Archives and Special Collections, Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage.
HMC-0859. Hilary J. Hilscher Alaska telecommunications history project records.
Series 3: Oral history recordings transcripts.

Tom Jensen

Interviewed by Hilary Hilscher

Dec. 15, 2001

Tape 1, Side A

Hilary: (I'm with) Tom Jenson on the 15th of December in the Conference Room of the Anchorage Museum. Tom, start at the beginning.

Tom: Don't I need an attorney to represent me?

Hilary: If you like.

Tom: Is there a statute of limitations on telecommunication activities?

Hilary: We can put an embargo on part of your tape.

Tom: For what it is worth, just for your background I'm a life-long Alaskan, born in Douglas, Alaska, to at that time a third-generation family which makes me fourth-generation, which means my children are fifth generation. Our family settled in Alaska in 1865, two years prior to the Russians arriving and buying it. None of which got me an extra nickel at all but it makes for interesting lies and storytelling.

Hilary: Why were they were in 1865?

Tom: They actually were an element of a family that fought in the Revolutionary War in 1776 to the British. They were Tories and French Canadian and ethnic backgrounds. When the war was over they lost so they scooted north to Canada and one branch of that family took about 90 years to migrate across Canada, settling just south of Ketchikan and that's where it all started. That was on mother's side of the family. Father's side of the family came to Alaska in the depression, came up steerage and worked their way (up). None of which made me rich at all, but I have great stories to tell about relatives who were federal marshals. Relatives who were gold miners. Relatives, who lost fortunes. So here I am working.

Grew up in the state of Alaska, lived in Juneau for a while, then Anchorage for a while, settled in Fairbanks going through junior high and high school. During high school, my sophomore year, I left home and needed to make some money 'cause you don't get to eat for free.

Went to work, believe it or not, for a little local radio station just gathering news for a local radio newscaster at the age of 15. Stuck with the business for about 15 years, worked my way up into the industry. At one time I was really the janitor working midnight to six. Cleaned the bathrooms, the toilets, changed the toilet paper, washed the

floors, fixed the teletype paper, changed the ribbon in it, and every 30 minutes got to open the microphone and say, "This is KFAR."

Interesting, it turned out. KFAR and Al Bramsted, who owned the network for one of the premier networks in the state, the Old Midnight Sun. Worked for Bram for about six years, seven years, and then worked for Augie (Hiebert) when I came back from Vietnam – was offered a job at Augie's station because Midnight Sun didn't have a home for me. So I then worked for the Northern Television Network. Migrated to Anchorage in the early 70s and ended up my broadcast career with Augie in 1976 as his operations manager for AM/FM radio, news director for television, newscaster on the 6 p.m. and 10 p.m. newscast and general gopher. For all of that -- six days a week from 6 a.m. in the morning until 10:30 at night -- I was paid the grand total of $1,300 a month, $300 of which was called talent fee which tells you how much talent I had.

And when I decided that I was going to get married and would like to see my wife more than two hours a week. I went to Augie and said that, "Gee, I'd kind of like to have maybe Saturdays off or a little more money." And his response was… keep in mind this was in 1976, nine years after the flood in Fairbanks. His response was, "Well, you know, we're still paying off the SBA (Small Business Association) loans in the Fairbanks flood and things are tight. We were kind of wondering if you could work a part-time shift on Sunday." At which point I went back to my desk and resigned. To this day Augie and I are still very good friends. I admire the man for what he has done. He knows where every nickel is he's made. In fact, he may still have some of the first ones. Very prudent businessman. But I just couldn't live by eating teletype paper and stealing records. It just didn't work out real well.

Hilary: So Tom, go back to the early days with KFAR in Fairbanks. What kind of equipment? What kind of programming?

Tom: Well, the Midnight Sun Network was really the only network around. There was another station there but no one listened to it and part of it was because of personality. It was small-town radio and personality radio. Most of the equipment (was) usually surplus Korean War stuff. On the television side… when we went into television, we went into television with the old tube transmitters. We had no transistors or anything. We had black-and-white film projectors. There was no videotape at all.

For years in Alaska broadcasting, (as) I'm sure you've heard, Alaskans watched the CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite 24 hours after it aired to the rest of the world where it was live. And what made it rather unique is that you could read the newspaper at the end of the day in Fairbanks and find out what happened and that would tell you whether you wanted to watch the newscast the next night and see about it. And if there wasn't anything real exciting that happened, then you just didn't watch the news that night. And I grew up under that aura.

1969 was the first year ever of a live satellite broadcast feed into the state of Alaska. It was made possible by the United States military who made some of their facilities available. The Comsat earth station located in Talkeetna downlinked the signal and we all got to watch man landing on the moon. Now I have in my portfolio a Polaroid picture, black and white, that I took of my television screen as the satellite or as the spacecraft first lifted off on the moon mission and then I have a second one I took when man landed on the moon. So I had these little black-and-white photos that I can say these were taken when it actually happened, even though it was my TV set's -- sitting in Alaska – black-and-white picture.

So Alaska came into the telecommunications age just sort of late. It was a while later, after that first broadcast feat of the moon walk, that they figured out how to get enough money to bring in some other events live, and believe it or not it was football and it was sports and the Super Bowl and so forth.

And the reason for all of that was that satellites were relatively new. The cost of satellite time started out at somewhere between $5,000 and $4,000 an hour to downlink a signal if you have the equipment to put it into your station and then broadcast it out. That's a lot of money back in the 60s and early 70s for a broadcast to underwrite. Most advertisers had a fixed budget for the year and if you convinced them to underwrite your Super Bowl football game for two-and-a-half-hours at $5,000 an hour, you had just eaten up their first six months of the budget and you weren't going to get any more money from them. So you were just taking the money from one pocket and putting it into the other. Took a while for the economics to catch up. What helped is the introduction of satellite dishes that were a lot less expensive. Transistor electronic equipment and the cost of satellite transmission went down as more satellites went up. Competition helped. Now as we sit here in the year 2000, you can have a dish in your backyard for less than $200 installed, (and) pick up 150 channels of live digital television. That's not the way it started.

Hilary: Talk to me about those early days of radio programming.

Tom: We had… it was some strange things. First of all, in the telecommunications arena, long distance did not exist outside of Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, and Ketchikan. So the rest of the state to rely on or to get messages (by) tuning into AM radio and just about every station in the state had a program similar to what we did in Fairbanks called "Tundra Topics". And what would happen is people could write into that radio station or they could stop by if they were local and drop off a message. At nine o'clock every night we read these messages on the air to people in our listening audience who were maybe in Minto or Nenana or other cities that had radio reception but no telephones. Some of the unique messages… they were one-way conversations 'cause there was no response and some of them got rather personal, like, "George should know he should go down and meet the plane Wednesday his uppers and lowers are being delivered and he doesn't have to drink soup any more." Yeah. Or, "Harry should know Margaret is not coming home. She hates him and is going to find a lawyer and divorce him." Those kind of things were

read on the air. I mean, you know… and everyone listened in and went, "Oh, okay, that's what's going on."

However, it was also more than just a convenience of talking to people and getting messages out and commerce: "You should know that your groceries are being shipped and will be on the barge" and that sort of thing.

In one case, I recall working at KFAR (when) we got word from a fellow who came into town on a riverboat. A woman in the village of Minto about 70 or 75 miles south of Fairbanks was trying to deliver a baby and was having a terrible time and he described in great detail to the doctor where he took the message what the problem was. The weather was such that they couldn't get an airplane in the air to go to Minto and to bring the lady back. A doctor couldn't fly in. There were no roads to Minto and time was of the essence. And rather than put the doctor in the riverboat and rush down the river, that night at 9 o'clock, that doctor came to our radio station and explained (in a) one-way conversation how to deliver a breech birth. Now I got to tell you, I was a kid then of about 17, 16 or 17, I didn't want to hear that, you know. I was working the board and running the electronics and it was more than I wanted to know about childbirth. The mother and the baby survived.

