

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Announcer: Roy Bliss grew up in Worland, Wyoming where his father was in the Culligan Soft Water business. A neighbor, Tom Mitchell, read about cable television in a magazine. Roy's father owned an airplane and Tom asked if Roy's father would "fly around to see if they could find a TV signal, line-of-sight", which they found coming from Billings, Montana. And that was the beginning of the cable TV business for the Bliss family.

Roy was very young when he helped his father bring cable to Worland. In time, Wayne Swearingen an oil man who saw the potential for cable television asked Roy to join him in Tulsa. Wayne was part owner of Tulsa Cable, which bought a microwave company, United Video. Becoming president of United Video Roy distributed Chicago's WGN TV via satellite nationwide. Roy was with United Video for 26 years before retiring from the cable business.

Listen to Roy's oral history as he describes how his father captured a TV signal from a Billings, Montana station and how the cable business became Roy's profession on the podcast and website of VoicesOfOklahoma.com.

Chapter 2 – 9:10

Bliss Family

John Erling (JE): My name is John Erling. Today's date is October 24, 2018. Roy, would you state your full name, please?

Roy Bliss (RB): Roy L. Bliss.

(JE): L is...?

(RB): "Lee."

(JE): Okay. Alright.

(RB): I don't like to use it that much, but dad is Roy Bliss. It's Roy Everett Bliss, and I'm Roy Lee Bliss, so I'm not really a junior, but, we do get -- used to get -- confused fairly often.

(JE): Yeah. And your date of birth?

(RB): December 20th, 1942.

(JE): And your present?

(RB): 75.

(JE): Is 75. And we're recording this in the recording facilities of VoicesOfOklahoma.com. And by the way, I might just -- since this is for the future generations.. In the world around us right now, the nation is about ready to vote in a midterm election of 2018. President Donald Trump is the president of our country, and the World Series is on, and the Brooklyn -- or the, I say "Brooklyn" because I used to know them there -- Los Angeles Dodgers and the Boston Red Sox are playing, so just a little bit of background of what's happening right now.

(RB): Boston won last night.

(JE): Boston won last night. 8 to 4.

(RB): I stayed up.

(JE): Well, I shut it off in the 8th inning. I figured I know what's gonna happen. Where were you born?

(RB): Casper, Wyoming.

(JE): And your mother's name?

(RB): Nellie Taylor.

(JE): And where was she born and where did -- where was she raised?

(RB): She was raised in Wyoming, near Casper, and I don't know if she was born in those days. She was born in '23, I think, whether she was born at home or in a hospital in Casper, but they lived about 45 minutes outside of Casper. Her dad was a rancher, built a huge ranch in Wyoming, one of the biggest ones. Taylor Ranch. Her name -- her maiden name -- was Taylor. His name was Bill Taylor. He was in the Legislature in Wyoming.

(JE): Okay. And what kind of person was she? Describe her personality, your mother.

(RB): She was a fun-loving ... She liked Ferris wheels and exciting things. She did a lot of ... I don't know where that came from, really, but she had 3 brothers; maybe that was part of it. She was, in those days, yeah, she was pretty strict. I remember she would backhand me once in a while with her ring on and hit me in the mouth. But actually she was very, very nice. That didn't happen very often -- only when I was probably badmouthing her.

(JE): Rambunctious, yeah. Back talking like, yeah. Your father's name?

(RB): Roy Everett Bliss. He was born in Illinois. I know he was born at home. He was the youngest of 3 boys.

(JE): You tell me he's 100 years old?

(RB): He's 100 years old as of last March, still driving a car. I talked to him at least once a week, sometimes twice a week, and I live more in Arizona than I live here. I live in Scottsdale and I try to have lunch with him at least once a week.

(JE): Yeah. Wow. 100 years old.

(RB): And we meet at a different restaurant all the time, so he drives. We're about 45 minutes away, so he'll drive halfway and I'll drive halfway and meet somewhere.

(JE): Well, what was his personality like -- if it changed in elder years or when you were growing up? What was he like?

(RB): He's extremely religious. He was an accountant by trade, but an entrepreneur at heart. He started at least 3 businesses. I grew up in Wyoming cause that's where my mom was from. That's where she drug him to, I guess, after the service. He was in the Air Force where it was the Army Air Corps at the time; flew B-29s, flew all kinds of different airplanes, but ended up flying B-29s, but never made it overseas. He was suited up and ready, and they had issued him firearms, and all the gear that you would need to be in the Pacific. And half of his squadron had already gone to the Pacific. For some reason, he said they always started with the A's and went down. When they sent him to the Pacific, they started with the Z's and he's a B. And they dropped the bomb at the G's or somewhere in there; and so the war was over and he never had to go.

I asked him one time... I thought that when the war was over they just said, "Okay, everybody, you can leave and go home."

And he said, "Oh no, they, they sent him, they split his crew up." He said he never even got to say goodbye to his crew, which he always thought that was not fair or not right; but they sent him to Albuquerque -- he and his co-pilot -- for a month with nothing to do. They rented scooters and drove all around the Albuquerque area and then sent him to Denver and ... What do you call it when they turn you loose? There's a word for it, but I can't remember.

(JE): Yes, right.

(RB): And he thumbed a ride up to my mom's -- up to the ranch -- where she and I were. I must have been about 2, I think, or something like that.

(JE): So you're talking about -- when you said "drop the bomb on Nagasaki to end the war" --

(RB): Correct.

(JE): -- which was started in December 7th, 1941, and dropped on Pearl Harbor. And, of course, you were born after that, so you have no recollection of it.

(RB): Yeah, I didn't remember that one. Well, I don't remember, really. I do remember when I was maybe 5 years old, we lived in Gillette, Wyoming for maybe a year and a half, and my dad worked for my mother's brother. He was an accountant; worked for him for a year or so.

(JE): Yeah. So, his business then: what did he do for a living?

(RB): I think, after the service, he bounced around a little bit because I know we lived in Ogden, Utah for a little while and I think he was a sales rep or something. Then he got the job with my mother's brother; I think it was a Chevrolet dealership. It was a car dealership of some sort in -- what did I just say? Gillette, Wyoming. And then he got an opportunity. I don't know quite how it came up, but to start a Culligan soft water business in Worland, Wyoming, which was over the mountain from the ranch. We moved over there in a covered wagon, essentially, and lived for several months, and then my mom and I came over and we lived in a trailer for I think maybe a year; and then they built a... I've never seen it happen anymore, but in the old days, you saw it once in a while. They built a basement, and we lived in the basement for a couple of years before we built the house on top of the basement. It was one of those where you see that stairs -- you kind of see the stairs going down into a basement. You used to see that once in a while. I haven't seen one for 50 years, but.

(JE): And so that business then was the ...

(RB): Culligan soft water. The water was horrible in Worland, Wyoming, so he did very well, I think, with that and sold it. He had a guy that worked for him and sold it to him when he got into the cable TV business. He was ... he built the first cable TV system in Wyoming in 1951.

(JE): So he was laying groundwork for you, wasn't he?

(RB): He didn't know it, but he certainly was.

