with, and when you work with Mr. Temple secondly, you work a lot.

JG: So did you work seven days a week?

DW: It never hurt me. No there would, I think in the beginning Erwin McMullen worked weekends. I think later Bobby Ramsey did. And that is how he got his introduction into radio and he subsequently stayed in it and is about to retire as head of Department of Communications at SFA, so Bobby stayed in it. Ulman stayed in it, others did. I chose not to at a young age.

JG: When did you leave the station?

DW: In 1960 I left the radio station full time. I still worked weekends at KTRE in Lufkin while I began my life insurance career.

JG: What did KRBA play? You were talking about the type of music you played in the afternoon was more of the teenage and young adult music, was new.

DW: KRBA played the same kind of stuff we did except more country and gospel. Then they went to an afternoon teenage request show and...

JG: But KSPL was first?

DW: Yes, and I was head up with Ray Driver in Nacogdoches later, who was a good disc jockey with Ken Carter who was a disc jockey for KRBA opposite me. And with Hub Trevathan who was as well.

JG: Now the radio station was here in Diboll just south of town.

DW: Yes.

JG: And I think you mentioned it was, I think a 1,000 watts, is that right when it first came out.

DW: It might have been.

JG: And I'm assuming Buddy and Chotsy at the time were living in Lufkin.

DW: They were in high school, living in Lufkin.

JG: So you could pick the radio station up pretty much all the time in Lufkin with the 1,000 watts?

DW: Yes, yes, pick it up well. It broadcast well as far away as...I had a lot of listeners in Corrigan, Groveton, Chester, Camden, Lufkin, that area.

JG: Okay, so I'm admitting my ignorance here, but I guess Corrigan didn't have a radio station at that time.

DW: No.

JG: Did Livingston?

DW: Livingston had a little station that was run by a mom and pop. And they didn't play the kind of music the young people wanted to hear.

JG: What about Nacogdoches?

DW: Nacogdoches started when Ray Driver started at KEEE. They got with it and came on and promoted him.

JG: And that was after KSPL or before?

DW: I think after, I really, I think we were the first station to really get with a show designed to play the currently popular.

JG: Well I was just thinking with SFA with the college, you know there would certainly be an audience.

DW: Yes, I had worked at KSFA my freshman year at SFA and we didn't have any kind of request show there then. And I had this show in Henderson KWRD and came here with it.

JG: Okay. Anything else, any particular stories that come to mind while you were there?

DW: We worked a lot of hours, worked hard, we had a good time. We had great audiences. We had people who, John Hannah and Claude Welch would call from Huntsville where they were in school and request songs. They would call collect knowing that Mr. Temple was going to raise hell with me, and I'd accept the call.

JG: Now, could they get the station in Huntsville?

DW: On the way, they could get it on the way home or on the way back and they'd...

JG: So they would request something to be played at a certain time.

DW: Wait till they got there, or to somebody back here. All the Diboll people who have always been really good to me, I first met when I was at that radio station. Stayed here after leaving the radio station in '60 and went in the life insurance business and stayed until '70 and then left. Had four sons here and came here, literally hitch hiked into Diboll to work the shift and work for \$75 a week for Mr. Temple and left here on the way to financial success. And thanks to how I was accepted and appreciated and promoted and loved in Diboll.

JG: Okay, all right.

DW: This is where I met some of the people whose friendships have remained the longest, not only Buddy and Chotsy but also the Stubblefield's, the Denman's and all the Capps boys, and the Baker's, the Poulard's and all those fine people who remain my friends to this day.

JG: Okay. I was just, I wanted to ask Mr. Wier also about some of the Diboll Day shenanigans, specifically the Wier's Wierdo's

DW: That is what Holubec named them.

JG: We are talking about the Diboll Day tug of war. Just tell us a little bit about that.

DW: I had been president of the Diboll Booster Club when I was here, living here as I was president of the, charter president of the Jay-C's. and booster clubs of all kinds. Because I always felt like I could give something back and I've made an effort to do so. Anyway, one year after I moved to Nacogdoches, I decided to bring a tug of war team down. So I got several of the Stephen F. Austin football players, and they were animals, to come down. We marched in the parade and then we were there to challenge all comers in the tug of war. Well we all were wearing tennis shoes and Henry Holubec had made sure to put mud on our side of the tug of war pit. Which was a hole dug in the ground full of water. And the loser got pulled into the hole, as you know. Well to make things more spiffy, I wore a white suit with a white tie, white shoes, and white socks. And had said if my team loses I'll go in the mud, and I did.

JG: Did they loose fairly?

DW: Uh, no, they did not. They were big strong guys, but they didn't loose fairly. So that is my tug of war. There is a picture of that.

JG: Did you do that one year or more than one year.

DW: I came with two teams and the second year, I came prepared to win with the white suit and the challenge.

