

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Announcer: Ray Bingham was an agent, producer, and manager for some of country music's biggest stars.

Music has made Ray's world go around since he was nine and started listening to western swing bands at local ballrooms. Music was popular entertainment in Claremore, and where Patty Page, Tommy Allsup, and Stone Horse started out.

Ray's life story is the history of country music from Oklahoma roots to far beyond. Bingham has been the man behind the scenes promoting and booking top talent for more than four decades, including Garth Brooks' first gig and his mother Colleen Carroll for years before him, the Tulsa Playboys, Peggy Rains, Vince Gill, Reba McEntire, Willie Nelson, Alan Jackson, and Tim McGraw.

A deep love of music and friendship with two men – Billy Parker and Red Steagall – eventually led him to start Ray Bingham Productions.

Ray will tell you stories about Reba McEntire, Garth Brooks, Ray Stevens, Patsy Cline, and more on the oral history website and podcast VoicesOfOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2 – 13:00

Moonshine

John Erling (JE): My name is John Erling, and today's date is February 18th, 2021. Ray, would you state your full name, please?

Ray Bingham (RB): My name is Raymond L. Bingham.

JE: And your date of birth?

RB: 5-21-38.

JE: May 21st, 1938. And your present age is?

RB: 82 years old. And I mean old.

JE: You're not old. I'm recording this here in our office of Voices of Oklahoma in Tulsa. And where are you?

RB: I'm in Claremore, Oklahoma, in my office, which is on my little tiny farm I have here in Claremore.

JE: And COVID and snow has been keeping us home, right?

RB: I've been home so long, I'm fixing to take his ankle bracelet off and go somewhere.

JE: And we didn't commit a crime. We were under house arrest.

RB: That's right. We're doing our time. So now we ought to have one coming. We ought to be able to go out and do a little crime. Right.

JE: And COVID, what did it do to your lifestyle? Did it keep you home completely? Did you go to the grocery store or what did you do?

RB: Well, I did stock up pretty good. And I've got some friends who last two days came and picked me up and took me shopping and whatever I needed to do. That's because of the snowstorm we're living under right now.

JE: Right.

RB: And COVID, that didn't change my lifestyle except my livelihood. It closed down all my commercial jobs. But as far as staying home and all, I did not stay home.

JE: Well, now we're into the vaccination period and everybody's talking about that. Have you had your vaccination yet?

RB: Oh, it's been canceled twice, but it's scheduled again next Monday. So maybe this time I'll get it.

JE: Well, I hope so.

RB: Yeah.

JE: Where were you born?

RB: Emmett, California. Baker's Street labor camp.

JE: In a labor camp? Wow.

RB: Baker's street labor camp in a (I can't understand what he's saying), you know they had the little tents. That's where my parents are living – picking grapes and whatever they did in California to survive.

JE: Wow. I want to come back to that. Tell us your mother's name.

RB: Beatrice May Stoneburger.

JE: Where did she grow up?

RB: Gore, Oklahoma.

JE: What was her personality like?

RB: Well, she's very uneducated and just a hard worker. Had 10 pregnancies. Raised six of us to adulthood. Didn't know anything but work.

JE: Yeah.

RB: She died when I was nine years old.

JE: Wow.

RB: My father, Walter Kitt Bingham, is from Braggs, Oklahoma, close to Gore there. He was born in 1901 in Indian Territory, of course.

JE: What did he do for a living?

RB: He did all kinds of things. He was a good fiddle player, and he played a lot of dances around the country, but he was an expert moonshine maker. It was where we lived, had to have a good little creek on it so he'd get water, and he made a lot of moonshine, and was arrested for it a few times, but that's what he did. But then he did a little painting, and he did barber work, and he was uneducated, also.

They came here to Claremore. When they put the water line in from Spavanaugh to Tulsa, I think it was a WPA project, made a dollar a day. Pretty good. And then when that project finished, they migrated to California, following the harvest and so forth, and that's when I had another brother two years older than me, and then I was born there.

When I was four months old, they came back to Oklahoma. They had the original Grapes of Wrath trip to California, and they were from that same part of the world, I think. Yeah. That's the one down there in the book, in the movie.

JE: Tell us about this camp, again, that you were born in, and what they were doing there.

RB: Well, have you seen the movie Grapes of Wrath?

JE: Yes.

RB: All right. Those place where all the migrant farm workers lived. On my 50th anniversary after being born, I went back there to see it, because it wasn't in existence anymore. The grocery store and parking lot, of course, that was, but that was just where they were living when I came along.

JE: And then, overall, you had 10 brothers and sisters?

RB: She gave birth to 10 children, yes.

JE: They didn't all survive?

RB: Right. Six of us reached adulthood, but not so much with her help. Like I said, I was nine years old when she passed away.

JE: Then, as you said, they came back to Oklahoma when you were four months old, and then they settled there in Claremore.

RB: Yes, and moved quite often. They never owned the place. They moved from one place to the other. They go to school. They're either Chambers, Lone Elm, or Verdigris. My dad stayed in that area, because there's quite a few little branches of water that he could set up to make his whiskey. It's where I live now.

JE: There are people listening to this don't understand what moonshine is. Describe that.

RB: It's the same thing as whiskey that comes from Jack Daniels distillery. They've made it out in somebody's barn or out in the woods. It's very illegal, because there's no taxes paid on it. And Oklahoma being a dry state even made it more illegal.

JE: You said he was arrested.

RB: Oh, yeah. He got arrested several times for it they bust up his steel so he'd have to go to a real job somewhere like painting or playing a barber or something so he could get his steel put back together. D

JE: Do you remember people coming to the farm to buy the moonshine?

RB: Yeah, yeah. We did at night because if they saw the smoke coming from the fire they would know that somebody's in the woods doing something and they'd come and fire so you did it at night so they didn't see the smoke and bottle it up and take it wherever he would be hiding it out maybe a barn or something.

JE: So then you needed the fire for what?

RB: The cooker, they call it. And I could not make whiskey right now my older brothers could. I was so young when it was going on I remember seeing I know what it looked like the boiler and the coal and the signaling that comes out but I couldn't make it – I wouldn't have the knowledge to make it, but older brothers, they sure could.

JE: Older brothers – let's get you into school. Elementary, junior high school, high school was that there in Claremore?

RB: Well, the Chamber School – it's about a mile from where I'm at now it's three miles south of Claremore. Eight grades in one room. Mrs. Lawrence is a wonderful teacher. Now, as we would move we'd go to Verdigris Fields for a while which is a little more modern and it had running water and everything. Or Lone Elm, or Justice. But I always come back. See, I always came back to this area and we'd love Chamber School.

I don't know if you're aware, John, but the schools in Oklahoma – I did a story one time and Carol Lester ran it in the Claremore paper about education in Oklahoma and these one room schoolhouses – I found that idea very interesting so I did some research and when they built these schools in Oklahoma they're no farther than six miles apart. The reason being that no kids had to walk over three miles to school and that's a pretty long walk on these cold mornings and look at it like you got Claremore then you got Justice out on Highway 20.

And then you got Harmony Star each of these are six miles apart and then Osage school and then Pryor. Every one of those are six miles apart and go the other direction on highway 33 or 412, it is now, you go from Manola back to Catoosa and there's two schools in between.

A lot of those schools are still standing there turn them into residence and so forth. I found that very interesting if you go north of Claremore you got Claremore, then Sequoia, then Foyle, then Bushya Head, and Chelsea right on up to Benita. They're all six miles apart. Some might find that interesting.

JE: Yes that's very interesting. How many grades did you remain in the one room schoolhouse?

RB: Eighth. Now we were back and forth here and there so eighth grade I wasn't living at home anymore. I was working on the dairy. I graduated from Justice School, eighth grade. I still got my diploma. There was eight of us in my class.

JE: Where was high school?

RB: I went to Claremore High School. Then one year I went to Collinsville. And then back to Claremore another year. I left the educated part of my life in the 11th grade and joined the Air Force.

JE: What year would that have been?

RB: 1955. August 3rd, 1955.

JE: When you left school and joined the Air Force.

RB: Yes. I ended up, there were five of us here in Claremore all joined together. And it was a great experience. As soon as basic training was over, we were scattered all over. Eisenhower was the president at that time. And there was no war going on.

They were overstocked with things, so they gave you an option for discharge. So I got discharged after two years instead of four. I had a younger brother and sister that needed my help. So, oh, my. I discharged after the hardship.

