

TOUCHING

THE

STARS

Touching The Stars

from the
FOREWORD

By Bob Hite

(Voice of the "Lone Ranger")

During my exciting 42 years in broadcasting, I experienced many thrilling moments behind the microphone. From the WXYZ days as narrator of the *Lone Ranger* and *Green Hornet* radio shows, to introducing one of America's treasures, Water Cronkite on *The CBS Evening News*. The success story of Ron and Barbara Hickman's 8-year legal ordeal to become founders of WOTB — FM in Middleton/Newport, Rhode Island is heartwarming, tenacious and reassuring that justice prevails—although sometimes it seems to take longer. In his book, Ron shares with us the entrepreneurial struggle and how he ultimately won the permission from the Federal Communication Commission and the Rhode Island courts to build a new FM radio station. On a local level, Ron epitomizes the qualities necessary to succeed in both founding and programming successful radio stations. I believe you'll find the interviews with the stars and the interesting experiences he's enjoyed both on and off the mike to be entertaining and worthwhile.

Ron's lineage dates back to the roots of our American history. Robert Morris, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and

financier of the American Revolution is his great, great, great, great, grand-father...and Ron certainly displays the pioneer spirit in his book *Touching the Stars*.





Ron Hickman has been a broadcaster for over 32 years. During that time, he served as a member of the Presidential Press Corps and interviewed hundreds of celebrities, sports stars, and political VIP's. He has owned and operated an FM radio station and is now a radio station broker.

TOUCHING STARS

- Describes the entrepreneurial struggle of founding an FM radio station.
- Provides first-hand insight into the lives of numerous stars, including:
 - ★ Walter Cronkite
 - ★ Bob Hite (the voice of the "Lone Ranger")
 - ★ Ronald Reagan, Richard Nixon, and Gerald Ford
 - ★ Eddie Arnold
 - ★ Zsa Zsa Gabor
 - ★ Joe Louis
 - ★ Arnold Palmer
 - ★ President John F. Kennedy
 - ★ And Many More!

★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★

"It's a compilation of the best anecdotes and experiences of a 32-year broadcast veteran, a man who started as an air personality, began an FM station from scratch, and who, after getting out of the ownership ranks in 1983, became, like the clubhouse lawyer who becomes an agent, a broker."

H & R Magazine

\$14.95

ISBN 0-933703-21-X

TOUCHING

THE

STARS

LPH
LOIRY PUBLISHING HOUSE

Ron Hickman

Copyright (c) 1986 by Ron Hickman

All rights reserved. Quotes of up to 500 words from this book may be used for reviews and instructional purposes. For longer reproductions, permission in writing must be received from Loiry Publishing House, P.O. Box 288, Tallahassee, Florida 32302.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data.

Hickman, Ron.
Touching the stars.

Includes index.

1. Hickman, Ron. 2. Radio broadcasters--United States--Biography. 3. Journalists--United States--Biography. 4. Radio broadcasting--United States.

I. Title.

PN1991.4.H45A3 1986 791.44'092'4 [B] 86-21307
ISBN 0-933703-21-X

Printed in the United States of America

First Edition

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

FOREWORD

During my exciting 42 years in broadcasting, I experienced many thrilling moments behind the microphone, from the WXYZ days as narrator of *The Lone Ranger* and *Green Hornet* radio shows, to introducing one of America's treasures, Walter Cronkite, on *The CBS Evening News*. The success story of Ron and Barbara Hickman's 8-year legal ordeal to become founders of WOTB-FM in Middletown/Newport, Rhode Island, is heartwarming, tenacious and reassuring that justice prevails—although sometimes it seems to take longer. In his book, Ron shares with us the entrepreneurial struggle and how he ultimately won permission from the Federal Communication Commission and the Rhode Island courts to build a new FM radio station. On a local level, Ron epitomizes the qualities necessary to succeed in both founding and programming successful radio stations. I believe you'll find the interviews with the stars and the interesting experiences he's enjoyed both on and off the mike to be entertaining and worthwhile.

Ron's lineage dates back to the roots of our American history. Robert Morris, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and financier of the American Revolution, is his great, great, great, great grandfather . . . and Ron certainly displays the pioneer spirit in his book *Touching the Stars*.

Bob Hite

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It would be virtually impossible to list the many, many people who have provided direction, assistance, advice and professional help during a wonderful 32-year career in broadcasting. I have attempted to recognize many of these people in this book. To those whom I may have inadvertently omitted, may I express my deep gratitude.

Also, to my parents, Charles and Thelma Hickman, who celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary on June 4, 1986 in New Port Richey, Florida, for their support and encouragement.

And finally, this book is dedicated to my lovely wife and constant companion for over 28 years, Barbara. As my partner in life, she has shared the joys and tears, has given us three fine sons, Ronald II, David, and Todd, and has been totally supportive and enthusiastic in our broadcast endeavors. I know she concurs when we say "We did it *our way*."

TOUCHING

THE

STARS

CHAPTER ONE

"And that's the way it is". . .

Walter Cronkite

It was a late January afternoon in 1979, when I arrived home in Jamestown, Rhode Island from a busy day which had begun at the radio station shortly before 5 a.m. The mail contained one very special envelope post-marked New York, New York.

It read, "In honor of Bob Hite's retirement, Mr. and Mrs. Walter Cronkite request the pleasure of your company at dinner on Tuesday, February 27th, at 8:00 p.m., East Eighty-fourth Street, R.S.V.P. 488-6802."

Wow . . . Barbara and I were going to the Cronkites for dinner! The excitement struck like a tidal wave. The Hickmans would soon be having dinner with the legendary anchorman, whose face and voice is more familiar than almost anyone else in the world.

Bob Hite, whose illustrious broadcasting career had begun over 40 years earlier at a tiny radio station in the suburbs of Detroit, Michigan, was leaving the profession he enjoyed so very much. Bob's instantly recognizable voice was so closely identified with the CBS *Evening News*, that the producers referred to Hite as the "Captain." Bob used to say that the only way he earned the name of Captain was to buy his own boat. Each week night, Bob would be solely responsible for introducing Cronkite to millions of listeners. In dulcet tones, Hite would say, "This is the CBS *Evening News* with Walter Cronkite." When Walter closed his newscast with a smile and his now famous line "And that's the way it is," Captain Hite would wrap up the 30-minute news program with the appropriate finale.

Bob would often joke that when Dan Rather substituted for Cronkite, he'd have a larger part—"This is the CBS

Touching the Stars

Evening News with Dan Rather substituting for Walter Cronkite.”

Hite had reached the golden age of 65 and at Paley's Palace, you were put out to pasture, whether you liked it or not! Cronkite and Hite had become not only great personal friends but also had become sailing buddies over the years as neighbors in Greenwich, Connecticut. I reached for the telephone and began dialing to confirm our acceptance of the special February dinner engagement. Meanwhile, for the event of the decade, Barbara's attention turned to her wardrobe. I was preparing myself on exactly what I would say to Walter or Betsy Cronkite, whoever answered the telephone first.

After two rings, there was a voice at the other end of the phone. The voice, sounding very oriental, said “Hal-low.”

I thought perhaps I had dialed the wrong number and reached a restaurant in Chinatown, I cleared my voice and mustered the most mellifluous radio tones I could create. “Is this the Cronkite residence?” I asked incredulously.

“Yes, yes,” replied the voice.

I attempted to confirm our promise to attend the scheduled dinner party, but it was obvious we were encountering some mutual difficulty understanding one another. Finally, I was convinced that the oriental person at the Cronkite home understood and would insure that our names would be included on the guest list. As I put down the receiver, it struck me as being funny. America's great communicator, Walter Cronkite, employs a Chinese helper to protect his privacy and probably discourage the constant wave of public intrusion . . . Ah so.

Friday, February 28th, rolled around on our calendar. We drove to New York City to check into the Berkshire Place Hotel and rest a while before the big party. About an hour before we left the hotel, we both agreed that a good vodka martini would ease us into the evening full of anticipation. We savored every moment. The events leading up to this night were really unbelievable. Twenty-

Touching the Stars

eight years earlier, I had begun a broadcasting career at a small radio station in the Appalachian hills of Kentucky. During the ensuing years, I had interviewed many top recording stars, political leaders, Hollywood stars, sports greats, owned several radio stations, and now Barbara and I were ready to hail a cab to Walter Cronkite's home for dinner. Only in America!

We were first greeted at the brownstone door by a young man, who I'm certain doubled as a bodyguard for the CBS anchorman. This very handsome but muscle-bound chap politely ushered us upstairs into the foyer, where we were cordially greeted by our genial host, Uncle Walter. That's another favorite name with which Bob affectionately refers to Walter. In person, Cronkite appeared much younger and somewhat smaller than he did on TV. There were 19 invited dinner guests and, as cocktails were served in Walter's memorabilia room, the guests mixed and mingled. Bob and his lovely wife Nancy, longtime friends of the Cronkite's, were enjoying this expression of friendship.

As I perused the hundreds of awards and plaques on the walls surrounding us, the front cover of a *Time* magazine caught my eye. Two Chinese were standing in front of the Great Wall of China, and one was saying to the other, "If Cronkite said it—it must be true."

Dinner was served in a formal dining room downstairs. Barbara enjoyed the companionship at Walter's table, and I had the opportunity to get to know his wife, Betsy, and some of the other guests. One of my dinner companions was a marvelous talent that I remembered watching on TV—former weathergirl and broadcaster, Jean Parr.

After dinner and some five choices of wine, Walter rose to his feet. Suddenly there was a hush in the room. Cronkite paid tribute to his good friend who was riding off into the sunset . . . who had the good fortune to be free to do the many things he always wanted to do. He wished Bob the very best. Several other guests and friends of

Touching the Stars

our honored guest extended more toasts of good cheer. Resisting as long as I possibly could, the next thing I knew, I sprang to my feet and proposed still another salute and some sincere words about Hite. I had known Bob since 1969—in a very different kind of way. His friendship, generosity of his talent towards our radio stations and his likeable personality made my admiration of him more like that towards a favorite uncle.

The speeches ended, as did the evening for several guests who were saying their farewells. It was almost midnight. Discretion always being better than valor, I walked over to Walter, shook his hand, and expressed our genuine appreciation for being included in the memorable evening.

“You’ve been the perfect host.” I said to Cronkite.

“You’re not leaving?” said the anchorman. “We’re all going upstairs for an after dinner drink . . . won’t you join us?” I was afraid he would *never* ask.

Upstairs in the memorabilia room again, I noticed Walter attempting to insert a player roll in the piano to provide some music. I stood next to him and couldn’t resist striking a few melodic piano chords.

Walter took me by the arm and said, “Oh, you play the piano . . . come with me.” We strolled, arm in arm, into the living room where there was a beautiful white piano. He sat me down and said, “Go ahead and play something!”

I had studied music and piano for a year or so at the age of ten. However, a stubborn streak prompted me to abandon my lessons. It was my father who had played professionally all his life—entertaining with his 4 or 5-piece bands at country clubs and hotels along the Jersey Shore and North Jersey. Especially during those deep depression days, my father’s musical talent provided additional income to augment the weekly salary he earned as a meter reader with Jersey Central Power and Light Company. Oh, if he could only have been there at that moment to entertain!

Touching the Stars

I emulated one of my Dad's great introductions to *I'm In the Mood for Love* and started playing. About midway through the song, I glanced over my shoulder and viewed the multi-talented Cronkite playing an oboe. The only thought rushing through my mind was the question, "What's this kid from Morristown, New Jersey doing playing the piano while America's most trusted anchor-man is playing the oboe?"

After a couple of songs, Barbara, in her great wisdom, leaned over and whispered into my ear. "Don't you think that's enough for now?"

Until this moment in the evening, we had not had a photo opportunity with our famous host. Time was running out. We all posed for pictures, right after the duet, and while I'm running low on copies there's probably still another 5,000 prints remaining.

We adjourned to another room where Walter regaled the remaining guests with stories about his recent monitoring of the whales off the West coast. We viewed some personal videos of the Hites and Cronkites sailing with their families off the Connecticut coast and finally, the evening had reached its conclusion.

We poured out onto the streets of New York and into the stark realities of the world. A beautiful evening to remember—with one of the untarnished stars in our wonderful industry.

CHAPTER TWO

"Darling, put down zee glass."

Zsa Zsa Gabor

If you've ever experienced a breathtaking autumn in New England with the mountains ablaze with vibrant colors of red, orange and yellow . . . you know the sensation of viewing Mother Nature shedding her clothing for another season.

In Northern New Jersey, where the Appalachian mountain range snakes across the extreme portion of the state along the Delaware River, you can enjoy another beautiful site of this special season. Growing up in North Jersey in the late 1940's in the historic community of Morristown, our perimeters didn't extend to New England. In fact, about the farthest north we traveled was some 18 miles away to Butler where our Morristown High School Colonial Football team would tangle with the Bulldogs under the lights. Our Colonials won the State Championship title in 1949 . . . and that year brought a great honor to our school.

Late in each game—when we were usually well in front on the scoreboard and en route to another victory during this undefeated season—our lovely cheerleaders would lead our vociferous contingent of home town fans in unison, "Go back, go back, go back to the woods—cause you haven't, cause you haven't, cause you haven't got the goods—Rah! Rah! Rah! M-H-S!" And, if you really got lucky, after the game some of the cheerleaders who weren't madly in love with our football heroes would accept a ride with several of us non-football types to Archie's for foot-long hot dogs, soda, a jukebox and pinball machines. Life was so simple then.

As neophytes in the game of love, our cheerleader companions, Lois, Lynn, Mickey and other beautiful girls,

Touching the Stars

appeared to be as untouchable as Jane Fonda, Raquel Welch and Olivia Newton-John.

In the ensuing months and years, several opportunities occurred, laying the foundation for the career in broadcasting. In high school, I earned my thespian credentials for appearances on stage, both in school productions and as a member of the famous comedy team of Robshaw and Hickman. Or was it Hickman and Robshaw? We would write or borrow our own material and perform before audiences at the drop of a hat. Dick Robshaw, who was basically a funny kid, played the comic, while I generally was the straight man or the Bud Abbott of the team.

Can you believe jokes like this would get good laughs?

“Hey Dick, I went to see the Giant’s football game last Sunday—and boy, were we sitting high up in the stadium!”

“How high were you?”

“We were so high I got nosebleeds!”

“I said to the guy next to me . . . how do you like the game?”

He said, “What game? I’m flying the mail to Pittsburgh!”

Well, those gags and others earned us a five-minute appearance on Channel 13 Television in 1950. The TV station, which was licensed to Newark, was new and invited talent to appear from various communities around the Garden State. I remember we did many of the same jokes—including our creative sponsor and brand new product, Slow Drip catsup. A number of years later, one of the major catsup brands actually used the concept of slow drip catsup in one of their TV commercials.

With the Korean conflict on the horizon and high school graduation behind me, I realized I would soon be faced with some decisions. Those of my school friends who were not college bound appeared enroute to a military career. In January, 1951, I enlisted in the Air Force. A few days later, we were flown to Lackland Air Force Base in

Touching the Stars

Texas for basic training. Some six or eight weeks later, I was assigned to Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, Mississippi, to await admission into Radio Operator's School. While learning the Morse Code and other skills, I was stricken with severe asthma attacks. Within six months from the date of my enlistment, I found myself accepting an honorable discharge at the convenience of the government. While friends and acquaintances from Jersey were serving our country, I was enroute home to Morristown, feeling defeated and humiliated. I would never get the opportunity to go to Korea and fight for my country.

Call it nepotism, but I landed a position with the Jersey Central Power and Light Company, where my father had advanced his own career from the lowly position of meter reader to District Commercial Manager. The line department needed a radio operator to talk clearly into the mike and reach the line crews on location—and I was on the air!

Earning about \$90 a week, my experience talking on the microphone fueled my interest, and I soon discovered one of the veterans benefits available to me was some limited funds for college education or career opportunities. The Radio School of Technique had its newest enrollee!

Three evenings a week—immediately after I finished my very responsible broadcasting duties to the line department and clerk obligations at JCP&L—I'd be in my 1946 Ford, racing across the Hudson River to Columbus Circle for evening classes at radio school. They included elocution, microphone technique, commercial copy writing, operating a console board, timing, and a general "quickie" introduction into the world of broadcasting. Several excellent broadcasters of the early 50's in New York, including newscaster Jerry White, would lecture and work with the students. Of the some 25 potential broadcasters in our class learning a new craft, one could

Touching the Stars

sense that probably 80 percent of the candidates were practically unemployable as on-air talent. At times, I even included myself in the group. Some had difficulty reading, others didn't appear to have any kind of stage presence or timing needed for broadcasting and one guy even had a lisp. Shortly after I graduated from the school, I believe their fraudulent activities caught up with them and prompted the closing of the school. Anyway, I had been bitten by the radio bug. Luckily, thanks to the school of radio technique, I had been offered an announcer's job in Pikeville, Kentucky. Broadcasting was calling!

I immediately resigned on Friday from the utility company and purchased a one-way train ticket to the Appalachian Mountains! My mother, believing I was about to begin some nomadic lifestyle, said "I'll probably never, ever see my son again."

WPKE, Pikeville, Kentucky and the wonderful mountain folks more than accepted this young Yankee who hosted the *Morning in Pikeville* show. I even got a chance to play my ukelele, sing songs, do my impressions of Nat Cole, and play records every morning from 6 to 9 a.m. I was earning sixty dollars a week instead of ninety dollars, but I was in broadcasting and people seemed to enjoy it.

WPKE was a 1,000 watts affiliate of the Mutual Broadcasting System and served Pikeville, a town of 5,000 and the county. In addition to the network shows, *Queen for a Day*, *Mutual Game of the Day*, etc., we programmed our local news, record shows and play-by-play coverage of both Pikeville High School and college football and basketball. Al Kahn was program director of WPKE and later would be appointed General Manager. The personal interest Al invested in my career was a godsend. Hailing from Syracuse, New York, and gifted with a fine sense of humor, Al had graduated from Syracuse University where he had majored in communications. Al's pro-

Touching the Stars

essional abilities and on-air style were infectious. Listening to Al describe the ball game unfolding before our eyes, as well as his choice of words to depict the story, was like watching Picasso use his brush to create his paintings.

Almost six months passed, and true to the advice offered young broadcasters, I resigned and returned to New Jersey with the hope that William B. Williams would be leaving WNEW and there might be an opening. I returned to Morristown and was unable to find a job in radio. Lesson number one—never resign a job in radio until you have already secured your next position.

Morristown had a local station—WMTR—which was a daytimer with local flavor. I walked into the station, auditioned and landed a weekend announcer's position from 6 to 12 noon. Six months in the business and I'm working behind the mike in my own home town. Bob Vessell, the station's morning man, learned about my ukelele playing. Together with another friend, Paul Underhill, we made regular live Saturday morning appearances. My father, a very talented pianist who had studied music since he was five, taught me how to play the ukelele. He taught me all the progressive chords, all the professional sounds you could use to make the instrument sound alive. Arthur Godfrey was selling the plastic ukes on TV, and after learning how to play, I invested in a professional Martin ukelele for the total sum of \$65.00.

I had been appearing locally, singing and playing, when I noticed an ad in TV Guide inviting talent to appear on the Paul Whiteman TV Show. I responded and three weeks later was invited to appear for an audition at a Newark Theatre.

Apparently the audition went well, and I received the usual show biz comment, "We'll give you a call if we can use you on the show."

Touching the Stars

Sure enough, several weeks later the phone rang. A spokesperson for the show said I was booked to appear on the Paul Whiteman Radio Show, live from the Ritz Theatre, in New York City on July 28, 1952. My dreams were happening—I was booked to play the Big Apple!

The day of the show, I arrived at the Ritz Theater with eleven other performers. We did a dress rehearsal late that afternoon. When I realized the caliber of talent on the show, accomplished pianists, singers and others, I decided that despite the formidable competition, I would just do my best. After all, I was on the program. We broke for dinner and each of us received a program line-up. My eyes froze on the leadoff name, "Ronnie Hickman and his uke." The next thing I remember was standing on stage, with one leg resting comfortably on a stool, staring into a sea of some 800 faces as Paul Whiteman's daughter introduced me on ABC—coast to coast.

"Let's take a listen to 19-year old Ronnie Hickman of Morris Plains, New Jersey," she said to the radio audience. "Ronnie sings and plays the uke."

Paul Whiteman, reading from his prepared radio script, looked over at me and said, "Not related to my pal Arthur—is he?"

His daughter said, "I don't think so, Pops, but he does a swell job on *Five Foot Two*, so Ronnie, let's get started!" Two and a half minutes later, with resounding applause from the audience, I had finished my debut on a New York stage! Of the twelve contestants, I managed to win third place, and was the proud recipient of the \$50 savings bond. The winner was invited back to compete the following week.

Only a few months later, however, the thrill of performing on a coast-to-coast network radio program and my weekend announcing position came to a shuddering halt. Ken Croy, owner of WMTR, called me aside one Saturday morning and said "Ron, we're going to have to let you go—the key doesn't fit here."

Touching the Stars

What the hell did that mean, I silently asked myself. Crushed and not fully understanding the reason my broadcast career was apparently over, I returned home to ponder my future. As you will see, it was the best thing that ever happened to me. Al Kahn had advised me against leaving WPKE and I immediately got on the phone, waiting to hear his voice again.

"Hello Al, it's me, Ron!"

"Ron who?" was the reply.

"Stop joking, Al—I want to come back to Kentucky. You were absolutely right—I should have never left."

After a gentle fatherly admonishment, Al extended my same job to me and said, "Hurry back!"

Three days later I arrived back in Pikeville, had my old job again, and enrolled in Pikeville College enroute to some solid career steps.

In those days, with less than 3,000 radio stations on the air (today we have almost 10,000 FM and AM stations), you were given a great deal of latitude around the studio. There were no structured formats like Current Hit Radio/Adult Oriented Rock/Adult Contemporary. The program director simply showed you where the records were stored and let you play what you thought the audience would enjoy.

A typical morning segment which I recently listened to sounded like this: "In case any of you missed the basketball game which was played over in Elkhorn City last night between the Pikeville Panthers and Elkhorn High School—well, here it is! Hold on to your hats. Pikeville lost!"

And in a sing-song tone of voice. "They did—they lost to Elkhorn Cougars . . . 59 to 58."

Yes, I was the bearer of bad news in Pikeville. "And if you missed the broadcast, it was a thriller. No one knew who was going to win until the final buzzer blew. That's the final score—59 to 58."

Touching the Stars

Then I continued, "I have a record here on the Dot label. It's by Jam Up and Honey. That's the recording artist. The title of the song is *Wild Honey Rag*, and I think this is a real dilly. Let's listen."

Can you believe it? That was the way I sounded on the air during my first couple of months in Pikeville. Thanks, Kentuckians, for giving an inexperienced broadcaster a chance.

Basketball was king in the hill country . . . and it was every young Kentucky boy's dream to win a state title, journey to Lexington and bask in the limelight of state-wide media attention, and hopefully receive a scholarship to play basketball for Coach Adolph Rupp at the University of Kentucky. During the season, we would broadcast four or five high school and college games a week, which managed to keep the broadcast team quite busy. On a free afternoon away from the studios, I would get a chance to work out with some of the players.

At Pikeville College, a two-year junior school at the time, one outstanding player by the name of Grady Wallace was being observed closely by major universities. Grady was the leading scorer and, by far, one of the most talented players in the state. Can you believe this future All-American learned how to play the game by shooting a ball through a peach basket at his home up in one of those hollers?

Grady was an easy, unassuming person, and we established a campus friendship that would continue until several years later when Grady accepted an offer to transfer to the University of South Carolina to join the Gamecocks. Grady averaged over 32 points a game in the Atlantic Conference and was named to the 1957 All American College Team with Wilt Chamberlain, Rod Hundley and Jim Krebs.

I had left Kentucky by 1957 and was working in radio at WNNJ, in Newton, New Jersey, 40 miles from New York City, and still playing some independent ball. When I

Touching the Stars

heard that Grady Wallace, my good friend from Kentucky, would be appearing at Madison Square Garden in an All Star Game, I couldn't wait.

"Grady," I said, "Welcome to New York. How would you like to come out to Jersey with me after the game and maybe even suit up for one of our local playoff games?"

"Sounds great to me!" said the lanky 6'6" Kentuckian, as he spoke to me from his New York hotel room. "Meet me in the locker room at the Garden, right after the game."

Grady performed well that Saturday afternoon in the Garden, displaying his graceful moves and shooting ability. Inside the Garden locker rooms, I was aghast. There were a few metal lockers, some pegs on the walls for clothes and four or five shower stalls. Most Kentucky High Schools had far better facilities than the old Garden!

Grady had been ducking reporters all week because of shyness. We slipped out of the Garden and drove away from the city into the rolling hills of Sussex County. After dinner, our mild-mannered guest did his special Superman routine again and changed from street clothing into his All-American uniform for another ball game. Word had leaked out on the air (guess who?) that All American Grady Wallace might appear in the line-up at the Newton High School gym. All eyes were glued on the tall Kentuckian as we warmed up on the hard wood. The men in the striped shirts blew some mighty quick whistles, and Grady got into foul trouble early in the first quarter. The All-American was fouled out early in the second half, and our rising hopes of victory went down in flames.

Grady's plane was scheduled to leave La Guardia Airport in New York around noontime. We had just enough time to stop in Mendham, where my brother Bob and his wife Bobbie prepared breakfast for our Kentucky hero.

When we arrived at La Guardia, I found a parking place and walked Grady to the terminal. After the goodbye's, I turned and walked from the terminal back to my car. As I approached the intersection, I spotted a lovely steward-

Touching the Stars

ess (today's flight attendant) standing on the corner waiting for a ride into the city. I obliged, rolled down the window and offered Miss Eastern Airlines a lift. She accepted—after all, I looked harmless enough—and placed her luggage in the trunk of my Chevrolet and off we headed for downtown New York. The doorman was there to greet us as we rolled up to the front of the hotel. As we said goodbye, I emerged from the driver's seat and put the key into the lock to open the trunk. Nothing happened! I couldn't get the lock open and as I struggled in disbelief, the stewardess and the doorman both looked at me with suspicious thoughts. I was suspect!

Sunday morning in New York City is not exactly the ideal time to locate a locksmith. We both got back into the car—she, obviously visibly upset and me in total embarrassment about what was happening—and drove around the city for about an hour until we found a willing service station operator to perform surgery on my car. He removed the rear seats and cut through into the trunk to extricate Miss Eastern's luggage. Wherever she is today, *honest*—my car did not have a trick trunk lock!

