

Chapter 01 – Introduction

Announcer: James C. Leake was a Television pioneer along with his wife Marjory Griffin Lake and brother-in-law John “J.T.” Griffin. In the 1940s, they applied to the FCC for licenses to put television stations in Little Rock, Arkansas (KATV), Tulsa, Oklahoma (KTUL), and Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (KWTV). They put these three stations on the air in nine months. What you are about to hear is James C. Leake describing the process from application time, their competition, money issues, to building studios, and to when they went on the air December, 1953.

It was February 3, 1998, when Mr. Leake recorded this oral history account of Oklahoma and Arkansas television. He was 83 years old when he talked for an hour without an interviewer or notes as he recalled in interesting detail the many challenges they faced in constructing these stations “put on by folks who had never seen it.”

Now listen to James “Jimmy” Leake on Voices of Oklahoma.com.

Chapter 02 – 10:40 How TV Came About

James C. Leake: Here we are on February 3rd, 1998. What a long journey we’ve traveled in this television business and I would never had dreamed that I would be this old, or that we would have been a part as anything as wonderful as Channel 7, Channel 8, and Channel 9.

A lot of people don’t understand how television come on the scenes. But since we were there, I’ll attempt to give you an idea. Of course, the FCC, before World War II, had what they call an ‘allocation table’ for television. Before WWII, no one had seen any television to mount anything — no one knew what

it looked like, how it really worked. And we didn't have much more having been in the broadcast business — the radio business — we had a little bit better knowledge than the average person.

But, at the time the war started, the FCC in Washington froze all the applications and all of the channel tables and everything was devoted to the World War II effort — to win the war. And, of course, a great deal of interest continued to be in the upcoming great invention of television. And people had their own ideas of what it would be like and how it would do and so forth.

And when the war was over and the lid blew off of the can, everybody started getting out, trying to find what television would be — how it would work, what it would do for the country, what it could do for the people. And at that time, we had, of course, thought about it during the war and had come up with the idea that we just had to be in the television business. We're going to stay in the radio, but we had to be in television.

So it fell on my part to, at the end of the war, to be the one to sort of try and guide our family into the television business. By that I mean we had to see what markets we were going to operate in and nobody had made any applications for any markets. We had them ready to make. And there was some sent in, but they were all frozen.

So after considerable study and looking at the markets — and, of course, we had an advantage over most other people in that we had operated a grocery business within all of these markets and were very well-acquainted with the markets and the statistics of the people and knew all about it. So we had decided "Well, we're going to go after this station." And I'm sort of a country hick in most ways, but I was a pretty good one-gallused engineer and I thought that Channel 7, 8 and 9 would be the best frequencies to go after; and the reasons were several for that reason. But we were sort of in the middle of the dial and that was always a good place to be and there were other interferences that would come into play in some of the very early channels or the very low channels. So we concluded that we would go after Channel 8. And, at that time, the first allocation table before the war put Channel 8 in Tulsa. So we decided we'd go after that. And that's what we did. We formed the application, we filed it with the FCC, and after the war, we began our long

journey of getting it through the FCC to where we could start building somewhere down the line.

And the cost of television — we knew it was going to be horrendous. We didn't know how in the world we would ever figure that out. Pouring money in the banks was a very difficult thing because of the unknown qualities of television, and the expenses of it, and how it's ever going to operate and where it's going to go. It was a tremendous undertaking on our part and we finally got together with an engineer by the name of name of Paul Godly who lived in West Montclair, New Jersey but operated — worked through — the FCC.

We made the application, and had a lawyer in Washington — Mr. Griffin had had radio lawyers up there, Spearman, Sachs, and Robinson. So the application was filed and we waited to see what we were going to do with it. And in the meantime, John Griffin and I had studied the markets — grocery markets — and all very thoroughly and we came up with the idea, “Well, if we're going to go after one station, maybe we should go after another.”

So we looked around about what stations we ought to go after and since we owned KOMA in Oklahoma City, we decided that Channel 9 would probably be a good frequency, so we worked up an application for Channel 9 for Oklahoma City. We finally got it filed a few weeks after the one with Channel 8; and after it got in the mail and starts to grind through the FCC, we got to looking around and said, “Well, maybe we oughta make an application for a little further away from Channel 9 and Oklahoma City.” And we thought “Well, it'd be nice to have 'em right close together.” And everybody said, “But then, when you look at the requirements, they have to be located so many miles apart.” I've forgotten — 25? Well, maybe more than that. Maybe 50 or 60 or 70 miles apart. And, of course, in our looking at Channel 9, it was like Channel 9 — pretty much free from interference and looked like it might be a good idea.

