

VOICES OF OKLAHOMA



Radio veteran John Erling talks with 84-year-old Gloria Dialectic during a Voices of Oklahoma interview at her residence. JESSIE WARDARSKI/ Tulsa World

In their own words

Story by Jimmie Tramel
Photos by Jessie Wardarski

The origin story

Voices of Oklahoma, which is dedicated to the preservation of the oral history of Oklahoma, owes its existence to one of John Erling's lunch buddies.

Erling was a morning talk show host on radio station KRMG when he was befriended by Tulsa oilman and philanthropist Walt Helmerich. Erling said they went to lunch together once a month for about 12 years, rotating between the Wild Fork and Stonehorse Cafe.

Helmerich told interesting stories during the lunch sessions. Erling suggested the public would enjoy hearing the stories, too.

Helmerich had no interest in the stories appearing in book form, but he agreed to be interviewed by Erling so the stories could be recorded. What do you do with the recording? Erling suggested putting the interview, and others like it, on a web site for educational purposes. Helmerich gave his endorsement and asked his friend Henry Zarrow to be the second interview subject.

Erling said he doesn't know if he would have come up with the idea if not for the lunches with Helmerich.

Interviews recorded for Voices of Oklahoma were stockpiled in Erling's computer until a **voicesofoklahoma.com** site was created.

Erling said he interviewed Bill Warren and, after the session ended, Warren asked Erling if Voices of Oklahoma had any financial needs. Erling said Warren provided a check for \$20,000 to create **voicesofoklahoma.com**.

Shortly after the site launch, Wilma Mankiller died (April 6, 2010). Mankiller had already been interviewed for Voices of Oklahoma, so Erling hustled to make her interview the first to be posted on the site. About five years later, Voices of Oklahoma became partners with the Oklahoma Center for the Humanities at the University of Tulsa. The center is the home for Voices of Oklahoma.

Radio veteran interviews all types for collective history

By Jimmie Tramel
Tulsa World

What if folks like Roy Clark, Barry Switzer, Wanda Jackson and Eddie Sutton were willing to sit down and tell you their life stories?

Would you be interested enough to listen?

Bait, if you want to take it: Jackson, the queen of rockabilly music, once dated a lad named Elvis Presley.

Voices of Oklahoma welcomes you to that conversation, and many others.

John Erling, a member of the Oklahoma Broadcasters Hall of Fame, has interviewed almost 200 individuals for Voices of Oklahoma, a venture dedicated to preserving the oral history of Oklahoma.

Erling said recordings of 130 interviews have been posted to **voicesofoklahoma.com**, where they can be accessed for free. An additional 60 interviews need maintenance before they can be posted "but I keep interviewing people, so my inventory stays about the

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John Erling listens to Gloria Dialectic speak during a two-hour Voices of Oklahoma interview at her residence.

TULSAWORLDTV.COM

Watch a video

John Erling explains the Voices of Oklahoma oral history project before interviewing Gloria Dialectic. Erling said he had fun during his years on radio station KRMG, but he described Voices of Oklahoma as his most lasting work.



There hasn't been a plan to who I would talk to and I'm kind of glad about that because it has given me a real smattering, a cross section, so it's a very good cross section of Oklahomans."

John Erling, who has interviewed almost 200 people for Voices of Oklahoma

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TULSAWORLD.COM/SCENE

Grammy contenders have Oklahoma ties

By Jerry Wofford
Tulsa World

When it comes to people with ties to Oklahoma at the Grammy Awards, several musicians could add some heavy hardware to their already stacked shelves.

With 20 awards already, Vince Gill could add two more. Carrie Underwood could get No. 8. With a quickly growing stack, Pentatonix could see more.

Many around here will be keeping an eye on those trophies, but at the top of the awards bill, it could be high drama with big names competing for top categories when the awards are handed out Sunday.

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Vince Gill performs with The Time Jumpers at Cain's Ballroom in July. The Oklahoma native could add to his Grammy Award collection at Sunday's ceremony through his work with the band. IAN MAULE/Tulsa World

AWARDS SHOW

The 59th Annual Grammy Awards

7 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 12
CBS, KOTV channel 6 in Tulsa

Hosted by James Corden, the annual awards ceremony will be broadcast live from the Staples Center in Los Angeles. The Grammy Awards Premier Ceremony, where about 70 of the 84 Grammy Awards will be handed out Sunday, is set for 2:30 p.m. Sunday, streaming live on **grammy.com**. A full list of nominees is at **grammy.com/nominations**.

