

Bob Kern:



I was on the air the other day and read an announcement for one our local high school's reunion committee's meetings. It suddenly occurred to me that this is the 50th Anniversary of my graduation from Leyden High School!!! Where did the time go? Unbelievable!

Anyway, I checked the internet and found your 1959 reunion website and also discovered that I'm among the "Missing."

I remember many of you from classes and activities we had together and I'm happy to see you're well. I was sad to see so many names of old friends and classmates on the "Departed" list.

I was looking at the '59 Eagle Annual this morning, and found that my future plans were to become a "Radio Engineer." I'm happy to report that I've accomplished that - and then some - over the past 50 years. However, I don't look much like that kid in the picture anymore.

My life has taken some odd turns over the years, but I know going to school at Leyden and the guidance of many teachers there gave me a good basis

for a direction to follow. Some of the teachers I remember particularly well included John Striepling, who got me turned on to electricity and electronics. He put in many hours as the faculty advisor to the radio club. He helped many of us kids get our amateur radio licenses. I got my first "ham" license when I was 15, and still get on the air 50 years later (KL7NC). There was also Joe Thomas, who made American History come alive with all of his war stories. Lee Witt introduced me to public speaking, writing, and doing research in his CORE classes - stuff I still use every day.

And, of course, anyone into music at Leyden remembers Sig Swanson - one of the best, most dedicated teachers ever. He lived across the street from the band room. Not only was he at school days, evenings and weekends, but you could always find kids dropping by his house at all hours of the day and night.... no one was ever turned away. He inspired a life-long love and appreciation of all kinds of music in me. Former band kids I've run into still remember him with fondness and respect. The '59 Eagle was dedicated to him.

After my graduation from Leyden, I went to DeVry Tech, studying Radio-TV Communications during the day, and working at the Jewel stocking shelves at night. I earned an FCC 1st Class Radio License and was fortunate to land an engineering job at WCLM-FM in Chicago.

The station was installing a new 60,000-watt transmitter at the time and I got to do most of the wiring for the new transmitter and studios. The station would sign-off at midnight and I'd go to work with my soldering iron and wires. It was at WCLM that the announcing bug bit.

Do you remember Linn Burton? Linn Burton (For Certain) was that white-haired pitchman that used to do all of those late-night TV car commercials on WGN and other stations.

I was working as the board operator for Linn Burton's radio show on WCLM one day, when I blurted out, "Linn, what's the best way to learn to become an announcer?" He said the best thing to do was to "Pack your bags, kiss your mama good-bye, and go to some little station out in the boonies where you get experience doing everything from news to sales to engineering to dee-jay work."

Linn also told me that he'd heard that Howard Miller was looking for a combination engineer-announcer for his station in Beloit, Wisconsin, so I gave Howard a call. Howard interviewed me in the studio between commercial breaks while he was doing his morning show on WIND.

It was a pretty strange interview. Howard would ask me a question and before I could answer, the "On The Air" light would come on and he'd have to intro a record or read a commercial or something.

Meantime, Howard's announcer and newsman Milo Hamilton, his record spinner and his engineer were all kibitzing in the background - "You'll be sorry" "Howard's the biggest cheapskate in town" "You'll go to Beloit and never be heard from again." Somehow, Howard liked me, I got the job and I headed for Wisconsin in my '55 Chevy.

I spent a couple years at WGEZ in Beloit, and several other stations around the mid-west until the draft board started making noises. I enlisted in the Coast Guard, was sent to the Coast Guard Radio School, served on the East Coast, Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, and - the life-changing transfer - the Coast Guard Communications Station (NMJ) in Ketchikan, Alaska.

The Comm Station was considered isolated duty at the time. The station was on a dirt road about 15 miles north of Ketchikan. We had a station recreation boat and I spent lots of time fishing for salmon and camping in off-duty hours.

