

## Chapter 1 – Introduction

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**Announcer:** Vietnam-era U.S. Marine Corps veteran Rusty Fleming was born and raised in Oklahoma City. Following high school graduation, he attended Cameron Junior College on a basketball scholarship but returned shortly to Oklahoma City and started a career with the Bell System in 1964.

The draft came calling in January of 1966, and he joined the Marines for two years, deployed to Vietnam in March 1967, and served in an artillery unit. He returned in March 1968, during the Tet Offensive.

Rusty resumed his career with the Bell System, which resulted in a transfer to Tulsa and the introduction to Grand Lake, which proved to be a life-changing experience. He left Bell System in 1981, moved to the lake, and actively supported Grand Lake initiatives.

In 1988, he established the Grand River Chronicle newspaper. He backed mandated lake level targets, highlighted FERC's lake management role, advocated Shoreline Management and water quality projects, and participated in multiple lake groups.

In his oral history, Rusty talks about his Vietnam service, his newspaper, his radio show, and Oklahoma State University on the podcast and website Voices of Oklahoma.

## Chapter 2 – 7:15 Big Daddy Don

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**John Erling (JE):** My name is John Erling and today's date is November 19, 2025. So Rusty, would you state your full name, please?

**John H. "Rusty" Fleming (RF):** Full name is John H. Fleming, F-L-E-M-I-N-G. Nickname is Rusty.

**JE:** OK, I've been dying to ask you the question: Why Rusty?

**RF:** That is, that's a good question, John. When I was in the 1st grade, we had—John was a very popular name, and we had like 7 of them in my class. And so my teacher approached my mother, since I had the red hair, if they could simplify it a little bit and nickname me Rusty, and it stuck.

**JE:** How about that? And where are we recording this interview?

**RF:** This is known as Grand Lake, Oklahoma, and we're at the Grand River Dam Authority building in Langley, Oklahoma.

**JE:** And we're looking out here at a beautiful view of the dam which has created this marvelous lake, and I would say this is one of the prettiest views I've had as I've done all these interviews.

**RF:** And it's nice that we're not enduring white caps today. It's really pretty calm out there.

**JE:** It is, and both of us have a love for this lake. Your birth date and your present age?

**RF:** Birth date is March 21st, 1944. I'm 81 years old.

**JE:** Where were you born?

**RF:** Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

**JE:** Let's talk about your parents: your mother's name, maiden name, where she was born, and that type of thing.

**RF:** She was born in Chattanooga, Oklahoma. And her name, last name was Coe, C-O-E.

**JE:** And about her personality—tell us what she was like.

**RF:** Well, that's an interesting question as well. Probably as smooth a person as you would ever meet, laid back. Nothing seemed to rile her. She had a perfect handle on life in general, how the things were to work out. And being in a [Great] Depression—I'm sure had something to do with that.

**JE:** What would you draw from her? What would she—as a parent, was she strict or...

**RF:** “Don't sweat the small stuff. She had 7 brothers.” They taught her a lot and she found out that maybe she was not at the top of the totem pole, so to speak. Learned a lot from that, I'm sure.

**JE:** And your father's name?

**RF:** James Harold Fleming. He went by Harold.

**JE:** So where was he from? Where was he born?

**RF:** Well, he was born in another very large town: Faxon, Oklahoma, which is just south of Lawton by about 7 or 8 miles, and I'm sure does not have a building standing to this day.

**JE:** And his personality, what was he like?

**RF:** He was a little more demanding. As a matter of fact, I've often said that one of my mother's jobs was to be my attorney representing me to my father. But no, he was demanding—a good man, a loving man. Very fortunate to have him, and I should touch on that a little bit since I'm an adopted child. I was born at Deaconess Hospital in Oklahoma City, which at that time was primarily for unwed mothers, and my birth mother, which we have come to know... I was 17 years old and my parents adopted 3 kids out of Deaconess Hospital about 5 years apart and loved them like they were their own.

**JE:** And they never had natural children.

**RF:** They had lost 3 -- stillborn, and my parents described one of the losses as being like Kennedy's baby that they lost while they were in the White House, and a lung disorder and that kind of stuff.

**JE:** What did your father do for a living?

**RF:** He owned his own grocery store at 12th and Portland in Oklahoma City, and it had the typical neighborhood grocery—groceries on credit if you needed it, about everything you could eat. He butchered the meat himself, minded the store, so to speak. But when the change started coming in like Humpty Dumpty and Safeway and those kind of folks, well, he saw the handwriting on the wall. He closed it down, remodeled the building, and rented it out after that, but he was always a cattleman as well. Had 100 acres out south of Oklahoma City, and he always had 20 or so head of

cattle that he tended to, and as you might expect, Faxon, Oklahoma was rather a rural community, so tending to cattle and making a living to some degree from that source was not uncommon.

**JE:** Were you expected to do some work in the grocery store or in the cattle?

**RF:** Not really, because when he shut the grocery store down, I was like in the 6th grade. So there was—I spent some time over there, no doubt, but I don't remember being assigned any chores other than eating the candy and maybe a little later on stealing the cigarettes.

**JE:** Then did you—your first education, grade school, where was that?

**RF:** James A. Buchanan Grade School in Oklahoma City.

**JE:** Then on to junior high and high school?

**RF:** That was Taft Junior High.

**JE:** And the high school was...?

**RF:** Northwest Classen.

**JE:** All right. What year did you graduate from high school?

**RF:** 1962.

**JE:** Did you play in any sports?

**RF:** I was a basketballer. My senior year, we made it to the state tournament, which was the first time that had happened for Northwest Classen, and that being a relatively new school, that was a memorable experience. We didn't win, but we certainly had a memory to take home with us.

**JE:** You're tall now, so you were tall back then, I suppose. So you were their center.

**RF:** Well, actually, our team was—for a high school team—was pretty unusual. We had two guys that were 6'5", me and one other, and he played the center position. I played a forward position because I could shoot a little bit. Then we had three guards: one of them was 6'1" and the other two were probably around 5'10", but for that day and time, that was a pretty sizable lineup.

**JE:** Yes, how much fun you must have had, huh?

**RF:** Great time. Great time. And I remember when you ask about basketball, I have to mention my high school basketball coach Don Van Poole, who is a member of the Oklahoma Coaching Hall of Fame now and, of course, deceased. We learned a lot of lessons from "Big Daddy Don," as we called him when he wasn't looking. (Laughing)

**JE:** (Laughing)

### **Chapter 3 – 13:20**

#### **Vietnam**

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**John Erling (JE):** I like to see where people begin things, and you did become a writer that we're going to talk about. Was writing of interest to you when you were in high school?

**Rusty Fleming (RF):** No, I didn't even want to get close to the student newspaper. I was more interested in shooting free throws.

**JE:** Got you. All right, so after high school you went where?

**RF:** I went to Cameron Junior College and played basketball there for one year, but John, my attention to academics was a little less than stellar, I have to admit. There was also a young marriage in there. That took me back to Oklahoma City. From there I ended up going to work for Southwestern Bell at about the age of 19.

**JE:** OK, but didn't you go to OSU and UCO? That's in here.

**RF:** Well, that's all in there. When I went to work for Southwestern Bell, they sponsored academics. From that time on, we went to UCO and then later the University of Tulsa for one semester. I guess that's where my academics were less, as I said, less than stellar, so that was about where we wound up. Now, most of the rest of my education came from Southwestern Bell and all the schools and different things that they sent me to and ran me through. I was a marketing guy and we would do the various things from selling equipment to selling long distance promotions

back when long distance was kind of a big thing. It was not like it is today where everything is pretty much included on your cell phone.

**JE:** But how did you get connected to Southwestern Bell? Were you in school and then applied?

**RF:** I had gone to school and then I worked for Oklahoma Tire and Supply while that was going on after I moved back to Oklahoma City. Kept looking for a better way, so to speak.