VOICES OF OKLAHOMA

Voices: Oral Roberts made him the most nervous

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same and I can't ever get ahead of myself."

The most recent Voices of Oklahoma interview occurred Wednesday, when Erling huddled with former Call Rape Executive Director Gloria Dialectic, who, at 84, is still active in community service efforts.

Among things learned during a two-hour interview at Dialectic's residence: Dialectic is not her birth name. She didn't want to keep her husband's last name after a 20-year marriage ended, so, for a new last name, she chose a word that was reflective of her world view. She grew up in Pennsylvania and went through a "hippie" phase after moving to Arkansas. She has long battled rheumatoid arthritis. She once got arrested while occupying the site of a proposed nuclear power facility in Inola.

Interesting? There's a lot more, but you'll have to wait for the interview to be uploaded to voicesofoklahoma.com.

On deck for future interviews are Wes Watkins, a retired member of the U.S. House of Representatives, and Jane Jayroe, a former Miss America.

No one has ever turned down an invitation to be interviewed for Voices of Oklahoma, according to Erling. Perhaps that's because Voices of Oklahoma, though it has entertainment value, is meant to be an educational resource. Click on a name, learn all about that person, beginning with family roots.

Erling said the most nervous he has ever been for any Voices of Oklahoma interview came when he met with evangelist Oral Roberts.

There's a backstory.

Erling was the longtime host of a popular "Erling in the Morning" show on radio station KRMG. During that time, he made fun of Roberts' fund-raising endeavors. Erling pointed out that he never made fun of Roberts' faith ("because the basic tenets of his faith, I happen to believe."). But Erling wasn't opposed to saying, on air, that he saw a 900-foot Lassie and was going to build a Kennel of Care for cats and dogs, just like Roberts was building a City of Faith.

Worry kicked into high gear when Erling visited Roberts' condo for the Voices of Oklahoma interview. Does he know me? Does he know I used to make fun of him on the radio?

Said Erling: "Then he started talking about the media and he said 'You know John, the media would sometimes come on to me and they would write negatively about me. But I never pushed back, did I John?' And I knew he had me. He knew."

But Erling said his regard for Roberts went up 100 percent in that moment because the evangelist didn't let whatever was said on the radio interfere with the Voices of Oklahoma session.

Erling described the Roberts interview as "super." It may have been Roberts' last interview, according to Erling, who said Roberts died seven or eight months later. Roberts is one of 45 Voices of Oklahoma interview subjects who are no longer around tell their own stories.

"Alex Haley says every death is like the burning of a library," Erling said. "Those stories would have been gone."

But the stories of historical figures like Roberts and Mar-



Radio veteran John Erling, armed with pages of research, conducts an interview with Gloria Dialectic for Voices of Oklahoma. JESSIE WARDARSKI/Tulsa World



John Erling thumbs through his notes during an interview with former Call Rape Executive Director Gloria Dialectic. JESSIE WARDARSKI/TULSA WORLD



Radio veteran John Erling interviews Gloria Dialectic for the Voices of Oklahoma oral history project. JESSIE WARDARSKI/TULSA WORLD

ian Opala survived because of Voices of Oklahoma.

Opala, who came to the U.S. from Poland, served as a justice of the Oklahoma Supreme Court for 32 years.

"He was a prisoner of war," Erling said. "It was just wonderful the way he talks about how he was liberated by the Allied Forces and he came up from under these haystacks with his hands high and he is crying telling the story."

Opala was 89 when the interview took place. He seemed to be in great health and his mind was sharp during the interview, but he died four days later. Erling doesn't want to play favorites, but doesn't mind saying the Opala interview is one of his faves.

Though transcripts of interviews are available at voicesofoklahoma.com, Erling believes people are cheating themselves if they read the transcripts instead of listening to Voices of Oklahoma interviews. You can't hear Opala's accent (Erling loves it) in a transcript. There's an extra layer of reality when, instead of reading about these things, you hear Henry Bellmon talk about signing House Bill 1017 or hear astronaut William Pogue talk about floating in space or hear Doris "Coke"

Meyer talk about her uncle, Will Rogers.

"The point I am trying to make is when you hear the voices it just makes a difference," Erling said.

Erling hopes this project makes a difference.

Again emphasizing that Voices of Oklahoma is an educational tool, Erling thinks young people can learn from the stories of interview subjects who beat the odds, like QuikTrip founder Chester Cadieux, who had to sell the concept of a convenience store, and Hobby Lobby founder David Green, who worked for TG&Y as a teen and eventually began making frames in his garage.

