Madison Historical: The Online Encyclopedia and Digital Archive for Madison County, Illinois

Sam Stemm Oral History Interview

Jeff Manuel, Interviewer

Simmons, Hanly, Conroy, LLC, Alton, Illinois

June 12, 2018

Jeff Manuel (JM): The following interview was conducted with Sam Stemm on behalf of the Madison County oral history project that is part of Madison Historical, the online encyclopedia and digital archive for Madison County, Illinois. The interview took place on Tuesday, June twelfth, 2018, in the offices of Simmons, Hanly, Conroy in Alton, Illinois. The interviewer is Jeff Manuel from the Department of Historical Studies at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Ah, good afternoon, Sam, thanks for conducting an oral history interview with us and I guess we could start at the beginning and you could just mention where and when you were born.

Sam Stemm (SS): Well I was born on July seventh, 1954, right here in Alton, at St. Joseph's Hospital. My parents, ah Gerald Stemm and Bonnie Stemm and I am the oldest of six siblings. My mother always tells the story that she, she suffered greatly. She was in labor for three days, she went into labor on the Fourth of July and I guess I didn't wanna be a firecracker baby. I held off for three days and um, apparently was somewhat of a miracle baby because the doctor had told my my father and my grandparents that because of the hard labor that probably neither one of us was going to survive and we both did so, that's the good news.

JM: Can you tell me a little bit about your parents?

SS: Um, yeah, you know they're typically a typical fifties parents, they met in the workplace shortly after World War Two and you know Dad, Dad worked at Owens Illinois glass company. Mom was a stay at home mom raising six kids and eventually dad transitioned into the savings and loan business that which he worked in for the rest of his life. And you know we were the typical middle-class family. My father was an only child and so it was, it was I think kind of interesting that he ended up with six kids, but my mom came from a big family so on my mom’s side we had lots of cousins and aunts and uncles and on dad's side it was just grandma and grandpa.

JM: How would you describe Alton during the years when you were growing up when you were I guess a young child?

SS: Well, I spent you know my earliest memories are when we lived, and I guess I ought to cover that, from that, I remember going to kindergarten at Clifton Hill school out on what was then route one hundred, now route three. But right after my kindergarten year, dad worked for Owens Illinois glass company and he was transferred to the plant up in St. Charles, Illinois, and so we moved up there and so my first five years were spent up there and that was interesting from the standpoint that, you know, we didn't really haven't we didn't have any family up there. And the subdivision in which we lived was all seemed to be all people from elsewhere in the country who had come, it was in Geneva, Illinois, which is

a west Chicago suburb. It was an outer suburb then, now Chicagoland I think goes west past Rockford, but everybody seemed to be from somewhere else and so neighbors sort of became family. And so for, you know, my first through halfway through fifth grade, that was the environment in which I was raised so when we moved back to Alton, you know, we knew we were moving home. I was a ten-year-old at the time, but I didn't really have any memories of Alton so it was all it was all kind of new and it was it was a lot different family environment because now there were all these relatives I mentioned Mom came from a big family and her youngest siblings were, her youngest sibling was just seven years older than me, so he was almost like an older brother more than an uncle. And so then you know it sort of became this family environment, and then of course all new friends and school and in the neighborhood, but we lived in Middletown, in an old house, two-story house with the big trees and within walking distance of school. We went to a Catholic school of St. Mary’s and then eventually to Marquette and that was all fairly much in the neighborhood. So it was really kind of an exciting time that was 1965 when we when we moved back here and it was a completely different environment than the subdivision that we lived in in Geneva was all new construction, and because of that you know there were no big trees or anything like that. Here we moved back onto Liberty Street in Alton and it was, it was a completely different environment. Alton of course in the sixties was still a bustling factory town and so even just, you know, walking to and from school hearing the factory whistles and the, the rumble of the trains going and the barges on the riverfront, it had a completely different vibe than a Chicago suburb from the sixties. And so you know those are my earliest memories of Alton other than, you know, my faint memories of kindergarten out on at the Clifton Hill school. But you know it was, it was exciting because of that vibe that, hey this town has energy and it has history and I didn't really realize how much history at that time as a ten-year-old and then of course you know that they just kind of progressed through, through high school. And you know after college my opportunities seemed to be, stay in Alton I didn't make a, I don't think I made a, I don't think I made a conscious decision that oh I’m going to spend all of my life in Alton. It just worked out that way. But those are my memories of Alton, especially the feel, the feeling of the energy also the topography was interesting in, you know, all the hills and that that wasn't something that was common up there in the Chicago suburb either. So, you know, for a ten-year-old it was even though I’m a native of Alton, it was it was all new to me at ten years old as well.

JM: Uh, moving forward a little bit, you'd mentioned you went to Marquette high school here in Alton. How would you describe that, or do you have any experiences that stand out to you when you look back on those years?

SS: Well, you know at the time it was just, it was just what we did, you know? I went through all through Catholic grade school in Geneva five years at St. Peter’s grade school in Geneva and then midway through fifth grade moved back here to St. Mary's and it was, it was all we knew and then it, you know, Marquette was the next step and so, you know, Marquette was much different back then because they still had a lot of nuns on staff. The Ursuline nuns where the, most of the classes were taught by the Ursuline nuns, a few lay teachers. But that was that was what we were used to from grade school as well, so it didn't really stand out to me and I don't think I ever realized how unique an opportunity it was until later in life, when I look back and, and saw what a sacrifice it was for my parents to send all six of us through Marquette. Now back then it was, I distinctly remember my senior year my tuition was two hundred and thirty dollars. Well that was, that was deemed to be fairly steep in 1971 and ’72, you look back on it now and it's like it was dirt cheap compared to what families pay now. But it, you know, I think one of the great things about Marquette was that it was, it was much smaller than Alton High and so there was, there