(JE): Yes, absolutely. And he flew planes, too.

(RB): He flew. That's how he got into the cable business. He had an airplane. I don't know how you could, how you can afford an airplane at the time

because we didn't even have a real house, but he had an airplane and maybe we had built a house by then.

I think my mother's dad, Mr. Taylor, loaned my parents some money and built the house because he came over to visit once and said, "You guys can't live in this stupid basement."

So he loaned them some money and they built a house, which I thought was a wonderful house, but I've gone back to see it more recently and it was probably 1500 square feet or something like that.

I have two sisters, so 5 of us lived in that house with one bathroom and swamp cooler for the summers; but I had a wonderful, wonderful upbringing. I was very happy there.

(JE): Right. Your sisters: are they, in age, to you...?

(RB): I'm the oldest. I've got a sister who's 18 months younger than me and one that's 8 years younger than me. The one that's 18 months younger than me lives in Michigan -- Mount Pleasant -- and the younger one lives in California. Southern California.

Chapter 3 – 12:03

Cable TV Beginning

John Erling (JE): So after Culligan, then, he went in the video business?

Roy Bliss (RB): Yes, he had. Well, I started that story. He had an airplane and somehow he got hooked up with a couple of guys that were technical. And one of them had gone to MIT and lived in Worland, Wyoming. It's hard to believe.

He is really good, smart, technically; and he had been reading, I think, about cable TV and the possibilities and somebody started a TV station in Billings, Montana, which is 150 miles north of Worland.

And he said, "Can we borrow your airplane or use your airplane? We'll dangle an antenna out the door and we'll go look and see if we can pick up this TV signal," because you couldn't get it on the ground. So that's the way cable TV actually started everywhere.

So they flew around and found a hill outside of town where they could get --

(JE): Outside of which town?

(RB): Worland. Worland, Wyoming, which was named after a guy named Worland. Chief Washiki, who was a Shoshone chief -- a very well known Indian at the time way back when -- lived right in that area. That's a side story, but...

So they found a signal. They landed, went out field strength meter and an antenna where they had located that signal from Billings, put up a little -- I don't know how tall it was -- a tower of some sort -- 40, 50 feet -- with a TV antenna on it, and they could get Billings. And they built a little building there and started trying to raise money. I think that would have been 1950. 50 or 1951.

I think they were ... They signed up a bunch of people at -- as I recall, I could be way off on this -- \$100 for a pre-install. These people had to believe that my dad could actually pull this off, and he signed up quite a few people and \$100 in '50 was probably a pretty good chunk of money on a hope that this would happen.

And my first recollection of that, really, is going out there in this tiny little building that they had built, and a little round TV set that probably was maybe 10 inches across, and people were crowded around the door trying to look at this little-bitty TV set.

But he raised enough money to cable from there into town -- which, you have to amplify it every so many hundred feet -- and it must have been at least 1 mile out of town, maybe 2 miles out of town. So this cable wound into town and he took it to -- not a hardware store, but in those days it was maybe a furniture store. One of the bigger stores in town and the guy had

a TV set -- a fairly large old, big, huge TV set, but still a little-bitty screen -- and put it right in the window and we were getting Billings, Montana television.

(JE): How exciting for them, huh? And for him!

(RB): That was a big deal. I mean...

(JE): How many miles is Billings from the town in Wyoming?

(RB): I'm just guessing: It's got to be more than 100, but probably less than a 150 -- something like that.

(JE): Alright. So is it because of the topography of the land?

(RB): Right.

(JE): The signal -- a TV signal -- normally doesn't go that far.

(RB): Oh, it'll go forever. But it's line-of-sight.

(JE): So it was because it was line-of-sight, and you weren't in mountainous areas, or big cities, or anything like that.

(RB): There were mountains all the way around, but there wasn't a mountain between Billings and Worland. And west of Worland were hills. Worland's 5,000 ft to begin with, so that whole area is high mesa. I don't know -- the hill, I would call it a hill rather than a mountain -- had to be maybe 800 feet higher than town and that was high enough to get the signal.

But in our microwave business, we figured the curvature of the earth would -- microwaves also line of sight -- so you'd have a dish, you see those towers. You used to see them -- hardly anymore, you don't see them much anymore. because fiber optics has taken over that business.

But you see these tall towers with a big dish on them, and they would each be 300 feet tall and about 30 miles apart, because that's how you had to be: 300 feet on each end, even on a flat area of the United States to get

around the curvature of the earth, if that makes sense, you know what I'm saying?

(JE): Yeah. Right.

(RB): But in the mountains there's a lot of microwaves that you could even bounce the microwave signal off of -- like a billboard made of metal -- so you could bounce it and make an angle. Bounce it off of the top of a mountain and down to a town or something.

(JE): Right. Alright. So this was in the early 50s that your father did this. Was there cable? Was he the early forerunner of cable in the United States?

(RB): He would have been. He was right the within 2 or 3 years. I supposedly the first -- there's always a question of who actually did the first because there weren't really good records on that -- but it was in Pennsylvania somewhere that claimed the first. And they were probably getting signals from some big city -- Pittsburgh or Philadelphia or ...

(JE): Right.

(RB): They're too far from New York. But Dad was in there pretty, pretty early.

(JE): Oh, yes.

(RB): I'm sure he was the first one in Wyoming.

(JE): Or in the Midwest.

(RB): Well, probably.

(JE): I mean, you go through all those states in the Midwest, probably he had to be the first, I would think. I think that's very exciting. So, then, a little bit about that then: How did it grow?

(RB): Well, once we had one signal and he started, you know, cable -- cabling up and down all the alleys in town. Charging. It seemed like \$5 a month for one signal. So then they started looking for a second signal, and we had to

use microwave to get the second signal. We went; he found Carter Mountain, which was a mountain south of Cody, which doesn't mean anything to your audience, but it would be maybe another 100 miles west of Worland. And you could pick up Idaho Falls. Idaho Falls.

They had a TV station. This was like maybe 2 years later, so it'd be '53, '4-ish. Picked that up at the top of the mountain. He built a building with a generator -- because there was no electricity -- that would run, you know, 24 hours a day, continuously, basically forever. And they hauled fuel up to it.

I remember they had a problem with the fuel freezing, slushing up to where it would -- the generator -- would shut off because it was really, really cold in the winter time. They had to walk. I went there. I've only been there once in my life. They were using a microwave company. I'm trying to remember the name. It escapes me now, but they were in a magazine. I remember seeing a magazine. It was the tallest microwave site in the world in the late '50s. And, anyway, so they had this generator receiving this signal, and then microwaving it back to Worland.

A microwave requires an FCC permit and a whole bunch of governmental hoops to jump through. And they got -- he got -- sued by some organization and the NCTA, National Cable Television Association, which may have been a different name in those days. They took up the case for him and paid to litigate it. Then the TV stations didn't like the idea that you could take a TV signal from one place and put it to another place. But they couldn't really stop you from picking it up off air. But they could stop you through the FCC using a microwave signal that the government had to approve. And that case lasted several years and he lost.