Hilary: Great story.

Tom: And that was the way it was. I mean, people nowadays will say, "Well, my God, 40 years ago you had to put up with that. How terrible." Well, it wasn't terrible. It was just what you did to survive. The other thing that became fun in radio… we used to have a lot of fun. First of all you need to understand that broadcasters don't have a lot of brains. These are people who sit in a room and talk to themselves for four hours at a time and so sometimes the rational thought-process leaves them. And I recall one morning sitting there. It was in the fall of the year, the first (time) the thermometer had registered below 32 degrees, meaning it is frozen. Being a helpful lifelong Alaskan I'm concerned about newcomers. We had many newcomers in Fairbanks because the military had a constant rotation schedule. I felt that my obligation to get them some helpful winter hints. And I recall, I don't recall *saying*, but I know I did, something to the effect that, "Now that it is below freezing, you folks new to the state need to know it is time to get that warm summer air out of your tires and replace it with the cold winter air, otherwise the warm summer air will contract in the cold and your tires will go flat." And then I went on to read news or play a record.

Anyway about 30 minutes later the owner of a local service station called and said, "You idiot. I have had four people in here from Fort Wainwright who wanted the air changed in their tires." I said, "Run them through the garage, charge them five bucks, and everybody will be happy. Who cares?" But that was also part of the stigma of living in Alaska: we do things differently here and people want to hear about the difference. They don't want to hear about the normalcy that we have. You're supposed to live in an igloo in Alaska. You're not supposed to have a house. So they like to hear things like, "My gosh, it was so

cold last night, we lit a fire in the fireplace. The smoke froze, fell down, and kept putting the fire out. It was really terrible." "Oh, golly, I hadn't thought of that."

Hilary: What were some of the other programs that you did? There was some live radio at that time.

Tom: We did… all radio was live. We couldn't afford to bring anything in on a satellite so all the voice, the talent was live. You played records and in those days record companies sent you records. Records like 45-rpm records, which are now pieces of art. They don't even produce them any more. Thirty-three and a third (rpm records). We still have some 78 (rpm) records. Some programs that you played, especially on Sunday mornings, the religious programs… The voice of whoever and this all came on these huge records. The platters were about 18 inches in diameter and they were an hour long. It was a horrible shift to work because sitting there for an hour listening to a sky pilot could drive you crazy because some of these people got pretty carried away and there is no one in the room to visit or talk to.

I recall -- and this didn't happen to me but it happened to one of my fellow announcers -- on the Sunday morning he put on the voice of whoever, put the stylus in the groove, turned up the volume, the sermon started and he went downstairs to have a cup of coffee. Two bad things happened. One, when the door shut behind him on his way out. It locked. And he had forgotten his keys. And half-way through his cup of coffee… breakfast… about 30 minutes into this preaching show, the record stuck. And unfortunately it stuck -- I've been told, I didn't hear it -- but it stuck on some sort of a passage in the sermon that had something to do with, "You should go hell" or "You've been to hell" or "Go to hell" and it kept saying it over and over and over and over. He, of course, (came) in a full panic up the stairs, into the studio and couldn't get in, no keys. Now I understand he kicked the door down, hurt himself, had an ankle injury as a result but got in there – and that solved that problem.

Yeah, we did a lot of live radio where people could call in because it was small town -- Alaska as well -- and this wasn't unique to Fairbanks. I was in Fairbanks but it happened in Anchorage, it happened in Juneau, it happened in the other communities and people would call in and you'd put them on the air. As you would imagine, in any small town everyone likes to know what everyone is doing. Today we would call that being nosy, you know, a busybody. But in those days it wasn't. It was just that you cared. You were concerned.

And many interesting things happened. I did a Swap-and-Sell program for many years on the morning shift where people could call in and sell things. We called it "Tradio". You called in: "Hi, I have a stereo for sale." "I want to sell my snowmachine" or whatever. You would get some unique items for sale. The one thing you learn over time in broadcasting is don't ask a question if you're not sure what the answer is going to be. A woman once called me and said, "I have a pregnant turtle for sale." And my first question out of the box 'cause it just hit me, "How do you know?" Have you ever seen a turtle?

How would you know? And her response was, "'Cause I saw them doing it." Well, you know, you couldn't say that on the radio then. The FCC got really upset if you implied anything sexual or swore, so I got fined and the station got a nasty letter 'cause we were talking about pregnant turtles doing it. It goes on and on.

We used to… I recall another program I did and this one I love and it's true and I think everyone can relate to it. I used to do every Christmas morning. I enjoyed it and I volunteered to do this. I would come in and I'd work from six until noon and every 30 minutes I would just track Christmas music, background music, because in all the homes around Anchorage people were getting up, opening presents, and they just had the radio, but for the other 30 minutes of that hour I'd have the kids call in and we'd put them on the air and we'd talk to them about what Santa brought. And again small-town Alaska. There were at that time maybe 20,000 people living in the Fairbanks and so you would visit and it was a background noise to some but some would listen intently because they're nosy. They're curious.

And in this one particular case – 'cause I have seen it written up -- a young lady called in. "Hi, what is your name?" "My name is Judy." "How old are you Judy?" "Well, I'm nine." "Do you have any brothers and sisters?" "Yeah, I have a brother Timmy." "How old is Timmy?" "Well, Timmy is seven." "Oh, and what does your mother do?" "Well my mom is a schoolteacher." "And what does your dad do?" "He's a plumber." At this point the audience knows who we're talking to. I mean, you've got Judy, Timmy, the plumber, the schoolteacher. I mean everybody knows them. So we talk a little bit about the presents they got and this and that and the other and then I did what you're not supposed to do and asked a question I wasn't sure what the answer would be, especially with children. I said, "Well, did you get up early? A lot of kids get up early. What time did you get up?" "Yeah, we got up at two this morning, but we had to go back to bed." And then I asked the question, "Why?" And then Judy told me. "'Cause mom and dad were in the living room and they didn't have any clothes on."

For the next two weeks I drove around town waiting for a plumbing truck to run over me at an intersection. I just knew it was going to happen. Radio and communication then was real. It wasn't pretend. It is just… what you heard is what you got.

We had several announcers who were legends in Alaska, who are gone now but several of them had drinking problems. Sometimes they came to work without the problem because they had been drinking. Other times they came to work with the problem because they had been drinking late, stopped and didn't feel good at all. And if you're in the audience, you suffered from it either way. You're just stuck with whatever they're putting out you know and it got interesting. People would do the darnedest things up there.

We finally got big enough in our station where we decided we could do remotes. Those were the thing in the industry. We would actually go outside of your station and find something exciting going on and broadcast it live back to the station. And the way we

Mickey Moused that technologically was a nightmare but it worked and we got some things done but we also had some problems with some of these remotes.

I recall out at the State Fair, Tanana Valley, one year I was spinning the records if you will, and running the program at the center of the midway there on a little podium they built for us. And then I had a fellow broadcaster Larry Holmstrom, who is since deceased so I can tell this story, who was wandering around with a wireless microphone and he got in line to ride the Hammer, which was the big ride that year at the Tanana Valley Fair. I'd throw it to Larry, I'd say, "How's it going?" "Well it's a popular ride. I'm only halfway in line but I'm enjoying my hot dog." And then I'd play a record and we'd talk to some people at the fairgrounds and I'd throw it back to Larry. "Well, where are you now?" "Well, I'm about a third of the way there but I'm having another Coke and it should be a fun ride." Finally we get to Larry and he is getting in and he is hamming it up as well. "Well, they're putting me in, strapping me in. Why are you strapping me in?" "Well, so you don't fall out you fool. This thing runs around in large circles." "Oh, okay." We left the microphones on. Larry is talking and the Hammer starts. Starts out and Larry is saying, "This is really exciting. This is really great" and Larry got quiet for a minute. You could hear the crowd and the noise of the squeak, clink, clink and then we all heard Larry throw up, live on the air you know. It was just sort of a first in broadcast, never been done before. (Laughter)

Hilary: Tell me about sports.

