Voices of Oklahoma | Oklahoma Historical Society

Lewis Meyer

Lawyer, Bookstore Owner, Host of "The Lewis Meyer Bookshelf"

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Announcer: In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Junior League of Tulsa conducted oral history interviews with pioneer Tulsans on medicine, lifestyles, architecture, government, business, education, journalism, and many other subjects regarding the early history of Tulsa. The collection rests with the Tulsa City-County Library.

One of the interviews featured Lewis Meyer. For sixty years, Meyer was a Tulsa institution as an author, bookstore owner, and book reviewer.

Lewis Meyer was an attorney who found practicing law dreadfully boring, so he opened a bookstore in 1955 next door to the Brook Theater, now the location of The Brook restaurant at 34th Street and Peoria Avenue. He started writing book reviews for local newspapers in the 1930s, then began discussing books on local radio stations and even made public appearances to give speeches about books.

By the early 1940s, Meyer had his own daily radio program, "The Values We Live By," and was speaking to crowds twice a week at downtown Tulsa's popular Brown-Dunkin department store. His Sunday morning TV show, "The Lewis Meyer Bookshelf," began airing on KOTV in 1953, and continued for 42 years.

By visiting the Tulsa City-County Library website and the digital collection, you can hear the entire oral history project. The library has granted permission for us to share this Lewis Meyer interview conducted March 26, 1980, by Danna Sue Walker who was the People and Places columnist with Tulsa World.

Listen to Lewis Meyer talk about early Tulsa radio, hypocrites, and alcoholism on the podcast and website of VoicesOfOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2 – 11:15
People Lewis Worked With

Danna Sue Walker (DW): My name is Danna Sue Walker. I am a volunteer of the Junior League of Tulsa, Incorporated. I am conducting this interview, this 26th day of March 1980, with Lewis Meyer at the Lewis Meyer Bookstore, exclusively for the Junior League of Tulsa's Historic Preservation Project. Mr. Meyer is going to be discussing his early days in radio in Tulsa. But first, how did you happen to come to Tulsa and become interested in radio?

Lewis Meyer (LM): I'm a lawyer. I'm a member of the bar, and I had a law office in Sapulpa. I started doing lectures and book reviews at Brown-Dunkin, a department store here, every twice a week it was. Then Brown-Dunkin sent me all over this part of the country. I would do as much as 20 or 25 lectures and book reviews a month. They gave me with their compliments to any group that would guarantee a crowd of 300 people, and I went into Kansas, Arkansas, all over this area with them, and it helped to build their mail-order department.

So then from that, I just went into radio for Brown-Dunkin first. I was on for about 17 years on KVOO for Brown-Dunkin—15 minutes a day. Then I branched out, and at one point, I was on two and a half hours a day. I bought my own time on shows and sold it to sponsors.

DW: What type of things were you doing? Book reviews and that sort of thing?

LM: Book reviews were part of it.The show was called The Values We Live By, and I think that kind of names it. I just did all types of shows—interview shows, books. Then I had sponsors, you see, through the store. Berkshire Stockings sponsored the book reviews for, I guess, about 15 years every Friday. Elizabeth Arden did poetry. I did poetry every Wednesday -- every Wednesday was poetry day, and this was like that, you see.

DW: What were those early radio studios like, and what year was that?

LM: Well, the radio studios of yesterday were just exactly like they are today. KVOO then was in the Philtower Building.

DW: And what year was that that you started in radio?

LM: I don't know. It was around 1940, 1941.

DW: So you had at first a 15-minute program?

LM: Well, I did a 15-minute program for Brown-Dunkin every day. Then I did an hour on what they called KOME—that station is not in existence anymore. I had an hour on KAKC, and then I was on KTUL for an hour.

DW: Who were some of the people you worked with back when you first started?

LM: You mean on KVOO? Well, there was Tubby Young—he's still around.

DW: What did he do?

LM: Tubby Young was the music librarian and the union representative, and he was very popular. You really ought to talk to him. I think he's still over there at KVOO.

DW: OK, and then who else was doing programs with you? I mean, not necessarily on your show...

LM: Let's see... They had a lot—Johnny Lee Wills, of course, was very big then. Johnny Lee Wills was my friend, and I wrote—I did a couple of records that Johnny Lee Wills recorded. And he was playing—

DW: You mean you played them on your show? Is that what you mean?

