

Harry Frey

Tape 1

May 23, 1980 -- 2:00 P. M.

WTHI Building - 9th Street and Ohio Street, Terre Haute, Indiana

Interviewer: Martin Plascak

Transcriber: Nancy Bettinghaus

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MP: Harry, you go back in the radio here in the Terre Haute area to 1932. That's a long time ago. That was during the Depression years. What was radio like when you first started in 1932?

FREY: Well, Martin, my first impressions of radio . . . I actually got started -- what little bit I did in radio at that time -- because out of school, I sang. I was a singer and sang in plays and in productions that we had at school, and I decided to try to get an audition on radio. I had listened to radio and I heard people singing with singing programs and I thought, well, I'll try it. So I went down to get an audition; and they said, well, they liked me all right, but they didn't pay any money or anything like that. If I wanted a program, I could have it. So my first impressions were that kind of thing. The fact that nobody . . . I suppose at the time there were a few people getting paid, but people who did talent programs like that received nothing. We got theater tickets or maybe something like that once in a while, but that's about all. And there was a lot more of that kind of thing going on in radio then. See, they had really no network programs or anything like that so all the radio programs were originated right there at the station.

So I had a regular singing program -- a 15-minute singing program. As I remember, I think it was twice a week. They called me The Matinee Songster. That's the way it was billed.

At the same time, there were two other people who had singing programs. One, of course, was Burl Ives as you remember. He had a program they called "The Wayfaring Stranger" in which he was then doing folk songs as he has done all through his career. He was in school here at the time. And also a fellow named Claude Fitzsimmons, who they called The Melody Lad, also had the same type of 15-minute singing program.

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FREY: They had other programs of people playing piano and various music programs and talk programs. That was all they had on radio at that time.

MP: Now, when you began in 1932 was it to perpetuate or promote a musical career, or did you ever think that you eventually would end up to stay in broadcasting as an announcer and later in news and the other jobs associated with broadcasting?

FREY: Not really. I was already getting interested in the music business even when I had the singing programs. I saw the bands playing and this kind of thing, and that intrigued me. I did play a little bit of piano and had fooled around with a bass viol, so I began to think, well, I can sing a little bit here, apparently. Maybe I can get a job with bands playing the bass and singing. So that's really . . . further than that I had no thoughts of staying in that particular thing or winding up in broadcasting in any other capacity.

MP: When and where did the change begin then? When did you ease out of the musical field and finally get into the announcing bit or the on-the-air portion of your career?

FREY: Well, this was much later, Martin. I did this. As I say, I was playing the bass viol and singing, so I decided to try to get work with bands after I got out of school. And that's exactly what I did. I started working with local bands first. Leo Baxter (you may have remembered Leo Baxter had a band). I was with his orchestra for quite a long time. I actually started out with a band. Jack O'Grady's orchestra was the first one I worked with. I later went with Leo Baxter and sang and played the bass viol in those bands. Again, as I say, I had no thoughts

Actually, I should go back a little farther even before I went up to get an audition as a singer to try to get a job or to get a singing program on

FREY: this station. I can remember when the station was a little earlier than that. I think it was just south of Wabash Avenue on Eighth Street, if I remember right. Either there or I think it was in the Deming Hotel for a while -- one of those two places anyway. There were two people that I knew pretty well. One was Stanford Gilley, Bobby Gilley [nickname], who later was a music teacher at McLean Jr. High School and several schools around the Terre Haute area. Another singer who worked with a trio, Bobby Jones, worked with a vocal trio around town. I can remember seeing -- looking through the window and seeing them. They were called singing messengers -- or singing pages rather -- and they carried messages back and forth between people. They would stop and sing a song over the radio ever so often. Well, I was fascinated by that. If I remember, I think that is really how come I later decided to try to get an audition and get a singing program.

MP: Well, So to summarize for just a moment then, you actually . . . your first interest in broadcasting -- early broadcasting in Terre Haute -- began with the idea that you wanted to sing with a view toward developing a musical career, I take it?

FREY: Right. At least playing and singing in bands.

MP: What do you remember even before you took your first audition or went to it? What do you remember about those? We were in the middle of a depression at that time. Radio was not very old. What do you remember about this first commercial radio station in Terre Haute, which was WBOW [and] which developed soon after WRPI at Rose Poly ended its broadcasting?