was a collegial feel to it and I can give you a little anecdote, my junior year our English literature teacher was Miss Dorothy Colonias, who had been the department chair for the English department and the drama department at Alton High for years and years and she had recently retired and Marquette apparently had a need for somebody teach an English literature course so as a retiree from Alton High she took that position. And as that school year progressed Ms. Colonias would just rail from time to time about how our class drove her crazy because, there was always all this chatter, and finally about mid-term that year she said, you know it finally dawned on me, she said you kids all know each other. She said when I taught at Alton High, you know, they'd send me twenty-five students and a few kids here and a few kids there might know each other but the others were in essence strangers because, you know, they came from different middle schools and, there were so many different classes in any given discipline. She said but at Marquette she said you all know each other and so you have so much in common that you just have all this energy. Well that wasn't anything that we knew at the time, but now you know looking back at it, it really was you know the, there were probably then four Catholic grade schools feeding Marquette. Well, you know about one-fourth of the students you already knew from your grade school experience and you became fast friends with the rest. And you know, it really did make for, for lifelong friendships. And I'll say this about Marquette, I've kind of kept a lifelong association, from the standpoint that, you know I served about ten years on the school board. Just, that ended maybe six, seven years ago. But I've also broadcast their football games on the radio continuously since 1987 and so I've had you know I've had this relationship with the coaches and the administrators and even the, many of the football players, and so that you know that something that has been a constant almost from my high school years to the present.

JM: Now were you involved with sports yourself when you were in high school?

SS: Well to a very minor degree. I did play, I went out for football my freshman and sophomore years and both seasons I got injured before the first game, so I never played a game. For two years I went through, back then they had the summer two-a-days, which were pure hell. You know, because you go out and practice in hundred-degree weather for twice a day. And then you know I went through all of that and then when it came close to the first game, I got injured both times so my junior year I decided, no I'm not going to do that. I did play basketball as a freshman and I was, I was the fifteenth man on a fifteen-man squad. I was not terribly talented in basketball. I would have been, my best talent was in football, but I couldn't stay healthy and stay on the field. So I never played a game, but I've broadcast hundreds of games over the years so I guess I've made up for it. But less, much less likelihood of being injured up in the broadcast booth.

JM: Outside the, outside of schooling was church and the parish important to your family as well, beyond just going to a Catholic school system?

SS: Yeah, it was, you know, that was all wrapped up into one the church and school was adjacent to the church if you're familiar with St. Mary's in Alton. It was the grade school my mom and her siblings attended, it was the church where my mother and father were married, all of us kids were baptized, you know grandma and grandpa's funerals were there, so church, it was it was very instrumental and the longtime pastor Monsignor Suddes, he was an assistant to Monsignor Brune when my mom and her siblings were in school. And then he became the longtime pastor and, just as an anecdote there, my father was not raised Catholic, he was, he converted prior to my mother and him being married, and so his

parents were not Catholic and years later back, ah I'm trying to think what year it would have been, probably in the late eighties not too long after Monsignor Suddes had retired, he went, Monsignor Suddes lived down at Marian Heights apartments and my dad's mother, my grandmother, who was a widow at that time, she sold her home and moved down to Marian Heights. Well by happenstance she ended up across the hall from Monsignor Suddes, and I'll make this story quick, but it, I think it's kind of interesting, one Friday in Lent he was trying to fry fish, and he set the smoke alarms in the building off. And so she went over and told him what he was doing wrong and why the oil smoked because he had the fire too hot and all that. So she vowed to teach him how to fry fish. So they sort of became fast friends, and of course he realized who she was because he knew, you know, all of her grandkids and kids and all that, so, ah, a couple of years later for just prior to Easter she announced that she was going to be baptized Catholic that she taught Monsignor how to fry fish and he converted her to the Catholic faith. So, you know it's kind of interesting, the Lord works in strange ways and all of those relationships always seemed to tie up. But in response to your question about, yes, church and school were very important. They were really kind of the core of family life and you know it all kind of had the neighborhood feel as well. Many of the kids in our neighborhood over on Liberty Street were students of St. Mary's, parishioners at St. Mary's and so neighborhood and family and church and school all just kind of seemed to have, gel in into a nice, nice tight little package.

JM: Were there religious divides in Alton that you could perceive at the time between, you know, Catholics, non-Catholics, things of that nature?

SS: You know, not that I, I suspect there were but it wasn't too terribly apparent to us. Now I do have recollections of at least a couple of nuns cautioning us in Catholic grade school that you know we probably were best to avoid making fast friendships with the Protestant kids, you know. But that my recollection was that kind of seemed to wash off my back because there were kids in the neighborhood they attended First Presbyterian Church or you know Baptist church or whatever and they seemed just perfectly normal to me. And I think the nuns even more so were attended to caution against when you grow up and get married you, you know, you don't but in terms of just in the neighborhood or in Alton society in general at least in our neighborhood within our family there never seemed to be any animus towards people of other faith and you know so other than those couple of cautions from the sisters and that wasn't really a big deal it was maybe almost kind of anecdotally, like you know when you get married obviously you're going to marry a Catholic girl because we don't, you know, we don't share the same faith with the others. Now there were some rivalries when we were in grade school, we'd walk home from school it was about a mile walk every day but for the most part we'd walk home from school and there were a couple of public schools nearby in the Middletown area and sometimes we'd cross paths with the kids coming home from the public schools. And there were some rivalries there. And every once in a while, maybe a little fight, you know under a shade tree or whatever say here you hold my books and somebody holding these two guys were going to, you know, defend the honor of our school and it never was anything too terrible, just I think normal rivalries between boys. But beyond that that didn't really have a religious connotation, that was just more of, hey you know we're from St. Mary's and you're from Garfield and we're better than you are oh yeah, well, you know, I'll show you and okay tomorrow you know under the shade tree up there in the corner we'll settle this you know. And word had spread and everybody'd gather and usually it turned out to be more of a shoving match than anything else and then everybody went their way. You know the one thing in terms of talking about neighborhood and school and family and all of that, the one thing that really stands out in my mind, and I had three brothers. Our

