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**William Burgan:** I'm Bill Burgan. I'm speaking with Hampton Dunn, former editor of the *Tampa Daily Times* newspaper. The paper originally owned WDAE Radio [620 AM]. The topic is early radio history.

**Hampton Dunn:** Yeah, first of all, I am a native Florida Cracker. I was born up in Citrus County, and went to school first up at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia. It was there in Macon that I had my first—the first time I went on the air. It was a local radio station, WMAZ [940 AM]. They were using Mercer students to fill in on newscasts and that sort of thing. And so, that was the first time I went on the air.

I subsequently transferred to the University of Tampa to handle the publicity for the Spartans, the University of Tampa football team. I also put out the school paper, *The Minaret*. Before the end of my second year, I was working full-time on the old *Tampa Daily Times*, went to work there in May of 1936. And I stayed with the newspaper for twenty-two years, with the exception of four years during World War II when I was overseas. I was a major in the Air Force. And during that period, I was handling public relations for the Twelfth Air Force. I was a PR [Public Relations] (inaudible) for the Twelfth Air Force. And in addition to covering the war ourselves, we assisted war correspondents in doing their job.

WB: Then, you worked with the paper that owned the radio station?

HD: Yes. The *Tampa Times* owned WDAE from its very beginning, which was May 22—May 15, 1922. That's the day that the station went on the air. The newspaper owned it then and continued to own it up until the *Times* was sold to the *Tampa Tribune*, June 1, 1958. The last owner of the *Tampa Times* was Mr. David E. Smiley, and he continued to own the radio station for several years after the merger of the newspapers. Then his sons Joe Smiley and Dave Smiley carried it on for a short time, and then it was later sold to (inaudible), who, I believe, owns it now.

WB: So, could you tell us your relation with the station itself, the contacts?

HD: With the station itself, yes. Well, first of all, when I went with the *Times*, I was just a brand new club reporter, and was on the streets covering the news. The *Times* and WDAE worked very closely together in getting news reports out. We believed in the newspaper promoting the radio station and the radio station promoting the newspaper, so we made available—as I recall we made available carbons of the news stories we wrote, and this was made available to the staff of the radio station to broadcast frequently. We used it as promotion. You know, it would get—a story popped at one o'clock, and then they'd put it on the news, just on the radio, mentioning that a murder happened in Tampa this afternoon, read details in the final edition of the *Tampa Daily Times*, that sort of thing.

WB: Did you know the personnel down at the station?

HD: Oh, yes. I was very—well, when I first went with the station, the station was over in the top of the Tampa Terrace Hotel, which no longer stands, but they had very fine studios over there. The *Tampa Daily Times* was in the building where the Merchants' Association is now, on Franklin [Street] and Washington Street. But nevertheless, we had very close association. I know the manager; the longtime general manager was Spencer Mitchell. Mr. Mitchell had been with the station since the early thirties [1930s], I believe it was, and he stayed with it until he had retired, just a few months, I guess, before his death in early nineteen—well, several years ago, in 1972—seventy [1970], I believe it was.

Mr. Mitchell was a native Floridian, and he got his first contact with the radio as a—he was in the Navy during World War I, and he got intrigued with it. Later on, he had a filling station. I think he operated out there in Ybor City and then he got into the old (inaudible) hardware. They had a retail outlet there in Tampa at Lafayette Street, which is now Kennedy Boulevard. They wanted to put in a radio department, they called it; this was when radio was becoming hot, in the early 1930s. So Mr. Mitchell ran that for a while, and then he went with WDAE and stayed with them for many, many years. So, Mitchell was one that I knew very well: very jovial fellow, but a real pro in radio.

Sol Fleischman, of course, everybody knows. Sol went to work in 1928 by a freak situation. I guess you'll want to interview Sol on that, how he got started, but I can tell you that he played drums in a band. And in the early days of radio, they were broadcasting the University of Florida football games, but they weren't able to give you a remote broadcast from Gainesville. What they did was the news came in, in Morse code, and it was written out there in the studio. Sol would read this thing and give (inaudible)—not Sol; there was another announcer named [Roger] Lum, I forget his name. Sol and the other boys were playing music in the background; give you the sound like you were right in the stadium.