JE: So then you were helping your brothers and sisters living on a farm in Claremore?

RB: Yeah, different farms. My dad, when my mom died, turned us over to the county. And they would find you a place to live. But drawback to it, you had to work.

JE: He turned you over to the county?

RB: Welfare department, I guess.

JE: And then who did you live with?

RB: They had an orphanage in Pryor. And I never chose to go there. We decided to do the other thing. And I guess they still do it. People take these young people in, and they get paid so much a month for taking care of them.

JE: Is that what you did? You went to live with foster parents?

RB: Seven different ones. Six of them had dairy, and I milked cows. Then I got tired of that.

JE: What ages were you living in those seven different foster homes?

RB: Third and nine years old.

JE: As you look back on that, what did that experience do for you? Was it always good? Or there was some ups and downs through all that?

RB: I had one place that I felt they really wanted me there because they liked me. They were both school teachers. They retired and moved out of state. And I was with them for a little over a year. It was the best time of my childhood. However, none of the rest of them had an interest in me. It's what I could do as far as milk and feeding hogs and doing things.

Probably the best thing for me, though, because I never have been scared of work. I've never been out of a job over half a day. Lose one, go find another one. So working like I did for those people and getting nothing in return except a cot to sleep on, it was not a good life. I'm not here to complain. I think it was good for me because it taught me how to work.

JE: That's a good lesson there. A lot of people will blame their childhood, and you chose not to do that. But you had that innate quality that work was it. And so work got you out of it.

RB: It worked for me.

JE: It worked for you, right? Absolutely.

RB: It worked for all of us. All my brothers and sisters did well.

JE: Did your father stay in touch with you while you were living in all these homes?

RB: Yeah, I'd take someplace where he was playing music. And I'd go to watch him. We'd visit a little bit. And then every once in a while, I'll go stay a day or two with him. But he never took the responsibility to take care of us in any way.

JE: As you got older, did you resent that?

RB: I don't think so. I kept hoping that, well, maybe on the phone, he'd say, "I'm coming to see you this weekend." And I'd set out on the porch where I was living at the time, waiting for him to come. And he wouldn't show up. Those things were not.

JE: Yeah. But, uh, that's sad. How old was he? When he died?

RB: 53. He died of cirrhosis of the liver.

JE: Was that alcohol that took him?

RB: Yeah. Uh huh. And I was 15 years old when he died.

Chapter 3 – 5:00

LeRoy Vandyke

John Erling (JE): At 10:22 in the morning on this February 18th, did Leroy Van Dyke call you this morning?

Ray Bingham (RB): Leroy Van Dyke called me this morning at 8:30, which is what he's done for the last at least 10 years. Maybe in a year, he might miss two or three times. Otherwise, I can count on it. Like when he had a hip replacement two weeks ago, that morning he couldn't call me.

It's something like that or if he's in Wyoming where he still doesn't have any phone service. But as soon as he gets to a phone, he calls me. I don't know why that started or how it started, but I love it. I've heard his same stories a dozen times, and I never get tired of hearing them.

JE: How long do you guys talk every morning?

RB: About 30 minutes, because Peggy Raines calls at nine o'clock. So he'll look at the time, he's about ready for "Miss Peggy" time.

JE: Who calls at nine ten?

RB: Peggy Raines.

JE: She calls every day too?

RB: Uhuh.

JE: Well, we know Leroy Van Dyke from The Auctioneer and Walk On By. I think he's 91 years old now.

RB: 92.

JE: Okay. Pretty amazing. That's a great story. Yeah.

RB: Yeah. And he works about 30 days a year with a full band. He works at California, Florida, wherever. And he's so young looking for his age.

JE: Peggy Raines. Tell us about her.

RB: Well, Peggy, her husband's a dentist. They live in Pryor, Oklahoma. And several years ago, her husband called me and wanted me to take her to Nashville and record an album for their family. Her singing an the use the same type musician as Reba would use as she was going. And I said, "well,

we can do that. It's gonna be pretty expensive.”

And he said, “Well, I want to do this for her for 25th wedding anniversary.” So I said, okay. So I set it up. We went and recorded an album. It came out pretty good. We didn't expect it to do anything as far as commercial, but I started sending it around to different people that I knew. Of course, every. Larry Parker helped a lot. Sent it overseas.

The title song on it was It's a Good Day. It's an old Peggy Lee song from the 40s. Right after Peggy did Sleep at the Wheel and It's a Good Day. That thing started playing over there and got popular, and they started ordering CDs from all over Europe. Just as quick as we could get them, we'd have them sold. All at once, she's a household name in the country music world.

She did some shows with George Jones, some with Charlie Pryde. I was able to get her a deal where she'd be able to do an album with David Frizzell. We ended up doing four albums all together of hers, and then one with David. Then Billy Parker was on the one with her, and they did two songs that were just unbelievably good.

That's how that happened. It was an accident. Nobody's smart or brilliant or anything, because she's a lady 50 years old at the time. 50-year-old people don't become stars. That's where our friendship started, and it had developed. They came picking me up last night, and we went over to Tucson. That's the Peggy Raines story.

JE: That's a great story.

RB: Wonderful person.

Chapter 4 – 5:04

Becoming Music Promoter

John Erling (JE): Okay, let's bring you back to how you became an agent or music promoter. How did that all begin?

Ray Bingham (RB): When I was about 10 years old, there was a band in Claremore, Oklahoma, Swing Bellies. I have pictures of them. Tommy was also part of that band. He went on to become a superstar in the music world. I would go there on Saturday night. They had benches around there. They didn't have tables and chairs like they do now.

One of my brothers ran the gate for them, and then he sat in and played with them a lot. I'd roam around, and I'd see when they finished the bottle of whiskey. They're dry stakes, you know, so they have the whiskey in their boots. I knew enough about whiskey from my dad what I could do.

When they finished the bottle, I'd walk up and say, "You want me to go get you another bottle?" "Yeah, will you do that?" I'd say, "Yeah, I'll do it, but I want a quarter." From there, I'd get a quarter for it. I'd go down about two blocks down the street from that Lamb Carol's, the name of the place, and he'd let me take it back up there and collect for him.

I'd make four or five runs a night up there. Sometimes make \$2.50, \$3 every once in a while on a good night. I was a bootlegger myself, I guess. Yeah. Yeah. Early age.

JE: And where was this now?

RB: In Claremore, at the Legion Hut.

JE: Okay.

RB: Now it's a parking lot for the police cars. There was a dance every Saturday night there, an acre in the Oklahoma Swing Billies.

JE: You were interested in music?

RB: Oh, yeah, I loved it. I absolutely loved it. And so when I started actually booking, I just put together a few things. Channel 8 had some kind of a show up there, and I'd call and get somebody that I knew. And I enjoyed that, but I hung around with Leon McCullough so much at the Cimarron Ballroom, and he was so nice to me.

I might have been in his way, maybe, but he gave me something to do. And after the dance on Saturday night, sometimes I'd say and help clean up everything, because it's always a pretty good mess. And then he had me start taking tickets at the door, and then rock and roll was taking over the Western Swing thing.

He was having to travel to Las Vegas and Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and South Louisiana and play with his bands in order to survive with the bands like he had. And so he's got to trust me so much that he had me to book the Cimarron Ballroom while he would be out. Speedy West had just moved here from Fender's place. Speedy is a famous steel guitar player. So I had Speedy put a band together, and they would be the house band, but I would bring in Jim Reeves, different ones, Ray Price, John Wakewitty, acts like that.

JE: Patsy Cline, was she part of that?

RB: Patsy Cline, yeah, brought her twice. One time we did an album. We didn't do it. 30 years later, her husband took it and did it. We taped the show that night. Of course, there's big news for her having to have a live at the Cimarron Ballroom. Very poor quality. We taped everything down there on a reel-to-reel. I did an interview with Patsy Cline.

It was on reel-to-reel. Billy Parker took it and made it into a cassette, but now he can't even play a cassette. Patsy Cline was really a sweet person, a nice person to work with, and very, very nice. I got a letter from her mother hanging on my wall wanting a copy of what we recorded of hers, and this letter tells her history so good. I said, she raised her two daughters and so forth.

Two weeks after she wrote that letter to me, she died. That letter, I don't know how I got it. It was addressed Mr. Ray Bingham, booking agent, Tulsa, Oklahoma. I got that in my mailbox. It don't say nothing but Claremore or nothing. Kind of interesting.

JE: You were that famous. You didn't need it. You were that famous.

