

# An Autobiography by Lee Kline

Written November 2003

I was born in January 1930 and grew up on a rented, 176-acre farm near the small town of Conrad in Grundy County, in central Iowa, during the 1930s and 1940s.

In 1936, my father purchased his first tractor, a two-cylinder John Deere "B" row-crop machine with a 9.28 horsepower on the drawbar.

I grew up on the seat of that tractor, part of the mechanical revolution that swept the country as farmers switched from horses to machines.

I graduated from Iowa State University in 1951 with a degree in Agricultural Journalism.

1951 was a big year for me: I had my first job as a public relations person for the Chicago Stock Yards, was engaged to Lila Jean Stackhouse who was in the process of graduating from Drake University and I was drafted into the U.S. Infantry for two years during the Korean Crisis.

When released from the army in 1953, we returned to work at the Chicago Stock Yards. In 1954, Herb Plambeck, farm director of WHO Radio in Des Moines, called to say they were starting television at WHO and they needed a man with market experience.

This was the job I had inwardly sought all my life. We eagerly moved to Des Moines. I did the markets, weather and farm news on a half-hour noon television program called "TV-RFD" and on WHO Radio.

Three years later, the television program ended and WHO's farm department, four men and a secretary, concentrated solely on farm radio broadcasting.

And that I did for 41 years, retiring from full-time broadcasting in 1995. I like to point out that my father farmed the same, rented, 176-acre farm for over 40 years. Like father, like son!

Three events stand out from my broadcasting life:

In 1985, I received the prestigious "Oscar in Agriculture" award from the National Association of Farm Broadcasters.

In 1991, I was asked to be a part of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival on the national Mall in Washington, D.C., outdoors, in the shadow of the U.S. Capitol, over the July 4th holiday. The theme was "Farming in the Heartland" and I was there to broadcast live back to Des Moines from a mock-up of a radio studio to demonstrate how farm broadcasters helped farmers.

In 1996, I returned to the Smithsonian's Folklife Festival when Iowa was featured for its sesquicentennial year. My job was to represent Iowa radio broadcasting and host discussions under the trees on the national Mall, and encourage questions and discussion from the visitors at the festival. Iowa artists, farm families and business people would tell their stories.

My day-to-day job at WHO included what all farm broadcasters do...report on the markets, weather and farm news.

But if I were to summarize my life, and my way of doing things, it would be this: I didn't really feel complete unless I was out in the country, with my tape recorder, climbing into the cab of a tractor at planting time or the cab of a combine at harvest time...getting the story for the next day's broadcast.

My goal was to get the very best expression from the man or woman that they could possibly give on the radio. And the way to do that was to get on their turf, in their machines, where they were comfortable and at-ease.

The resulting interview carried the background sounds of the farm - the churning of the big machine during corn harvest, interviewing in the machine shed with the sparrows chirping overhead, or talking pork production with the hog self-feeder lids occasionally banging in the background.

Sometimes I did interviews that were not business but dealt with life in the Midwest. That would include following along with a raccoon hunter near Rhodes, Iowa late into the night, with his dogs baying. Or riding with an Amish farmer in his buggy as he explained why he wore the hook-and-eye fasteners on his overall jacket.

I think one of the big satisfactions of broadcasting on a 50,000-watt, clear-channel radio station is finding out who is listening.

A towboat captain on the Mississippi River told me he tuned to WHO and the farm news while at the wheel of his boat, pushing barges of corn and soybeans down to New Orleans.

A pilot for United Airlines, who grew up on an Iowa farm, said he would tune in WHO Radio farm news in the morning while flying over Iowa at 30,000 feet, heading from Chicago to Denver.

And on a trip with farm families to the Calgary Stampede in Canada, Lila and I rented a car and drove out into the Canada plains to try to identify a crop that appeared very yellow from the airplane window. It turned out to be canola.

But while we were driving through the Canadian farm country, I stopped a man on his tractor who was tilling a field of harvested wheat. I identified myself and was shocked when he replied: "Oh, we hear you up here in Alberta doing the farm news in the early morning!"

You never know who's listening or where they are!