Erling suggested young girls could benefit by listening to interviews with former Cherokee Principal Chief Wilma Mankiller and former state Sen. Penny Williams.

Maybe, said Erling, others will use Voices of Oklahoma to learn "I didn't know that" things about people from Oklahoma. Catharine Kingsley of Stillwater was employed as a code-breaker during World War II. Wanda Clark of Idabel and Oklahoma City was Lucille Ball's personal assistant for 28 years.

Erling keeps a list of people

he would like to interview, but names are always being juggled. The next interview could come as a result of someone saying "you ought to talk to so and so."

"There hasn't been a plan to who I would talk to and I'm kind of glad about that because it has given me a real smattering, a cross section, so it's a very good cross section of Oklahomans," he said.

At least three times during a 50-minute interview about Voices of Oklahoma, Erling referred to himself as a "North Dakota farm boy."

Why does a North Dakota farm boy care so much about Oklahoma stuff?

Erling, who came to Tulsa in 1976, said he established a relationship with the state by way of KRMG and the station's huge audience.

"So many wonderful things happened to me it became very easy to call Oklahoma home," he said. "The longer I lived here I became fascinated with the history of the state, the story of our Native Americans and the very interesting geography. Forty years of living in Oklahoma will do that to you."

Voices of Oklahoma interviews have touched on war remembrances, the struggle for racial equality and the Holocaust. Erling indicated there have been moments when he got moist eyes because the person he was interviewing became emotional. Of course, there have been fun moments, too, but the conversations (often two hours long) and the research required to maximize the conversations can be exacting.

"It's work," Erling said, "But I tell you, if I didn't have this, I don't know what I would have done with myself. ... I have been gone from KRMG for 10 years. What would I have done those 10 years? I have no idea. It has probably saved my sanity to be honest with you. It gave me self-worth. It gave me a reason. I know why I am here. I know I am doing a good thing. If I didn't have all those things going for me, I think I would be a mess. I really do. So, not only is it good for the public to hear these voices, old John kept his brain straight and is doing a good thing."

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In their words...

Their history, their words. Selected quotes from Voices of Oklahoma interview subjects:

Paul Andert, World War II veteran: "We heard this siren coming and we knew it was Patton. We called him the Green Hornet in those days because the Green Hornet radio show was on and he wore a green uniform."

Bob Barry Sr., sports broadcaster: "Bud (Wilkinson) was somebody that had the aura of being one step above everybody else. I don't mean that he was conceited, but he just had a star quality about him. He would walk down through the campus at OU and everybody would just sort of stare at him. He was just almost like a god-like figure and I don't mean that disrespectfully. He just had an aura about him. I don't know how else to say it. He was friendly, but almost untouchable."

Henry Bellmon, former governor and senator: "It was a miserable job to milk cows and I've never liked milk since."

Johnny Bench, baseball player: "My all-time hero was Mickey Mantle. He was the one that inspired me at three years of age, watching the black-and-white television with my dad. They announced, 'Now batting, the next superstar to switch hitting, a centerfielder from Oklahoma, Mickey Mantle.' I looked at my dad and said, 'You can be from Oklahoma and play in the major leagues.' That's what I want to be.' And that's where it all started."

Betty Boyd, queen of Tulsa TV: "Harrison Ford was fun to interview although he was so bashful. I thought he would never say anything. This was during the 'Star Wars' days. Gene Wilder was a hoot. He's the only one of them that I have ever asked for an autograph (because my son wanted it). I just can't bring myself to do that."

Wanda Clark, Lucille Ball's personal assistant for 28 years: "Oh golly, those awful yellow tabloids called all the time with something just the most outrageous to see if they could get some information from me. Fishing, just fishing for something to print."

Bart Conner, gymnast: "I remember in '94, I went to Romania with (Nadia Comaneci) for the first time to meet her mom and dad and ask her dad for her hand in marriage. That was pretty intimidating because not only was I being scrutinized by her family, but, of course, because she's a hero of Romania, I was being scrutinized by an entire nation. But everybody said yes, and it was good."

Jim Economou, Coney Island: "Once you put ketchup on something it doesn't make any difference how bad it is or how good it is; you will only taste the ketchup."

Nora Guthrie, Woody Guthrie's daughter: "He wrote in one journal that he felt sorry for the rich. He goes into it in depth in a very human way. First of all, he says, they tend to be lonely because the only people that surround the rich are people that want their money. So they don't really have any true friends or true friendships. It's really hard to find people you can trust that are not after you for something."