They also had another in the interim there. They had built another location south of Worland. But also, at that time, he had built 4 other little communities out: Thermopolis, Wyoming; Riverton, Wyoming; Grable, and Basin. And instead of using microwave, we built, actually, a landline -- open wire landline -- down to town so we didn't have to use microwave when we got around that rule on microwave.

(JE): When you say "landline" -- a cable, or...?

(RB): It wasn't a cable; it was two copper wires with spacers in between them every couple of feet. I don't know how that worked, but I was a teenager by then and I actually worked on that. And I remember one time, one of the poles got hit by lightning, and it blew the pole into splinters, probably 3 inches long within 100 ft all the way around and melted that copper wire back to the next pole on both directions. And we had to go in and slice that together, me and the guy that worked there.

(JE): The TV station in Billings, whether it was a network or a station...

(RB): I'm sure it was network.

(JE): Right.

(RB): Probably NBC that was; they were one of their first.

(JE): Alright. So was he ever -- your dad -- ever challenged because he was making money off that signal?

(RB): He was never challenged. I wouldn't be surprised if there were some challenges early on, but that case law was settled pretty quickly that he was doing nothing that anybody couldn't do with an antenna. If you were in Billings, you had to have an antenna. If you were 20 miles away, you had to have an antenna. We were just a long ways away with an antenna.

(JE): Right, but then he was selling it. There was never an issue with that apparently.

(RB): Apparently not. That I don't remember

(JE): And we're glad he didn't, because...

(RB): It would have put him out of business for sure.

(JE): Right. So you're working on it. Does it flourish? Does it really grow bigger?

(RB): He struggled the whole time. He had a lot of debt and my mother hated debt. I think my dad was a little more willing to have debt, but, they were

just always worried. Although he did ... I would say the kids in my school thought I was rich. I got a car when I was in high school, so I was richer than probably most of the kids.

(JE): Well, you were working and he paid you, obviously.

(RB): From the time I was probably 13, I cleaned the office. I was a janitor for... After school, I always went there and mopped the floor, and cleaned the windows, and the toilet, and all that kind of stuff. And I was a very responsible kid. He gave me a key to the office and I had a run-in with the office manager once. I was cleaning and I was watching TV and fiddling around, and she said, "I can't leave until you're done, and I want to go home."

And I said, "Well, I've got a key. You can leave whenever you want."

And she fumed out of there.

(JE): Didn't realize she was talking to a responsible person.

Chapter 4 – 7:55 Came to Tulsa

John Erling (JE): So you went to your elementary, junior high, and high school right there in...

Roy Bliss (RB): In Worland.

(JE): And so you graduated, then, in...?

(RB): When I was in high school and could drive, then I worked summers and worked a real cable TV job: did installs, and I think I crawled under half the houses in Worland and drug cable around and changed the tubes -- in those days the amplifiers had tubes in them, which are always hot and you had to change them while they were. It was a string of tubes. I think, maybe, a dozen, so you had 6 tubes in each side of this. rectangular box.

And the tube is kind of like an amplifier, so you're amplifying your signal, and you had to take them out one by one and put in a new one, and it burned your fingers. And that's all I remember. I also painted every box we had. So I actually worked for the probably 3 or 4 summers while I was in high school before I went to college.

(JE): And so you graduated in 19...?

(RB): '61.

(JE): 1961. Alright. So you said you were working for a cable company.

(RB): My dad's cable company.

(JE): Your dad's -- Okay, so then it was about 9, 10 years old by that time, your dad's cable company. So then it was growing and...?

(RB): Yeah, he did well.

(JE): Did he sell that as a company?

(RB): After I went to college, he sold out to a company in Denver, which was buying cable systems all over the west. And he moved -- he, and my little sister, and mother -- moved to where he grew up in Bloomington, Illinois and built, I think, 4 cable systems back there.

(JE): Your college. Where did you go to school?

(RB): I went to Arizona State. My mother's parents had a place in Phoenix, and when I was in high school, we used to go down there for vacations and stuff, and I just loved the desert. And I had a cousin, on the Taylor side, who was 2 years ahead of me, and he took me to a party at ASU. And anyway, I didn't even apply to Wyoming. I just applied to ASU and got in and never looked back.

(JE): Yes, what was your degree in?

(RB): Business. I started out as an engineer till I got that trigonometry and then I changed the business. (Laughing)

(JE): But that was good that you did that, because you ended up being in business.

(RB): Right.

(JE): And so...

(RB): It was a good start. Met a lot of people. Arizona State was a wonderful school and is probably a much better school now than it even was then. The guy running it is a guy named Crow; he's just done a fabulous job. It's a huge school, but I support them and have gone to a lot of their extracurricular things.

(JE): Did you meet a certain girl by the name of Toni?

(RB): No, I've been married twice. I met a girl named Cheryl at college. She was from Michigan. We got married on campus. I went to work the next day. We had a like a weekend honeymoon. We went to Disneyland in California and I came back and started working at a cable television manufacturing company called Amiko in the west side of Phoenix. And I worked the night shift there for about a year.

I graduated after summer school that year -- '65. I almost moved. They were going to give me a job in charge of their warehouse in Pennsylvania. I was actually talking about moving and then they decided to shut the warehouse down and they subsequently went out of business. Luckily, before that all happened, I took a job with Sperry Flight Systems, the old Sperry Rand company in Phoenix. There, I was in the marketing department, selling avionics equipment, mostly to the military at that time -- gyros and stuff like that; autopilots and gyros.

(JE): Alright. So, then, how many ... You were there for a few years, were you? With Sperry?

(RB): About a year and a half, I think. And my dad kept telling me, he said, "I've got this friend Gene Snyder, and Gene is gonna sell his Casper."

He had built a cable system in Casper, Wyoming. And he had a brother-- a couple of brothers -- and for some reason they had a ... he was from Texas and they had a cable system in Perryton, Texas also. And they were going to combine that with some cable systems from a Texas group that had several cable systems.

Somebody in Tulsa, Oklahoma was gonna purchase the whole package. It was LVO Corporation, which was an oil company. They had a lot of cash and needed some depreciation. The cable business was perfect for them. Wayne Swearinger was running that company.

So my dad kept saying this: "Gene Snyder. You ought to call him."

And I said, "Well, I'm happy here. I don't need another job."

So, that went on, maybe, for six months and finally I said, "Okay, I'll call him."

So I called him and came to Tulsa for an interview in November, I think, of '69. Met with Gene Snyder and Ed Drake. We went to Jamil's for dinner and I drank too much. I remember that. But they offered me a job. They basically said, "We'll hire anybody who knows what cable television is."

They paid me 30%-40% more than I was making at Sperry. So I packed up my family, sold my house, and moved here in December in an ice storm. I didn't know there was such a thing as an ice storm. It come in through right down by the refinery. It's icy and slick, and we lived in the Holiday Inn, I think it is, downtown for about maybe 3 months before I found a suitable place to live.

(JE): You had children by that time?

(RB): I had 2 -- had twins -- that were really fun to play with, but they were about 3. 2-and-a-half, 3 years old. And I worked in the LVO building, which is at 5th and Boston.

(JE): So, United Cable.