From 1951 to 1955, I worked side by side with Al Kahn. I suppose I didn't realize at the time the invaluable broadcast knowledge and experience I was learning—news, air-shifts, sports, color man, interviews and even a live band remote. One of the first remote broadcasts I recall being involved in was a live two-hour Saturday morning show from a used car lot in downtown Pikeville. Saturday was a big day for the mountain folks to come to town and make purchases. Bill Monroe and his bluegrass boys had made their debut in 1949 and were really popular in blue grass music. I interviewed the Decca Recording star. He was to be the first of many stars I would have an opportunity to meet and interview.

I enrolled at Pikeville College, as a part-time student who realized the importance of public speaking, vocabulary building and English. And I *concentrated* on those

Touching the Stars

subjects! Up every morning at 5 a.m.—on the air at 6 a.m. until noon—attended classes three afternoons a week—and back at the studios for the 5-6 p.m. afternoon news broadcasts. Most evenings, during basketball and football season, Al and I would be off to broadcast a game. And Saturday nights I would often get a chance to host the WPKE Saturday Nite Dance Party. It was a college town and our request lines were always busy to keep a lonely disc jockey spinning the popular records. The requests would pour in for the Hilltoppers, Crew Cuts, Four Aces, and others. Usually, some friends would come by the studio and while the music requests were being fulfilled over the airwaves, we would dance in the studio.

One of the early remotes (and first and only Big Band one) occurred during my second year in radio. The station manager asked me if I would like to be the announcer for Live band remote. I accepted and prepared for the show which was originating at a nearby restaurant in a small town called Shelbyville. Three, two, one—we were live! I stepped up to the microphone. “WPKE proudly presents the Big Band Music of Bobby Richards and his Orchestra.” Everything was going pretty well until I got ready to introduce the third selection on the show. “Now—the orchestra will play one of their favorites—Siboney.” I slaughtered the pronunciation and pronounced it Sib-Bone-nee . . . instead of Si-Bow-Nay. I thought it was an Italian love song!

There were two roads leading from the county seat of Pikeville . . . and Al jokingly referred to this in his book title, *Two Roads to Nowhere*. Somedays, I suppose we all felt that way, deep in the bowels of the Appalachian Mountains, as though our broadcast careers would never lead us to greater heights. Pike County was dry—as well as 75% of Kentucky. Anyone interested in imbibing had three choices: visit a bootlegger (and the county had

Touching the Stars

many of those guys operating in the shadows of the law); or you could drive to Elkhorn City, which was wet, and buy anything you wanted; or drive over three mountains to nearby Williamson, West Virginia.

One Friday evening, the three of us took my Pontiac sedan and headed for Williamson. Several hours and several beers later, I slipped behind the wheel and steered towards the Kentucky state line. On the return to Pikeville, we were barely halfway up the first of three mountains when everything went blank. Moments later (or maybe minutes), I realized I was inside the wreckage of my car and unable to find a way out! I had missed the curve, and our four-door sedan went screeching off the embankment, overturned, and landed upside down in a 35-foot deep gully! Dazed and disoriented, I realized what had happened and feared for everyone's safety. The driver's window was smack up against the mountain—no escape there. I managed to crawl out the other window to safety, stand on what was the undercarriage of the vehicle and began frantically calling the names of my companions. Although it seemed like hours, in a few minutes I heard sounds coming from up near the highway. Both of my friends had emerged from the wreckage and made their way to higher ground. I examined my limbs—one by one—and thought I was experiencing a miracle. No broken bones—no signs of blood—only a slight bump on the forehead! My car was totaled in a deep gully, and miraculously, all three of us walked away without a scratch! By the time we arrived back in Pikeville with the tow truck, it was 3 a.m. I had to be on the air at 6 a.m. to sign-on the station. Somehow, I pulled myself together, realizing the magnitude of the accident. We had just had a genuine brush with death.

While growing up in New Jersey, baseball was a great medium in our home. Both my father and only brother were faithful New York Yankee fans, while I lived and died with every game played by my Brooklyn

Touching the Stars

Bums—something like our modern day rivalries, when fans stood by their Bears or Patriots in the 1986 Super Bowl. You get the idea.

In the late 40's, Joe Dimaggio had hit two consecutive home runs in a game and was at the plate again for another try at a four bagger. Pow! Another round-tripper for the Yankee Clipper! That day I converted from Yankee hater to Yankee lover! And it was a good thing, too. I was about to meet the first of several New York Yankees—in person!

Earl Combs, a great centerfielder from another time frame—the Babe Ruth and Miller Huggins era—had played with the Yankees from 1924 until 1935 in the shadow of the immortal Babe Ruth. The Yankees won the pennant three years in succession—in 1926, 1927, 1928—and it was Earl Combs who went into the record books in 1927 when he batted 356 with 231 hits. That's no simple feat. Overall, Combs batted 325 in the majors during his splendid baseball career.

Retired from baseball, Combs was a sales representative for a major sporting goods company and was in Pikeville, seeing a client. Acting on a tip, I called the hotel where Combs was staying and asked to speak to the great centerfielder.

"Hello," said the voice at the other end of the phone.

"Is this Earl Combs?" I asked.

He assured me he was and I immediately asked for an interview—and got it! Like I learned in sales life later on in broadcasting—if you never ask for the order, you'll probably never get it. I rushed over to the hotel, met Earl Combs, talked baseball for the best part of an hour and departed. It didn't dawn on me until many years later that I had the pleasure of interviewing one of the great players of his times—Babe Ruth's playing partner. Anyone who has ever had the opportunity to spend a few minutes with Earl, instantly liked him and had to be impressed with his charm and southern gentlemanly demeanor,

Touching the Stars

qualities that are so apparent in many of the giants in the sports and entertainment world.

As I said before, the best advice being given to young, struggling broadcasters in the early 50's was to remain at your first job for no more than six months. I had already disproved that theory. After all, I was learning a craft, enjoying part-time college life, and was an appreciated ukelele player and singer . . . a big fish in a little mountain pond scenario. Why move on?

A sales opportunity occurred when a salesperson resigned. The manager called me into his office and offered me a chance to broaden my experience and do some part-time selling. Why not? My first client was a local funeral home/ambulance service. I recall servicing the account one afternoon, when the funeral director had an emergency call. The ambulance backed up to the delivery platform—and out came the corpse! One of those good ole' mountain boys had had an argument with his daddy and simply plugged him full of holes! It was a grim sight, as well as a close view of the Hatfield and McCoy stories and songs that I had only read and heard about back east—a glimpse of the “real world” in Appalachia country!

It was common knowledge around the station that the stockholders of the company were feuding. I was to learn later in my business life that it often seems that all small company owners ever do is have internal fights. The stockholders were coming to the radio station for a special meeting, and the staff deserved the right to know what the hell was going on. Our chief engineer, Edwin Meek, came up with an ingenious plan which would rightfully share the stockholder's information and decisions with the entire staff. He decided to secretly record their meeting. Some additional microphones were put strategically in place and activated in the announcer studios, adjacent to the lobby. The lights would be turned off and the doors left open so no one would suspect a

Touching the Stars

thing. Edwin was usually floating around in the control room anyway, so his presence didn't raise any suspicions.

The stockholders showed up right on cue to resolve their differences and reach their clandestine decisions, they thought. The station was soon going to be sold to the owner of the Coca Cola Bottling Company. The next morning, the entire staff, including our General Manager gathered in the control room and heard the playback of the stockholders' meeting. It was a learning experience for me that I never forgot. Beware when you're around an open mike—somebody may be listening!

The next day we were carrying the Mutual Game of the Day. Between innings, Al and I would have a game of our own outside the building in the Peach Orchard parking lot. We'd wrap our own baseballs with Associated Press paper and black engineering tape from our engineer's room, grab a broomstick—and play ball! The studio speaker would be turned up extra loud to enable us to hear the station break. Many times, we would be forty or fifty yards from the console when we'd hear "This is the world's largest radio network . . . The Mutual Broadcasting System." One of us would make a mad dash to the studio, open the mike and almost breathless, say "This is WPKE, Pikeville, Kentucky." I have since fired staffers for less callous actions.

Around every radio station, every week of the year, one of the highlights for any young announcer is the arrival of the trade magazine—*Broadcasting*. The help-wanted advertisements could possibly be the ticket to a new job back east in Worcester, Westerly or even Presque Isle—and the next stop or next to next stop to stardom in a major market. That was the feeling of aspiring broadcasters in the 50's, and to a great degree it's probably still very true today. Our General Manager always carried the morning mail and there was usually a reception committee to greet him in the lobby. The manager would step into his office, close the door, and, we learned later,

Touching the Stars

would himself frantically search for a new job. Finally, when the *Broadcasting* magazine reached the receptionist's desk with the rest of the mail—we would practically *kill* to get our hands on the newest job offers! Under the cover of darkness, those searching for a way out of the hills of Kentucky would fill the recording studios and make audition tapes to go out in the mail the next day. I'll bet Tuesdays were the busiest day of the week at the Pikeville Post Office!

With some newly acquired sales experience, some play-by-play know how, and over 3 years of making my mistakes, I felt it was now or never to make a career move. Remembering an earlier vacation, I recalled visiting a radio station under construction in Newton, New Jersey. WNNJ-AM—a 500 watt day-timer—had been on the air for about a year. Three radio engineers who worked at a New York Station applied and received permission from the FCC to construct the facility to serve Sussex County. In fact, Bill Fairclough, one of the principals, had greeted me on the construction site and invited me to keep in touch. Now, the audition tape was in the mail, complete with resume and a prayer! A week or so later, I received a job offer to join WNNJ as a staff announcer/salesman starting July 5th, 1955.

I bid adieu to my friends in Pikeville, and reported for duty on Friday, of the 4th of July weekend. Ted Holmes, General Manager, welcomed me aboard, introduced me to the staff and gave me a rate card. "See you Monday morning!" said Holmes.

Enroute to my parent's home in Morristown, about an hour away, I approached Ledgewood Circle when my eyes focused on the marquee of the Ledgewood Drive-In Theatre. Why not make my first sales call and get a little practice? Bill Smith, owner of the theatre, listened to my story about just returning to New Jersey and joining WNNJ. I suggested that he should consider investing

Touching the Stars

some advertising dollars in our station and attract people the short distance to his drive-in. Sussex County's population tripled in the summertime and he would feel the effects of a good radio schedule. Between paying customers, I apparently made some good points because the owner invited me to return Sunday evening about 8 p.m. after the first feature was on the screen. Now, remember, I hadn't even officially begun my new assignment at the station and I was already making plans for a call-back to see my first client! Needless to say, things went very well Sunday evening and I left the drive-in with my first sale—a signed one-year contract for 52 weeks for \$4,500! I found out much later, when I became General Manager of the station, that the new drive-in account had become one of the largest advertisers on the air.

Monday morning, with the yearly contract bulging in my sport jacket, I arrived at the station and inquired if I needed an account to begin my first day. When I presented the signed agreement, management almost fainted and I had found success and acceptance overnight.

The radio station owners were having both financial and personal difficulties. Sy Geller, who sold his 1/3 stock interest to his partners, would later establish an FM station—WVCA-FM in Gloucester, Massachusetts. In 1982, the FCC voted to deny renewal of Geller's station and to grant competing application of another group. In an unusual reversal of its license-revoking decision, the FCC recommended in December 1985, that Geller owned no other media interests, and should have his FCC license restored. It was a heartwarming decision for a government body that under previous leadership has displayed some ruthless acts.

An ownership change occurred simultaneously with my arrival in Newton, when the stockholders approached a local business woman with the idea of investing in the new media venture. Naomi Wolfe and her husband elect-

Touching the Stars

ed to join the engineers in the fledgling station. The Wolfes were my strongest supporters during my tenure at the station. Naomi, who had been married previously to a physician, had remarried the family chauffeur after her first husband had killed himself. Simpson, her husband, owned and operated a service station in the town and was a likeable, friendly businessman.

Every Friday morning, Naomi and I hosted a weekly 15-minute radio show designed to get the food shoppers to hear the week-end food specials. During the show, Naomi and I would breeze through the full page advertisement of the local weekly newspaper with lots of small talk, and pretend we were so excited about the specials. Naomi would say “Look Ron—three cans of creamed corn for only 49 cents— isn’t that exciting?” It was fifteen minutes of dribble, but I guess it worked because the show was still on the air eight years later when I left WNNJ.

“Ron, how would you like to be our News Director?” That was the offer extended to me by management and I immediately accepted. I was already enjoying some limited success in sales and when the News Director and close friend of the General Manager was no longer able to handle his drinking problem, there was an opening. I told management that I was abundantly qualified to be the best News Director the station ever had. Since there weren’t too many predecessors, I felt quite safe with that statement. On the weekend, I camped next to our Associated Press printer and pored over every story, checking on sentence structure—the who, what, where, when and how of journalism.

The Newton Trust sponsored two daily newscasts at 8 a.m and 1 p.m. Part of the News Director’s commitment was to report the morning news until 9 a.m., cover outside stories, and then personally broadcast the bank’s news. For each Trust newscast, I personally received a \$2 talent fee or an extra \$30 a week. That was equal to

Touching the Stars

the \$30 cut in salary I had taken when I left JCP&L to go to Kentucky. This enhanced my earnings, and with total sales commissions for the next couple of years, I was earning a handsome \$9,000 a year!

Sussex County reportedly had more cows than people back in the mid-50's. We would have the occasional major story, a milk strike by farmers, fire or highway fatality, but generally it was life in the slow lane because the county was ostensibly a rural area. Associated Press called the newsroom one weekday afternoon before Easter Sunday in 1957.

"Ron, Magda Gabor is getting married in Franklin at a private wedding ceremony and we would like you to cover the story."

I accepted and completed my plans to be represented with a handful of newspaper reporters at the doctor's residence. The entire Gabor family was there—here a Gabor, there a Gabor, everywhere a Gabor—Zsa, Zsa, Eva, Magda and Mama Gabor! In fact, Mama even rivaled her attractive daughters. The Gabor girls were absolutely glamorous.

Zsa Zsa went upstairs to the powder room and I arranged with the photographer, Bob Mitchell, to take our picture, if Zsa Zsa agreed when she returned. A few minutes later, this gorgeous Hollywood starlet reappeared and was standing next to me on the stairs.

I requested the photo opportunity and she responded with "Why certainly, darling." As we posed for the photo, Zsa Zsa noticed I was holding a glass of champagne in my left hand. "Darling, we'll take the picture, but first, put down zee glass." Zsa Zsa, in her social world didn't want us to be captured on film with a glass of *anything* to suggest that we were drinking. To this day, I always remember Zsa Zsa Gabor's admonishment, which still rings in my ear—"Darling, put down zee glass."

Touching the Stars

WNNJ was growing and becoming more involved in the community every week. Our only competition in the County was a weekly newspaper—*The New Jersey Herald*. We managed to scoop the paper almost every day of the week, except for their lead story on Thursday. Sometimes, even their best story was stale by the time they published it.

On election nights, until we signed on the FM station in 1961, we would wait for all the paper ballots to be delivered to the Court house before we could determine winners. On presidential election years, I would leave the Courthouse at 5:30 a.m.—sign on Wednesday morning with our results, and barely make it through the morning until I would collapse. The good ole' days of working in a one-station market!

CHAPTER THREE

"I would like to sing a special song for a special couple."

Vic Damone

Summertime in Sussex County was a special time of the year. The 80 lakes attracted thousands of people, almost tripling the size of the county and audience potential. One summer highlight was the annual Sussex County Farm and Horse Show in Branchville. WNNJ enjoyed a good relationship with fair officials, and we became a fixture with our broadcast booth on the fairgrounds. The staff announcers were assigned air shifts to work the fair, talk with visitors, exhibitors, sponsors, equestrians and guests. Often some of the surprise guests were Hollywood celebrities enjoying the fair incognito. The Andover Summer Theatre, only a few miles away, played host to so many of the major stars—Groucho Marx, Betsy Palmer, Cesar Romero, etc. Cliff Robertson, whom you see strolling across your TV screen for AT&T, walked past our microphones and willingly did a walk-on interview. Merv Griffin, who lived in nearby Hunterdon County, and loved horses, was in the audience one evening. I spotted him and introduced myself. Remember—back in the late 50's—Merv Griffin wasn't exactly a household word. Merv's success in the music industry came as a singer with the Freddy Martin Orchestra. I quickly called the studio and told somebody to locate the Capitol record, *I've Got a Lovely Bunch of Coconuts*. Merv did the vocal on the recording and I wanted to have it ready to be aired. Merv and I talked about the horse show and his TV work. I asked him if he would please introduce his own recording of *Coconuts*. He was pleased that we had the music ready and gave an introduction to his song. With the happy strains of Freddy Martin coming through our speakers over the air, we shook hands and Merv disappeared into the crowd.

Touching the Stars

Merv has matured into a popular talk show host and owner of several radio stations. At this writing, he is negotiating with Coca Cola to sell Merv Griffin Enterprises at a price in excess of \$200 million. Merv, now it's your turn to invite me on your show. You owe me one!

Speaking of popular names, Vic Damone was friendly with Father Steve (of a local church in Franklin) and promised to appear at a summer festival to support the financial efforts of the church. To promote Damone's appearance, Father Steve, another announcer, John Bennett, and I were invited to CBS-TV in New York to interview the singer. Damone was taping his show when we arrived at CBS. Between takes, Damone was on the telephone talking overseas to his wife Pierre Angela, trying to save their marriage. We broke for lunch and the four of us, Father Steve, Bennett, Damone and I went to the CBS cafeteria. It sure was exciting to be on the inside of the TV network happenings. We taped the interview with Damone and returned home to await the singer's performance the following week at the festival.

Damone brought an unknown comedian with him to Franklin—Buddy Hackett, who was refreshing, funny and still clean. I was onstage taping the performance. Vic had gotten his first job as a part-time usher at the Paramount Theatre in New York, where he became a headliner five years later. His first million seller was a song called *Again*. That night, the popular singer was singing for his friend Father Steve and the church community.

As news director, there would be numerous political stories and personalities to cover and I enjoyed every moment. Whether it was Senator Clifford Chase at a Republican gathering, or talking with gubernatorial candidate Malcolm Forbes at a coffee fund-raiser stop, I would show up with mike in hand. Reaching political figures for unscheduled interviews is sometimes as easy as reaching for your telephone. That's how I interviewed

Touching the Stars

Governor Robert Meynor one Saturday morning on the opening day of trout fishing in 1957.

The Governor and his lovely wife were being joined by members of the Fish and Game Council to lead the parade of Jersey trout fishermen into the streams. Meynor's party was having breakfast at the Hackettstown Hatchery. A friend's brother managed the Hatchery and when I learned the tentative timetable for the breakfast, I dialed the private number. I introduced myself and asked to speak to the Governor.

Within seconds there was a familiar voice on the phone. "Good morning, this is Governor Meynor."

"Welcome Governor . . . what are your chances of catching any trout today?" was my lead-off question.

The Governor said, "Well, I would say about one out of 4 1/2 because there are 85,000 licenses and 264,000 trout in New Jersey."

We chatted for a few more seconds and I asked him if he had had breakfast yet. He politely informed me that he was having breakfast when I called him to the phone. I thanked the Governor and terminated the interview.

Senator Wayne Dumont of Warren County was a high ranking Republican and former gubernatorial candidate. Early one morning about 7 a.m., I dialed Dumont's home number, hoping to get a comment or reaction to a major story of the day. "May I please speak with Senator Dumont?"

His wife politely informed me, "He's in the shower—just a moment—I'll get him."

Seconds later, I was conducting an interview with the state's most prominent Republican leader and getting his reaction to the story—probably dripping wet and in the nude! If, as a newsman, you earn the trust of the newsmakers, and develop rapport, I believe you will generally find the people in the news responsive.

Many years later, in the early 1970's, in the community of North Kingstown, Rhode Island, the USS Intrepid was

Touching the Stars

based at the Quonset Point Naval Air Station. The ship and crew were leaving on a six-month tour of duty. We approached the navy and suggested a weekly 30-minute program direct from the giant carrier, for their loved ones back home. Junior Officer Sweet was assigned to meet with us, and plans were announced on the air for the weekly shows direct from the USS Intrepid.

Several weeks and maybe a month elapsed without a word from the USS Intrepid. At the urging of a public affairs officer at the base, I fired off a stinging letter to the Admiral which read, "Dear Admiral Tebbetts, almost four weeks have gone by and we haven't even had so much as a bottle wash up to the back door of WKFD, the Radio Lighthouse, let alone a taped program from your USS Intrepid."

Within a few days, a tape recording arrived at the radio station direct from the ship. I learned later that the Admiral had radioed from Rhode Island to the flagship of the Atlantic Fleet, even using the quote about "not even a bottle washing up" and demanding an immediate response. A few weeks after at a cocktail party on the base, I found myself standing next to the Admiral at the bar, ordering a drink.

"Well, did you get your tape?" the Admiral asked with a wink.

It's this kind of relationship between radio owners and their newspeople that brings the desired result. Without the station's dedication and working relationship with the navy, Admiral Tebbetts would never have put his name on the line to excoriate his fellow navymen at sea.

The Hilltoppers with Jimmy Sacca became one of the most popular recording artists in the country in 1952 when their Dot recording, *Trying*, caught on, and for 18 weeks was the #1 song. The Hilltoppers were a hit! They didn't even have an on-stage routine or attire. The group wore sweaters and campus-type beanies and recorded one hit after another, including *Only You*, *P.S. I Love You*, *Marianne*, etc.

Touching the Stars

Don McGuire is a name I heard often in Pikeville, because of a local businessman who had met Don and always talked about the Pikeville connection. Don and another member of the recording group were drafted into the Army. While in uniform, they were only allowed to join the group for occasional appearances. In fact, in those pre-television days, the Hilltoppers sent two singing groups around the country on appearance. Don and the original members would unite for a TV show in New York to perpetuate the group's image during the Korean conflict.

McGuire was stationed in Baltimore, Maryland. Arriving in New Jersey during the summer of 1955, I attempted to contact him for an exclusive interview with the Hilltoppers. When I reached Don, he was receptive to doing an interview at his home after I mentioned the Pikeville connection.

"Let's do the interview here Saturday morning," he suggested.

Two days later, as my car reached the top of the Delaware Memorial Bridge, I encountered a problem. My car conked out as I coasted to a stop at the toll booth. The car's transmission had become inoperative. I called Don, who lived less than an hour away and explained my quandary.

He said, "Stay where you are—I'll be right there."

I hadn't met Don yet, but I figured he would have no trouble locating me next to the disabled vehicle. I was right. The Hilltopper arrived, rescued me, and we drove back to his home. After taping the show and reminiscing about his home state of Kentucky, Don drove me to the railroad station in Baltimore where we said good-bye and I returned home to New Jersey. Two days later I returned to Baltimore to reclaim my car—fully repaired. Don McGuire was truly a star for his understanding of the desire of a young broadcaster determined to get the interview at all cost—even that of a new transmission.

Touching the Stars

In the late 50's, before the age of TV talk shows, the summer theater stage was one of the best mediums to expand your legion of fans. The Andover Summer Theatre attracted the Big Names in show business—Groucho Marx, Dorothy Lamour, Robert Mitchum, Marilyn Maxwell, Angie Dickinson and many others. Because of our special working relationship with the theatre, most of the performers were very receptive to either appearing at the studios or doing an interview at the theatre.

Mae West, the buxom blonde bombshell of the 30's, who became famous with her one liner, "Why don't you come up and see me sometime?" consented to a back stage interview after her evening performance. John Bennett, who was conducting the interview, and I went back stage to meet Miss West.

I couldn't wait to get a glimpse of this sex legend, and I confess I was sadly disappointed when the first words out of her mouth were, "What questions are you going to ask me?" Here this veteran performer of movies and stage, in her advancing 60's with her sex appeal fading quickly, was apprehensive about being interviewed by a couple of home town announcers with a tape recorder and mike. Dorothy Lamour, the darling of the Bob Hope and Bing Crosby road movies, also appeared nervous when she and her husband visited our WNNJ studios. I guess neither was aware of the awe in which we held them.

Groucho Marx also appeared at the theatre one summer. Although we never got the opportunity to interview the funnyman, there was an incident which actually occurred at the former Cochran House Hotel in Newton.

The untold story by eye witnesses goes like this: Groucho was alone having a bowl of soup, when another customer—a woman dining with her son—observed the famous comedian from across the dining room. After a short period of time, the woman couldn't resist any longer.

Touching the Stars

As she approached Groucho she excitedly said, "Aren't you Groucho Marx?" Groucho nodded his head and kept slurping his soup.

The woman said, "I couldn't be sure because I didn't see the cigar."

Gruffly, Groucho replied, "Lady, how the hell can I enjoy my soup and smoke a cigar at the same time?" Visibly shaken, the embarrassed woman and her small son disappeared.

In the summer of '57, Audrey Meadows was appearing in a summer stock show, while movie star Elaine Stewart, was in rehearsal for her upcoming role in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Arrangements were completed for an evening interview with both Audrey and Elaine at the theatre. Imagine, both of these lovely, talented women and little ole me taping in the living quarters. Audrey and Elaine were all mine! As it turned out, we had an audience of about 8 or 10 theatre people listening.

About midway through the taping, someone hollered "Fire on the stage!" There was a mass exodus by everyone in the room except Elaine Stewart and myself.

There we were, face-to-face, the lovely daughter of a Montclair police officer, who made it big in Hollywood starring in those romantic love scenes with actor Jeff Chandler. I did the only proper thing . . . I offered Elaine a drink. We exchanged some small talk, and within minutes—although it seemed like eternity—the theatre people and Audrey returned and we finished the taping.

Being single, and thinking about those private moments with Elaine Stewart the night before, made me debate the merits of inviting her to dinner. Why not? What did I have to lose? I reached for the phone and was soon talking again with Elaine.

"Thank you for the interview last evening," I told her. "I was wondering if you would like to join me for dinner this evening." Elaine graciously declined because of a cast party but immediately invited me to join her.

Touching the Stars

“Ron, why don’t you come as my guest to the party?” She told me where and when it was. I believe I fumbled for some excuse like maybe I would join her. I decided later that if I had to share Elaine Stewart with the rest of the cast for the evening, I wouldn’t attend.

Several nights later, Audrey Meadows was on stage. As I took my reserved seat down front, just prior to curtain time, I spotted her husband a few rows behind me—Steve Allen! Before the show started, I approached Steve, introduced myself and expressed my appreciation for the opportunity to interview his wife. Steve said he had heard about the fire and the interview. The theater lights dimmed and I again shook hands with Steve. I had just talked with one of the truly funny guys in show business who is still doing his show on television some 29 years later.

