

**William “Bill” Weaver
Narrator**

**Jim Baccus
Interviewer**

**February 24, 1988
Heritage Education Commission Oral History Project
Location?**

JB: This is part of the audio program. I’m Jim Baccus, and I’m going to interview with Bill Weaver, a North Dakotan, and the date is February the 24th, 1988.

Bill, it’s a pleasure to see you. You’ve had much experience in North Dakota radio and television. And we’re going to get into that in just a moment. First, I’d like you to...have to say this for the record, where you were born, something about your education, something about your early background, if you please, and if you wish, something about your marriage and your children.

WW: Alright. Thank you, Jim. I was born in Doyon, North Dakota. That’s about twenty miles east of Devils Lake. And my dad was manager of a grain elevator there. When I was about ten years old, he was transferred to Webster, North Dakota. Now that’s about ten miles north of Devils Lake. And there I took most of my grade school, and I graduated from high school from Webster. And from then on, I went into the broadcasting business. I...you asked about my wife. Isabelle is a girl from Christine, North Dakota who is a singer with the Gal Friends at WDAY years ago.

JB: Mmmm.

WW: And I met her at the station there, and the singer and the sportscaster got married. Our oldest child, Dick, now lives in Palm Desert, California, where he is a real estate salesman for the Desert Horizons Country Club, a very exclusive country club in Palm Desert. My next son, Kevin—believe or not, Jim—is back as sales manager of WDAY radio! And our daughter Jane has gone into advertising, too, worked for places like Campbell Mithun and big advertising agencies, but is now...is vice president of media for General Mills in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Jane is sent on trips all over the country. She works with all the magazines, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and all those magazines, and isn’t working with one of General Mills’ advertising agencies; it’s General Mills’ advertising agency that *overlooks* their agencies. I think you know what I mean by that! And she has a two-year-old daughter, which is the...the highlight of our lives, our only grandchild. Little Lauren is two years old.

JB: Well, I didn't realize, you know, Bill, that your family is certainly into publicity, advertising, and show business!

WW: This is true, Jim. [Chuckles]

JB: Well, you gave them a good legacy, because I know that you certainly were probably the first play-by-play television radio caster... or television caster. Is that right?

WW: Well, that's true. It was back in June 1953 when WDAY-TV went on the air, and I had a ten o'clock sportscast. And we did a one-hour musical show from six to seven o'clock that night. Then we went into the films, as it was then not network. And I had a ten o'clock sportscast, which at that time was fifteen minutes, Jim. Not four and a half like they are now, but fifteen minutes. So I guess I was the first voice on the air for news, weather, and sports in the state.

JB: You had a great background to the television era of course. You started, I believe, in Devils Lake. Tell me about your radio experience.

WW: I started at KDLR in Devils Lake. I wanted to go to college, and our family...it was Depression time, and didn't have money for college. I'd hitchhike down the ten miles to Devils Lake every weekend and read for the station owner down there. Finally, he gave me a job. I later went on to KOVC in Valley City, where I was very happy doing play-by-play of all the sports of two high schools and the colleges. And later I went on to KFYZ in Bismarck and worked for a year. And then war broke out, Pearl Harbor came and I went and joined the Air Force.

JB: At that time, I suppose, Bill, during that period, you did a lot...you did everything. You know, the story was that...that the announcer swept up the studio, and...it was almost literally true!

WW: Mmmm.

JB: Ah...there was a good deal of riding the board, there was a good deal of programming, there was a good deal of reading the news, there was a good deal of having street broadcasts, and almost anything that came. And as I remember, and I have worked with you in the distant past, you were very articulate, and you could do almost any kind of assignment that came along.

WW: Well, Jim, you brought back memories when you brought that up. Because I want to say first that I came from a Depression family. And every summer, the day school was out until the day school was back in the fall, I went to the farm. And I milked...helped milk twelve cows in the morning and twelve cows at night, and I did everything there was to do on the farm for a dollar and a quarter a day. So when I went into broadcasting, I had a background. I felt I could talk to the farmer, the businessman, the banker; I could talk to those kinds of people in their language.