family the four oldest were boys and then the two youngest were the girls and so you know us four boys were, did a lot of things together. But the one overriding memory I have is we went everywhere on our bicycles. And that's so different from today. I still live in Middletown, Alton, and I hardly ever see a kid on a bicycle and you know from the time we moved back to Alton when I was ten years old all the way up through probably, you know, early high school, that was our primary mode of transportation. We went everywhere on our bicy-, we rode our bicycles to school when the weather permitted it, we went all over town on our bicycles, if, you know, we wanted to go over to grandma's house we'd get on our bicycle and go. And you know there was even there were even rivalries there. Hey my bicycle's faster than yours and we'd have bicycle races and you know and that part of growing up and that part of culture is just so different from today because I don't even know if parents would let their kids go all the way across town on a bicycle, you know, let a ten-year-old, eleven-year-old, twelve-year-old but back then it was just commonplace.

JM: The 1960s is also sometimes remembered in Alton and this, southwestern Illinois in general, as an era that had a lot of contention around race and civil rights. I'm wondering were you aware of any of that when you were in school here in Alton?

SS: You know, I think only vaguely and I know there was some, I know historically now that there was some racial tension in Alton, there were some buildings burned as some racial unrest but none of that ever seemed close to home for us. And so, I think really my knowledge of that is more in a historical sense, having looked back and read and, you know, seen newspaper articles than it was actually experiencing anything like that. So, yeah, you know, you're right there were those issues but it just never really hit home it didn't seem close to home. Now I will tell you this, looking back in all my years in grade school, we had one black classmate. And we didn't think of him as black, he was just, he was just another classmate. But you know then, I'm and now I know, looking back, that was so much different than what the public schools were, so you know maybe there was more, the kids in public school may have had more of a sense of any unrest than we did simply because there were a lot more black students and, you know, those tensions may have been more openly expressed there than they were. And then even in high school, my class at Marquette we had two black students or three and again you know that, so you know maybe we were just insulated from that. And I look back on that I wonder, I don't know why that was. I guess in part if you look at it socioeconomically, and I do have my minor at SIUE was sociology so, but if you look back at it, apparently in Alton not very many black families were Catholic, and so, you know, I don't think it was that they weren't welcome in the Catholic schools they just weren't Catholic and therefore you wouldn't, you know. I think nowadays there are more non-Catholics in the Catholic schools then there were back in the sixties. And then you know the other point was even the black families that were Catholics sometimes I guess the economic conditions might have made it somewhat difficult for them to access private schooling but, you know, the short answer to your question is while I know historically that there were racial tensions in Alton I don't have any overriding recollections of remembering the experience at the time or being fearful of it. I think it was in the early seventies when I was in high school when there was, you know, there were some buildings burned, some arsons and so I was aware of that but again I think it was before I was driving and so, you know, it wasn't like I felt like I was going to be in harm's way. I was safe in my cocoon at Liberty Street. So never any fear, but some knowledge of it at that point in time.

JM: So, wrapping up with high school, I guess what came after high school for you?

SS: College. I uh as a high school student, I do have this recollection of, you know, proceeding through the second half of my junior year and into my senior year, and guidance counselors saying, okay, you know, you need to you need to make a college choice and a career choice and all of that. And I had no idea what I wanted to do I really didn't. I just I just really had no career aspirations. And so being pushed, um, it was like okay for whatever reason I kind of liked to tinker with things and electricity kind of, uh, intrigued me, and I had you know helped my dad rewire some things around the house or whatever and it's like, well yeah that's kind of cool, I'll become an electrical engineer. And, and you know my ACT scores I had a very high score in math, so I had a high math aptitude so it's like okay. That's fine, I'll be an electrical engineer, so that led to choice of a college being Bradley University in Peoria because they had a strong engineering department. So I went away to college in the fall of 1972, believing that I was going to major in electrical engineering and let that take me wherever it was. Well, I took my first calculus course and decided there was no way in the world I wanted to be any kind of an engineer, let alone an electrical engineer. So there I was right back to okay you know I'll finish my freshman year and my guidance counselor at Bradley is like, "okay well if you're not going to major in electrical engineering, you're going to have to declare another major. What's it going to be?" It's like, I don't have a clue. And when I look back on it, I probably would have been better off if I had taken a year between high school and college. And just experienced life. But that wasn't a common thing, I think that's much more common now than what it was back then. It never really was presented as an option. But fast forward so I had to choose another major, again I didn't have any strong career aspirations, and it was like, well what do I like. Well I'm a huge sports fan. You know, I listen to every Cardinal game on the radio, loved Harry Caray and then later Jack Buck and all of that and wouldn't it be cool to be like a sports writer and get to go to ballgame every, that's your job, you go and sit and watch the ballgame, you write a story, and they print it in the paper and that's your life. It's like, okay, I'll be a sports writer. So I changed my major to journalism, took some journalism courses at Bradley and enjoyed them. But in the course of it, there was a multimedia class that we had to take and I kind of got to rub elbows with some of the students that were in the radio program. And so the next thing you know I'm kind of hanging around them and it's like now this is really cool. This is much cooler than being a writer, being a journalist, and so I really then started to think about a career in radio. And at that point in time changed my major to Mass Comm. After my sophomore year at Bradley, I changed uh I transferred to SIU Edwardsville because Bradley didn't have a strong, you know they were an engineering school they didn't have a strong Mass Comm program. SIUE back in the '70s had a very strong Mass Comm program. On top of that, I had in two years had accumulated ten thousand dollars in student loan debt. That doesn't sound like a lot now, but back then it was a lot of money. And it was like well, SIUE's a better school for Mass Comm and its a heck of a lot less expensive I can live at home and save room and board expenses and all of that and so that was the that was the switch I made then. And from that point forward worked, well I say part time, but it was nearly full time, because I had two part time jobs and went to school part time. And so I graduated from high school in '72 and did not graduate with my undergraduate degree in Mass Comm until 1978 because I, my, you know, junior and senior years I was attending part time but fell in love with radio and you know was just sure that that's all I wanted to do with my life was be in radio. But then there were some twists and turns after that.

