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LOCAL HISTORY

Mr. Loren Boatman Interview

August 11, 1986

This is the oral history program for the Decatur Public Library. We are recording at the library on August 11, 1986. One of the main purposes of this series is to show the changes that have come about over the years in the Decatur area. No one could have seen more profound changes in the course of a career than our guest today - Mr. Loren Boatman - who is meteorologist on the news staff of WAND, television channel 17 in Decatur.

Mr. Boatman, welcome to our oral history series.

A. Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

Q. We're very glad to have you. Have you always lived in Decatur?

A. No. I moved to Decatur in 1949 so I call myself one of the early '49ers.

Q. And you found gold here!

A. Yes. I moved here from the University of Illinois when I finished my master's degree. I came to Decatur in '49 and joined the staff of the brand new Lakeview High School, which opened its doors in September of '49. So I've been in Decatur that many years.

Q. You came to Decatur to teach at Lakeview?

A. Yes.

Q. What was your field of teaching?

A. My field was science, math, and social studies. I hit all three.

Q. That was a broad background. But before we go on with your career, let's hear something about your childhood.

A. All right. I was born in Carlinville, Illinois, which is 40 miles south of Springfield. I grew up there, and was educated in the Carlinville schools all the way through high school. Then I went to school at Southern

Illinois for the first year of college and then I joined the Navy and got my second year and third year of schooling in college at Indiana State Teacher's College, which has since been renamed, but that was located in Terre Haute, Indiana. Following that I was sent to Northwestern Midshipman School at Northwestern University by Chicago. I finished my training there, received my commission in the Navy, went overseas for a while, came back, and finished my senior year at Southern. From there I went to the University of Illinois to get my Master's.

Q. Where did you go overseas in your Navy duty?

A. All of the Pacific! I went all over the Pacific. I was sent to Pearl Harbor, of course that was after the action there. Then I was assigned to a ship at Pearl Harbor, and we went over to the Florida Islands, the Russell Islands, Guadalcanal. Those are all over in that same area. Then we went to Iwo Jima, and from there we went back home.

Q. So you not only studied history, but you saw where some of it had taken place?

A. I saw where a lot of it had taken place right there on Iwo Jima, yes.

Q. And then you came back and finished your degree?

A. I finished my degree at Southern. I had one year to go--my senior year--and then after my senior year, I taught school for one year at Coulterville, which is a little town in southern Illinois. Then I got an assistantship at the University of Illinois. I went there and taught for one year at the same time I was getting my Master's. Then in 1949 I graduated from the University of Illinois with a Master's and came to Decatur in August of 1949 and started teaching at the brand new Lakeview High School.

Q. That must have been a thrill!

A. I was there until they closed the doors 33 years later.

Q. Teaching isn't your present occupation, is it?

A. Oh yes! Some people would call it "moonlighting", but I have worked two jobs for the past 33 years. I am starting my 40th year of teaching two weeks from today. I taught at Lakeview High School 33 years. Then in 1953 a television station was constructed. It went on the air in August 16 of 1953. From that time on, I've been teaching during the day and doing the weather forecasts in the evening.

Q. How did this happen? How did you have that opportunity?

A. Well, I was reading the paper and keeping up with the news of the construction of the television station when I happened to notice that they were looking for a meteorologist--someone to broadcast the weather forecasts. I thought, "Why not?" I had taken weather observation on the campus at Southern, I was a government weather observer there, and I thought "I know a little about the weather. I've taken courses in that study. I stand up in front of the students in a classroom and teach. Why couldn't I stand in front of a camera and talk?" So I went to apply and was hired. I've been there ever since with that job.

Q. So you made your own approach? In other words, you didn't go to school to learn how to do this?

A. No, that was my first introduction. For weeks before we actually went on the air, we rehearsed. We had a lot of dry runs of news, weather, and sports programs so that when we hit the air on August 16, 1953, we had a feel for it.

Q. This might be a good time to tell us something about the station--the equipment and especially changes that have come about since those early days.

A. A fantastic number of changes have come about not only in the field of meteorology but also in the equipment that is being used. Our first cameras were huge, monstrous things, and of course they have miniaturized everything since then--going from the use of tubes to just little crystals--so cameras have come down in size. The lights that we used to light the studio in the early days were 2000 watt incandescent lamps. Now we use little tiny light bulbs that are no bigger than your finger, and yet they light the studio beautifully. They aren't nearly as hot, I can tell you that. We used to turn the 2000 watt bulbs on, and thirty minutes after they were on, we could kiss air conditioning good-bye.