Tom: Sports, well, yeah.

Hilary: I mean, remote.

Tom: Sports was a big one. I was never a sports person because I discovered girls young in life and they were a lot more fun to talk to and visit with than to go to some sweaty old basketball game, (and watch or) play as a participant. But sports was big in Alaska. People followed the major league baseball certainly. Football wasn't all that big. In the early 60s and 70s it started building with the Super Bowl and so forth. But people followed sports and, again, broadcasters couldn't afford live feeds from the ballpark. And so the thing was instituted in the state -- it was done in Anchorage, it was done in Fairbanks and Juneau -- called re-creation. And what they would do is recreate baseball games. And the way it worked: if you ever read the newspaper and see baseball stories and scores they have a thing called box scores where it tells you every three innings how many hits, runs, and errors and then, if there are any hits, they tell you George Smith single, Paul Johnson double, etc. etc. That's all they gave you, three innings at a time.

What the broadcasters would do is put a sound-effects record on that sounded like a park with the crowd noise in the background. You could control the volume. They would get off the teletype at 66 words a minute -- that would come in on paper -- the three-inning box scores. So they would wait until the third inning was over before you started the game. They would know what score and they would make up the game. They knew who

the players were because you could get that from each one of the teams, get it out of the newspapers and they would make… and the only thing they had to be accurate on is who got what kind of hit and what the score turned out to be at the end of the inning. Everything else you just made up. How many pitches were thrown, were they strikes, were they balls. "Now the pitcher stopped. He is scratching his nose. It looks like he has got, oh yeah, his nose is bleeding. Now they're going out." All of that they made up just to add to the excitement of the game as though you were there, with the crowd noise in the background.

In fact one announcer, now long gone, Steve Agbaba, also had a small dowel hanging down in front of the microphone that he would hit with a pencil and it made the same sound as the bat hitting a ball if you were sitting in the ballpark. I mean it really conned the devil out of you. I recall a couple of things that happened that were rather fascinating due to that recreation. By the way, I would quantify this statement. The announcers told the people going in, "This baseball (game) is being re-created. Your sponsors…" and so forth. The game is occurring in Cleveland, Seattle, or wherever and "this is re-created and time-delayed". I mean, they said this out loud. It was not a surprise.

We had a little bit of billing problem in our radio station one month and we hadn't paid our Associated Press teletype bill and bookkeeping had been talking to the Associated Press and they were arguing, "Yes we have," "No you haven't", "Yes we have." Steve Agababa was doing one of these games and at about four-and-a-half, five innings in… so he had three innings at a time, the teletype was turned off. The Associated Press shut off our service. Steve is in the middle of one of these re-created games and all of a sudden he is not getting box scores any more. So he made up a rainstorm, big storm, thunderstorm, lightning, pouring-down rain, covered the field. "Well, standby. If the weather clears, we will get back in to the game. They may have to call it because of weather…" And in the interim, I'm outside on the phone trying to get them to turn our teletype back up or find out what is going on. Never did succeed, but finally got the station manager to authorize a long distance call so we could find out what the final score was and we did that. Cost about ten bucks a minute back then, found out the final score, came back in, gave the paper to Steve. "And oh, the sun is coming out, wind is blowing the field dry, they're taking the tarp…" He made all this up. None of that happened. The game was over by then. There hadn't been a storm and he finished the game.

About a week later, some fellow was in the studio doing something and made reference to the fact that he had been at such and such a ball game while he was Outside. And one of the people said, "Oh, yeah, how did you survive that storm? Where did you go?" He said, "What storm?" "There in the bleachers, I mean it was pouring down rain, thunder and lightning. I mean, we heard people were scrambling to get out of that raining, blowing." He said, "It was sunshine all day long. What, are you crazy?"

The other thing we had a little fun with, re-creating games… people occasionally in Alaska are known to have a drink and one of the local bars -- it wasn't a sports bar then -- but everyone who sat around followed sports. And in this bar, they sat and listened to the

baseball games that were re-created. We found that after you got through the sixth inning, if you were at the station as I was as an employee, a young man then, and several others of us -- you could look at the teletype as the announcer was going into the seventh inning and you already knew what the final score was, 'cause it was right there in front of you. If you had a game, for example, where the score was 7 to 1 -- and in those last three innings it turned around, that's the game you went to. That was what was happening. We then went down to that local bar and the score is 7 to 1, the so and so's are leading. Sit there and order a drink and you'd find two or three people talking about it and listening. "I tell you what. I'll give two-to-one odds I bet they come back." And you'd always find some idiot that forgot that it was recreated and he'd bet with you and be absolutely astounded that we knew that they could turn it around like that. And we were always polite whenever we won a bet like that, we'd buy a round of beers for the house before we left. And I'm not making this up. It was just part of the living "on the air".

Hilary: What about dog sled races? Weren't there some remotes done with…

Tom: Dog sled races… like dog sledding, of course the sole sport for the state of Alaska and so it has been a big sport throughout rural Alaska with some of the bigger races held in the larger cities, Anchorage and Fairbanks. Over the years, radio broadcasters would broadcast them. Toward the mid-70s to the mid-80s they were actually televised. Dog sled races are not hard to broadcast because dog teams run, at the most… the sprint team will run maybe 15-to-20 miles an hour for short distances and then they slow down to about eight or ten. So you see them coming. You can discuss what they're doing and explain what the wheel dog, the team dog, swing dogs, the lead dog are doing. What the musher is doing. You can add some color on radio broadcast to make it exciting.

However, sometimes the dogs will do things to make it exciting for you too. It is a rule of thumb not to put a female in heat in a team with a lot of boy dogs 'cause sometimes they just don't want to race. They have other things in mind and they'll stop to entertain the crowd while entertaining themselves. And occasionally the announcer will get carried away and describe that to the folks at home and that can get you into a lot of trouble.

Years ago in Anchorage there was a broadcaster who has now passed on, Orville Lake, and Orville occasionally liked to stop and have cocktails between when the teams went out and the teams came in. And Orville worked with Al Bramstedt, Sr., on 4th Avenue, radio broadcasting the races. And we had one race where the two teams were coming in, I heard this. I was actually there, I heard this, so this is not a repeated story.

Hilary: This is not a repeat.

Tom: Two teams -- some (stories) have been repeated, but this one I was a party to, listening to and participant -- two teams coming down 4th Avenue from Cordova to the finish line almost side by side. Now this is the end of the race, second or third heat of the Rondy Race, the big race, the World Championship race. People are tuned in throughout the state of Alaska listening to this race. It is broadcast. All the stations carry it. It's a big

deal. And Al Bramstedt, Sr., who is the straight man explaining the race -- who is winning, who is losing -- turns to Orville and said, Here comes… so and so, "Who do you suppose is going to win?" And Orville said something to the effect of, "I think the son of a bitch on the left will probably beat that bastard on the right." You couldn't say that in radio back then. The FCC got really upset and they fined you and your license went away for a while and Bram damn near swallowed the microphone. That was the last thing he expected to hear from Orville. But Orville always got the last word in.

We had some of that. Some of that went on. Broadcasting was interesting with the sled dog races. The other problem you had sometimes (was that) sled dog racers themselves could be rather vocal. Whenever you went to do an interview, you were never sure what you were going to get on the other side coming across. If they were the winner, they were always gracious, but if they were the loser sometimes they were bitter and sometimes they used not-so-mild expletives to explain why they were bitter. So a lot of interviews were done -- if you can picture this in your mind -- with a microphone in your right hand and your mitten hand sheltering it until you knew what kind of an answer you were going to get so you wouldn't have to cover it up.

Television changed all that because people could see the race. It also changed a lot of the way the mushers not so much acted but their persona when they were actually in the race because they realized they were being viewed and they were becoming role models in some cases. Some of them didn't care, but most of them did.