JM: What was SIUE like in the years once you came back there?

SS: I found SIUE to be very exciting. It was different because it was a commuter school, and so, you know, two years at Bradley I lived in a dorm, so you had that aspect of it. SIUE was much different in

that, you know, you show up and attend class and maybe hang out for a few extracurricular activities, but then it was off-campus and forget about it until the next time you went to class. So it was very different from living on campus at Bradley, and, you know, in essence having all these buddies that were almost like family because you were living together. Um but SIUE at that time had so much energy. Now, this was, I enrolled there probably...when, probably about '74, '75, so it was still a relatively new campus. In fact, it only had the one classroom building at the time, the Peck building, the next two classroom buildings were built during my time, they were buildings two and buildings three, I think they have names now. Back then, they just had building two and building three. But there was just a vibrant energy to the campus, and the one thing that struck me was that the faculty seemed so young and energetic compared to what the faculty was at Bradley. Not that they weren't energetic there, but that you know they were, seemed ancient to me. They were probably in their fifties, you know, and as a twenty-something or less, nineteen-year-old, they seemed ancient to me. But SIUE was just a really great experience for me and being involved in the radio program there, the radio station was on the air at the time, WSIE and I got super involved in that. And uh you know when I wasn't in class, I was hanging out at the radio station. And always hoping to pick up another air shift, or are they going to need someone to go do a ballgame or whatever and those are the first play-by-play opportunities I had, was at WSIE, and I just loved every minute at SIUE. I really did, it was an exciting experience for me. And really, I think one of the keys to my maturation process, I look back on my life, and you know when I enrolled at SIUE, I think I'm still a kid, and when I finished there and had a degree, I was more of a man.

JM: What was the general perception of SIUE in Alton, as far as you could tell?

SS: Um, I don't know that I had any sense of that, truthfully. I think, to some extent, it was looked at, it didn't have, it didn't have a lot of stature at the time. So it...but, because I transferred midway through my college years, it wasn't like I got a lot of feedback from people about, you know. When I was a senior in high school, "hey where you going to go to college? Bradley University," well, you know, that has some stature to it; it's a long time private university and so it wasn't like I told anybody I was going to SIUE and got any reaction out of it, so. I can't really give you a strong impression about what the community thought back then.

JM: And, once you graduated, what came next after that?

SS: Well, actually, what came next came before I graduated, shortly before I graduated. I was, I was, back then, SIUE was in a quarter system and I was working on, I had like one quarter to go. Maybe eight quarter hours to finish to get my degree. And there news came to the radio station that there was an opportunity at the Alton radio station, WOKZ. They were looking to hire a sports director. So, like, holy smokes, it's my hometown radio station, and sports radio was what I love, and so I went and applied and interviewed and I got the job. But it was a full-time job. And so, at the time, this was in, uh, 1978. So I went, when I interviewed for the job, I said to the general manager, you know, I um, I would, I understand it's a full-time job, but I would like for my schedule to be flexible enough that I could, over the course of a couple of quarters get these, maybe take one class each quarter so that I could finish up my degree. "Oh, that's no problem, no problem whatsoever." So, you know, I didn't enroll in the next quarter because I wanted to get my feet on the ground at the job and so my first job, my first paying job in radio was at WOKZ in 1978. And I went in as the sports director and that was a real eye-opener. I learned, I learned more there in the first two weeks about what radio was really like than I had learned in all those years in

the classroom. And I loved, loved every minute of it. But I only stayed in that job for about two years because, despite the promise of the flexibility, the flexibility never came, and I was really starting to get anxious, that my goodness, I'm ninety- eight point five percent away from having a degree, and here I sit doing a minimum wage job. And entry-level jobs in radio then were like that, they probably still are at most places. And, you know, the more time I let pass, the lest likelihood there is that I'm going to get that degree. And to this day, I still have dreams where I am, like, one class shy of getting my degree, and for whatever reason I can't get that class completed. So, ultimately what happened was I left the job for that reason and some others. I left the job, went ahead and finished, took the last two classes that I needed to take in order to receive my degree, and that was in 1980. I said I graduated in '78 from SIUE, well, I did, I went through the graduation ceremony even though I was that close, because at that point in time I was enrolled and, you know, it was like okay, you don't have to wait until next year, you can go through the graduation exercises when you get those final eight quarter hours, then we'll mail you your diploma. So that came two years later. And, and so you know, I left radio in 1980 and for the next seven years did other things. I became a licensed insurance agent for the Equitable life insurance company, that lasted a couple years. Uh, and then I worked for a couple of years at St. Joseph's Hospital here in Alton as an orderly, simply because that was the only job I could find at the time. And then ultimately transitioned to a job in their educational department, at St. Joe's, where I oversaw a program of video continuing education courses. They had installed a satellite dish on the roof, which was cutting-edge technology at that time, in the mid-'80s, and were downloading video programs for doctors, nurses, and allied health professionals which gave them an opportunity to earn continuing education credits, which they needed to keep their licenses current. And I oversaw that up until 1987 when, um, the healthcare environment was changing at that time. You know, there were four hospitals in the region, St. Joe's, St. Anthony's, Alton Memorial, and Wood River Township Hospital, and the handwriting was on the wall there was no way all four were going to survive. And St. Joe's was the first to go belly up. And so I was in one of the early waves of lay-offs in 19, in the spring of 1987, they eliminated my position. Eliminated most of the education department. And, uh, at the time, um, my intent was to start applying at hospitals over in St. Louis to try and find a similar position because I knew they all did things similar to what was going on there, and I loved, loved that environment. But the, the then-owner of WBGZ, now, I mentioned that in '78 I worked at WOKZ. The station changed hands in 1984, the Dreith family bought the radio station, changed the call letters from WOKZ to WBGZ, and they, um, uh, the then-owner and general manager, Louie Dreith, had, he and I had become acquainted and I had done a couple of sports broadcasts for them. Somebody had introduced me to him and I told him when I was still working at the hospital that if, hey, if you ever need anybody to do a sports broadcast or whatever, I used to do that and I'd, you know, I'd like to do it just to dabble. So I had done a couple of things like that. Well, he had heard that I got laid off at the hospital and he called me and he said, you know, "why don't you come see me, I've got a job opening, and I'd like to talk to you about that." I said, oh, Mr. Dreith, I've been there, done that, my radio career is over. Well, he was persistent! He said, "well, just come in and talk to me. Just come in and talk to me." And I distinctly remember my thought process being, I haven't been on a job interview for about seven years, and so I'll just go talk to him to brush up on my job interviewing skills. Because I'm going to need, need to, you know be on my game when I start applying at these hospitals over in St. Louis. Well, I went and saw him and he told me about this opportunity he had, and there I was in the studios where I had worked in the late '70s, seven or eight years previous to the time of this interview, and, you know, all the juices started flowing, and the excitement of the radio station was refreshed in my mind, and in my soul, I guess. And when I left that job interview, I had accepted the job, and um, and I, that was spring of 1987.