**JE:** It was also known as Otasco.

**RF:** Yeah, absolutely, but I just interviewed—my dad knew somebody as I recall, in Southwestern—

**JE:** At Southwestern Bell?

**RF:** Yeah. So I interviewed Southwestern Bell, went through some various testing and what have you, and then eventually was hired. And I wasn't 20 yet. From that point forward, I was working for Southwestern Bell. They sent me all over the place, spent 3 months in New York.

**JE:** For training?

**RF:** For training; and that was back when data transmission and that kind of stuff was coming on the scene. The things that you learned were everything from data equipment and applications to transmission to the actual marketing of the product, and that was a 3-month duration. Of all places, that training was conducted at Cooperstown, New York. At Cooperstown, there is a luxury hotel, a very nice lake, which we never saw because it was frozen over. I attended in January, February, and March. It was used as a resort hotel about 3 months out of the year and the rest of the time it was snowed in and AT&T made a heck of a deal on it, I guess, and that's where they conducted the training. About 100 guys went through it at a time.

**JE:** Cooperstown, isn't that the home of a museum...

**RF:** Hall of Fame.

**JE:** Baseball Hall of Fame?.

**RF:** Hall of Fame, right, and Reedy's Bar. I remember that. (Laughing)

**JE:** But you probably went to the museum too, I hope?

**RF:** Several times, right.

**JE:** Well, you say academics didn't come to you, but you're able to master the material that Southwestern Bell offered you...

**RF:** ...and motivation is...

**JE:** ...when you have money on the line...

**RF:** ...yeah, is the key. Yeah, we went through that pretty good. After I worked for Southwestern Bell for a couple of years, I was getting close to being drafted.

**JE:** Well, how long were you with Southwestern Bell?

**RF:** 12 years. And at that time I was in a long distance promotion sales group, and some of my customers or clients, if you want to call them that, was the recruiting station across the street from 707 North Robinson where we were officed.

And the recruiting offices included the Marines and the Navy and the Army and probably the Coast Guard and anybody else that wanted to jump in there, but that recruiting office incidentally was in the American General Building, which about got blown away in the giant explosion in downtown Oklahoma City. Of course, that was years later and what have you, but anyway, my recruiting buddies across the street, they used a lot of long distance and they were a pretty big customer of mine.

They kind of got into a contest as to who might entice me to enlist in their branch of the service. And the Marines were—I was attracted to the Marines because they had a two-year enlistment program. I wasn't going for more than 2 years. That was my plan. They, of course, the Army just drafted whoever they needed, which was a 2-year deal. But I had some mental block about being drafted.

And I told several people, I said, "I saw too many John Wayne movies." And for that reason, and the fact that the Marines had a 90-day delay that you could put off until you went in, and I was naive enough to say, "Maybe they'll end this thing in 90 days."

**JE:** All right, this thing you say is called the Vietnam War, and it was known as a conflict, I believe, but finally became known as the Vietnam War. Couldn't you have joined the Army Reserve or the National Guard?

**RF:** John, there were so many people flocking to join the National Guard or that kind of thing that you had to know somebody and you had to have some money.

**JE:** Really?

**RF:** Oh yeah. Getting into the National Guard was a big deal back then.

**JE:** Everybody was trying to dodge, trying...

**RF:** ...to dodge the draft. And my point of time was from '66 to '68 -- was my period of time.

**JE:** And we should say that according to the Library of Congress, the Vietnam War was from '61 to '75. I can just relate to you because I'm about of your same age, and the draft was after me and I went into the Army Reserve. And that's how I tell people I dodged the draft, and they don't like to hear me say that, but we did. I did. There's no question about it, but you did the honorable thing. However, maybe if you could have gotten in the National Guard, you would have gone that.

**RF:** I would have probably, but my mother, which we've already previously described and in her attorney function, called me in one day and she said, "We think you need to go back to school and you will be able to avoid this draft thing and we'd hate to see you run into a terrible situation over there."

**JE:** Right, because you could get a student deferment.

**RF:** Right. And I said, "No." I said, "I'm not going in somebody else's place." And elected the option. Now, when we got to San Diego going into boot camp, and I'm standing in those yellow footprints and they're this far from my face yelling at an extremely high decibel level, I'm thinking, "Where's my mother now?"

**JE:** "I wish I was in the classroom," right?

**RF:** But we made it through boot camp. Eventually we were stationed at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina for a period of time. Wasn't too long though

till I was on the USS Gordon with 5,000 of my closest friends headed to Vietnam.

**JE:** Tell us about that a little bit. What do you remember when...

**RF:** For somebody that was not particularly gifted at academics, I tested out pretty good. And so my MOS, military occupational status, was 0844, and that's artillery. It's beyond—but it's artillery beyond the guns. And when I say that, I was trained as a chart operator to shoot azimuths and figure millage on a 6400 millage circle. And that's how we would aim those guns.

**JE:** And they had to be precise.

**RF:** That's what they had me doing. So I was either in the fire direction control center as a chart operator or we had 3 observation posts that looked down on Happy Valley, which is where the Da Nang Air Base was. We would observe any rockets or other weaponage coming in and out of Happy Valley to hit the air base and we'd shoot azimuths till we triangulated and wanted to shoot a mission to retaliate. Which rarely happened because they couldn't get clearance for the friendlies in the area that we might shoot, but they're shooting rockets at us.

**JE:** And you're talking military talk here, so you couldn't get permission to shoot.

**RF:** Right.

**JE:** Why?

**RF:** Because of the civilians in the area. Usually it took so long to get the mission cleared that by the time that we're cleared, they were gone. But not to get lost here—so the next day, this is how the military works—so the next day they load us on a Chinook helicopter, fly us out to where they shot from and tell us, "OK, we're gonna dump you out here, survey this site in so that if they ever shoot from here again, we'll know where they're coming from." Now that created a lot of speculation, a lot of discussion, and a lot of cussing.

**JE:** But then did that actually work? They didn't shoot from there again, did they?

**RF:** They never shoot from the same place twice. Common sense would tell you.

Most memorable experience is that when I was up on those observation posts, at least 6 months, and of course we're in constant contact with the fire direction control center and one night there's rockets coming from several different directions and nobody can get a triangulation on where they're shooting from.

So our commanding officer calls me up and he says, "Can you see the rocket flares?"

I said, "I can." He said, "Can you call a mission?" which I wasn't trained to do.

**JE:** What does that mean, "call a mission"?

**RF:** Well, I think I know where they're coming from, so I'm gonna fire one round out there and then I'm gonna do "will adjust." So I'm gonna add 500 or I'm gonna take 500 off and go to left 300 and that's how I'm gonna adjust where those artillery shells are gonna land.

Let's just say it was less than a stellar performance. I can see the target, we fire it in, it's "will adjust" and there's formulas that you use to adjust distance and it's like if you're gonna add 500, you do this and if you're gonna do that, you convert it to millage and it helps you get it where it's supposed to go. Well, I go, "OK, add 500. And we will adjust."

I screwed up, John. So I come back and I say, "-1000." And the fire direction control center was—they were pretty amused. So it wasn't a court martial offense. And they were pretty amused in the intelligence or the S2 officer, which is the one that I reported to, he comes on and he says, "Well, Fleming, if they're out there, you got them." So that was an amusing effect, but I was also there for the Tet Offensive.

**JE:** What kind of weapon is it that you're firing?

**RF:** There's 3 or 4 different kinds of artillery units or pieces, but a 155 millimeter is pretty standard. And there's a 105 that is also used in smaller situations.

**JE:** Well, I'm quite certain though, you cited one that became a problem that you were probably zeroed in and killed the enemy, didn't you? You had some success.

**RF:** I think we at least made them nervous.

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## **Chapter 4 – 11:50**

### **Drugs in Vietnam**

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**John Erling (JE):** Let me bring you back to when you first landed in Vietnam and your immediate surroundings and what struck you first: the heat, humidity, landscape, sounds, or smells. Do you remember any of that stuff?