And then it came up there was a rule with the FCC that you couldn't put Channel 8 and Channel 9 together. They had to — certainly, no short spacing — but the more we looked at it, and studied the frequencies, we realized that Channel 9 and Channel 8 would not interfere in the major markets — in the markets of Tulsa and Oklahoma City because a strange phenomena developed in Channel 8 and Channel 9 in that Channel 9 would not go into the Tulsa market as long as the signal was stronger than the signal coming out of

Tulsa market. In other words, it neutralized itself just about 50% of the distance from the two towers. And we studied that out with our chief engineer and everybody and we come to the conclusion that there would be no interference from these stations being so close together.

Based upon that rule, we asked for a waiver that the FCC not consider the spacing as normal and give us short space in the distance it would be between the two transmitters. And we made the application on that basis, and of course, the application was attacked by everybody as being short-spaced, but we were able to argue it around and the FCC engineers agreed with us and that gave us the freedom to go to work on Channel 9 in Oklahoma City.

At that time, some few years before that, we had bought a radio station — an FM station — here in Oklahoma by Mr. Bonebreak. He had a radio station — been very successful radio operator — and he bought about 80 acres out here on North Kelly for the placement of his tower and had built a 985 ft. tower and had his FM station going very soon after the war ended and had found out that it was working fine, that FM did good, but when you looked at it, there were no receivers that were turned to FM at all. You couldn't hardly find a radio receiver, so Mr. Bonebreak operated for a short time and decided he wanted to get out of the FM business, so John and I bought the property with the idea of moving KOMA from the Biltmore Hotel, where it had been built back long ago — I don't know how far back, we'd been on the Biltmore Hotel. But, anyway, we decided to move KOMA from the Biltmore Hotel out to North Kelly to use this tall tower. We thought that would be big enough and good enough if we ever got into the television business for at least a startup television operation.

We went ahead and made the application to move KOMA radio out there and changed our application on television to use that as the basis of our location. And, of course, we started scrapping it all through the FCC and we had all kinds of opposition, and we had KLKY, they had been on before the war. And primarily, I think, as an experimental station, they had worked with it.

Chapter 03 – 8:03 Competition

James C. Leake: Now then after we had made the application, we had several people decide they wanted Channel 9, so anyone could make an application on top of the ones that were there up to a certain date. It had a cutoff date and then they would accept no more applications. Well, we had two or three different groups apply and then we started looking at our applications — what kind of rules we felt the FCC would put into television and we decided it would be about the same as we had in radio. So we worked from that angle. And when the other applications came in on top of us, that then shut off all applications and then it started grinding through the FCC in its slow form.

We had to go through a lot of hearings and various types of information where we would develop and release the information based on what we were going to do with the station if we were allocated it. As we worked along, finally, Mr. Edgar Belle, who had been the station manager at WKY at the Oklahoma Publishing Company — Mr. Gaylord decided to part company — and here was probably the most capable television manager anywhere in Oklahoma or the Southwest on the form of Edgar Belle, so we went ahead and hired him to join us in our application. And at the time he joined us, Governor Turner Luther Delanie forced Harper and Henry Griffin — Henry Griffin was with the old Griffin Amusement Company that worked with theaters all over this country. Of course, Harper was an oil man and, together, we agreed to make them 50% partners and that meant Edgar and his group of 4, and John, Marjory, and I on the Griffin side.

So we joined forces and it was a great thing for us when we did, because Edgar Belle brought to us much more of an understanding of programming and various other assets that he had learned in his long stint in The Daily Oklahoman. So we set up to go through that process and then, of course, we were working on the application for Channel 8 all during the same period. And, as time went by, we wound up with 3 stations in the FCC trying to come work through the myriad of activity that one has to go. When the FCC froze the first application, they just froze the allotment schedule that they had proposed and shut down taking applications or anything for anything further until they studied the operation of several stations they had in operations. One would be in Oklahoma City and one was in Tulsa. And in so doing, that gave us information - the FCC information — we needed in order to modify our application. And in the meantime, they changed the allocation table and

allocated Channel 8 to Muskogee, Channel 9 to Oklahoma City, and Channel 7 from Little Rock to Pine Bluff.