Now you bring back memories of Valley City, which I'd get up often in the morning and do mid-morning devotions, I mean, play the records of the music. Then it went on to doing the morning

news. Ah, then maybe a couple hours off, and come back and do the noon news and things like that. And then there was always a sportscast at six fifteen in the evening. And then it was out to do play-by-play. And just exactly what you said, Jim. I've gone out and done play-by-play of the Valley City Vikings, the Valley City Highlanders, and gone back and swept up the station, and was through at eleven o'clock at night. All...*all* for one dollar a day. One dollar a day.

JB: Well, it was a great period. You know, there were...there were many very colorful announcers in North Dakota. There were some at KFYZ, you know, who had the...first the...usually the Class A, what we call today the Class A basketball.

WW: Yes, I remember.

JB: And there were some very colorful characters, of whom you were one. But you made a passing reference to World War II. Pearl Harbor came along. And like many another, you decided to see what that was all about. Tell me something then about your military career.

WW: Well, Jim, I wanted to be...I was always, from the time I was a little kid, I was interested in airplanes. One of the biggest spankings my dad ever gave me is when I went up in an old Jenny airplane with a pilot from Webster, North Dakota. But he used to laugh about it later and said that, "Look it, I gave you a spanking for going up in that airplane, and the United States government gave you a half a million dollar airplane and told you to go fly it!"

Well, Jim, I joined the Air Corps, and I went down to Texas. And I took my primary training, and then I took my basic training, and then the advanced training. And we were given our silver wings and made a second lieutenant. From there on, we were sent to Gainesville, Florida and put in those high powered P-47s, fighter planes, which carried a two thousand horsepower engine. And ah...that...what I think is the funnest airplane ever built, the airplane that won the war, Jim. P-51 pilots won't tell you that, but...

Ah, from then on, after three months, I was sent overseas. And they were losing some pilots from the group that had gone over there, and we were immediately put into combat. And...we learned by doing. Hmmm, I flew eighty-one missions with the Eighth Air Force over Germany and over France. Hmmm, I've seen the channels, and Zuiderzee, and all those...the North Sea...I can see them in my dreams. But Jim, when you're not married, didn't especially have a girlfriend, it was a great life, flying...flying combat. It's danger; you don't know if you're coming back or not, but it's a great, happy life.

JB: [Laughs] Well, how many missions did you actually put in?

WW: I flew eighty-one missions. They were somewhere between four and a half to five and a half hours a piece.

JB: And hmmm, you have some honors, I suppose?

WW: Well, I earned a...I don't know if I earned them or not. I was awarded two distinguished Flying Crosses, and five United States Air Medals.

JB: Well now, when you came back, you certainly wanted to get back into the radio business. There were rumors of television coming up over the horizon. [Chuckles] And I suppose you thought of that, too, when you...while you were winding up with the Air Force.

WW: Yes, they sent me back from England to Texas to instruct pilots that would be going into combat. Instructing combat tactics. And I did that for about six months. And the war was winding down in Europe, and they didn't need pilots like they needed before. And any of us that had three hundred hours or over of combat could not be sent to the Asian Theater. They figured our luck had run out. And if you had over three hundred hours, they couldn't send you to another war zone.

Well, I had three hundred and four hours, so one day they asked me, "Would...? We're going to discharge some pilots, would you like to stay in or get out?" And I said, "I have a broadcasting job ready for me back in Valley City, North Dakota. I'd love to go home and start over again." So I immediately came home. And I worked about...I think eight, nine months at Valley City. And WDAY called me one day and said they had a sports-casting job open, and would I be available? And hmmm, I stayed there for twenty-one years, Jim.

JB: Before we leave the question of the war, did you have some narrow scrapes? Did you have some narrow escapes, as most flyers did?

WW: Yes, Jim. Hmmm...I have two I particularly remember. We've all been into the dogfights, we know that. I shot down two German airplanes, one ME-109 and one FW-190. And that's always a great thrill, but the second one I shot down was...hmmm...a case where one morning we had a briefing, and the colonel asked for the hands of four flyers. He wanted to send them on a low escort mission over to St. Joe in France. It was after D-Day, and the Germans were moving troops up from Southern France to the beachheads, and were moving over the top of a bridge at St. Joe. I was one of the four that raised our hands.

So we skipped over the trees in England, down over the chalk cliffs of Dover, and up over the chalk cliffs of France, tree top. Pulled up to about a thousand feet and bombed...dive-bombed this bridge. And we got it pretty well. But the minute we came out of our dive bombing, four German airplanes jumped us. And...ah...in about three or four minutes, there were four huge fires on the ground. Each of us shot down one of them.