LM: No, I wrote them.

DW: Oh.

LM: I've written seven books.

DW: Yes, well, I knew that you were a book author.

LM: I've written, yes, and The Coyote Blues was a big hit. My first date with my wife—she was from Paris, France, and she was visiting her brother here. I was then doing a night show on KOME, 45 minutes. I would buy the time and so did the sponsors. After that show, I took her to Cain's Academy where Johnny Lee Wills was playing. Every time I would walk in, they

would start playing The Coyote Blues, and she was terrified. But it worked out just fine.

DW: When you had your first radio job, give me the mechanics of how you went about doing it.

LM: I did all my things from scripts. I wrote the entire script—commercials and every word I said. In my opinion, this is what's wrong with radio today: the great American ad-lib. It's terrible. I wrote everything from script. It's more work, but then you know what you're doing. After writing it, I would go over it aloud, emphasizing words, and when I got on the air, it was a finished performance.

DW: So it sounded very casual and conversational, but—

LM: That's the only way it can. When you're ad-libbing, that's when it sounds just awful. I've gone around the country and been interviewed, and many people will say, "We'll just do it off the top of our heads." I don’t like that because it’s never as good. If you sit down with someone and talk about your questions in advance and how you’d like to go, it’s always better. Any rehearsal makes it better.

DW: Any rehearsal is better -- right. Try to think of some other people that you worked with.

LM: Ruth Devore—she was in traffic. She was Ruth Graber, G-R-A-B-E-R, and then she married Tom Devore, who was also at the station.

DW: What was her capacity? Traffic—that meant regulating the programs, what went on when, and so forth?

LM: And Joe O’Neill was there. And Martha Stewart was the receptionist—S-T-E-W-A-R-T. She’s in town here now. She would probably have many more memories than I would of there. She knew them all, and her memory is very alert.

DW: Did you work with Ben Henneke?

LM: Ben Henneke was on the station at the time, but he just had his show -- his Back to College show.

DW: Well—

LM: He was an announcer. Ben Henneke was an announcer, too, when I was there. Yes, yes, yes, I remember.

DW: Well, he is the one who said, "Oh, be sure and get Lewis Meyer. It just won't be complete without him."

LM: Yes, Ben was there. I know there was an old Latin teacher in Sapulpa who was constantly getting after Ben for his grammar, his diction, and some of his pronunciation. There was one word in particular, and I always think of Ben when I hear it. Anyway... She was a source of discomfort. But Ben was—yes, and then he went on up, yes.

DW: When I talk to people who have been in any kind of media, they're always playing jokes on each other and trying to disrupt people when they're on the air. Did anything like that happen?

LM: Very seldom. No, no, it was all very professional, always. It was just work. But Patti Page—she came into being when I was on KVOO. She used to come up to the studio. She was singing. Glenn Hardman was there, and she was singing to the organ on KTUL, I think, for $15 a week. I immediately saw that she had great talent.

We had sort of a Patti Page fan club, and she would come up to my program at KVOO and stand outside, watching through the glass. I told her one day, I said, "Claire Anne"—her name was Claire Anne Fowler—I said, "If I had any guts, I'd stop what I'm doing and I would become your manager because you could go to the top." Well, I didn’t have what it took, but she got someone who did. But she had great talent.

DW: Do you have any particular remembrance that stands out? The most interesting story you did or interview?

LM: There's one person I should mention—Lil Smithline. And Glenn Hardman—both were organists. Most of my shows for Brown-Dunkin were done with an organ background, playing for the poems and as background too. They would just play as I talked. They could use a lot more shows like that, really.

DW: I guess you got into, oh...

LM: Everything. On my poetry day, I would have one for great poets' birthdays—Robert Frost, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. I would tell their whole lives in terms of their poems. Then I had many days of comedy.

I remember once, I was selling Elizabeth Arden Revenescence Cream, and I took a bath in Revenescence and grew younger and younger and younger—until I was just a baby. But I always mixed it up. You have to, to stay on 17 years for a tough department store, you know. But my ratings were always very good, and I enjoyed it. Then I went to television 26 years ago.