Well, we made a long steady of that situation when they changed the allocation there. So we dedicated, "Well, Tulsa and Muskogee are not that far apart; and if we located the antenna in a proper location between the two, we could get city signal in both Tulsa and Muskogee." Always have to have city signal in your area of dominance, and so that worked out very well in both Little Rock and Pine Bluff.

So we started out, then, in moving the station to Muskogee. We had to re-work the application completely and then, finally, when the freeze was lifted, we had pretty much put into operation our application at the FCC. Channel 9 was allocated to Oklahoma City, Channel 7 to Muskogee. And, of course, everybody said, "Well now, let's just see about Muskogee. It's a very little ol' place over there."

And most people said "Oh, there's no way that you can ever make any money — that you could even break even in a city the size of Oklahoma City," but having been a fairly decent engineer and using the engineering capabilities that were available to us in Paul Godley — who'd been our first engineer in Tulsa — he had retired, so we had to pick another one. We used the same engineer that Edgar had used when he repaired the Oklahoma City application: Walter Davis. He had a brother named George — George and Walter Davis. They then became our engineers before the FCC lifted the freeze.

Finally, a year or so after they froze it, they had all the information they wanted, so they lifted the freeze. And then it was like a horse race when they — start the horse race, everyone was on his own down the track. And we just kept on fighting with 'em. Everything that came up, we tried to beat it and win it, beat it down. And over the long period of time that lasted maybe from the time we first started in television — which would be about 1945, clear on up to 1949, 50 — before the FCC finally got rid of their paper backlog and started signing applications. And we wound up that we had all three applications in. They were in good standing and the first one that came out was Channel 7 in Little Rock. And that was really some great — you know, we thought, "Boy, that's great. Now we'll get started building Little Rock." And just about 30 days later, here came Channel 7 and they did allocate Channel 9 and Channel 7 at the

same time. And then Channel 8 was delayed with a lawsuit down with a fellow we had in Texas that wanted to put in an application. The FCC hadn't worked that one out yet. So when we found John Griffin, Marjory and I, and our friends in Oklahoma City found that we were in the position of having to build two stations immediately. And, of course, our friends in Oklahoma City — Turner Delanie, Harper, and Henry Griffin — they owned only half of Oklahoma City and we had no partners in Tulsa, err, Little Rock.

Chapter 04 – 7:40

World's Tallest Tower

James C. Leake: And, boy, was that a tremendous undertaking here at Tulsa. We tried and figured out: "Now, where are we going to put the antenna?" The radio antenna had been out near Turley, north of Tulsa, and we decided that wouldn't work at all because that'd be too far from Muskogee and too far north.

So we kept on looking and finally decided that the best place — the engineers and lawyers and everybody agreed — was on a little ol' mountain northwest of Haskell, Oklahoma called "Concharty Mountain." And that was a tribe of Indians that I'd never heard of that one time had lived in that vicinity.

So we started out with our application there and it looked good, looked like it would work. And then we tried to find a tower. And we were having trouble getting steel because of the Korean War — the situation looked bad on that front. We couldn't get enough steel, so we decided to put up a 800 ft. tower on this little mountaintop and Johnny Andrews — of Andrews Steel in Ft. Worth — come up with a new type of tower in which he welded together, in Ft. Worth, a box of steel girders and it would be 40 ft. long and about 6 ft. square. He would work up a 40 ft. length of it and then build it right in his place in Ft. Worth and haul it by truck up to Concharty Mountain.

Well, the Concharty Mountain site was a real problem because there were no roads up there and we had to build the roads and clear off some of the land around there. It really was a very big job, something we had never had to do before. Finally, we got it on the way and got KTUL — we called it KTUL TV at

that time — but since it had been moved to Muskogee, the FCC wouldn't allow us to use KTUL, so we called it KTVX was the call letters of Channel 8 in Muskogee.

We had about 5 or 6 different people apply against us and we had to work each one of those out, which we did do. Bixby, who owned the newspaper in Muskogee, was one of 'em. We had several others. But the beautiful part about Muskogee and Pine Bluff was people agreed that there wasn't any way you could make a living out of it or make it grow, so we didn't have any of the — what you might call — “big boys” making an application.

In Muskogee, we kept on working on it. Finally, we got it out in very early Spring of 1954. We had gone on the air in Little Rock on December 19th, 1953. Oklahoma City was December 20th, 1953. When we started building them, we knew it'd be impossible for a pair of us — John Griffin and myself — to look at everything that was done at each place, so we divided up and I took Little Rock and he took Oklahoma City. And I decided, “Well, boy, that's really going to — we'll just get that down to business and we'll see who can win.”