**Rusty Fleming (RF):** Well, John, I think the part that amazed me the most and that I noticed immediately was that we had no weapons. And the USS Gordon was a large troop carrier and it's parked out there and it's just like when you see the movie Saving Private Ryan when they're coming in on those landing crafts. That's how they took us ashore and we went in, we loaded the landing crafts, and we hit the beach just like in every movie you've ever seen except for one thing: no weapons. And when we hit the beach, I just look around and it's like, there's tents and all kinds of stuff everywhere because the shore is pretty secured. And it's like, "Really?" And then they load us on these trucks and take us to our units. In my case, it was only about 5 miles away to headquarters battery 11th Marines, but some of those guys were gonna be in those trucks for an extended period of time taken to distant locations to be replacements, and then there's the guys coming that's getting ready to go home. Excuse me, but they're laughing their ass off.

**JE:** Sure. Did you sense a danger? I mean, if you're coming on there with no weapons, do you think you're going to be shot at?

**RF:** A common feeling, I think, among any branch of the service during that time was, "It would be a real shame to get shot on my first day here." And even a bigger shame to get shot on my last day here. And so we all had our

short-timer calendars on the wall and marked the days off one at a time, and in my case, I was fortunate to get out of there.

**JE:** What did you do with your time? Days could be long. What did you do with your time? Did you write letters? Were you able to get mail?

**RF:** Yeah, yeah. The mail was pretty constant. There was plenty of shenanigans going on that were pulled by the troops. Things like marijuana were pretty common.

**JE:** Where would they get that?

**RF:** Oh, the natives. That is, I mean, if you had \$5 it was available. And as a matter of fact, they sold it—they would reuse Marlboro crush-proof boxes: 20 joints, 5 bucks. And no, don't ask, OK?

But I think probably my 2nd year, Newsweek did a huge article about drugs in Vietnam. And it was pretty accurate. And most people on the home front would ask me either via letter or something like that, "Is any of that possibly true?" And I think Newsweek was estimating that like 80% of the troops had at least tried marijuana. And my answer to them was, "I think they're a little light."

**JE:** May have tried, but then there were those who were probably trying to be on it continually. What about your commanding officers and so forth? Did they talk about that or punish people for marijuana?

**RF:** There was all kinds of warnings about where not to go. It was quite a string of tents and various little marketing-type setups that are down there near the beach. And like in my case, we were only 5 miles from Da Nang. So you could catch a ride on a truck and take off and go to the town—what there is of it—and buy various different things. And then there are also the PXs located there. So there's always a good time to go in there and get supplies and anything else you could find that tweaked your interest.

**JE:** Did you come under fire at all at any time?

**RF:** A couple of different times. The Tet Offensive that started just not too many days before my rotation date to come home, that was pretty hairy for a while. As a matter of fact, I came off one of the observation posts because they brought me down because I'm a short-timer. And then the

first night I'm back in the headquarters battery, they get mortared from all over the place. I say to my commanding officer, "Can I go back up to the observation post?" which I did for another few days.

**JE:** Let's talk about the Tet Offensive because this is all history and for those who are listening may not know, which was a major series of surprise attacks that North Vietnam and the Viet Cong -- forces during the Vietnam War. And it began on January 30th/31st, 1968 during Tet, which was the Vietnamese Lunar New Year when a ceasefire had been expected and more than 100 cities, towns, and military bases across South Vietnam were attacked. But didn't it kind of backfire? Because while North Vietnam seemed to be victorious, this became a turning point in the war and a psychological thing that people in the homeland began to realize, "we ain't getting anywhere." You talk about that.

**RF:** I'll give you one example, and in my personal feelings about the war when it's going on. And that is when the Tet Offensive started, of course, I'm somewhat apprehensive about the fact that I'm very short and getting ready to go home and this thing is going on. The OP Condor that I was on was attacked one night and we had all this concertina wire out in front. One of the reasons you talk about it being a turning point is they took a tremendous amount of casualties. In that particular night, we had one that was carrying satchel charges around his body trying to get through the concertina wire to blow up our bunkered location. He didn't make it. We shot him. Somebody shot him. I mean there were several rifles being used at the time. But when I looked at that guy in that concertina wire, with satchel charges strapped around his body, I'm thinking, "They're on something that we don't understand."

**JE:** This was the Viet Cong?

**RF:** Yes, yes. If they're that committed, I doubt we're ever going to win this deal over.

**JE:** Were you aware, or maybe this was just when America was beginning to realize that this is not going to work? Were you aware of the discussion back home about—or was it just the beginning of it, so you didn't know?

**RF:** It was the beginning of it. There were some protests and various different things. John, when I flew home, left the Da Nang Air Base, I'm on a Continental flight. I'm like, "Is this not weird that we're leaving a combat

zone and it's on a Continental flight and we've got round-eye stewardesses on this plane?" So it was pretty strange. The whole thing was, and I don't think there's any doubt that the American people were misled. And I mean, that's been documented over and over again. And when you say the Tet Offensive was a turning point—body counts were so exaggerated that it was hard to tell. I mean, you know that casualties are being taken by the Viet Cong and that kind of stuff, but when you see—I mean, we weren't that far from Khe Sanh up on the actual demilitarized zone between the two Vietnams. Those guys were under siege for like 60 days. You look at it and go, "We're the mightiest country in the world. We can't get those guys out of there." Many casualties were taken.

**JE:** Did you ever get hit by anything, shrapnel or anything?

**RF:** I got a little piece of shrapnel right into my butt from a grenade that was thrown by one of my buddies. But so, no, I didn't qualify for a Purple Heart and I'm glad of it. (Laughing)

**JE:** (Laughing) You're on the flight home. Did they make the big announcement on the plane: "Ladies and gentlemen...?"

**RF:** Oh, it was one of my most memorable times was getting on that airplane and we're sitting there and as we're taxiing down the runway, I'm thinking to myself, "They rocket this thing all the time. I hope they're not sending anything in here today." He turns that thing around—I think it's probably a 727—turns it around, heads it into the wind. When we lifted off, the pilot came on. He says, "Gentlemen, you have just left the Republic of South Vietnam." And the place just went crazy. I think we flew to Guam, and then from Guam to Hawaii, and then from Hawaii to the States. I remember—probably the only thing I remember is when we came up off the ground and then re-landing at Will Rogers Airport in Oklahoma City. Right before we're coming in—I guess it was quite a bit before that, maybe a couple hours out—the stewardess just went around and offered all of us razors that we could go into the laboratory and shave if we'd like to do that. It was good. My family was waiting on me at Will Rogers International Airport. For me, I never witnessed any of this spitting or disrespect of the troops. One of my friends that didn't go, but we've talked about it some, and he says, "Of all my friends that I knew that went to Vietnam and came back, you're the only normal one." Which is a joke, of course, but by the same token, there's a lot of what-ifs and could-have-beens.

**JE:** You say you weren't treated poorly, but many soldiers were treated poorly. They were over there fighting for their own country, and when they come home, they were spit on and yelled at, probably fights and all that kind of thing, and they had to get out of their uniform to get into civilian clothes so that they can hide the fact that they were fighting for their country in Vietnam. Isn't that amazing?

**RF:** It is amazing. It is amazing.

## **Chapter 5 – 11:10**

### **Grand Lake**

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**John Erling (JE):** So then you celebrate a little. When you come home, what do you do? You go back to Southwestern Bell.

**Rusty Fleming (RF):** Well, actually, I still had 3 months to go to get out of the service. They sent me back to Camp Lejeune in North Carolina for 3 months, then I came home and went back to Southwestern Bell. As a matter of fact, a funny story on the day I got out: you have to have your commanding officer sign your discharge papers, and they have to do it—it's mandatory by noon of the day you're supposed to be discharged. So you show up at 0800 hours and you sit there till noon. Then your commanding officer calls you in and he says, "Well, Fleming, what do you think you're gonna do when you get out of the Marine Corps?" I said, "Well, I'm gonna go back to work for Southwestern Bell Telephone Company in the great state of Oklahoma." And he just looked shocked and he said, "You worked for the phone company before coming in the Marine Corps and they had you in artillery and not in communications?" I said, "I rest my case." Yeah. (Laughing) But so that was my military experience.