RB: That's why I always hear them say, send your donation to Oral Roberts University, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

JE: Exactly. Or Billy Graham. You said Billy Graham, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

RB: Yeah.

JE: You were just as famous as they were.

RB: I'm sure that's going to impress a whole bunch of people.

JE: Let me bring you back to the Cimarron Ballroom because Cimarron Ballroom was in competition with Cain's Ballroom.

RB: Right. Bob Wills only played at Cain's two or three years, unless he was just traveling to Wichita again. He played there two or three years. Then he went on the road all the time. And Johnny Lee took over the deal at Cain's. And Johnny Lee never played Cimarron, not one single time. He played Thursday and Saturday nights at Cain's. And Leon played Wednesday and Saturday night at Cimarron.

So the weeknights, they weren't head-to-head, but on weekends they were.

JE: So did both places get packed out?

RB: I remember, you know, I was in the Cimarron Ballroom. I remember them being so full. Sometimes you just decide, well, I'm not even going to try to go in there. But boy, when Blue Suede Shoes came along, that changed everything. If there was a hundred people in there, there'd be maybe 200.

JE: Yeah. When Elvis Presley came along with Blue Suede Shoes is what you were saying.

RB: That's true.

JE: But that was pretty exciting. It had to be really fun between those two places.

RB: Oh yeah. Yeah. Billy and I. Wasn't that... I had... Billy says it was Buck Owens, but I know it wasn't. It was Conway Quitty at Cain's. Billy tells the story and he says Buck Owens. I had Billy opening for him. And somebody else famous was over at Cain's. And I had done some booking at Cain's also. But Alvin Perry ran Cain's.

He knew that I was working at Cimarron. So Billy and I said, we'll run over to Cain's and listen to this guy. I don't remember who it was. It was some big star at the time. We go over there and they just motion us going through and we go right up by the bandstand.

And about halfway through one song, these big strong hands grab my shoulder and Billy's shoulder. He's between us. He's like, "come on boys, you gotta go out." His ground over was security over there. And Billy goes, "what do you mean we gotta go out?" "Alvin don't want either of you in here. You're fired from here for life."

He says, he's trying to kill his crowd of books and over there and give us the lecture as he's walking through the door. So we actually did and didn't go back for a long time.

JE: Well, the competition was so stiff.

RB: Yeah.

JE: You couldn't take it. And who was that again? Who took you out?

RB: Gene Crown over a steel guitar player for John Lee Will and Bob Will, was a head of security at Cain's ballroom. I don't remember his first time. But his name... He was Gene's brother. And that guy, I mean, he was just doing what his boss told him to do. You know, there's three damn falls gone at that time. That one at 41st and Memorial Caravan.

Oh, it wasn't called the caravan when it first opened. But sometimes like Hank Thompson would be there. Conway one and Ray prices all three at the same time. But that's what people liked in those days.

JE: That caravan building is still there, isn't it? At 41st.

RB: Yes, it is. And he just closed it down about a year ago. He kept it going all these years. Jack – can't remember his last name now.

Chapter 5 – 8:55

Parker and Steagall

John Erling (JE): You talk about Billy Parker. How did you meet and how did you get to be his agent?

Ray Bingham (RB): Billy Parker is just one of the most wonderful people in the world. And if it wasn't for Billy Parker and Red Seagull, I would have never said this professionally.

Billy was playing around these [unintelligible], I'll call them. Basically for tips. I'd go watch him and talk to him. I said, "Billy, we need to play somewhere better than this." My brother and Archie had played music around in France itself. I had a relative of ours. He had a good band and played around. So I said, I'm going. "I'm going to book you at some of the places where Francis plays."

And so the first one I tried was at the Elks Lodge, south of Bartlesville. The rock building is still there. Somehow I got acquainted with him, talked to him. And I booked Billy Parker there. I gave him \$60. Now, I know he had never made anywhere near that before for playing. And he was very, very happy with that.

I continued finding places like that. And we had that radio show out at KFMJ. He got me a job out there on weekends as a weekend DJ. And I've probably gone down in history as the worst disc jockey in the world.

I heard some of those tapes later, and I said, I cannot believe it. I can't believe they let me stay on. But anyway, Billy got me hooked up out there for that. He told me, he said, "I want you to be my manager."

I said, "I want to be." And he said, "all right, draw up a contract." And I said, okay. And that scared me to death because I didn't have a clue what a contract would look like. So time goes by, and he's playing here and there. He mentions it every once in a while. "Go ahead. Get that contract, and we'll sign it."

Well, as he said later, he didn't have a clue how to do a contract either. He didn't even get as far in school as I did. So here it is 60 years later, and we still do not have a contract. It worries me. I'm afraid he'll leave me. I'm afraid he'll dump me for Jim Hawsey or something.

JE: That's right.

RB: And my deal with Red Figg-Off is kind of the same. I hooked up with him in '78. Billy was in the late 50s with Red in '78. We never even thought about a contract. What a wonderful, wonderful man, he is.

JE: By the way, I've interviewed Billy Parker for VoicesOfOklahoma.com, and so I would urge people to listen to his story, which is a good one. And he, of course, talks about you, even says some nice things about you, Ray. And I don't know if I should edit that out or not, but I'll leave it, I think.

RB: I'll have to listen to that.

JE: Yeah, about Red Stiegel. Interesting how he did that Western swing version of Somewhere My Love, the theme song.

RB: Oh, isn't that beautiful?

JE: It is.

JE: I was listening to that, and then I realized Roy Clark did it too, to have country Western people take a song like that, which was not country, and record it. How did that come about?

RB: Well, Red, we did a whole album of songs like that on it. I Left My Heart in San Francisco.

JE: Okay.

RB: I can't even remember now all the songs we did on that album. And every one of them was just fabulous like that. Red's one of the most brilliant men I've ever known in my life. He's got two or three degrees from one college. He's just a brilliant, brilliant man. He came up with that idea. Well, it worked good. I think it's just beautiful, that song.

JE: Yes, it is. And I was listening yesterday to his song. It's called Lone Star Beer and Bob Will's Music.

RB: Yep. Yeah, that's one that changed him from hamburgers to steak.

JE: And it's interesting about Red, and I want you to tell this story. He actually had polio when he was 15, and he taught himself the guitar and mandolin to strengthen his arms and hands.

RB: Yes, he did. That's true. His mama, I think, taught him. She played piano and all like a lot of those school teachers do back then, and she got him the mandolin. You know, he goes on stage when he's playing the guitar, he turns it with the back of the guitar up by his shoulder, and he can reach with his hand and take hold of the neck of it.

Then he pushes it back up, and nobody in the audience ever even have any clue that he's doing that because he don't have any thing in that arm. He can move his fingers enough to play, but he can't do anything else with that arm.

JE: Then he was in Hee Haw about six times, and he did a couple of movies, Benji the Hunted in '87. What is he doing now?

RB: He does a television show every Monday night called Somewhere West of Wall Street. It's on the RFD channel.

JE: How old is he?

RB: He's six months younger than me. Okay. Me and him and Billy are all within six months of each other. Do you wanna know how I met Red?

JE: Yes.

RB: I was driving up Harvard Street, and I heard that song come on there, Somewhere My Love by Red Steagall. I pulled over and stopped to listen to it without any interruption. I just couldn't believe what she said, that western swing. I drove on about three or four blocks before after it was over. We went to Bill's Tea Record Shop there.

They had it, and I bought two copies of it. One I sent to my brother in Frankdale, Arkansas, and the other one I kept for myself. The next week, I was listening to the radio, having breakfast, and Jack Cox said, "the next guy's going to be in Stillwater this coming Wednesday night or something" for the Block and Bridal Club thing at the university. I said, well, I've got to go see that.

So I went. Didn't find anybody to go with me. Nobody was real sure who he was. But when I got there, they were sure who he was because they were totally sold out. I couldn't get a ticket to get in. So I walked around the building, and a guy was unloading his product, caps and T-shirts and records and stuff.

I introduced myself to him. I said, "I drove from Claremore, Oklahoma up here to see this guy, and now they're sold out, and I'm having trouble getting a ticket." He said, "well, you won't have any trouble if you help me carry this stuff in there." He sat down at the table with me and said, "Stay as long as you like." His name was Wormy.

He drove [unintelligible]. He drove a bus for him and handled his product sale. I stayed until he was over, and he introduced me to Red. Red said, "well, if you like this, we're going to be in Oklahoma City Saturday night." I said, "well, I sure did like it."

