

*An Interview with museum volunteer Dan Thomas, January 21, 2016*

VRCM: What I'm interested in is a thumbnail sketch of your background for the website. So if you'll tell me a little about your schooling, your work experience, the things you're proud of, how you got into ham radio and how you joined the museum.

DT: I grew up in southern Colorado, a place called Pueblo. From the time I was about four years old. We lived there until I moved to Connecticut just a few years ago. I graduated from South High school, went to SCSC: Southern Colorado State College at the time; was a speech major.

Got interested in broadcasting through the back door and ended up being journalism major. I was working at an electronics company basically sweeping floors and helping install aircraft radios and a few other oddball things we did, including putting out targets for satellites to look at for the military, which they had a contract for. There was a lot of labor and you never know when you'd get called out for a "corn alert," they called it. And it was a buck twenty-five an hour. Then a friend of mine called me out of the blue and said "How would you like to be on the radio?" He says it pays a buck twenty-five an hour. It was better than sweeping mass pieces of canvas out on the hot tarmac at an airport, and for the same money. So I decided O.K. and was working weekends at a little station called KFEL. It was owned by a gentleman named Max Clifton. It was a religious station, but Max liked young people and he gave a lot of us start in the business; The job entailed everything, so it was a trial by fire: you were on the air reading news off the old teletype; United Press International at the time.

VRCM: What time period was this?

DT: This was in 1966-67 when I started there. I worked Saturday afternoons and Sunday mornings. And you played the various programs. And then we did music in the afternoons and a classical music show. But it was a day-timer, so in summer you got great hours because you'd be on... I think the latest we stayed on was 6 or 6:30 in the evening during the summer. But in the winter you shut down at 4, 4:30 because sunrise-sunset back then. And the same thing with opening. But you also did your own logs. So I actually typed up the logs for the entire week. That was part of the duties of the weekend guy. You got a great education in radio... swept floors... did dishes if left dishes in the little kitchen; it was in kind of a little old farmhouse. You learned how to turn on the transmitter and of course take readings every hour.

After a couple of years working for Uncle Max and two other stations, I decided to go full time. I had fallen head over heal for radio. All of a sudden I was 19 and the assistant news director.... news was my first love at the time. It was KKFM formerly KGHF and was the original station in our community. It started in 1928 –

it was an AM station; 1350. It was non-directional day at 5 KW and 1KW at night directional. I was there all of a month and a half and they came to me and said, "Well, our news director decided he wants to go to Denver; doesn't want to stay in Pueblo and now you're the new news director". At 18! (Laughs)

So I did morning news every day and was responsible for the news department. We had two wire services: Associated Press and United Press International. It was a trial by fire but I learned a lot of skills; did a lot of ambulance chasing, did reports via pay phones and anything else at the time. I lasted there a year and they were having severe financial difficulties; more severe than I knew about. I got married and the day I got back from my honeymoon they had to let me go! I was out of work about 12 ½ hours: called the number one AM station at the time, KCSJ, and they hired me on the spot doing weekends. It was a full time job again, but I was on the air. Later it was purchased by American Media. I was there for 15 years. I went from disc jockey to production director. I was in charge of commercials. Basically all the production plus writing commercials: they put me in charge of that; it was crazy.

I had the news experience and still did some of that too, but a young man named of Ray Klotts, came in as out chief engineer and we got to be very good friends. I started working with him. We put an FM on the air and I actually put the transmitter together under his direction. I designed and built a remote control system for it and fell in love with engineering. Well, Ray left to go to a major market and that left an opening for chief engineer and management came to me and said you don't have your ticket yet: we'll pay for your schooling – go get it – you'll be the new chief engineer. And that was in 1974 – 1975. And I came back as full time chief engineer for a three tower directional AM and a full power 100,000 watt FM station. And I loved engineering so much...

VRCM: This was a first class license?

DT: Yes, You had to have that to do any technical work on the transmission system. I was there for a few more years. Management changed; Stations changed hands and the new FM owners wanted me as news director and chief engineer, by then I was also doing talk radio, which I kind of liked, and I was doing a weekly television show on the local PBS TV station. It was a news interview program. I was also doing a law show occasionally for them as well.

VRCM: you were a busy guy!