But just...I was taking a head-on pass at a German plane, hitting him all around the cowling. He let loose two twenty-millimeters, and it caught me in the right wing, and blew all of the fifty-caliber guns out of the right wing. That means I could not get any...any altitude. The throttle is on the left side of the cockpit, and I was holding the stick and the throttle in one hand. And the other pilots came and made an umbrella over the top of me so we wouldn't get jumped again. Well, things were going fine. I was limping along at eight hundred feet 'til I got back to the Chalk Cliffs of Dover in England.

The English had the barrage balloons up twelve hundred to fourteen hundred feet. That means I had to go another hundred and fifty or more miles around those barrage balloons. Well, we got around the barrage balloons, but the colonel was calling from the base, and wanted to know how bad I was hurt. And he said, "I'm coming up to look at you." And he said, "I think you'd better get out of that airplane. Because when you let the wheels down, the wing is going to break off." I told him, "It's a brand new airplane; it's only had three missions." It was a beautiful silver job. And he said, "Alright, open the canopy. Get back five miles, open the canopy, take off your oxygen mask, unhook your microphone, and let your wheels down. And if that wing breaks off when you let your wheels down, jump." Which I didn't relish at eight hundred feet!

JB: [Chuckles]

WW: [Chuckles softly] But I got back five miles, did as he told, let the wheels down. And that wing just wavered out there, up and down, maybe two or three feet, and steadied down. You land a P-47, a three-point landing, about ninety miles an hour. I did this in a wheel landing at about a hundred and forty miles an hour. And, ah, I was very happy two, three weeks later when the colonel gave me the Distinguished Flying Cross for bringing that plane home.

JB: That's a great story. Now you mentioned that once you were discharged, you went back to Valley City.

WW: Mmmm-hmmm.

[Recording interruption?]

JB: Just to kind of...warm up again for the communication business.

WW: That's right.

JB: And then as the...well, you said you were offered the position at WDAY. And WDAY was very soon coming on to television. And you were there twenty-one years, I believe you said.

WW: That's right, Jim.

JB: Your...your first assignment was news, primarily?

WW: No. Ah...I did sports, play-by-play sports, and that...only after three months...I had been out in California, Jim. I won't go into too much detail on this, but I had seen a television show with a guy and a girl, and it was an hour every afternoon. And they would use film clips of things that happened around Los Angeles. I kept that show in my mind, that what a good show that would be to use live interviews instead of film clips. So three months after we went on the air, I went to Tom Barnes, he was the commercial manager, and I explained my plan to him. He said, "Alright, let's try a show like that. We've got time during the afternoon, let's try it." And that was when *Party Line* was born, which lasted for what, twenty-four, twenty-five years?

JB: That's a bit of history, isn't it? That that was the genesis of *Party Line*. [Chuckles] And I suppose many, many people in the Upper Midwest are acquainted with *Party Line*. It had an enormous audience. It...it...wasn't it all over the clock? Was it morning, was it afternoon?

WW: Well, it started out from three to four in the afternoon. Then it had changed—being the network were changing a program—to one thirty to two thirty. But we generally shuffled between one thirty and about four o'clock. But the point of *Party Line* was to interview everybody, five or six a day...but not anybody too long. Ah...I would never interview anybody...only one person I ever interviewed over ten minutes, over five, seven minutes, and that was Governor Nelson Rockefeller of New York and his wife, because he was so gracious and so much fun, that I couldn't let him go.

But Jim, we interviewed every celebrity that came to this city. And I can just...I have these pictures in my den at home on the wall. And if I can just enumerate, people like Ted Williams, Vice President Nixon, Governor Nelson Rockefeller, Satchell Paige, Jack Dempsey, Joe Louis, hmmm, there was Phyllis Diller, Dennis Day, Cab Calloway, ah, Zsa Zsa Gabor, ah...oh my, there's many, many more. Then I have kept pictures of every one of them.

JB: Everybody who came to Fargo-Moorhead was on *Party Line*.

WW: You remember Roy Peterson was the promotional manager, and nobody stepped into the station to *Party Line* that he didn't have a camera there ready for a picture.

JB: Well, that's remarkable.

WW: And...and not only celebrities, Jim, we interviewed thousands and thousands of people right here in our community. We've done things for the community.

JB: Of course.