Hilary: What about radio news back when you were first working in Fairbanks and Anchorage? How did you get it? How often was it on? Did you do any local news?

Tom: Radio news when I started – again, at 15 years of age -- I was in charge of local news and I would get up at four in the morning, and at five a.m. I would be at the local police station and look at the police blotter and I would write down who had been arrested and for what -- the story, if you will, from the police blotter, what it said. Then I would go over to the hospital and (find out) who was admitted or who had babies overnight, etc. and so forth and I would write all that down and take it to the station. Again I was 15, so I wasn't on the air. I would give it to the fellow, Morrie Smith, who was the hometown reporter, if you will. He would do the final story editing and a lot of the things I would say, he would neglect to add or leave out, etc. I just wrote what I saw. So that is how you acquired some of the local news. Throughout the day, people would call you if they had a news story. As happens, businesses would call the media and say, "I'm a really nice person 'cause I'm doing this and I want you to write about, read about it or televise it." So those were some of your sources.

The national news came on the teletype and so all you really had is what you call "rip-and-read" -- whatever the Associated Press fed you and sometimes it would feed you stories that weren't true but you got suckered in like everybody else got suckered in. You'd read it and then the next day when they retracted you'd say, "Sorry, just kidding." And you'd fix it.

I had some interesting experiences that never got on the air but, keep in mind a 15-year-old teenage boy who was on his own, going to school and supporting himself and certainly a stalwart member of the community. Never did anything wrong. One of my beats was, in the afternoon, I would go over to the local hospital and interview the new mothers. It was a small town and you would say, “Who is the father, grandfathers and the grandmothers and what’s the family history and what’s the name of the baby and what are you looking forward to doing?” And all of that. And I would do that every day at 2 or 2:30 and it was just expected. I would go to St. Joseph’s Hospital and do that.

One day something came up where I was a half-hour late. And a thing happens at the hospital at three (as to) why the babies are out. What that means is that they bring the babies in to the mothers and if the mothers chose to feed them, then that’s what they can do. Well, I was well-known in the hospital. I had been doing this for six months, eight months, a year. So I just went bopping up the stairs and right into the maternity ward and here are all these mothers feeding their babies with their built-in baby feeding equipment and for a 15-year-old boy that was the most embarrassing thing in the world. I couldn’t get out of that room quick enough. Then I had to go back when the babies went back to the nursery and talk to these same women. And some of them took pleasure in making me… “Weren’t you earlier? Didn’t I see you standing by the door?” It was terrible.

But local news was such that you wrote it… you used, I think, probably more of your own discretion then than is done now. I think in newsrooms now there is a policy and procedure for everything. Example: here in Anchorage recently there was a fight at the school and several kids literally, more than 100 kids, have been suspended. The school district’s policy is they don’t release the names. As a result, the news media here doesn’t inquire after them or chase them. In old-time radio and television, if you knew it, you used your own discretion whether to pass the name on or not.

Example: a very prominent businesswoman in Fairbanks one evening was going home from an evening out with another very prominent Fairbanks citizen, a gentleman. They were neither married so I’m not implying anything wrong there. They were just dating. They had a dinner. The police pulled the car over because the gentleman was swerving on the road. It was obvious he had too much to drink so they said, “We’ll call you a cab.” They didn’t offer to arrest him. They said, “We’ll call you a cab, leave your car here.” The woman, the prominent businesswoman, was offended that they would accuse her escort of being a drunk driver, so she hit the cop and they arrested her for assault on a cop. This happens at three in the morning. I wander into the police station at five and there is a big to-do going on downstairs where this woman who had been arrested, the prominent businesswoman, had finally reached the point two hours after she had been arrested that she realized she was going to be in front of a judge here in about another two hours having to explain what she did and she just didn’t want to do that. So she thought if she burned her clothing they certainly wouldn’t take her over there in her birthday suit. So when I got there about five, they were just putting out the fire where she had burned all of her clothing and herself and they were just wrapping her in a blanket and she was arraigned that morning at eight o’clock in the blanket. Now let’s just leave it at this: Her

name never was on the air and I got great discounts at her retail business for years to come whenever I came in to purchase a product. I guess that was sort of payola, wasn't it? She, by the way, is still around and we still kind of giggle about it from time to time – part of my retirement fun.

Hilary: That's great.

Tom: But it was and… it was just done differently then. I certainly was not the caliber of radio or television today they have on the air now, the kids that are coming into broadcaster are better than that. We just did it that way because that is all we knew.

Hilary: What was the change in technology as you worked in the industry itself, what changed?

Tom: Well, first of all, government regulation pretty well dictated what you could or could not say or put on the air. Part of that changed, that's not technological, but it changed. It became more liberal as to what could or could not be put on the air. As that came about, the live portion of the programming, what the talent said, how they introduced records, what kind of talk shows -- they had changed. Today it is obvious. You watch, you tune in to a talk show on everything from how to knit if you're left-handed to any kind of deviation you might have in mind. I mean, it is just all out there. That wasn't the case.

Technology -- at the same time the social aspect of what was changing -- was always trying to find more efficient, faster, better, clearer, easier to understand, more audible ways to get the product on the air. There was money to be made, so they did that. We went from the old tube technology where you had to warm up the transmitter for four hours -- two hours before you kicked it on the air -- to transistorized solid-state equipment that you just push the button and it was there. The power output was twice as much. The audio level stayed stable.

One of things we talked earlier (was) about talk shows. We used to do talk shows live where people could call in and it was live -- meaning when they said, "Hello," it was heard on the air, "Hello", but occasionally someone, as I indicated, might say a bad word or something, and as a result it was determined maybe we ought to tape-delay the response. Tape-delay the program. And for those that might hear about this: the way you tape-delay something is, as the input came into the station as you're talking on the telephone to somebody, you're conversing and their (voice) is going into a tape recorder, being recorded, and then it runs through a series of spools to kill time for maybe six or seven seconds, and goes back over the playback of that recorder and that is what goes out on the air. So from the time I was conducting… the interviewer is saying, "Hello, Hilary, How are you today?" until it gets on the air, "Hi, how are you today?" Six seconds. So if you say something terrible about how you are today, I have had six seconds to throw the switch and it is not heard by the audience.

One day while working the board doing a talk show, the record head went out -- the one that records the conversation -- and so what we got is the same 18 seconds of

conversation that was on the tape going out on the air over and over and over again. I had no way of knowing this cause I'm carrying on a program. But the audience is listening to 18 seconds of conversation the same and all of a sudden I get a couple calls people saying, "Your record is stuck, your program is stuck." "I don't know what you're talking about, you people are crazy." When I went to a commercial break and closed the microphone, I could then hear it on the air monitors. What they were talking about became obvious so we did the rest of the show live, and then the chief engineer -- to save my life so that would never happen again -- devised a wonderful method of fixing it. The next day I came to work, (and) he had a set of earmuffs for me to wear. One was what I was saying live to the caller, and the other was six-seconds delayed of what was going out over the air. And I challenge anyone to have a conversation with anyone else while that's going on in your head. About 30 seconds into that I was a blithering idiot. Now technology is such that tape-delay is automated through the control board. The announcer is just there live without even earmuffs on and an engineer controls it all and if something untoward is said it is automatically taken out. So that technology has changed.

Hilary: When you were working in radio early on, you were talking about the Tundra Topics and those kinds of programs. Were there other options for people out in the remote areas at all for communicating?

Tom: Well, really there wasn't, Hilary. Recently we picked up sponsorship of the 800 Yukon Riverboat Race. Someone asked, "Well, why did you do that?" I said, "That was one of the original forms of communications in Alaska. Mail messages, packages, were carried up and down the rivers on the riverboats, be they pleasure boats that people had out -- there weren't that many of them in the old days -- all work boats, fishing boats or the sternwheelers were hauling freight and that meant in the winter months you weren't getting any mail or packages on the boats. In the winter months, communications, messages, packages, mail were carried some placed by dog sled, in some places airplanes brought them into the village. But you start thinking about the cost of that and there weren't a whole lot of huge packages. Nobody ordered pillows to be shipped through the air. It wasn't very cost effective. So communications was restricted, tremendously restricted, and people just lived with it. It was just the way it was. It was kind of odd in a way.