I have very fond memories of the day Don Rondo came to our studios. Rondo was a singer who burst upon the musical charts one summer in the late 50’s with a song entitled *White Silver Sands*. This former plumber turned pop singer had the hottest single in the country and was appearing at nearby Wild West City. An invitation went out to Don and he accepted. We broadcast the interview with Don and played his hit record. As we emerged from the studio, Don asked directions to the men’s room. At WNNJ, we had only one bathroom—with a leaky faucet. I showed our famous guest to the bathroom and couldn’t resist pointing to our plumbing problem. Seconds later, Don Rondo—who was riding high in popularity charts across the country—was down on his knees exploring the leak. Don immediately recognized the problem, rendered a temporary solution, and recommended we have a plumber resolve the matter. A singer/plumber who makes house calls. Don Rondo—a regular guy!

Buff Cobb, a stage actress and first wife of popular CBS *Sixty Minutes* host, Mike Wallace, arrived at our WNNJ Studios for a scheduled interview and an opportunity to promote her appearance in a summer stock production

Touching the Stars

at Lake Hopatcong Theatre. After the show, Buff was without a ride back to the theatre . . . so I volunteered. By then, obviously, there was a definite trend developing in my personality. Either I always wanted to reach out and “touch the stars,” or I was seeking a full-time chauffeur career.

Wednesday afternoons were sleepy afternoons in Sussex County. Rotarians met at noontime for lunch and usually arranged to play golf at the Newton Country Club that afternoon. Many shop keepers still closed their stores to enjoy a tradition which gave the retailers some mid-week time away from their businesses. Simpson Wolfe, co-owner of WNNJ, also owned a Cities Service Station in town, and would spend considerable time in his overalls working on cars. However, whenever he appeared at the radio station, he was generally well dressed or in nice looking casual attire.

It was almost noon as Simpson's Cadillac whipped around the corner and parked next to the service station. Russ, his trusted employee, was just about ready to turn the key when Simpson appeared.

“That's all right, Russ, I'll lock up. Got some things to do first” he said.

Minutes passed, maybe 10 or 20, while Simpson watched and waited. A shiny blue convertible pulled up to the garage door, and behind the wheel was a lovely blonde. The woman, who had been having troubles with her husband, beamed a broad smile. Simpson pushed the button to raise the automatic door. In seconds, the convertible rolled into the empty garage and onto the lift. The pair embraced in the car. Simpson hit the raise button, lifting the convertible to the very top of the garage—both the woman and Simpson were now out of sight. It was a weekly occurrence for the woman to schedule a visit to the garage and go up on the lift with Simpson. Simpson Wolfe later divorced his wife, Naomi,

Touching the Stars

and married his blonde—they are now living happily ever after.

It was the summer of 1957, and there was another Sussex County Farm and Horse Show. Wednesday evening, when the Queen was selected, was the highlight of the fair. A panel of judges would choose a new Queen from the girls who represented most of the municipalities in the County. The contestants would be escorted in convertibles and circle the ring so everyone could make their personal choice. As News Director, it was my job to be in the center ring with my trusty tape recorder, waiting for the new Queen to be crowned. I would tell the radio audience how thrilled she was to be the reigning Queen of the Fair.

Miss Hamburg, Barbara Sanders, a junior at Rider College, captivated the judges with her winsome smile, beauty and charm, and won the title, going away at the finish line. I went to work and asked the Queen, who was wearing her new tiara and looking radiant in her attire, the usual questions.

“How does it feel to be Queen of the Fair? Do you have any sisters or brothers? When will you graduate from Rider?”

As I returned to the studios late that evening with Barbara’s voice on tape, I pondered. Maybe this was going to be the start of something big!

Several weeks later, I encountered one of the Queen’s classmates and discovered over a cup of coffee that she was already pinned to a Rider man. Immediately, I lost interest and pushed aside any fantasies I might have had about the Queen of the Fair.

A year later, at the same Farm and Horse Show on a Wednesday evening, a new Queen was about to be selected. I found myself again in the center ring. Only this time Barbara and I were seated next to each other. She, as retiring Queen, was there to crown the incoming Queen. The chill of the August night air prompted me to

Touching the Stars

offer Barbara my blazer. A gallant idea—and she accepted. And after I interviewed the new Queen, Barbara and I left the fairgrounds together for a drink and late snack. It was the beginning of a beautiful relationship.

We were engaged several months later on Thanksgiving Eve, November 23, 1957. Being a traditionalist, Barbara actually expected me to get down on my knees to propose to her. Parked outside her home, I produced a diamond, then got down on my knees in the front seat of the car to propose. Our wedding day would be Saturday, April 19, 1958.

I had learned singer Vic Damone was appearing at the Copacabana in New York. To celebrate the engagement, I reserved a ringside table for my fiancée, myself, and another couple. When Damone introduced his accompanist—a fine young black piano player named Bobby Tucker—I couldn't believe it. Bobby had graduated from Morristown High School a year or two ahead of me. I excused myself and went directly to the lounge and asked to see Tucker. In a few seconds, Bobby appeared and we renewed our casual friendship. I told Bobby I had been with Damone in new York earlier this summer, and asked if I could talk with him.

Another few seconds passed and there was Vic Damone, saying, "Hello, Ron." I quickly announced my engagement and asked if he would please come to our table and meet Barbara. Vic willingly obliged, and there I was introducing the star of the show and one of the hottest recording artists in the country to my fiancée.

After exchanging pleasantries, Damone turned to the Queen and asked, "What song would you like me to sing?"

Well, I really thought Barbara was going to lose her composure. She babbled something like, "Oh, anything you'd like to sing for us would be just fine." I believe she was star-struck.

Touching the Stars

Damone departed and a short while later the Copa announcer introduced him. Some twenty minutes into the show, Vic stopped the music, turned up the house lights and said, "I would like to sing a special song for a special couple—Ron and Barbara, who are engaged to be married." Bobby Tucker led into the familiar strains of one of Damone's biggest hits, *An Affair to Remember*. Vic had another lifelong fan.

Our wedding day was a joyous one, as family and friends crowded the tiny Hamburg Baptist Church. I couldn't even stop working on our wedding day, and had arranged to tape the exchanging of the vows at the altar. Conspirators spirited my bride from the reception in what was a blatant family kidnapping. It was really family revenge for the previous deeds committed by brothers and cousins at other ceremonies. I had tucked our car safely inside the Sparta Police Station, determined to succeed in keeping the vehicle out of reach. Under duress, after flying over back roads at high speeds, Barbara revealed the hiding place and was safely returned to an anxious husband and wedding party.

Our honeymoon plans included a 12 day motor trip to Florida, the Sunshine State. After overnite stops in Trenton and Williamsburg, we were on the road again, driving through Lumberton, North Carolina. Al Kahn, my Kentucky mentor, had purchased an AM radio station in the town for \$55,000 in the late 50's. I was determined to pay him a visit. After seeing WAGR and spending a few hours with the Kahn's, we resumed our honeymoon south-bound, continuing our discussion about someday fulfilling a dream to own a radio station.

Our wedding gifts also included some wonderful cash presents. However, to insure a happy honeymoon, I arranged to borrow \$300 at a bank in Branchville. We owned a '55 Chevrolet, a rented home for \$60 a month and, without sounding corny, we knew we were going to own a radio station some day—even if we had to earn it

Touching the Stars

the “old fashioned way.” We dreamed, planned and reached for our dream.

Many years later, while attending a broadcast convention in Los Angeles, I had an opportunity to visit the Crystal Cathedral and listen to Rev. Robert Schyler. He's great! In a stirring sermon, on the day he had Franklin Roosevelt, Jr. on the platform, the minister talked about a very successful Asian businessman, who only several years prior to developing an international company was poverty stricken and living—existing—from stripping bark from trees and making home-made soup for survival.

Schuyler's profound remarks were “You've got to begin at the bottom—to believe in the top.” We were believers!

In the later fifties, the owners of WNNJ received permission to boost their power from 500 to 1,000 watts. Once the technical adjustments were made and a new transmitter in place, we prepared for our official on-air announcement. For days we ballyhooed the coming of our new and much taller radio tower to give our station greater reach and to serve a much larger area. The morning of our official sign-on, something went wrong and we were unable to get on the air.

The phones were ringing and we were trying to appease our disappointed listeners, but the one caller who I remember was a farmer from Wantage Township along the Delaware. He said the best line of the day, “I think you raised your tower too high . . . I just can't hear you this morning!”

WNNJ's General Manager, Bob Gessner, had successfully obtained an FCC license to construct a new AM radio station in Beacon, New York. Bob was in partnership in Beacon with the Dressner brothers. (Many years later Dressner, Dressner and Gessner would sell the station to Robert and Alford Lesser. I always liked the way that assignment rhymed.) A managerial opportunity was in the air!

Touching the Stars

The owners of WNNJ invited me to stop by their home after work for a talk. As News Director and the leading sales person, apparently I was a candidate for the General Manager's position. That evening I accepted the General Manager's post, the new challenges and the monetary incentives.

My new gross income would reach \$12,000 annually. With the additional income, Barbara and I focused our sights on the goal of radio ownership, sometime in the future. Right then however, with the new managerial responsibilities and state-wide exposure with fellow broadcasters in the state organization, the pursuit of owning a radio station had to be placed on a back burner. We purchased our first home in Sparta, a quaint, rustic setting with 2 1/2 acres of property.

Barbara and I had a fabulous opportunity to go to New York City to the Roosevelt Hotel and interview Buddy Morrow. The Morrow band's most remembered hit was *Night Train* and we received royal treatment, a table down front, dinner and a chance to talk and interview the RCA recording artist. After our meeting, Buddy and the band performed on tape for a savings bond show on the ABC network.

Our first born, Ronald L. Hickman the 2nd, had arrived on April first, 1959, exactly 18 days before our first anniversary. Making his debut in the nursery at Newton Hospital, he even cupped his right hand over his ear for the photographer. I was certain we had another broadcaster in the family!

Barbara retired from her accounting field to raise a family, and became the ideal mother. We were not prepared for the threatening telephone call we received six months later. Barbara often placed our son's carriage on the short sidewalk outside our Andover home, for some fresh air. A caller told us that if we valued our son's life, we should not leave the child unattended.

Touching the Stars

We were both shocked and angry at the idea of someone doing such an act, I immediately arranged to meet with the County Prosecutor, Frank Dolan. As News Director in the market, I undoubtedly alienated my share of victims in the news and might have triggered someone to want to harm our child. Precautions were taken immediately by the State Police to insure protection during the ensuing days. But nothing ever happened and there were no further incidents. The threat served as a signal to us that while we didn't live in any day-to-day danger as a broadcaster or news person, we could never be too careful. From that period on in our lives, we always took extra precautions.

CHAPTER FOUR

"It's plain that passion rather than reason rules the world."

Lin Yu Tang

New Jersey had some 45 radio stations in 1960, and by 1985 would boast of 85 commercial radio stations with more FM frequencies allocated by the FCC under the so-called 80/90 rules. Flemington, the county seat of rural Hunterdon county in central Jersey, appeared to be the ideal place to pioneer a radio station.

I called my old friend Al Kahn in Lumberton, North Carolina. "Al, it's a natural," I suggested. "Philadelphia and Trenton are far enough away and with a county population of about 75,000 and only a weekly newspaper, it would be a winner!"

Al arranged for his radio engineer to fly into a small airfield at Flemington and surreptitiously monitor the existing frequencies. He checked into a motel, set up his gear, and immediately began searching the AM dial for any unused holes on the band. The results in Flemington were very disappointing. Our energies were concentrated on only AM possibilities and there was nothing available. At the time, in 1960, FM was not a factor or even considered a good investment. Only 15 percent of the country was listening to FM. Our dreams of establishing a new AM radio station evaporated. Since we really didn't focus on the FM band, we'll never know how many millions of dollars we could have found. FM prices today would yield a very handsome return.

Some days before President John F. Kennedy was killed in Dallas, Texas on November 22, 1963, the Chief Executive had launched an agricultural swing around the nation. His first stop was at the Pinchot federal park along the Delaware River in Pennsylvania. I petitioned

Touching the Stars

the Secret Service for permission to cover the event and after the usual clearances, was granted Presidential Press Corp credentials. There were two things I remember about that beautiful day on the grounds of the former Pinchot estate. First, there were secret servicemen behind every tree and around the speaker's platform. The band played *Hail to the Chief* as President Kennedy stepped onto the podium. I remember sitting in the designated press area some 50 feet from President Kennedy and thinking how *young* he looked. Second, I could only marvel at the President's speaking ability. Kennedy, as an orator, had the power to memorize speeches verbatim. As my eyes followed the advance text, Kennedy didn't miss a beat.

On that fateful day in our history, everyone remembers exactly where they were and that gut-wrenching feeling upon hearing the news. I had just left a Rotary meeting in Branchville when the bulletin flashed on our air. "President Kennedy's motorcade has come under fire. It is believed the President has been shot."

As General Manager and President of the New Jersey Broadcasters, my primary responsibilities were to return to the station at once—but I didn't. Stunned, I continued some 9 miles north to the town of Sussex for a scheduled sales appointment. Upon arriving and realizing the full impact of the scenario in Dallas, I said good-bye and rushed back to the WNNJ studios. Four of the longest and saddest days in broadcasting had begun. Fellow managers and owners were looking for direction in programming. As conditions deteriorated and we realized the President would not survive, stations toned down the music from popular to classical, and abstained from all commercials. We gave continuous updates from our Associated Press service. With the announcement of Kennedy's death, we turned to local clergy for prayers and comforting words during the painful ordeal. I telegraphed a message of condolence to Mrs. Kennedy and her family on behalf of the NJBA. Several months later,

Touching the Stars

Jackie Kennedy sent a personalized acknowledgement in printed form.

Active in the New Jersey Broadcasters, in 1962 I became the youngest State President. A year earlier, Jaycee President Tom Sperry had asked me to serve as his press secretary. The invaluable Jaycee experience was helpful in preparing me for my new duties as leader of the NJBA. Any self-doubts were quickly dashed by my best fan and critic—Barbara Alice Hickman.

In the sixties, the government pendulum for stricter regulation on radio and television stations placed the fear of God into most broadcasters. One FCC Commissioner was rattling swords and threatening to lift licenses for relatively minor infractions. Being State President during that time wasn't exactly a dull job!

In the fall of 1963, the Federal Communications Commission wanted to make certain rule changes relating to the length or frequency of broadcast advertisements on radio. The Commission suggested adopting the National Association of Broadcasters' time standards as a federal regulation, although other limitations would also be considered. Despite the opposition to this proposal, and unfavorable editorials in many of the nation's newspapers, FCC Chairman E. William Henry, in a September speech before the International Radio and Television society, attacked present radio and television advertising practices and pointed to the need for federal time standards.

Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, House of Representatives of the Eighty-Eighth Congress, were set for November 6, 7, and 8th, 1963. On Friday, November 8th, the afternoon session reconvened at 1:30 p.m. Congressman Walter Rodgers of Texas rapped the gavel, saying, "The Subcommittee on Communications and Power will come to order for further consideration of pending business. Our first witness this afternoon is Mr.

Touching the Stars

Ronald L. Hickman, President of the New Jersey Broadcasters Association. Mr. Hickman, we are glad to have you."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman and Congressmen." I replied. "To avoid duplication this afternoon I will exercise brevity in delivering my prepared remarks to you and the Congressman."

Rodgers said, "Mr. Hickman, did you want to read the statement because, if not, we can insert it in the record, if you like and you can comment on it."

"Well, it would only take about two or three minutes, if you wish."

The Congressman capitulated, "Why don't you just go ahead and do it then. It is short, I notice."

I was not going to be denied a chance to verbally go down in the Library of Congress. So I replied, "Fine," and read the following:

"The competitive system of American Broadcasting is threatened by proposed rules to regulate advertising. Therefore, my purpose for appealing before this committee today is to illustrate the inequities in the Federal Communications proposal as they apply to New Jersey. As President of the New Jersey Broadcasters Association, I represent a total of 53 AM and FM radio stations in our state. New Jersey is unique in the sense that we do not have a commercial television station. Our broadcasting stations are truly community stations operating purely in the local community interest. New Jersey radio depends for its economic existence upon its ability to sell advertising. Radio, like all other modern media of mass communication, plays a triple role today. It is a craft, a business and a social force, particularly on the community level. Radio is supported by advertising revenue. It is up to the industry to decide how much advertising is needed to maintain good programming standards. In our association's opinion, the proposal to limit the advertising time is impractical because broadcasting, as practiced under our system of free enterprise, is flexible from

Touching the Stars

market to market, station to station and community to community. In New Jersey, we have a number of stations which operate in the resort areas of the state. To stay in business, make a profit and thereby enable them to operate in the public interest, convenience and necessity, these resort stations must make the bulk of their profit during the summer months, so as to compensate for operating at a loss during the off season months. Why does broadcasting differ from station to station? A daytime station is usually the local community station operating from sunrise to sunset. The daytime local station, in addition to a shorter operating time, has peak listening hours. People awake to the station, drive to work with the station, go to their place of business for 8 hours, and again rejoin the station on their way home from work. These peak listening hours are the times which are most saleable due to increased listenership during these hours. Hence, it is incumbent upon these stations to utilize these few hours in the broadcasting day to derive its income. Now, let us compare community to community. Most of these stations, being local, know their community's needs and program accordingly. In advertising or frequency of commercials, being a local station, they hear immediately and forcefully from fellow citizens when programming is unacceptable or indeed when commercials are too frequent, too loud, and too long. This immediate feedback to a local broadcaster enables him to program in the community's interest. The number of commercials alone do not necessarily determine or assure that a radio station is going to be good. Content, type of commercials, programming, and many other factors go into the presentation of a good station. The New Jersey Broadcasters Association is in sympathy with the aims of the Federal Communication Commission in eliminating the overcommercialization indulged in by a small number of broadcasters. However, the FCC proposal on regulating and limiting commercials, we feel, would tend to impose economic hardships

Touching the Stars

on responsible and dedicated broadcasters. We go on record today as being in favor of your proposed bill."

Mr. Rogers: "Thank you, Mr. Hickman. Mr. Hull, do you have any questions?"

Mr. Hull: "No questions."

Mr. Rogers: "Mr. Broyhill?"

Mr. Broyhill: "No questions, sir."

Mr. Rogers: "Mr. Hickman, I noticed here that you say that New Jersey is unique in the sense that 'we do not have a commercial television station.' Do I understand that there is not a television station in New Jersey except the educational?"

Mr. Hickman: "That is correct, speaking of VHF. There is an application for a UHF channel in Wildwood, but there are no commercial VHF television stations in New Jersey."

Mr. Rogers: "Why is that?"

Mr. Hickman: "Well, I believe it was the Commission's decision to convert Channel 13, which was at that time a commercial channel, to grant them an educational license. This has been secured, perhaps, within the last 13 months."

Mr. Rogers: "Where do you get your television? From New York?"

Mr. Hickman: "Primarily New York. There are a few Philadelphia channels which come into the area."

Mr. Rogers: "Do you get those by community antenna systems?"

Mr. Hickman: "No sir, direct transmission."

Mr. Rogers: "Yes. Yes, of course, that is right. Well, that is very unusual. I did not think there was any state in the union that did not have any commercial television stations. Here is one, right in the heart of the most populous area. Thank you very much, Mr. Hickman, for your statement."

Mr. Hickman: "Thank you!"

Mr. Rogers: "Our next witness is Mr. Jack Brown, of the North Carolina Association of Broadcasters."

CHAPTER FIVE

"Most of us never embrace fully, even those we love."

Leo Buscaglia

A brand new AM radio station was approved by the FCC for the community of Pompton Lakes, New Jersey. The applicants were Bob and Joan Kerr, both with backgrounds in showbusiness, who had sought permission to build a daytimer in the county in which they lived. Bob, in his 60's, was the prototype of the large, cigar-chomping, tough-as-nails, wheeler-dealer. His claim to fame was that he was responsible for bringing the radio *Amos and Andy* team to NBC in New York. Joan Kerr was an attractive woman who earned some recognition singing on the Red and Blue network radio shows in Richmond, Virginia and who appeared in nightclubs. Joan was going to be her husband's new radio star on WKER.

I met Bob and Joan at a State Broadcasters Convention in 1962, and was interested in their struggle to build a station in Passaic County. Kerr needed someone younger, with both sales experience and a news background. A meeting was arranged to discuss some possibilities. I accepted the General Manager's position and an opportunity to purchase stock in the station. The offer was 10% for \$10,000. I resigned from the Newton station, sold our home in Sparta, and prepared to relocate in a rented home in Pompton Lakes.

In the following weeks, I would handle my WNNJ managerial duties, on-air commercial work and sales, then disappear during lunch time to drive 45 minutes into the Pompton Lakes market to sell charter advertisers for our new station. Weekends were largely devoted to planning New Jersey's newest station. It was not in Flemington, but it was brand new and Barbara and I owned a piece of the rock . . . 10%, we were told.

Touching the Stars

One Sunday afternoon, the Kerrs drove to our Sparta home with the contract papers and revealed that we owned not 10% but 5% of the station.

"Five percent?" I quizzed Kerr. "What happened to the other five percent?"

Kerr flatly denied any representation of stock offerings of 10% for \$10,000. He maintained the stock offer was based on a valuation of the construction permit of \$250,000. I had resigned from my position in Newton, we had already sold our home and there was no turning back. The Kerrs left early. The domestic scene was anything but tranquil that evening. Out of one job and ready to begin a new one, our family had been enlarged with the addition of two more fine boys, David and Tod . . . and the worry that we were possibly in partnership with a crook. Other than that, there was a future, but we were not sure what it was going to be.

In 1965, at the NAB Convention in Chicago, Bob Kerr and I arrived in the Windy City on a late Saturday afternoon American Airlines flight and attempted to check in at the Hilton Hotel. By design, and largely due to Kerr's Scottish ancestry, Kerr tried to talk his way into our assigned room at midnight, which, starting Sunday, April 7th, was the date of our confirmation. We were staying through Wednesday. If the room was vacant upon our arrival, Kerr and I would enjoy the occupancy from midnight on Sunday, compliments of the Hilton.

This time the ploy failed, as someone occupied our room for the night and we spent Saturday evening visiting hospitality suites throughout the Hilton. Beginning at midnight and every hour up until 3 a.m., Kerr called room 2111 and we would take turns dialing and would ask the occupant the question "Is Bob Kerr there?" or "May I please speak with Bob Kerr?"

The tone of the voice at the other end became progressively more annoyed, and there was a final 3 a.m. response, "No, Kerr is not here!" and he slammed down

Touching the Stars

the receiver. Kerr and I went across town and checked into another hotel for the evening a few miles from the convention scene.

Sunday morning, after a late breakfast, we took a cab back to the Hilton for our official check-in around noon. As we reached 2111 with our bellhop and luggage, the door was opened and a weary hotel guest was just leaving. He looked at the imposing Kerr and said, "You must be Bob Kerr . . . they've been calling for you all night." The unidentified Hilton guest departed as we settled into our room. Kerr beamed from ear to ear while chomping on his always present cigar.

WKER, the "Mighty 1500", signed on the air October 3, 1963—in the black. We had 41 charter advertisers, and Kerr's promotional talents drew Congressmen, mayors, and other local personalities into the limelight of opening day. Joan's voice was the first to greet the listeners at 6 a.m. inviting the audience to join us on Kerr Radio for music, news and community coverage. It was a happy day—despite my growing personal unhappiness and my increasing suspicions about the principal.

Actually, during the next five years, Bob and I worked quite well together, despite my mistrust. We'd meet with potential sponsors over lunch. I discovered a pattern in observing Kerr's gestures. Whenever Bob was lying, he would reach and touch the lobe of his right ear. Then, you could immediately reduce whatever figure he was giving the advertiser by 50% and you would have the exact amount. One day, Kerr was telling a client about his 77-acre home in West Milford. I again noticed the tell-tale gesture. The next day I visited my friendly real estate broker, Leon Feinbloom, and he allowed me to peruse his land description book. I focused on Bob's property. I found what I was looking for. Property deeded to Bob and Joan Kerr—7.7 acres of land. Instead of his usual 50% inflated number, he really told a whopper.

Touching the Stars

A rising young singing star in the entertainment world in the early 60's was Frankie Randall. A product of Clifton, New Jersey, Frankie was recording for RCA and turning out some great songs. Frankie plays the piano as well as anyone and at one point was named to be the next Frank Sinatra. As President of the NJBA, we were trying to recognize a New Jersey native for his achievements in show business and thus created our first award. I had suggested Randall's name. The committee agreed, if the recipient would appear at our convention in Atlantic City. I had about an hour to spend with Frankie before the ceremony and was really impressed with the way he handled his success and how he related to people.

In February, 1986, 22 years later, Barbara and I were in Atlantic City on a combination business-pleasure trip when I noticed Frankie Randall was appearing in the casino entertainment lineup. Randall handles all of the bookings of talent at the Golden Nugget and also performs on selected weekends. We arrived at Elaine's Lounge just before the midnight show and I sent a card backstage that we were in the audience of only 18 people, just in case he didn't recognize me. Frankie, who has remarried and is both a daddy and grandfather, is like vintage wine when it comes to his voice and piano playing. He's doing a great deal of composing new material and is taking his career in new directions. Frankie did remember, and we spent a few minutes together before and after the show renewing our acquaintance.

If Sussex County attracted the Hollywood crowd, Passaic County certainly gets good ratings for drawing some of the sports greats. Babe Ruth spent many leisure hours visiting friends in and around Passaic County during his hey day. As a local sportscaster and play-by-play announcer of the weekly "WKER Big Game of the Week" broadcasts, very often I would be asked to emcee events or banquets. The Wayne Sports organization had

Touching the Stars

arranged for a special speaker for the evening, Don Maynard, of the New York Jets. After accepting the toastmaster's assignment, I immediately telephoned the Jets Sports Information office in New York and requested information on their outstanding receiver. I knew the Jets were enjoying an excellent season, but didn't think they were enroute to the Super Bowl. Maynard, who later became one of the game's greatest receivers, ended in the record books with 633 receptions. Only Charlie Taylor eclipsed him with 2 more receptions—635. Maynard compiled a total of 11, 834 yards—averaging 18.7 yards a reception and a total of 88 touchdowns.

The evening of the banquet, I arrived at the restaurant in plenty of time to obtain the program and make some copious notes for any extemporaneous remarks. It was becoming a very special evening. Some 400 youngsters, parents and supporters were in attendance. After welcoming everyone, I sat down next to Don Maynard for some dinner conversation.