So on Saturday night, I drove to Oklahoma City. Took a friend with me that trip. I booked him for it. It was Johnny Lee Wills Rodeo at the fairgrounds there in Tulsa. He played that, and after that, we went out to eat that night someplace on 11th Street there, State Open.

And he said, you know, "I'd like you to do more booking for me. I'm very unhappy with who I've got right now, and I'd sure like for you to do some booking for me. Not necessarily exclusive until we see how it works out." So I hooked up with Red Seagull.

JE: The relationship lasted all these years. Did you do any recent booking for him?

RB: Oh, yeah, I still do all of that. Yeah. All he's doing right now, he has... He had that virus real bad, so he's over. He's doing his Monday night TV show, and he's doing the radio show for years. Every little radio station in America, I think, plays it, where he interviews cowboys and different famous people. Somewhere west of Wall Street, it's taken off pretty good for him because there's nobody having any music. Right now, he can't book anything, so those are only two things he's got going now.

JE: He has a great, great voice and so much character to that voice.

RB: He's just an absolutely wonderful man. I love him. His family has made me part of their family. He's got four brothers and one sister. He had a brother just die a while back, but they never have anything family that they don't include me on it. They don't have any type of family gathering or something. He don't call me a sister, Will, or one of his other brothers.

Chapter 6 – 4:14

Alzheimer's Disease

John Erling (JE): You married, and when did you get married, and did you have a family?

Ray Bingham (RB): Yeah. I started dating a girl when I was in the Air Force in Louisiana. When I got out, I went back and talked her into marriage, and she was absolutely wonderful, wonderful lady. Moved to Tulsa. She went to work at a public service company. We were both pretty young, of course. We decided we didn't want to have any children until we got older.

So in 1963, we had my first son, and in 1965, we had a second son. She didn't work anymore after we had the kids. But what we had done, we never cashed one of her paychecks. We just deposited them. We lived on what I would make. We was able to buy a house, 742 South Sandusky in Tulsa.

That's where we started out and raised our kids, and we bought 12 acres out of 95th and Yale. One of the kids got. 10 and 12 years old, something like that, where we built a house out there, and they went to Jenks and graduated from Jenks School. Both of them did good in college. They both got baseball scholarships. Certainly baseball is my favorite thing in the whole world, besides the good fiddle.

My wife died when my boys were in high school. She had early onset Alzheimer's. I started Alzheimer's Association here in Tulsa and hooked up to the national one in Chicago. I ran that for a while. We were dying for money, but I wanted to educate people about that disease. We did a little fundraiser and stuff. Now there's no problem because lots of money people in Tulsa have suffered with the Alzheimer's thing, so they don't have to do it now. I'm so happy that it's doing so good for them. It's just wonderful.

To bring you up to date right now, one of my boys died 11 years ago, and my other son died a year this last March. They inherited that early onset Alzheimer's. It's a terrible, terrible death. I married another lady, and we were very, very happily married, but she died also, but not from Alzheimer's.

Yeah, Lou Gehrig's, is that what they call it? So now I'm a single man. I've been single for a long time. I coached American Legion baseball for 17 years in Jinx. I love baseball.

JE: That's a tragic story. And what was your first wife's name?

RB: Rita.

JE: And then let's give your son's name.

RB: Tag and Todd Bingham. Tag was Raymond Bingham Jr., but we called him Tag. Bob Wills gets our player named Tag. He was with me at the St. Francis Hospital when he was born, so his whole life he was called Tag.

JE: I just can't imagine what you went through.

RB: Have you ever witnessed any of these Alzheimer's at the time?

JE: I have, but here Rita dies from Alzheimer's, and then your second wife dies from ALS.

RB: Yeah. Isn't that something?

JE: That is something else.

RB: Yeah.

JE: And the grief.

RB: Rita's dad died with Alzheimer's, and his mother died. But see, I didn't know what Alzheimer's was. I'd never heard the name. And her mother didn't tell me. I just said, "what happened to your dad?" She said he had a brain tumor. I had no idea what he had really died from.

I certainly would not have had any kids. I have a granddaughter and a grandson from Tag, the one that just died. His son, he goes to Stanford University. He was a valedictorian at Cashew Hall the year before last.

JE: So you worry about them as having that gene?

RB: I certainly do. I don't worry about the girl she's adopted, but I worry about the boy. I certainly do. It's always in their 30s when they get it.

JE: Well, I admire you. You've been through a lot, and you've been very successful.

Chapter 7 – 7:46
Reba McEntire

John Erling (JE): Tell us a story about Reba McEntire and how that came about.

Ray Bingham (RB): Yeah. I had so little to do with that. I did have her brother for years, and Bill booked him from Lake McEntire, and I booked Susie, his sister, a little bit. I was only familiar with them from them singing McEntire's at different rodeos.

So when Red heard her for the first time, he really thought she was something special and decided to take her to Nashville. He said, "Here's what I need you to do, Raymond." That's what he called me. And he said, "I've got this girl. Nobody's going to know who she is. And you and I have seen thousands of these, but she's special, and I want you to book her. If you don't have a band, you get Stonehorse or some band to back her on jobs, or you can use my band when I'm not using them."

So that's what I did. Most times we'd use Red's band. She knew their stuff, sang with them, and they knew her stuff. I had them at Apollo Delman Theater. They're at 15th and Lewis in Tulsa. I had her there with Red's band in different places, Tulsa State Fair, all around. And I got real acquainted with her and her husband, me and my wife. Couldn't stand her husband, but I had to put up with him. Nobody else could either, so that's not going to surprise anybody if they hear it.

JE: Reba's husband you couldn't stand.

RB: Charlie Battles, yeah, Charlie Battles. He's dead, and I shouldn't say that about him. I'm sure he had a lot of good points, and I just didn't run into any of them. He was no help to her career, but she got a divorce from him. My wife and her got to be very close. She talked about my wife in her book, helping her dress, know what to wear at different venues and stuff like that.

All I did was book a person that was unknown on a bunch of honky-tonks. I

did get her honking for George Jones at the Mabee Center one time, a TFX radio show out there. I got a pretty good job. I got her a thing in Denver, Colorado. The PRCA people, where all the rodeo buyers were there for the convention. So they booked her on their rodeos.

I got a hold of an agent at William Morris Agency, who I really had good luck with him. He'd been honest with everything. I had him come to Tulsa, the Mabee Center, and listen to her. She still didn't have a band at that time, so she used Red Band for that. She had a good performance, and then he asked her to come to Nashville. She did.

She did, and they signed up. So that was my relationship with Reba, was just helping her get started. Anyone else could have done the same thing. There wasn't no type of move on my part or anything. I didn't know some other agency would have got her sooner or later. At that time, I wanted William Morris to have her, and so it worked out.

JE: But you spotted, you knew there was something special about her.

RB: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I don't particularly care for the songs she sings now, but she... There's a lot she's got to do to make a living. When she's singing that go-ahead, straight, great price country stuff, it puts chills down your back.

JE: Yeah.

RB: I got her hooked up with a deal to make everybody in the audience feel like she was singing to them. And I coached her and coached her. They'd get in a telephone booth and sing, and she'd make eye-to-eye with him and sing. I went 30 days without watching her sing, and then he told me I was ready to watch her, so I set out in the audience, and I felt that there was no one else in that building, just me as a Ken Lance Sports Arena native. No one else in this building but me. She's singing just totally to me. And she had that skill to do it.

JE: You talked about the phone booth. What did you mean?

RB: Well, they'd get in a phone booth and she'd sing, and she had to face him. I thought the audience didn't feel like she was just there for them. And this

guy was a coach. I didn't find him. Actually, the same guy got William Morris. There was one that found him.

JE: So the coach got in the phone booth with her, and she sang to him.

RB: Staring eye-to-eye with him.

JE: Yeah, and that made a major difference when she got on stage.

RB: Yeah, she was looking at those people eye-to-eye. And if you happen to watch her on television or something, you'll see what I'm talking about. You don't look up at the ceiling or down at the floor. She stares right at those people out there, and she rotates from one to the other. Picture either one or two of us, but everybody in there feels that.

JE: She's making major dollars now.

RB: \$400,000 a night. Plus a bunch of stuff. Sound and lights and a bunch of stuff.

JE: So she could probably get into the \$800,000, \$900,000 for a night.

RB: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

JE: When you booked her before she became famous, what kind of dollars were you making?