DW: Did you review cultural events in Tulsa at all?

LM: That I did on other stations. I used to review the evening paper when I was on KOME. I was on from, I think, 4 to 5 every day for an hour and played records, a disc jockey-type show. Then I had a show called Nuts About the Girls. I would buy this time and sell it. It was very profitable—very good for business. You buy your time like paying rent, and you go out and sell to your sponsors.

DW: Do they do it the same way now?

LM: No, they don't. They said the stations frowned on it. They said the FCC did, but I think there's a trend back to that now because it gives a better show.

I would review the evening paper and say, "Well, I see they are showing this movie on television tonight—it's only 22 years old," you know. Things like that. And that was a popular feature.

DW: What were some of the problems you ran into trying to put on your program? Just the mechanics of it.

LM: There weren't any.

DW: Everything was smooth sailing?

LM: See, today almost everything is taped. And in those days, it was live. That made a difference.

DW: Do you think that helped with the immediacy and excitement of it?

LM: With taping, everything can go wrong. The tape can be erased, the tape can be lost, it can be a bad tape.

Chapter 3 – 5:54
Alcoholism

Lewis Meyer (LM): When I was on those early years—see, I've been an Alcoholics Anonymous member for 31 years now—but I was on KVOO then in the mornings, and I would tell how I would come to work, go into the men's room, and cry before going on the air because I was just a typical alcoholic.

Danna Walker (DW): And you just had that terrible feeling of depression?

LM: Depression and drinking in the morning. Then I went into AA, and it's made all the difference in my life.

DW: You just seem like the happiest person. You come across that way.

LM: I ow all my happiness to AA. I owe it all to AA. Everything I am I owe to AA. I was asked to speak at the international AA convention a year ago in Canada—the greatest thrill of my life. Five thousand people were there.

DW: Oh, that's amazing.

LM: Yeah, and it was wonderful, wonderful. Off the Sauce has now sold 700,000 copies. And it's a great thrill for me. In this bookstore, sometimes there are people shaking in every corner. Every day, the phone rings—I get to help someone. That’s the greatest thing that's happened to me.

But radio in those days—it was very wet. It was very conducive to drinking. There was a lot of drinking being done. Of course, in this day and age too, it all goes with the media.

DW: I was going to say, because so many of the people that I have interviewed in newspapers, that was just one of the big things. I mean, they were even doing that on the job. It just kind of went along with everything.

LM: Yes. Drinking was.

DW: What people in Tulsa were making marks on the city at that time? Who was very influential in the city?

LM: Well, Ralph Talbot. You know, downtown—he was a leading citizen. He owned all the theaters. I worked for the Talbot Theaters for about 12, 15 years. I did the movie reviews every day on the radio.

Mr. Way, of course, was the manager of KVOO. Everybody liked him. I lived in Sapulpa until I was married, and that was about 28 years ago that we moved here. So I was really away from the Tulsa scene. I commuted every day.

DW: How was Tulsa different then than it is now? Except aside from all the growth -- that's obvious.

LM: I think that today it's a much less interesting city because of the fundamentalist impact.

DW: Explain what you mean.

LM: The so-called morals today, which stem from the church groups and all like that, have strangled us, I think. While I am an alcoholic, I think it's a disgrace that Oklahoma is the only state where you cannot go in and buy a drink of whiskey. It's a disgrace to the nation.

Why? Because when there are 16 AA groups in Tulsa alone, the point is, they drink just as much here. But we're hypocrites. We bring our children up that way. That's what I mean. And I could just keep on going.

And no horse racing in Oklahoma—so they all go to Hot Springs and spend millions of dollars, and yet they breed the finest racehorses in the world in Oklahoma. This is something that disheartens me terribly.

The neo-moralistic movement, which isn't moralistic at all—the pseudo, hypocritical morals—that's a tragedy. And it grows every day. I lay this straight at the door of these do-gooders. I'm in favor of do-gooders. They have a right to live the same as anybody else, but no more right than anybody else.

They are controlling destinies. You have to travel, really. We take many trips.

We go abroad, we go to other cities, because you have to, constantly, to realize that Tulsa is not the world. It's just a pimple on the face of the world in many ways—this beautiful, lovely city that I've loved all my life. And I see it going down, down, down with these people, and it's a tragedy.