**JE:** No doubt. And you went back to work for...?

**RF:** Bell. And I was transferred to Tulsa shortly after that, came to Tulsa, and that's when I started hearing the Mighty John Erling on the morning show.

**JE:** Right. Does the name Bob Bresnahan ring a bell?

**RF:** Absolutely. I spent some time in Bob Bresnahan's office.

**JE:** Did you work for him?

**RF:** He was in the commercial operation, which is the business office, and I was in sales/marketing. But Bob was the guy in Tulsa.

**JE:** No doubt. There's no question about it.

**RF:** When competition first started rearing its head for Southwestern Bell and AT&T, if you lost a case like Getty Oil—Getty Oil was a big PBX customer. And we lost it. And Bresnahan called me into his office because the guy that handled the account worked for me. We had quite the... Bob and I hit it off really good because I'm, as you might expect, a little direct at times. And Bresnahan respected that.

**JE:** But I remember we used to interview him on the radio and he was very charismatic, but for Southwestern Bell, they had a major player that the whole town knew about. They knew him. I remember he even drove that Mercedes-Benz automobile that he drove around in. So I remember that for sure. Then how long did you stay there?

**RF:** Lynda and I married in '79.

**JE:** Lynda—who is Lynda? What's her maiden name?

**RF:** Her name is Carinder. Last name is Carinder. Lynda, L-Y-N-D-A.

**JE:** Where did you meet?

**RF:** The Trade Wind Central bar. (Laughing) And Tom Dyer introduced us.

**JE:** And Tom Dyer was...?

**RF:** Tom Dyer was the division sales manager in Tulsa. He and Bresnahan were good buddies. As a matter of fact, Tom and I and Lynda bought a cruiser on Grand Lake, paid \$4,500 for it, John.

**JE:** A cruiser?

**RF:** A cruiser. It was a woody, a Chris-Craft, and we named it the Trilogy: Rusty, Lynda, and Tom. And Bresnahan, as a matter of fact, spent a day on that cruiser.

**JE:** But wasn't your introduction to Grand Lake that you worked for Carl Carmen?

**RF:** Correct. And when I first came to Tulsa—when the transfer occurred, it was effective like April 1st, 1970—Carl was the account manager on City Service, and I was assigned to him as a data sales type to handle things for City Service. Carl had a cabin on Grand Lake. It was right across from the Bonita water intake right there by Grand Lake Towne. Carl had always had a stag weekend each year in the spring.

**JE:** Meaning “only guys,”

**RF:** Yeah, only guys. So anyway, that was where I first was exposed to Grand Lake. It was a very memorable experience, but not one that was gonna change my life at that very moment.

**JE:** So that first weekend then, was this something that you felt hooked on?

**RF:** We skied, he charcoaled steaks. It was a great weekend, no doubt, and I just remember waking up and thinking “these birds on Grand Lake must have much larger lungs than the ones in Tulsa.” (Chuckling) But yeah, we had a great time and went back to work.

**JE:** And but it wasn't significant enough to think...

**RF:** Not at the time. We could somehow bring up a divorce I had, and that was not all a bad thing because she was the mother of my son. But she married within 6 months after we had divorced. And I do know this, that was 1976. And I can tell you this, the minute that alimony payment went away, I went to H&R Marine and bought a boat in Claremore, Oklahoma. (Laughing)

**JE:** (Laughing) That Lynda then is part of this story now, isn't she?

**RF:** Oh yeah, absolutely. Yeah, yeah. So it's '76 and we're dating kind of off and on a little bit and she calls me up one day and she says, “Well, I can't accept your date proposal because my boyfriend has decided he doesn't like it.” So she booted me, John. And at that time, I was freshly divorced. “OK, we'll find us another one.” And down the road we went, in both cases, hers and mine. But a year and a half later, we reconnected and been together ever since.

**JE:** For 46 years you said?

**RF:** 46. Yeah, yeah. Best decision I ever made. A proposal that, apropos, occurred in the Cove Club.

**JE:** In the Cove Club, which is right here at Langley.

**RF:** You can throw a rock and hit it from here.

**JE:** Right. And then Lynda, of course, took to Grand Lake as much as you did, I would imagine.

**RF:** Well, it took a little coaxing, but yeah, she did.

**JE:** All right. So then was there a point you decided we want to buy a place at Grand Lake?

**RF:** Well, I had already bought a place before we got married. I bought the place in '76. And then she and I were married in '79.

**JE:** But you hadn't moved. You weren't considering living here permanently?

**RF:** Not at the time. When I bought the place in '76, I'm a weekender just like everybody else. I just became infatuated with Grand Lake, and I was less infatuated with the corporate life that I was leading. Oftentimes we talk about whether I wanted to operate a chicken farm or continue corporate lifestyle. There were just stages and steps and mostly baby steps, but in July of '82, I walked away from Southwestern Bell. At that time, it was actually AT&T. I walked away from it. Lynda and I were married. She was a very well-compensated drug representative, which allowed us to do some of the things that we did. So on New Year's Day 1981, we became full-time residents.

**JE:** What were you going to do? Be a fishing guide here? What were you gonna do to make some money?

**RF:** Well, John, that's a good question. We would sit around for a year before that on our deck in Tulsa talking about how can we make a living on Grand Lake. So we came up with—we were gonna open an indoor-outdoor living center where we're gonna sell hot tubs, fireplaces, plants, outdoor furniture, all that kind of stuff. So that's what we did. We just went and there was a little rock building in downtown Langley that we bought to open this little dream job. I remember when my dad looked at it, he said, "Have you put any money down on this place?" And I said, "Well, yeah,

10,000." He says, "I'll tell you what, I'll pay you 10,000 not to buy it." Yeah, he was probably right about that. As it turned out, eventually we sold that building and you probably remember the old Quonset hut building that had the chicken coop in it. That was our nursery. That was our business location.

**JE:** Oh, that's the building you're talking about, the Quonset hut.

**RF:** Yeah. Well, the first building was in downtown Langley and then we moved it out on the highway -- "location, location, location" -- and we built that building.

**JE:** You built the Quonset hut?

**RF:** Yeah.

**JE:** Wow. That was a landmark for many years.

**RF:** One of the guys that was working for me at the time, he and I put every screw in that building. We ordered that as a package out of Florida and put it together and put our little dream job in there.

**JE:** But you had to have money to get started. I mean, you bought...

**RF:** Yeah, we had a big savings plan. We had that and various other places to borrow money thinking that we were going to make everything work out. Well, it didn't work out.

**JE:** Why?

**RF:** We went broke.

**JE:** Okay, but people were—but you had plants. You sold shrubs and trees, and they weren't buying them.

**RF:** They bought them in the spring, and then we found out about the seasonality of Grand Lake at that time. But it was like we've kept pouring money into it and adding product and then something that's gonna get us out of this thing. OK, well, here's what happened.

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**Chapter 6 – 18:30**  
**Newspaper**

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**Rusty Fleming (RF):** There was an existing newspaper, and this is how our newspaper came to be. Existing newspaper's daughter comes in one day, and this is probably March. And she's buying a few things. And I told her, I said, "We need to buy 3 months' worth of advertising for the spring season." She says, "Well, you just have to come to our office because we don't come out and see people." And I said, "Really? I think there may be room for another newspaper here." And that's how the Chronicle was born.

**John Erling (JE):** Because she said, "You have to come to my office."

**RF:** And if you don't care enough to go out and try to draw up a few things or at least make a sale... I just thought with my marketing background, I thought to myself, "There's room for some salesmanship here."