RB: When she got out of her band, I continued to book her after that. I'd just buy her from William Morris. I didn't sell her. I'd get \$4,000 or \$5,000. Got up to \$10,000, about the most I ever got. Then I did her in Chicago a few years back. I got \$250,000 on that one. But I've never booked her once she got that big money.

JE: If she was sitting here talking to us, what kind of a person is she?

RB: Oh, yeah, I absolutely love her. She's two people. When the show was going on, she's on stage. She's one person. She's looking at those people out there, and she's telling them about living down the road with their

mamas and mamas and this and that and making all the women out there just absolutely love her.

And the curtains slow. And the cat sharpens her claws. She's in charge of everything. And she's the best businesswoman I've ever seen in my life.

JE: Interesting.

RB: She's one smart businesswoman. And you love sitting down and talking with her and visiting with her.

JE: And, you know, I'd like to do that for Voices of Oklahoma. I don't know if she would even do that now.

RB: I don't know. I don't know. Up until six months ago, I could get anything I wanted from her because I'd go through her mother. For some reason, her mother really liked me. And I think it's because I went ahead and stuck with Peg and Susie after Reba left them. You know, they were singing MacEntires before Red took Reba away.

But anyway, if I needed Reba to wish somebody a happy birthday or anything at all like that, I'd just call her mom, Jackie, and tell her what I needed. Like Billy Parker's retirement thing, I'd call Jackie. "Oh, Billy played Reba's first song on the air. Here, what does she need?"

I'd have never got through Reba's people to get that, you know. Within 24 hours, Reba sent this video.

JE: Oh. I love Reba's accent when she's speaking.

RB: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Wouldn't know she's a big major from that college at Durant, Oklahoma, would you?

JE: I'm surprised some coach didn't say, you've got to change your accent. Maybe they did, but it's charming.

RB: When they talk down to Reba, anything like that, she'd get rid of them so quick. Yeah. She's in charge of everything herself.

Chapter 8 – 9:10
Garth Brooks

John Erling (JE): Another personality that you, of course, had association with, and that is Garth Brooks.

Ray Bingham (RB): Uh-huh.

JE: Tell me how you met Garth Brooks and your first association with him.

RB: His mother was on the Ozark Jubilee, and Billy Parker was on there. So I booked his mother at Jump's Roller Rink in Fairfax, Oklahoma, three or four places like that after she had her kids. I don't know how many she had, but after she had them, she quit. She was on Capitol Records.

JE: Colleen Carroll?

RB: Yeah.

JE: His mother.

RB: Yeah. I had a band called Stonehorse playing up at Stillwater a lot. Garth would come to me. He was a bouncer there, and they let him fit in with them. We're glad to do it because he was an asset, and they all liked him. They all went to school at OSU anyway. Also, my son and him were friends in college up there, tagged one at a time recently. So I kind of got to know him there a little bit, and, knew his wife. She'd come out there. They weren't married at the time. She'd sit at the table with me while he'd get up there, but New Year's Eve, and I don't remember what year it is.

My nephew has a tape of it, but he can't find it right now. There's another club out south of Stillwater. It was called Cimarron Ballroom, too. No relation to the one in Tulsa. In fact, one in Tulsa had already turned into a parking lot, but I was doing a lot of booking out there, so New Year's Eve, I booked, with Millie Parker, Red Steagall, and some lady, actually, I can't remember what it was, but she was a big name.

They all worked with Red's band there at that Cimarron Ballroom. So Garth shows up, and finds me. He wanted to sing with Red's band. He said, "man, I never had an opportunity to sing with a band like that. Could I do that?" I said, "okay, after intermission, Garth, we'll do it." I didn't have to ask Red. I mean, Red trusted whatever I say.

Danny, Steagall is Red's brother, and he's the front man on his band. I take Garth over and introduce him to him. He wants to sing a couple of songs with the band. Danny said, "okay, that's fine. I'm glad to meet you. What songs do you want to sing? What key do you want to do them in?" Because they didn't have time to rehearse. Danny had his guitar there. He said, "I'd like to do Lone Star Beer and Bob Will's music and Party Dolls and Wine." That's just something you don't do. You don't sing the star's song.

And so, Danny said, "are you frightened?" He said, "yeah." He said, "make it easy on you guys because you know those are ready and I can do them in the same key he does." Danny, as honored as he can be, thinking, boy, this is going to piss my brother off. Good. So, the break's over and Red's sitting over a table. His wife and me and my wife and all of us just having a great time over there.

They kick off Lone Star Beer and Red starts jumping. And, damn, I got to get on stage. He started on stage and Garth already there with a mic in his hand singing Lone Star Beer to Bob Will's music. And Red just stopped and stared at it. And he came back. He said, "what's going on, Raymond?" I said, "well, he's a good guy. He's a good friend of mine." But he said, "he's singing my song. I save for my finale."

He said, "well, anyway, I got him to sit down and settle down." He did Party Dolls and Wine. It was another Red song. And he came down and introduced him. And Red, gentleman that he is, he said, "you sound pretty good. I like your choice of music." After Garth became a big star, he was in Fort Worth at a radio show there.

And Red was on the road somewhere, but he was listening and he called it and asked the disc jockey, "I need to talk to that guy you got there, Garth Brooks." And he said, "Garth, I want to ask you one thing in Stillwater, Oklahoma. Why did you sing my song?" He said, "Red, I just knew that

your band would know him.” He said, “I sure didn't mean to offend you.” But you know, Garth, now he still loose as a goose with the stuff like that. And here he's in Tulsa to grab that boy and bring him up on stage with him. He just lives like that.

JE: When Garth did that and he sang, he did, he did a good job so he didn't embarrass you at all, right?

RB: Oh, no, he didn't embarrass me at all. He did a good job. I've got a folder here of his contract. I've looked at him a lot of times. I had him opening for Billy Parker when Billy played Stillwater. I also had him opening for the Stonehorse Band. I consider Garth and me pretty good friends. We went to some baseball games together two years ago.

I always got this Marymore baseball program going up here. American Legion is no good in Oklahoma anymore. That's unfortunate because that's the best baseball program there was, but they got the idea of where they put all the better players on one team and Garth knew some of the boys that would be playing at Owasso.

So he called me and we went to a couple of games here in Claremont and won in Owasso. But I haven't talked to him since. Two years, I guess.

JE: And then you did some other booking of him and caused him to send you a letter thanking you for what you've done.

RB: I've got it on my wall right here. I forgot about that. At Marlboro Traveling Show, a contest to get somebody that was kind of a medium star just getting started to emcee the show and sing a couple of songs. So I got that for Garth. I've got it hanging on my wall here.

It says, “Ray, thanks so much for what you're doing for me. Coming to Stillwater for my very first official gig is a neat feeling. Here are four songs that I have. If you'll have the band to learn any of them, which one do they like the best? I do appreciate it. I appreciate them doing this. Please give me a call when you receive this. I would like to hear from you. God bless, Garth Brooks.”

Yeah, he did that. There's those Marlboro shows. That's what I did. Ronnie Dunn, too. Nobody else is going to have that letter because this is my first official gig.

JE: It's nice that he stayed in touch with you. I mean, you went to a baseball games.

RB: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. I have nothing but good to say about him. I've heard some people in Nashville don't like him so much, but I'm glad he's here. But that's their problem. He's always been good to me.

JE: But wasn't he a great promoter himself?

RB: I don't understand it. I mean, he is not the most talented. I mean, he's very talented. But they say, well, he's got a good voice. Well, I can tell you a whole bunch of them has got a good voice.

JE: Right.

RB: The way he jumps around on stage. Yeah. I don't understand how he can sell out in that Bay OK Center five nights in a row. Stuff like that. I can't believe it. You know?

JE: You're saying many of them are just as good as he is, but the way he's promoted himself. And then remember, he had a big concert in Central Park, New York City.

RB: I know. Yeah, he's played some weird places.

JE: I always thought that Garth could sing almost any kind of music and it wasn't just country. He could sing rock and roll. He could sing other... Do you agree?

RB: Oh, I agree 100%. Yeah. He can sing. But that's not what people buy a ticket. They go see him for what he does. I mean, his songs.

JE: He did have quite a few hits, didn't he? Now he's got his own radio channel.

RB: Yeah.

JE: And Friends in Low Places is the signature song for him. And here in Oklahoma, we love it.

RB: Oh, yeah.

JE: Are you still amazed that he became the star that he did?

RB: I'm amazed that he got that big, but there's been nobody else in the history of music ever got that big. I don't believe. I don't know anybody that sell out in the OK Center five nights in a row.