Now, back to Oklahoma City. After we had moved out to Kelly, and using the radio station that Mr. Bonebreak had built as our television operation, we then had both KOMA and Channel 9 operating out of the same small building. In the center of the building, where Channel 9 operates ... with both stations, we had built a very small area there that was sort of a library for our radio business and then we decided that would be big enough to start off with on the studio.

And as we prepared and got ready to go, we found out that we couldn't buy a tall tower. We had worked around all the time deciding what size tower that we would have and we finally got ahold of tower builders and they said they'd never built a tower any higher than 1,500ft and they were almost reluctant to start that. But they did quote us a price on a 1,605 ft. tower in Oklahoma City and that was then, when we finished it off and topped it off, that was then the tallest tower in the world. And Mr. Bonebreak, when he built KOCY, he had built the 985 ft. tower and that was the tallest one in the world. So Griffin-Leake Interest had built, by the time we got our stations on the air, we built 3 of the tallest towers in the world at that time.

And I know we finally decided we could go on the air when we got our application approved in Oklahoma City by building a small tower and putting an antenna on top of it, which RCA and engineers said would work fine, so that's what we decided to do. And we went on the air on December the 19th, 1953 at Channel 9. And we called this tall tower — we tried to figure out what was our call letters going to be on Channel 9 — and finally somebody come up with the idea that "World's Tallest Video," so KWTV means "World's Tallest Video."

An west of the Mississippi, we had to have the prefix "K" and east of the Mississippi, we had to have the prefix "W," but now WKY in Oklahoma City had received their license and their call letter before the rule had been made at the FCC and that's what they are "WKY."

So we became KWTV: "World's Tallest Video." And, boy, we thought that was really some deal. And, finally, after about, I guess, 3 years approximately — maybe a little longer — we operated KWTV on this little small tower. And incidentally it's still sitting out northwest of the building, still there, and I suppose still hooked up in case of emergency. But they can't operate from there.

But we went on to build the tower and then we, of course, had to do a lot of enlarging of the radio building that we'd had and all of that went together. I don't remember when we went on the big tower, but it was about 3 or 4 years later.

Chapter 05 – 9:30

Educational TV

James C. Leake: And as we progressed in the FCC application, we had certain things we'd do and were promised by us and by other people, and we decided that what the educational authority that — the FCC had allocated a channel for the education authority in Oklahoma City and Tulsa. We thought that, "Well, we'd just go down to the state capitol and tell the Governor that we'd like him to endorse KWTV as the best applicant for the Channel 9." And that's what we did.

We then gave enough land to the state for the educational television — and not only that — we said that we would allow the antenna for the Oklahoma Educational Authority to put their antenna just below ours on the new 985-foot tower, and that would make the educational station in Oklahoma City have the tallest tower and the best telecasting facilities anywhere in the country for an educational station. We really played that up very well and it played pretty well, so we had to include their operation in our application when the FCC granted it. They also granted the educational television station authority to build a station right adjacent to KWTW and if you look at it today, it's right across the way — a little bit west and south of the present building. That worked out very well and helped us a whole lot all through the years. We've always been very pleased to be located right near the educational television station. It was quite a boost to the FCC granting out Channel 9 application. And if you'll look today, it's pretty much all there as it was when it was first built.

Now then. Getting back to KATV in Little Rock. When we looked around at stations that we thought would work in very well with the grocery company and the promotion of our products and all, we decided that Arkansas had been good to us since we'd had a grocery house / produce house in Fort Smith and also one in Rodgers, Arkansas that that would fill in a very large gap and do a great deal to our grocery business. So we went ahead and chose Little Rock as a very good place to put another station. And we looked, of course, at the application tables and the channels — 7 was there. And we thought "Well, that'd be great." Now, that had been allocated to Little Rock in the original FCC allocation, but changed to Pine Bluff.

So I went down to Pine Bluff. I was flying an old Navy on this; it's been a long time ago back about 1941, 2 or 3 when we decided we'd make an application for Little Rock. We had looked at Austin, Texas; Springfield, Missouri; and various other locations and had concluded that if we got the 3 television stations — Tulsa, Little Rock, and Oklahoma City — that that would be about all we could possibly chin, because we always had trouble borrowing money, clear on up to probably in the '60s before the banks in this country just decided television was a profitable thing and was going to be here from now on and eased up a little bit on us.

