**“Horatio Alger in the Sticks--Or, how I rose from tractor driver to TV director in just seven panic-stricken months”**

By Gary W. Jones

When I was 16, my family became neighbors with a television station. This event was a bit miraculous, since our "neighborhood" was the wooded hills near the town of Jonesboro, Ark. I immediately turned in my ax and entered the glorious, show-biz world of television as a $20-per-week photographer’s assistant.

Men’s fortunes rise and fall quickly in the television industry, but nowhere with more frequency and unexpectedness than in small-market TV stations. This explains why I found myself promoted to Channel 8's chief photographer with my television career only four

days old.

I viewed my instant success with equally instantaneous panic--an understandable reaction, considering the fact that I had no idea what I was doing. Characteristic of my flair for fumbling ineptitude was my habit of streaking out to photograph an assignment, only to meet with darkroom disaster later on. I never could quite come to terms with all the mysterious chemicals that confronted me daily amid the inky environs of our broom-closet-turned-darkroom.

Although my trial-and-error method of processing meant that I wasted much time remixing, pouring, cranking and rinsing, my photo fiascoes were most embarrassing when 1 had to skulk back to the client and ask to reshoot the pictures. "You here again, kid?" became a painfully familiar refrain.

If I had not been a much better photographer than I was a laboratory technician, I would have been back baling hay in short order. Luckily, however, I had a knack for composition and telling a story pictorially, so I began trying my hand at studio camera work. Since I had no worry about processing, electronic photography and studio production seemed a more exciting—and safer—area in which to work.

One day the station's only director failed to report for work. As a result, I got another on-the-spot promotion. From tractor driver to television director in seven months--it could only have happened in Arkansas, a state which, after all, does claim to be the "Land of Opportunity.”

Because our television station was located in one of the world's smallest TV markets and was challenging established Memphis outlets for viewers, survival was a daily goal. For a number of years our station was an independent operation--meaning we had no network affiliation--and were forced to supply all programming.

This need to fill air time made Jonesboro's Channel 8 a mecca for amateur country-music singers whose hearts' desires were to “pick and grin” on prime-time TV. The only prerequisites for having one's own show were (1} a guitar and (2; a friend or relative with enough money to buy a haif hour commercial sponsorship for 13 weeks. The ability to sing was helpful but was by no means necessary.

On Saturday and Sunday nights, pick-up trucks from throughout the Ozark foothills would converge on Channel 8. Kids, grandmothers, well-to-do doctors, $40-per-week waitresses and would-be performers from all walks of life would come to audition for a chance to appear on *Hillbilly Hootcnanny*, *Country Junction* and other equally memorable programs. From the opening hoedown the closing hymn. Channel 8's brand of country-music show was unrehearsed, unpredictable and packed with hard-sell, "down-home” commercial pitches.

I logged hundreds of hours directing these country-music spectaculars--issuing such commands as: "Camera Two, give me a shot of the sack of flour....Camera One, I need a close-up of the guy with the jew's-harp. That's right, the fellow standing next to his bird dog....Two, swing over to the photograph of the cotton picker….One, tell the banjo player either to find a spittoon or get off the set. . . . Two, lock down your camera on a shot of the steel guitar and get a microphone for the guy who just walked in rolling the tractor tire….One, give me a wide cover shot of the entire south end of the studio. I think I've just lost control of the show. . . ."

Of course, my seat-of-the-pants directing was constantly being aided by on-camera advice from the performers themselves. "Son, turn that big Kodak there around on Orval and his git box so as he can light into a little 'Wildwood Flower'. . . . And if you folks out there got any dedications or requests, you just call up our directors to let us know."

Despite Channel 8's popularity with area country-music fans, the station had difficulty in attracting community support and interest. A major reason for this was that the studio and offices had been built out in the woods far from town. The place was so remote that our visitors were mostly hunters or wandering Boy Scout troops asking for

directions back to civilization. An old logging road was our only physical link with the outside world. And since the station's power came from a rural electric cooperative, Channel 8 was knocked off the air each time too many electric milking machines were plugged in along the line.

Because of the station's struggles to survive economically, we rarely produced a program--regardless of length or complexity--with more technical personnel on duty than two cameramen, an engineer and one hapless soul who functioned as director/switcher/audio man/ projectionist/telephone operator. A television control room--with its monitors, meters, communications circuits and electronic gadgetry--is always a hectic place to work, even when the operation is fully staffed. But Channel 8's two-man control room not only sharpened a director's reflexes, it tugged at his sanity.