Don appeared to weigh about 170 pounds soaking wet and, as I introduced the New York Jet to the enthusiastic audience, I tried to imagine how he could accomplish everything he had achieved in professional football without being annihilated on the gridiron. Maynard talked about growing up in Texas, and playing high school and college football later at Western Texas. Throughout his entire high school and college playing days, Don said his father never came to see him play in a game. And Don went on to relate that although he knew his father loved him, his dad never put his arm around him and said, "Don, I love you."

Leo Buscaglia, in his book *Loving Each Other*, says, "Most of us never embrace fully, even those we love. Interestingly, we seem to reserve our embraces for sexual acts, for moments when we have just won a TV jackpot, or for tragic moments in our lives in hospital rooms or at funerals. It is natural for us to want to show affection.

Touching the Stars

But for some mysterious reason, we equate tenderness with sentimentality, weakness and vulnerability.”

Don’s message that evening was loud and clear, and I observed a lot of parents embracing their youngsters as they left the restaurant.

An organizer of the event told me that Don needed a ride home to the Jet’s Stadium in New York. I volunteered. I phoned Barbara and informed her that I was going to New York with some very precious cargo—Jets receiver Don Maynard—and I would explain later.

Maynard was extremely appreciative of my gesture and we spent an enjoyable 90 minutes together driving across the Hudson. It was after midnight as we pulled into the stadium where Don had parked his car. Don promised to send me autographed footballs for my three sons as a token of his gratitude.

He gave me his phone number and said, “Let me know if I can ever help you.”

A couple of months later, and the Jets had made it to the Super Bowl to face the Baltimore Colts as a 17 1/2 point underdog. We jumped on the Superbowl bandwagon and sold a local beer distributor a pre-game show with exclusive interviews with you-know-who. We enjoyed his insight into the big game and behind the scenes conversation about his fellow players. The Jets won 27 to 23, that Super Bowl Sunday, and I couldn’t help think, as I watched Maynard make those great catches and Joe Namath raise his finger to tell everyone the Jets were #1—the world champions—that Don was not only great for football but a real credit to the human race.

Joe Louis, the former heavyweight boxing champion of the world, was returning to Pompton Lakes where he had trained for many title fights. Max Schmelling, Jack Dempsey, Billy Conn, and many other contenders were the images of the past glorious days in the ring with the Brown Bomber. As a youngster in the late 40’s, I remember walking a couple of miles to the Mt. Kemble fire sta-

Touching the Stars

tion in Morristown to watch the Louis-Conn fight on a tiny TV set. The picture I had of Joe Louis was bigger than life and today, I was getting to meet the Champ! Ron, my oldest son, and I were going together. When he asked, "Dad, who's Joe Louis?" I realized there was a generation gap to be filled. We read the encyclopedia and learned the Joe Louis story all over again.

Pompton Lakes went all out for the Champ and gave him a warm reception, a key to the city, a parade and finally, a nostalgic stroll through the former training camp. Louis seemed visibly moved by the visit. Surrounded by officers and standing in the hallway of one of the buildings, we were face to face with the tape rolling. Joe reminisced about his days when he was training for the title fights. One of my fears was that I would be unable to engage the Champ in interesting conversation. I remember Joe, a sharecropper's son, saying to the interviewer after every fight, "I want to say hello to my mudder and my fadder."

I only wanted to capture the moment. Someone had told me about Louis's visit to Germany and I thought this might be an ice-breaker. "Champ—tell me about your visit to the Berlin Wall." I asked.

Well, the response couldn't have been better. Louis, countering with verbal lefts and rights, let me have it. He told me how a visit had been arranged for him to tour the Berlin Wall. As the Champ climbed up a stairway to a viewing platform and peered through binoculars across the Iron Curtain into East Berlin, there were a dozen or more East German soldiers also looking through binoculars and waving to the Champ. He waved back. The soldiers had been alerted that the former heavyweight Champion of the World was in town, and even *they* didn't want to miss the opportunity!

In 1965, there were some anxious moments in Pompton Lakes when the big flood hit the area. Relaxed zoning laws had enabled hundreds of families to develop homes along the Ramapo and Pequannock Rivers.

Touching the Stars

When the flood crested, several lives were lost, and millions of dollars of damage had occurred. The President declared it a disaster area. The station arranged for a rowboat to ferry the announcers and staff to the studios, which were marooned on a tiny knoll. The town fathers had the foresight to require our broadcast facilities to be constructed on the second floor of the split-level building, much to the chagrin and anger of founder Kerr. We requested and received permission to broadcast 24 hours a day from the FCC during the emergency.

From our production studio, we became the Flood Control center. We established immediate and constant contact with the local agencies, mayors, Red Cross, etc, and became the focal point of information for the beleaguered residents.

Gov. Robert Rowe toured the devastated zone by helicopter. Within minutes, he was on the phone from the airport talking with us about the impact of the flood as well as directly to the stricken citizens—radio during its finest moment. I still remember one gentleman who lived not too far from the station in the affected area. After the flood, he elected to remain with his house the first and worst night. With his personal belongings and other worldly possessions raised to the second floor, he sat on the kitchen table, with rushing water swirling at his feet, listening to WKER for every bit of information. He said it was traumatic, yet the warm, reassuring voices, and the constant touch with local radio helped him make it through the night.

CHAPTER SIX

*"This is fun . . . and you get **paid** for doing this?"*

Jim Bouton

One of the holiday promotions sponsored by our station was a live Christmas show, which originated for five weeks from the store window of Stern's department store, in Wayne's Preakness shopping center. Beginning Thanksgiving weekend, we would broadcast a 2-hour show with interviews, guests and Christmas music every Saturday morning. Our "Little Miss Christmas" contest attracted young girls from age six to ten and we would select a winner on the final broadcast.

Jim Bouton, the controversial pitcher of the New York Yankees, was at the zenith of his baseball career, and becoming involved in the community of Wyckoff where he lived with his family. Bouton was the chairman of the Muscular Dystrophy chapter and was scheduled to come to our studios to record some public service messages.

We talked about the season and got down to business. The Yankee pitcher really enjoyed the recording session. After the taping, he seemed to be anxious to do more.

"Jim, would you like to record a couple of station sports promotional announcements?"

Jim agreed and I soon had him back at the mike. "Hi, this is New York Yankee Jim Bouton. When I'm driving to and from Yankee Stadium, I tune into WKER Radio, the Mighty 1500."

Jim was so excited about broadcasting that day, he turned to me and said, "This is fun . . . and you get *paid* for doing this?"

I said, "Don't tell everybody, Jim, or I'll be out of a job."

Several years later, Bouton launched a broadcasting career as a New York TV sportscaster and authored *Ball Four*. Two weeks later, I telephoned Jim and invited him to appear live on our Christmas show in Wayne. He

Touching the Stars

appeared, right on cue, walking on as he had strolled from the Yankee bullpen so many times.

I produced a catcher's mitt, pitcher's glove, and a ball, and we played hardball for the audience. I got to catch Bouton's fast ball!

Sometimes you didn't have to reach for the stars—they actually touched *you*. In broadcasting, you never know who's going to pay you a visit. One weekday afternoon, a surprise guest appeared in the lobby.

"I'm Les Paul," the gentleman said as we welcomed him to WKER. We all remembered the great music Les and his wife, Mary, recorded, and we were delighted to have Les walk into our studios. Les and Mary had recorded one hit after another, *How High the Moon*, *Bye Bye Blues*, *Vaya Con Dios* and so many others, and I remember playing the hits on the air from Pikeville to Newton.

Les and I went to my office and we talked about music, about his recording studios at his nearby home in Mahway, divorce, and the break-up of his professional partnership with Mary Ford. In the late 40's, an exciting version of *Lover* swept across the country. It was this recording by Les Paul that rocketed him to the heights of fame, and began an era in which he and Mary were to reign as "Mr. and Mrs. Music." Few people have had a greater impact on the recording business than Les Paul. He pioneered the use of over-dubbing and special recorded effects. He created new sounds and new recording concepts. Les even reminisced about how he first started playing and singing on a local radio station out west in Idaho. His nickname in those days was "Idaho Red."

That evening, over dinner, I told Barbara that we had had a very special guest visit WKER that day—"Idaho Red." After letting her guess for a while who that could have been, I finally told her it had been Les Paul.

On a sales call in nearby Oakland a few weeks later, I stopped by a public swimming lake to discuss adver-

Touching the Stars

tising with the owner. The guard at the gate house had someone in the office with him, and I introduced myself.

The stranger said, "Hi, Ron, how's the radio business?" For the life of me, I didn't immediately recognize him, but he had a familiar show business presence. It was singer Lou Monte. He had recorded some popular novelty songs with RCA including *The Sheik of Araby* and *Wake Up Mary—We Need the Sheets for the Table*. Lou lived in Oakland and was enjoying a few leisurely minutes with a friend.

At dinner that evening, I asked Barbara, "Guess who I met in Oakland today?"

"Idaho Red?"

"No, singer Lou Monte."

The 1968 Thunderbird Golf Classic was going to be held at nearby Upper Montclair Country Club. Jack Nicklaus would be there. So would Arnold Palmer and Billy Casper. There would be no television coverage of the event—why not broadcast radio coverage?

I reached the promoters and hit paydirt! The promoters were eager for publicity and liked our suggestions for live WKER coverage from the Clubhouse. They even offered me an opportunity to join two other amateurs and golf professional Phil Rodgers for 18 holes of Pro-Am fun.

It was a picture postcard day! As our foursome reached the first tee, we posed for the traditional photograph. Phil asked me, "What's your handicap, Ron?"

"Eighteen." I replied.

We teed off on the relatively easy par four hole. Luckily, I rolled in a 25-footer for my par, and with my stroke, our team went one under par after one hole. On the second hole, I managed to get on the par 5 green in three, just missed dropping a long birdie putt and tapped in for another par. Our team was two under at the end of the holes.

Rodgers announced as we walked off the green, "We've got a ringer."

Touching the Stars

My true golf game finally returned on the very next hole when I hooked a tee shot and found all kinds of difficulty. Our amateur team, along with Rodgers, placed tied for fourth just out of the awards, but it gave us a great deal of satisfaction considering the large field. There was a great field of professionals in the '68 Thunderbird, with Nicklaus and Palmer locked in one of their classic duals. Down the home stretch, it was Bob Murphy, the friendly Irishman who pulled off another victory with his great golf. Each day we would go live every 30 minutes with updates and interviews with golfers and guests. Bob Kerr generally was a big pain in the ass for the entire tournament because he didn't really appreciate the game and was constantly promoting Joan at every opportunity—and Joan knew less about golf than her husband.

I strolled into the locker room and found the golf greats willing to talk, including Arnold Palmer. The PGA was going through some real growing pains at that particular period and Palmer was under a great deal of pressure from all sides. Moments before we got the tape rolling, the Happy Puerto Rican, Chi Chi Rodriguez, was tugging at my leg.

"Hey, interview me . . . I taught him everything he knows about the game." And Rodriguez was pointing at Palmer with a big grin. That was Chi Chi then—and that's Chi Chi now—still playing on the regular tour and now competing with the seniors.

Doug Sanders, the gregarious Georgian, had a reputation on the tour as a lady's man. And he certainly didn't disappoint anyone! A beauty pageant titleholder was smothering Doug everywhere he went—both on and off the course. Doug would hit the ball, glance over to the roped area and ogle his beautiful companion. And she'd ogle back from behind the ropes! I followed Doug around for 18 holes during Pro Am day, and watched the sideshow.

Doug appeared on the radio with us for an interview after his very arduous round. *Golf Digest* said about

Touching the Stars

Sanders, "The secret of Doug's consistently low scores is his controlled compact swing." Doug sure didn't share any of his romantic secrets that he used to charm his lady friend.

Rabbits, or unknown rookie golf professionals, were easy to interview and they enjoyed the notoriety. One of our favorites was Tom Shaw, a personable young professional from Golf, Illinois. Tom had suffered a fractured back in a car accident and was on the rebound. Three years later, Shaw reached the top of the PGA tour with wins in Hawaii and, later that same year, with a victory at the Pleasant Valley Classic in Sutton, Massachusetts.

The very next day, after his triumphant win at Pleasant Valley, Tom and a number of professionals were scheduled to appear at Point Judith Country Club in Narragansett, Rhode Island for a one day shootout. Golf's hottest player reached the putting green and began his workout. All eyes were on Tom. As I approached the green and Tom recognized me, he hustled over and renewed our friendship from Upper Montclair days.

The young blonde golfer who earlier had been seeking media attention had finally found success, but this didn't affect his public relations instinct to greet a familiar face. I interviewed Tom and reached in my pocket for another prepared radio station promotional announcement.

"Tom," I said, "How would you like to know your voice is on the air every day? Would you like to record a station promotional announcement?"

"Let's do it," said the new reigning winner of the Pleasant Valley Classic. And, standing off the putting green, we recorded the spots.

"Hi, this is Tom Shaw—for the very latest golf results and interviews—stay tuned to 1370—the Radio Lighthouse, WKFD."

Jimmy Durante probably said it succinctly and honestly from a star's point of view. "Be sure you treat everyone the same all the way up the ladder—because they're going to be the same ones you'll meet all the way down."

Touching the Stars

After finishing our round of golf in the Pro-Am event, I checked in at our broadcast table inside the plush clubhouse. It was time for more interviews to climax a fabulous day!

Gordon MacRae, who crooned in a surrey with the fringe on top in *Oklahoma*, appeared in other films and had recorded some great songs on Capitol Records in the late 40's and early 50's, had played in a foursome just ahead of us. Gordon entered our lounge area and took a seat with friends near our broadcast section.

I approached MacRae, introduced myself and invited him to join us on the air for an interview. MacRae's career in 1968 probably wouldn't have permitted him to get arrested, let alone get some solid bookings. But people have to keep up appearances, so Gordon jumped to his feet, glanced at his watch as though he was extremely busy and informed me he had an engagement at Shawnee on the Delaware later that evening.

"Where do you want me?" said Gordon, as we walked across the room to our broadcast table. Larry Fox, one of our sportscasters whose voice and knowledge of the game added immeasurably to our coverage, had fun talking with MacRae.

Many years later, at the Newport Naval Officer's Club, I interviewed Gordon's former wife, Sheila MacRae. She enjoyed a great career, including working with Jackie Gleason on the TV series. She is a very talented lady. Gordon MacRae died at the age of 64 in February, 1986, after battling both cancer and alcoholism.

In 1969, the New York Yankees held a pre-season press conference luncheon at the old Ballantine Brewery in Newark, New Jersey, and a number of Yankees and coaches would be available. As I entered the old brewery building and reached the second floor, I found a coat room right off the hallway. I placed my coat on a hanger and turned around—only to be face-to-face with Yogi Berra!

Touching the Stars

“Hi, I’m Yogi Berra,” said the Yankee with a big hand and a soft voice. We exchanged introductions and walked down the hallway together, chatting as we entered the banquet room. I couldn’t help but think—Earl Combs, Jim Bouton and now Yogi Berra.

It is interesting that the game of golf would also be the medium which brought me together with my future business partner. In 1962, as a member of the Newton Country Club (and before relocating to Pompton Lakes), one of the members, David Adler, suggested I meet his brother. David was Superintendent of Schools in Newton and his brother, Lou Adler, was a CBS radio reporter and broadcaster in New York. A couple of weeks later, David invited his brother to Newton and played a round of golf. In fact, the two of us hit it off very well. David was perceptive to see that Lou and I shared a mutual love for our profession.

As we reached the 16th green, David said, “Why don’t you two guys get together and buy your radio station?”

The seed was planted right then and there. Within six years, Adler and Hickman would form Adman Radio Company and own a 500-watt radio station in Wickford, Rhode Island. During the ensuing years, Lou and I would continue to play golf and our families would socialize, while we searched for a radio station which was within our comfort zone and also was a nice place in which to live geographically.

CBS announced plans to introduce an all-news format and named Lou Adler as morning anchor. The first day of their new format, a low-flying small airplane crashed into their radio tower outside the city, killing the pilot and delaying their debut as an all-news station.

Meanwhile, at WKER, there was growing discontent by the Hickmans with the dishonesty of my associate, Bob Kerr. This led me to take steps to protect our investment.

Touching the Stars

As a minority stockholder, we made every effort to document the flow of company checks and transactions. As president, the one serious mistake made by Kerr was to allow my wife, Barbara, to keep the books and handle the billing. She had majored in accounting at Rider College and was excellent at “counting beans.”

Barbara easily detected how Kerr was misappropriating funds from the company for his own personal use. Copies of every check were recorded and stashed away for future use when the inevitable would happen, and we would wish to sever our affiliation with Kerr.

Adler and I spent numerous weekends on the road looking at stations, meeting brokers and inspecting one undesirable situation after another—from Oswego to Amsterdam to Orange, Massachusetts—to no avail. Adler, now hosting the All-News morning slot, was enjoying greater popularity in the Big Apple. His on-air-work and voice print had become as welcome in the morning as that first cup of coffee. Lou would eventually leave WCBS in 1981 and join WOR Radio as the highest paid radio anchor/news director in the country. His salary is reportedly over \$350,000. Not bad, considering his salary was barely \$65,000 when we were partners.

In January, 1969, Lou and I made arrangements with a media broker to inspect an independent daytime station in Wickford, Rhode Island. WHFD was exactly the kind of property we had been looking for. The antenna was situated in a salt water cove, affording the 50 watt station the opportunity to radiate a marvelous signal around Narragansett Bay. The salt water covering our radials was like having 50,000 watts of power—well, almost. It was a strong selling point and deluded the typical young agency buyer who would single out the station’s power as a deterrent. It was located in the charming village of Wickford—home of the annual Wickford Art Festival, the Quonset Point Naval Air Station, and several USS

Touching the Stars

aircraft carriers, including the USS Intrepid and the USS Wasp.

Newport, the charming "City by the Sea," was a bonus. Only 12 to 13 air miles from our studios, we would be able to project a primary radio signal over a city population of 33,000. And the only station on the island was WADK, Newport. We drove to Newport, immediately liked everything we observed, and made a written offer to purchase WKFD for \$136,000.

I phoned Barbara, "Honey, we've just bought a radio station." I assured her she would love the area and that we would return the next weekend.

Our attorneys drafted the paperwork to enter into a formal agreement and a month later later we met with the seller in New York to sign the document. Adman Radio would soon own a station!

My employment contract with Kerr allowed me to terminate my managerial relationship, providing I gave the company 90 days notice. It was an inordinate amount of time for someone to stay around a station when his interests were elsewhere.

The stock ownership was another story. Who would be interested in buying less than 10 percent of the stock in a closely held family company? AM radio stations were still dominant in those days and professional opinions placed the value of WKER at \$750,000. Kerr received my resignation news while vacationing in Florida and returned to Jersey within a couple of weeks.

Cordially, Kerr walked into my office and said, "What the hell are you doing to me? Here I sit with my cock in my hands—and you're going off to Rhode Island." I wanted to laugh because it was a funny line, but I didn't. I assured him that we could make the transition smoothly.

When I asked him, "How about my stock, Bob?" he was prepared for battle.

"I'll buy it back from you for \$18,000." said Kerr.

"You're going to buy it back for \$75,000!" I fired back. "I figure the station is now worth \$750,000 and I expect my

Touching the Stars

share." Kerr muttered something and stormed out of the office. War had been declared!

Over the next few weeks, before my very eyes, I was quietly deposed as manager. Responsibilities were re-assigned to two other working stockholders. As I reached the final day as General Manager, I viewed the options. Either Kerr had no intentions of buying back our stock, or Kerr was going to give me the ole' NBC humiliation treatment. He did both. Hickman would not be replaced by another General Manager. At NBC many years earlier, Kerr had arrived one morning at work only to find his desk, chair and personal belongings in the hallway. Kerr was told by the network that they needed his office and he would have to work in the hallway. Kerr resigned.

It was my final moment of glory at WKER—the radio station founded by the Kerrs and developed by all of us, energized and in black ink from the very first day—and it was time to say goodbye. Kerr arrived and firmly requested my keys, credit cards and a few other items.

I refused to surrender a thing and said, "Bob, I am still a stockholder in this company and have every right to walk out of here with the items you requested until my stock has been purchased."

Kerr's ploy was to see if I could accomplish the purchase of WKFD without the use of the stock money. Our application at the FCC was moving slowly and the stock issue was nowhere near being resolved.

We loaded our personal treasures and followed the moving van 176 miles through Connecticut into Rhode Island. Our profit from the sale of our Pompton Lakes home gave us about \$15,000 extra. With the assistance of both a bank loan and family loan, we managed to come up with the \$26,000 needed to buy our 50% share of the Wickford Station.

On a visit to New York to work with Lou Adler on pre-takeover plans, I arrived at the Black Rock. The elevator reached the 16th floor and I stepped into the newsroom.

Touching the Stars

Lou was preparing to go back on the air for his 1 to 2 p.m. air shift. We went into the studio. Lou reported the events of a typical day around New York City—two shootings, one rape, one political scandal, etc. When he broke for commercials and turned off the mike, the two of us would center our conversation on our exciting plans in Wickford. Talking up the hourly network news . . .

“At the tone, it’ll be 2:00. This is WCBS, New York. I’m Lou Adler.”

One of the perks for early morning anchormen at the CBS is free parking—right in front of the skyscraper. As Lou unlocked the doors of his Buick Riviera, he glanced over the pedestrian traffic hurrying by.

“Do you recognize that face?” asked Lou. An unshaven, middle age, slightly inebriated man wearing a topcoat shuffled past us.

“That’s Dana Andrews—the actor. He walks by every day.” said Adler.

Sure enough, the movie actor who had starred in so many great Hollywood films was just another bum lost in the Great White Way. What kind of calamitous events led to the dumping of Dana Andrews onto the cold sidewalks of New York City? Dana starred with Donna Reed in the Western movie *Three Hours to Kill*. The sheriff told him he had until sunset to get out of town. If Dana were playing a movie role that day, he couldn’t have played the part any better. A tarnished star!

Less than an hour—that’s about all it took for Lou and me to arrive in Yonkers where the Adlers lived. Actually, the Yonkers-Bronxville town line is dissected by Pondfield road. For those affluent New Yorkers who prefer the Bronxville address, even though they reside in Yonkers, they make sure they identify with the proper address.

Lou, who started his day at 3 a.m., said to me, “How about a drink before we get started?” Lou’s wife, Thalia, was not at home, and as we settled in to do some work, Lou’s search became more frantic.

Touching the Stars

"God damn her—where the hell did she hide the liquor bottles?"

After a brief search, Lou's wife was determined not to let happen to her husband what had happened to Dana Andrews.

The new Newport Bridge had been under construction for almost six years and was scheduled to open on June 19, 1969. Lou and I conceived the idea on one cold February evening while dining at Christie's Restaurant in Newport to broadcast the bridge opening. Bill Christie liked the idea and offered to sponsor the show. We had our first sponsor! The idea fermented until June, on a Wednesday afternoon, four days before the bridge was scheduled to be formally be dedicated. Lou and I were still optimistic we could close on the station and be a part of this exciting, historic monument in Rhode Island history. The \$64-million dollar super-structure would link both sides of Narraganset Bay and forever change the future growth of the area. While vacationing from his on-air duties at CBS, Lou was working behind the scenes, waiting for FCC approval. We stopped by the Congregational Church to see an old friend, Rev. John Dorney. Dorney and I had been friends back in Sussex County when I was news director and Dorney was the morning preacher on the air. John had also unsuccessfully attempted to organize the dairy farmers in North Jersey and took them out on a strike. The situation got quite messy and Dorney's life was even threatened. He kept a loaded revolver in his desk drawer at the parsonage—just in case.

Our Washington attorney, Lee Knauer, reached us at the church and shared the happy news. "The FCC has approved the license transfer. We'll close Friday in Providence."

Unheard of, I thought, realizing our counsel and good friend from Morristown High School days would come through. We prepared the commercials for the bridge

Touching the Stars

broadcast, sold another sponsor, ordered the telephone lines, purchased supportive newspaper advertising and technically had everything ready for the historic opening. Immediately after the 7 p.m. closing, Lou and I drove directly to our newly acquired radio station in Wickford to prepare for the next day's big show and to illuminate "The Radio Lighthouse"—a new dimension to a New England tradition.

Opening day was a thrilling event. Festival Field was the site for the speeches and dignitaries, while we also established another remote point at the foot of the bridge in Jamestown. Senator John Pastore, Gov. Frank Licht, former Gov. John Chaffee and many others paraded past our WKFD microphones and talked about this glorious day. WKFD was the only radio station in the world broadcasting the event live, while the Outlet, Cap Cities and the rest of the ten TV and radio stations were sitting on their tape recorders. They all got caught with their pants down by a tiny 500 watter in Wickford!

Our only local competitor, WADK, a daytimer in Newport, was hosting a studio talk show where the announcer was trying to explain to his audience why the Newport station was not on the scene and a WKFD from Wickford was on the air! Lou's fellow announcers at CBS, Bob Glynn, Bob Hite and Dave Campbell, were really helpful and, as a favor to Lou, freely supplied their mature, network voices with customized WKFD commercials and station promotional announcements. Combined with Lou's talent and the new staff, WKFD hit the air with a network quality that most small stations are unable to achieve.

Our next big coup came shortly after our June sign-on. The USS Intrepid was returning home from a six-month tour of duty and I was in the audience at the docks at Quonset Point Naval Air Station. Taping Gov. Frank Licht, anxious wives, and recording the Navy Brass Band, we approached the appointed hour of 1 a.m., but

Touching the Stars

no ship. The sun was shining brilliantly—not a cloud in the sky except one or two banks of fog.

The public address announcer reported “We regret to inform you that the USS Intrepid has run aground—off Jamestown, and will be arriving late.”

I jumped in my mobile vehicle and rushed to the tip of Jamestown. Only a few hundred yards off shore, a giant fog bank had enveloped the 1,000 foot long carrier and followed her under the Newport Bridge and up the bay. She touched bottom and for 7 hours lay helplessly off shore, 2 miles from a wild reception waiting for the ship and crew at Quonset Point. I gave live accounts from the scene, estimating the time of arrival, etc., right up to nightfall. Returning to Quonset, and with only a TV crew and a Providence Journal reporter on the pier, the USS Intrepid sheepishly nudged her way to the pier. WKFD was the only radio station on the scene and we managed to obtain exclusive taped radio interviews of a hurried press conference aboard the ship. Sitting across from Admiral Richard Moore, I contemplated his future. There is an unwritten rule in the Navy that in the event the Captain should ever run his ship aground, it's axiomatic that a desk job is waiting for him in St. Louis!