(RB): It was called something else for ... It's changed its name two or three times, but ended up as United Cable. That's what most people would recognize. And so, at first, we were buying cable systems, we were getting franchises for cable systems all over kind of the Midwest: Illinois, Tennessee, Oklahoma, anyways, anywhere we could.

There were only about 10 of us, at the time, working at United Cable, trying to build this cable system. We bought some cable systems in northern Illinois, and it had a microwave company -- or microwave entity -- taking Chicago signals out to these cable systems across the northern tier and then down the middle ways. And Gene put me in charge of the microwave company and tried to expand it; and we wound up over a period of 8-9 years, we built about 1000 miles of microwave all over the Midwest -- Saint Louis to here, Dallas up to here, Houston over to New Orleans -- serving cable systems about every 30 miles around Illinois out into Iowa, and that was a reasonably good business until satellite came along.

Chapter 5 – 4:30

Tulsa Cable

John Erling (JE): So in this time period, when does Tulsa Cable come about and when does Tulsa get cable?

Roy Bliss (RB): Tulsa Cable was a long struggle for two reasons. One was that just getting a franchise here was a struggle. Two: There weren't many big cities being built with cable at the time because they didn't have much to sell. There was already 3 stations here, maybe 4. I don't know if there's a PBS at that time or not. So what were you going to sell them? What were you going to sell anybody? They already had the three big networks and maybe a PBS. So all you had to sell was an independent. There was an independent in Dallas we could bring up, but that's, you know, only one extra channel.

(JE): What time period are we talking, and were you involved in the Tulsa Cable?

(RB): I wasn't involved too much. I was peripherally involved.

(JE): Okay. In 1977-1978, United Cable had gone through some struggles. The FCC kept changing the rules on what cable systems couldn't do. It was very new territory, and the cable industry kind of suffered a setback on growth. These little towns where they couldn't get TV, they flourished and did fine, but the towns where there were always already were TV stations were struggling. And LVO decided we needed to shed some assets at United Cable, so they were gonna to shed the microwave company. And a guy named Larry Flynn came along from Connecticut and he bought the company I was running.

He and I worked very well together. He never bothered me. I ran the company virtually the whole time. He was a good guy to work for and he gave me a lot of stock in the overtime.

(JE): In United Cable?

(RB): In United Video, which turned into a satellite company.

(JE): Okay.

(RB): So United Cable -- I kind of got off track there. United Cable, by that time I was ... They had an office and they were still downtown, and I had a .. United Videos office was at 52nd and Harvard.

And we were doing our thing, but I always stayed in touch with them, and they went through several hoops. Sorry, I don't really know the dates, but it would have been late 70s, middle to late 70s.

Bill Swanson was trying to get a franchise. And United Cable was trying to get 'em. Bill Swanson was running Channel 8. I don't know if Channel 8 was involved at all, but maybe it was just Bill. He was a big personality in town. And finally they made a deal to work together to get the franchise, and they got the franchise, and then started building, but it was a real

struggle for them because we brought microwave from Dallas up to here, and from St. Louis -- another independent -- and Kansas City down. So they had 3 services. But an independent in those days was still a pretty... Didn't have a lot of different things: Gilligan's Island reruns and stuff like that, and old, old movies.

So the United Cable had a tough struggle until the satellite came along, which was very late 70s. And HBO put one signal on the satellite, and then Ted Turner put WTBS on the satellite. And we put WGM on the satellite. And we got in the business of -- for a short period of time -- building at that time, we were putting a huge dish, a 36 ft size dish, which you still see around some, just to receive the satellite signal before they went to more powerful satellites and just shrunk that down to DIRECTV-kind-of-size dishes.

So we were in the dish business for a little for a very short period of time.

(JE): As United Video?

(RB): As United Video, but we built the dish for Tulsa Cable to get HBO. HBO, and WTBS, and WGN were all on the same satellite. So, over time, they ran out of satellite space and the cable systems had to build multiple dishes to receive different satellites.

Chapter 6 – 13:14

Future of Cable

John Erling (JE): I have the date of December 27th, 1976 that Ed Taylor began distributing Ted Turner's WTBS in Atlanta to cable systems via satellite. And tell us about this \$1 investment that Ed talks about.

Roy Bliss (RB): He'd worked for AT&T, then he was a consultant in the telephone business. And United Video, when we were still with LVO and United Cable -- we were part of United Cable -- we decided we could be a piece of that using our 1000 miles of microwave, and we were gonna build -- add -- a lot of equipment, a lot of expense, into all of these towers and

transmitters and receivers and carry telephone across our part of the country.

So I went and interviewed Ed -- Ed Taylor -- in Kansas City. Ultimately, we hired him to run that piece of our business. He was technically my boss, but I was running the video side and he was trying to get in the telephone side. We ultimately decided that we couldn't compete in that, and we sold our everything we had done up to then to Southern Pacific. Ed went to work for Southern Pacific for not too long and then he switched over to Western Union.

And, at Western Union, he was selling a satellite space. And he called on Ted Turner and Ted Turner said, "Well, I need somebody between me and the customer because I'm a TV channel owner. I cannot be the transmitter to the end user or to the cable systems. And if you'll form a company, or I'll help you form a company -- and give me \$1 -- and you can be the intermediary." That worked out very well for both of them. That was the dollar.

(JE): Yes! That was the dollar. And, then, so...

(RB): Ted was really the marketer. Ed's a bright guy, really bright guy. I really like him, but I mean, having Ted Turner as your voice and face of the service -- and he was at every cable system -- he was just all over the place touting WTBS, which was really a mediocre television station to say that the best. It was mediocre compared to WGN, which we were carrying at the time.

(JE): But you ... Didn't you follow WTBS and then went to get WGN. So Ted still led the way on that.

(RB): He led the way.

(JE): "Superstation," we called it.

(RB): As soon as he did that, we said "What could we do? We could rent a channel and do the same thing." And we loved WGN; they carried the Cubs. We had a good relationship with them, although they couldn't stop

us. We were carrying their service all over Illinois. And, Jim Trechek, who we talked about earlier, a good friend of mine, and was working for me as a consultant in several areas. He and I went up and visited with WGN and told him what we were doing. They liked the concept, but it worried them that if we started carrying them all over the country, they were paying for Gilligan's Island and all these movies and stuff. They were paying the owners of the rights for Chicago. And all of a sudden, it might be in LA and San Francisco -- all over the United States -- and that worried them that that would increase their costs, and they couldn't see how they were going to make any extra money from it other than the exposure. I think, over time, they did, they were able; they got a lot more national advertising instead of just Chicago advertising. Anyway, we put up a satellite dish outside of Chicago, beamed them to the satellite, and sold it to cable systems for 10 cents a subscriber.

(JE): And you -- and again, in that case -- did you have to pay WGN?

(RB): No. No. We were just taking it off air.

(JE): Oh, that was another case, way back when.

(RB): I don't think that was ever even litigated because it was already said that you can do that: pick up an antenna. We really had no direct connection from them, although, somewhere in the late 80s or maybe even 90s, I think we did put a direct connection in. And then they started. WGN finally embraced the whole concept about the time I left -- mid 90s -- they wound up buying the whole thing. I was long gone, but...

