



BILL PAYNE

Living Up To His Reputation



Starting out at 12 (left) on his father's station KWHP-AM/Cushing, OK in 1952, Bill Payne parlayed his love of country music and the radio business into what is now a six-station group. He honed his on-air craft working for Top 40 pioneer Todd Storz, became a skilled radio engineer, and, at age 22, built a successful FM station in his Edmond, OK home, putting up his refrigerator as collateral for turntables. Bill, who is still on the air every day at 71, gave a foothold to countless

nationally-known broadcasters such as Michael Elder, Kevin Metheny, Ken Fearnow and well-known OKC talent Mike Munday, Tom Furlong, Bill Lacy, Johnny Bond, Ben Buckland and many others. When Payne joined KOMA he worked with Don Schaeffer, Don Bruce, PD Hot Rod Roddy, Sweed Daddy Ron Thompson and Don Hodges, not to mention his six-time Marconi nominee son, Will Payne. With a devotion to community service across southeastern Oklahoma, you could say Bill is an original "prairie home companion."

My dad, William Payne, was an attorney and Oklahoma Congressman Will Rogers' press secretary. He loved country music. I remember him playing Eddy Arnold's "I'll Hold You In My Heart Until I Can Hold You In My Arms" over and over. He once took me to see Ernest Tubb in Washington, DC, presented by [promoter and founding CMA President] Connie B. Gay.

My parents let me move to my grandmother's home in Edmond, while my father was waiting for his FCC station license. I liked Edmond much better than DC

five cents a bottle. I was always hanging around the engineers, and later did the morning show. One morning, when our engineer/morning announcer quit without any notice, my dad kicked me out of bed and said, "Get over there and turn that transmitter on and get us on the air, because you're the only one who knows how!" My radio career began that morning.

When I was 18, I was employed by country entertainer/station owner Jack Beasley. He gave me the opportunity as a First Class Engineer to install the wiring and equipment on the first daytime Country station KLPR/



my initials, too, the call letters were named in honor of my father, and I'm proud of that. Our garage was remodeled to house the control room and office. The transmitter was in our spare bedroom.

We erected a 77-foot tower in the backyard. Our home was in a residential area, not zoned for a station; that's how naïve I was. The one house the tower could possibly fall on was next door, but I had put up guy wires for 100-mph winds. Our neighbor said, "Bill, I see how you built that tower. That's not going anywhere." So I thought I was OK. But three

training, and they were able to tell employers that they had on-air experience.

Our Edmond station was a family affair, with Mom (Gail, bookkeeper) and our three daughters – Anne, Kelly and Haydon, working at various jobs including airwork.

Our son Will started on the air at KTFX/Tulsa in 1985, also at age 12. On Sunday morning, he would come in with me and we would do *The Bill and Will Show*. I would say, "You're listening to *The Bill ...*" and he'd announce, "...and *Will Show*." As he got more

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because of the small-town atmosphere. My loving grandmother knew just how to keep a young boy on the right track. In 1952, when my father's license came through, we moved to Cushing, where my dad started KWHP-AM. Frankly, as a youngster, I had no image of myself until I got into radio, and I became popular and respected. It was the turning point in my life. After all, I had a good reputation to live up to.

After starting KWHP-AM, my dad gave me my first job at age 12 hosting *Bill Payne's Record Shop*, playing country records. I wasn't paid anything, but got to refill the Coke machine and keep any profits I could make at



Pearls Of Wisdom: Here's Bill with the late Opry legend Minnie Pearl in the mid-'80s at an artist taping session during CMA's Fan Fair.

Oklahoma City when the station moved to their new building. As the morning man, my beat included going to police station at 3:30am to look at the crime blotter and see what went on overnight. Next, I'd head over to the fire department to see if there were any fires. As the morning show DJ, I would also report the news.

In 1959, I was hired by GM Jack Sampson to join 50-kw Top 40 KOMA/OKC to do the combo DJ/engineer job from midnight-6 for owner Todd Storz and program manager Graham Richards. Personally, I thought if a song was commercial, we should play it. Graham disagreed, and later I understood why. I made the mistake of breaking the rules and played by request Bobby Vee's new single, "Rubber Ball." The next day, Richards called and said, "What are you doing playing that off-the-wall song?" I said, "Well, I thought it was good." He said, "It wasn't on the playlist and if you ever do that again, you're fired!" After we got a gold record for it, he called back later on and said, "OK, you got lucky on that one."

With 50,000 watts at night, the atmosphere was so electric at KOMA that those long fluorescent bulbs would light up, even across the street. We had cheerleaders coming over with them, twirling them like batons.

In 1962, I was 22 when we built KWHP-FM/Edmond in our home. Although they are

days before we were to go on-air, the mayor and city manager called me and asked, "What are you doing starting a station in your home? You can't do that." I said, "Why can't I? Look across the street. There's a beauty shop over there." They said, "You make a lot of noise; we can't have that." I explained, "Radio doesn't make any noise. It's *radio waves*!" The mayor said, "Well, we would like to have this station here. Let me see what we can do." So they researched all the laws, which were written before radio, and couldn't find radio listed. The mayor called back and said, "I think we can get away with this."

To get listeners, I called as many people in the phone book as we could, but only 10% of them had FM radios. Many told me that their FM tuner section didn't work; the tubes had burned out. A *Reader's Digest* article said FM would exceed AM in five years, and I would take that story around to advertisers to show them what was coming. Getting business was real tough. I used to tell myself, "I'm not going home until I sell something today." So I didn't quit. And to this day I always tell people, "If you don't quit, you can't lose."

Times were so difficult that we started the Oklahoma Academy of Broadcasting, a school to train DJs. Because of this school, we were able to train students that became local radio announcers; some went on to national acclaim. The school allowed the DJs on-the-air

experience, we expanded what he said to song titles and artists. Later, we added temperature and other bits. *The Bill and Will Show* was unique and became the only program on our station that was No. 1! At age 15, he began his first solo show.

Will became our manager and morning personality at KITX (K95.5) in Hugo at 22, and has been there for going on 16 years. His ratings quickly grew in Oklahoma. When Will added Barry Diamond from Paris, TX to the *Morning Circus Show*, the two talents together were great. The program became No. 1 on both sides of the border. The *Will and Barry* show was launched, and the duo are recognized as community leaders.

My advice to younger personalities is just to let people know that you care about them. In 1957, at KWRW/Guthrie, Senior Wally Seeds (an announcer and minister) told me, "Bill, if you really want to be the communicator, you need to smile when you're talking into the microphone. Enunciate clearly and talk with passion to one person that you love and care about." So when I do my shows, that's how it's done – in a loving and helping way. People simply relate to folks who care about them.

Today, at our radio stations, we stress that we must go out and help and love people, and let them know that we care. I believe that's what people want to know." **CAC**