Q. And there went your make-up?

A. There went make-up. You were sitting there or standing there bathed in perspiration. It got very hot! Even in the winter time those lights were hot. But now it's not as bad.

Q. And microphones?

A. Microphones went from the big bulky type that they put on the desk in front of you or that you carried in your hand to the little tiny ones not much bigger than your little finger nail or the tip of your little finger--that is about the size of the microphones that we wear now. As people may have observed, there are two microphones on my tie clip instead of one. We always have two so that if one goes out, the other will work. We're protected that way. We've done a lot of things that have changed television. The equipment itself has gone from big, bulky size to miniaturizations.

Q. There is something we haven't talked about that made a tremendous difference--and that is video taping or even audio taping.

A. Right! That was one of the early changes. In the early days we used to do all of our commercials live--absolutely live--and we would have huge sheets of paper hanging from the television cameras where we would write out our commercials and read it from that. Now we have teleprompters. We can look directly into the lens of the camera, and we have taping facilities so that if a commercial doesn't go well, we can do it over and over until we get it right. Before we were taping--when we were doing it live--if we made a mistake everybody knew.

Q. And there was such pressure on the performers?

A. Tremendous pressure! A pause of 5 seconds seemed like 5 minutes.

Q. So now we have you at the television station, and you are set up with your equipment. Let's talk receiving equipment. That has changed too, hasn't it?

A. Oh, a tremendous change! And the broadcasting--we go up with the towers. We have the microwave dishes that can transmit our signal and the receiving we have now. If people drive past Southside Drive in front of the studio, they can see three huge dishes there. These receive our signal from the satellite in the sky. These used to come from telephone lines. The whole system is advancing so rapidly that we no sooner have a piece of equipment installed and used about a year than it is outdated because something else has come along to replace it that is better and smaller.

Q. It really is fantastic to consider what the engineers and technicians have been able to accomplish, but let's talk now about your own field of meteorology. That is a field that is very close to everyone--something everybody is interested in.

A. I can't think of anything else that people can't get away from.

It affects everyone, regardless of his walk in life or his occupation. People want to know what the weather is like. I have always tried to use my weather forecast and my weather program to inform the people, give them the stright facts, tell it like it is without a lot of fancy talk around it. I'm pretty straight forward when it comes to doing a weather broadcast. I don't like a lot of little things on the side that distract. If you're going to put on a show, forget about it. I just want to get up and do the job and tell the people what they want to hear and let it go at that.

Q. You don't try to be a comic?

A. Not at all! I try to be very serious with my part of the program, as the others should be.

Q. You just tell us if it is going to rain or not?

A. Yes. I got started way back when I was at Southern University. I was taking weather reports there as a government weather observer. It's always fascinated me. Meteorology is a very, very young science. You can't understand all of it. There is a great deal about it that we really don't know. When we talk about hurricanes or tornadoes or severe thunderstorms, watches and warnings, it effects everybody--something people need--they can't get along without knowing what to do. It's one of the most viable parts of the newscast.

Q. Do you have any stories to tell us about reactions or how things have gone?

A. Oh yes. In the early days people used to call me, "Hi, Mr. Boatman." As we became better acquainted, I'm just plain "Boats" to a lot of people, and that's just fine. It used to worry me. I'd meet people on the street who would speak to me, and I'd wonder, "Where did I meet that person?" Then I realized that I really didn't know them

at all. They know me, but I don't know them. So I just say, "Hello! How are you?", and go on.

But some of the things that have happened behind the scenes at the studio during the actual broadcasting of the weather make very funny stories.

When I was doing the weather we had a gentlemen out there by the name of J. Giles, who used to be a radio announcer and news broadcaster at WSOY. He came to work at the television station. He was doing a commercial on my left side. As I was doing the weather, he would have to get down on his hands and knees and crawl in front of me and go around to my right side with the microphone to do a commercial over there. The weather map was flat against the wall so he couldn't go behind me. This one day, I was doing the weather as he was on his hands and knees crawling around in front of me when I felt a hand go up my pant leg and start to pull the hairs on my leg. It was difficult to finish the weather with that hand there, but I finally went on.

