

WHO radio farm broadcaster Lee Kline, who covered rural life in Iowa for 64 years, dies at 91

Des Moines Register

6:56 p.m. CT January 13, 2022

As long as most Iowans have been alive, Lee Kline was the voice of the state's rural communities on Des Moines' WHO radio, attracting not only farm listeners but people from all walks of life.

Known for both his creative approach to storytelling, including soundscapes he created with his tape recorder, Kline died of natural causes in a Des Moines hospice care center Jan. 11. He was 91.

Marvin Leon Kline— his full name — was the second-longest-tenured radio host at WHO, behind only sportscaster Jim Zabel, when he retired from his daily midday show in 1995 after 41 years. He carried on another 23 years with his popular “Lee Kline’s Notebook” weekly show on WHO, WMT in Cedar Rapids and KWMT in Fort Dodge until switching off his mic for the final time in 2018, when he was 88.



The late Don Muhm, the Des Moines Register's longtime farm editor, wrote in a 1995 retirement profile of Kline that he had the highest-rated noon radio show in the Des Moines market, providing listeners a rich blend of farm news and human-interest stories.

Zabel, who died in 2013, said Kline brought his fans stories that went "way beyond farm stuff."

Muhm wrote that in addition to rural listeners, Lee attracted city dwellers "who know little about things like pork bellies, dirt farming and cutworms — or leafy nightshade and farm policy."

Lee captured Iowa farm life for listeners with his ever-present tape recorder. It ranged from "old two-cylinder 'Johnny Poppers' and livestock auctioneers to the monotonous hum of 17-year locusts to a barbershop quartet of farmers," Muhm wrote. "He even once tried, unsuccessfully, to record ... the snap, crackle and pop rumored to occur as Iowa corn grows rapidly in response to muggy, nighttime conditions."

Kline wrote in a short autobiography that he "didn't really feel complete" unless he was out in the country with his tape machine, "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."

He was born Jan. 25, 1930, to Leslie and Daisy Kline, and wrote that he "grew up on the seat" of his father's "two-cylinder John Deere 'B' row-crop machine" on the family farm north of Conrad in central Iowa.

He graduated with honors from what is now BCLUW High School and went to Iowa State University on a scholarship, graduating in 1951 with a degree in agricultural journalism. He married his high school sweetheart, Lila Jean Stackhouse, in 1952 and served two years with the U.S. Army infantry.

Lee Kline worked as a public relations specialist for the Chicago stockyards for a few years before joining the growing farm department at WHO radio in 1954. He called it his lifelong career dream.

His work wasn't limited to feature stories. He even broke national news on occasions, including landing an interview with Reagan administration budget director David Stockman's mother, a Michigan farmer, in which she voiced her opposition to her son's call for slashing agricultural subsidies.

Kline wrote that one of his "big satisfactions" from his broadcasting career was finding out who was 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," he wrote in his autobiography.

"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."

Kline was an avid gardener and had a lifelong fascination with trees. He was a board member of Living History Farms in Des Moines and an active member of downtown's First United Methodist Church, where he sang in the choir. He also was an enthusiastic traveler, conducted more than 30 international group tours with his wife.

The couple was recognized in 1993 as the Des Moines Register's "Neighbors of the Week," nominated by fellow residents of their neighborhood near the Wakonda Club who said the two continually took the lead in planning social events that knit the community together and brought new arrivals into the fold.

Kline is survived by his wife of 69 years, sons Douglas of Minneapolis and Gregory of West Des Moines, two granddaughters and a great-granddaughter.

Gifts may be made to Lee Kline Memorial, Living History Farms and EveryStep Foundation/Kavanagh House hospice.

A memorial service will be held 1 p.m. Jan. 17 at First United Methodist Church, 1001 Pleasant St., Des Moines. Arrangements will be handled by Iles Funeral Homes.