April 13, 1987 was my first day at WBGZ and I'm still there.

JM: If I could back up just for one second, to those hospital years…

SS: Mm-hmm.

JM: Uh, why, in your opinion, was the market for hospitals changing, or, you know, what lead to the sort of downsizing layoffs of that era, as you understand it?

SS: Well, it's, it's pretty complicated. And again, as somebody with a minor in sociology, you know, you could write papers and books about what happened. But a lot of what happened was, and, I guess part of what I'm going to say is somewhat my opinion, some of it could be backed up, I think, by experts, and some of it is probably open to debate, but I think the healthcare system started changing when the government got into the business of providing healthcare. First through Medicare, and then later through Medicaid programs. And early on in those government- sponsored plans, there were incentives offered to doctors and hospitals and other facilities to get them to accept the Medicare and Medicaid patients. So in many instances early on, and my numbers may not be right, but the reimbursement rates were more than one hundred percent. It's like, you know, "Doctor X, if you will see, if you will take on our Medicare patients, for every dollar of care we'll reimburse you a dollar ten," or whatever. And so doctors and hospitals were anxious to provide that care because there was an economic incentive to do it. Well, fast forward a decade or two, well, a couple decades, and, you know, the cost of those programs were starting to become a burden to the government, and so there were, um, the government had to find a way to cut costs, and part of the way of doing that was by cutting the reimbursement rates. So, ultimately, it got to the point where, well, for a dollar's worth of care you might get reimbursed less than a dollar. Um, and, so, you know, some doctors in hospitals were given the option that well, "if you don't want to accept these patients..." well, that became a big chunk of the possible business, so nobody really could, for the most part, reject them. Some specialists did, but you know the hospitals didn't. Well, where it really changed the healthcare environment, then, was when the commercial insurance companies said, "well, now wait a minute," you know, "government, this is not fair. We're in the same business you are, we're trying to give people access to healthcare as well, and we should have the ability, you're doing it by statute," the insurance companies said to the government, "we should be able to do it by agreement so that if a hospital will give, take our patients, if we're, insurance company, the ACME insurance company, we should be able to make deals and we should be able to also take a look at what services are being provided that they're really necessary." At that point in time, the government and the insurers started having a profound effect. And if you go back in the '60s and even into the '70s, if somebody had a tummy ache, they would go into the hospital for three days and have an upper-GI series and all that. Well, you know, the insurance companies, the government said, "Well that's not really necessary. You don't need to bill for three days in the hospital, you can do that on an outpatient basis." And so, I was kind of there in the early '80s when this environment was, was all changing and some of it was necessary change, but it also reduced the need for a lot of the services that were being offered. There weren't nearly, wasn't nearly, if you're not going to put somebody in the hospital for three days to give them an upper-GI series to find out why they got a stomach ache, well, now you don't need as many hospital beds. And so, all of those pressures, and probably my explanation is overly simplistic, but it kind of gives you a flavor. It had as much to do with the fact that the, the payers, the government and the insurance companies, were starting to mandate what was allowed for reimbursement, and therefore the hospitals and the physicians had to react to that. And so

there was less need for inpatient services especially. And that's when you started seeing the, you know, back in those days, there's no such thing as an outpatient clinic, or even an outpatient procedure, you know. If you needed a procedure, you were admitted to the hospital. Either that or you went to the emergency room. And so as that environment changed, of course that put a lot of pressure and it was not unique to the Alton Riverbend area. I mean, in communities all across the country the, you know, the number of hospital beds were drastically reduced in that time frame. And, uh, led to hospital mergers and closures and all of that. And the result of that in our community is where in the mid- '80s we had four fully-functional hospitals and ultimately that got down relatively quick, quickly, I'm not sure when Wood River Township Hospital closed, but probably around the turn of the century. So, you're down from four hospitals to two, and the number of hospital beds, I would suspect if you went back and calculated, was probably cut in half. And rightfully so, because there wasn't the need for that many hospital beds, just based upon, you know, the evolution of the healthcare industry.

JM: Now were there other industries that closed, or left town, or downsized during the 1980s, here in Alton as well?