There is a line from a country song that goes “I guess I could always give my hands, heart and voice another line of work—but I'm a prisoner of the broadcasting industry.” Actually, I modified the working to suit radio, but it's true. You meet the nicest people, both in the world of entertainment and the communities you serve.

One warm, summer afternoon in 1971, we had a visitor in our WKFD lobby. “Hello, Ron,” said the friendly southerner named Gabe Tucker. Gabe, who is Eddy Arnold's promotional manager, travels around the country with the singer and was in Rhode Island in advance of Arnold's appearance at the Warwick Musical Theater. We talked for over an hour about Eddy, Gabe's experiences as a faithful employee of Col. Tom Parker, Elvis Presley's

Touching the Stars

manager, and generally got acquainted. Gabe invited us to see the Eddy Arnold Show and it was the beginning of a wonderful friendship.

Every couple of years Eddy Arnold would come to Rhode Island and Gabe would always telephone in advance to arrange for radio advertising. Barbara and I would go to the trailer where the stars stayed before their performances, and we'd see Eddy Arnold and spend some time with him. The boys got to go back stage after the show and Mr. Arnold posed for picture with them.

I interviewed Eddy during one of his rare golf outings at the Point Judith Country Club in Narragansett, and thanks to Dave, we'd be backstage with the star right after the show.

In 1981, Gabe had completed his inside book about one of America's most popular singers, *Up and Down with Elvis Presley*. Gabe arrived at our FM studios in Middletown and appeared on our pre-taped Sunday interview show. Tucker tells one of the honest appraisals of Presley's career, marriage and drug troubles. Gabe witnessed the rise and fall of the singer and shared every step along the way from his discovery to his death. After we taped the show, Barbara had a New England lobster dinner ready for us on our picturesque porch overlooking the bay.

Gabe retold the stories, one by one, including Presley's gold Cadillac. If you're a real Presley fan, you'll recall Presley's gold Cadillac toured the country. Well, it was Gabe, the nice southern gentleman talking with us on the porch, who was assigned by the Colonel to drive the car across the country to promote Presley's RCA records.

When we sold WOTB-FM in Middletown and Eddy Arnold was returning for another appearance in 1985, I wondered if I would be forgotten. Gabe still calls, Barbara and I still are invited backstage after the show, and our friendship with Eddy Arnold and Gabe Tucker continues. As a young ukelele player and singer, I knew many of Eddy's earlier recordings and admired his voice.

Touching the Stars

I played his songs on the air since I broke into radio in 1952 and still played his recordings in the 80's. In his book, *It's a Long Way From Chester County*, Eddy tells about his father's death and a year later at age 11, how he stood with his mother as the bank auctioned off his family farm in Tennessee. From that humble beginning, Eddy Arnold has become a giant in the entertainment world and yet is so easy to talk with and so unpretentious. Eddy Arnold has sold over 80 million recordings. He is listed among the top four recording artists of all time in the world—surpassed only by Elvis Presley, the Beatles and Bing Crosby.

In 1985, after the show, Barbara and I were welcomed into the performer's quarters to see our friend, Eddy Arnold. Eddy included some new material in his show that evening like *Of All the Girls I Loved Before* and others. His voice was never better. We talked about Brentwood, Tennessee, where Eddy lives, and about his recent business transaction. Eddy and some associates had purchased some 600 acres of land years ago for literally a song. General Motors recently announced plans to construct a new plant in Spring Hill. A realtor approached them about selling. They did sell for over \$6 million dollars, and Eddy was beaming as he told us the story. I'll bet the motivation all began back in Chester County.

Eddy and Gabe were programmed to go out to dinner with the theatre owners and some friends, and the evening was almost about to end. I had told Eddy that one of my associates lived in Brentwood. Arnold invited me to call him the next time I got to town and he would take us to lunch. He even mentioned the restaurant. Imagine—Eddy Arnold! The Country Music Hall of Fame, the singer who recorded so many memorable hits, including *Bouquet of Roses*, *Anytime*, *Make the World Go Away*, *Misty Blue*, and hundreds more, displaying the charm and warmth that has made him a success.

Touching the Stars

In 1976, the Governor of California was running for the highest office in the land, and from his mountaintop ranch at Santa Barbara, he was employing radio to reach voters with his message.

We had received an invitation to interview Reagan at a prescribed time period, 10:30 a.m. on a weekday morning. When the call arrived, our news director, Ed Shur, would welcome Reagan and go live with a five-minute interview.

Some 15 minutes later than planned, Ronald Reagan was on the telephone ready to talk to our WKFD listeners.

Shur, who by nature could be both abrasive and arrogant because I suppose he felt intimidation was the path to success in the world of journalism, greeted the Presidential aspirant with "Mr. Reagan, you're late. We were scheduled to interview you 15 minutes ago."

Reagan seemed taken back with the comment and said, "Well, you know I have been on the telephone talking with many radio stations and I apologize for being a little late reaching you."

Sitting in my office listening to Shur, I realized either I or someone else should have been talking on the air with the future president. Privately I always felt Reagan would make a good President because I didn't feel an old sportscaster like "Dutch" would ever give us the wrong score.

Bob Hite's voice is probably best known as the prelude to the *CBS Evening News*, during the Cronkite era. Each evening, as the camera zoomed in on the familiar face of Walter Cronkite, Bob Hite was sitting in a booth a short distance away ready to deliver those famous nine words. "The *CBS Evening News*—with Walter Cronkite."

We first met in the summer of '69—a couple of weeks after Lou and I purchased WKFD. Bob's son, young Bob Hite, had finished his Marine Corp duty and was looking for a radio job. We hired him in Wickford, and while he

Touching the Stars

only stayed with us a few months, he certainly was gifted with his Dad's pipes. Young Hite worked on the air in Greenwich, Connecticut and a couple of other stops on TV in Pennsylvania before landing his current anchor news job on TV in Florida.

Hite is one of the highest paid TV anchors in the Tampa market and appears nightly on WXFL-TV, the NBC outlet. Bob's dad extended his professional support during the developmental years of the station. We would conceive a contest idea to give away Block Island. The vacation giveaway copy would be written and mailed to Hite at CBS. Within a couple of days, faster than any agency could respond, we would receive a tape in the mail fulfilling our every request. Our 500-watter had that network quality.

Hite Sr. started in broadcasting at a small radio station outside Detroit—WXYZ. The station became famous for originating such early radio shows as *The Lone Ranger*, *The Green Hornet* and other programs. Bob, along with Mike Wallace, Doug Edwards, and other later CBS announcers all worked together at the same station and market before moving to New York and careers at CBS. I remember as a youngster, every Monday, Wednesday and Friday evening at 7:30 pm, I would retreat to my bedroom, turn on the radio and stay glued to *The Lone Ranger*. Hite was one of the narrators of the program and with a very identifiable voice, recreates the "Hi Yo Silver" story wherever he is—at a party, on the boat, anywhere.

It stirs a lot of memories to hear those lines—"The fiery hoofbeats of the great horse Silver—Hi Yo Silver away!" And these many years later, the narrator is one of my best friends.

Rhode Island is blessed with outstanding leadership in the United States Senate in the persons of John Chafee and Claiborne Pell. Arriving in Rhode Island in 1969, I soon realized that there apparently had to be a striking

Touching the Stars

resemblance between myself and the former Governor, John Chaffee.

On many occasions I would meet someone on the street and they would say "Hello John (or Governor),—oh, I thought you were John Chaffee." I suppose at the time, when we were both considerably younger, there may have been a likeness.

Chaffee, a popular Governor, Secretary of the Navy during Nixon's administration and later a U.S. Senator, was easy to interview and fun to talk with. I probably have interviewed Chaffee fifteen times or more, but I remember best one of the first interviews. Chaffee was on the verge of announcing his intentions to unseat Pell, Rhode Island's senior senator, but I fully knew he would choose the time and platform for such an announcement. Chaffee was campaigning hard, but denying any intentions of running for the Senate seat. I knew Chaffee would select the propitious moment, and it wouldn't be a moment, and it wouldn't be during our broadcasts live from the fairgrounds in Wakefield. Word reached us that Chaffee was on the grounds, making his way to our microphones. We prepared to take the air—as the Former Secretary of the Navy arrived and we renewed our acquaintances.

Live, I welcomed the former Governor. "Gov. Chaffee (once a governor, always a governor), if I may, I'd like to ask you the question which is on the minds of every single Rhode Islander." I observed Chaffee cringing. "Who do you think is going to win the chess match between Bobby Fisher and the Russian?"

Well, I thought Chaffee would fall off his chair! Typically, he responded that there was much interest all around the world in the chess matches and naturally he supported Fisher . . . blah, blah, blah. He relaxed and we had a great time talking one-on-one from the fairgrounds.

Nelson Rockefeller, campaigning for the Republican party in the seventies, was scheduled to appear as the featured speaker at a luncheon at the Viking Hotel. The

Touching the Stars

media were invited to meet with Rockefeller before the luncheon. We would have a chance to ask questions and talk with the former Governor of New York and a member of one of the richest families in the world. The press was assembled in a small room off the ballroom awaiting Rockefeller's arrival.

The door opened and Nelson Rockefeller entered—and the room was aglow with that Rockefeller magic. One has a perception of an individual of Rockefeller's stature. I pictured him to be a towering giant, but he turned out to be 5'8" instead of seven feet tall, as I had imagined. Rockefeller sat down with us and fielded questions. A very personable man, Nelson made everyone in the room feel at ease.

The press conference over, the Rockefeller entourage stayed behind while the media was seated for the luncheon in the main ballroom. As Rockefeller marched to the head table, he passed by our table and with clenched fist, lightly punched me on the shoulder like I had seen him do to others so many times in his political forays and said something like, "How're you doing, pal?"

It was infectious even though you knew he didn't really care. It was his style. I did manage to send my business card to Jerry Dwyer, who was sitting next to the future Vice President, and obtained an autograph. At dinner, I had another broadcast souvenir for one of my sons—Nelson Rockefeller's autograph.

As WKFD was being accepted by the communities, Adler and I decided to explore the possibility of locating an FM frequency. Lou and I believed FM was on the horizon and we wanted to be ahead of the gold rush for FM frequencies.

The first step, in what would later become an eight year legal struggle, was taken in May, 1970, when we filed with the FCC an engineering statement in support of comments to assign FM channel 296-(107.1) to Newport, Rhode Island. Our engineer discovered a frequency

Touching the Stars

which could be assigned under FCC provisions, in that the reference point for Newport fell a fraction of a mile short of meeting minimum spacing requirements with an existing station, WAAF, Worcester, Massachusetts. The use of 107.1 at Newport would provide the first full-time local service for the community and would not affect potential new assignments on any of the pertinent adjacent channels. Along with the proposed maps, a request was on file awaiting formal action by the FCC.

One year later, the FCC approved the request, paving the way for anyone to file an application for a construction permit. Lou and I hurriedly completed the paperwork and filed with the Commission on June 13th, 1971, for a construction permit for a new FM station to serve Middletown, Rhode Island. Our strategy was to file for an unserved community, which was contiguous Middletown, thus making it difficult for the only daytime station in the island licensed to Newport to mount a valid objection.

The great land search was underway. We had to locate the antenna to meet the criteria of 64.5 miles separation between our site and WAAF-FM (107.3) in Worcester. We formed Bay Broadcasters Inc., and successfully negotiated a lease with the land-owner of a tiny parcel of land adjacent to St. George School and within our tight constraints. Neighbors abhorred the idea of a self-supporting tower situated at the end of their street and rising high in front of the oceanview of the private Episcopalian school. Other than that, I thought it was a pretty good idea.

We filed for the site with the FCC and waited for the opposition to surface. It didn't take very long. Neighbors and WADK filed at the FCC and we soon realized we would have to give consideration to alternate sites. A few tenths of a mile north, we located a rather odd-shaped parcel which would give us adequate space for a tower and building. Oddly enough, WADK, who was opposing us, had operated their studios and tower from the conti-

Touching the Stars

guous piece of land until we were on the scene. They relocated their entire operation and physically moved to Newport. WADK's objections were disallowed and the FCC granted Bay Broadcasters a waiver of short-spacing rule of 64.18 miles and not 64.5 miles, as required, from WAAF-FM, in Worcester. With the granting of a construction permit, it appeared we would be on the air in months. In the real world, this marked only the beginning of more zoning fights, court battles and frustrations which would continue for another six more years.

Meanwhile, Lou Adler had been named News Director of WCBS Radio in New York. On his very next weekend visit to Rhode Island, he informed me that his superiors expected him to withdraw from station ownership because of a conflict of interest. We were sitting outside our Wickford radio station, in his car, when Lou greeted me with the announcement. It was either sell WKFD or buy Lou's interest.

"Lou, losing you as a friend and a partner is the last thing I want to happen. But if that's the way it's going to be, so be it," I told Adler.

Only a couple of years after resolving our bitter dispute with Kerr in Pompton Lakes, I was faced with another problem—losing another partner. We had successfully challenged our former partner Bob Kerr in the New Jersey courts. Faced with mountains of evidence during his deposition at a lawyer's office in Pompton Lakes, Kerr paid us every penny of our requested \$75,000.

The strong bonds of broadcasting and friendship began to unravel during the coming months, and it wasn't too many weeks later that Adler and I were talking through our respective attorneys, in an attempt to resolve a buy-out. Barbara and I were operating the Wickford station, and within another 14 months we would acquire Adler's stock in both the AM and FM stations. After almost 12 months of silence between us, a tentative agreement was reached through our attorneys and a meeting was

Touching the Stars

scheduled in Washington to hammer out an accord. I was determined to remain, while Adler wanted out.

In Washington, at the offices of Wilkinson, Barker, Knauer and Quinn, during a morning session between lawyers, some heated words erupted before a pre-lunch compromise was reached. Adler indicated he would accept the valuation estimates of both the radio station, WKFD and the construction permit for the FM. We then broke for lunch with our mutual attorneys. As we reconvened in the afternoon, Adler's position had been altered somewhat and the stakes for a Hickman stock purchase had been raised another \$25,000 due Adler for his share of the FM valuation. My usual demeanor of a calm, even temperament turned sour. I asked for a consultation with my attorneys in a side room.

"What the hell is this action?" I shouted. "Now, after agreeing earlier this morning to a settlement, the price to buy out Adler has gone up?" I asked my attorney. "I refuse to settle—I'm going back to Rhode Island."

I telephoned Barbara and explained the new scenario. After a long discussion, our general consensus was: accept Adler's ante and close the chapter so we could get on with building the FM station. Then the Hickmans would own 100% of two stations. While passion usually rules the world, I elected to go ahead and acquire Adler's stock for the afternoon-inflated price. We would then own WKFD and the rights to build the FM station in Middletown.

Several months later, we returned to Washington to sign the final papers, which would give Adler approximately \$128,000, less liabilities, or a net of about \$78,000. Considering Adler's initial investment of \$26,000, plus the many hours of labor, time and talent he contributed to our Wickford endeavor and a 5-year purchase agreement, we decided it was a pretty fair deal after all. In 1977, we sold WKFD for \$270,000, and in 1983 we sold WOTB-FM, in Middletown for \$700,000.

Touching the Stars

At the closing, Lou's wife Talia, who presents herself as an affluent Bronxville housewife who is knowledgeable about the world around her, read the *Times* magazine the entire session. While attorneys were shuffling papers for all of us to sign, Talia read a 6-month old periodical. When it came time for passing checks, I reached across the large table to hand Lou the \$20,000 down payment check. His wife scooped up the check, stuffed it in her purse, and continued her reading. Adler and his wife got involved in a domestic dispute, with Adler demanding the check and his wife shaking her head no, and pretending she was engrossed in the *Times* magazine.

In Los Angeles, eleven years later, I met Lou at a Broadcasters Convention and we had a chance to renew our friendship. Bygones were bygones and I imagine our personal feelings were probably similar to those of a divorced couple who, after sharing many happy experiences together, go their separate ways and come face-to-face years later.

I sent Adler a note several days after the convention which said, "It's been said that to forgive is to be forgiven." I was pleased that Lou and I had the opportunity to talk again. Adler is truly one of the best radio talents in America, and is deserving of his \$350,000 salary and then some for his daily contributions to our industry.



Ron Hickman, host of the "Morning in Pikeville" show on WPKE, Pikeville, Kentucky in 1953.



Bride and Groom, Barbara and Ron Hickman, on wedding day, April 19, 1958.



"Put down zee glass," said the lovely Zsa Zsa Gabor to Ron Hickman as they pose for a photograph at her sister Magda's wedding in Franklin, New Jersey.



Joe Louis, one of the world's greatest heavyweight champions, reminisces with Ron Hickman during a nostalgic visit to his former training camp in Pompton Lakes, New Jersey.



Vincent Wasalewski, President of the National Association of Broadcasters, officially swears in the New President of the N.J.B.A. at Princeton, New Jersey.



"The Lone Ranger," CBS announcer Bob Hite, dancing with my faithful companion for 28 years, Barbara.



Eddy Arnold, relaxing between shows during a round of golf at the Point Judith Country Club in South Kingstown, Rhode Island. Ron Hickman (left) brought along his trusty tape recorder.



Grand Opening Day ceremonies at WOTB-FM, Middletown, Rhode Island. FCC Commissioner, Joseph Fogarty (second left) prepares to activate transmitter and initiate programming. Bob Hite, CBS announcer (right) joins Ron and Barbara Hickman.



In 1969, Ron Hickman (left) was often mistaken for Rhode Island Gov. John Chaffee. This photo taken in early 1980's, shows striking features of Chaffee and Hickman.



At Walter Cronkite's New York home in February, 1979, (left to right) Bob Hite, Barbara and Ron Hickman and Cronkite celebrate Hite's retirement from CBS.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"The FCC wants you and Barbara to have a Radio Station in Rhode Island"

Attorney Leon Knauer

Perhaps I was getting ahead of my story because it was one overcast, rather dull afternoon on March 23 in 1972, when the intercom message was for me. "Mr. Knauer is calling you from Washington," the receptionist said.

"Hello, Lee," I said rather intrepidly, hoping for the best news possible.

"Ron, the FCC wants you and Barbara to have a radio station in Rhode Island," said Knauer.

The final decision had been kicked out by the Commission earlier in the day and one of the legal staffers had obtained the afternoon release from the FCC. Bay Broadcasters had been granted an FM construction permit to build a new FM station. I congratulated our attorney profusely and silently left the office. I headed to Jamestown to share the exciting news with Barbara.

"What are you doing home at this hour?" was Barbara's reaction. She was working with a couple of neighborhood women in preparation for a fund-raiser drive.

"Come into the living room a moment and please sit down." I requested. With the most somber countenance I could create, I asked, "Are you ready to accept the decision of the FCC?" Barbara's face emulated my rather dejected facade and I told her the news. "The FCC wants you and me to have an FM Radio station in Middletown!" We burst into cheers, tears and a dance and all of those I-can't-believe-it kind of things. It was a time for celebration! We would soon be founders!

Don and LuAnne Fitch, good neighbors for several years, received our telephone call and gave us an invitation to come over for a celebration drink. We toasted our

Touching the Stars

good fortune and soon we had all arranged for baby sitters to watch the children and were off to Christie's Restaurant for dinner. In less than two years after filing for the station, we now owned a construction permit and had 15 days in which to select our call letters. We chose WOTB-FM. On-the Bay, Over-the-Bridge, Off-Track Betting—whatever you wanted to call them—we had a fresh sound for the bay area.

One of the Fitch children, a darling 2 1/2 year old blonde child, was a frequent visitor to our yard and porch during those days. Almost nightly, Molly would greet me in the yard and come sit on the porch for an evening chit chat. She was a charmer. Little did we know this beautiful little face would go on to become a "Face of the 80's" and win the USA title to compete in the nationally televised event. Her career as a professional model was secured with her victory January 13, 1986 of the title "Super Model of the World."

With the Jerry Lewis Cinemas popping up all across the country the famous comedian was preparing to introduce his latest theatre and new concept to Rhode Island. Actually, Lewis was booked for one week at the Warwick Musical Theatre and in advance of his opening night had scheduled a press conference at the Hilton Hotel in Cranston. About thirty media guests filled the small banquet room and I felt honored to be a part of the happening. There are some advantages of not being bashful and gravitating to the seats down front. Jerry Lewis joined everyone and sat down opposite me for lunch. For the next 45 minutes or so we talked about his return to Rhode Island, showbusiness and other table talk. Knowing his love for the game of golf, I asked him if he had ever played at my club—Quidnessett C.C.—in North Kingstown. Jerry said he loved the course and plays QCC almost every day when he's appearing at Buster Bonoff's theatre. That wasn't the only thing we had in

Touching the Stars

common. Jerry was born in Newark and I was born in Belmar, New Jersey.

Once introduced, (as if Lewis needed an introduction), Jerry told the friendly gathering of media people about his growing chain of movie theatres and his strong desire to return wholesome film entertainment to the screen.

One reporter said, "Jerry, you're not very funny."

"I get paid to be funny!" snapped Lewis and said, "Come to the Warwick Theatre tonight if you want to see how funny I can be." Soon, Lewis had everyone in stitches with his ability to make faces, and tell stories about his police escort to the theatre each evening by the Warwick police officers with Dick Tracey watches.

Later that evening, Barbara and I were in the theatre audience enjoying Jerry's performance. On stage, Lewis talked about playing golf that afternoon at that nice golf course. "You know the name," as he led the audience . . . "Ledge—eh—Ledge—" as the audience began to pronounce Ledgemont.

"Ledgemont," said Lewis. "You know, the Ledgemont's membership is primarily comprised of a Jewish clientel." Little did the audience realize that was Jerry's decoy so he could walk the links course of Quidnessett unnoticed.

We left the theatre that night knowing that we had just enjoyed one of the great comedians and humanitarians in this world.

WKFD has presented a daily live one-hour talk show from Christie's Restaurant since we purchased the radio station. The vehicle gave us visibility and beach head in the previously impenetrable island market. Christie's was one of our larger advertisers, spending some \$500 a month. For the cost of a telephone, which averaged about \$40 a month, we had an open microphone to the island audience, as well as others around the bay. Our guests and host would have a free lunch, compliments of Christie's. Governors, senators, community leaders, mayors, sailors, America's Cup personalities all paraded past our mikes daily. Marylyn Rockafellow, a former Miss

Touching the Stars

New Jersey who was very active in Newport Little Theatre circles, became our permanent personality on the show. Marylyn is very talented on stage and she later moved to New Jersey and performed in a popular off-Broadway production.

Frankie Frisch, Baseball Hall of Fame nominee in 1947 and one of the best infielders of his day, lived in nearby Charlestown, Rhode Island. I called Frankie and invited him to appear on our radio show. He accepted on the condition that someone would pick him up and return him home after the show. Since I had credentials in port-to-port shuttle service for celebrities, I volunteered. All the way to the broadcast, Frisch told me how much money he usually receives for personal appearances, etc. and I promised him he would get a free lunch.

Bill Christie, who as a boy, lived at the Giant's ballpark in New York and remembered vividly every game, and all the players, was waiting at the door to greet Frankie Frisch. Bill joined Marylyn and me on the broadcast. With each martini Frisch socked away, the program and the stories got better and better. Frisch died tragically in an automobile accident on a Maryland highway a couple of years later. Bill Christie sold his restaurant and also died a few years later. I often reflect on that exciting afternoon, when Bill Christie—beloved Giant fan—spent an hour on the air reminiscing with the “Fordham flash.” What a wonderful time we all had!

The White House announced that President Nixon would be the featured speaker at commencement exercises at the graduating class of OCS school at the Newport Naval Training Center. And he had a personal interest, after all, his son-in-law, David Eisenhower, was among the honored graduates.

The creative ideas began to flow as to how we would cover the event. Could we sell live coverage? The Newport National Bank joined us as sponsor and we completed the technical arrangements to cover the Presi-

Touching the Stars

dent's visit to Rhode Island. Once again, the local Newport station monitored our announcements about our planned coverage, jumped on the bandwagon, and announced their station would be covering Nixon's visit to Newport. We did them one better. We arranged for coverage the moment the President's jet touched down at Quonset Point across the bay. Our "Touchdown to Takeoff" radio coverage began when Nixon stepped off the plane. Nixon had once been stationed in North Kingstown as a young navy officer, so it held some memories for him to return to Quonset.

We made arrangements with a navy officer at the base to broadcast an update of the arrival by phone. The moment President Nixon stepped off the plane, our man on the scene was reporting the story. Meanwhile, Jim Roberts and I were live at the OCS auditorium in Newport waiting for the President's arrival. The Navy band played, while the auditorium filled with graduates, family and guests.

Moments before the President appeared, First Lady Pat and her lovely daughters walked to their front row seats. In the Press Corp, which probably numbered over 100, I could distinctly and plainly hear one male voice in the background as he got his first glimpse of the President's daughter. When he loudly called her a vulgar name, I cringed, but didn't believe our audience could hear the vulgarity over the air—and they didn't.

President Nixon addressed the packed house and later afforded the media a walking press conference to the helicopter, which would take the first family to their waiting jet at Quonset Point. Silhouetted behind Nixon was the beautiful new Newport Bridge.

A local newspaper reporter asked the President, "How do you like our new bridge?"

"Very nice," replied Nixon.

"It costs two dollars one way," said the reporter.

"Not for me!" quipped the President, and in a minute he was up in the air. At first, I didn't notice who I was stand-

Touching the Stars

ing next to during the Presidential departure. it was John Eisenhower, son of the late President and famous General, Dwight Eisenhower.

"Hello, Mr. Eisenhower." I offered. The tape was running and I captured the event from another point of view. Eisenhower said these were exciting day for the Eisenhower and Nixon families. It was like touching history to talk with a member of one of America's patriotic families.

The Newport Navy facility was a constant source of news and some history-making days. Queen Elizabeth and Prince Phillip arrived aboard their ocean-going ship for a special visit to Newport. Our microphones captured the entire day's highlights from an up close broadcast point, while the pride of the England navy was tied up next to us.

On the entertainment agenda, we interviewed Lionel Hampton, Buddy De Marco of the Glenn Miller Orchestra and others. And when the Navy War College got a new President, Admiral Stansfield Turner, that called for a party. Turner would later be appointed by President Jimmy Carter to serve as CIA Director. Some 25 media representatives of local and state newspapers and a few radio people were invited to the President's home for an informal evening with Admiral Turner.

"Hi, I'm Stan Turner." was the friendly greeting from the tall, handsome officer wearing civilian clothes. Admiral Turner's arrival on the scene coincided with the recent wave of Z-Grams inspired by its author, Admiral Zumwalt. Zumwalt's relaxation of navy rules and regulations created a stir among the ranks of the more senior officers.