We looked around, tried to figure out where to put the tower for KATV. And since we were in the Korean War — along about that time was in the making — we couldn't get steel, we couldn't buy a tower of any consequence. So we decided that we had this tower that Mr. Bonebreak had bought for FM. Well, we decided we wouldn't need that with the new 965-foot tower that we're going to build for KWTV, the tallest tower in the world, so there was towers available and no steel available. We dedicated to move that tower over to KATV. So that was then done and it was quite a task to tear down the tower here.

I think we had 13 truckloads of steel off of the Oklahoma City tower that we hauled to Little Rock. We made a big splurge about it as we went down Little Rock's main street and down Pine Bluff's main street with all this retinue of trucks loaded with steel. And, finally, we had picked out a small area. I think we bought 55 acres up around Redfield. And we started the long journey of trying to build a tower — move it and build it. Well, it got to be quite a long journey and always a lot more expensive than you thought it would be. And finally we got the tower up in Redfield.

I went home, went to bed, I'd been working night and day. And then about early morning on a Sunday, they called and said the tower builder — which was Beasley's Oil Company in Muskogee — said the tower wouldn't hold up the television antenna. Of course, the old television antenna was a batwing — what we called a batwing antenna — with 7 bats in its structure. And it was very heavy. I've forgotten what it weighed but quite a lot.

And I know I worked all day long and a couple of days and I said, "I just know that this gosh-darn tower will withstand that weight. I know it will; I just know it will. So let's sit down here and figure out what's wrong — why we're not be able to do it." Some of the fellas were even afraid to ride the headache ball up to the top for fear that it would move around, sort of in a circular position. And finally I tried to figure out who in the world are we going to get to do this?

Now, Bob Snyder was the chief engineer for both the KTUL and KATV. Morris Thomas was the chief engineer for KOMA and we had appointed him chief engineer for the construction operation of Channel 9. Bob Snyder was chosen by us as the man to supervise the building of KATV and the building of KTUL-TV.

And it's an interesting thing that Bob is still alive. He had helped Mr. Griffin put the first radio station we had on the air in 1934 in Oklahoma City. He helped build Tulsa, Little Rock, and he and Morris Thomas worked on Channel 9 over here. And I must say that no engineer — no individual — in Oklahoma ever built as much of the television and radio business as Bob did here in Oklahoma. He did a magnificent job.

I recall one time I was saying, "Bob, where on Earth are we going to get an engineers to operate these television stations? Little Rock and Oklahoma City?" I said, "There's nobody that I know of that we can hire anywhere. There are two stations operating, but if they don't have a very large staff..." So I said, "What do you think we ought to do?"

And he said "Well, I tell ya what. I've thought about it a whole lot and I've talked to General Electric in Schenectady and RCA in Camden and they both say that they think the best way for us to get engineers is to go around through the area, and hire the best radio engineers that we can find, and then we'll have to send 'em back to both Schenectady and Camden to let us teach 'em how to run this thing."

So that's what we did. There just wasn't anybody that we could hire that knew anything about the business. It was a terrible handicap. In the promotion department, it's pretty much the same for television and radio.

Chapter 06 – 4:30

Hope to See Picture

James C. Leake: And the engineers were the ones. I shall never forget as long as I live, sitting in the studio down at KATV in the 19th of December, sitting there watching that television screen and hoping to God that — "Oh lord, just help us" — maybe we can figure out something that will work out and let's hope that we see a picture, because we'd already sold the sign-on in both Oklahoma City and Little Rock.

And sure enough, how wonderful it was to see that KATV sign come on the television. And over here at Oklahoma City, it was the greatest relief that both of 'em — John went on the air in Oklahoma City the 20th and I went on the air the 19th of December 1953. What great days they were for us. We had spent every bit of the cash we could buy, borrow, and steal; and everything else that we had had gone into these stations and we just ... nobody has any idea what a great feeling Majory, John, and I and our friends in Oklahoma City had that night. That was something out of this world.

But then we got 'em both going, got 'em all on the air. Now then, the old batwing antenna we called them — I always thought it was a miserable piece of equipment and it just barely did work. And finally, they did come out with a new antenna but that was about 10, 15 years later. Those old batwings were put over at Little Rock, Arkansas when we bought the equipment. They didn't have a 316,000-watt transmitter, which was the power the FCC had signed to for Channel 7 and Channel 9 and Channel 8. So we just kept on working at it and finally got it to go.