I have an uncle who is in his 90s who, at one time, was an elected official, a territorial senator and then later a state senator. It was his habit -- because the elections were held in the fall of the year -- he would vote absentee and then go deer hunting out to his remote cabin site and he didn't want to know until it was over whether he won or lost. And so he would be out there for a week and when he got off the boat when he came back to town he'd find out whether he won the election or not. Then some idiot brought a radio out to deer hunting camp and almost got shot because you could turn this radio on, transistor radio, something new, a portable radio would receive radio signal and by God you could hear the news. And Marcus found out whether he won or lost before he wanted to find out and was really irritated. Some people didn't adapt to modern technology as others.

Hilary: Well, and I think you bring up an interesting point here, and that is the one about traveling in the Bush. When you were out of touch, you were really out of touch. There weren't a lot of weather reports. You couldn't call in if there were a medical problem, that sort of situation.

Tom: There was no two-way telecommunications at all. If you were lucky, you'd find somebody going to where you wanted a message delivered and say, "Would you mind taking this note or relay this message?" Otherwise nobody knew anything until you showed up.

` I had a great uncle who ran a gold mine out of Nome, Alaska, and he worked the entire winter during the Gold Rush on his mine. It was the spring of the year before his family even knew if he was alive. All they knew is he got to Nome the summer before because he sent them a letter back (saying) that, "I got here and I bought a couple of claims that I will be working on this winter." All winter long, of course, there are no boats running from Nome back to the Lower 48 and no one runs a dog sled that distance and so it was summer when the first boat came in after ice breakup that his mail, his letters… so for eight months, the family didn't know whether he was dead or alive or what to think. They were pleased to hear that he had done well and made some money because then they figured they might get some of it, but it didn't work that way.

Hilary: You're right.

Tom: And people weren't that comfortable with it… People were, to my recollection, back in the 50s. I can still remember the 50s.

Hilary: The 1950s?

Tom: 1950s. Glad you qualified that. People back then were more private. In family gatherings they would share what was going on. If they at church or so forth, they would share what they felt was "community" but what happened within the family and the confines of the family's dwelling was nobody's business but the family. And then, all of a sudden, they have this technology where you can pick up a telephone and someone in your house could tell somebody in another house what you were doing or "Dad just got laid off today" or "We ran out of money." It took a while for some of the older generation to adapt to that and become comfortable with that instant communication. The other thing was trust. Who else is listening to this? Who else is watching this? How do I know it is just you and me?

Hilary: Because there were, oftentimes, more than one person on the other end of the line.

Tom: Oh, yeah… and party lines, of course, and we haven't even got into the phone industry yet. But I can tell you some party line stories and some other stories about communication nightmares where people were talking and didn't realize who was listening. But it just took a while for that technology to catch on.

I recall my aunt -- who is still alive and in her 90s -- when the first airplane arrived in Juneau, Alaska. Her father forbade her to go look at it. It was a bi-wing. It landed at the old dairy across the channel and the reason he did (forbid her) -- and Mame tells this story -- is he said, "If God wanted us to fly, we would have had feathers. That is a tool of the devil." So she had to sneak out of the house to go see the first airplane. Now this woman who is in her 90s marvels that man has been at the moon. You can get in a jet airplane at Juneau's airport and in 90 minutes be in Seattle, Washington. I mean, the things that have happened in her lifetime are phenomenal. We take them for granted.

A story I tell when people ask about the technology change -- and maybe this isn't appropriate but it's a fact -- five years ago I built a new home in the Anchorage area and when I was putting things away in the loft my young son, who at that time was 10, was helping me and I came across a small metal box that had a suitcase handle on it and a clip that held it shut. He asked what that was. Now this is only five years ago so we are talking 1995. I opened him and showed him my Smith Corona portable typewriter that I had used in high school and college. And he looked at it and he said, "Where is the screen?" He had never seen a keyboard that didn't have a screen attached. He didn't know what a typewriter was.

Hilary: Oh, and "word wrap". When you get to the end of the line, then what do you do?

Tom: Oh, that led to a conversation of, well, how to you make… where does… and so we had to put the paper in. What? You had to put the paper in it. And so we ended up doing a demonstration. He said, "Well, what do you do if you want copies?" Then I tried to explain to him, but I didn't have carbon paper. Now try to explain to someone what carbon paper is, you know.

Hilary: Or "cut and paste". "Cut and paste" actually came from somewhere. People used to cut and paste.

Tom: It's crazy, you know, and that's technology changes in the last five years. Some people -- when technology was changing back then -- as it is even today, as you go from one phase to another, what are we losing in the interim? I worry as I watch youngsters working computers today when something happens and it jams, it stalls, it freezes. They just do something with the keyboard and there it's fixed. And then you ask them, "Well, how do you do that?" "Well I just…" "No, better yet, *why* did you do that?" They just know that it fixes it. They don't know the process. I could tell you with my typewriter if the keys jammed how to fix them. I could tell you if the ribbon was bad how to replace it. I mean, I knew how to fix those things. There is a process in the new communication age that isn't quite the same.

Hilary: Yes, I want to go back to the changes.

End of Tape 1, Side A

Tape 1, Side B

Hilary: (We're) talking about the changes in technology. What year did you start in radio and then what year did you leave the broadcast business for new and better things? And what were the changes that you saw during that time?

Tom: On the radio side?

Hilary: On the radio and on the TV side.

Tom: On the radio side it is pretty simple. I mean, the radio when I started was records played on turntables. Microphones were in the station. During the 15 years I was in broadcast, records then came on tape. You could buy complete programs, hours of programming of all of the music with the commercial breaks in it where you could plug in your local news, your local sports, your local community. Came on reel-to-reel tape. It used to be that way. Made it a lot cheaper.

Hilary: Came through the mail?

Tom: Came through the mail. Then toward the end it, came through telephone lines where you could actually bring it up and throw a switch and through a telephone line. And nowadays, of course, it comes -- as I left the industry -- through satellite links and just automated programming. Probably half the stations in Anchorage, Alaska, now 90% of their programming is coming off a satellite feed from the Lower 48 and the only thing that is done really locally is an engineer turns knobs and buttons and the local announcer breaks in when it is time to break in with news, weather, sports, commercials or whatever.

Hilary: And what about any Tundra Topics any more?

Tom: It still exists and it is kind of fun now. There are still cities around. Glennallen is one, for example, I know for sure. KCAM Glennallen has been on the air for almost half a century and they do a thing called Caribou Clatter. That's what they call it and people write in or call in to the station. They can now call on the telephone and give a message but still to people who live outback where there aren't any phones. And messages are still as interesting. "Harry, you need to come to town. The dog had puppies and I don't want to keep them." I mean, there are still, "My God, what is the matter with that family? You know -- or Josey should know -- that the green gunk that so and so is spitting out of his nose, it is okay. He just has the flu and the doctor said that he would be fine."

I mean, that's the only way they can communicate so they do it very basically. Interesting to note that some of those programs got in trouble legally a while back in that

people were fencing stolen goods using code words and selling drugs on some of these programs announcing where you could pick them up, what the prices were and so forth. I had no idea that was going on. I saw the article in the newspaper where the police had cracked the ring announcing where various pot parties were held. You had to know the code. You had to be in the "in" crowd, where to buy things, so they were using the old telecommunication systems to get people together. Passing useful information on.

Hilary: If you look back at that span of time and what you know about the history of radio before that, broadcast in the state, who were the personalities who made a difference?