Well, one day the announcer apparently had imbibed a little bit too much and went on the air, and the further along he went, the less he could talk. And so the manager said, "We

gotta have somebody. Does anybody know anything about football?” Harvey Barritt, who was playing in the band, says, “Sol, you do! You were a cheerleader,” a cheerleader at Plant and Hillsborough, which he was. So, Sol sat down and began broadcasting that day in 1928 and continued to broadcast for almost fifty years. But he can tell you that story.

But Sol I got to know from the very early days of radio, my stay in Tampa. Sol, I guess, knows more people by first name than anybody in Florida, and he remembers them.

WB: Well, I guess we can mention here that you’re also a writer, and have written books on this topic.

HD: Yes, yes. I’ve written about a dozen books on Florida history. The second book I wrote was a history of WDAE. It was called *WDAE, Florida’s Pioneer Radio Station*. It was published in 1972, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of WDAE.

One thing that that book established, I think, was the fact that WDAE was indeed the number one station to get a license in Florida. You get all kind of claims. There’s a station down in Miami, WQAM [560 AM], that claims to be the first on the air, and one up in Jacksonville, WCAN. Well, in those early days there were a lot of them on the air, but they were just (inaudible) operations, had no license. But in this book that I wrote in 1972 we nailed it down, and have a letter from the Federal Communications Commission stating that, “A research of the records of the broadcast stations licensed in the early 1920s by the Department of Commerce has revealed the fact that radio station WDAE was first licensed on May 15, 1922, and was the first radio station to begin operation in the state of Florida as a broadcast station.”<sup>1</sup> So, that was important to get that established, and that’s what the records in Washington show.

WB: Getting back to the people involved with the station—

HD: Mm-hm?

WB: The owner at the time was Mr. David Smiley?

HD: When I went there?

WB: Yeah.

HD: Yes. When I went to the *Times* in 1936, Mr. Smiley was a co-owner with Mr. Ralph Nicholson. Mr. Nicholson stayed there until—I think it was 1951, when he went to New Orleans and bought out the *New Orleans Item*. He continued to be a part owner [of the *Tampa Daily Times*]. And then later they had a split there, Mr. Smiley and Mr. Nicholson, and Mr. Smiley finally bought out Mr. Nicholson.

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<sup>1</sup> This letter is reproduced in Dunn’s book *WDAE, Florida’s Pioneer Radio Station*. The letter is dated August 11, 1972, and is signed by Quentin S. Proctor, chief of the FCC Broadcast Bureau’s License Division.

WB: Could you tell us anything about the input Mr. Smiley had at the station?

HD: Well, Mr. Smiley didn't claim to be a radio man. I mean, he didn't know the technical part of it. He had good business judgment and good sound ideas on policy and public policy, so he was very strong on public service. And he was always heavy on—he stressed weather, weather news, and we'd have daily broadcasts from the weather station, some of the first in the country. He also had public affairs programs. And we also had election parties, election returns, and we developed that technique before it was—quick and the best in the country on election returns. Mr. Smiley then was very interested in radio, and worked with—he had a lot of confidence in Mr. Mitchell, and he'd depend on his judgment as far as the entertainment end of it, and the technical end.

WB: Was—

HD: Excuse me, go ahead.

WB: Was the station helped by the fact that it was owned by the newspaper and had access to the news?

HD: I think so. I think that—it was a good arrangement, because I know on every page of the *Tampa Times* there was a little—up on the top where they have the dateline and the page number also was “Tune in to WDAE,” and they had the tune cycles there. And we listed the daily programs; of course, we listed them for all the stations. WFLA, which was owned by the *Tampa Tribune*, [was] the competitor, but we always listed WDAE, usually the first in the column. And we always ran a picture of some star that was on WDAE, and we gave it a lot of publicity.

WB: Is there any—what's the earliest big event on the radio station that you can remember? A prizefight, or something of that nature?

HD: Well, I remember before I ever went to the station, and before I ever went to Tampa, hearing the Jack Dempsey/Gene Tunney fight.<sup>2</sup> That was a great event.