FREY: Well, the station itself, when I went up to the audition when I started doing the singing programs, was at Sixth and Wabash [Streets] over where Rogers Jewelry Store is now. That was a multiple-story building at one time. Of course, you probably remember that. They took off the top stories. Well, WBOW was on the second floor of that building so that was my first impression.

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FREY: Bill Bearman was the manager of the station at that time and I don't remember too much about the . . . I know there were DJs and they had commercials, were selling commercials, etc. I don't remember much about the rest of the personnel, because I was too tied up with the people involved in the singing programs. There was, as I remember, a Buddy Lawson that played piano and his sister, Ruth Lawson, sang. She had a singing program like the fellows did. And there were two or three other people besides that who played. But again, I would repeat that most of the programs were locally originated -- mostly musical programs [with] some talk programs.

MP: What kind of a physical facility was up above Rogers Jewelry Store?

FREY: Well, it was just a few rooms on that second floor. We didn't have the entire floor; and, as I recall, there was a control room, one room they used for studio, and some waiting room space which, as I remember, was out in the hall with two or three sofas along the wall for people to sit in until they came into the station.

MP: Herman Moench told me this when I interviewed him pertaining to the station at Rose. [He said] that he thought that the first station -- the first studios for the first commercial station -- here in town, WBOW -- were in the old Deming Hotel building. Do you remember that facility at all?

FREY: No, I don't. This may be the place I'm talking about that I used to watch Bobby Jones and Stanford Gilley as singing pages. I'm probably mistaken about the Eighth Street address. It was probably the Deming Hotel rather than that.

MP: So you remember from there the studios went up above the Rogers Building or at the . . . I understand at one time they were at the Oddfellows Building too?

FREY: Well, this is what I was thinking of. That's where I thought I remembered these studios as being at Eighth [Street] and the alley between Wabash and

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FREY: Ohio Streets on Eighth Street. I think that's possibly one of the moves that they made before they went to the Sixth and Wabash

MP: I don't think they were at the Deming Hotel too long.

Harry, again, what was Terre Haute like back in those early years when commercial radio blossomed upon the scene?

FREY: Well, Martin, of course, they were in the middle of the Depression. My impressions of that were that everybody was trying desperately to have enough money to feed their families and to exist. That was -- the main object was -- to exist. And there was no work for many, many, many people. So not being paid at the radio station really didn't bother any of us much because we couldn't make much money anyway anyplace else. My family, of course, were . . . my father was working but just barely. I mean, there was not much money to be had. So really, my impressions of the city and of the whole thing at that point were pretty depressing.

MP: Was radio a big thing then? Can you recall?

FREY: Yes. Radio was becoming a big thing, even just with singing programs like that. You would go out and people would say they heard you on the radio, so it was growing. It was, of course, not, you know, to any kind of capacity like it became. But it was growing considerably.

MP: In other words you would sing in your early years when you first got in, and someone would say "I heard you" just as years later they would say "I saw you on television."

FREY: Right. Same idea.

MP: All right. Now, let's find out and get started in when you actually made the move to get into broadcasting as a broadcaster.

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FREY: Maybe we should. There's another step in there before that, Martin, that I think probably we should And that's the fact that they [the studio] moved from the above the Rogers Jewelry location [16 North Sixth Street] down to Sixth and Ohio [24½ South Sixth Street] which, at one point, (let's see --the northeast corner, that would be) was the Beach block. Part of the Root Store was in that building where now, I guess, the Root parking lot is. Well, this is kind of an interesting thing. They had to move the station when they were off the air, of course. They had the Beach block location -- which again was on the second floor -- already to go but the equipment had to be moved so several of us who were more or less working at the station moved all the equipment of the station at night after midnight after they signed off. They signed off at midnight. This one night, we carried bodily all the equipment -- control board [and] everything that the station operated with -- carried it down the street and up the stairs and into the Beach block. The engineers hooked it all up and they went on the air the next morning. [1933 or '34]

MP: And you participated in that even though you were actually not a member of the broadcasting staff?

FREY: That's right. All the people who worked in any capacity were there and helped, which was part of the job.

MP: So, from there then

FREY: After that, Martin, I left. [1936] I was with bands by that time and left and went on the road and didn't get back in to Terre Haute until 1942, actually. I came back for real brief periods but not to work or anything.