Tom: Well, obviously Cap Lathrop out of Fairbanks who funded the premier radio stations and networks in the state of Alaska. Cap was an entrepreneur even (then) but he had been around for a while and made his money in the railroad and coal business, but recognized that Alaska was coming of age and needed things like the theater and the arts. He built, in Fairbanks, the old Empress Theater, which doesn't exist any more. [*Ed note: Lathrop's Empress Theater and Lacey St. Theater buildings in Fairbanks are still extant.*] It is now gone but its twin is the old Fourth Avenue Theater in Anchorage which has been restored and does exist. He built, owned, and operated Midnight Sun Broadcast, which was KFAR Radio in Fairbanks and still exists. The transmitter is still there on Farmers Loop Road. If you walk in, it's a piece of history in that building -- right out of the late 30s and early 40s because of the architecture, the furniture, the wall paneling, all of it. That's where it came from. It was state of the art. It was the best you could buy and it's there. In Anchorage KENI radio, was his station and it still exists. The transmitter site over on the lagoon there, that's Westchester Lagoon, and I don't know what is being done with it. It's not a broadcast station any more but the building is still there. When Cap decided to do this, he hired himself a talent named Al Bramstedt from the Lower 48, and he hired an engineer named Augie Hiebert, and they both got to Fairbanks and started in broadcast or started his station for him.

Augie then spun off and came to Anchorage and started his own radio station, but further, (he) opened the first television station in the state of Alaska. I was in Anchorage when KTVA Channel 11 went on the air. I grew up without television and all of a sudden in 1955 TV was here. I can honestly tell you we owned one of the first TV sets in our block. It was an Emerson. It had a weird-shaped screen. It was black and white. It had a channel selection knob and there were only VHF channels so there were 10 of them. An on and off switch, that's it. Nobody had even thought of color. When Augie went on the air, for the first week he broadcast for about an hour a day in the afternoons the old Indian head test pattern while he was tuning his transmitter. Kids would come home from school with me and we would sit in our living room and watch the test pattern. We had never seen television and it would flicker once in a while. "Did you see that?" "Yeah, the third feather on the right is moving." "Did you see that?" "I saw that." I mean, we'd sit there for an hour. Our mothers loved it. For an hour we were locked in, in front of the TV set, doing nothing. Some things don't change. Now kids are locked in for hours on end doing nothing. But Augie then signed on TV.

We talked a little bit earlier about the tape-delay function of television with the news. Well, that's the same way programs came to Alaska in early television. All programming then was on film. There was no videotape and so, depending on what network you were in -- ABC, CBS, NBC -- you would get from the Seattle affiliate of that network the reel of film that was that program, whether it was "Groucho Marx", "You Bet Your Life" or whether it was a "Lawrence Welk" show or some of the old, old programs, "Death Valley Days," came in film.

Now, the way it worked is (that) the West Coast in California showed those programs when they were supposed to be shown. If it was a Wednesday program, then the following Wednesday it was shown in Seattle, then it was shipped to Anchorage (for airing) the following Wednesday. It was…all the promotions were built into the program. "Be sure to watch next Wednesday when the Cisco Kid does…" whatever or "…when I Love Lucy and (Desi) off together." The promos were built in so it had to run. So the following Wednesday, it would come from Seattle and be played a week later in Anchorage, then a week later it would be played in Fairbanks and then finally a week later, when television went to Juneau, in Juneau. So you were at least three weeks to a month behind the curve on all your programming. I grew up as a kid watching Christmas specials about the second week of February. I mean, that's just the way it was. You didn't get them in Anchorage because they came a week after, a week after, a week after. I thought you always watched you know the Christmas shows in February. That's the way I thought it was.

That technology obviously changed from videotape to satellite 'cause they could make a videotape and make massive dupes of the programming and send them out to everybody.

Going back to where I was coming from, with this, programs were always delayed and occasionally – no, not occasionally, on a *regular* basis -- you would see on your screen the regularly scheduled program for this time, "I Love Lucy" will not be shown this week due to non-arrival of film. The regularly scheduled such and such will not be shown due to non-arrival of film cause it was all coming through the airplanes didn't fly or the weather was bad.

So it was kind of interesting to know when Augie first signed on the air, the very first television station ever in the state of Alaska to sign on -- they came up on the air. They did the voice-over of what they were doing, "Isn't it wonderful: television coming to Alaska." And then the next announcement was, "Due to non-arrival of such and such, the program scheduled for this time won't be shown. In its place…" So the very first program scheduled to go on the air was preempted 'cause it didn't get here. True story.

Hilary: Now Augie never told me this story.

Tom: Oh, it's true, absolutely true. Talking about television…when we moved to the satellite era, it became imperative to have earth stations 'cause satellites work from the space down to an earth station on the ground. And the very first earth station in the state of

Alaska was built by the military under contract by Comsat, built in Talkeetna. Now it is called the Bartlett Earth Station. Did Augie tell you how it got its name and the history?

Hilary: Yeah.

Tom: Well, I won't bore you with that. But it belonged to the military. Didn't belong to the civilian community and so they had to make it available whenever the civilian community could con them into it, to watch things like man landing on the moon or Super Bowl. Pretty soon, the demand was every day (that) the civilian population wanted TV programming and the military figured out, "Maybe we should get out of this business." Now that's about the time that ACS, the old Alaska Communication System, decided that it had enough heat with the problems they were having with broadcast people wanting their satellite used for video and they ran the only long-distance networks in the state and they were getting a lot there cause that wasn't their prime objective so they put it up for sale.

In 1969 RCA Corporation was the successful bidder. They paid $5 million for it and offered to double that amount in the next five years. So $10 million invested over a five-year period of time to upgrade communications in Alaska. Let me assure you, they spent hundreds of times more than that, when you consider the last satellite launched to service Alaska was a $250 million bird.

Hilary: And one goes up Tuesday that will serve Alaska again.

Tom: Yeah. We did an Aurora I and Aurora II when I was in the Alascom business. I assume they're going to call it Aurora III. I don't know. I haven't seen anything in the media. When we sent our first one up, we had a statewide contest and let the school kids name it and (inaudible). We'll finish off with broadcast I know you want to move into the other ones. Broadcast was fun. We traveled the state. We did remotes.

One of the big events still is (covered) but now it is covered in small print in the newspaper but then was broadcast live on radio. If you ever lived in Alaska, one of the most important things about an Alaskan winter is when it is over. And one of the official times when it is over is when the ice goes out on the Tanana River in Nenana, Alaska. And so a betting contest originated down there, where they took a bunch of old telephone poles, put them in the form of a tripod and stuck them out on the ice and they started taking bets on when that thing was going to fall over when the ice went out. It evolved into something that tickets were sold statewide and you guessed the day, the minute, and the hour. And the city of Nenana administered it. If you were on the winning ticket when it finally went out, you got 50% of whatever was in the jackpot. Now once you started getting that kind of money involved, people had an interest in it. A lot of dollars were invested. We're talking about in the 60s when I first got involved in the broadcast side of it, jackpots of $150,000. Now $150,000 in 1962-63 was big bucks.

Archives and Special Collections, Consortium Library, University of Alaska Anchorage.
HMC-0859. Hilary J. Hilscher Alaska telecommunications history project records.
Series 3: Oral history recordings transcripts.

So obviously broadcast was interested and KFAR out of Fairbanks would go down to the banks of the Tanana River in Nenana and broadcast live every hour on the hour the status of the river and the tripod. Now they would wait until it was pretty sure it was going to go within a week or so, you know. I, unfortunately, one year… and all of us who have been in broadcast for any length of time -- Dick Lobdell who is still alive, myself, several others -- got to pull that duty. One year they had a warm spell in mid-April where it got up to 45-50 degrees for a couple of days and snow melting and oh, my God, the ice was going to go.