Turner expressed an open attitude toward the modern approach and during a discussion with Admiral I said, "I can picture the scenario now. As you enter the mess hall for an inspection, you're greeted by a young ensign who says "Hello, Stan, baby. How do you like our mess hall?" Thank goodness, the Admiral had a fine sense of humor.

Touching the Stars

About a year later I was flying to Washington, D.C. in connection with our legal battle to construct an FM station in Middletown. As I eased into my seat aboard the American Airlines jet, who comes strolling down the aisle, with his navy aides, but Admiral Turner! I couldn't find it within myself to blurt out, "Hello Stan, baby," but we made eye contact and I said hello.

Once airborne, I felt a tap on my shoulder. Stan Turner had come forward to chat. He was enroute to the Pentagon and I was enroute to see our attorneys. I wasn't surprised a few years later to hear the news about Turner's appointment to the top position in the CIA.

On the FM front, our local attorneys prepared for appearances before the Middletown Zoning board, to request a zoning variance for the WOTB antenna site. Over the objections of neighbors who had lived with an antenna on WADK's site for more than thirty years, the Zoning Board granted our request on February 7, 1973. The losers sought relief at the Superior Court level. Much to our surprise, they were successful. On January 26th, 1974, the Superior Court Judge reversed the Middletown Zoning Board of Review's favorable decision. Six months later, on July 3, 1974, our petition for writ of certiorair of WOTB for review of the Superior Court decision was denied by the Supreme Court. In essence, we were without an antenna site—four years into the project and nowhere to turn.

The navy commitment to Newport had been trimmed substantially in 1973 when the fleet was relocated and the economy was affected by the loss of some 11,000 sailors. This turn of events caused local leaders to re-think the future of Aquidneck Island, and to attempt to find a way to become less dependent on the Navy economy. This worked in our favor.

On January 3, 1975, we received support by the owners of the Seaview Motel who were willing to allow us to erect a 300-foot antenna on their front lawn, overlooking

Touching the Stars

the Atlantic Ocean. It took some selling effort, but we succeeded and filed the request with the FCC. On March 5, 1975, the Commission granted the modified construction permit for the new site. The local attorneys again prepared our plan of attack. Meanwhile, I also had to win the support of the trustees of the John Clarke estate which owned the land, and which had mixed emotions about our design.

We first appeared before the Middletown Town Council with a request to amend the town ordinance to make possible the filing of a special exception to install the WOTB antenna. With the first step completed, we appeared before the Middletown Zoning Board of Review and, after a series of hearings, the Board granted a special exception. This action came on December 24, 1975. What grinch could oppose this favorable action on Christmas Eve?

Before the Window of Appeals closed, a neighbor and former business associate of the owner of the only local radio station on the island, Jerome Kirby, filed against the favorable decision with the Superior Court. I never questioned his validity to object, only his motives. Arnold Lerner, owner of WADK, and Kirby became friends in the business community and were associates in the business community. They were also associates in the development of the Treadway Inn on the Newport waterfront. My supposition was always that if Lerner ever needed a favor and wanted someone to lead the opposition to a proposed tower in his neighborhood, he would ask an old friend. In any event, Kirby's legal efforts only served to slow down our hopes of getting on the air and cost us greater amounts of money.

On September 1, 1976, the Rhode Island Superior Court upheld the Middletown Zoning Board of Review's decision. Losing another battle, Kirby's attorneys filed for an opportunity to be heard before the Rhode Island Supreme Court on December 3, 1976. It was no small coin-

Touching the Stars

cidence that both Kirby and Lerner engaged the same law firm for this project.

It was a cold, dreary February afternoon in 1977 when my Newport attorney, Salvadore Virgadamo, called on the phone. Sitting in my Wickford office, I got the news I never wanted to hear.

“Ron, the Rhode Island Supreme Court has granted the petition to hear the request of Kirby.”

Virgadamo said the briefs had to be filed within 30 days. And no matter how we wished for a better outcome, the case could be tied up in the court for many months.

Dejected and mad as hell at the judicial system, Barbara and I evaluated our situation. If we threw in the towel and sold the construction permit to Arnold Lerner, owner of WADK, we would probably regain our legal expenses and lose our dream forever! We decided to hang in there and battle by searching for still another undetermined antenna site. We drove around Aquidneck Island for a fresh new look at potential sites. As we returned across the Newport Bridge, we noticed a small antenna on top of the western Tower.

“That’s it! We’ll locate the FM antenna on top of the Newport Bridge and we’ll have a beautiful signal.”

James Canning, the Executive Director of the Bridge, was receptive to the idea and invited me to appear before the entire Bridge Authority to make a formal request. Within a couple of weeks the Authority agreed to enter into a long-term lease with Bay Broadcasters, Inc. to permit us to affix our antenna on top of the Eastern Tower.

Our consulting engineer, Robert Dutriel, of Washington, D.C. liked the idea but said, “Ron, I don’t want to spend any more of your money. However, I would like to fly to Rhode Island tomorrow and inspect the site.”

Dutriel was on the next plane to Rhode Island, and as we drove to the bridge, he shared our enthusiasm over the new site. Since I had already climbed the tower earlier with the bridge engineer, Joe Wheeler, I elected to

Touching the Stars

remain behind in the office while Bob and Joe inspected the tower site some 400 feet to the top.

After their inspection, and as Dutriel stepped out of the tower onto the concrete roadway, he looked up and noticed a man climbing the four-foot thick cable piping.

“Joe, what’s that fella doing?” asked Dutriel.

“God, we’ve got another leaper!” shouted Wheeler. Wheeler ordered Dutriel to remain where he was on the bridge as he radioed the office, then started back up the tower in an attempt to prevent the man from jumping.

In the bridge office, I noticed a sudden flurry of activity as I waited for my engineer to return. “We’ve got a leaper on the bridge!” said a bridge employee, as everyone prepared for the worst.

Picture this if you will. All I could think about was the media arriving at the scene with cameras, microphones and pencils, discovering Bob Dutriel—the first person to see the victim—and asking him what he was doing standing on the Newport Bridge. The opposition to our FM existence would surely be aware that we had found probably the best antenna site in the area.

Valiant bridge employee Joe Wheeler and the police saved a life that day. But Dutriel found several major obstructions to the site because we only had a 36-inch oval opening in which to get our heavy broadcast equipment through. The manufacturers would not guarantee the transmitting equipment if we had to break them down to squeeze through the bridge opening.

We aborted the bridge plan and had to start all over again. It was going on seven years since we first initiated the steps at the FCC to bring a full time facility to the Island, and we were still without an antenna site.

Barbara and I would take a drive each evening looking for a possible area we may have overlooked all these years, trying to find the missing piece of the puzzle to solve our nightmare. It was almost dusk one March evening when we spotted a high-rise apartment building on the skyline. Almeida Apartments would be ideal for

Touching the Stars

our antenna. They were located just across the Middletown line in Portsmouth and reached eight stories into the air.

The very next morning, I was on the telephone arranging a meeting with the owner of the apartment complex. Joseph Almeida and I toured the building and discussed the space we needed for our antenna. A 35-foot support pole would easily serve to hold our antenna and we agreed that the abandoned elevator shaft would be perfect. I suddenly realized that, if Almeida said yes, we were *finally* close to getting our station on the air!

Mr. Almeida and I struck a deal for a monthly lease of \$200. I was to call his attorney in the morning. By the time I reached his attorney 24 hours later, the price had increased 100%. Still, it was a bargain if we could finally get on the air. Since we had no place to go, we signed a long term agreement.

The attorneys hurriedly completed the paperwork and a formal request was submitted to the Portsmouth Zoning Board by Mr. Almeida. The owner of the well-established apartment building was requesting permission to erect a new 35-foot antenna—nothing that would arouse suspicion that Bay Broadcasters were involved. After getting your head bashed in for going on seven years, you either begin to like it or learn to duck. We chose the latter.

The night of the public hearing, and without any advance publicity, the attorney who represented Kirby and Lerner was in the audience. He was there on another matter, but lingered while our request (or I should say Mr. Almeida's request) was heard. We presented our involvement to the Portsmouth Zoning Board and won approval. WAKD's attorney was unable to comment, because it was too late for him to play games and prop up another objector.

Within an hour, our request granted, we felt certain we were about to taste victory in our lengthy struggle, both locally and at the FCC. Our attorneys recommended we appear before the Portsmouth Town Council the follow-

Touching the Stars

ing week to obtain their endorsement of the town's zoning board action. The Town Council blessed our new antenna site, and on June 17, 1977, application for a new site for WOTB was filed in Washington with the FCC.

With the stakes so high in broadcasting, one has to expect his opposition to take great risks to prevent you from success that is rightfully yours. Arnold Lerner, who owns several radio stations and served as a director of the National Association of Broadcasters, finally realized that he had failed in his efforts to drive us off the island, and in preventing us from getting on the air I'm sure he had wanted to preserve his daytime economic situation and hopefully buy us out. Lerner sold WADK in the fall of 1977 and silently withdrew from the market, knowing fully that with the advent of WOTB, a 24-hour FM radio station, the media balance was about to change.

We submitted our application for the new apartment antenna site on June 17, 1977. Close to realizing our dreams, we decided it would be in our best interests to sell WKFD, Wickford. New owners took over the facility in August.

We anticipated favorable FCC approval within days. So when we received the news that the Worcester FM station WAAF had opposed our new site at the FCC, it was like being hit by lightning—more delays were still ahead.

With the sale of the Wickford station, and all three sons enrolling in the Middletown High school system, we had to again sit on the sidelines, while the attorneys hurled accusations at each other before the FCC.

During our constant attempts to win local zoning battles and gain approval to get on the air, the WADK owner, Arnold Lerner, applied to the FCC for permission to increase the power of the station and to become a full time AM station. The moment he filed his application, under FCC doctrine, we were given the opportunity to file an objection which we did. Lerner's expansion efforts were also opposed by Capitol Cities who own an Albany station on the same 1540 frequency. After our successful

Touching the Stars

evening in Portsmouth before the zoning board and new filing with the FCC for a shift in antenna sites, Lerner realizing that within months or a year, the likelihood of WOTB getting on the air was certain, he sold WADK.

The new owner picked up the application and pursued the idea of establishing his daytimer into a fulltimer. While the license was being transferred, which normally required about 60 days, Lerner requested an appearance before the FCC to discuss his fulltime application. Arriving at the meeting at the FCC building in Washington, my attorney Lee Knauer and I entered Mr. Morris Levy's office where Lerner, an attorney for the new buyer and manager had also just arrived. Levy opened the meeting with "Why are we here?"

Knauer, who was one of our officers in high school drama club, gave a sterling performance. Knauer shot back "That's exactly what I'd like to know, Mr. Levy!" Pointing an accusing finger at Lerner, Knauer said "This man has been instrumental in keeping my client Ron Hickman from getting his radio station, WOTB, on the air for 7 years." Knauer continued to excoriate the broadcaster who entered into the meeting without an attorney. His attorney—the former FCC Commissioner, William E. Henry, would have been formidable competition!

Lerner stepped forward. With a Rhode Island map in his left hand he said to the FCC official, "I have a Rhode Island map."

Levy interrupted him and said "Mr. Lerner, I have a drawer full of Rhode Island maps—so what?"

Undaunted, the broadcaster from Massachusetts raised another subject. "I know an FCC Commissioner, Mr. Fogarty."

Again, the FCC official interrupted. "I also know Mr. Fogarty, Mr. Lerner."

At that point, Lerner, looking like a shrinking violet, returned to his seat and the meeting soon ended.

Touching the Stars

The motivation for our boys to enroll in the Middletown school system was to enable them to participate in school golf. All three boys were good golfers and, in their senior year, Ron and David would be joined by their younger brother Todd to comprise the starting MHS golf team. Their former school in North Kingstown had severely eliminated many sports programs, including golf. We took our stand and looked forward to the upcoming year.

In November, David, who played varsity at North Kingstown, was invited to try out for Middletown. Under Rhode Island scholastic requirements, David was not eligible to play unless he was a resident of Middletown. The Hickman family decided to establish residence in the community. We rented an apartment where we all lived as a family weekdays, and returned to our comfortable Victorian home on weekends. It was a total family commitment, which lasted the entire school year and one about which we have no regrets. David's basketball team reached the Semi-finals in State Championship action and he received All State honors, 2nd team. Todd's freshman team won the Freshman championship, and in *their* senior year would win the state title. All three sons became the nucleus of the MHS golf team that year.

Ron is a PGA Golf Professional and is affiliated with the Country Club of Louisiana, a Jack Nicklaus course which is owned by its founders and the Jack Nicklaus Development Corporation. Ron is a graduate of the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg and married to Pipper Curley. David graduated from Florida Southern College in Lakeland and joined us at WOTB in 1981. He later joined WPRO-AM in Providence as an account executive, before changing careers. He is now an assistant golf professional at Rivermont Country Club in Atlanta, Georgia. Todd received his degree in 1985 from New Hampshire College. He is in marketing and sales with Ernest and Julio Gallo Wine Company located in the Washington, D.C. area.

Touching the Stars

The first American to orbit the earth, a modern-day American hero whose tiny space vehicle now hangs in the lobby of the Smithsonian, was scheduled to address an audience at the Naval War College in November, 1978. When we first learned about his forthcoming visit, we immediately started checking the commercial airlines for arrivals from Washington. A friend at the Navy base suggested that we check with Newport Airport. He said, "Senator Glenn flies his own plane, you know."

That had to be it! Late in the afternoon, on the day of John Glenn's arrival, Kris Ryan, our news director, and I bolted out the door, headed for the small state airport a few miles from our WOTB studios. From the moment we arrived, we knew we were right on target. There was a clandestine effort underway to spirit Glenn from the airport to the base without the media. A black, unmarked military vehicle was parked near the door. Standing inside the terminal was another American hero, Admiral James B. Stockdale, with his wife. Stockdale, wearing civilian clothes, turned away as we entered the terminal, probably hoping he'd go unnoticed. Stockdale had been captured by the Vietnamese and held in captivity for more than six years as a prisoner of war. As President of the War College and personal friend of Glenn, Stockdale and his wife were the reception committee for Senator and Mrs. Glenn.

I approached the Admiral and told him what we were after and held my ground. Stockdale was damn angry but realized, as we did, that the Senator was public property. We were in a public building and we were not going to accept "no" for an answer! He finally told us that we could interview Glenn, but only for a few minutes.

Seconds later, a small single engine plane taxied up to the front door of the terminal and soon Senator Glenn and his wife were on the tarmac. The Stockdales greeted their old friends and brought the Senator to us for an interview. It was timely, because Glenn had just come

Touching the Stars

from the Senate floor where some important action had taken place and we captured every word on tape for our evening news—scooping even the CBS evening news!

I thanked Senator Glenn, the pioneer spaceman, and we shook hands. As a gesture, I reached in my pocket and handed him one of our WOTB-FM key chains wrapped in plastic. At first, Glenn thought I had given him a tiny, miniature radio. He held the key chain to his ear and appeared to be dialing it.

Red-faced, I said to the Senator, "It's a key chain, sir!"

An equally red-faced Glenn replied, "Oh! Thank you very much."

CHAPTER EIGHT

"The dreamer says 'Life is but a dream', . . . and the realist replies 'Quite correct' . . . let us live this dream as beautifully as we can."

Lin Yu Tang

It was 1978, some nine years since we had first talked about building an FM station in the Newport area, and almost eight years since we initiated action to create this facility. Perhaps pioneer Andrew Carnegie was right when he said pioneering's no fun.

The owner of WAAF-FM was Bob Williams. After his company had filed objections to final approval for WOTB to go on the air, we were engaged in *more* legal fireworks. But in early 1978, Williams and his wife filed for divorce, prompting Williams to sell his Worcester and Bridgeport radio stations. Hurray for Mrs. Williams! It was the breakthrough necessary to break the log jam. At the FCC, Williams filed his intentions to sell, opening the door for the good guys to object, and we did. Our Washington attorneys called Williams' dilatory tactics more, rather than less, suspect. In Bridgeport, we cited the station's lack of compliance with the Equal Employment Opportunity practices currently in place. Our involvement in their application to transfer the licenses got everyone's attention. On April 10th, 1978, a compromise was reached. WAAF would pay for a portion of the antenna cost and we would withdraw our objections. Williams could then go ahead and sell his stations, proceed with his divorce and WOTB would receive final permission to go on the air. Just think. If matrimonial bliss had prevailed in the Williams household, we might have had to abandon our dreams and hopes of getting on the air and I would never have had the opportunity to write this book.

Construction plans were underway and we selected a studio site on West Main Road, in Middletown. A reason-

Touching the Stars

ably certain on-air target date was set for September or October. As our grand opening plans progressed, pre-promotion, photographs and stories were going out to the media, agencies, and others to promote our arrival.

Fitzgerald and Toole Advertising spotted my photograph and invited me to audition for a TV commercial for De Blois Oil. The agency was looking for a sincere news anchor type person and I got the job. We taped the first series of TV commercials in August, 1978 and the commercials were aired starting in September—a month before we opened WOTB. It was the perfect vehicle for us to receive some personal attention. After all, I had been on the air in Rhode Island as a radio voice for over 8 years, and I believe the opportunity was a great help. Besides, I had always wanted to do TV commercials since those days when we practiced before the camera at the School of Radio Technique. The commercials were well received and the identity, which lasted for more than four years, took us on location from the top of oil storage tanks to outdoor swimming pools.

The TV exposure opened up doors to other TV and radio free lance work, including the New England Buick Dealers, Globe Wine, AAA and House of Pancakes. Between commercials, while standing in the TV studios in Providence, I couldn't help but remember wishing I could do TV. Now, in the late 70's, it was happening. I enjoyed the camera work and now feel very relaxed on camera!

The skies were threatening the morning of October 6, 1978, but nothing could dampen the spirit of this long, arduous journey which was about to end. The eagerly awaited moment was set for 10 am—we would soon give birth to the state's newest radio station, WOTB-FM. Over eight years had transpired, and now the stage was set for opening ceremonies under a bright yellow and white striped tent outside the studios.

Invited guests would include some 125 local leaders, business people and others. Lee Knauer, our Wash-

Touching the Stars

ington attorney, Joseph Fogarty, FCC Commissioner and CBS Network announcer Bob Hite were the featured speakers. Hite had left New York on the midnight train and arrived at the Kingston Railroad station at 6 am. I was there to greet the Lone Ranger as he stepped off the train. Knauer, also our long time friend from high school days, stayed overnight and within a couple of hours we had all arrived at the studios for this historic day.

Our advertising agency had assisted us in every detail—except one. Someone forgot to fill the several hundred balloons with helium for our blast off. Behind the studios, in a garage, Bob, Lee and I pitched in and started filling balloons. I knew they shared our wonderful feelings of victory after such a lengthy ordeal.

I stepped up to the microphone and for the very first time in my entire broadcast career, I was actually speechless. Naturally, I had prepared some remarks for the special occasion. After all, I had almost 8 years to think about what I was going to say if I ever got the opportunity to be a founder of a radio station.

Overwhelmed with emotion, I stood frozen at the microphone, unable to utter a sound. Almost a minute passed with me appearing to have stage fright. Actually, with the scenario of the prolonged litigation, the many personal sacrifices Barbara made for the family and our dream, the thoughtfulness of the professionals who assisted us on the project passing before my very eyes—I just couldn't speak.

FCC Commissioner Joseph Fogarty was seated next to my wife and whispered, "If Ron doesn't start soon, I am going to stand up and help him."

Like a changing tide, the deep emotional currents receded and everything began to flow. I introduced Sal Virgadamo, our Newport attorney, "Sal, the kind of relationship we've enjoyed over the past eight years is usually reserved for someone on death row, and many times I felt like I was there."

Touching the Stars

Bob Hite, who didn't need any encouraging to ease into his Lone Ranger routine, in his familiar and well-modulated tones, began the first broadcast with a formal "Good morning, this is radio station WOTB-FM with studios at . . . etc."

But with the good-natured urging by me, just before the station went on the air, Hite gave the audience at the ceremony a taste of yesteryear in radio: "A fiery horse with the speed of light, a cloud of dust and a hearty Hi-Oh Silver . . . away!" Hite's voice boomed through the speaker, the way he narrated the radio show years ago. The crowd, that seconds before had been a distinguished serious gathering of Town Council presidents, mayors, lawyers and businessmen, briefly became enthusiastic young Lone Ranger fans again, applauding and cheering the familiar introduction to the old radio program. Hite had to catch a plane back to New York to do the Cronkite show at 6:30 p.m. He flew back after that evening to join his wife for a much deserved weekend with us in Jamestown.

WOTB-FM was on the air—we realized the true impact of being pioneers. WOTB was the newest radio station of some 9,000 FM/AM radio stations at that moment. We were now members of a select group of pioneers who had a dream and were willing to make the supreme sacrifices necessary to forge ahead and fulfill that dream.

Some 350 listeners responded to our on-air invitation to visit our new station and tour of the studios. And, as in Pompton Lakes, WOTB signed on the air in black ink. We enjoyed sufficient sponsorship from opening day to reflect a profitable beginning and promising future.

Channel 10 highlighted our Grand Opening on their 6 and 11 p.m. newscasts. The *Providence Journal* provided us with a generous three-column story with a photo, and the *Newport Daily News* also covered the story. One critic, Bill Kutik, a feature writer for the *Newport Daily News*, wrote a story a week later asking the question, "Has it been worth waiting 10 years for Aquidneck

Touching the Stars

Island's second commercial radio station?" Kutick went on to say in the story, "I guess that depends on your taste. The self-proclaimed 'Sweet Stereo' is sickly sweet stereo to my mind, a veritable non-stop stream of slush."

I had told him that we were more than beautiful music and that we added a contemporary sound.

Kutick continued in his column, "The 'we' in Hickman's statement should be changed to 'they' because on a recent visit to WOTB, I discovered the station selects almost none of its own music. It's all done by Bonneville Broadcast Consultants, which is most appropriately owned by the Mormon Church."

Despite the critic, WOTB outdistanced the only local station in the first Arbitron Rating book and was on its way to success. Kutick showed up during the Von Bulow trial a few years later as a New York newspaper reporter. I knew he had to eat those words he wrote about WOTB—what better way than in full view and live from the Old Colony building!

Johann K. Lavater said, "He who has not forgiven any enemy has not yet tasted one of the most sublime enjoyments of life."

Our adversaries in the courtroom became our neighbors, and Jerry Kirby, who actively opposed our antenna site, in a couple of years, became one of our larger advertisers.

I did take one liberty shortly after we got on the air. Kirby's son, Jerry, a fine sailor, experienced difficulties at sea with three female passengers aboard and crashed onto the rocks off Bermuda somewhere. The "Jerry Kirby and three females in distress" story got a lot of exposure on the air that day, probably more than it deserved.

It was in September, 1973. Barbara and I were joining our friend Bob Hite for cocktails in New York City at the New York Yacht Club. After our meeting Bob was taking us to join him for the CBS Evening News with Walter

Touching the Stars

Cronkite. As we entered the grand building on West 44th Street, there, at the end of the entrance area was a small alcove. This alcove showcased the trophy some sailors would kill to get their hands on—the precious Ole Mug, bolted to the floor of the clubhouse. Sir Thomas Lipton, Baron Marcel Bich and Alan Bond spent millions and millions of dollars trying to dislodge the Cup from its revered place of honor. The next time we would see the ornate silver pitcher would be at the Marble House in Newport on the afternoon of September 29, 1983, where 500 people gathered to witness one of the saddest moments in American Cup History—the surrendering of the Cup to the bloody Australians. The NYYC employed a Brinks armored vehicle to transport the trophy overnight from Manhattan to Newport for the presentation. The NYYC really didn't want publicity of this event, because if they did, the media would have received more than the 90-minute alert that the ceremony was going to be held behind the Marble House.

WOTB had been directly involved in radio coverage of the 1980 and 1983 campaigns and previously, as owners of WKFD, we had covered 3 other series, four successful defense efforts and now, the historic loss to the great sailors from “down under.”

Wonderful memories were recalled that sunny afternoon, as we watched the personalities who put on a great show at sea. The interviews with Bill Ficker, skipper of Intrepid, Ted “Capt. Courageous” Turner, a winner in 1977, Dennis Connors, who won in 1980 and was the goat in 1983, Australian skippers Jim Hardy, John Bertrand and many other America's Cup stars. I remembered witnessing Turner's less than sober appearance at the Newport Armory when the media king sloshed his way through a press conference.

The night that all America's Cup fans will remember—September 27, 1983—I was inside the crowded press area, broadcasting live. The later the press conference started, the fewer day-timer stations

Touching the Stars

were on the air, giving us another exclusive. Thousands of spectators surrounded the area, prompting police to declare the Thames Street area a pedestrian mall. WOTB was broadcasting the history-making event while later, we were told, thousands of people in the Newport Harbor were bobbing in their boats listening to us while we took them inside the Armory. We captured an emotional Dennis Connors, who will be remembered as the skipper who lost the cup, as he graciously accepted defeat before the world.

The America's Cup is to Newport merchants what the Super Bowl would be to any city, multiplied by 100 times or more. Every three years the syndicates establish their lodgings, dock space and supply needs for a full summer campaign. Add to the American effort the challenges by the Australians, French, Italians, English and others and you can easily see the financial plum Newport has enjoyed for decades. Several million tourists drive or float into the city every campaign, bringing serious money to the market. Guaranteed is an extra Christmas season all summer long, every three years! In recent years, there have been grumblings by some of the syndicates and the NYCC about the rising cost of mounting a campaign and holding the America's Cup Series off Newport. Nevertheless, the series always returned and it was business as usual.

There are many sincere and devoted Newporters and Newport business people who have worked behind the scenes to perpetuate the relationship between the NYCC and the "City by the Sea." Newport shopkeepers and businesses are the major benefactors during a Cup summer. It always disturbed me to know that some merchants would close down their cash registers in the afternoon to avoid reporting huge sums of America's Cup summer money. I'm really surprised the State of Rhode Island hasn't caught on to the scam—or maybe they just look the other way. I know of several business people who cleverly conceal the "SALE" sign on the register with

Touching the Stars

a "Smile" poster or other decal. I believe these summer dollars go unreported and the true impact of an America's Cup summer is far greater than the reported retail dollars.

Newport is not alone in coining underground income. In resort markets from Asbury Park, N.J. to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina government agents attempt to ferret out cheaters. In Wildwood, New Jersey, one of the boardwalk attractions is a giant Ferris wheel. IRS agents sit by the hour on summer days trying to estimate the income of the Ferris wheel owner.