(JE): But you were there in the history-making time because television was never the same.

(RB): No, the satellite changed everything.

(JE): It changed everything, didn't it? And with ...

(RB): The talk of 200 channels really happened.

(JE): Right. In that day -- in the early days -- everybody said, "Well, that's just ridiculous. I mean, what could you do with 200 channels?"

(JE): Right. But then, and maybe we're ahead of ourselves, then people started creating programs and gave you content to sell and reasons to have cable or satellite. Ted Turner -- were you around him, any, at all?

(RB): I was around him some. He tried to buy our company -- or talked about buying our company -- at one time. Larry Flynn and I went down and had a visit with him. You know, he's just like you have seen him. He's a real flamboyant, bigger-than-life kind of guy.

(JE): Nice guy in person, probably, yeah?

(RB): He's pretty egocentric, but a nice guy.

(JE): Yeah, it was sad to see recently on television.

(RB): I saw that interview, yeah.

(JE): And I believe dementia or Alzheimer's had been setting in.

(RB): There's some other word he had a name for it, but it's some form of dementia, I think, yeah.

(JE): Right. So you had ownership, then, in United Video. They were thinking then how many channels. They were limited to 12 channels, I think. But then they were thinking, "Well, maybe we could have 24 channels," and they never thought about 200 at that time.

(RB): If you go clear back to my dad's day, I think his amplifier only did 3 channels. So it was a technology issue. The cable that they were putting in always could carry a lot of information -- coaxial cable can -- but the amplifiers were 3 channels, 12 channels, 24 channels. Now, it's unlimited because they're using fiber and they're using a whole different kind of amplifiers. That's the reason, actually, why cable's gonna be around forever because they've got that coaxial cable running everywhere that carries a huge amount of information. If you're streaming, you still have to use a

cable to get it to your house. There's no way around the cable into your house. There's no real wireless system that works adequately.

(JE): I was noticing YouTube TV. And that may not even be anything. We think in terms, when we do these, that we're talking to people 50 years from now -- they're looking back, alright? So you have YouTube TV -- that's cable-free live television is what they're promoting: "... best way to stream TV." So there's not cable involved in that at all, and you can do that on your iPhone.

(RB): Technically, that's true.

(JE): So we're in this flux area now. Which way is it going to go? Streaming, and apparently all these companies that are producing movies specially made for streaming, are probably going to be it for the future. I don't know.

(RB): Well, I think they've changed. One thing they've changed is the dynamics of how you make a movie or a TV series. I mean, Netflix has got -- as much as they're doing, they've got to be making them much cheaper than they would have been made 10 years ago by Hollywood.

(JE): Right.

(RB): They've got character actors, who are very good actors, who I know they're not paying like they pay the big guy. But it's nice, easy, constant money for the actors and probably easier work schedules than making movies and. I've even heard some of them say that. I mean, this is compared to making a movie and working 24 hours a day with time schedules, and doing these half hour segments, they can still have a family and live in one place.

(JE): Right. But major series like Mad Men came along and Jon Hamm became a star as a result of that, and that's happening now and they're quality actors and quality programs. And they have to do that, I would imagine to compete with everything else; we wouldn't take anything inferior, otherwise we wouldn't sign up for it, so.

(RB): Yeah. Right.

(JE): You know, I never really have done this before, when I've done, these to have this kind of a discussion, but because I'm a consumer and you were in the business, it's probably alright for the people of the future to hear this kind of conversation going on.

(RB): Right, but neither you nor I know what's gonna happen.

(JE): No, no. And you didn't have any idea when you were starting cable what was going to happen, except you probably knew it's going to revolutionize. Did you know, and thinking in those terms, "it's gonna revolutionize the industry -- big time"?

(RB): Yeah. I thought from the very beginning that we would have more and more channels. It never occurred to me. I mean, more and more meant 20 or 30, but it never occurred to me we'd have hundreds and hundreds of channels. I don't know; there must be 10 food channels just... And what cable's -- one of the things they're faced with -- is breaking up or not the cable and the networks breaking up their services. I mean, you don't necessarily want all of NBC, you only want 3 things that NBC does, and you'd like to pick and choose those; and streaming will allow you to do that. I have noticed. I have Cox here as well, and I'm not sure which button I push, but it will say -- oh, it's "on demand" -- so you can go back and order, find on any network show, and get on demand, but you can't fast forward through the commercials.

(JE): Oh, yeah. Right.

(RB): So they don't care when you watched the commercial as long as you watched it.

(JE): So then in our town ... And by the way, Oklahoma City: Do you know what was happening to them as cable was beginning here? Do you have any idea what happened there?

(RB): I didn't follow that closely.

(JE): Yeah. Right, right.

(RB): I assumed something very similar. But, yeah, it was just a tough nut with not much to serve the customers with back in the late '70s until the satellite came along and then. All of a sudden, you could have cable in every city and you could start having 30 or 40 channels and...

(JE): Right. Did you just love being in this business?

(RB): I loved the technology part. I loved... Yeah; I did. It was a wonderful time. I was in it at the perfect time, too. We went public in '92, which was really an exciting event.

(JE): Okay, "we." Who's "we?"

(RB): United Video.

(JE): Okay.

(RB): And the stock came out at 12 and all my friends bought some and it went to 8, and most of them bailed, and then it went to -- after splits and stuff -- 140 or something.

(JE): So those who stayed with it...

(RB): Did really well.

(JE): ... did very well.

(RB): Yeah.

(JE): Uh, you mentioned HBO before, but they really helped, too, didn't they? To promote.

(RB): They started the satellite business. I mean, they put a fight on. As I recall, that was the first thing that they did that proved you could take a signal from one place, put on the satellite, and beam it to a bunch of places, and it would work.

(JE): Okay, so that was the model and everybody else looked at that and said, "We can do that too."

(RB): Right. And it would happen pretty fast after that. There were Western Union and RCA had satellites up in the air. I don't know if you remember: they were talking at one time about doing telephone through the satellite, but there was too much latency. You're going a long ways up and a long ways back, and even though you're going at the speed of light, it still gave you that echo quality. Then Corning came along with the fiber and all of that telephone talk just went away and it's all underground and fiber now.

Chapter 7 – 6:36

CNN was Born

John Erling (JE): I got to say this: I know you've reflected on your life, but the plan by our maker to put you in that position to get all that stock started right back here, with your father, and you got into the business, and it was just ... I've talked to so many people in this series for VoicesOfOklahoma.com. When you trace back, "Yeah, I was... the groundwork was being laid for me to get to the point..." like where you were.

Roy Bliss (RB): Right.

(JE): Do you think about that?

(RB): I do. There was no question I was lucky. I was in the right place at the right time. I think I was a pretty good people-manager of United Video. We wound up with 800 employees in the end, and that's the part that I missed the most of being not working was having all those people. We had a wonderful family of people working for us.

(JE): Well, it's not to take away from the fact that you were a hard worker and you earned it. "You did it the hard way," as they say -- you earned it. And if you were a people-manager and so you earned wherever you got.