**JE:** What was the name of that newspaper?

**RF:** The South Grand Laker, which exists today. Now. I mean, it was resurrected. Anyway, there for a period of time, we're like selling ads out of one end of that Quonset hut and we're selling plants out of the other end. (Laughing)

**JE:** Wait a minute, you went too fast on me there. You started your newspaper in that Quonset hut.?

**RF:** Yeah.

**JE:** All right, what made you think—this is what I've tried to talk to you about writing earlier—what made you think you could be a writer for a newspaper?

**RF:** John, I wrote—as two or three of my different bosses at Southwestern Bell used to like to say, "You can always tell when Fleming's frustrated because he starts writing letters." And the other thing was we wrote sales proposals. And part of that training came from that training way back in New York. It's just something that I enjoy doing.

**JE:** OK. You realized when you were writing sales proposals and so forth, you enjoyed writing those, right? Obviously.

**RF:** Yeah, I think so. It was something you had to do to achieve your goal, but still it was—I didn't consider it to be painstaking or torture. But when we finally started the newspaper, then it was like you don't have a choice. You've got to fill this white space up with something.

**JE:** Exactly. So what was the name of your newspaper?

**RF:** The Grand River Chronicle. And later on, we changed the name to the Chronicle of Grand Lake. And you ask: "Why would anyone change the name?"

**JE:** Yes.

**RF:** The guy that owned the Grove Sun, Pete Crow, was a little smarter than I was, and he recognized the fact that websites were coming into their own. So when we went to register our website, he already had it. I don't remember whether he ever asked any money or he just really did it for aggravation, but the fact of the matter is we just said, "Well, we need a website and we'll just change the name to the Chronicle of Grand Lake." It's still got the Chronicle—that's everybody calls it the Chronicle anyway—and so that's how that all went down.

**JE:** OK, let's get to the very beginning. You're gonna start a newspaper. And how do you start a newspaper?

**RF:** Well, you go see Tom Workman.

**JE:** And who's he?

**RF:** Tom Workman was the guy that financed your lake place.

**JE:** Oh, at the bank.

**RF:** At the bank, yeah. And go see Tom Workman and say, "Tom, I think I wanna start a newspaper." And he says, "Well, how much are you gonna need?" I said, "I think around \$5,000." Because we needed a certain printer and a Tandy 3000 computer that wouldn't do hardly anything. And Tom says, "I think we can do that." Order the two pieces of equipment, we get down to expecting it to come in, which means we're going to have to pay for it. And I go back down to see Tom. And Tom says, "Well, we've got a new president of the bank. And you're going to have to talk to him." Well, I'm starting to sweat by this time and go in, and the guy's name is Bob

Heathcock. Bob's long since deceased, but Bob says, "What do you know about the newspaper business?" I said, "Not much." "Well, I really need you to write up a proposal, what you want to do and how much you need," and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. So I'd work on that and I'll take it back in there to him and he says, "You know, we've had several people try newspapers around here and they all go broke. I just don't think this would be what you really ought to consider doing." I leave, and where the Security Center is now—the guy that owned the Security Center's name was Dave Wall.

**JE:** What's the Security Center?

**RF:** Like alarms and home security.

**JE:** OK, I don't know where that was.

**RF:** Yeah, but he was a good friend of mine. So I go down there and I'm telling him what's happened to me and he says, "Well, how much do you need?" I said, "\$5,000." He says, "You got it. Pay me back when you get a chance." So Dave Wall is the guy that really helped us out on the newspaper and so we get it started.

**JE:** Did you go to the Security Center because you knew he had money or he was just...

**RF:** Yeah, we always went down there and there was a wood stove in the back room and coffee and it's kind of a gathering spot and...

**JE:** You were just dumping your...

**RF:** ...yeah, I was just telling him my...frustrations.

**JE:** You didn't go there expecting to get money, right?

**RF:** No, no, no, not out of Dave Wall. No, never. But...

**JE:** So Dave Wall is the one who launched your career.

**RF:** Yeah And then there's another significant player in it as well, or two actually, and that's Art and Lolita Corley. Art was working at the bank as well as a loan officer. He was a retired colonel out of the Army. And he comes down to see me one day and he says, "You're undercapitalized, you're never gonna make it." I don't even think we've gotten the first issue out yet. So he proposed becoming a partner. And he put up a sizable

amount of money. I think it was another \$5,000 or something like that. And he stayed there for a year and decided that retirement was a whole lot better than that, but by that time we were able to pay him off and we were off and running. Things were starting to pop pretty good for us.

**JE:** You remember your first advertisers?

**RF:** I know the first full-page ad was Shirley Webb, Webcraft boats. And Roger King—that you drive by King, the old King's Marine building. Roger was one of our first advertisers. I remember that. And then Chezzy was one of our first advertisers. I remember going around because I went around and I talked to all my business buddies. I went around and told them, I said, "I think I'm gonna do a newspaper." And Jerry Hopper says, "Are you insane?" Chezzy says—Tim Carter—Chezzi says, "I'll buy a full-page ad every week," and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. So when it comes down to the fact, it's a little-itty-bitty ad and it's about like that, a little small. We had some people stepped up to support us. I'm trying to remember his name, but there at Place 85—or what used to be one time was Place 85—and the guy that owned it, his last name was Goins. And he bought a half-page ad all winter, which was a tremendous help for us, but we got it off the ground.

**JE:** Right. So then you decided you're going to give this newspaper away. You weren't going to charge for it.

**RF:** No charge for it. You know, we're "priceless," as we like to say. And we never did charge for it.

**JE:** So then you had to find distribution points.

**RF:** Absolutely. And the first couple of years, I delivered it myself, which was a good way to sell a few ads and interface with the public. You know what, John, it was—started out Langley, Disney, and it just kind of started developing a life of its own. And you ask about the writing, I can't tell you how far into the equation this was, maybe 2 years after we'd started. I don't know how I came up with the idea that I needed to write a column. So I decided I'd write a column.

**JE:** I'm a little surprised you didn't feel as the editor that you needed to have your own column.

**RF:** Well, it was a newspaper, not a column paper, and we had several people that were contributing things to go into it. Everything from recipes to town meetings to the various different things. And after that 2nd year, we had participated in the Tulsa Boat Show, come to be acquainted with several people that I like to think we were kind of connected at the hip: the Joe Harwoods, the Ugly Johns, the Webcrafts, the various people that have changed the outlook of this lake totally from where it was, the Terry Frosts. You know, it was a lot of that kind of stuff that went on in those first few years, and somebody suggested that I should write a column. So I did. And then when I wrote the first column, I said, "I'm gonna write about whatever's on my mind. Not what you necessarily want to hear, but what's on my mind." And then since the biggest body of water that I was raised on was a pond, my conclusion is to be, "I'll see you around the pond." And I started writing that column and it was like—I was more stunned than anybody that anybody cared. And a lot of them did, and you found out that they cared when you didn't write one.

**JE:** And I've got to say that many of us grabbed that paper because we wanted to know what Rusty was writing about. So you did hit on something really good and you were honest and forward and you were a good—you're a good writer.

**RF:** Well, thank you. I appreciate that.

**JE:** And you obviously—and you enjoy it. But no, that column picked the newspaper up.

**RF:** It became Rusty's newspaper, and that was the part that was a positive thing. And, John, we had things along the way that happened. I mean, if you're in business, you're going to have some disagreements with people and with clients and that kind of thing, which we did. But you know what, we were all kind of going in the same direction at that time.

**JE:** Right. But you took on issues too on the lake, I think, and probably went after people that you got pushed back on, and isn't that true?

**RF:** That's very true. You know, I had two or three different things that I was really passionate about. One of them was the lake level being as low as it was because when I bought my place in '76, that first winter—and I'd tell people this later on—that first winter where we are, the lake level went down like 737. Which means that even my dock only had like 3 feet, 2 feet

under the back edge of it. And there were marinas on the ground, there were people that couldn't get their boats off lifts, that kind of thing. That one, and then 1990 was a big year for this lake for all the wrong reasons, and that is the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission license came up for renewal. And when it did, there were a lot of demands associated with it. That's where the millet seeding program came from to benefit the ducks. It's kind of a "ducks over people" type deal...