The medium of radio lends itself to almost any situation. In 1969, Paul Dodson inaugurated an In-Water Boat Show in Newport. We approached Dodson and in exchange for the rights to broadcast from the show, an official booth, and the opportunity to sell our sponsors, we became the voice of what would later become the Newport International Boat Show. Providence-based radio stations soon followed our lead!

Jerry Nevins, a former News Director of the Newport daytimer, was unattached to a station and joined us on the shows. Jerry had vast nautical knowledge because of his Cup experience and added immeasurably to the over-all sound. We also utilized Nevins' talents on play-by-play broadcasts of football games in the early 70's on WKFD. In the late 70's, Jerry was arrested and later convicted of molesting a young girl. He was sentenced to a term at the Adult Correctional Institute in Cranston. We never used Jerry's talents after that incident, because as far as we were concerned, he was poison ivy. Apparently on the road to recovery after his release from prison, Jerry was arrested again for the same charge—only weeks before his parole period ended. The Judge put Nevins behind bars again.

Our live coverage from the Newport waterfront was not only a money maker, but often gave us exclusive human

Touching the Stars

interest interviews with sailors and other interesting yachtsmen.

One of four active fleet frigates, the USS Capodanno, was assigned to Newport. It was scheduled to arrive on Thursday, December 21, 1978. The ship was named after Chaplain Vincent R. Capodanno, a medal of honor winner. Not since the early 70's, when the Navy had over 11,000 white cap sailors assigned to Newport, had there been such interest in a ship arrival. Frank Pritchard, the Public Affairs Officer at the Navy Base, extended an invitation to WOTB to send one of our news people to join the captain, officers and crew for an overnight sail from Maine to Newport. I volunteered, packed my bags and drove to Boston, where we joined several newspaper reporters and headed to frigid Bath, Maine.

Our loveboat was waiting for us at the Bath Shipyard and we were piped aboard. Soon, we were enroute down the Kennebunk River into the open Atlantic Ocean. Several hours out to sea, I visited the radio shack and got a first-hand look at how our navy's men and women stay in constant touch with the world. It was exciting and impressive. The guys established radio contact with our WOTB control room and I transmitted a prepared 90-second story about life aboard ship and with a patriotic theme.

I knew Barbara would be standing in the control room listening to my report and I asked her to join the other Navy wives at the pier. As we cruised under the Newport Bridge and to the pier homecoming, I spotted my lovely wife standing with all the Navy wives. I knew then the emotional feeling so many Navy personnel must experience after months at sea.

I received a telephone call at the studios one day in 1980 from an officer of the Industrial National Bank. "How would you like to meet New England Patriot Stanley Morgan, and pick up \$225 in cold cash?"

Touching the Stars

Morgan, the outstanding wide receiver for the Patriots, was conducting a youth football clinic sponsored by the bank at the Y.M.C.A. in Middletown. Some 200 youngsters turned out for the session, and had a chance to meet and work out with the professional football player. After Stanley and I chatted for a few moments, he opened the clinic and I circulated with the youngsters, assisting in any way I could. I received a check for my less than one-hour effort, and I didn't even have to drive Morgan home!

Speaking of football, two other NFL Football stars come to mind—Mark Van Eagen and Ray Guy. Mark played his high school football days in Rhode Island. We had broadcast several of his games, never realizing his desire and talent would take him to Colgate to become one of the leading rushers in professional football. Guy is a Mississippian and an outstanding golfer. Our son, Ronald, introduced us to Guy one day while we were all playing Hattiesburg Country Club. Young Ron plays quite often with Guy and says he hits the longest ball off the tee for a guy his size and just blows it past the pros.

Bob Hite was visiting us in Jamestown one America's Cup evening in August, 1983. Ironically, we had received word by telephone from our Washington attorney only minutes earlier, that our application to sell WOTB had been filed at the FCC. I got off the phone about 5:30 p.m. and returned to our living room to share the news. It seemed only right that Hite should be with us the day we were announcing the sale of the station, since five years earlier his voice introduced us to the airwaves.

Bob had been in the recording studio earlier with me doing what he knew how to do best—record great commercials. When I broke the news, Bob said "Sell? I thought you were going to offer me a fulltime job—you know, a salaried position." The Lone Ranger was almost speechless.

Touching the Stars

We adjourned to the formal dining room for dinner. Todd, David, Barbara and I toasted Hite as we relaxed to enjoy one of Barbara's gourmet dinners. Hite seemed to sense Todd's anxiousness to leave the dinner table and hurry off to pick up his girlfriend in Middletown. In a fatherly fashion, Hite engaged Todd in some lingering conversation, and it may have saved his life. Moments later, Todd excused himself, kissed his mother and left by car for the short two-mile journey across the Newport bridge. David, our second son, also left a few moments later and the three of us settled down for a pleasant evening of conversation.

Ten minutes later, the ringing of the telephone punctured our dinner conversation and David's voice said, "Dad, there's been an accident on top of the bridge and Todd's car is there." My heart pounded, "Don't worry, Todd's all right, but I believe it's serious. One car has flipped over and off the bridge."

Incredulous, I broke the news to Bob and my wife. Within a minute, we drove to the bridge where traffic was backing up, somehow found an opening and made a beeline to the toll booth. We were waved through the halted traffic and raced to the top of the super-structure wondering what had happened, how our son was involved and our broadcast responsibilities.

Todd was visible as we approached the accident scene and we rushed to hug him and find out the story. He told us he had been directly behind a car which was passing another car going east-bound, when the vehicle brushed or struck the car and veered into the westbound lane, hitting another car head-on. Todd said the victim's car slammed against the bridge railing, teetered on its grill almost vertically and crashed into the waters—some 200 feet below. The operator died, and several women in the car he struck head-on were injured. Luckily, our son escaped injury.

Barbara and Hite stayed on the bridge with Todd while I ran to the nearest telephone to give eye-witness ac-

Touching the Stars

counts of the fatal accident and traffic information. David was giving additional traffic updates from his vantage point somewhere in the maze of traffic. The bridge was sealed off from traffic for almost two hours. Todd spent the night at State Police barracks giving depositions and I filed first-hand stories all evening.

Newport is a mecca for newsmaking events and world famous personalities. We had the opportunity to broadcast coverage of queens, kings, and royalty. We were invited aboard Norway's tall ship for a cocktail party where we met the Prince and Princess of Norway. Hollywood stars, golf greats, and political figures are often in the city incognito or to play. A fallen star, Betty Hutton, arrived quietly on Aquidneck Island to stay in Portsmouth and work for the priests and nuns while she was drying out from a bout with alcohol. She even accepted a public relations position with Newport Jai Lai to stand in the lobby and greet the public.

The QE II, more formally the Queen Elizabeth II, was scheduled to arrive in September, 1982 and drop anchor in Newport Harbor for a brief visit. This 963-foot-long vessel, weighing 67,139 tons, was going to create waves the moment she appeared on the horizon. WOTB-FM was going to be first and best with the story!

We learned interesting facts about the QE II. The ship carries the following provisions on an average transatlantic crossing: 50,000 tea bags, 5,000 pounds of sugar, 150 pounds of caviar, 50 pounds of dog biscuits, 3,000 pounds of cheese, 1500 pounds of lobster, 5,000 pounds of ice cream, 25,000 pounds of beef, 27,000 pounds of fresh vegetables, 1,000 bottles of champagne, 1,000 bottles and 41 different brands of whiskey, and 25,000 packs of cigarettes.

I placed a telephone call to the New York office of the QE II and advanced our request to broadcast live from the deck of the ship. Unsuccessful, we obtained the

Touching the Stars

name of the radio announcer aboard the giant ship and requested an interview before the ship arrived. We were granted an interview and didn't even have to pay for the call. Richard Spinks called us ship-to-shore and the evening before the big day, WOTB had established contact with our expected visitor and had an on-air preview of the upcoming events for the 1800 guests and the 950 member crew.

At daybreak, from the pay phone along the shoreline in Jamestown, I went on the air describing the scene—the magnificent ship approaching the harbor, the many people perched on the rugged shoreline to view the vessel and the mood. Only a few months earlier, the ship had been converted into a transport ship to assist in the Falkland Island war. On this day, the QE II sailed past us into Newport Harbor full of gaiety and happiness.

Spinks joined us for lunch in Newport and we arranged for him to produce a 30-minute radio show to be taped aboard the ship's station for play-back in a couple of weeks. Our entire news coverage of this major weekend story, from start to finish, cost a grand sum of one thin dime—the price of a phone call.

It was one more way for our station to increase its visibility and create that constant rapport with our audience, letting them know that if something worth reporting is happening around the bay, WOTB will take you there!

That's chutzpah—not cheap!

President Gerald Ford arrived at Providence Airport enroute to Newport for an appearance at a Republican fund raiser. The natives refer to it as Green Airport because technically it's named after Theodore Green. At the airport, the President was joined by several other leading Republicans, including Providence mayor Buddy Cianci. Cianci told me later at a broadcasters' meeting that he was sitting in the jump seat inside the Presidential limousine and chatting with Ford about a federal building they were trying to obtain for the city of Providence. The President kept slapping Cianci on the knee.

Touching the Stars

Cianci said, "Here we are—riding to Newport and the entire ride I'm playing knee-sees with the President of the United States."

I was in the Presidential Press Corp that evening. In advance of Ford's arrival, I walked over to the reporter's headquarters which had been established a block away from the Slocum home on Bellevue Avenue in a nearby garage. Strolling with me was a TV reporter, Steve Bell. We talked about the President's visit and entered press headquarters for copies of the speech. Bell has gone on to become a morning fixture on the ABC *Good Morning America Show*.

The host, Dave Hartman, is the pride of Ryan's Market in Wickford. David is fourth or fifth cousin to the Ryan family and has paid a couple of visits to his relatives in the Meat Room at Ryan's. The daily town news and stories that are told in Ryan's Meat Room would make for a good show on TV.

It reminds me of the one holiday morning I was doing the early morning news in Wickford on WKFD. About 15 minutes before the 6 a.m. sign-on, I would stop at the coffee shop and fortify myself with a cup of coffee. This one beautiful Memorial Day morning, with the sun glistening on the water in Wickford Cove, I found the coffee shop locked and only one other Wickford fella standing outside the door.

"Good morning," I said to the man without a name.

"Eh-yah . . . it is," he replied.

"You know, it's such a great day it would be nice to just get in the car and drive to the ocean or wherever and spend a lazy day enjoying yourself." I suggested.

"Right," he remarked. "The only problem is by the time you get there, it's time to come back."

I had just been introduced to Wickford mentality. This attitude is not representative of the business community and others, but there is a segment of the community that would like to see things stay the way they were.

CHAPTER NINE

"Anyone who plays this game for a living is not overpaid."

PGA Golf legend Bob Toski

In Newport, one of the most publicized trials of the decade and maybe the century was about to begin. Claus von Bulow, the Danish husband of wealthy American utilities heiress, Martha "Sunny" Crawford von Bulow, was charged with the bizarre attempt to murder his wife by insulin injections. The trial would soon capture everyone's imagination, and at the same time portray a dramatic picture of high society at its best and lowest levels.

"We're going to cover the trials," I said as I telephoned the Judge's chambers. A spokesman for Judge Thomas Needham said there were only 12 reserved seats for the entire media pool in the relatively small Newport courthouse. If WOTB would guarantee the seat would be occupied for the duration of the 12-week trial period, it would be ours. We would have to have our courtroom reporter in his seat when the trial opened five days later with jury selection. I accepted, and as I hung up the phone I pondered a moment. How were we going to find a qualified, knowledgeable, courtroom reporter with legal credentials, who could relate to the audience about the emotional and technical testimony we were soon to hear?

Our local attorney, Sal Virgadamo, suggested I contact Howard Levie. He was a retired Colonel in the U.S. Army, a lawyer, and Professor Emeritus at the Naval War College. Howard Levie arrived at our studios within hours of my telephone call and was very receptive to the idea. We negotiated a mutually agreeable arrangement. Howard, who lived only a block from the courthouse, was thrilled at the prospects and consented to our daily court-

Touching the Stars

house compensation of \$10 a day. Levie would feed the station two 3-minute reports daily and additional reports when necessary. And when the jury finally reached a verdict, Howard and another attorney, James O'Brien, assisted us during the six-day period live from the courtroom and Old Colony House building. O'Brien and Levie contributed so much to our award-winning radio coverage.

Our total budget to cover the extended Von Bulow trial was ten dollars a day for the salary of our ace reporter, Professor Howard Levie. While our total expenditures were under \$500, over 250 correspondents representing TV, cable, radio, newspapers and magazines were pumping thousands and thousands of dollars to cover this international event. To effect a further savings, we arranged with the curator of the Old Colony House, which became our broadcast headquarters, to utilize his regular telephone. Each day of the trial activities, we would connect our remote unit and our own telephone to the connection and go on the air with half-hour updates. Our access fee to broadcast was zero, while the mass media was spending oodles to provide in-depth coverage.

The lengthy Von Bulow trial in Newport's historic setting captured the interest of people around the world. The lure of the trial was an opportunity to look over the tall iron gates that insulate the rich from the rest of the world. Even WOTB could not have anticipated the high drama of the conclusion of the Claus von Bulow trial.

Our trial reporter, who as an army officer and lawyer tried a woman for the murder of her military husband, provided unmatched, crystal-clear perception into the events of the Von Bulow trial for our radio audience. The Von Bulow trial was one of the biggest spectacles Newport has ever witnessed. The trial was into its fifth week when our trial reporter had to excuse himself to leave for the midwest to fulfill a speaking engagement and I was nominated to keep the seat warm. After all, I cut my teeth on courtroom reporting in Pikeville, Kentucky in the late

Touching the Stars

50's during the Catfish Damon trial—the story of an itinerant visitor who got involved with Catfish and later disappeared. The victim's torso was later uncovered in a shallow grave and Catfish was tried and convicted of the crime. The gruesome details required the funeral director to retain the evidence on his premises throughout the lengthy trial. When the verdict was returned, I recall reporting the dramatic results live from the Pike County Courthouse.

This was the winter of 1983 and in the morning session Prosecutor Stephen Famiglietti was attempting to make a point with the jury about the questionable behavior of the victim—Sunny von Bulow.

Famiglietti said, "I'm neurotic." Pointing to his adversary, defense attorney Harold Fahringer, "*You're neurotic.*" Looking and pointing to Judge Thomas Needham, he said, "*You're neurotic—we're all neurotic.*"

Judge Needham brought laughter to the courtroom when he immediately responded, "If you don't mind, please leave me out of this."

After Judge Needham had recessed for lunch and shortly before 2 p.m, I returned to our WOTB reserved ringside seats in the courthouse. The other eleven reporters were gathering and there was a rumor circulating that was gaining credibility minute by minute. Alexandra Isles, Von Bulow's mistress, was in Newport and would probably be a surprise witness for the prosecution later today. The attractive dark-haired actress and controversial figure in the trial walked into the courtroom, looked at the empty bench and immediately left.

When she took the stand as the lead-off witness, Isles' testimony was potent. Alexandra appeared as a trusting woman who had believed the stories told by the married von Bulow. In a soft voice, she told the jury and the world of her relationship and intimate details of her affair with a married man. For those of us in the courtroom, it was difficult to keep in perspective that what we were seeing was real live stuff, not fiction or the afternoon soap.

Touching the Stars

On another occasion later in the trial, I was seated only a few feet away from von Bulow throughout the morning session and during a mid-morning break, I encountered the tall aristocratic gentleman in the hallway. I introduced myself and we exchange pleasantries. Obviously you couldn't talk about the "sunny weather" outside. The conversation was ever so brief and I turned to von Bulow and said, "Don't worry, this will soon be over." While von Bulow was convicted and sentenced to prison for over 30 years, his appeal won him a new trial at which time he was acquitted and never served a day behind bars.

O'Brien, a former Newport Prosecutor, joined us for the final week during jury deliberations. Our intelligence supplied information to Levie and O'Brien quietly and in advance of almost everyone else in the media pool. I'd spot one of the two returning to our broadcast mikes, and all eyes and ears would follow our reporter and take notes from their comments on the air. O'Brien's former association across the street in the courthouse enabled him to come and go as he pleased, even after the Judge ordered a courthouse ban on all media. He would bring back bits and pieces of the entire story before any of the reporters were aware.

During the six-day period the jury was out, we interviewed network reporters, journalists from England and around the world, Hodding Carter, President Carter's former Pentagon spokesman, and many others.

When the jury announced it had reached a verdict in the trial, WOTB-FM Radio was the only radio station live and on the air at the scene.

"All right, here we go!" I said as I watched the TV monitor and the jury parading into the courtroom. "Judge Needham is on the bench . . . let's take you inside the courtroom for this dramatic moment on WOTB Radio."

A few seconds elapsed and then the jury forewoman spoke: "Claus von Bulow—guilty."

Gasps of surprise filled the airwaves as our radio station was caught up in the vortex of this historic moment in

Touching the Stars

criminal trials. People later told me that in stores around the island, shoppers actually paused in silence listening to our station and the jury's announcement. Radio at its finest hour—and one of the reasons I've kept this love affair with broadcasting.

The only other station on the island, WADK, remained in their studios up until the Sunday before the verdict was meted out, before appearing at the trial. Apparently, one of their weekend announcers was monitoring our station, heard us report that we would be right back with some announcement and interpreted the wrong story. The other station's announcer went on the air and created a flap. The judge demanded WADK send someone to the trials if they were purporting to cover it. Thirteen weeks after the international trial got underway, and three days before the verdict was announced, Bob Sullivan, WADK's News director, showed up in the media pool.

Two months later, von Bulow would be sentenced for his crimes to 30 years at the ACI. We closed our Associated Press Award winning coverage from the Old Colony House with a comment I made to our fine trial reporters. "Lin Yutang, Chinese philosopher, once said, 'If one is too well read . . . then he does not know right is right and wrong is wrong'."

Rhode Island, a state that's 45 miles long and 35 miles wide, has an intimacy that's very unique. Especially as an owner of a radio station and newsperson, you often develop first name relationships with the newsmakers. Senator Pell, who is one of the richest and most powerful men in the United States Senate, does not have a pretentious lifestyle back home among his constituents. Pell and his wife live in a comfortable home on Ocean Drive overlooking the ocean, but in every other fashion he seems to live by that New England ethic, "Practice family frugality and avoid public exhibition." The Senator drives around Newport in a battered old Volvo, rattles around town in old clothes you and I would probably drop off at

Touching the Stars

the nearest Salvation Army depot, and generally retains a low profile. Even so, when the Senator is back, he pays attention to his constituents' requests, makes state-wide political appearances and even has his name listed in the local directory.

In Washington political circles, some of the classic stories told about Senator Pell have now earned a title. They're called "Pellisms." Marching in a rainy Columbus Day parade, the rain-soaked Senator rested while his aide rushed to get a pair of dry shoes for the legislator. Returning in a few minutes, with a brand new pair of shoes, Pell asked his aide, "Where did you get the shoes?"

To which his aide replied, "Oh, from Thom McAnn."

The Senator responded in a sincere tone, "You be sure to thank Tom for me."

Another Pellism occurred on the air at WKFD during one of the Senator's annual pilgrimages to state radio stations. We were discussing the tremendous rise in sugar prices and one listener demanded an explanation. Pell told the woman that he thought it was awful that sugar prices had reached the \$1.50 per 5 lb. level and that he would try and do something about it. When we broke for a commercial, I enlightened Pell that sugar prices had soared to more than \$5 a 5 lb. package. He thanked me. On the air again, the Senator smoothed over the glaring misstatement by establishing the current sugar prices and went on to the next caller.

We were having a sales meeting at WOTB on December 10, 1982 and were waiting for the pending arrival of Senator Pell for an interview. An employee rushed upstairs into the meeting and announced, "Senator Pell is here and his hand is bleeding. Does anyone have a handkerchief?"

I said, "Handkerchief—hell! Sounds like we've got a wounded U.S. Senator in our lobby. Call CBS and maybe we can still make the evening news tonight."

Touching the Stars

Moments later, I greeted Pell and offered my handkerchief. He graciously declined, but my insistence prevailed and he finally accepted as he tried to stop the bleeding. Pell told us he had been jogging, and had slipped and fallen on the ice before coming to the studios.

Senator Pell had recently returned from the Mid-East where he had represented the United States at the funeral of Egypt's Anwar Sadat. He told us the Egyptian government issued bullet-proof vests for visiting heads of state because of the tenuous situation in the country in the immediate hours following Sadat's assassination.

Pell stepped into the studios to record and we returned to our sales meeting where I produced the handkerchief with the blood of Senator Pell. "See, contrary to public opinion, the Senator's blood is not blue, but red—just like yours and mine." I saved the handkerchief, dated it and stashed it away. Imagine what this item could bring at a future auction?

During the America's Cup summer of '83, shortly after the announcement of the sale of WOTB, Senator Pell was in Russia on an extended visit and had several meetings with Soviet Leader Yuri Andropov. At a glamorous America's Cup party, hosted by the Australians in Newport, Barbara and I were socializing with the some 200 invited guests at the Marble House. As I approached the large ornate dining room table for some food, I noticed Senator Pell coming in our direction. When our eyes made contact, the Senator immediately approached me, and congratulated us on the sale of the radio station. We talked for a few minutes and he excused himself. All I could think of was that Senator Pell had been in intense discussions with Andropov only a few days earlier and had the time and presence to sincerely congratulate us on our good fortune. I immediately forgave him of all Pellisms.

Touching the Stars

The Tennis Hall of Fame is the stage for major tournaments every summer and over the years I have enjoyed interviewing some of the tennis greats—Arthur Ashe, ViJay Armitras, Billy Talbert, and others. In fact, the interview with Armitras was right after his debut in the James Bond movie *Octopussy*.

A press conference was announced by Newport County Chamber of Commerce in the spring of 1980. Amazingly, *Golf Digest Magazine* had enticed the Newport Country Club Board of Directors to open the historic links course to the public for the annual Merrill Lynch-Golf Digest Commemorative Pro-Am Tournament later that year. The senior golfers were appearing in a few tournaments and the magazine announced plans to mark its 30th anniversary by staging the event. WOTB immediately contacted a representative of *Golf Digest* after the press conference and requested permission to broadcast live from the tournament. The relationship would continue for the next four years, with WOTB providing exclusive coverage and updates. I had an opportunity to get to know some of the legends during in-depth interviews which I will share with you.

I suppose the announcement by the media of the planned Senior PGA Golf event to be held at NCC sent shock waves through the city. The total membership of the club is comprised of about 110 members and while some local golfers are members, the majority of the members also belong to the elite 400 circle.

The best illustration of the sometimes perceived stuffiness of NCC is told in a story by the late Bill Reed, a manager of the Newport Country Club. In the early 70's Reed and three others were playing during an Elk outing. The event had been scheduled in early fall after the summer colony crowd had left Newport. As their foursome reached the ninth green, near the clubhouse, Reed spotted Mrs. Harvey Firestone's car entering the grounds, and excused himself from the group. He greeted Mrs.

Touching the Stars

Firestone, who said in her seemingly affected tones, "Billy, who are *all* those people out there on the course?"

Attempting to calm her, the manager said, "They are Elks—about 200 of them—here for a golf outing."

"Well," said Mrs. Firestone, "We're not ever going to have them back here again, now are we, Billy?"

I understand if an end-of-the-year assessment is required, the inner circle of Newport Country Club coughs up a check and that's that. The attitude at the club by some older members is that if someone is standing on the first tee as you turn onto the long driveway, they consider the course congested.

So, the all-star cast of golfing greats were soon to make an appearance at the site of the first national golf championships ever played in this country, the 1985 Amateur and Open. Newport is as near to being a British seaside course as can be found in the U.S.A. Sammy Snead, Billy Casper, Don January, Arnold Palmer, Miller Barber, Bob Toski and many other golf greats were ready to compete again.

The first Pro-Am was not as well organized as later tournaments and our broadcast and press accommodations were established inside the clubhouse in the ladies locker room. WOTB-FM was the only radio station broadcasting the event and we enjoyed the preferential treatment.

It was *deja vu*—upper Montclair all over again, but better! I interviewed Bob Goalby, former Masters Champion and now NBC golf commentator. Across the room I saw my next guest—Roberto De Vincenzo—the man who really won the Masters, but lost the coveted prize when he scored his card incorrectly.

When I broached the subject, years later, De Vincenzo told me, "We have to play by the rules—otherwise it would be a crazy game."

The Seniors were renewing their long-time love affairs with competitive golf—all waiting their turn to be interviewed on WOTB. A broadcaster's dream come true!

Touching the Stars

Sammy Snead, golf's longest running super-star, has a reputation for being gruff and unfriendly. After posting a good opening round score to take the lead in the first tournament, Sammy was in a very receptive mood and was holding court at a press conference. Behind the mike, we started reminiscing about his four decades of golf and his early years as a young professional. Snead told one story after another. Unlike *Good Morning America*, or a structured show, where the interviewer has to wrap up the entire interview with his or her guest in several minutes, our format during this golf weekend called for about 5 minutes of conversation on the half hour. However, when you've got a superstar, a microphone and you own the station—you just keep talking and let the good times roll.

As I prepared to close the interview with Snead, I said "Sammy, if you could write your own epitaph, how would you want it to read?"

Without hesitation, Snead said, "Jesus Christ couldn't please everyone and so I've got a fat chance." That ended the interview!

Caddy assignments were available. Two of my three golfing sons were in the neighborhood and applied for jobs. They drew Australians Peter Thompson and Kal Nagle and served these two fine gentlemen for the next three tournaments. As you would expect, in addition to the thrill of being the sidekick of the 5 time British Open Champion, probably the most important highlight of any caddy assignment is payday. There's always a degree of uncertainty when the tournament is over and it's time for your rewards. David and Todd were waiting outside the Newport Country Club Clubhouse, when Nagle appeared with checks for both sons. Nagle also carried some golf sweaters, shirts, golf balls and Peter Thompson's putter.

Nagle said, "We don't have room on the plane to take these things back with us and we hope you'll be able to

Touching the Stars

use them.” Some warm gestures from the gentlemen from “Down Under.”

Bob Toski, winner of many PGA events, teacher, and now Senior player, was one of our guests during the 1983 Fourth Annual Merrill-Lynch Golf Digest Commemorative Tournament. Toski was practicing for the start of the tournament the next day and was in one of his very relaxed and talkative moods.