Carl Hickerson, who was one of our sports directors, was doing a commercial once for El Bauer Chevrolet. He had a huge dog in his station wagon at the back of the studio. In the middle of the commercial the dog jumped out of the back seat and into the front seat with Bill Cecil, who was doing that at the time. The dog started barking very loud, and there went the commercial. The next day there was a sign posted, "There will be no live animals in this studio during live commercials." This was before we had taping. Now if something happens, we can tape it over. But this was during the live days.

Carl Hickerson, who was one of our sports directors, was doing

a commercial on a special lawn mower that had a swivel front wheel so you could pivot around objects very close. He had a Coke bottle on a piece of false grass as he was demonstrating this. Three times he tried. Three times he knocked down the bottle. It was very funny.

Then Don Foreman, one of our commercial announcers, was doing a commercial for the Redwood Restaurant. He had a table with a little vase and a flower in it, and he had the menu there, and he was looking over the menu and talking about it. At that moment Bill Cecil walked in. He thought Don was simply rehearsing. He didn't realize Don was doing it live. Bill walked up to the table, sat down, and said, " Well, Don, what are we going to have for dinner tonight? "

As a result, Don, with a tremendous presence of mind (I would never have been able to pull this off myself. I would have just folded.) But Don handed him the menu and said, " Bill, why don't you look over the menu and make a selection? " He went on as if there was nothing going on. Anyone who saw that thought Bill was a part of it, but Bill didn't realize until after it was over that it was live, and he was part of the commercial. Then he collapsed. But we've had a lot of fun.

People have called me at all hours of the day and night. I had one lady call me especially--this was rather amusing. It was shortly after we had gone on the air. I don't remember whether it was in the first or second year, but it was in the early years. She had announced her daughter's engagement during the Christmas holiday season, and it was to be a June wedding. In January I had a call from this lady. She told me who she was. I said, " Oh, yes, I remember seeing the announcement in the paper of your daughter's wedding--a big picture and all that. " She said, " Can you tell me,

Mr. Boatman, what the weather is going to be like in June? We're going to have an outdoor wedding and reception with in excess of 300 people there, and I must know. "

I said, " I'm sorry, but if you'll call me about six days before, I can give you a pretty good idea. "

She said, " I can't wait that long. "

I said, " If you're going to take out insurance, call Lloyds of London. " I don't think she was too happy with my comments. There are many amusing incidents like that.

Q. Do they think you have control?

A. I wish I did have the control they think I have because they would be shoveling snow off their driveway the fourth of July!

Q. The field of meteorologist on television has changed, hasn't it?-- the way in which you do it?

A. Before, I used to do in a very amateurish way--rather very primitive-- because we tried to be professional in everything, but now we have the color graphics machine. We have radar. We have satellites that beam us our pictures so even though meteorology has moved a great distance from the early beginnings, it's still considered pretty much of an infant science because there are so many things we don't know about it. We know what happens, but we don't know why. In the 33 years that I've been out there, I've seen it go from going out and reading a thermometer and reading the rain in a rain gauge to satellite pictures. I now use a color graphics machine, which reproduces maps. I make up my maps and type all the stuff and put it in nice form for people to see on the screen--much better than my scribbly handwriting that I used to use.

Q. The use of percentages has helped, hasn't it?

A. Oh, yes--the use of percentages. People say, " Well, if he said there's going to be a 50-50 chance of rain, I'd better take a rain coat. If it's only a 20% chance, there's an 80% chance we won't get rain. They can figure for themselves, but a lot of times they really need to know if they should carry a raincoat or an umbrella. Of course, there is all kinds of information we try to pass on-- for example, try not to use an umbrella in a thunder storm, especially if it has a metal rod and handle because that will attract lightning. Don't stand under a tree because lightning could hit the tree and jump from the tree to you. We try to pass on information that people might not know at the time.

Q. This may be the time for you to tell us about your day. You must have a very full day.

A. Yes, a very full day--now that I'm teaching at MacArthur High School. Two weeks from today I'll be starting my 40th year of teaching and next week I'll be starting my 34th year at the television station.

My day begins quite early--5:45 a.m. I'm usually at the high school at 7:30 or 7:35. I teach school during the day, and stay after school to work until about 3:30 or 3:45. Then I head for the television station. I try to get there no later than 4:00 because from 4 until 6 o'clock I'm very busy gathering all the information I'll use on the 6 o'clock show and putting it into the computer color graphics machine. Then I make up the forecast pages and the maps, and we sequence all of this in the order we want it to appear. Then I usually get an hour and a half break for dinner. I'm back at the television station by 8 o'clock at night. We're there until we're finished with the 10 o'clock news--usually around 10:35-- except on Monday nights when there is a ball game or some other

special event that keeps us late. You could roughly say that from 6 o'clock in the morning until midnight I'm on the go. I get about 6 hours of sleep, and I thrive on it.