But my personal contact with the station—as I say, I was a reporter for the *Times*, and back before World War II we had quite a good little program going there. At noontime each day, Sol Fleischman, and I believe there was a fellow named Bob Proctor who would help him, would set up in front of the Tampa Theater. Downtown at that time, at noontime, was really crammed and jammed with people, because everybody came to town in those days. So, at noontime, they'd set up in front of the Tampa Theater and stop people [for] man-on-the-street interviews. And I was there to record and report what the people were saying to the question of the day, and then I'd write a story for the afternoon newspaper.

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<sup>2</sup> This was the boxing match for the World Heavyweight Champion title in 1927, which Tunney won, as he had won the 1926 championship. This fight is also known as the “Long Count Fight,” due to a controversy in counting the time.

We had a lot of fun with that, Saul and Bob Proctor and myself. I think they were still doing it at the time that I left to go into the service in January 1942. In this book that I wrote, Sol said that this program had to go off the air after the war started, because it was possible—the government felt that it was possible for the enemy to relay messages by code or something by dropping along there and being interviewed by Sol. So, they went off the air, as far as the man-on-the-street broadcast. But that's one I remember very well.

Then, I used to—when I was still a reporter, I used to—on Sunday mornings, all day Sunday, they wanted some firsthand reports of the news, because it was just pretty dead. There was no—the *Times* did not come out on Sunday afternoon. The *Tribune* had already, had come out early in the morning. So, it was my job to go out early on Sunday morning and check the jails and the hospitals and all the news sources and put together a newscast, and this I'd do. It was a program that went for a long time.

I also, in later years as I developed—and this was probably after the war. I became city editor and then managing editor and political writer. I wrote a column in the *Tampa Times* called Palm Tree Politics, which was a statewide column, and we addressed political subjects all over the state. But at that time, we'd do a lot of public affairs broadcasts. I remember when the Tampa Police Department and the city wanted to put in one-way streets, and it was a very touchy subject because the people really didn't want one-way streets. But the town had grown, the traffic had grown to a point that something had to be done, and this was something that could be done. So, I remember Captain Flaherty, John Flaherty; we had him on several times. And through these broadcasts, I know it contributed to better understanding of the people, and they accepted it and we had no trouble.

WB: Could you tell us about the makeup of the listeners, and maybe even about the tourists, people that were here?

HD: Well, uh—

WB: We have a lot of tourists in the wintertime?

HD: Tampa never has been a real tourist town. They always went to St. Petersburg, but they could hear WDAE, and WDAE was classed as a Tampa/St. Petersburg market by the FCC [Federal Communication Commission]. So, you did have plenty of tourists over there, and we'd have some tourists here in Tampa. In fact, we had a tourist recreation center over there in Plant Park, back by the University of Tampa there. I'm sure that they were listening to us.

We went network with the Columbia Broadcasting System in 1931 and it stayed CBS right on up until after Mr. Smiley sold. For a while there, they dropped the CBS affiliation. Then they went to ABC entertainment and network, and then more recently went back to CBS. CBS, I think, through the years pretty much has been the number one network, so being the CBS outlet here, I'm sure that we were listened to by tourist people.

But of course we had good music, and we had top forty. We had disc jockeys, good disc jockeys. A fellow named Damon Eckles was one. Van Wilson had a morning show called Greeting Time. Van's still around town.

WB: How did the network affiliation help the station? Did you air a lot of network programs?

HD: Well, yeah. You got your news, mainly. Yeah, there was plenty of—there was heavy network programming, all your soap operas, and of course top news, news reports and commentaries, spot events, special events. All these things, the network was right on the ball. And then WDAE carried all of it, was heavy on network.

WB: Did they also have musical programming?

HD: Yeah, they had big bands. At night, after ten o'clock, you'd usually go to the network, and you had good music right on up until closing time, usually twelve or one o'clock. But that was all network music, and so you were able to get the very top bands.

WB: So—

HD: The thirties [1930s] and forties [1940s] was the age of the big band.

WB: Well, that helped the station progress?

HD: Oh, yes. I think it gave it prestige. And radio was really the medium, and still is very, very important. I listen personally to radio more than I do to TV. I travel a lot, and I have—every minute I'm in that car, that radio's going. But I don't have that—I'm not home that often enough to listen to the TV.

WB: Can you tell us something about the equipment, the radio equipment, during the times you were affiliated with the station?