Besides the usual director's responsibilities of making decisions and issuing instructions, I was also required to select video sources with my right hand while flipping audio switches and controlling sound levels with my left hand.

At the same time I had to scurry back and forth juggling slides and loading film projectors. Jogging was a necessary exercise in the Channel 8 control room long before it became a popular national pastime.

Needless to say, Channel 8's programming continuously teetered on the verge of complete chaos. And when it tottered too far, disaster might ensue in the form of a rollicking series of audio/visual goofs or in an extended telecast of the director's favorite station identification or "technical difficulty" slide.

During moments of directorial catastrophe I had a bad habit of getting my cameras (all two of them) confused. I would yell for Camera One to get a shot but would push the button for Camera Two instead. I soon learned that this recurrent camera miscommand of "Ready One, Take Two . . ." was certain to treat viewers to unscheduled glimpses of elbows, earlobes, and fuzzily kinetic camera work.

The various station managers who took the helm at Channel 8 were always encouraging directors and engineers alike to exercise their imagination and ingenuity. This is a positive way of saying that there were never any production budgets and seldom any equipment working properly. For example, the Channel 8 concept of set designing was to figure out today how to rearrange the same background flats, curtains and set pieces we had used yesterday and the day before. One particularly unkempt plastic potted plant--affectionately dubbed "Matilda"—was shown so many times on different sets that it began to draw fan mail.

One year we received permission from CBS to carry a Sugar Bowl game in which the University ot Arkansas Razorbacks were playing. Since we had no AT&T microwave or coaxial television transmission lines, the only way for Channel 8 to telecast the game was to pick up the signal from the Memphis CBS affiliate and rebroadcast the picture. Electronic interference was very bad near the studio and transmitter. Our intrepid engineering department solved the problem by fastening a home TV antenna to the top ot a Volkswagon bus, driving the vehicle far out into the woods, and running a cable back to our control room. This Rube Goldberg arrangement might have worked if it had not rained in Jonesboro New Year's Day and if a passing hunter had not gotten his car stuck in the mud close to our bus. The ignition noise from the car’s engine ruined our reception. And thousands of Channel 8 viewers cursed and fumed until our two trusty cameramen sloshed through Ihe woods to help push out the floundering automobile.

Once while I was directing a live wrestling show, the combatants decided to continue some real, unscripted violence in my control room. I quickly ordered lights and cameras to be turned in my direction and ducked for safely under the switching console just as the hero administered the *coup de grace* with a borrowed chair. Nothing helped

our wrestling ratings more than honest bloodshed.

But studios and control rooms were not my only training grounds in grassroots television. Since Channel 8 had no 16mm motion-picture camera, I paid $150 for a World War II-vintage Bell & Howell model and immediately cornered the film production market in Northeast Arkansas.

I was forced to employ an "auteur," or do-it-all, method of newsfilm production. After shooting the film story (usually a beauty pageant or a cheerleading clinic), I rushed back to the studio and developed the film in a hand-cranked processor. I then dried the wet, dripping mess by stringing the film from lights in the studio. While the film dried, I wrote the accompanying news copy and prepared to direct the evening's first newscast. TV stations just do not put together news programs that way any more.

My memories of this type of rustic television are a mixture of chagrin, smiles and tremendous pride. During my four-year apprenticeship in Arkansas television. I became an authority on Wallace Beery movies, Roller Derby, Veg-a-Matics, *Highway Patrol* re-runs, and chinchilla-ranch promotions. Much more importantly, I discovered that television in even its most backward, gosh-awful state exerts a powerful communications force.

The TV studio back in Jonesboro is still out in the woods, but civilization has begun to encroach in the form of paved roads and real-estate subdivisions. Channel 8 is now a prosperous, progressive ABC-affiliate station which no longer has that quaint, anachronistic charm. And I suppose beginners there are no longer allowed all the mistakes I once made.

Today--almost eight years after fouling up my first batch of slides for Channel 8--I am still in the "glorious, show-biz world of television." But although my position as a film/videotape producer for WFAA Productions in Dallas affords me the opportunity to use millions of dollars' worth of the latest equipment, to travel throughout the world and to work alongside some of the top professionals in the industry, I sometimes miss the simple satisfactions and insanities of my first job back in Jonesboro.

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