MP: I think it's a safe assumption to say that if we trace early commercial broadcasting in Terre Haute to studio locations in the city, that the first studio was in the Deming Hotel. We're sure of that. For how long we don't know. From there it apparently went to the Oddfellows Building which is at Eighth and [Ohio]. . .

FREY: South Eighth Street.

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- MP: Right. And from there it moved to the Rogers Building; and from there to the Beach block at the Root store; and from there to Sixth and Poplar, apparently . . .
- FREY: Where it stayed for a long, long time -- until 1955.
- MP: Right. All right. So now . . . we have gone from Rogers to the Beach block. You were then not on the staff yet when the studio was located in the Beach block, were you?
- FREY: No. Same thing. It was the same setup as I had before the Rogers location.
- MP: How much time -- back in those years when you were singing and doing these musical programs -- did you spend at the station?
- FREY: Probably more than I should have. I was fascinated with the business -- any phase of the business. Probably, if I had known it, I was fascinated just with radio and didn't realize it; but I was, of course, involved in the singing end. I was down there probably part of every day. I didn't have a program every day. I had one only a couple of times a week. But I was there anyway, because I was just fascinated by it.
- MP: So in addition then to your own musical program and other musical programs, did . . . can you recall any other particular events? Most of the programming then was live. Were there any speakers that came in of a national importance or anything like that?
- FREY: Martin, I know there probably were . . . I don't think there was anybody of national importance, but I'm sure there were some talk programs. Again I was probably kind of on a one-track situation there and was more interested in the musical end than in the others, but I'm sure there were other types of programs, talk programs and But a lot of it was musical.
- MP: Before we start developing your actual broadcasting career, while we're on the subject of music, you remember then Burl Ives?

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FREY: /I/ sure do.

MP: Did you actually work with him?

FREY: Yes.

MP: What kind of a relationship was that?

FREY: Well, as I say, there were three of us who had regular singing programs; and we were there together quite a bit and listened to each other and talked a lot. He was in school at ISU at the time. He had been in school at Eastern Illinois, as I remember, and came over here for some special work and was studying under a local folk music teacher, woman. I don't recall the name or anything, but he was taking -- studying -- folk music at the time. All through this he was studying folk music.

MP: Um-mmm.

FREY: And spending his time at the radio station.

MP: Did you say that Bill Bearman was the manager then?

FREY: Bill Bearman was the manager. Right.

MP: All right. Now. Should we now begin pursuing your actual broadcasting career or are there some other thoughts that you have prior to . . .

FREY: I don't think so. As I mentioned, I was in the music business and traveled with traveling orchestras for quite some time. /I/ came back in occasionally and played with a local band /but/ then /went/ right back out again. But I came back in 1942 to, I thought, probably stay in Terre Haute. I didn't know exactly what I was going to do at that time. We were on a very successful . . . band that I was with at the time. But the war was on. I was 1-A. It was becoming difficult to find places to live and the places Housing was getting tough all over the country, and my wife was going to have out

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FREY: first son. I thought, well, I don't know. I don't think I want to drag a child around like the life we've been leading, so I just made up my mind that when he was born I was going to quit. So he was born in 1942. Before time for the baby to be born, I came home, left our last job (with the band) and came home and was here with no job. So I tried a number of things. [I] worked at several things. There were a couple of plants here in town [that] I worked at. [There were] various things like that.

And then I was again playing with Leo Baxter's band [which was] by that time in Terre Haute. And Leo was musical director at WBOW. So one night on a job -- I wasn't working daytime -- I said something about "gee, I wish I could find something to do in the daytime." Things were pretty tough to find a job. He said, "Well, why don't you come up to the station and audition to be an announcer?" I said, "Well, I've never done anything like that before, and I don't know whether I could or not." He said, "Well, you might as well try." So I did. I went up and auditioned, and I was very bad, I know. I listened to myself and thought it was terrible. George Jackson was the manager then. Well, George had a talk with me and said, "Well, you're not very good but," he said, "we need people." He said, "why don't you go home and read aloud for two or three weeks and come back up and we'll try it again?" So I did just that and when I went back up, he hired me. That was the spring of 1942.

MP: That was right in the middle of the war. So your broadcasting career began then. You were hired by George Jackson, and Leo Baxter was the musical director. He later became program director.

FREY: Leo later became program director. Right.

MP: So now you're in the radio station there. What was your first job?