SS: Oh, yeah, almost all of them. Um, yeah, the Alton of my youth, it was a factory town. And actually, you know, there was a period of time in the '40s after the war and through much of the '50s and well into the '60s that, you know, if your dad and maybe even your grandpa worked at a particular factory, you had a pretty good chance of getting on there and working there until the day you retired. There were whole families that they all worked at the glass works or the steel mill or the box board. And so yeah, we had the Alton Box Board Company, which later became Jefferson-Smurfit, and eventually closed down. The Owens Illinois glass plant, well, the big one down on Broadway and also a facility out in Godfrey. And my mother's family, my maternal grandfather worked his entire life at Laclede Steel. And his oldest son worked his entire life at Laclede Steel and two of his other sons worked there until they decided they didn't want to spend their whole life in the steel mill. So that, and you know that was Alton in its heyday, I think at one time our population I think peaked right around forty-five to forty-eight thousand. And as those, as that industry started closing in the '80s, the population dwindled, the town changed radically. And one of my frustrations, um, I became general manager of the radio station in 1990, so it was not too long after most of the industry had left or some was still leaving. One of my frustrations was city leaders who would not let go of the idea that we need to bring the industry back. Because for whatever reason, it became obvious to me that it's gone and it's not coming back. We need to find another path. We need to rebrand ourselves, we need to redefine our city. But that was a hard thing to do simply because you had a city of forty thousand plus that that was all they knew, was industry. And even today you look at, in this last Presidential election, you know, there was talk out in West Virginia about bringing the coal mines back because that's all they know, you know. And if you grew up in a mining family and the mines are closing down, you're desperate to get the mines reopened because that's just the way it is. And that's the way it was here, you know, a lot of people were, they're a Box Board family, they're a steel mill family, and they're a glass works family, you know, and there was Duncan Foundry and, I'm trying to think if I'm leaving any of the other industry out. But once it was gone, Alton changed radically. And it was a painful transition. And I think, to some extent, there's still pain being experienced. Although, you know, you now have probably a couple generations that never knew that, and so it's, that sense of loss is not there for them. So eventually, I guess, time will, time will mitigate those circumstances. But that really was a very painful period and led, I'm not sure what Alton's population is now, I think it's around twenty-five thousand, so I mean our population was cut nearly in half and it was, it was primarily a result of the loss

of industry. Now, you know, we weren't the only, the only factory town to see its factories roll up, roll away and be done with, and the beauty was what we had left was history and, you know, scenery, and a lot of natural resources. And I also recall when, in the early days of our Convention and Visitors Bureau being formed and talk of, well, you know, "we can be a tourist destination!" Oh! People scoffed at that! Who in their right mind, what kind of tourist would want to come to Alton? Well, they probably wouldn't have when it was a factory town, because there wasn't really much to see. But, you know, over the course of several decades I think we've done a good job of identifying the historical and the natural resources and all the factors that do attract tourists, even if it's "let them come look at turkey vultures because they think they're eagles!"

JM: So, back to it's 1987 and you've gone back to WBGZ. What was the station like when you returned there in 1987?

SS: Well, it was exciting. Um, at that time, they were still running music, it was a music format. And when the Dreith family took over in 1984, they had put a music format, a country music format, and soon discovered that many of the advertisers said, "well, my customers don't listen to country music," so they kind of changed to a light AC-type of music, but they had a daily talk show and a swap shop called the "Garage Sale of the Airwaves."

JM: Can you clarify, what's AC mean?

SS: Adult contemporary music. Light AC. You know, basically middle of the road stuff like Neil Diamond and Barry Manilow and that sort of stuff. And basically their music, their music choices were made of, what is, what kind of music is going to alienate the least number of people? Because that was not their forte. Their forte was, and still is, local news and information. And they had a pretty aggressive news department, Jim Scanlon who was a long-time news man for St. Louis radio had made his name at WRTH, which was one of the top radio stations in St. Louis in the '60s. But Jim lived and raised his family in Godfrey, and he was later in his career and Louie Dreith had prompted him to come work at the radio station so the news department was strong. At that time, the radio station was a daytime only, the AM. Now, when I was there in the late '70s, they had an FM, but they sold the FM in 1979 to a St. Louis group, so the FM kind of went away. And the AM was a daytime only. When they sold the FM, then they lost their ability to do live sports in the evening, high school sports. Um, and daytime only meant that at sundown they had to sign off the air and they couldn't sign on until the next morning. Well. In the summer of 1987, Ronald Reagan signed a treaty with Mexico and there was an agreement to allow many of these daytime stations to stay on at night. And I could get into a lot of the technical reasons why that happened, but it you know Mexican stations were protecting U.S. stations and vice versa, and Reagan and Mexico signed this pact, and basically it's like "okay, if you've got a station in the U.S. that's on a Mexican clear channel, where it previously couldn't broadcast at night, now it can, but it has to be at reduced power." But at any rate, the effect of that for us was that in 1987, then, beginning in the summer of that year, we were able to stay on throughout the night and that allowed us, then, to start doing our high school sports broadcasts in the fall of '87. And we started it then and we're still doing it today. And that was a great boon for, because there's nothing, nothing local like a local high school sports broadcast. So, yeah, the station had a commitment to the community, local news and information, had the talk show with local guests, had the local news, and then we started the high school sports in the fall of that year. But I was hired in the spring of '87 with the title of program director, but along with that was a five-hour on-air