WW: Our pride is that one thing that we raised every year, we used to put lights on the Christmas tree and raise money for the Fargo-Moorhead Opportunity School. And before he passed away, Don Fraser, who was treasurer of the school, told me that *Party Line* had raised over fifty thousand dollars in a five-years period and had saved the Fargo-Moorhead Opportunity School. I think you remember that, don't you?

JB: That's remarkable. And I do remember it.

WW: Mmmm-hmmm.

JB: Now you were anchorman for this show, of course, but you had...ah, you had a straight man, who was very often a woman. You had an assistant. And who were some of those?

WW: Well, we started out with a girl, young girl by the name of Beverly Agnew that worked at the station. And then Beverly went on, and I think was married and moved away. And then next was hmmm...I...[sighs] well, I just don't recall her name right away. Then came...hmmm...oh boy, it's on the tip...

JB: Verna Newell...?

WW: Ah, no, Verna came after...Lois Leppart!

JB: Oh, yes.

WW: And Lois was working for the other station in town, and I approached her for the job, and she came. And it...that just got too much. The mail was running hundreds and hundreds of letters a week, and they were doing recipes, and things like this, and sending them out. So we sat down one day and decided we'd use two girls, one alternate weeks, and take the load off of the mail and things like that. And then Verna Newell came. Vicki Selberg did work in there for maybe two or three months, and...but, basically, *Party Line* worked around Verna Newell and Lois Leppart.

JB: There were many, many people around the show, back of the scenes, you know. Ah, you mentioned some of them. Bill Weaver, I suppose...I'm sorry, Bill Snyder probably supplied some film from time to time. And Norman Selberg is another name that...a great graphic artist. And you had...

WW: Ah, Jim...we had...I had two of the finest directors or producers you'd ever...John Kittleson, he went on to be with NBC...then just a super man to work with. And hmmm, oh, he knew where I was going. I could pick up a microphone and walk anywhere around the room, and he was always right on me, because we just knew each other, what we could do. Dick Berdahl was also a director of *Party Line* for many years. And he was just the same as...as John Kittleson.

JB: You had, in addition to these interviews face-to-face, you had some regular features. I think you had...there was someone who talked gardening; there would be someone who would talk...other subjects of interest.

WW: Cooking.

JB: Cooking, for one.

WW: Gardening. Hmmm, many things like that. But one of the nicest things I think we did, and I got the idea one day, it struck me out of nowhere, and it was one of the most popular things we did. Ah, Don Rosen[sp?] and Pat Kelly were our piano and organist at the time, and each day we took three minutes for meditation and a hymn. And that was one of the most popular things that we added to the show.

JB: Mmmm-hmmm. Now I want to get on to your business career, because on top of all that you have told me so far [chuckles] you have had quite a...quite a business career. When did you decide to hang it up in broadcasting?

WW: [Sighs] Jim, I don't know if any man has had a more beautiful life than I have at doing what I wanted to do. So in 1964, I just decided I was through with working at eleven o'clock at night. I didn't get to see my children; I couldn't go to their band concert. They were both good golfers, I couldn't go and watch their golf tournaments. I was on that air all the time.

In 1964, I just decided I was going to go into business for myself. Now I knew something about the advertising specialty agencies, because I had some relatives in it and some friends in it. It had always interested me. Now, advertising specialties is calendars, pens, business gifts, all sorts of things like that, that you put a man's name, who he is, where he is, and what he does on those business gifts and calendars.

So I started working for a firm out of Pennsylvania. And it wasn't over six, eight months later, Mr. Carraway, the Carraway Company, long known in this area in the advertising specialty business, was going to retire. I went over to visit one day and asked him if he...if I could buy out his business. And I didn't have a lot of bucks in the bank, but I had a few. And we came to an agreement, and I kept the business. I renamed it the Bill Weaver Company, and I kept the business then for eighteen years. And I was very happy in it.

JB: Can you tell me something more about the specialty business? Hmmm, it'd cover...ah, it covered a wide range of advertising items...ah, it's a...it's a mysterious business in some ways to people. [Chuckles]

WW: I think it's probably the most under...unknown business that there is, Jim. Ah, the specialty advertising business can show you fifteen to twenty thousand items. Now, I'm talking about the...I bet you, if you look at your desk at home, you've got seven or eight items around your house or in your desk at home. I'm talking about pens and pencils and items on your desk, little notepads and things like that. On up to expensive business gifts for glassware, hmmm, metal gifts and things like that, belt buckles. Ah...oh, they'll even...right now, today, they'll even put your name on your shoelaces if you want them. That's...what the specialty business has gone to.