Q. And that is how many days a week?

A. That is 5 days a week. Usually on Saturdays or Sundays when I could sleep, I don't because I'm so used to getting up. Basically there are three months out of the year that I do the weather show on Sundays--just at 10:00. That makes six days a week then.

Q. Well, it is a demanding job.

A. I live by the clock.

Q. Still, it's a very satisfying one I would guess.

A. It has to be, or I wouldn't stay with it. Both jobs, in fact.

Q. Television is so important to people in their daily lives that you must feel you have a tremendous impact upon them?

A. I think I do have because people recognize me wherever I go. It's so strange. I was over in England just this summer. I got back just about a month ago. I met people over there who hollered, "Hi, Boats!" They don't live in Decatur, but they live in an area where they receive us. In Hawaii it was the same thing, and down in Epcot. As I would be walking through the grounds, someone would call "We're from Decatur," or "We're from Mt. Zion," or "Springfield" or "Champaign"--a tremendous number of people. You can't just begin to believe the effect you have. I'm so glad they speak to me because I think it's fabulous that even away from home they know me. It's so nice to meet someone who knows you.

Q. And all of this has happened in just thirty or forty years?

A. Thirty-three years.

Q. Let's see if you can tell us how television in general and WAND in particular has changed life--especially in Decatur?

A. As far as television news is concerned, it puts you there when it is happening. You have the audio portion with radio, and with newspapers you could read it the next day, but television puts you there now. For instance, take the royal wedding. We left there on a Thursday before the wedding took place. We came home and watched it as it was happening. I kept saying to my wife, Pauline,--" We were there. We were sitting in that pew in Westminster Abbey, where the wedding took place. "

You see everything instantly. The Korean War made people realize it. It's a shame that it had to come into being in that war, but it brought the war to the people--the savage brutality of it. People could see for themselves what was going on. It's an instant impact. It has changed people's thinking tremendously, but on the other hand, it gives them the information immediately. I think it will continue to do that. Most news departments want accuracy in reporting. It's a very talented and very professional group of people.

Q. So you think on the whole that television has had a positive influence?

A. Oh, yes! It no doubt has changed a lot of sleeping habits for people because many people will stay up to watch the late night news and programs. Before television they would click off their radios and go to bed at 9:30 or 10 o'clock. Now when they stay up, they are being entertained. I think people like to be entertained. Many people are very passive.

Television has been tremendous especially in the medical field. They can video tape not only operations and surgery, but televisions have been placed in hospitals and patients' rooms, and it's a tremendous entertainer for people who lie in the hospital and are on their way to getting well. Watching television takes their minds off their illness and fills in the time for them.

Q. Is it possible that it might be too passive?

A. Oh, many times. There are times when parents should turn off the set and chase their kids outside, and say, " Go play! " There are times when the kids will want to stay inside and watch. It's up to the parents to decide how and when television will be used and what is to be watched, especially when it comes to the younger children.

Q. Do you sometimes wonder what people did before they had television?

A. Oh, yes. Many people do not read as much as they used to, and they do not sit around and talk. At my home, if we happen to have the set on when someone comes, it immediately goes off, and we talk. Some people, however, are put out if you don't let them watch the show. You are in second place--the television first. I don't think that's the right way to treat company.

Q. You said that television has changed peoples sleeping habits. It has changed their eating habits too, hasn't it?

A. Oh, yes! Now they eat with their eyes glued to the set--very definitely. They see all the commercials with all the products being advertised-- oh yes. It has a tremendous impact.

Q. So it has its' pluses and maybe a few things we ought to watch?

A. Yes, indeed.

Q. On the whole, television is an asset?

A. I agree--a very positive asset.

Q. What do you think is the future of television?

A. I think we're going to see smaller sets but more instant news--for example, for more programs like those we produce with our " live line " truck. We can send that truck anywhere in the field. We don't have to be in a city. We can send it anywhere, as we can very well see from the reports that come in. People are aware of this. We now have the capability to go down to Lake Decatur or Lake Shelby-

ville or go over to Springfield and televise to our station by means of the little dishes we have--to show events as they are happening, right here and now. I think we'll see more of that instant field reporting.