shift each day from one until six p.m., which was sign off. Um, and I pretty much continued in that mode until the spring of, late winter of, well it was February of 1990. When Louie Dreith went on to other endeavors and his brothers who were his partners and formed the management group approached me and said, "would you manage the station on an interim basis?" and I figured if I said no that, you know, I, truthfully, at that point in time, it's like, I don't know anything about managing a radio station. I never set out to manage, I just, you know, I just wanted to do some sports play-by-play, and you know my afternoon on-air shift, that was fine, and had fun making commercials and I was happy doing that, but it's like, well, if I tell them no, then any chance for advancement probably goes out the window, so I agreed and after a few months as the interim general manager they said, "well, you're doing a good job, we'd like you to keep the job." And that was the beginning of my management career. Shortly thereafter, I was offered the opportunity to become part of the ownership group because Louie Dreith had expressed his desire to sell his stock and his, I think part of it was his brothers couldn't afford to buy him out completely, so it's like, "hey, maybe your new general manager would like to be part of that, too," so 1990 I became the general manager, 1991 I became a small stockholder. And then over the course of the '90s I had more opportunities to buy more stock and until it got to the point where it was me, one of the Dreith brothers, his name, actually, was Clyde Jones, he was a half-brother to Louie and Chuck Dreith, but I bought about half of Louie's stock and then I bought about half of Chuck Dreith's stock when he expressed his desire to sell out. And it was Clyde Jones and I who formed the majority interest. And in 2006, I believe it was, Clyde came to me and said, "I don't want to sell to anybody else, but I would be willing to sell to you, if at some point you want to buy me out." He said, "I'm perfectly happy being your partner." But he was not a radio guy. He had a job in the military, ah, and just kind of was an accidental partner in this radio station that his brothers had bought in 1984. But he was a driving force, and you know, keeping the radio station going, and giving me the opportunity, he was probably my greatest mentor, in terms of teaching me how to manage a business. And so in 2006 I bought him out and became the majority owner, which I still am as of today.

JM: Just to, uh, zoom back to sort of those, maybe those early years, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, what was the, how would you describe the landscape of Alton media in those years, both including radio and maybe other media in town as well?

SS: Well, the, the most respected and the most, uh, visible medium was the, the Telegraph. Then, I guess, it was the Alton Evening Telegraph. Um, you know, it'd been publishing since 1837, I believe, 1836 or 1837. And, you know, as far as I knew, growing up, everybody, everybody took the Telegraph. Truthfully, when I first went to, in 1987, when I first went to work for WBGZ I'd run into people in town, maybe somebody, an old high school classmate, or an old friend of the family, run into them, and say, "what are you doing?" and, "oh, I'm working at WBGZ." "'W' what? What's that?" Um, so it was, it was a much different media landscape then. There were also some, uh, some small weekly newspapers, the Alton Citizen, the Bethalto American. I think there was one down in Wood River, they later became affiliated with the Suburban Journals and then got folded into the same company that then later on, you know, bought the Telegraph. But it was a much different environment back then because the Telegraph was, was the primary medium, and the primary advertising vehicle for local, local businesses. And so that was something difficult. And I have to tell you, my early years of managing the radio station, it was, it was a real struggle. There were some, there were some really lean times where, you know, we were, we were just trying to scrape by. That changed over time. In part, I think, because, well, I'll tell you, there was a seminal moment, I think, two, two things that happened. That really created awareness for the radio

station. And I'm trying to think of the chronology, I think the first one was, if you're aware, the Paula Sims case. The, the second child that died, Heather Sims, uh, Paula and Robert Sims had lived up in Brighton, and their infant daughter Loralei had disappeared and, ultimately, they found some remains, but the case was never solved. And everybody, everybody, thought well, the parents had something to do with it, but there was never any proof. Fast forward a couple of years, and they were living up on Washington Avenue in Alton, and the same thing happened: the infant daughter, Heather, disappeared. And, of course, it was a sensation. Well, you know, every television station in St. Louis, every radio station in St. Louis, every newspaper within a hundred miles, they were all over this, and so were we. You know, it was like, hourly updates, what did the police, what did this, you know. The chief of detectives that Alton was doing three times a day news conferences with updates, and ultimately, within a couple of days, they found the baby's body in a trash barrel over across the river. So, I was in the middle of all of that, that had to have been 1989 or 1990 if, you know, if I had a chance, I could go, if somebody could go back and do research and find out exactly when it was. But at any rate, with that breaking news and then the arrest of Paula Sims and questioning and all of that, events were happening faster than the newspaper could cover it. By the time it was in the newspaper, it was old news. And maybe two or three things had happened in the case since the paper was published. And so a lot of people were turning to the local radio station. And we were fortunate in maybe having some access, you know, to, through the police department that some of the St. Louis media didn't. And so, to an extent, having a strong news operation worked to our benefit there because people were looking for information, didn't want to wait until the next issue of the newspaper came out, so they were turning the radio on, you know. And St. Louis, yeah, the five o'clock news and the ten o'clock news, they'd have an update, but they weren't breaking in and doing updates, like we were. You know, any time something would happen, boom, there we were, we're live on the scene, here's what's going on. I remember, I myself covered, I was over across the river at the boat landing over there where they found the body. I mean, the news came in, "hey, they've discovered a body and they think it's the Sims baby, and it's over cross the river over there." And doing live updates with the, you know, our very first, we had just procured a cell phone. It was one of those big, bulky bag phones, and it maybe the battery lasted maybe twenty-five minutes, so. We could do a couple live reports on that cell phone and then, and then it was somewhere to plug it in to get it juiced back up before we could do, do a couple more. The next seminal moment for awareness, locally, of the radio station, was the flood of '93. And, again, events were happening faster than the newspaper could, could keep up with it. Um, and it was a, it was Sunday morning, August first, when the water plant was inundated, and also the sandbag levy downtown Alton failed at the same time. Downtown Alton was flooded. And we were on the air doing live updates every step of the way. We had the IEMA, Illinois Emergency Management, director was in town, and we had the first reports of the water stations that were being set up that people could go get bottled water and could bring their own containers to get water out of a tanker truck because the, the running water didn't work in Alton anymore because the water plant was under, underwater. And again, it was a situation where people were looking for immediate information and the only place they could get it was the local radio station. KMOX wasn't cutting it with updates, but the Big Z was. And, um, I'll never forget, shortly after everything had calmed down after the flood of '93, I got a note from a fellow that I had gone to high school with, and I hadn't talked to him since high school, so it was, I graduated '72, so this is twenty-one years later. I got a note from him saying, "I never listened to the Big Z before, but during the flood my mom and my wife and I started listening," and he said, "and now our dial doesn't leave 1570 AM." And I don't think that that was, I think that was repeated many, many times throughout, throughout the community. So, you know, sometimes, you have to do what, you have to fill the need. And