And they'd said "Now, we think that this 178-foot station over in Little Rock will do color when color comes in." Lord, we looked and hoped that color would someday come, but it was a long way down the line. We were broadcasting in Oklahoma City at 178kw. In Oklahoma City, I'd forgotten what it was, but it was much reduced from that because we couldn't get an antenna that could give us full power. It took us quite a long time to finally wind up with all 3 stations on full power.

The tubes that I remember on Channel 8 in Tulsa, we had 4 tubes in the transmitter and each one of 'em cost \$4,500 a piece. And I thought "Oh, lord. Let's hope to God they'll run for awhile." And they did. In Oklahoma City, I'd forgotten. It was, of course, each time you stepped up in power — or, in channels, from 7 to 9 is two channels — you increased the size of the transmitter to be sure you'd get out 316,000 watts of what we call "radiated power" from each antenna.

One in Little Rock, when we first went on, would not carry 316,000 watts. It hadn't been built to do it — they had not ever built a transmitter, General Electric. We bought General Electric equipment in Little Rock because the other was not available. We bought RCA equipment in both Tulsa and in

KTUL-TV we got to 316,000 watts. Before it was all over, 5 or 6 years later, we were all operating on 316,000 watts.

Chapter 07 – 7:40

Building a Studio

James C. Leake: There were so many different assets to building these stations; you can't imagine what we had not been able to think about. One of them is "Well, what do you do in the studio?" Well, how big a studio do you want? And finally, do we got the network in on all of our planning? And they said "We think that a 60ft x 60ft high studio is the best thing. It will work out to where you'll need that extra height if you want to get some close-in shots and various other things."

We decided that was too far out so we decided to put 20ft studios. We had it 60 x 60 x 20 with the control room on the side. So now then, how are you doing to insulate the studio so it wouldn't be going across into the next building or the next room? How are you going to keep interference out? Well, John and I had built a new studio for a radio station in Tulsa and decided that there was a tile company in northern Arkansas — northwest Arkansas — by the name of Herwagon.

And he made insulation material out of egg crate cartons. And they thought this was the greatest, biggest thing. And when you looked at the cost of it, it was tremendous; they had to form all of it by hand and all, and we agreed that we can't afford that kind of a thing, so let's figure up something that's different — something that'll do just as good a job.

So were looking in the studio, sitting there and looking trying to figure out what in the world to do. We were using various types of insulation and so forth. Finally, somebody came in with about a 2x4 square of 4-inch insulation that was backed by a heavy material, which I think was foil of some kind. And they opened — and the front end of it was open. Boy, that idea. I don't know — I think maybe I was the one that thought about that. And I said, "My, my, my. Boy won't this be good. Let's try it and see."

So we built a series of ... and area there and took these tiles or pieces of insulation — they got 'em 4x8, I believe — and they went between the 2x4 joists at the ceiling where it was a single 2x4 and we just fit this little batt of insulation into those squares of 2x4 in the walls, turning the open part of the insulation to the inside where it would absorb the sound and it couldn't get out the back because it was this foil material in the back. And we tried that and, boy, it just worked like nothing you could imagine. Just perfect.

In fact, we built a studio in Little Rock — a whole 60 x 60 x 20 area, including the ceiling — filled it full of this insulation batts. And we had some of the network people down who were helping us try to decide what to do, and they said that was the deadest studio they'd ever been in. It absolutely had no reverberations anywhere and they said, "Well, we got to put it on the floor."

And I said, "No, we don't use the floor because it'll be impractical," and everything.

The we got to looking at this studio and thinking, "Now what's going to keep television people, just like radio and others — they'll be tearing that insulation apart and get to looking like *The Grapes of Wrath*."

So we concluded that, "Well, now we're going to put some chicken wire over that and that'll hold it in place; and also, it won't affect the insulation of it a bit." So that's what we did. And then we got to thinking, "Well, that doesn't look any good with that chicken wire holding up that insulation," so we just decided that we would cover the insulation with cheese cloth — regular, white cheese cloth, which was the cheapest material that we could buy.

So we covered this studio with cheese cloth and then, on the outside of it, we put the chicken wire to protect it — to keep people from knocking holes in it. And I swear to goodness, if I don't think at KWTW, there's still some of that original material that we put on the studio at Channel 9 and at Channel 7. And it was a poor boy's way of doing it, but it worked so well that if you go to New York, you'll see that ABC Studios and CBS and all are made the same way; it worked so very beautifully.