JG: Okay, any other particular, I'm just trying to...I guess just going back to the radio days, when you left in '60 was the radio station pretty much what it was when it started? Had there been some changes, a few new people?

DW: Well, it was essentially the same.

JG: Was Mr. Lanyon still there?

DW: I believe so. And then later the station went...

JG: See Mr. Temple and Lottie sold it in '67.

DW: They did, and it went country, full country. That is when Mr. Parr and the big guy, I don't remember his name.

JG: Atmar?

DW: Lester Atmar [Atmar Lester] and others, that when they played country music.

JG: Now when you say you went away, you went to Nacogdoches?

DW: Yes, I moved to Nacogdoches in 1970.

JG: And then that is when you were still doing your insurance?

DW: Yes, I know who it is, this is the guy I was thinking of.

JG: Oh, Louis knows who he is.

DW: J.W. Mitchell, he had a big voice. Ken Barfield was a good guy. He was here in '66. I had...

JG: We are looking at a image here of a KSPL ad, that shows the K looks like a pair of cowboy boots, SPL and then the guitar. Was that a, I know KIKK in Houston had the K like the cowboy boots. Was that first, or KSPL?

DW: That was after me. I think so, I think KSPL was, but as I say, that was well after.

JG: After your involvement. Alright Mr. Wier, well unless we think of something else, I'll go ahead and stop the tape. Again, I appreciate you doing this.

DW: That picture there taken 50 years ago, hardly looks like me.

JG: We are talking about some of the newspaper columns that Mr. Wier had, as well in the weekly newspaper at the time it was the News Bulletin edited by Paul Durham, who later changed the title to The Free Press. Mr. Wier was just telling me a little bit about that.

DW: Paul was a good guy and a good friend. And later a client wrote an editorial about me, one time, and I'd like to have, if you run across it I would like to have a copy of that. So he said I was the only guy he ever bought life insurance from. Anyway, he asked me to do a story, and I would do these little stories. And they talked about what music was big or current or popular and tidbits on the various artists or in the song business and the music business each week. I took a lot of it off the wire and then I added some stuff on my own.

JG: And he and you were just 19, 20 years old at the time.

DW: I've done everything if not well, early.

JG: You always, in these pictures you're always dressed pretty spiffy. (laughter)

DW: I think at the time this picture was taken, I had one suit and maybe two pairs of pants. But the people didn't know it.

JG: In fact I think we have an interior shot, we are looking at a picture of the exterior of the radio, and Mr. Wier, and Mrs. Delores Camp and Tommy Ward Lanyon are standing outside. But I think we've got one inside the same day and there is a piano inside.

DW: Oh really, yes there was a piano there.

JG: And I think maybe she was sitting at the piano, but you were there with the microphone you know. Anyway it was a staged shot, but...well and while we are talking about that. Can you tell me about the interior of the radio station? What do you remember about that?

DW: It was spartan as most of Mr. Temple's creations were. He didn't waste a lot of money. You walked in to a little reception area and it had the news machine, the Associated Press, or United Press machine would be there printing it's little heart away. Took a left to one room which was the office, or a right to a room which was the control room and then there was another room that you had to go outside to get to that was a little studio. It really was a three room affair.

JG: I went into the old building, course it had been, the roof had leaked. And kids I guessed had kind of ransacked the place. But I went into it just before they tore it down, and it was pretty small.

DW: Yes it was.

JG: So you were hired then before the building was, I guess even finished, or constructed.

DW: I think the building was under construction. I think this article is in March. Is that true?

JG: June, the station aired June 2, 1957 and this photo was from, is from that day. Yes this article you're referring to is one I wrote in March of 2000. But yes June. My understanding is that photo was made Sunday morning.

DW: And I must have come down here shortly before then, because we did some test broadcasting. The official first sign on was that day.

JG: Yes, and I had interviewed Mr. Martin, Murphy Martin, at one time. And he told me one time he was interested in buying the station. He and the baseball player, Pete Runnels, and he told me that was one of his largest regrets in life. That he didn't buy the radio station.

DW: Mr. Temple one time said, "Wier, you should have stayed with me. We would have owned a chain of radio stations." And I said, "Mr. Temple the problem with that was you would never pay me more than seventy five dollars a week." And he said, "I didn't know I paid you that much, I paid you too much." (laughter) And I left the business because I by that time had 3 boys, later had another. And I realized that in order to make it in that business I would have to go to a metropolitan market in a large city.

JG: Which is what Mr. Martin did.

DW: Right, and I would have to live there for nothing until I made it big, if I ever did. And guys from my era are Casey Kasem and Johnny Carson and Regis Philbin, and those guys who are pretty close to my age and who had their start as small town disc jockeys. Now they are an infinitesimal small amount of people that made it, most didn't And I didn't want to pay the price and take the risk to do that.

JG: To do that. Well again thank you.

DW: Alright.

END OF INTERVIEW