Wanda Jackson, queen of rockabilly music: "Daddy liked Elvis real well. He thought he was a real gentleman, which he was. So he didn't mind letting me go out with him after shows and what have you."

Stephen Jones, attorney for Timothy McVeigh: "(Richard Nixon) had the same thing for lunch every day, unless he was eating out, which was cottage cheese with ketchup. I thought, God what a diet."

Wilma Mankiller, principal chief, Cherokee Nation: "I was involved somewhat in the San Francisco Indian Center, but the world was changing around us. In the San Francisco Bay area during the late '60s you could go hear Janis Joplin in a park or hear Jimi Hendrix in a park or go to the Fillmore and hear some of the most famous bands like Jefferson Airplane. The music was changing. The politics were changing."

George Matson, 45-year Southern Hills golf shop employee: "Arnold (Palmer) was a wonderful gentleman. He used to come in early in the morning. He'd have his newspaper under his arm and he'd come in and he'd stand at the counter. If I was busy, he would open up the newspaper and start reading, and then as soon as I got rid of what I was doing, he would always roll up his newspaper and stick it under his arm, and we would talk. He was so nice."

Boone Pickens, oilman and philanthropist: "My grandmother could stretch a dime pretty far. I can still remember that she marched me back into her room in her home and she said, 'Okay, this is the light switch. You see it turns it on and it turns it off. When you come in, if you can see well enough, you don't turn it on. But one thing you do if you turn it on, when you leave the room you turn it off. Next month, if you continue to walk out of rooms and leave the lights on, you will get the light bill. And I will expect you to pay for it.' That made an impression on me."

Washington Rucker, Jazz drummer: "I've only met two really musically talented people in my life. One was Stevie Wonder, the other one was Hampton Hawes. They were the most talented musicians I've ever seen. Stevie could take two pieces of card and make a sound out of it and write a song at the same time."

Eddie Sutton, basketball coach: "About the third or fourth hole, the president (Bill Clinton) hooks one over in the rough (while golfing). These (secret service) guys, man, all 16 of them came hustling down to look for the golf ball. The same thing happened to me about three holes later and not one of them came over. I said, 'Boy, your hospitality stinks!'"

Memorable moments

Voices of Oklahoma host John Erling recalled five memorable moments from interview sessions:

Erling on Marian Opala, state supreme court justice: "He lived in Poland when Germany invaded in 1939. During the war, he fought with the British. Along with another soldier, he was told to stand on a street corner to wait for two German officers. When the officers arrived, they were instructed to kill them, which they did. Eventually he came to Oklahoma to serve on the state supreme court. Movies are made about lives like Marion Opala. Marian died four days after I interviewed him."

Erling on Joyce Henderson, edu-

cator and civil rights activist: "She participated in lunch counter sit-ins in the mid-60s. She said, 'For many, you could be black and look white, if you were biracial. And that's why I say many times it was primarily because of the color of your skin. Once they found out you were part of the Negro race, that just put up a wall for many people that something was wrong with you. And we're not supposed to treat you like you are a human being, so to speak.'"

Erling on Marques Haynes, Harlem Globetrotter. "He grew up in Sand Springs and talked about the house he lived in and how they insulated it. He said, 'We used boxes left over from the box factory called Sand Spring Box Company, which was right across the street

from us. They made corrugated cardboard boxes. We used them to tack up on the inside of the house.' And he said they decorated their walls with newspapers. "We had the Tulsa World and the Tulsa Tribune during those years. There were also a couple of black newspapers, The Oklahoma Eagle in Tulsa and the Black Dispatch in Oklahoma City.' Along with the Globetrotters he entertained fans in 106 countries around the globe."

Erling on Catharine Kingsley, WWII cryptographer: "Catharine graduated from OSU as a language major. She spoke five languages and went to Washington, D.C., to work for J. Edgar Hoover. She told the story of doll factories. Japanese spies in the United States would

send dolls to a doll repair shop. But she said that doll represented a ship and they would say, 'Well, this doll's arm was broken and we had to do this.' Then, said Catharine, when the Japanese got that, what was supposedly fixing a doll, was actually passing information of what had happened to the ships that were in the dry dock."

Erling on Rex Calvert, WWII veteran: With the 4th Marine Division, he landed on Iwo Jima and fought off the attack of the Japanese. While under fire, he said brave Marines were calling for their mother 'momma, momma.'

He made three other combat landings and was hit by enemy fire on Saipan for which he was given the Purple Heart."