HD: Well, when I—by the time I came to *Tampa Times* and WDAE, it was a pretty first class operation and very sophisticated. In the early days, of course, they had crude equipment, just like all the other stations. But as time went by, it became a very smooth operation, and they had the finest equipment, RCA. So, we were right up to the minute. And we had—we went on mobile—we had a mobile unit early in the game, I remember. And this was something that I would do; go out with Saul and some of the other announcers to the scene of fires. I remember a waterfront fire we covered one time, and we covered the W.T. Grant—I believe it was the W.T. Grant building that burned—and some of the other big events like that.<sup>3</sup> We were right on the scene with the mobile unit.

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<sup>3</sup> W.T. Grant was a chain of dime stores that went out of business in the 1970s. The fire HD mentions took place in 1937, doing \$200,000 worth of damage. The store that burned was at 901 North Franklin Street in Tampa, and was rebuilt after the fire.

WB: The station also aired the fireside chats?

HD: Yeah, the fireside chats of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. That's right. He was elected, as you know, in 1932, took over in 1933. And he brought a fresh breath of air to public governmental service by having these confidential fireside chats with the people. And the networks carried those, and of course WDAE carried them. They were very popular—he was popular. And he would all—he had a flair for the dramatic, and he liked to make news, and he would save goodies to pop on the air there. So, it was a very popular feature.

WB: Do you remember any big events in Tampa that were covered by the—

HD: By radio? Well, let me see. Well, I mentioned the fires. I remember one time there was a—we had a dangerous murderer at large. He had killed some people over in Pinellas County, and he was on the run and hiding out somewhere in Hillsborough County. And everybody was scared, and the town was all alarmed. His name was Rastus, James—Russell, I believe, was his last name. So, late one evening—maybe it was around eight o'clock—he was captured out in the woods here near Tampa. And we went on the air to assure everybody that he was in custody and everything was all right. We brought on the officers who made the arrest and had a very dramatic report on that. I remember that.

Election returns we've always—as I've told you, that was always a big event. We would go on the air immediately, the minute that the polls closed at seven o'clock, and we used our *Times* people, our *Times* reporters and all the families that worked for the *Times*, to go out. We had people at every poll. It was their job to call direct to our office, and we'd compile the information. I remember in 1930—in 1952 it was, [Dwight] Eisenhower and the Eisenhower/[Adlai] Stephenson race, I guess it was. We wrapped up the county in that race in twenty-eight minutes, faster than they do today with all their sophisticated computers and all that.

WB: So at that time, that was the only way they knew about the returns?

HD: Oh, yeah. That was. That's right. Of course the newspapers—back before radio, the newspapers always had these boards out on the front, and they would get the returns and write them up there—big blackboards and write the returns. And the people would come down to the office and see this. But as soon as radio took that over, then that was instant reporting. This is one of the advantages of radio. It seemed to me that we did it faster than TV does it today, although we had no such thing as the projections of who's gonna win and all that sort of thing, which the networks are doing now.

WB: In the early days of Tampa, was it the newspaper that brought the baseball scores in, and play-by-play?

HD: Yes.

WB: And they also had downtown boards?



HD: Well, they did that, yes, just like on the election returns. They had these animated boards out front there in Tampa, on Franklin Street there in front of the *Times*. And Sol Fleischman told me that he used to do the announcing. He had a megaphone there, like he used as a cheerleader. He would get the news off the teletype, or whatever, and he would give the descriptions, give a fine description of what was going on. But that was before radio got into the business and gave you the play-by-play.

The *Times*—I mean, WDAE—had brought games from Plant Field there. Plant Field was there by the University of Tampa, and that was where the Cincinnati Reds [baseball team] trained. One of the fellows who was a big name in radio, “Red” Barber—“Red” Barber was a Florida man, came from Sanford. His father was an engineer, worked for the Atlantic Coast Line [Railroad]. “Red” went to University of Florida and started to work on WRUF up there, and then he made big time and was broadcasting, I believe it was Cincinnati Reds games. They were training here in Tampa. Their management thought it would be good business to broadcast at noon, just before the afternoon spring training game. And so, “Red” Barber was on the air there on WDAE, along with Sol Fleischmann and others.

*end of interview*