Sharing some of his inner thoughts about the game, he said, “Our golf game falls apart because we’re not geared to understand how much success we can accept as a person. A lot of people are afraid to get rich. A lot of people are afraid to make nine birdies. Their limit in a round is five—they make five and go down hill from there.” Toski preached, “You’ve got to believe that if you can make five birdies—you can make six—and if you can make six—you can make seven—and if you can make seven, you can make eight.”

“Any superstitions, Bob Toski?” I asked.

“Not really. Any superstitions I’ve ever had, I’ve overcome. Like being too small, being Polish, and being told I was dumb. All those things that I was told I couldn’t do, I’ve overcome because of faith in myself and God.”

Toski shared with us his feelings about professional golfers. “Anyone who plays this game for a living is not overpaid,” said Toski. “Think about a ballplayer batting 210 and getting \$3 million dollars or a pitcher with a 2 and 8 record getting 1/2 million dollars. In golf, if you don’t produce right down to the end of the wire, you don’t get paid. It’s not what you did yesterday. You don’t play one good round and rest on yesterday’s laurels and get paid 1/2 million dollars for yesterday’s play. The money is up front to play for and you’ve got to go get it. You don’t come in with an agent who tries to make you worth five million dollars.”

Toski and I were sitting in the press tent live as Bob continued his candid talk. “Capitalism is a great thing—but

Touching the Stars

you can't con anybody in this game for another extra million dollars."

I was tempted to coax Toski and asked, "You mean you have to earn it the old fashioned way?"

He responded the way I wanted him to and emulated the famous line in the TV commercial for the investment firm as he growled, "The old fashioned way."

I interviewed Bob Goalby several times, including during the 1982 event when the former Masters Champion said, "When you've been a player, as most of us have been, and then been thrown out to pasture with nowhere to compete, and you get a chance to compete in tournaments again—boy, everybody's happy, fired up, and rejuvenated!"

I asked him about playing with an old set of clubs. Goalby said, "You always want to keep your old ones close by, because if you had a fork that didn't hit your mouth it would be kind of tough, and if you've got a club you didn't hit the green with, you'd better get those old ones back in there!"

Five-time winner of the British Open, Peter Thompson was a regular guest on the air at the Newport tournament. In 1983 it was particularly exciting because, as we interviewed Thompson, his record across the big pond was being chased by American golfer, Tom Watson, in the British Isles.

Thompson told us on the air, "If Watson wins, I will send him a telegram and welcome him to the 'Five Times Club'."

Watson captured the British title that weekend and tied Thompson's very impressive string of victories. Thompson described his game over the years as a Hogan type of game where he's straight and on the green. Reminiscing about his sterling performance in the British Open, Thompson said, "When it's under hot and dry conditions, it's the old dog for the hard road."

Touching the Stars

Ron Funseth, winner of four PGA events, quit the game of golf and became involved in other business interests. Ron decided to return to tournament play in 1983 when he turned 50 and became eligible for the Senior Tour. Funseth captured two Senior wins before he was forced to stop playing golf because of cancer. During our pleasant, relaxed weekend conversation at Newport Country Club, Funseth remarked how much fun it would be to be in a place like Newport with not so many people around. Sadly, less than two years later, Funseth died of cancer at the age of 52.

Doug Ford, another Masters champion and winner of the *Golf Digest* event in 1981, had just about iced the tournament with a marvelous 40-foot putt on the 18th finishing hole and tied Sammy Snead. On the first hole of a sudden-death playoff, Ford knocked in a 15-foot birdie putt to defeat Snead and capture first place honors.

I called him a legend during our interview before the ceremony and Ford said, "To be called a legend in your time is a great thing," adding, "I think more sports should honor their great players while they can appreciate it."

Ford must be pleased to hear about the Major League announcement this year that a barnstorming group of retired players will stage old-timers games in every major league ball park this season, starting May 17th at Boston's Fenway Park.

Black golfer Charlie Sifford has been a regular starter in the tournament after playing on the PGA tour from 1959 to 1974. He never missed the top 60. Sifford's golf philosophy is, "Don't make no difference to me. I just tee it up and play. Whatever happens is going to happen. If I get to playing good, nobody beats me. If I get to playing bad, everybody beats me." Sifford expounded about the racial issue. "When they wrote the by-laws of golf, they had a clause that only whites could become members of the

Touching the Stars

PGA. I didn't think that was right. In 1959 the PGA changed the rules."

Sifford said, "This is too tough a game for blacks to be playing golf. Man, you got to be half crazy to tackle the game. When we go to school, they teach us football, baseball and basketball. We don't have the opportunity to play golf."

In the 1983 event, Sifford hit a four-wood which produced some fireworks on the 10th hole. It's a par five and, hitting his second shot about 238 yards, he bounced the ball on the green and it rolled into the cup for a double eagle.

After the round I caught Sifford near the press tent. In his unemotional style, Sifford recreated the exciting moment, "I hit the fairway, took my four-wood and shot at the middle of the green and it rolled in the hole. Just one of those things."

I couldn't resist . . . "Oh, just the old ho-hum routine double eagle, right?" There's a warm golf story which may never be told if I don't take the opportunity in this book.

The leading amateurs of the country are invited to Rhode Island every year to play in an insurance classic at Wannamoisett Country Club. Brad Faxon, who achieved state, national and world recognition in his young career, was a member of the Walker Team in his senior college year, and was playing one of his final amateur rounds before turning professional. We interviewed Brad as we had so many other times, dating back to his senior year in high school when he defeated our son David in the State Amateur tournament. There's an interesting friendship which develops when you see an extraordinary talent like Brad in schoolboy competition. After the personal involvement disappears, you really are very supportive of his career. Faxon won his first PGA Tour Event, the Provident, in Chattanooga, Tennessee,

Touching the Stars

on June 15, 1986, and a check for \$54,000. Move over, Nicklaus and Floyd!

The story is told about a young boy who is scheduled to caddy at the event and arrives in plenty of time for his assignment. Now this young impressionable sixteen year old has two idols—Bobby Orr and Jack Nicklaus. And he is assigned Jack Nicklaus, 2nd, son of the famous Golden Bear, and he's thrilled to death. It's Pro-Am day and playing with young Nicklaus is none other than Bobby Orr. This youngster is in hog heaven!

He covers eighteen holes with Orr and the younger Nicklaus and after the round, he is invited to go with them to Jack, Jr's home where young Nicklaus is staying for the week. There's post game conversation with family and friends. Soon young Nicklaus excuses himself and leaves for the dinner party at the Clubhouse. Everyone leaves but Bobby Orr who decides to linger awhile and talk with the youngster. Imagine—what a day it has been! Soon, Orr leaves for the social commitment at the club.

As the young caddy settles back in a recliner, the telephone begins to ring. He picks up the phone and responds "Hello."

"Hi, this is Jack Nicklaus. Could you tell me how young Jack played today in the tournament?"

Hole by hole, the caddy shared the game with Jack's father—his other idol. What a memorable day for the kid from Wannamoisett!

In a way, the final decision to sell WOTB-FM, our young infant, was probably easier than one could imagine. Barbara, who became an active business partner by default when we acquired Adler's stock, shared the day-to-day ownership responsibilities. After the legal scenario and additional demands of accomplishing our early goals with a new business, I suppose we both were suffering from burnout.

Touching the Stars

Enroute to the studios one morning in 1982, a sudden illness struck my wife. We barely made it to a nearby emergency room in Middletown. While doctors attempted to stabilize her semiconscious and apparent heart condition, the decision was reached to transfer Barbara to Newport Hospital. Within an hour, I was behind the wheel, following the ambulance which was transferring my stricken wife. I did a great deal of soul-searching during that brief trip. When we arrived at the hospital and Barbara's physician took her under his care, I knew it was time to re-evaluate our situation. After several hours of testing, Barbara's doctor consulted privately with me about her health. While all the symptoms pointed towards stress and anxiety, there were also some important medical questions.

The doctor advised me, "Ron, I wish I could tie a big ribbon around the problem and identify it for you, but I can't do that. We're not certain."

Barbara was under heavy sedation when I stopped by her room to say goodnight. I returned home to our large, empty house and cried my eyes out. Our 28-year struggle for success, a radio station, and a happy family was threatened and I was determined to resolve the problem. Talking long distance to my three sons that evening, I again lost my composure over their mother's illness, and its possibilities. The weeks which followed were heartening, however, as Barbara displayed a dramatic recovery. She was apparently enroute to full recovery.

"It's time to sell the radio station. I think we should do it tomorrow." I suggested to my partner and roommate.

After many hours of discussion, we agreed it was time to sell WOTB. The actual sale was not consummated until about one year later, when we signed an agreement to sell to Leisure Market, a New York City based group, for \$700,000. Our terms were for almost 50% down and the balance over a reasonably short 5-year period. This enabled us to receive a little less than one million dollars

Touching the Stars

in both principal and interest. Considering Lou and I invested \$3,000 each as seed money when we conceived the idea, that wasn't a bad return!

Our decision to sell WOTB and the announcement to the public came as somewhat of a surprise and prompted a chorus of comments ranging from sincere to humorous. I began writing them down. "Here comes Daddy Warbucks, hello money bags . . . now you can go thumb your nose at everybody. Congratulations, do you want to buy a bowling alley? The good book says you shouldn't be jealous, but I'm jealous. You sold your station again, No one can have the best of both worlds . . . if you goofed off all these years you wouldn't be able to enjoy this moment. First thing I felt was . . . it was like hearing about close friends getting a divorce . . . others probably feel you've come in, made a killing and are getting out. Trouble with us swamp yankees is, we're afraid to part with a dollar, because we may never see it again."

It was the community reaction to someone's apparent instant success—new-found liquidity and the opportunity to seek a new and challenging career at the age of 52.

CHAPTER TEN

*"It was just a walk in the park . . . that's all that it was . . .
but oh, what it seemed to be."*

George David Weiss

There *is* life after 32 years in broadcasting! Given the opportunities to do new things and take a well-deserved vacation, we left Rhode Island in January, 1984, for a two-month respite in sunny Florida. I observed in the trade magazine that the Florida Broadcasters were meeting in Saint Augustine. I arranged to stay overnight there and meet some new broadcasters. Randy Jeffrey, a former Florida broadcaster who had taught a communications class at Florida Southern College where our son David had graduated, was in attendance in his new role as a media broker. Randy had joined the Chapman Associates firm and was excited about his new career.

"How would you like to join me next Wednesday in Crystal River and see how a broker works?"

"Sure," I replied. And on Wednesday, I drove along the western coast to join Randy while he put the buyers and seller together.

After a tour of the station, which was located right off the first tee of a golf course, Randy said, "Why don't you think about joining Chapman as a media broker? You'll be good at it!"

Barbara and I vacationed with my parents for a few days and stayed a month at beautiful Sanibel Island. I couldn't stop thinking about the idea of continuing my love affair with broadcasting.

The president of Chapman Associates, John Emory, invited me to visit the headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia, for an interview. A month later, I returned to Atlanta for another interview and was invited to join the firm as an Associate. In Las Vegas, a few weeks later, I would meet

Touching the Stars

all of the twenty Associates at the National Broadcasters Association Convention.

Chapman had scheduled some pre-convention Associate meetings for Thursday at 1 p.m. and I didn't want to be late. Arriving in Vegas the night before, I retired early for my first day on the job as a broker. After breakfast, I was sitting near the Keno games in the Hacienda Hotel when I heard a familiar voice behind me.

"Hello, Ron." It was the president, John Emory, who looked somewhat fatigued and disheveled. John was toting his flight bag and luggage.

"Did you just arrive?" I inquired.

"No, I'm leaving for Atlanta."

John informed me that he had a major disagreement with his partners and was returning to the home office. "Here's the key to our Chapman suite. Ron, would you give the key to my partners?"

I agreed, while not trying to display my state of shock. Emory shuffled across the lounge and disappeared behind the one-dollar slot machines. The Chapman company was the original brokerage firm in the media field and enjoys a great, well-deserved reputation in our industry. When the founder sold the business to four associates, the internal problems began.

I stood there, on my first day with Chapman Associates, holding the key to the suite. I asked myself, did this mean I was now acting president of Chapman Associates?

The corporate fallout occurred during the day and the other principals took immediate steps to correct the problem and strengthen the internal operation. Bill Cate, one of the principals, was named President and announced plans to immediately move to Atlanta and take the reins. Several months later, the company invited Associates to participate in a stock equity plan and later invest in a new corporate headquarters in Atlanta. In a few short months, I was already a media broker, stockholder and limited partner in one of the country's preeminent media brokerage firms!

Touching the Stars

Since becoming a broker, I now perceive our industry in a different light, perhaps. Now I find myself talking daily with the prime players and influential people in our dynamic industry.

Curt Gowdy has quite literally done it all in the field of sports broadcasting. He has covered eight Super Bowls, 16 World Series, 12 Rose Bowls and seven Olympic games, spanning a career that began 39 years ago. Gowdy, who owns several radio stations, was in attendance at a Paul Kagen Seminar last year in Boston, where I had the opportunity to meet him.

Several years earlier, I had received a feeler from a third party that Gowdy wanted to buy our station. Curt remembered and confirmed that his wife really wanted to come to the Newport area. The interest was genuine, although we never got together. We met a second time that same day in the men's room of the hotel, as I congratulated him on the fine story recently in *Radio and Records*.

Touching the stars resulted in the strange meeting between songwriter George David Weiss and me in Dallas in September 1985. Enroute home after a six-day convention week, one of my colleagues and I were booked on the same People's flight from Fort Worth-Dallas airport to Newark, New Jersey. Our flight departed at 11:50 a.m. As we checked in at the counter we were assigned Gate 21-A and passed through security. People's had quoted me an extremely low fare of something like \$69, and when I bought my ticket the charge was \$129. This bothered me. Since it was my first time flying People's, I returned to the counter to ask why. Referred to the manager's office across the floor, I knocked on his door. When it opened, I met Mr. Lou Rossati, who explained that air fares were subject to change and was most cordial. I rejoined my colleague for pre-flight drink.

Touching the Stars

There was little activity around gate 21-A, although our scheduled flight departure time was posted on the marquee. When our flight time arrived and passed, we became concerned. Ten or fifteen minutes later a People's 727 jet taxied away from our terminal.

"Something's wrong," said Warren Gregory, as he rushed to the counter for an explanation.

Moments later, he returned—livid with the news that our plane had left without us. An inexperienced ticket person had inadvertently assigned us to the wrong gate when our flight actually departed from Gate 21.

A girl at the ticket counter directed us to the manager's office across the floor and through the door. I knew exactly where to go and we knocked on the door. The door opened and we were greeted by a comely young lady, Leah Mara, who was the manager. Leah listened to our plight and immediately went to work to resolve our problem. She succeeded in booking Gregory on an American Airlines flight to Hartford at 1 p.m. only 20 minutes from then.

While Leah was finalizing the flight, I asked to use their phone and call information in Newton, New Jersey. "Operator, may I have the phone number for Robert Holenstein."

Leah, sitting at the next desk, said, "Oh, I dated Michael Holenstein—their son." What are the odds of this coincidence?

Leah now had my complete confidence, and the only way American would accept Gregory aboard their 1 p.m. flight was if I personally endorsed a check. Unfortunately, my colleague was traveling without cash or credit cards.

We left my luggage behind in Leah's office, since I had been offered a complimentary flight on People's 4:30 p.m. flight. We rushed by car from one terminal to another to catch Warren's flight.

As he departed for an American boarding gate, Leah turned to me and said, "I can get you on a 1:10 flight to Newark on American."

Touching the Stars

"Great, but my luggage is back in your office." I told her.

Undaunted, the ambassador for People's replied, "I will personally deliver your luggage in Newton tomorrow morning." She knew that we were going to be staying at the home of Dr. and Mrs. William Gray. Since she had been a cheerleader with the Gray's daughter, she knew exactly where we would be Saturday morning. Now *that's* service!

I raced for my flight on American. I stepped aboard just as they were sealing the door. Someone was already occupying my assigned seat, so I strolled down the aisle until I found an empty one. As I settled down in my window seat, I introduced myself to the bearded gentleman next to me.

"I'm George David Weiss," he said.

I couldn't resist sharing my travel experiences over at People's with my new flying companion. George is President of the Songwriters guild. He was in Dallas for the purpose of appearing on a panel dealing with pornography in the recording industry. I knew I had recognized his name from many years as an on-air personality. Weiss had attended Juilliard Music School and was responsible for some great songs and Broadway musicals.

"George, I know I've played many of your songs—give me a hint. Sing a few bars."

George didn't need prompting. He broke into the melody of the song that he wrote and Frank Sinatra popularized. "It was just a walk in the park . . . that's all it was . . . but *Oh, what it seemed to be.*"

Together, we sang a string of his hits, playing *Name That Tune—Wheel of Fortune, Cross Over the Bridge, Too Close for Comfort, Mr. Wonderful*, and others. Two contemporaries, really enjoying the moment.

Suddenly, everyone inside the plane started a mad scramble for their belongings as the Captain announced cancellation of the flight, due to hydraulic problems. You can imagine the chaos which followed—with some 300 passengers stranded, trying to reschedule, missing con-

Touching the Stars

necting flights, etc. I told George not to worry—that our friend at People's Airlines would arrange for both of us to get aboard the 4:30 p.m. flight to Newark.

Again, Leah Mara came to our rescue, drove us back to People's Terminal and we were ticketed. Now, instead paying for my flight, People's was returning me on a "freebie." George and I made our way to Leah's office. By now, word was out that People's had a celebrity flying with them.

Four of the airline staff were in Leah's office. I turned to my songwriter friend and said, "I bet they'd like to hear a few of your songs, George."

A real performer, he belted out a couple of hits he knew would delight the younger people, *The Lion Sleeps Tonight*, and Elvis's big number, *Can't Help Falling in Love*, as well as one the Stylists recorded, *Let's Get it All Together*. Then, George and I spent the next two hours over drinks sharing our life's experiences.

As we boarded the 4:30 p.m. flight back to Newark, the Captain, Co-captain and entire crew were lined up to greet us. "Great to have you with us, Mr. Weiss! We've enjoyed your music over the years." Just before take off, Leah Mara came aboard to wish us a good flight and couldn't leave without giving our songwriter and his press agent a big kiss.

When we touched down at Newark Airport and bounded off the plane, my lovely wife was very fractious. She had waited at the terminal for over six hours, without a single message or a promised phone call by People's. After I introduced Barbara to Weiss, I don't believe she stopped explaining her frustrations until we reached the parked car. I had promised George a ride to his car at the American terminal.

With George in the back seat, I turned to Barbara and said, "Honey, you don't know this, but George David Weiss is a professional songwriter." I gave George the cue. "Sing a song for Barbara, George."

Touching the Stars

After a few lines of *Oh What It Seemed to Be*, *Lullaby of Birdland*, and a few more life was tranquil again. It's true, music can sooth the savage in all of us. Some 35,000 feet high, I had suggested to George that we compose a song to mark the occasion. Together, we came up with the title, "I'm up in the air, out of my mind, trying to find my way back to you." We're now working on the music.

Harriet Beecher Stowe said, "When you get into a tight place and everything goes against you, til it seems as though you could not hold on a minute longer, never give up then, for that is just the place and time that the tide will turn."

Lin Yu Tang says, "No man can tie a string to the sun and hold back its course."

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's advice is apropro: "Perseverance is a great element of success. If you can only knock long enough and loud enough at the gate, you are sure to wake up somebody."

You might wish to add *chutzpah*—the Yiddish word for supreme self-confidence—as an important ingredient in reaching your goals.

All I had wanted to do was become an announcer like those I heard on the radio. One goal led to a newly defined goal until I was touching the stars—and *you can, too*.

Thirty-six-year-old Englishman Peter Byrd probably best illustrates the example. The free-lance photographer set out to row from California to Australia all alone in a 36-foot boat. His first two attempts failed—one when his boat crashed on the rocks off Maui, Hawaii. On his third and successful attempt to get into the record books, Byrd completed the journey in 294 days—but not without many life-threatening experiences.

His boat was hit by a cyclone. Byrd said the incredible noise of the rain and spray pounding the outside of his small boat was frightening. Byrd wondered if the boat would be all right. Would he survive? He remembered

Touching the Stars

the way he helped build the boat, from stem to stern, and began to feel more comfortable.

Byrd's craft reached the Great Barrier Reef, and was sighted by Australians who were watching for his arrival. Under tow and hit by a huge 12-foot wave, the stern of Byrd's boat filled with water. He fell and broke the tiller, and the boat began to break up. Byrd salvaged the important things—his camera, his journal, and his life.

As for the warm reception given him, upon his record making trip, Byrd said the Australians felt, "Anybody who would row to Australia can't be all bad."

In Newport, in 1983, in an interview on WOTB radio, Byrd shared his voyage and experiences at sea with our audience. The message Byrd gave is this, "If Peter Byrd can row across the Pacific Ocean, then anything is possible of anybody. Because there is nothing special about me. Just somebody who wanted to do something . . . who went out and gave it a go."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ron Hickman is the founder of an FM station, owner of two other stations, an invited dinner guest to the home of TV anchorman, Walter Cronkite, luncheon guest of singer Vic Damone and comedian Jerry Lewis, was taught social graces by Zsa Zsa Gabor, befriended the Lone Ranger, and interviewed hundreds of celebrities, political leaders, and sports stars, including Merv Griffin, Sammy Snead, Arnold Palmer, Audrey Meadows, Gordon MacRae, C-I-A Director Stansfield Turner, Joe Louis, Don Maynard, Elaine Stewart, Dennis Connor, Ted Turner, John Glynn, Marylyn Maxwell, Jim Bouton, Frankie Frisch, and many other personalities.

Hickman enjoys the friendship of his boyhood singing idol, Eddy Arnold. He was a business partner with Lou Adler, New York's most successful radio news anchor, personally served as a member of the Presidential Press Corp., covering Presidents Kennedy, Nixon and Ford. He reported five America's Cup campaigns, the first Von Bulow trial in Historic Newport, and interviewed the "Queen of the Sussex County Farm and Horse Show," and married her in 1958. And he is still married to the "Queen."

INDEX

Adler, Lou	71,74-75,86,88
Allen, Steve	42
America's Cup	110
Andover Summer Theater	35
Arnold, Eddy	79-80
Bell, Steve	118
Bouton, Jim	65
<i>Broadcasting Magazine</i>	29
Buscaglia, Leo	61
Byrd, Peter	143-144
<i>CBS Evening News</i>	9,81,109
CBS-TV	36,71
Chaffee, Governor John	77,82-83
Chapman Associates	137-138
Chase, Senator Clifford	36
Combs, Earl	27
Cronkite, Walter	9-13
Damone, Vic	36,45-46
Faxon, Brad	132
Federal Communication Commission	30,31,51,53,64,74,76,84-85, 86,89, 98,100-101
Forbes, Malcolm	36
Ford, President Gerald	117
Ford, Doug	131
Frisch, Frankie	92
Funseth, Ron	131
Gabor, Zsa Zsa	33
Glenn, Senator John	103-104
Goalby, Bob	130
<i>Good Morning America</i>	118
Godfrey, Arthur	19
Gowdy, Curt	139
Griffen, Merv	35-36
Hackett, Buddy	36
Hartman, Dave	118
Hilltoppers, The	38
Hite, Bob (Jr.)	81-82
Hite, Bob (Sr.)	9,10,77,81,107,109,114-116
Kahn, Al	18,24,51
Kennedy, President John F.	51-52

Kennedy, Jackie	52-53
Kerr, Bob and Joan	57
Lamour, Dorothy	40
Lewis, Jerry	90
Licht, Governor Frank	77
Louis, Joe	62
Marx, Groucho	35,40-41
Maxwell, Marilyn	40
Maynard, Don	61
McGuire, Don	39
Meadows, Audrey	41-42
Meynor, Governor Robert	37
Miss Hamburg	44
Mitchum, Robert	40
Morrow, Buddy	48
New Jersey Broadcasters Association	53
Nicklaus, Jack	133
Nixon, President Richard	92-94
Paul, Les	66
Palmer, Arnold	68
Palmer, Betsy	35
Pastore, Senator John	77
Paul Whiteman Show	19-20
Pell, Senator Claiborne	82,124-125
QEII	116
Radio School of Technique	17
Randall, Frankie	60
Rather, Dan	9
Reagan, Ronald	81
Robertson, Cliff	35
Rockefeller, Nelson	83
Romero, Cesar	35
Rondo, Don	42
Sacca, Jimmy	38
Sanders, Barbara	44
Sifford, Charlie	131
Snead, Sammy	128
Stewart, Elaine	41-42
Thompson, Peter	130
Toski, Bob	129-130
Trial, Claus von Bulow	120-123
Turner, Admiral Stansfield	94-95
USS Capodanno	113
USS Intrepid	38
WAAF	105

WADK	95-97,99
WAGR.....	46
WCBS.....	72,75,86
WKFD.....	38,73,74,81 84,87,91
WKER.....	57,59,65,66,71,73
WMTR.....	19-20
WNEW.....	19
WNNJ.....	22,30,32,34, 35,40, 42,43, 47-48,52,57
WOR.....	72
WOTB.....	95,100,105,106, 108,110, 116,117,122,126,134-135
WPKE	18,21
WVCA.....	31
WXFL.....	82
Wallace, Grady	23
Wallace, Mike.....	42,82
Weiss, George David.....	139,141-142
Wolfe, Simpson.....	42

AVAILABLE FROM LOIRY PUBLISHING HOUSE

- Touching the Stars***, by Ron Hickman
Raising Readers, by Felicia Brings and Alicia M. O'Neill
Habit Breakthrough, by Mitch Bobrow, M.S.W.
The Easy Gourmet Cuisine (That Women Just Can't Resist) Cookbook, by Ricky Frazier and Jack Olesker
Indicted, by Mallory E. Horne
A Surrogate Mother's Story, by Patricia Adair
Sex and Circumstance, by Robert B. Greenblatt, M.D.
The Winning Vote, by William I. Hampton
He Eats His Sandwich Upside Down!! by Clell C. Warriner, Ph.D. with Dorothy Beanland
It's Not My Fault, by Hugh J. Burns, Ph.D
Senior Shape-up, by Carley McBride and Kate Lefler
Where Do Adults Come From? by James P. Barton, Ph.D., and Mary M. Cotrell, Ph.D.
Today's Stars in Country Music, by Patricia Woodward
Winning With Science, by William S. Loiry
A Time to Live, by David A. Loiry, Ph.D. and Carol J. Loiry, M.A.
The Impact of Youth, by William S. Loiry

To order, contact your local bookstore, or contact the publisher:

Loiry Publishing House
P.O. Box 288
Tallahassee, Florida 32302
(904) 681-0019