(RB): I tried to be there before anybody else and leave after everybody else.

(JE): Right. So, you -- I call it, "that worker chip that's in our brains." Some of us just have to work and some people just have to play.

(RB): Right.

(JE): But some of us have to work and you were one of those "have-to-work-ers" kind of guys.

(RB): Right. I was.

(JE): That's the example we want young people, as they listen to this, to learn. Either they have it and learn to have it, or they have it from the very beginning -- from the get-go.

(RB): I tell my kids and my grandkids, "You know, be there early, be there late, and take every chance you can to take more work than what your boss will give you." That's the way to get ahead.

(JE): Did any of your children ... How many children did you have?

(RB): I have 3 girls and a step-son.

(JE): Okay. Any of your family that might be in the cable business or television business at all?

(RB): Nope. (Chuckling)

(JE): No. Didn't want to be part of that.

(RB): Well, I have 3 girls, so they, you know, they're 2 of them are housewives. Well, all 3 of them are housewives and, actually, all 3 of them kind of work now, but not at anything very serious.

(JE): We should go back and talk about Ed Taylor again. He started a channel with news photographs and announcers reading stories about those pictures.

(RB): He started... Yeah, he tried a whole bunch of different things. I had kind of forgotten about that because TBS was the real money, but I remember that. You ought to talk to Jim Trechek some more because he worked for him while they were doing a lot of those different services. I don't remember that one at all.

(JE): Well, then, Ted Turner says, "Nobody was interested in 24 hour news." But apparently there were some results from people who were watching the photographs with newsreaders. And they started a company called Cable News Network. And so CNN was born, but it was in Ed Taylor who planted the seed, apparently, in the brain of somebody like Ted Turner. And he Ed Taylor is a Tulsan. So you have taken losses along the way, haven't you?

(RB): Oh, yeah (Chuckling). We tried a lot of things. We were the first ones, also, to do radio at our uplink in Chicago. We had one of the guys that worked for me was a tech -- a real technology guy -- and he said, "You know, video signal is this wide. And video really only takes up this. So you get a little bit of space here, and a little bit of space here, and we can slice that up into little frequencies and put radio signals on there."

And we started the Satellite Music Network, selling 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week, country, rock, jazz. I can't remember how many ... I think we had 5 channels and we had 5 disc jockeys full time -- round-the-clock kind of disc jockeys -- and we were selling those to radio stations, mainly to fill in mostly the little radio stations, like Worland, Wyoming, where they couldn't afford or didn't want to ever have a guy working all night and there'd only be 3 people listening. So they could take our service at a pretty cheap deal. So when they went off the air at midnight, our service was on until 6 o'clock the next morning. So they were running 24 hours a day and all they had to do was flip a switch. And we sold that. That went public actually. And my board of directors at United Video said, "That's the dumbest thing ever. You'll never make any money," but I invested quite a bit of my own money in it. And we sold it to ABC and did really well. (Laughing)

(JE): (Laughing) You invested quite a bit of your own money, but United Video was the name on it -- doing it -- and they, your directors, laughed at you, but you put your own money in it and it worked.

(RB): Yeah.

(JE): And did anybody come to you and say, "You were right, Roy."

(RB): They did at the end, yeah. (Laughing)

(JE): (Laughing) Because you ended up making money for the company.

(RB): Right.

(JE): Fascinating. Those of you who are so successful, you're willing to take risks. You're willing to risk money, maybe reputation. Would you agree? You have to be a risk-taker.

(RB): Yeah. It really helped that we never had any debt, really, after the satellite thing started going. That's very helpful: not having any debt and having a pretty good cash flow -- a really good cash flow, actually. It helps that you can take some risk, maybe more than you could if you were living hand-to-mouth. We started a weather business, a digital -- not digital at the time, but, I guess it was digital -- through the satellite, sending weather information, and that we finally sold that. It didn't do much. Again, we were using empty space on our satellite channel.

(JE): So you were just sitting around figuring out how to fill that space.

(RB): Yeah.

(JE): I bet you had many -- we talked about brainstorming -- amongst your table that says, "What can we put on it?"

(RB): Yeah. We started a company called Satellite Spacecom. We split those signals up in a whole bunch of different ways and we were selling service through the satellite to anybody. We offered as a common carrier kind of service: anybody that wanted to go through and distribute to a lot of people on a one-way kind of signal. That's how we got into the preview guide business. I don't know if you want to ... That was really the best thing we did. That was worth lots of money.

Chapter 8 – 7:46
Preview Guide

John Erling (JE): Okay, tell us about that: Preview Guide.

Roy Bliss (RB): Well, it goes back to where we were talking about 24 channels, 36 channels. And we could see that there was a real problem: With any kind of TV guide, paper guide, when you get to even 30 channels, trying to have a guide on 30 channels is a big deal. And if you had hundreds of channels, it's basically impossible. So one of my technical guys had seen a guy in Michigan was doing a page-by-page guide and he's using a little, real basic computer. This is pretty early in the computer days and putting a page up at a time that would stay there for 20 seconds and then rotate to another page that would show you what's on at all the different times and the 10 different channels you had.

And we said, "Well, we could send that information through the satellite and blanket the whole United States."

And we made a deal with a guy in upstate New York who had all of the TV stations in a database, and he was selling it to guys in different towns who were doing paper guides, selling that information. You know, NBC the Today Show is on at 7 'till 9 on Channel 2, and the local guy would put it. It was Channel 2 for him and some guy in San Francisco is Channel 4, and he would match that up.

So we were getting all these channels from him. And we built a computer that would sit at the cable system head end, which is where everything comes together and starts into the cable system -- the head end. And this computer would know what the channel numbers were for ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, WGN and everything. Because they've started all over having Channel 2 on Channel 2 almost everywhere, but that didn't used to be the case; they were scattered. Every place had NBC on a different channel.

Anyway, we figured we'd design some software. And we spent a lot of money, because it's really a tricky business, that would take all that basic information, send it to a computer at the cable system that would say,

“Okay, NBC here is at this time, and it's on this channel; CNN's at this time on this channel.”

And we would send all the information multiple times cause we didn't have a feedback to say, “I got it.” Most computer things are two ways, so you send -- well they were in the old days, anyway. You send it, and you didn't know whether the other end got it or not. So we sent it multiple times and if it didn't match, it would throw it away, and they would call us on the phone and say, “It's not working right,” and we had sent it again.

But anyway, we were sending this information down, and then this little computer -- I wish I could remember the name of it -- and it was generating a video signal that would scroll. The old scrolling preview guide. And we were putting TV Guide out of business with that because they just couldn't do more than 20 channels. I don't remember what they were doing, but we were selling that to cable systems and that was a real hit. We basically sold it to every cable system in the United States.

So when we went public, that was a big deal. And when TCI bought control of the company, that was really what that was the primary thing they wanted. And we also spent an awful lot of money, and never could quite get to the end of doing. We recognized that the scroll was better than the paper. But as we got to hundreds of channels, even the scroll -- you just couldn't wait long enough to see that scroll come by with the channel you're looking for or what you wanted to watch.