But those days were very trying because we never had enough money to hardly get along. Go back to Oklahoma City, we had operated with our 4 partners which were very wonderful people, very wonderful families — just couldn't be any finer folks. And we got along very, very well. And we got KWTV off the ground to making a little bit of money and things were looking pretty good.

So we decided, "Well, everything's going great," but they were on in years, somewhat older than John, Marjory, and I, and they decided they wanted to sell the station. We had a number of offers immediately when we got it all going, everybody wanted it.

But we decided, "Well, we don't want to sell ours. We've been in this business for a long time." And we said, "Well, now, let's work out a deal whereby we can do it." So we borrowed the amount of money — I'd forgotten what it was — somewhere around, at this time, around 7 to 8 million dollars is what the station was appraised to be worth. And it would take about \$3.5 million dollars to float the thing.

So, finally, Carl Mosteller here in Oklahoma City, who was there and had been our tax lawyer ever since 1940. He came up with a proposition, working with Chuck Voss and Jim Kite, Chuck's son-in-law, whereby we would sell to our partners all of the equipment at all 3 stations. Then they could lease it back to us on a long-term payout. And that sounded like a very good deal. Then Chuck — and First National Bank — Chuck Voss decided that was a good deal, too. He thought that First National in Oklahoma City would work that deal out.

So then, directly after a while, he decided it was a little bit risky, but that he and Jim Kite had formed the Kite Investment Company and they would buy the equipment from their partners who then owned all the equipment at all 3 stations. And that they would then turn around and lease it back to us on 10-year payouts. And that's how we bought the other half of KWTV. That would be along about the time that Kennedy was assassinated.

When that deal was worked out, I'll never forget that, because we were in the old Beacon Club when that tragedy happened and I never will forget that.

So we worked that out; and over a period of about 5 or 6 years, business got to be better and we began to sort of pay our way out of this hole that we dug for ourselves. And we managed to work that out, pay that off. But the unfortunate part about the television station has been that about every 10 years, you have what I call a “technological change,” in which virtually every on-the-air production equipment changes completely. We had tape recorders added to it and various other things.

And we had no more paid off the stations, and we now owned all 3 of them, then we were faced with a complete upgrade of most of our equipment. But much to everybody’s surprise, the old batwing antennas had worked out very well and the transmitters had settled down to where they were doing pretty good. So we decided that we didn’t have to buy that heavy equipment. So then came the input equipment from the studios, and that was changing. But we used that equipment so heavily that it just wouldn’t last a lot longer than 10 years. It was wore out.

Chapter 08 – 11:40

Color Television

James C. Leake: 1965, color began to show its ugly head and we began to realize that color was the one thing that would really top off television as being the real entertainment media of the public. There was very little color film available. We’d have to use the color movies and so forth, but that would entail a complete change-over of all of our equipment.

So we decided then, at that time, we’d go through RCA and buy RCA color cameras and color reproduction equipment, at which time, we did. I’d forgotten how about — we must have bought about 15 color cameras. And it was at that time that we also decided we had to have a remote unit. We bought one in Little Rock at some little time earlier that was a very good one. It worked fine on black and white and all and it was through this remote unit that KATV originated all of the school crisis of Eisenhower and Faubus and so forth.

So we decided we'd build some color remote units. We bought some old post offices that the government had — the government had what they called 'rolling post offices,' that would pick up the mail over a general route for quite a ways and they'd have several people inside of the truck sorting the mail as it went from one location to the other. And they were enlarging their operations some, so they sold some of these old traveling post offices and we bought the — I bought 3 or 4 of them and sent 'em back and had 'em remanufactured by the Crown Coach Company in California.

And out of this came the color film cameras and then we realized, too, that we were going to have to equip everything for color and, sure enough, the old transmitter — or the old antenna in Little Rock — and the transmitter we first put in would do some color. So we got by with that for awhile before we had to change all the rest.

But color did add an enormous dimension to television. It was the icing that went on the cake. So we went ahead and equipped that and, by that time, John, Marjory, and I had been in the television business for quite a little while — quite a number of years. We had got our business finally turned around to where it was making pretty good profit and my lawyer said to us, he said, "If you don't split this business up, since there's 2 families in it..."

My family, we're up and grown, John's was coming on a little small fella. So we decided after his consultation that we ought to sit down and divide up the whole shebang: the grocery company, the peanut company, and everything that we'd had, including the television. So we just decided we would divide it up — sit across the table and work out any kind of problems that we had; and that we began to do. It took us about 9 months to finally work that out. And it did come about in which John took KWTW Channel 9 in Oklahoma City. Marjory and I took Channel 7, Channel 8; I took the peanut company and John took the grocery company. We wound up with a pretty good — with a very peaceful and quiet division and each of us started out on our own. We tried to make our way. And, as luck will have it, it's worked out very, very well. But we've had very close ties between the 3 stations, which has been a great advantage to us along the way.