So they shipped me to Nenana and we had a little camper trailer that had a plexiglass window on the front. You lived in the trailer. It had a bed in it where you could sleep in your sleeping bag and a couple of turntables where you could spin records. You had a microphone and it was set up so I could broadcast and they wired it into a phone line. They had sold the broadcast of the Nenana ice coverage to about 25 companies so they're taking money. So every hour on the hour, I was obligated to come on the air and gave a five-minute ice report. I got down there the day the temperature dropped from 50 during the daytime to zero again and it hung there for 15 days.

First of all, the thing about this every-hour-on-the-hour, you know, you can do that for a day but the second day you start dozing off and about the third day you better start getting some sleep or you're going to die. And so I got a deal going with a couple of the local guys where they'd come in and I taught them how to open the microphone and just say the ice is the same, nothing is happening and then turn it off so I could get some sleep. But that year, I believe, the ice it went out one cube at a time -- as I consumed it in my cocktails -- when I finally got enough ice out of that damn river so that the tripod would fall over. It was a horrible experience. I thought I was born and was going to die on the banks of the Tanana River.

Now that all being said, the device that set off the clock or stopped the clock that determined it was the most "Rube Goldberg" operation you've ever seen. When you had that amount of money involved, people want to know how you determine what the time is. Let me tell you, the tripod sat in the middle of the river and from the tripod a rope ran to a tower on the riverbank about 200 yards away. That rope went over a pulley and was attached to a 50-gallon drum full of rocks. Okay. When the tripod moved far enough, it would pull the rope taut. The 50-gallon drum of rock would start to be pulled up just enough to release a pin that held a spring in place that allowed a meat cleaver to go blink and cut a rope on the other side of the tower that dropped the 50-gallon drum full of rocks. A small cord from that rope was attached to the clock and it unplugged the clock. That's how they determined what time the river went out. There is no way you could have done anything out there at the tripod on the ice to guarantee it, because all that had to take place and the tripod had to move 100 feet to make it happen.

I was on the banks of the river one year broadcasting. The ice started to go and moved about 50 yards and stopped. So we're live on the air now, the ice is all jammed up, and we are waiting for it to go the other 50 yards required so that it will stop the clock. The

siren goes off in town. Everybody in the city of Nenana was on the riverbank. It was about ten in the morning so they were all clothed but they were on the riverbank. About the first week in May I think it was, the last couple of days in April, first of May. Anyway, it finally moved. The ice pressure built up, the river burst out, very dramatic, the iceberg was jumping in the air 15-20 feet. We are talking about ice flows that are six, eight feet in diameter or thickness. The tripod moved the required 50 yards, the clock stopped, and the officials go to the base of the tower, the timing tower, and there through the glass window you can see the clock and it is stopped at exactly such and such a time. I say "exactly." The second was precisely on 12 and the determination had to be made that the last fraction of a second of this hour minute or the first fraction of a second of the next hour minute but it was right on 12. So the committee, the local residents, met right there at the base of the tower. All this time we're live broadcasting, "What do you think?" "Oh I think it's great." "I think they shouldn't do this." "Wasn't it wonderful?" And we're talking. They made their decision. They announced it and standing right next to me was Red Swanson, the former legislator, who has now passed on, who owned the minute they chose against. He would have been a winner if they had said no, it was the other minute. And so we did the rest of the broadcast with the microphone half shielded because Red was not kind in his remarks about the committee and about the decision that they had made. And Red's language was very similar to the color of his hair and his nickname, really, really vivid. It was one of those kinds of broadcasts.

I hold the distinction of having been the winner of that one year. Unfortunately and there was about 130,000 handed out. I was a member of a pool. A lot of people get together and everybody throws in five bucks and you buy 50 tickets. Our pool was one of 25 winners who had the right minute. By the time we split that all out, and then split it out in our pool, I got a check for $110 out of 150,000. But just being able to say we won it one year was well worth it.

Hilary: That is so great.

Tom: Thanks to the Tanana River and lovely downtown Nenana.

Hilary: What else about radio that, when you tell stories to your grandkids at some point in the future, will you look back and say this was one of the special moments?

Tom: What I found enjoyable about radio in my career is that it required your audience to use their imagination because there were no pictures to go with it. So, I think it required more concentration -- if you were listening to a radio program, to a story on the radio, to an announcer telling a story, an interview, whatever -- than television requires today. You can do television… I do television in the morning when I get up. I have a cup of coffee, the morning newspaper, and the television set on and I do all three and absorb a little from each, though not a whole lot from any one. You can't do that in radio and listen. So I guess the thing that I would say -- 'cause I made my living in the communications field -- is what you learn from radio is how to tell a good story if you were on the radio side.

How to keep it interesting, how not to be too wordy about it 'cause you lose your audience and you hear about that later when they tuned out.

The other thing that I learned -- and I watch youngsters coming up, I have a young boy who is a state debate champion and has won it twice, his team and then he has won a couple individually and so forth -- and what drives me crazy listening to my son talk is he speaks about 25 times faster than I do. It is all I can do to tune in and catch every other word. It happens to be the speech pattern of this generation and I try to remind him, if you're in that format of debate you want them to listen and hear, not miss every other word. "Well, Dad, you're just old-fashioned." I said, "No. Watch the television news today. It hasn't changed in the big networks. The Tom Brokaws of the world today are like the Walter Cronkites of yesterday. They pick and choose the words in their stories very carefully because the stories are not wordy and they speak not slowly but they speak at a normal rate and very distinctly."

So I always remember from the radio side… I'm not sure if that's where you were going with the question but that was the same to me what I found most impressive (was) what you could do with your voice. The other thing that I always marveled at is people could listen to you for a month and not make a comment but you make one mistake on the air and 512 of them will call you within 30 minutes and tell you about it. I mean, and I have done that. We all have done that. It is embarrassing and it is nothing. If it is done live, as opposed to tape-recorded you can always deny it, because they can never recreate it to prove whether you're right or wrong. If, unfortunately, it's on tape, it'll kill you. Now how crude do you want this tape recording to be?

During the pipeline boom in the 1970s when I was in television, we had a contract with the Alyeska Pipeline Company to provide them with the nightly Alaska newscast. And what happened is (that) I would air it live in Anchorage. I was the news director and one of the anchors on the cast and it was videotaped at the same time and then we would send those video tapes to the 20 or 24 -- I can't remember how many -- but pipeline camps. The next day Alyeska paid the freight because they had cars and trucks going so that those people, it was delayed, they didn't get it live but they got the news within 24 hours of when it was aired and it included local, national, etc. and so forth.

Well, I had covered a story about a young man who was working his trapline in Skwentna where he had been attacked by a bear and the bear had just jumped all over him and ruined his afternoon. And I had gone over and shot videotape as we rescued the man or as they rescued the man. Very dramatic, the helicopter had to hover, the wind was blowing, the trees were swaying, they had to come down in a basket, pick him up and half of his face was gone. He had been mauled terribly. I mean, it was just a marvel that he was still alive. His wife had done everything at the scene to stop the bleeding and probably was ultimately responsible for saving his life.

I covered that story on Monday night. Tuesday, I get the follow-up 'cause we in the media follow up lead stories like that and what's going on. And I recall what the story

said. It said, I know because I wrote it, it said, "Thirty-nine-year-old Ron Cole of Skwentna remains in critical condition tonight at Providence Hospital after being maulled by a bear near his cabin." Now I'm sitting in the studio in Anchorage and I read this story -- and I said to the entire Anchorage audience, live on television in their living room, on their TV set – "Thirty-nine-year-old Ron Cole of Skwentna remains in critical condition in Providence Hospital the night after being balled by a bear near his cabin." And my cameraman did exactly what you're doing. He fell on the floor laughing and giggling. I heard the switcher in the other room through the wall saying, "He can't say that on television," but I had already said it. Now I'm moving on to the next story and then I'm thinking to myself -- 'cause I heard the error, the tongue-tied error -- and I'm thinking, "I bet that hurt like hell. No wonder he is critical…" And so I started to smile a bit, live on television. Thank God we went to a commercial break.

