

The Broadcasting Years 1958–1989

Memoir of a Television Pioneer

William L. McGee
with Sandra V. McGee

BMC PUBLICATIONS

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Foreword

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Preface: From Levis and Boots to Brooks Brothers Suits

I am asked a lot about how I went from cowboying to a successful thirty-two year career in the broadcasting industry.

I'm not a celebrity, but I wanted to write my memoirs in hopes of inspiring anyone who — like me — did not pursue a formal education with how they can still succeed in the career of their choice. All it takes is target industry research, self-education, a plan, follow-through, and a healthy dose of “can do” entrepreneurship.

In the 1990s, I dictated a rough first draft of my memoirs and had it transcribed. Unfortunately, in 2003, one of the worse things that could happen to a writer happened to me — I became legally blind from macular degeneration. My memoirs were shelved and I didn't expect to work on them again. Years later, my beautiful wife and co-author, Sandra, said I needed a creative project and she offered to help me put a polish on the manuscript. As she was reading through the transcription of the first draft and sorting through the accompanying materials and photos, she saw my life divided neatly into seven phases. She suggested rather than write one memoir — which would be a very thick book — we write a series of seven shorter memoirs.

To set the stage for *The Broadcasting Years*, number six in the series, allow me to take you on a brief stroll down memory lane, starting with my previously published memoirs.

Montana Memoir: The Hardscrabble Years, 1925–1942

I was born in 1925 in the “wild and woolly” town of Livingston, Montana, and grew up cowboying on a cattle ranch in Phillips County.

The nearest town was Malta, a small cow town on the Montana Hi-Line just south of the Canadian border. My father deserted my mother, three siblings and me during the early years of the Great Depression. He moved to Alaska claiming Montana was getting too crowded. He was a scoundrel of the first order and never sent a dime home. I believe those tough and lean years instilled in me the very qualities I needed later on to make it in business and life. As James Michener, one of my favorite authors, said, “When you have a childhood like mine and you survive it, it gives you strength.”

Bluejacket Odyssey, 1942–1946: Guadalcanal to Bikini

When the United States entered World War II on December 7, 1941, I was sixteen. Like so many other youths, I couldn’t wait to turn seventeen and get into the fight. On September 30, 1942, my seventeenth birthday, I walked into the Marines recruiting office in Vancouver, Washington with a consent form signed by my mother. During the physical, the doctor found a small hernia in my groin. He suggested I have it operated on and come back, or go next door and join the Navy because they would take me and operate if needed. I joined the Navy. In retrospect, I believe that hernia saved my life. The odds of a Marine living to a ripe old age in 1942 were not very good. In *Bluejacket Odyssey*, I take the reader through my four years of military service in the Pacific theater, mixing history with my memories and those of many former shipmates and other survivors.

Operation Crossroads, Lest We Forget!

An Eyewitness Account, Bikini Atomic Bomb Tests, 1946

I had one year left to serve on my regular Navy hitch after the war ended. I put in a request for duty in the Atlantic Fleet, picturing a nice tour of European ports. Instead, I was shipped back to the hot and humid South Pacific on the heavy cruiser USS *Fall River* (CA-131). I had a front row seat at the first postwar atomic bomb tests, code-named Operation Crossroads, at the Bikini Atoll in the Marshall

Islands. Many regarded these nuclear tests as one of the most significant events of the twentieth century.

The Divorce Seekers

A Photo Memoir of a Nevada Dude Wrangler, 1947–1949

After my discharge from the Navy, I returned to cowboying — wrangling horses in Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming; working as a trail and deer hunting guide at Lake Tahoe, California; and then landing the coveted job of a dude wrangler on the Flying M.E., an exclusive dude ranch twenty miles south of Reno, Nevada. The “M.E.” catered to wealthy Easterners, socialites, and the occasional Hollywood celebrity, most seeking a six-week “quickie” divorce. It was during these years that I first became interested in the entertainment industry. I met movie stars, such as Ava Gardner and Clark Gable, and writers and directors from Hollywood and New York. While leading these guests on afternoon trail rides in the Sierras, or escorting them in the evenings to the watering holes in Carson City, Reno or Virginia City, I asked a lot of questions about their work. I thought if I ever left cowboying, I’d like to try to get into the entertainment business.

Merchant Man, 1950–1958: A Memoir

Then I fell in love. She was a beautiful young woman I met on the Flying M.E. We had nothing in common — I was a cowboy from Montana and she was from a moneyed family in the East — but we tied the knot anyway.

In December 1949, she took me to her hometown of Englewood, New Jersey for the holidays. At a cocktail party one evening, I was offered a job selling Willys Jeeps. I was told I’d make one helluva good salesman and could make more money in one month selling cars than in a year of cowboying. My wife, her father and I went into Manhattan to shop for new dude clothes for me. When we left the store, I had hung up my Levis and boots for Brooks Brothers suits (as

I liked to say). I stayed in Englewood for two years and sold automobiles. To my surprise, I enjoyed selling and decided to focus on a career in sales rather than return to cowboying. When my wife and I returned to the West, I worked in the world trade business importing steel and wire products. I rose to a top-level executive position and negotiated deals with big construction companies, such as Kaiser Engineers and Bechtel Corporation. I honed my sales and deal-making skills on a world stage, and I never looked back.

The Broadcasting Years, 1958–1989

Memoir of a Television Pioneer

And that brings me to this memoir. At age thirty-two, and with three decades ahead of me in which to forge a new career, I decided to look into opportunities in the entertainment industry. Once in, as I worked my way up the ladder in those early days of television advertising, my life wasn't unlike those of the characters portrayed on the television series *Mad Men*. It was a world filled with deadlines, pressure, too much travel (in my case), and more than a few martini lunches.

Thanks to Sandra, there are plans in the works for a seventh memoir which will cover my so-called golden years and my final career as a World War II military historian.

As with my other books (I've written twenty-two), this one is written in my signature spare and straightforward style, also described as "just the facts, ma'am" and journalistic. I've included a few time-outs for special trips I took that I thought deserved the extra ink.

I've been called a renaissance man because of the different phases of my life. I can honestly say I've enjoyed every one of them and have absolutely no regrets. Care to join me in my broadcasting years?

—William L. McGee