I fell in love with Alaska and, with the exception of a couple or three years in the Lower 48, have been here ever since. After my discharge from the Guard in '66, I went back to Chicago for a time, and got a job at ABC Radio. It was fun and I got to work with Paul Harvey, Billy Graham, and Don McNeill's Breakfast Club shows. I wanted to get back to announcing though, and bounced around working for stations in Miami and Washington, D.C., before eventually moving back to Alaska in 1970, where there was an opening with a station in Ketchikan.

Ketchikan is a small coastal city of about 20,000 people, located on an island in the Tongass National Forest in Southeast Alaska. We're about 90 miles north of Prince Rupert, B.C., 900 miles north of Seattle, and 1,000 miles south of Anchorage. The temperatures are pretty moderate all year-

round, ranging from the 30s and 40s in the winter to the 60s and 70s in the summer. We do get a lot of rain - about 14-feet a year.... after all, it is a RAIN forest!

Ketchikan was once known as the "Salmon Capital of the World," but most of the fishing fleet has moved west to Kodiak and Dutch Harbor. We still have great fishing, but the commercial fleet is nowhere near what it was in previous years.

We also had a thriving timber industry with a pulp mill that produced a fibrous product called "Tongass-cell", which was used to produce cellophane, bandages, ice cream, and dozens of other items. We also had a large saw mill that cut spruce and cedar cants for shipment overseas. Some of the wood cants came back to us as Yamaha pianos and guitars. Stringent environmental regulations and lawsuits forced the closure of the mills and threw hundreds out of work.

Now, Ketchikan survives on tourism. Each summer we host nearly a million cruise ship passengers who arrive in town on their way north or south. Ketchikan is a favorite cruise ship stop. Most days during the summer we get anywhere from 3 to 5 big cruise ships – some days bringing in more than 10,000 passengers. Many passengers take flight-seeing excursions and side-trips to hunting and fishing lodges in the area.

Alaska has been good to us. Over the years, I've been a radio station manager, engineer, disc jockey, news director, graphic artist, a Merchant Marine shipboard Morse operator, editor, printing press operator, fisherman, sailor, purser on a passenger ship, and TV news anchor. I built and was the first manager of Ketchikan's first public radio station - KRBD. I installed Alaska's first digital TV station - KUBD-TV. I've sailed most of the West Coast from Seattle to the far-off Aleutians and everywhere in between and have seen a good part of Alaska in my travels.

About 1982, I bought a weekly newspaper in Ketchikan, and have been publishing the paper ever since. And, in 1997, I built a new radio station in Ketchikan - Oldies Radio KFMJ.

These days, I do the morning drive show, manage the station and help out in the news and engineering departments. A manager runs the newspaper and print shop. I love what I do and have no plans to retire.

In addition to the radio and newspaper enterprises, I serve on the Ketchikan Public Utilities Board, and have been chairman of the City Personnel and City Parks and Recreation Boards.

I was appointed by the Governor and currently serve as Chairman of the Alaska Public Broadcasting Commission. I've also served on the Alaska Legislative Telecommunications Task Force and was one of the founders of the Alaska Public Radio Network.

In 2003, I was honored to have been inducted into the Alaska Broadcasters Association Hall of Fame.

I'm married to a girl I met at the USO when I was in the Coast Guard boot camp in Cape May, New Jersey. We've been married zillions of years now, and have a son who just graduated from the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. My wife teaches Art at Ketchikan High School. We like hiking and fishing and camping in Alaska's great outdoors. I'm thinking about taking up kayaking.

Unfortunately, I don't think I'll be able to make it to the reunion due to distance and summer being our busiest time of year, but I'll be thinking about you and hope you all have a great time. I'd really appreciate receiving a class directory publication and will send Joyce my info and check.

Meantime, I'll see you on the radio... KFMJ has live streaming audio at [www.kfmj.com](http://www.kfmj.com), and has some photos of Ketchikan, the station, and ol' Bob.

All The Best,

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