We needed to be interactive and there was no way for United Video to be, although we worked on it. We developed a remote box that you had put at the TV set that would capture this information, and you could remotely -- from this little remote we designed -- you could page it on your TV, kind of like interactive is now.

But we couldn't figure out any way that we -- little, old United video -- could build millions of these boxes and put them on the backs of TV sets. It needed to be all the cable. The cable guys put a box on the back of your TV set. It really needed to be built into that box. And I I flew to Japan twice. I met with Toshiba because they were building these boxes. Scientific Atlanta was building boxes in Atlanta. We talked to them. Everybody knew

it needed to happen, but nobody could quite figure out how, mechanically, to do it. TCI, with their millions of cable subscribers, could go to ... They were buying all their boxes from either Toshiba or Gerald or Scientific Atlanta, and they could say, "We demand that you do this in all of the boxes we buy from you." And they could make it happen. So that's exactly what they did.

(JE): Wow.

(RB): I bet we spent -- which doesn't seem like a lot of money now -- maybe 3 or \$4 million trying to make that all happen. We knew how to do it, and what to do, but we couldn't get the mechanics of getting that into everybody's box.

(JE): Who are the actual people who are trying to figure that out? Engineers of some sort that are trying to do that?

(RB): Software people.

(JE): Okay.

(RB): We subbed some of it out. We told them what we were trying to do.

(JE): You know, we keep talking about this: all the national and international work. It's United Video right here in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

(RB): Right.

(JE): And we forget that, that this is -- was -- your headquarters. And you were doing things that maybe they weren't doing in bigger cities, or were other companies doing similar work that United Video was doing?

(RB): Nobody was. That interactive guide thing, nobody was doing that except us at the early stages. Other people ... the cable industry knew it had to be done, but they kind of coalesced behind two or three big cable players. That's what kind of forced it to happen.

Chapter 9 – 7:00
Direct TV

John Erling (JE): I think you've alluded to it earlier: You were in the fun time, weren't you? The creating.

Roy Bliss (RB): Oh, yeah.now it's much more of a cash-generating big business.

(JE): Right. They're not really discovering new things now. We've pretty much...

(RB): No. Just more of the same stuff over, and over, and over.

(JE): Yeah, right. And you were in that time where you could be creative and come up with an idea, and it would make sense. But we haven't talked about DIRECTV which comes into our home without cable.

(RB): Right.

(JE): So that was...

(RB): That was a bigger, more powerful satellite, so you could get the little -- real little -- dishes.

(JE): Right. So right now today there's a marketing between, say, Cox Cable and DIRECTV.

(RB): That's correct. They're direct competitors.

(JE): Direct competitors right now. And haven't they aligned themselves with AT&T so that you buy...

(RB): I just got something in my email box yesterday or day before that said, "Your DIRECTV bill will now be on your AT&T bill."

(JE): Okay.

(RB): "And you can combine your two services," because I'm an AT&T customer, so...

(JE): Right. So there's that battle going on right now between DIRECTV and cable.

(RB): I was always surprised how well they did, DIRECTV. Because I thought that dish would be so much of a problem, in so many places, where you had trees or buildings or some reason you couldn't put a dish in. I don't know what they've got. 20 million subscribers or something?

(JE): Right. So I don't know if one will prevail over the other or not. We don't know, sitting here...

(RB): I think it's pretty static right now. Neither one of them are growing much. I mean, they run all those ads: "Cut the cord," and do all that, but it's more complicated. I mean, you to make sure you can see the satellite. And it's multiple satellites, so most people have to have two dishes or a dish that can see both, which is a funny-shaped dish. Like you said, that's probably a battle that's kind of going on here, and the real battle is streaming Netflix; and that's where the real action is.

(JE): Another name -- I don't know -- that seemed to be Tulsa Cable was Mark Savage.

(RB): I saw him last night -- for the first time in several years. I thought he was living at the lake for a long time. But he built a house at the hills over by 71st and 75 or something.

(JE): And how did you see him last night?

(RB): At the Duet Restaurant; I just bumped into him.

(JE): Oh, you just bumped into him?

(RB): Just bumped into him.

(JE): Oh, how about that? And here we talk about him. So what did he mean to the cable business? Because he became a face, kind of; he became very famous in our town.

(RB): He was the face of cable television. He was kind of lucky in, one: he's a really good manager, and I really like him. But he was about the 5th manager of Tulsa Cable in 5 years, because, what I was talking about earlier, the difficulty of selling cable when you didn't have anything to sell or very limited amount to sell. He got there about the time that the satellite happened; and it just flourished and became ... just did really well.

(JE): And who was owning Tulsa Cable at that time?

(RB): United Cable.

(JE): Okay. And you were a part of that ownership.

(RB): No, not then. We were split off by then.

(JE): Okay. Alright.

(RB): But he and I were good friends, and we were a service provider, because he bought WGN and WPIX from us; and we built this satellite dish for him so he could receive all of those services.

(JE): Alright. So you were good partners in the same business.

(RB): Yeah. And later, after Tulsa Cable ... he's really smart guy and a good gambler. He and Gene Snyder, who ran -- started and ran -- United Cable, they were in the casino business in a big way in Colorado at Black Hawk. Have you ever heard of that? I think there's one little enclave there that ... I don't know how they ... I don't even think gambling was legal in all of Colorado, but there's one little area just off I-70 going west out of Denver. And there's Harrah's; and it's a real casino city with just a whole bunch of different casinos. Anyway, Mark owned one of those until May, I think. He just told me last night that he sold out in May.

(JE): And what was he selling? How was he involved? You said he was a good gambler. What did you mean?

(RB): Well, he was a gambler first. I mean, he's one of those guys that on any weekend would have several \$1000 going on 10 different sports events.

(JE): Oh, okay.

(RB): And he was really good. I think he actually makes money at it. And that's kind of a recollection that had nothing to do with nothing, except that maybe that kind of led him into being an investor in this casino. N

(JE): Okay.

(RB): Not only an investor; he actually ran the casino. I think he said they started in '92, so it was '92 to just this year that he, you know, he was up there once a week, or once a month for several days even now.

(JE): You know, I actually did a live television program for Tulsa Cable and Mark. I don't know what channel that would have been. They tried to do local things and local programming, and I did one, I think, once a week.

(RB): Half-hour or an hour?

(JE): Yes. Probably so. I can't remember, but I remember when people would call in the radio station. They were somewhat civil. But, so, I took phone calls on Tulsa Cable. But when they called, and they were seeing you on TV, they were much more direct and maybe mean, and caustic. So here they were, sitting in their house, maybe by themselves. We have this going on now with tweeting and all that that goes on. But when they saw my picture there, and they felt they could go after me more because -- well, first of all, they thought they were in front of me.

(RB): You'd think it would be just the opposite, though, that radio you would be more autonomous than video.

(JE): Well, they...I noticed a direct difference in the kind of phone calls I received, And I don't know how long we did that, but Mark was open

enough to try a local thing, I suppose. I think he was trying a lot of local programs.