JE: Well, Elvis Presley probably could have done that.

RB: Well, let's go back to the last time he was here. I don't know. Is that Mabee Center Elvis Presley, did he sell it out?

JE: I don't know. I have no idea. I don't know why that was funny, but that was funny.

RB: Well, anything about Mabee Center and you and me is funny.

JE: Well, should we move into that story right now?

RB: We sure can.

Chapter 9 – 9:11

Ray Stevens

John Erling (JE): Let me set this up because it brings you and me together. In 1980, Ray Stevens produced an album called Crackin' Up. And a song from that album was Would Jesus Wear a Rolex? It was written by Margaret Archer and Chet Atkins, the country gentleman. I didn't realize that. I somehow thought Ray had written it, but you and I both know that

Margaret Archer wrote the words, I guess, and Chet did the melody, correct?

Ray Bingham (RB): I'm thinking you're correct.

JE: So, Ray Stevens, you tell us now this part. You booked him at the ORU Maybe Center.

RB: Correct.

JE: To lay the background, I have the lyrics for the song here. Ray sings,

"Woke up this morning, turned on the TV set, there and living color with something I can't forget. This man was preaching at me, yeah, laying on the charm, asking me for 20 with 10,000 on his arm. He wore designer clothes and a big smile on his face, telling me salvation while they sang Amazing Grace, asking me for money when he had all the signs of wealth. I almost wrote a check out, yeah, then I asked myself,"

And the chorus is: "Would he wear a pinky ring? Would he drive a brand new car? Would his wife wear furs and diamonds? Would his dressing room have a star? If he came back tomorrow, well there's something I'd like to know: could you tell me, would Jesus wear a Rolex on his television show?"

Those are the words. I could say as a background here, I've been using some satire in my humor while talking about Oral Roberts those days. He was going to build the city of faith, so I was going to build the kennel of care for cats and dogs.

He sent out vials of water taken from the so-called river of life in front of the City of Faith. We had the water tested and it proved the water didn't come from Tulsa; it came from a packaging company in Dallas. And then he promoted a 900-foot Jesus and I promoted a 900-foot Lassie. So we were doing all that and then, of course, I played Ray Stevens with "Would Jesus Wear a Rolex" on my show many, many times.

So now you talk about how it is you booked Ray Stevens into the Mabee Center.

RB: Well, it was a Southern Shriners convention. I think five states of Shriners had their convention in Tulsa every year, and they had a big dinner and music show, and they asked me to help them with that. So I got Red Steagall, Stonehorse, and Ray Stevens for it. It was, of course, sold out only because it was the Shriners where each of them bought a ticket. There's that many of them there. It was a great, great lineup throwing a great show. We were all happy with everything the way it was going.

JE: I was there that night.

RB: Yes, but what built up to that night about a week prior to the event, I got a call from the manager of the Mabee Center and he wanted me to meet with him and Richard Roberts, who's Oral Robert's son. I met with him at a little restaurant over on Lewis there.

They said, "We can't have Ray Stevens in our theater." And I said, "What do you mean? The other song he sings is an insult to my dad and we don't want him in there."

I said, "Well, they have no choice. The Shriners have paid you the rent and they've paid me for the acts and they're going to be there. And I said, "I'm assuming if you cancel it that right between the power that the Shriners have got and Ray Stevens," he was hot then, "tomorrow morning on every network TV show, they're going to be talking about this and y'all right now don't need that kind of publicity."

They said, "Well, we would respect you and appreciate you if you, you know," and they started the religious talking to me and I said, "I have no control over it. I'm going to be there and the bands are going to be there and I don't know how you're going to stop it." That's the last I heard from them on it. We went ahead and did the show. Stonehorse First and Red Seagull did his. They're both short sets so everybody paid their money to see Ray Stevens.

There's a lot of confusion going on there and did I go on from here with what I did?

JE: Right.

RB: There was a lot of confusion going on and I said, backstage we're getting ready and Billy has been my MC I'm sure. I always had him. Anyway, I say, "John Erling and I knew about it. Do you want to do me a favor and go up there and bring on Ray Stevens?" And he, "Really?" "Yeah." And so you did.

JE: I was near the front. You came to me and I said, sure. And I don't know what I said in my introductory remarks but I'll never forget. I can still see Ray Stevens coming out on stage looking at me and he had a big smile on his face because I must have alluded to everything maybe that I'd done and then he was on. And then it goes back to you because once Ray Stevens was on and I was back in my seat didn't somebody come to you?

RB: Yeah. He sure did. He kept running to me and he said, "How did he get in here?" And I said, "I don't know. Who is it? Is he with your staff?" And that was it. Oh boy. All my friends in Tulsa who were following all that at the time they just thought that was wonderful. "Did you know John Erling was on that show at the Mabee Center?"

I said, "Yeah, I know he was on that. That was a last-minute booking."

JE: That was so clever on your part, to think "I want to have him go up there," and it was so much fun. I enjoyed it. And of course, something that you and I will remember forever and ever and have all these years.

RB: Yeah. That was great.

JE: I don't imagine Richard Roberts was in the audience. I don't suppose he would have shown up for that.

RB: I don't know. I doubt it.

JE: Yeah. Well, if I didn't thank you then, I'm thanking you now, Ray, for that.

RB: Thank you. You made it happen. You made it happen.

JE: And we've talked about it before and we've laughed about it. That is so funny.

RB: Right.

JE: But, Ray, I have a follow-up story to tell you about Oral Roberts that you may not have known about because as much fun as I had that I told you about, we did the Ray Stevens thing, I was able to actually interview Oral Roberts. I had a friend who had a connection to him. So I went out to Newport Beach, California. It was August 11, 2009. He was 91 years old.

I was very nervous about this, Ray, because of all the things that I'd been saying about him on the radio.

RB: Yeah.

JE: And you probably heard some of that yourself.

RB: Oh, yes. I listen religiously to him.

JE: And so I had fun at his expense, but I never made fun of his faith. It was his style of raising money, which was unusual in a way, but it was very rewarding for him. So my equipment is all set up. The condo was, oh, not the best, but it was right there on a golf course. Probably really nice in its heyday. Some tattered furniture.

He sat in a big easy chair and a big red shirt. A big robe on. And he wasn't in good health. He was 91. I start interviewing him. And I'm thinking, "do you really know who I am? Do you know the things that I did?" He started talking about the media. And he said, "You know, the media would really get after me, but I didn't push back. Did I, John?"

RB: He knew all the time, didn't he?

JE: He knew. I remember sitting there and I thought, “wow,” my respect for him went right through the roof because I thought he knew. And you know, he probably also knew I was just having fun.

RB: Well, sure. I bet he did.

JE: Even though his son and many out there didn't understand that and they were upset about it. But he probably knew. And then he knew that this was important for the website because it goes to students and everybody else to learn from him. And so he knew that.

RB: Exactly.

JE: And then I just needed to tell you that.

RB: Thank you for sharing that with me, John. I like that. I'll never forget it.

JE: And then I got to tell you, Ray, he died December 15th, 2009. That's two months later. So it was one of those interviews that were, you know, meant to be.

RB: Yeah. Probably the last interview he did.

JE: Yeah. I would agree with that. Very definitely.

RB: So anyway, thank you for sharing it, John.

JE: Absolutely.

Chapter 10 – 3:57

Ronnie Dunn

John Erling (JE): Ronnie Dunn, there's some story about Ronnie Dunn.

Ray Bingham (RB): Ronnie Dunn was the best at paying his commission of anybody I ever booked. Most of them aren't good at it, but there are a few

of them that'll skip around you after you book them. I have my office out at 95th and Yale back up in the trees. We book him on the weekend. I got a bunch of contracts here. Perhaps you wouldn't believe how little they are.

But on Monday before noon, we see a little red sports car and him driving, coming up that driveway. It might not be but \$25 or \$35. You know, for \$500, it'd be \$50. And those are real good ones. In three or four years that we booked him, he never was a day late with paying his commission. And just wonderful. I like that man.

He was in this contest out at Tulsa City Limits. Marlboro Contest. Same thing as Garth Brooks did. I did a lot of those for them. It was a contest and Ronnie put up his band on it. And they did good. They did real good. However, there was a little girl from out western Oklahoma that yodeled – can't recall her name right now, but she beat Ronnie Dunn by just a fraction.