DT: I *was* a busy guy. Well... if you had a job, I'd do it if you paid me (laughs). I had a family and two kids by then and the engineering was great because it was.... it was a mainstay. If you were an engineer you had no trouble getting a job. And if you were a good, decent engineer – and I thought I was... and about that time, it was in

late 70s early 80s, I met a gentleman named Mike Bauldoff who was also an engineer and air talent as well. He is still to this day my brother, my bestest friend on the planet and he and I started our own company. We were both working full time, he and I had our own engineering company and we were contract engineers for ... at one time we had ten stations we contracted engineering for plus we were both working full time jobs. He was teaching electronics at a community college and I was news director and chief engineer for McCoy Broadcasting.

So anyway that's kind of a summation. The KCCY years were the cream of the crop years. It was a country station before country was really a format. This was right at the early, early boom in country music. And I'm not a country music fan and never had been (laughs), but I had worked with some of the finest people in the business. From management to the talent to the owners, they were all radio people who loved radio and the number one thing was to have fun. And I teamed up with a young man named Dave Moore, and for fifteen years we had the number one radio show in the market. We pulled a 25 share every year and we had 15 stations in competition with us. At that time we also acquired through McCoy an oldies rock station, FM and that was the number two station and I also did news for both of them and was engineer for both of them.

VRCM: What brought you to Connecticut?

DT: I had some health issues and got a great offer from Pueblo Community College. I worked there for 13 years. I was the manager of the schools radio station and I was also the chief technician for distance learning. I learned a lot... I was doing quite a bit of television at that time: television engineering. We had a very active television department. Education is a devil's playground for some and I ended up retiring from there, sort of. And I went back into broadcasting for a short time. And my wife and I decided that... our kids were out here by then. My daughter is a software specialist in the insurance industry. She is a consultant. My son-in-law is a highly placed executive in the insurance business. They said come out and be with us. My son, meanwhile, married and with three kids, decided to move out here as well from Montana. And at that point in time they were all here and we were just, the two of us back in Pueblo, so we decided it was time to move and came out here. And I needed something to do. You talk about Ham Radio. A very good friend of mine, and I wish I could remember his call, and I've known him for years. And I was retired and was leaving at that point in time and I was having coffee with him – we had coffee a couple days a week – and he said you need to find something to do; you're going to be bored to death. And I said I know, I'm really scared about that. As I am used to being busy. He said you ought to get your ham license. And I said I've had ham friends for years.. But I was spending at least four hours a day on the air plus doing television. And I said you know, I really don't want a hobby where I sit in front of a microphone because I do this every day for a living! So anyway, Ed convinced me he said you're not going to have anything do to, so I got my general

and just five years ago. And then I got my Extra. I fell in love with the hobby, particularly ARES. I love activities – I enjoy that part of it. I don't do DX, I'm antenna restricted by my daughter, but I can do a lot of 2-meter mobile and UHF/VHF. I'm now into the digital modes. DMR has got me fascinated. It was fun so when I came out, I said I need something else to do. Ham Radio is fine but it's just sitting at home. I don't want to do that – I want to work on things! And I heard about this vintage radio and communications museum. And I thought I'd go out and visit it. I didn't realize it was cash only and I only had my credit card with me. And the gentleman at the time said no, I'm sorry I can't do it. So I said I'll have to come back. Consequently I came back on a Saturday and I met John Ellsworth. And that was funny because I'm sitting here talking with him: this giant man named John Ellsworth and he asked what did you do? And I said well I was a broadcast engineer for 40 years. And he grabs me by the arm and drags me into the studio which was about a foot deep in cable and wires strewn all over the floor. There was not much in there: it was just a room. And he proceeded to tell me about it and he said are you interested in it? And I said Yea! I'd love to build the studio; that's what I did. Over the many years I built quite a few. And I said I found a home!

I've been here ever since and I keep increasing the time I'm spending here. I'm here at least three days a week.

VRCM: You do a lot of repairs for eBay sales?

DT: Yes. We're doing that along with Danny Fitzin. He and I have started a thing with that. And eBay sales are taking a lot of time. I spend a lot of time back there. In fact that's what I'll be doing there today. I need to get back into the studio. We've got some things I need to do and upgrade. One of these days I'll get balanced again (laughs) maybe when the weather warms up again. But the museum has been a life saver because I don't... I wouldn't have anything to do without it. Amateur radio, yes. But that's not something you can do all day long. I've met some incredible people, both here and with amateur radio. In fact I'm amazed that, as many years as I spent in broadcasting, I've never met a finer group of people than the hams I met; I really have. I haven't met a clinker yet (laughs)