If people want to be saved, that's great. But the people who aren't saved have an equal right in this country. But they don't get it in Tulsa. That's what really infuriates me.

DW: Do you think it will change?

LM: Never. It's getting worse. Don't you find so?

DW: I keep on thinking that maybe they're going to get the votes through. Even if they let it be county option or something, maybe that would be—

LM: Well, there's the booze, there's the horse racing—

DW: Yes.

LM: There's the movies, the censorship. It's very bad, and it's much worse now than it ever was.

DW: What is scary is the people that are trying to censor all sorts of school materials.

LM: Well, they're doing it. They're doing it.

DW: They just cut parts out. I mean, censorship is always scary because—

LM: There's more of that now. And they do it because they can get away with it politically. That's all. That's a shame. In other words, living here is not as pleasant now as it was 30 years ago. I think you'll ask anybody that and they'll tell you.

DW: How was it 30 years ago?

LM: Very pleasant. Extremely pleasant.

DW: I mean, there wasn't so much—

LM: You felt freer. And, of course, I just—I loathe hypocrisy in any way, shape, or form. I always speak out against it.

Now, you see so much of it based on the dollar—people using the guise of morals and their church work to make money. It’s tragic.

Chapter 4 – 4:00
NPR

Danna Walker (DW): Where do you think radio is going in the future?

Lewis Meyer (LM): It's going to go right where it is right now—no farther. Just a money-making --

DW: Do you think it will become obsolete?

LM: No, no. Oh, no. I think radio is getting bigger and bigger. I'd love to own a radio station now. But it's just for money. It’s a moneymaker. They're moneymakers.

DW: Do you think the programs will trend in another direction, or will it stay the same?

LM: No, it's just going to be the same in the cities. The greatest advance in radio is public radio. On KWGS—do you ever listen to that?

DW: I don’t think so.

LM: Oh, you don’t?

DW: I don’t listen to the radio very often.

LM: Oh, it’s marvelous. KWGS is a university station and they have National Public Radio. National. It’s a national network.

DW: For student training?

LM: Oh, no; it's news and features—everything, with no commercials. It’s marvelous. From 6 until 8 each morning and from 4 until 5:30 in the afternoon. It’s the greatest radio that ever was.

DW: Well, you make me want to listen.

LM: Well, it's FM. You know, you can get it in your car on FM. Channel 6 comes in on FM, too, in the car, on the lower left. But National Public Radio is just great.

DW: And it's mostly just news, music, sports?

LM: No music.

DW: No music.

LM: Interviews, what's going on.

DW: That's about the only station that has that sort of thing, isn't it?

LM: Yeah; it certainly is.

DW: Because it seems like mostly—

LM: There are a lot of talk stations now, too. I did talk. Once talk was out and rock was in. And I weathered that. Then rock was out, and talk was in. But it's all commercial. It's just about how much they can make—which is all right if you want to do it that way.

But National Public Radio has no commercials. Then during the afternoon, on that station, they play classical music. They have National Press Club meetings. They have congressional hearings live from the Senate. It's marvelous.

DW: Would you like to see more of that type of programming on all the stations?

LM: Yes, it makes people more alert to what's going on. Do you realize that, for example, CBS radio news, which comes on every hour, has less than a minute and a half of news and almost three minutes of commercials?

I was reading the other day that Walter Cronkite is objecting to this in television, too—all those commercials. So you just start reading the headlines in the paper, and that's all the news most people get.

DW: Yes, that's true.

LM: It's got a long way to go, but then, you see, you come to commercialism—who's going to fight it?

I'm just now in a position where I don't practice law. I'm a member of the bar, but I don't practice law. I've retired to my little bookstore here. The New York Times calls this one of the 40 best bookstores in America. And we have a marvelous business—I do a volume almost equivalent to all the other bookstores in Tulsa combined. And it's so heartwarming.

I have a marvelous stock. It's a personal bookstore—one of the few personal bookstores left. God, marriages are made here, you wouldn't believe. Children's schooling is taken care of here. And if we can't help, we find someone who can.

If you want to work—and everybody should work—it's a lovely way to live.

DW: I thank you so much for your time.

LM: Well, I hope I helped.

DW: Oh, you have.

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