I mean, there's like one or two little numbers. But she got disqualified because they had a time limit that they could be on stage. And if they went over that time, they were disqualified no matter what their score was. She was getting such an applause as she did that Yodel tune. She left state. The band quit. She walked back out and takes a bow. That automatically discounted her. So it made Ronnie the winner. And then he goes to Nashville. That was the prize. Go to Nashville.

To the national championship. He goes down there and wins it. Now, let me tell you who the judges were in Tulsa. It was Bob Cooper, John Woolley, John Henry. You know all three of those, I'm sure.

JE: I do. Yeah.

RB: And the fourth one was Ray Bingham. The last four guys. Well, John Henry is not with us anymore, but I see John Woolley often. The contest was in '88. We all got these jackets and I found mine that had never been worn. It says Judge Marlboro '88. I was so proud that I found that three or four days ago. To me, it's kind of precious.

JE: The name of the woman who was yodeling, was that Ramona Reed?

RB: No. I know Ramona Reed. She lives down in Southeast Oklahoma.

JE: I just recently interviewed her for Voices of Oklahoma and we have her on our website. And now she's like 90 years old and she just sounded so spry, like a spring chicken, as we've said.

RB: Yeah. She still sings well.

JE: Yeah.

RB: Still sings well. Now this was a young girl. She came back the next year and won the contest and then went to Nashville and got defeated down there. But she was very, very talented. I can't remember her name right now. I was booking her a little bit and then she fell in love. You don't want to book a group because somebody in that group thinks they're all coming to see him. And just when you get it going good, they'll bail on you.

You don't want to sign up long term with a group because very few of them stick together very long. I love to book ladies. I love to hear ladies sing better than men. I like ladies better than I do men. But they'll go and put a lot of effort into it and then they become mamas. And there's one thing good about Peggy Raines deal because she, for past that stage, her kids were already grown.

JE: Yeah.

Chapter 11 – 5:45

Patsy Cline

John Erling (JE): We referred to dance halls earlier. The death of dance halls in the South and in Oklahoma was really bad. And maybe you can talk about where they were. And I remember I worked in Omaha, Nebraska, and there was a big dance hall up there, even in the seventies.

Ray Bingham (RB): Well, they stayed here until the bingo hall. Then that turned into casinos. Every town in Oklahoma seemed like it had a dance

hall starting with Sapulpa, right on. Every town had one. On Saturday night, we would have seven or eight bands playing in dance halls. And on Monday, they'd all become a [unintelligible].

I don't guess there's a dance hall left in Oklahoma now. And the reason being, they go to the casinos instead. And I don't blame them. It's free to get in and hear music. It's cheap, cool, and they drank beer and they had fun. Whereas a dance hall is not going to be a fancy room. It's not going to be first class, but I think of all of those dance halls that we booked for years, years, no water, [unintelligible].

I had Garth Brooks there. I had George Strait there and Reba, all of them as they were coming up, you know, uh, Johnny Lee will be on there. Rodney Lay there a bunch of them. Uh, they're not there anymore.

JE: No, they sure aren't.

RB: And that's the shame. Cause I like that kind of music that Western swing. Yep.

JE: Loretta Lynn, her husband died in 1996 and she found comfort by listening to a Patsy Klein concert that had been recorded here in Tulsa.

RB: Well, I'm not really acquainted with Loretta. I booked her a few times. Are you familiar with how they met?

JE: No.

RB: I understand that when Patrick Klein had the automobile accident, she was in the hospital and she was listening to Ernest Sub record shop. Every Saturday night as soon as the opera was over, they had a live broadcast from Ernest Sub record shop. She heard Loretta Lynn singing on there and she asked her husband, Charlie Dick, if he would try to make arrangements, bring her to the hospital to see her. He did.

I don't know what he promised her. But he did, but she was the kind of person that go visit a stranger that started their friendship in the Loretta Lynn movie. It shows their love that they had for each other. Really deep

friendship that they had. And I was only associated with Patsy a little bit. I booked Loretta.

She was always really, really nice to me and all my friends. Sometimes when she didn't want to go out to tables and sit and sign autographs. Her daughters would sit out there and sell the project. And then "you want us to sign Mama Jane?" "Yeah." So they tried. I always thought that was really, they did it at Muskogee when I had her down there. Did it at Grove, Oklahoma when I had her up there.

JE: And everybody said yes, they wanted to. But about Patsy Klein is interesting – I think her first singing performance after that car wreck was actually here in Tulsa at the Cimarron ballroom.

RB: Yes. Yeah. They're correct. I don't – that time she was here twice. She is on the crutch at one time. You got up there and then laid the crutch down, did her singing. I'll tell you a good autograph story. George Strait does not sign autographs. He just don't – never has. I mean, when he was first starting out Woodward, Oklahoma, had the rodeo there and he played the arena and then came in and did his show.

He was just becoming very popular. So these people just don't want to try and figure a way to get him to come out there and sign autographs. And he got on the bus and he threw for the night. They're loading the bus up. And this one woman was just driving me crazy to get him to sign his album. I said, "OK, let me see what I can do." So I took her album and I went around behind the bus and I wrote George Strait on it.

I come back and handed it to her. And she walked off. Well, bus is loaded. They're leaving. I'm getting ready to leave. Here come that lady. "Can you stop that bus?" I said, "why?" She said, "he misspelled his name." I thought it was the S-T-R-A-I-G-H-T. I said, "oh, well," I said, "you know, when a guy's drinking, sometimes they get confused." I never did that again. I had never did it before. I never did it again. Signed somebody else's album.

JE: Well, I'm glad you brought that up. That is a great story. To go back to Patsy Cline. Interesting. When that plane crashed, that took her life. Randy

Hughes was a pilot and Cowboy Copas died. And Hawkshaw Hawkins, who was a husband of Gene Shepard, died in that.

RB: Right. Yeah. Then the next week, the team, Johnny and Jack, Kitty Welch's husband, Johnny and Jack Anglin, they were on their way to Patsy's funeral. And they had a wreck and he got killed. Jack of the team, Johnny and Jack, Jack Anglin got killed in a car wreck going to Patsy's funeral.

Chapter 12 – 9:25

Music Promotion Business

John Erling (JE): Have you ever had somebody that you booked, thought he was going to be good, and then the show just flopped completely?

Ray Bingham (RB): You mean the show flopped or just career flopped?

JE: No, the show just flopped.

RB: Well, I had the worst band in the history of bands this last summer. I had a four-night deal over in Clinton, Arkansas, the world champion chuckwagon races. I had Chris LeDoux's son book there on Friday night. And on Thursday morning, I get a call that he's got the virus and can't come and live in Montana. So I had to get somebody from Thursday morning until Friday night. I had that much time to put together a show.

And a lot of bands disbanded this past summer. But I had this agent in Austin that was pretty good. I had just worn myself out trying to find somebody. I called him. He said, "yeah, I got a group for you." And he told me their name. I can't even remember now. And he said, "boy, they're really, really good." I told him what I had to spend. "Oh, they'll be thrilled to get that." "Okay, send them up here."

But I had to have a show, a real show. I'm telling you, they were absolutely horrible. Just horrible. They didn't know the song. They'd start one and stop. They'd look at the wrong one. That was the worst I've ever run into. I've had some I just didn't enjoy. But I wish I could think of their name.

JE: No, that's probably good that you did.

RB: Yeah, probably so.

JE: Since you gained so much notoriety in the business, would a lot of people come up to you and say, "Oh, you got to hear my son" or "My cousin's great"? Or "You got to hear this guy"? Did you get a lot of that?

RB: Because everybody knows I'm a little bit hooked up with Reba. Every grandmother that's got a granddaughter that's singing, especially if they sing the national anthem, wants you to listen to them. Not so much anymore. I'm old and times have passed. Reba's not popular with the young kids now. I'm sure some of these other acts are. But my goodness, I have so many of those. So many. And I always like to listen and be polite to them.

JE: Sure.

RB: Because they may be something, you know.

JE: Right.

RB: But whether they are or not, you don't want to be rude to them.

JE: Did you ever listen to somebody and think, no, I don't think they have it, and it turned out they did?

RB: Yeah. Yeah. I sure did. But I thought more they really do have it. And it turned out they didn't. You're going to laugh at it. I suggested to Garth that he finish college because at the top, you're going to be a weekend wanderer. And that just shows how, besides not being able to sing or play the guitar, I'm not able to pick a song.

JE: I bet he's forgotten that now.

RB: I bet he has too. I hope he has.