Now when I finished the newscast every line in the station was lit up, at which point I did the only honorable thing you could do and I lied. I said, "No, you misunderstood me. I said, 'The man was mauled by a bear near his cabin.' What a terrible thing to accuse me of." I forgot entirely that that newscast was videotaped and the following day it played in about 24 pipeline camps and the next day, Augie, the owner of the station, and the vice president started getting requests for copies of the tape because people wanted to send it down south to show how rough it is living in Alaska, you know. So it happens to all of us. You know, you get tongue-tied. You say the wrong word. I once got the words "organism" and "orgasm" confused in the newscast and that just proved really embarrassing, but it has happened to most people. It goes with the territory, you know. But when you're on air, they're always there to get you. You can do everything perfect 112 times, (but) do it wrong once and they get you.

Hilary: If that wasn't the example, what one anecdote would capture your career in radio or television? The broadcast period… and maybe not just one…

Tom: Well, I'm going to sort of create this the way you asked the question. I hadn't thought of it in that perspective, but my broadcast career was such that I was a local kid. I did the job, just kind of fell into it, and then it developed. After writing news there was a job to be a DJ, and I did that. And then I found it was pretty easy to just sit in a room for four hours a day and talk to yourself and get paid for it and people knew who you were and there was sort of an ego trip that went along with it and so forth. And as you did all of that, part of it went to your head: "well, maybe I'm a little better than the average guy because people know who I am." And I guess part of that is natural. You get over it real quick when someone brings you back to real life, but I was going through that phase of where I was a media… I don't want to say "star", but I was a media personality and I was living in Anchorage, Alaska, which was the largest city in the state, and I was anchoring the six p.m. newscast that was -- at that time -- the number one television station in the state and I was the news director for that channel. I didn't have any money by the way -- we covered that -- but I had a lot of credentials.

A fellow by the name of Jamie Farr, who played Corporal Klinger in the MASH (TV) series, came to Alaska promoting CBS television. And he was asked to do some non-profit public service announcements in drag because that was his character. He always dressed as a woman -- trying to get out of the Army because he was "confused". He was a psycho. He said he would do that but only if a couple of us local guys would join him in drag. Now I was young enough where I would take any dare. Nobody could scare me off so they said, "We'll take your news director, the guy that does the newscast. We'll have him." "Well, sure why not? Who cares?" And there was one other fellow. Now I am not a handsome fellow but when you put me in a sheath dress and a pillbox hat, nylons and high heels -- I'm flat ugly. Now we didn't have any speaking parts in that commercial. We just stood there beside him -- as local people who could be recognized, you know -- with mascara, eyebrow pencil, lipstick.

Hilary: Was this taped?

Tom: This was taped. Done on videotape, and we did two 30-second announcements where he did all of the talking and so forth, and it worked pretty well. The non-profit got quite a bit of response when he was there. I got 8,000 phone calls of what an idiot I was, laughing, giggling, pointing. My ego was really disturbed. So when the series was done, I personally stood in front of the degaussing machine and erased that videotape. It does not exist. It will never show up in America's Funniest Owned Videos, I guarantee it. I mean I know it's gone.

However, about two years later, minding my own business, I moved from broadcast and was now working in the communications industry. Considered a businessman. And had done some serious television interviews when a brown envelope arrives in my office. No, actually it was the home address, no return address on it, postmarked Anchorage. I learned that after I went back to look at it later. Opened it, and inside were two black-and-white photos of me in that outfit in the studio. Someone was in that room when we were taping, shot some film, and it is out there. Now there was no letter, no ransom demand, just the two photos arrived. About seven or eight, nine years later I got another one in the mail at my home and I had since moved, different address. So whoever this person is knows how to get a hold of me. I was in Juneau in the early 1990s and got one at Christmas time in Juneau, another envelope, same photos, (the photographer) only got two of them and they were really bad -- or good, depending on your perspective. And that's the last time I got it -- in the early 90s -- but what it tells me is, "Don't ever think of running for political office. Don't ever get any bigger than you really are. Don't forget where you came from." All of the above is what I take away from my broadcast career. Because there is always somebody out there that is a better gunslinger than you are.

Hilary: That's a great story. Okay, let's do this one. Okay, back to the Tanana Valley Fair.

Tom: Well, we learned… I made reference earlier to "never ask a kid a question you don't the answer to because they'll kill you.' Kids don't know how to lie; they have to learn that. Example: the Christmas story of when I asked him, "well, why were you told to go back

to bed?" And they told me. Another example of that; working at the Tanana Valley Fair, another year where we had a roving microphone, again the talent was Larry Holmstrom, who is long gone but a legend broadcaster, and I was anchoring it. Larry went over to the 4-H group because in broadcasting anything you do with kids gets you an audience. Kids are entertaining. And so I throw it to Larry for an interview over there and he has got, standing next to him, a young boy. He said, "Hi, what is your name?" And the kid said, "Jeffery"… something or other. (Larry) said, "You've got a goat here." "Yes, my goat.' He said, "I see it has got a ribbon." "Yeah, it won." "Well, what color is that ribbon?" "It's red." This is radio so you have to explain everything. "Well, what does the red ribbon mean?" Larry asks. "We got second prize." "Well, you must be very proud. Why didn't you get first prize?" Don't ask the question. "Why didn't you get first prize?" And the answer was, "Because he shit on the judge."

Hilary: That's great.

Tom: And there we were live with our face hanging out, you know. You can't say that on the radio and we just did. I don't know if you remember Irene Marie Sherman. She was the town character in Fairbanks.

Hilary: One of the town characters.

Tom: Yeah, burned terribly scarred. There were several. Mrs. Ford was another. But (Irene) was the town character. She died being called the "Queen of Fairbanks". She would show up at all the affairs. Nice lady. She was sort of our original bag lady, but she was used to threaten children as they were growing up. "If you don't eat your spinach, Irene is going to get you." She was also used by the local police department to test new cops. If they could pick her up once every six months, get her to the hospital where she had to have a physical and a bath -- neither one of which she wanted -- then they figured they could make it as a cop. Otherwise, if she beat the snot out of them, they weren't going to make it. Anyway Irene again taught me… a humble story just comes to mind after the (drag photo). I had gone to work for Alascom. I was now an executive. I wore a suit and a tie. I talked to business leaders. I traveled the state. I was an important person, Hilary.

I was in Fairbanks having a meeting. Prior to that in Fairbanks, I was a broadcaster. And as a kid who grew up (there) I met Irene and I knew her. I had done a couple of interviews with her, fascinating woman, little crude, but fascinating woman with a lot of history. Whenever I'd see Irene, I would always buy her a beer. Now sometimes she would just wave and say, "Hi." Other times she would come over and say, "Thank you." Never intruded but I'd always buy her a beer and occasionally I'd find some time and sit down at the bar next to her, buy her a beer, talk to her for a few minutes and excuse myself.

Now I'm a businessman, I'm important. I'm in Fairbanks sitting at a local bar entertaining out-of-state telecommunication business people. We're talking about a big contract and how important it is, and Irene walks in and she sits at the bar. She saw me

and I saw her. I nodded. I did not send her a beer. About 10 minutes into the conversation, Irene came over to the table. Now you got to imagine Irene. Besides being rather a badly scarred burn victim on her facial features, she was also a bag lady. She hadn't bathed in about six months. She smelled worse than a moose that had been dead for six months. Her clothing -- Salvation Army wouldn't even take it in, let alone redo it. Irene was a bad character as far as physical appearance.

Anyway, this woman dressed like that, looking like that, came over to our table. I was just impressing the hell out of these people. She walked up behind me and put her arms around my neck and gave me a big kiss on the cheek and said, "Hey, Sweetie, are you coming over tonight?" Turned around and walked off. There was nothing I could do at that point or say. It wasn't even worth an attempt. I mean, the meeting was over. They were going, they were gone. She taught me a lesson. No matter who you are don't forget where you came from.

End Tape 1, Side B