

Robert Abben
14 September 2007
Interviewer: Edward Woodward

Robert Abben was born in 1922 in Racine, Wisconsin. Abben, who served in the Navy during WWII, moved to Pinellas County in 1946 with his wife and parents. Abben's father had visited St. Petersburg in the early 1940s. "During the war I was in the Pacific, my father came to Florida and he liked it," Abben explained. "He thought it would be nice if the whole family could come down and live here, rather than up where we were. I think it was a good move on his part."

Abben tried to find work in radio, which had captivated him since childhood. But WSUN, the only radio station in town, wasn't hiring. Instead, Abben met someone with the Decker Record Company who hired him to promote and sell records, do personal appearances with record artists, and scout talent. Abben's territory included all of Florida except the southern tip, and parts of Georgia and Alabama. Abben talked about an evening with musicians performing in Orlando: "The artist was Eddy Arnold and he had Minnie Pearl and Little Jimmie Dickens and a bunch of people with him, stars of the Grand Ole Opry. After the show Mr. Arnold wanted to get something to eat and it was late,". They found a coffee shop. Afterwards, Arnold started singing. Abben recalled: "And we were walking down the middle . . . of Orange Avenue singing at the top of our lungs "Cattle Call" with Little Jimmie Dickens and Minnie Pearl."

While working for Decker, Abben became friends with the people at WSUN radio. He was later hired by WSUN and began a career in broadcasting that lasted about thirty years. Abben recalled one of his earlier experiences at WSUN: "In the winter time there was a national newscaster who had an early morning newscast. He was on ABC, so he came to the ABC station, which was WSUN. And he would go into the control room to do his broadcast, which was national . . . but he would write it in the hallway in the early morning. "And when I got to work in the early morning, I would stop off at the coffee place and get two cups of coffee. And I would have one, and the other one I would give to Paul Harvey. We would talk for a little bit and he was a wonderful person." Abben talked about his television duties during the early years. He wrote copy, painted sceneries on canvas flats, made props and learned to run a camera. When the station went on air, Abben sold television time, "which kind of became my strong-suit," he said. He sold commercials to Publix and directly to Jack Eckerd in his Clearwater store, among others.

Abben described WSUN's layout for television and radio. The television station's main studio on the first floor was once the streetcar barn in the Million Dollar Pier. The radio station was on the second floor. "We were really spread out, but it was fun because sometimes if you didn't pay attention you might walk into a room that was a live radio room going to your television assignment, or vice versa," Abben recalled. In the middle of the studio were four large four by four foot posts that held up the Pier. The posts, sometimes wrapped with crepe paper, became backdrops for television shows. Abben also talked about various shows at WSUN such as "Captain Mack's Adventure Trails" - a children's program with a live animal - and "A Date with Fran," - a woman's program.

The latter was part of on-set anecdote Abben recalled: “Somebody came in the studio quietly but didn’t realize what was going on and bumped into the flats and knocked them down. Now, the young ladies who were the models that were changing clothing were not on camera, but the crew sure got a big kick out of it,” he laughed. “And everything was okay after a while, everybody got around to being good friends again. But the guy that knocked down the flat, never lived it down.”

Abben talked about WSUN televising the Festival of States Parade during the 1950s. “We didn’t know what we were doing, but we did it and we had a lot of fun,” he said. “Because we didn’t have a remote unit, we made one.” They reinforced a camera on two by fours and placed it on rollers. WSUN also televised one of the first teenage dance parties at the Pier and parts of a popular sailing race from St. Petersburg to Havana, Cuba.

The Festival of States Parade concluded the tourist season, Abben recalled. He also talked about the days preceding tourist season. Nervous merchants waited for tourists to arrive before advertising on television: “Every year the merchants worried about the tourists not coming to St. Petersburg. Well they proved themselves wrong over the years, but they worried every year. They would never buy their advertising until they saw a foreign license plate or a bus load or something ... so they would hang around, as the joke goes, hang around the corner of Fourth (Street) and Central (Avenue) ... looking down Fourth Street waiting for them to show up.”

As a member of the naval reserves, Abben recalled delivering a green bench with silver “St. Petersburg” lettering to Kingston, Jamaica, a sister city. He was on leave while training in Key West. Years later, Abben recalled St. Petersburg’s benches being painted in pastels. Abben and another volunteer returned to Kingston on leave and painted that bench pastel. He was unsure if the bench remains in Kingston.

Abben, who was a national champion baton twirler in high school, recalled being impressed by Pinellas County’s music scene when he arrived in the 1940s: “There were several, many in fact very good musicians that had retired here ... that had played in big jazz bands or other bands,” he said. “There was so much music that it just kind of drove you nuts.” With wonder, Abben talked about a group of musicians who played at the Coliseum, then Williams Park and finally a dog track, without missing a beat: “They were so good that they could ... put anything in front of them, they could read it, and make it sound like it was supposed to sound.”

During Abben’s oral history interview, he noted an ironic twist to the experience: “In all the years that I spent in broadcasting, which was probably thirty-something in all, this is the very first time that I have ever worked a microphone, sorry to say.”