Q. Do you want to say anything about cable?

A. Cable television? I think it's something we all learn to live with--it's commercial too. Cable television is just another brand of television that has its pluses and minuses.

Q. It has to be used in a constructive way?

A. Definitely so. Cable is something more parents should get in and control.

Q. What do you think of Decatur as a whole? Have you enjoyed living here?

A. I've loved Decatur. It's my kind of town--if you want to put it that way. It's just the right size. You can get around in it easily, and I think that the Decatur Celebration we had just a week ago was fantastic. We saw people pouring out and taking part in the events. I'm looking forward to next year's celebration. It's a very positive attitude that we are now getting about Decatur. People say "there is nothing to do in Decatur," but I say, "you do not use your imagination. There is lots to do in Decatur." I wish I had time to do it all.

Q. What do you like to do when you have free time?

A. When I have free time I do many things. I like to travel. I just love to travel every year on my vacation. This year we were in England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. The year before we were in the Scandinavian countries. I love to travel.

Q. Do you act as a tour guide?

A. Once in a while....I love boating. Anyone with the name of "Boatman" wouldn't be anything else but a boater. My father was in the Navy, my brother was in the Navy--so we come from a Navy family--or "boaters."

I do have my own boat on Lake Decatur. I thoroughly enjoy getting out in the boat and moving around on Lake Decatur--not hot-rodding it as some of them do. Mine is a boat you don't go too fast in. It's just a cruiser. But I love boating and water activities.

I also love photography. I'm not very good at it, but I still love it.

Many times when I come home from the television station, I'll sit down at the piano and play for awhile--a half hour or an hour--just as a way of unwinding at night. I'm not very good but I love to play. So those are the things I have as hobbies. I've narrowed it down to boating, a little photography, and a little piano playing.

Q. And travel?

A. Yes--a lot of travel whenever I can. I used to do a lot of golf, but boating became more important.

Q. What are some of your favorite places to travel?

A. I think some of the prettiest places we have seen are in southern Germany and in Switzerland. I love those places. I love Hawaii--and I keep wanting to go back there, but my wife says, "Let's go somewhere different every year until we get tired. Then we can go back to Hawaii." Oh, that's a beautiful place!

Maybe next year we'll go back to the south Pacific--way south--maybe to Australia. I don't know yet. It's up in the air. But I do love traveling.

Q. Do you take time from your job to go?

A. Oh, yes--I always go during the summer vacation. Until I retire I have to work my vacations in during the summertime. After I retire, I can work my vacation in anytime. I'm looking forward to the time when I'll have six Saturdays and one Sunday in every week.

Q. How much time do you have for a vacation?

A. I have four weeks from the television station. That gives me a chance to travel.

Q. Very good!

What recommendations would you give to a young person who might be entering the field?

A. The field of television and especially meteorology? First of all, they must be avid readers, they must have good diction, good pronunciation, and good grammar. If they are going into the field of meteorology, they must--and this is a requirement of anybody--be good at math and science, because this is essential when they go to the university and major in meteorology. They will have to have a liking for math and science. First of all, they have to have a scientific mind and be curious. Otherwise, I think they will not make very good meteorologists.

Q. And if they do all this, they will have a lot of fun along with it--you guarantee?

A. I would almost guarantee that. It is a pressure occupation. You are working with the clock. I am a clock-oriented person. I get there at 4 o'clock and know I have exactly one hour and 55 minutes to get my show put together, into the machine, sequenced, and turned over to the director. The director likes to have everything turned over to him 5 minutes before air time.

Before we went into the computer graphics and the sequencing of these, I was able to work on my weather right up until I went on the air, but now I must try to have everything done five minutes before air time. From air time on, I'm working in the studio.

Yes, it is a pressure oriented, but there is a lot of satisfaction and a lot of fun in it--if you can handle the pressure.

Q. And you have contributed a great deal to the enjoyment of life in Decatur.

A. I hope so.

Q. I'm sure the people in Decatur are very pleased that you went into this field.

We thank you very much for sharing your reminiscences with us. It has been a pleasure to hear a bit of history in the making, and we thank you.

A. You're quite welcome. It's been my pleasure.

Q. You have been listening to the experiences and reminiscences of Mr. Loren Boatman, meteorologist and newsman on the staff of WAND, television station channel 17. This is Betty Turnell for the Decatur Public Library.