JE: Tell me about Jim Halsey and you. Did you end up competing for Samax? Did you have any back and forth with each other at all?

RB: We didn't have any back and forth. We always had a great working relationship. All he's got now is the Oak Ridge boys, and I use them a couple of times every year. I get along great with Jim. What he did in the music business is unbelievable. He's in Major League World Series, and I was in the D League out there.

JE: Oh, you.

RB: Oklahoma. I respect him, and he did a good job. I love him, and I think he respects me. I don't know, but I think he does.

JE: Oh, I'm sure.

RB: He's always so nice to me.

JE: Yeah. Tell us how that works. He owns, shall we say, the Oak Ridge boys, and he's their agent. But you can come to him and say, "I'd like to book them." So then he takes a percentage of that. Tell us how that financial arrangement works.

RB: Yeah, if you're a manager, you get a percentage of everything your act does, whether it's go on a talk show and get paid union scale for it, or if they get \$100,000 a night to get your permission from the other manager. I've robbed old Billy Parker for 60 years now.

JE: If you booked the Oak Ridge boys, say, at the Mabee Center, then you'd obviously make money there.

RB: Right.

JE: And you'd end up maybe making more than Jim did on that because it was your deal.

RB: Well, yeah, it depends on what I charge the place to put it on. We did them in December in Wellington, Texas. Yes. We had to split it up and do two

shows. We sold it out, but it couldn't sit close, so we did. Half of the people would show at 2 ½ noon, the other half at 7.30 that night. It was either that or canceled.

I had 16 big cancellations this last summer, and I didn't need another one, so we did it. And the agency that books the Oak Ridge boys, it's William Morris Agency. They get a commission, and Jim gets a commission, and then they've got their bus driver to pay, and their souvenir salesman, and their crew, and their band.

They've got to get a pretty big price in order to come out, you know, to make sense for them to come. The reason we can get them, and we pay them a decent price. We have to in order to make any money on it. But the reason we get them, they'll have three or four days in Branson, and then you can start that off for a day to end it. They do four days there. You get the first night or the last night.

If you're within driving distance of Branson, that's 500 miles for them. It's a good deal for them, even though they don't go home, because they pay for their fuel and their bus drivers and their stuff that they're going to have to pay anyway. So it's a good deal we've got going with them.

JE: The music promotion business today, is it a whole lot different than when you started, and would it be difficult for anybody to get into the business today?

RB: Well, it would be and the reason being – I mean, when I started, or years later, if you had a company and you wanted to have a Christmas party, or a special retirement party for someone, the big boss man would tell the secretary, “give us a band for that,” or “get Stonehorse for that,” or “get Leroy Van Dyke for that,” or whatever.

So she gets on the phone and starts trying to find out, and she finds an agency that booked it. But it's easier for her, at that period, just to call Jim Halsey or Ray Bingham, and let them do the worrying about how they're going to find that person, what they're going to price be, and so forth.

Now that they have the computer world, we're just like a travel agency. You

don't have to go to a travel agency now to get you an airline ticket. You just go to your computer on your desk. And if a boss tells a woman, now "get John Erling, we need him to speak for us, if he's not too high." And all she's got to do is turn on that computer, have John Erling out there, and talk to him personally, or his agent, if his number's on there.

If that makes sense, that's what's happened to my business. If it wasn't for my old stand by customers, I'd starve to death. But I've got people I've been booking stuff for for 30, 35 years. And they still use me. The chuck wagon races in Arkansas, the bullfights in Ardmore, Oklahoma, and quite a few performing arts centers.

But they just call me because they know I'm going to buy it for them at the best price I can get it, and still be fair to the act.

JE: Right. So you don't rely on the computer, you rely on your connections and your relationships down through the years to make it happen for you.

RB: Yes. And my nephew works with me, and he's a computer genius. He finds a lot of things that we can call and talk to him about. Like last year you had Loretta Lynn there. We'd like to talk to you about who you're going to have this year. I'm past the stage of liking to do that anymore.

But it's what I did to get where I am, wherever that is.

JE: And you know, I got to compliment you. You have your own charm and looks and so forth that got you into a lot of places. And you have to have that charm. Palsy has that too, to talk your way in or talk somebody into doing something. So there is a natural ability here.

Yes, you couldn't play a single tune, but, it was your charm and personality that really clicked for you. And you would have to agree with me, even though you probably don't want to compliment yourself.

RB: I truthfully really like people. If I have a party here at my house, I may have a banker, I may have a doctor, and I may have someone who was homeless last night. I've got the widest array of friends that you could ever see. I've got some people that have been challenged.

JE: Yeah.

RB: And they all blend together real well. I don't like to dislike someone because they are a banker or because they are this or that. But, you polish them all up together, it's kind of fun.

JE: Well, and then you have that ability. Not everybody can talk to all levels in society, and you've been able to do that.

Chapter 13 – 4:20

How to be Remembered

John Erling (JE): You know, I was asked at the end of these interviews how people would like to be remembered. How would you like to be remembered?

Ray Bingham (RB): He made sure the opening act didn't stay on stage too long because people came to see the star. And he got the opening act off in time.

JE: That's a great...

RB: That's the hardest thing to do because they want to stay on stage.

JE: And then you have to stand in the wings and say, "get off, get off?"

RB: I got a quick story on that. Here's a guy who sang Bony Fingers and his cousin was president at OU. He was president a couple years ago. What's his name?

JE: Boren.

RB: Yeah, Boren.

JE: David Boren.

RB: Yeah, well, he had a cousin. Hoyt Axton. Hoyt Axton. His mama was a Boren and she wrote Heartbreak Hotel for Elvis Presley.

JE: Yes.

RB: May Boren. I booked in Apollo Delman Theater there in Tulsa. He was a great entertainer. A lot of good songs. But that Bony Fingers was his biggest hit, I believe. I had Don White, who was a wonderful, wonderful entertainer and performed with lots of big bands. He was the opening for them. I told him, I said, "all right, do 20 minutes and come on." So when he goes on stage, I see he takes a six-pack with him. And I said, "no, you don't need that out there." He sang and tell about it. He wrote this song and that song.

The headliner and these girl singers and all waiting offstage to come on. And old Don just kept on, just kept on singing for 40 minutes. And now it's getting dead. But the people out there is wanting him to quit because they're wanting to see Hoyt Axton. Anyway, I turned the lights off on the stage. Hit the handle and turned the lights off on the stage. And we got him off there like that.

JE: Oh, how funny.

RB: Hoyt Axton. Boy, what a guy. What a nice guy he was. I kept saying, "I'm sorry, I can't get this guy to quit." He said, no. He said, "he's had his hour in their life." But Don had been with all the big stars, playing with them, wrote songs for old Chris Boyd and everything. And that night, he was wanting to sing. I probably exaggerated a little bit, but the whole crew was standing there waiting to go on. And him sitting out there drinking his beer and telling his little stories.

JE: Yeah, that's funny. This was certainly a lot of fun. Ray, I just thoroughly enjoyed it. I knew it would be good. And you've got so many great stories to tell. And we could go on for several more hours and you'd have stories to tell.

RB: I got names wrote down here. Things have happened to everyone. John Anderson, different ones. Things that happened to me are really funny.

JE: Have you thought about doing a book?

RB: John really talked to me about it. He and my nephew just did the history of Cain's Ballroom.

JE: Yes.

RB: They got Billy Parker. They got it finished, but they don't want to put it out until this virus is over. So they want to have a lot of people show up at their book signing. \

JE: Yeah.

RB: They've talked to me about it. And I just can't imagine anybody being interested in my book.

JE: You mean after these two hours, if nobody's interested, why did I talk to you?

RB: I don't know why you told me to start with it, but I sure do appreciate it.

JE: Of course you would have an interesting book.

RB: I have John and Brett. My nephew has it. If you got to play the joke on me, is there going to be some lady come interview me or something wearing a uniform?

JE: You are ripe for a book. That's for sure. Well, Ray, thank you so much for this and it'll be added to now 250 Oklahomans that I've recorded and VoicesofOklahoma.com. And I'm proud to have you on there.

RB: Thank you so very much. I really, really, really admire you. What you've done. Your household name. Without a doubt. And I respect you.

JE: Thank you. So let's answer the question. Would Jesus wear a Rolex?

RB: I haven't got an answer on that yet.

JE: I don't think he would.

RB: I don't think so either.

JE: Thank you, Ray, for doing this. I appreciate it very much. Thank you very much.

RB: Thank you, John. I appreciate you.

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