(RB): Well, that was one of the requirements that most cable systems had in their franchise that they would do. That was one of the ways they got the franchise was to say, "We're going to do a whole bunch of local things," even though it was very difficult to do -- costly -- and you didn't ever get any much viewership out of it. So they were kind of pushed towards that.

Chapter 10 – 4:52

Major Accomplishments

John Erling (JE): What do you think? If you look back on your life -- a major accomplishment, if you look back on your many of them that we've talked about, is there one that stands out that makes you feel good?

Roy Bliss (RB): I think putting WGN on the satellite, in terms of business. What makes me feel the best is marrying Toni (Chuckling), but that was a personal thing.

(JE): Right.

(RB): I got divorced. I was married 20 -- well, not quite 20 years. Divorced. As a bachelor, Mark and I were bachelors at the same time for about 3 or 4 years. He and I hung out quite a bit together and then I met Toni, and life's been fantastic since that.

(JE): And when was that? When did you get married?

(RB): We got married in '88.

(JE): Did you have children with her?

(RB): No.

(JE): She had children?

(RB): She had a son who was fif -- no, he couldn't drive yet. He must have been 14; 13 or 14. And our first date, I did a bachelor thing for ... not MS... Anyway, somebody talked me into being a bachelor, and they were auctioning bachelors off to all these women.

(JE): Yeah; right.

(RB): And I said, "Well, yeah, that'd be fun."

And anyway, she was -- her boss -- she was working for a chemical company. He had bought a table, so he sent all the girls that worked for him. I bumped into her at the shrimp table. They had a pre pre-party and I started talking to her. We had both lived in Phoenix. We both skied. I forgot what else. Anyway, I said, "Please, bid on me, because I'm afraid nobody's gonna bid on me."

Actually, I had it set up with some girls that work for me that I said, "I'll pay you back if you bid on me if it looks like nothing's happening."

So luckily I'm a "B", so I was like the 3rd guy up and she was -- Toni -- was sitting right where I could see her, and she bid on me once, but she didn't have any money. So she bid on me once, and then bidding... Actually, I came across pretty well...

(JE): (Chuckling)

(RB): And I had tickets to Chicago -- the group, Chicago -- at the Mabee Center the next weekend. And the woman who bought me was a lawyer and I told her, "You know, I've got these tickets for next weekend."

And she said, "I'm gonna be in San Francisco, so it was just money well spent. It was fun. You don't have to take me out or anything."

I said, "Oh, no. Call me when you get back and we'll go to dinner at least."

And then I went down and found Toni and said, "Do you want to go to Chicago with me?"

And she said, "Sure."

And I was driving a Corvette at the time. When I pulled up to her driveway, her son and his buddy came running out, and all they talked about was my car.

(JE): Sure, sure, sure.

(RB): A red Corvette, anyway. And they ran back in and told Toni: "He's driving a Corvette!"

(JE): That's fun. Well, that was a major accomplishment, but... Putting WGN online...

(RB): That was tricky because there was only one satellite channel left on the RCA satellite where everybody was, and we had to make a decision. We talked to them and fiddled with it, and I was having a tough time trying to convince Larry Flynn that this is something we should do, because it was pretty big. We had to sign a 5-year deal at \$140,000 a month. I had to convince him that that's something, and we finally bit the bullet and I think there was somebody right behind us trying to take that channel. But I sent him a telegram, I called them, I forgot how we did it. I said, "Sign us up; we're a go for WGN."

I think we had to dip into our bank line for the first month. And after that, we were making more money than we were spending.

(JE): Wow.

(RB): At 10 cents a subscriber, a month. My lawyer in Washington always said, "I'd just see dimes coming out of the sky."

(JE): But how long did it take you to convince Larry Flynn?

(RB): At least a month. I mean, we talked about it. We ran a bunch of numbers and I was convinced this was gonna be the end of -- not only the greatest thing ever -- but the end of the microwave business, which is what we

were in. That was the business and it was gonna go away and it did. We finally basically gave it away at the end.

(JE): And that's when you went to satellite, of course.

(RB): Yeah.

(JE): Right, right. And, so, was he still hesitant when you finally made that decision? Did he say, "Oh, well, I'll come along."?

(RB): Yeah, that was about it. I drug him along. Actually, I drug him along on most of the deals we did. Some of them, I had them. I was too deep in before I told him what we were doing, but he kind of came along; and, well, we were a pretty good partnership, actually.

Chapter 11 – 3:12

Advice

John Erling (JE): Maybe that leads into this: I always ask about advice somebody like you would have for young people. Maybe some of these youngsters who want to be in business or to the young in general. What would you say to them?

Roy Bliss (RB): Work hard. The younger you are, the easier it is to take a risk, as well. I've told all my son-in-laws and kids, you know, while you're young, you can take a risk. You can jump jobs 2 or 3 times nowadays. You know, if you've got an entrepreneurial bend, give it a shot. And a couple of them have, and one of them got burned pretty good. All my kinds, and I've only got a couple of grandkids working, but they've all done very well; I'm very happy. We haven't had any family troubles. I see some of these poor people that get in horrible situations, and we haven't had any of that, so I'm blessed.

(JE): You're very fortunate, yes. You never know when that's going to hit. How would you like to be remembered?

(RB): I think as somebody who really cared about people, I think the things we did at United video. Every time I bump into an ex-employee, he said, "That was the best company I've ever worked for." We did a lot of fun stuff. We had volleyball tournaments, softball teams. We did just a lot of fun things.

(JE): Is that one of the greatest things you brought to the table was your people skills?

(RB): Yes, I would say so. I mean, I'm not that bright, so... (Chuckling)

(JE): Well, I was going to say... (Chuckling)

(RB): I had good people working for me and I let them really run with different projects and most of them paid off. We had very few real failures. We had some that just limped along and didn't do much, but very few real failures. Preview guide that I was talking about, I think we had \$12 million into that before it turned around. That's a big deal for us.

(JE): There must have been some nights you couldn't sleep.

(RB): (Chuckling) There were.

(JE): You had lots of money on the line, and maybe you're the only one out there, and there had to be sleepless nights.

(RB): Yeah. I worked out a lot when I had those.

(JE): Worked out?

(RB): Yeah.

(JE): Lifting weights, and running, and all that?

(RB): All of that.

(JE): That helped clear your mind?

(RB): Yeah, yeah. I think that's really important. I ride a bicycle now. I think I've seen you on the path once.

(JE): Yes, I've been biking. Right.

(RB): It's usually: I see somebody and...

(JE): It goes so fast.

(RB): ... we're like 30 feet away by the time I go, "Oh, that was John!"

(JE): Right, right, I've been there, too. And it's nice to be able to bike. I just got a new bike the other day, by the way, that I'm really happy about. Well, I want to thank you, Roy, for doing this.

(RB): It was a pleasure.

(JE): Fascinating.

(RB): Please, and it was easy, and I wasn't quite sure what I was gonna be up against, but talking about my background, that's always easy.

(JE): Absolutely. And to have the history of this, and that you were a pioneer is really what you were, with some others, has to make you feel good; and it makes us feel good to know you. So, thank you very much.

(RB): You're welcome. I appreciate it.

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