JB: In due time, then, you decided to...to sell that part of your professional career and start to play golf. Do you recall when you sold your business?

WW: Yes, Jim, you...you gave the date, this is February 22, 1988. But two and a half years ago, I was sixty-five years old. And the rumor got around the state and the area that I was going to retire and sell out. I had no intention in the world of ever selling my business. It was very successful, I had ten salesmen, and across North Dakota and Minnesota. But I kept getting calls from...long distance calls saying that, "We hear you're going to sell out and we want to buy your business."

So I just said one day to two of my competitors who came over, two very nice men that owned the competitor. And they said, "What is this story?" And I said, "I have no intention to sell out. But I'll sell anything if I get the right amount of money for it." So they said, "Well, we're interested." So I got my financial advisor and my accountant to come through and go through the books. They came up with a figure, nobody complained, and it's been a very fine association with these fine people.

JB: How do you fill your time now? I suspect that you and your wife do some traveling, and you said you're a golfer. And do you have other hobbies that'll fill your time here? Your...ah, I can see that you're healthy, you're looking good, and feeling good. So you probably have some interesting hobbies, too.

WW: You know, Jim, I've talked to many men who have retired. And they'd tell me they're busier now than when they were in business. And I thought, oh, that's a bunch of malarkey. But I found out it's a hundred percent true. I get up in the morning, I have things I want to do. I like to do my yardwork. I like to golf, but I'm not crazy about golfing every day of the week. I like to golf a couple days a week. But I have other things that I want to do that I...I never had time to do. I had never seen Theodore Roosevelt National Park. So we packed up and went a few days. I'd go down to see the Twins three, four times a year. I go down to Canterbury Downs five or six times a year. And...I just make a mental note before I go to bed at night, these are the things I'm going to do in the morning, and I've never been bored one day.

JB: You've seen some great changes in the radio and television business. You were in, you know, almost in a way, at the beginning, ah...certainly of television. And I suppose you've been staggered by the changes in the news-casting and in commercial television that we've seen today.

WW: Jim, it's the graphics. It's the graphics that...that changed television. Do you remember when I used to come on with the baseball scores at night? Runs, hits, and errors, and I had to stick up every one of those numbers at a time, and then change the names on it, and the football scores, I had to go stick it up one number at a time. Now they just sit at a typewriter and pound those out, and it just takes them a few seconds. Where I'd work *hours* on those boards. And things like that have changed so much. And of course the color has come in now, that's made the big difference. And oh, just...they've got so *much* more equipment in the...in the photography line, and things like that. And where we used the old Bolex camera, you well remember that...and then had to take it down and process it. Now the new style cameras, they shoot the film, as I understand it, and put it on the air, practically, don't they, Jim?

JB: Yes, indeed.

WW: Yeah.

JB: Well, Bill, hmmm, you and your wife have been...certainly have left your marks in...in the local theatre, and the local music, and local show business. It's...it's certainly true, I think, when you say that you've had an ideal life. [Chuckles] You've had the...the wonderful life so far, and

you're going to have many more years, of course. And you've left a mark, I think, on...in sports in North Dakota. Ah, you were a contentious play-by-play announcer in many ways, which is...is to be expected. And people will remember.

WW: Well, Jim, we left out one point. Maybe I shouldn't even bring it up. Remember, I ran for mayor once and lost the election. [Chuckles] Back in 1964, remember? Herschel Lashkowitz had twenty years as mayor and I ran against Mr. Lashkowitz, and had a terrific campaign group behind me, and I lost by seven hundred votes.

JB: [Chuckles]

WW: [Chuckles]

JB: Well, Bill, it's been a pleasure to reminisce with you, and I think this is going to be an invaluable piece of tape for future history. You can say to your kids that in some way you've left an indelible mark on history here in the Upper Midwest. [Chuckles]

WW: [Chuckles] Well, I'm very...

JB: It's been a pleasure.

WW: I'm very proud that you thought enough to ask me, Jim. I thank you very much.

JB: The University makes the selections about people it considers significant. And it's been a pleasure to visit with you. This is Jim Baccus, bidding goodbye to Bill Weaver.

[End of interview]