And another thing that we did — I'd forgotten when the date was — but you realize that the only way we had of transporting signals was through

microwaves. And it was terribly expensive. If we had a catastrophe in Oklahoma City and wanted to show it in Tulsa and Little Rock and it'd cost an absolute arm and a leg to buy public facilities. So we decided, "Well, we're going to — we'll work out our own way."

And the Vietnam War had just ended and there was a fella come to see us named Ed Schultz from California — from San Diego. And he'd built a system for ABC and he thought maybe this system might work alright out through the midwest. So we did work it out and he had been working with the Army, blowing up bridges, with little airplanes. Take the little Cessna — pull-pusher — the "mixmaster" we called it and load a bomb in it and make a drone out of it so he could guide it from one place to another and run into (hit a bridge) and blow it up.

Well, when we got to ABC, they'd already did most of the engineering on it; it was working very well out in California and we felt, "Well, what the heck? We'll equip our tower at Oklahoma City, and Tulsa, and Little Rock and we'll put a microwave between the two towers and work out a system whereby we will be in complete contact with all three stations." I know about that time a tremendous tornado went through Dallas, Wichita Falls, and I don't know where else; and I thought to myself, "If we had this deal working, we could have sent a truck with a microwave on top of it about halfway from Oklahoma City to Wichita Falls and they could send us back the material on the tornado area and we'd go through the microwave truck and be able to reach KWTW tall tower." And we had decided it could be done where we would link up everything and we could be in constant contact from the Mississippi River almost to the Texas border.

And we did, then, start out on the long journey of installing that system; and I must say, it worked very well. But, except, we always had a lot more severe thunderstorms in this area than we did anywhere else. And Edward Schultz, when he was working with the Army, had found out that if you located the transmitter of a microwave on the base of a tower, that the line loss and the line to the top of the tower created a great deal of problems because not enough juice got to the top and out. So, darn it, he had gone to work and developed a deal whereby you could put the transmitter at the very top of the tower. And when we did that, the whole thing began to work like a clock.

And it's strange to see that this was a forerunner of what we now have today, in that it used microwaves to the fullest extent. And then of course, the next jump that occurred some good many years later, was the satellite — ground to satellite — which is today in use and interconnects the entire world. I know I was sitting in an ABC meeting in California one time at the Century Plaza and Leonard Goldenson, the head of ABC, had said, "Well, now," he made a great big hullabaloo about this, "ABC could be in touch with any point in the world within 3 hours from the time of the happening of whatever they wanted to cover." But this was after the satellite communication had come into it and I thought, "What a tremendous thing to be able to have a story with color out of any place on the earth within 3 hours." And that, I think, was pretty accurate, and he did it.

So our first attempt to interconnect our stations was done by our own microwave system and it worked very well. Previous to that time, we had always the problem of getting product to the place where we could transmit it or could use it. Throughout the years, we were always slow and it never did work too well. I thought, since I'd been in the airplane business for years and flew airplanes all over the country, I'd just use that. So we bought them little small Cessna 4-passenger planes. We had one that we put in Little Rock and I've forgotten what it was called; and one in Tulsa; and I think we had one over here.

And it meant that, if we could train a cameraman to fly or get a hold of a flier as a cameraman, it would work out very good. We could take out a reporter and cameraman and then increased our coverage into small areas a very great deal and make it possible for us to make it back to the studio in time for the newscast. And what we did, we'd take the airplane, the cameraman, and the newscaster, and you'd fly out from Oklahoma City to Enid and pick up a story and be back down here. Oh, we'd just fly over the station, there was a close airport, and somebody'd run out and pick up the film and all and then come back and it gave us a lot better coverage than we would have had otherwise. Those three little ol' airplanes were a lot of fun, and it worked out very well, and the good Lord was good to us and we never had a single accident of any kind.

But when you look at the — this is a hell of a story. We're talking about 3 television stations put on by folks that had never seen it!

Chapter 09
Conclusion

We are grateful to Nancy and Richard Sevenoaks (daughter and son-in-law) of Jimmy Leake for providing this recording. James C. Leake was 86 when he died July 3, 2001.