**JE:** ...because you had to reduce the lake level so that the millet could grow.

**RF:** Millet had to be seeded into the mud flats and then the lake level would come back up and then the rice would grow or millet would grow and the way it was... I guess as sometimes it happens with government, it sounded like a good idea, but the way it was being administered, the millet had damn little chance of surviving because the heat was gonna get it by the time it got up and out of the water. So we fought that battle along with Joe Harwood, who is probably my biggest ally on that water level thing. I mean, it was just like a lot of other things in government: once it started, you can't get it stopped, and that was one of the big problems. But it finally happened and...

**JE:** ...but you—that was something we can't go into all of it. But didn't you go to Washington? I mean, and lobby there.

**RF:** Yes, we did.

**JE:** How about and then Senator Inhofe do some help with you on this?

**RF:** Several different times. You know, we went to Washington. Actually, the trip to Washington was not lake level; it was a shoreline management plan. You know, we had used various different legislators—Inhofe being a big one. And...

**JE:** ...because he had a place here.

**RF:** Right, and he was always very positive about Grand Lake. A single soldier cannot win a war and that's what he was several different times. As a matter of fact, one time his field rep came up here, called me and he wanted to have lunch over at Arrowhead, and he says, "We've got her done. We're gonna get that lake level fixed. It's gonna happen in this bill on this

date at this time." Well, it didn't, and there was a lot of disappointments along the way on that.

**JE:** You wrote about that a lot in the paper, so you kept the attention of everybody.

**RF:** A lot, yessir. Well, there's other things that kind of teed me off a little bit too. One of them was the Highway Patrol running their roadblocks up here all the time. If you look at a map of Ketchum, Disney, and Langley, you can shut this lake down with strategically placed roadblocks, and it was killing the restaurants and some of the people that—patrons didn't want to go through a roadblock.

**JE:** A roadblock was they were gonna stop you and see if you've been drinking.

**RF:** But anyway, we'd have the—and like I wrote on several occasions, if the guy's weaving down the road and showing signs of being under the influence, take him, but don't stop every person that's going through this thing. And Easley became a pretty big advocate in that deal.

**JE:** Easley—say his name and what...

**RF:** Kevin Easley

**JE:** He was a representative, a state representative, and...

**RF:** Kevin, when I first met him, was our state representative, but later on became the general manager of the GRDA, and he was very helpful in what we were trying to do.

**JE:** So don't you think—do you think that about the roadblocks led to doing away with the roadblocks?

**RF:** One of my pet peeves on it, John, was the fact that in Tulsa, they told you where the roadblocks were gonna be.

**JE:** Yeah, they did. (Chuckles)

**RF:** And they refused to do that up here. I think it probably had some bearing on it. I do know that I was a marked man for a while.

**JE:** A marked man?

**RF:** Oh yeah, I was stopped on occasions for a period of time there. I broadcast the Ketchum basketball games; we were headed over to Hampton one night and I was stopped. And I asked the guy, I said, "Well, why are you stopping me?" He said, "Well, you went through an intersection and you're not supposed to pass in that." Well, my left-front tire was over the yellow line, but not very much—just barely. The guy was—had a lowboy trailer and he was turning right onto a section line road and there I was. I just pulled out and went around him like that and Highway Patrolman pulled me over, told me that, and I said, "Really?" And he says, "Yeah." I said something and he says, "I know exactly who you are." I mean, he let me know. And when he left, he didn't write me a ticket—no, he did write me a ticket. I'm sorry. And that's how that all came about was I had been written—I had received a ticket and I had Easley fix it. Well, they didn't much care for that. So we—lots of fun.

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## **Chapter 7 – 14:11**

### **Radio Show**

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**John Erling (JE):** We're looking at this dam right now and this is all—really wasn't built so that we could have fun on the water. It was built to generate electricity.

**Rusty Fleming (RF):** Correct -- and flood control.

**JE:** And flood control. Exactly right. But we're glad, we're happy for the way it all worked out. So you sold your newspaper, but you founded GLUE, and tell us what GLUE was.

**RF:** Well, the Shoreline Management Plan was dictated, mandated by FERC, Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. And it was shortly after I'd sold the newspaper and Bob Sullivan was the assistant general manager and had previously been their legal counsel. And Bob calls me one day and he says, "This Shoreline Management Plan's getting weird." He said, "They're forming committees and rights are gonna be taken away and we think that you would be a good guy to lead the charge." I said, "Bob, the lakefront in front of my house looks just fine." And I did not—I turned him down. And maybe a year later, these committees are still meeting and

they're initiating zoning for Grand Lake where some properties you wouldn't be able to have a dock. And various different things related to heavy metals, various different things that are not dictated to be good for wildlife, and the geese and the wildlife seem to be taking precedent over humans and that kind of stuff. Well, about a year goes by and Doug Cox, who is my doctor at the time and state representative, he calls me up and we've been longtime friends. He said, "Rusty, I'm telling you this is getting, this is getting dangerous on what they might take away from us. And I want you to be involved in it."

**JE:** When you say "they" -- the shoreline management -- who was that?

**RF:** Well, the committees I speak of were made up of people that came forward to serve on those committees. Well, most of them that came forward were stakeholders that already had their own thing. They just didn't want this lake developed any further, is what I got out of it. And it made for some—not serious, I guess, but emotional clashes. The Mike Bradys of the world were leading the charge, and it was just going in the wrong direction. And what we wanted to see was some kind of middle-of-the-road approach. And so we wanted to form GLUE, or Grand Lakers United Enterprise. And I just put it out. Told them, "Here's what we're gonna do. I'm gonna attend all the meetings. I'll write reports. I'll send them out to you, and I won't ask you to have your butt in the seat unless we're to a point that we think that we really, really, really need you." And so we did that. I guess we were in existence for at least a couple of years and GRDA allowed us—and when I say "us," Mike Williams was really the author that helped us write some of the arrangements that would be within the Shoreline Management Plan. So from that standpoint, I think we achieved quite a bit, and I will never deny that I'm not a big proponent of GRDA. I sit on my porch or my deck, I can throw a rock in the water. You go to a Corps of Engineers lake and you can't even see the water and what's happened here is not in spite of GRDA, it's because of GRDA and I'll believe that going to the grave.

**JE:** Why don't you just say a little bit more about Mike Williams? People may not know who he was.

**RF:** Mike Williams is currently a big part of Shangri-La Resort. And he is their government relations guy and media guy. And Mike had quite a history in Oklahoma City as an editor and a radio personality and moved to Grand

Lake. And we put him to work first initially as working for us at the newspaper as the editor. And Mike's just a really talented writer, can type like 125 words a minute, which leaves me out. But Mike was very involved in that. He was very involved in the Harbor View Marina expansion project. He was also—went to work, worked for several of the marinas and at one time worked for Cherokee. He ran the Cherokee Marina one day a week and he worked for me, and we considered it a real privilege to have him.

**JE:** Very talented person. You talk radio. You did a radio show, didn't you?

**RF:** Yeah.

**JE:** Tell us about that.

**RF:** Well, why don't you tell us about... no, no, I'm kidding. We got into that basketball thing doing the play-by-play for the basketball. I got acquainted with the radio station manager in Vinita, which was K-Grand, which is a 50,000 watt, and I told him—and Jack Lee was his name, and his son is the mayor of Vinita today. And I told Jack, I said, "Jack, boy, it'd be great to have a radio show on Friday afternoon and that people coming to the lake could listen to it and they could find out what's going on that weekend," blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And Jack was like, "I don't know. That doesn't..." So we have 3 or 4 conversations about it and he finally says, "Well, do you think you could do it?" I said, "Hell, I don't know, we do play-by-play. We can probably do that." But we ran across some guy named John Erling and told John about this radio idea and he said, "Yeah, you'd probably do that, but you gotta understand how to manage a radio show." And so John taught us how to do that with a pie chart and how much time would be allocated to commercials and how much time needed to be allocated to guests and that "never, never, never depends on your call-ins because they're not dependable." So we set out to do that radio show and in the beginning it was just me. We did the first one at Mooney's Sunset Bar and Grill, and this has been so long ago that I can tell you guys that there was very few cell phones. We had one and it was about as big as a suitcase. There's a pay phone on the wall, so we do this show for 2 hours. Bob Sullivan comes in and he's one of our guests, and I think the Webbs were on as guests and what have you. And so the show is over and I mean, I am up here on cloud nine that we got through this radio show and everything's cool and man, aren't we something. The phone rings. The pay phone rings, and it's John

Erling, and he says, "That's the worst 2 hours of radio I've ever heard." And we had to admit he was probably right, but it made us feel pretty good.

**JE:** That was just my sense of humor.

**RF:** The show lasted for 8 years.

**JE:** But you sold advertising for them.

**RF:** Oh yeah, it was revenue and we were sold out. We had—as I recall, we had 12 advertisers. And we commanded that they each take 3 spots at 30 seconds each. So we had them and we've had people waiting to get on it, but we had some pretty cool guests. I mean, we had governors—George Nigh, Frank Keating, some of our federal guys. Doug Cox was on several times.

**JE:** That's right. The name of the show was Grand Exposure.

**RF:** Grand Exposure Radio, and about that time, Northern Exposure was on TV, a sitcom, and so that's kind of where we stole the name from.

**JE:** Why don't we just give credit to George Nigh here because George had a place here on Grand Lake, and he was a big spokesman, cheerleader for Grand Lake. And he loved it here.

**RF:** Yeah, he sure did.

**JE:** Yeah, and of course this was known at one time as Green Country, and that all came about when he was governor or lieutenant governor probably, and he was promoting tourism. This area became Green Country because of him. And he's no longer living. Died last year, I think it was, and he was 90-some years old. We have his interview on [VoicesofOklahoma.com](http://VoicesofOklahoma.com).

**RF:** I just remember we're at the Webcraft dock in Ghost Hollow, and Mike's with me by then. We're doing the show together, and George is our guest. And we're talking to him and I finally asked him, I said, "Well, Governor, why don't you run for Senate? These guys are just killing me." And he says, "Because politics isn't fun anymore." And that was the end of that conversation. But yeah, we had a lot of people on there that were fun to have, and we didn't have any agenda. But we got fired in the end.

**JE:** Because?

**RF:** Well, we had a propensity to move from bar to bar, and the guy that bought the radio station was not as amused as we were. So when that happened, I couldn't get the guy to call me back. So we started running a full-page ad in the Chronicle, and there was a milk carton and Mike and I's pictures were on it. "Where are these guys?" Yeah. So, we had fun along the way and Mike did the local news and he was good at it and he put the news report together each week that we were gonna broadcast. But by the end of that 8th year, I was probably ready for it to go away.

**JE:** And it shall be revealed that Mike Williams was the Lake Bum in the Chronicle.

**RF:** Well, the original Lake Bum is sitting here.

**JE:** Oh, really?

**RF:** When a friend of mine moved to Florida and he calls me up one day and he says, "Man, they got this thing called the beach bum down here and they've even got a magazine that comes out that's got a centerfold." And I said, "Well, I doubt if a centerfold's going to work on Grand Lake." He thought we ought to have a Lake Bum. They had the beach bum, we ought to have a Lake Bum. So we started out and we started publishing a little paper that we stole most of the stuff out of the beach bum publication, but it was various different jokes and nothing serious about it. So that went on for a while, and then there was a couple of other guys, but Mike's been the bum for several years, and he made it special.

**JE:** Yeah, yes, he did. But the Grand Times on Grand Lake was launched in November of 2016.

**RF:** And that's—you brought that back again. We did.

**JE:** And why and when?

**RF:** What—somebody shoot me now and put me out of my misery. (Laughing) We saw a need and so we relaunched the paper in 2016 and we thought we could bring it back to where it was before. But things have changed so much—so much social media and not only just the social media, but the perception of social media that they could replace various other forms of advertising. And since we were a free publication, and then we converted it to online. Tried that for a while. Finally, on Labor Day of 2020, I said, "You

know what? It's time for this old boy to retire." And that's when we shut it down, didn't even attempt to sell it, just said, "I'm done" and that's where we are today.

**JE:** But you're still writing today.

**RF:** Yeah, I've got a blog that I write and occasionally—I don't want any... deadlines are out of my future and that kind of thing—and we write one from time to time. We've still got our 1500 email list that we send out the blog to, and then the blog is posted on Facebook and we get a few things out of it and some satisfaction and tag up with a few old friends and that kind of thing. So yeah, it's fun.

**JE:** But it's informative and I get it when you write it too. So you're still doing what you like to do and still writing and being involved.

**RF:** I'm still on the chamber board.

**JE:** Well, you served as part-time executive director of the South Grand Lake Area Chamber of Commerce. You still are on the board.

**RF:** Well, I'm on the board, but I was the executive director for like 4 years when we brought the paper back. I just told the board I can't do this anymore, I don't have enough time. The last 5 years we've just been taking it easy.

## **Chapter 8 – 15:50**

### **Oklahoma State University**

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**John Erling (JE):** So can you think about from '76 or so when you came here to today. The enormous development of Grand Lake—kind of talk about this—are you pleased with it?

**Rusty Fleming (RF):** Oh, I think there's always things that you would change for the better. I think the biggest thing that happened to this lake was COVID. When the COVID thing hit, there was an abundance of people that just moved to this lake to get out of Tulsa.

**JE:** And for those who will be listening in 3044, COVID was a pandemic. And you just basically had to stay home, stay away from people because it was a contagious disease. And so people came here to get away from people.

**RF:** Exactly. And the realtors, it was the biggest boom they've ever seen and that kind of thing. But that pushed a lot of things. And Joe Harwood, he told me one time, he says, "When a piece of real estate sells, that's when this economy starts really ginning." He says, because they've got to have a boat, they gotta have a dock, they've got to have a yard guy, gotta have a plumber, gotta have—right on down the line, you can list all the things that are here. But as I look across the cove from my place, I see places that have been built to be VRBOs, but they've replaced places that weren't as attractive. Let's look at it that way. But a lot of things have changed. And one of the things is there's not as many big boats as there was once. I remember Easley used to say that Grand Lake had like 7,000 boats moored here on Grand Lake. Terry Frost, who brought the Cherokee Yacht Club back before Joe bought it, has said to me on more than one occasion that the big boats that sell on this lake are going somewhere else, like Austin in Texas, or Texoma or somewhere like that. But there's still plenty of them. Don't misunderstand what I'm saying, but the Coffee Queens and the Six Jays and some of those kind of boats, you don't see as many as you used to see.

**JE:** You see the development of Grand Lake. In a major way we're getting people coming in more from Kansas City maybe than did before?

**RF:** I think that's probably right, but it'll never trump Oklahoma City and Tulsa, I don't think, because of the fact that they've got such a defined choice between Lake of the Ozarks and Grand Lake. I mean, you got to turn and go one way or the other, and you're splitting a lot of it, but it's... what I see is I see a lake that, OK, it's developed more than maybe some would like. But the rest of it is, it's a much calmer lake than it was in 1976. The Friday I closed on my place, Saturday morning, the boats are coming in Dripping Springs and running drag—that's when drag boats are real popular—and they're running races out around the no-wake buoys and back in. It was rowdy. It was just plain more rowdy and dysfunctional than it is today, and GRDA has had a lot to do with that.

**JE:** Because they put patrol boats out.

**RF:** And don't forget Henry Bellmon. (Laughing)

**JE:** What about Henry Bellmon?

**RF:** Well, Henry shut down Dripping Springs. I'm thinking that was 1990. And there had been some complaints about the nudity and various different things at Dripping Springs and, as they say, "Milquetoast Henry" didn't like that much.

**JE:** And how could he shut it down?

**RF:** Well, they had about 20 patrol boats searching boats and they're doing it by force and did a damn fine job of it. And of course, where I'm sitting on my perch overlooking Gray's Hollow, I saw the whole thing unfold before my very eyes. So just one of those things that you look back at and say, well, probably should have done that a little differently, but it was done.

**JE:** South Grand Lake is such a big player on this lake. Yeah, we have Shangri-La, which would be up north and Grove in that area. All the—should I say the power of the lake rests right here in South Grand Lake and the chamber. And they're the ones through you and so forth who directed legislation and rules and regs that made this a better place.

**RF:** Well, I don't think any of that is deniable, but by the same token, John, the development on this lake is just as impressive in the Grove area as it is here, and there's more involvement by their chamber. It has been very active. I know that Mike Williams is very much involved in it, various different people, but yeah, when you look at the big hitters down here, I mean, you look at what Joe Harwood's done with that fireworks show. And you look at what the things that Terry Frost initiated when he was in the ownership role at Hammerhead and in Cherokee and the Christmas boat parade, the welcome back weekend—those are all things that bring people to our lake, and I've got to say they're much better behaved than they were 25 years ago.

**JE:** Other than Grand Lake, you have some other interests, and I think you're an OSU Cowboy fan, aren't you? Just a little bit?

**RF:** Loyal and true no matter what. (Laughing)

**JE:** (Laughing) Didn't you entertain coaches and bring them here?

**RF:** Yeah, and John, that was one of my really good memories, I think, is that Andy Johnson was the first one to bring those coaches up, but somehow he shook that off to me. And so we did it for 20 years.

And we brought up the coaches, their families, their kids, put them up at Pine Lodge, various different places, and then we had a dinner on the first night, which was usually a Monday night. And then we took them out and played them on the lake all day the next day and then that night had a fish fry at Jeff Smith's house, then sent them on their way to go back and get prepared for another football season.

**JE:** But Coach Gundy—

**RF:** Oh yeah, Gundy was there. As a matter of fact, when we first started, Bob Simmons was the coach. But anyway, a comical thing that I would like to include, and that is that many of our listeners or people that will ever listen to this will know the Siegfried clan and Robin Siegfried. We became pretty good friends, but Robin was always a little bit jealous about all that attention those OSU coaches were getting.

And so one day he walks into my office and he says, "I demand equal time." And he's got his son with him, Reagan.

I said, "What do you mean equal time?"

And he says, "Well, the OU Board of Regents is coming up here. We're gonna have our board meeting at my house," which is over there on Hinds Point, which is the Bendel place now. And he said, "I want you to come and interview President Boren."

And I said, "Yeah, I can do that. And what time do you want to be there?" And he tells me. So we show up and he's ready to belittle me. They're going out to dinner, so most of them have already gone down to the boat. So in the living room is Robin and President Boren and myself. And when I walk in, Robin says to President Boren, he says, "President Boren, this is that Aggie newspaper man I've been telling you about."

And I laughed and President Boren turns to Robin, he says, "Robin, you know that my mother was a homecoming queen at Oklahoma State."

**JE:** (Laughing)

**RF:** Yeah. And his chin dropped off the floor a little bit, and he says, "And that my father's name, Lyle's name, is on the veterinary school at OSU." And Robin was like taken back once again. And so we continued to talk and, of course, I wrote a column the next week, "Orange is Gold." Yeah. But yeah, we were good friends with Robin and that OSU thing was—we had a lot of good memories and then there was like 20 to 25 guys. They stepped up to the plate and wrote a check for \$500 so that we could do this deal.

**JE:** I was wondering—each one of them wrote \$500 so you could do that.

**RF:** And there's also a breakfast. The morning before we took them out on the lake at Pine Lodge, Art and June Box did that. And at that breakfast, Gundy would entertain questions. He said, "You can ask anything you want to." And that was a very popular segment because most people don't have that kind of access to them, and the other thing is that you get to know those guys on a little bit more personal level and when people start complaining about their play calls and various different things, well then you kind of have a tendency to side with the coaches and that kind of thing.

**JE:** Yeah, it's a good event.

**RF:** And sports has been a big part of my life, John. And before we get out of here, I wanna make sure that I tell you that my most important achievement at Grand Lake was being the guy on the microphone the night the Ketchum Warriors won the state championship in 1995. My son and I called that game. And it was a fun ride for about 4 years, and I know you interviewed Larry Callison several times.

**JE:** We came to the Warriors basketball games.

**RF:** I'm telling you what a great ride that was.

**JE:** It was a fun time.

**RF:** Yeah, it was.

**JE:** I'm glad you brought that up.

**RF:** And the funny thing, you look at it now, we spread ourselves out and we look back at something of that magnitude, and then you walk in to look at

boats at Arrowhead and there's Brandone Sharp, who played on that team, selling you a boat.

**JE:** Yeah, that was a lot of fun.

**RF:** We've had a lot of fun, and I'm talking this personally—my family and I, we have had a lot of fun on this lake. There's been a lot of—I don't know anywhere else I would rather be than right here, and I see them when they leave, they go to Florida and I say, "See you." Lynda and I both done quite a bit of corporate traveling in our day. We like home sweet home. And I like waking up and going in there and grabbing my coffee and looking out at what's happening, you know.

**JE:** Well, I can insert myself here because this has been a wonderful place while we don't live here. We have a place here and it became a big family reunion place. We'd all get together on the major holidays and probably members of the family wouldn't see each other were it not for that place we have in Grand Lake. And we sit up on our deck, we go boating and all that kind of thing. It's a wonderful—and those who are listening can relate to what we're saying right now.

**RF:** Well, I'll maybe close with this, and that is that I've oftentimes written about the fact that I consider this to be one big sorority or fraternity, however you wanna look at it. Grand Lakers identify with one another, but you look around at some of the families that immediately jumped on this thing when it became available: the McMahons, the Siegfrieds, the LaFortunes—and John, things are just different here. I mean, you can think you're on a cul-de-sac in Tulsa and what have you, but it's just different here. I mean, when they're here, they're out in the country. And when we had that nursery, Bob LaFortune used to call me at about 4 o'clock on a Saturday afternoon and say, "Can you drop off a couple of bags of potting soil?" and you know what, I did it. (Laughing) But it's been a good ride. I've got no complaints.

**JE:** In terms of your many accomplishments, is there one or two that you're most proud of?

**RF:** Well, I think my family. We're a rather small, close-knit family. My son teaches school over at Grove Middle School—science—and he referees and he also has a lawn business on the side. But his two kids... my grandson is an optometrist in Vinita, Oklahoma, and made it all the way through when

we put him in the house over in Stillwater to go to college. I said, "Well, Jordan, what are you gonna major in?" When he told me, which was a scientific name about this long, and I'm like, "Man, I don't know about that." The fruit usually doesn't fall far from the tree, but this one had to roll a ways. And he got through it in record-breaking time.

**JE:** Through what?

**RF:** In regulation time -- for 4 years, and that doesn't happen very often these days that I see anyway. And then my granddaughter took a little longer, but she got through it and she's a human resources type person. And then we have a new baby great-granddaughter.

**JE:** How about that?

**RF:** Oh and all that kind of stuff, but they're all right here on Grand Lake. My daughter-in-law is a realtor here, very successful, I might add, a very important part of our family.

**JE:** So then, how would you like to be remembered?

**RF:** As somebody that made a difference, as somebody that loved this lake.

**JE:** And you did make a difference in a major way in this part -- in this neck of the woods.

**RF:** Let's call it what it is, right.

**JE:** So Rusty, see you around the pond.

**RF:** As they say. Thank you, John. I appreciate it.

**JE:** You bet. Thank you.

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