then you have to find those moments when people have the need, and suddenly, then they discover you. One of the most heartwarming moments for me during the flood of '93 was, that Sunday, August first, when the, when the water plant failed and downtown Alton was inundated, and I got a call from, and he was a friend of mine, Don Miller was the publisher of the Telegraph, and I got a call from him and he said, "We're publishing an extra." He said, "But I need to buy some commercials to tell people that our extra will be on the newsstands at five o'clock this afternoon." And I said, "You know, Don, if I was a no-good S.O.B. I'd tell you no way in the world," I said, "but I'll gladly take your money." But it was heartwarming to know that even the publisher of the newspaper realized that the radio station is the only way to let people know that hey, if you want to read about, if you want to see pictures of what happened today, these big events in the flood, the only way to get the word out to the people is on the radio station. And, uh, it felt kind of good cashing that check. So. But, yeah, that was the media environment. Now, you know, it's changed much now. It's a much different environment, you know. I take no pleasure out of saying it's hard times for newspapers. Not just our newspaper, but newspapers everywhere, because the media environment has changed so much. And the dawning of the Internet, and now the nice thing is in radio, you know, we were able to embrace that, and, I can't even tell you what year it was, it was probably ten years ago now when we established our first website at the radio station. We immediately put all of our news on there because we give our news away anyway, so if there's just another way to get our brand out there, we did that. Newspapers at that time, it's like, well, "we can't give our news away, you know, because we have to sell subscriptions. We're dependent upon the revenue model of subscriptions." Well, nobody's ever figured out a way to put a meter on the radio that you have to pump a quarter in there to listen to the newscast, so. Um, but it's a much different media world, but radio's still relevant. Radio's as relevant now as it ever has been. Um, it faces different challenges, but radio is resilient, and radio is, is adapting to those challenges, and is able to, in ways that print can't. You know, but magazines are almost nonexistent, and newspapers are struggling, and radio continues to have a, a great reach into the community. In fact, the latest Radio Advertising Bureau studies show that ninety-four percent of Americans listen to broadcast radio on a regular basis, and that's no different now than it was ten, twenty, thirty, forty years ago. And what's really surprising to us, an industry, is we look and we find that even among Millennials, broadcast radio is still of very strong medium. And there are many who can't believe that, but, uh, you know, broadcast radio is ubiquitous. And, uh, it's portable, and it's relevant. And, I think, in our case, being a local radio station, as long as we remain committed to the community and filling a need that the community has, I think we'll continue to be relevant.

JM: Can I ask, in terms of programming at WBGZ, were there other major sort of programming changes that you made in your decades where you were there as general manager?

SS: Yeah, it didn't take long. I became general manager in February of 1990 and probably by about May the "interim" tag was released, was lifted. And it was August of that year we did away with our music format and became a news talk station. And in fact, we were using music primarily as a filler, I talked about our strong news presence, and so in morning and afternoon drive, we were doing two newscasts an hour, top and bottom of the hour, and we were just using music to fill from news segment to news segment. In the mornings, we were, we did our swap shop, our "Garage Sale of the Airwaves," at the nine o'clock hour and had a local talk show on at ten. Ah, and then a strong news block at the noon hour. So the music was kind of just tiding us from one news information talk segment to another, and, um, by that point in time, syndicated talk programming was becoming more widely available through satellite technology, and so it started to become a little bit easier to fill out a complete broadcast day with talk

programming. And so I made the decision at that point in time, that, you know, if we're going to be news and local information based, then let's just go all the way. And the, the programming fare has evolved since that time. Okay, that was 1990, so, what that's twenty-eight years ago? Yeah, I hadn't really stopped and thought how long we've been doing the news talk format. It's evolved, but, you know, our focus always has been to do as much local as we can. So, currently, and for most of that twenty-eight years, we're live and local from five a.m. to six p.m. with the exception of two hours: from one to three in the afternoon, we do carry a syndicated program. So that's eleven hours out of the day that we're live and local, nothing syndicated at all, except for the top of the hour three-minute national newscast, you know. And then evenings, overnights, weekends, we then use some of the syndicated fare to fill out the, the broadcast schedule, but that's a, that's a really strong commitment. I can tell you that there are lots of local radio stations like the Big Z that don't have near as much live, local programming that we do. But that was a commitment I made. It's like, if we're going to do this, we're going to, you know, we're going to do as best we can. Now, you know, somebody said, well, "why don't you, why aren't you live local twenty- four hours a day?" Well, part of that is just economics. You know, when you're live and local, you have to be paying an announcer to be there in the studio. When you're carrying a syndicated program, syndicated programming is not nearly as expensive as paying somebody live and local. If, uh, you know, we could sell enough advertising to support live and local twenty-four hours a day, we'd truly do it, but you know, there's a, there's a trade-off there. But it, uh, it was a good decision in hindsight, because the station really took off from that point, and uh, and I think people in the community have recognized it, then. I think part of the problem is when you're trying to program music, you're never going to attract everybody, because I don't care what music I play, there's going to be somebody that says, "I don't like that music. I like my country music," or, "I like my rock music," or, "I like my classical music," or whatever. So if you're going to play a music format, you're going to lose a good possibility, a good chunk of the audience. If you're doing local news and information, you know, even the music listeners will tune over to you, say, "well, I want to hear the news." And then you hope that your programming's interesting enough that they forget that the news is over and you've gone into another segment, and we know that happens. A lot of times people will tune over to the, but we don't mind if they do tune back, you know, they don't want to hear what's in between the newscasts, they just want to hear the news, and that's fine, too. Ah, but yeah, that was a decision. And I'll tell you that, I hate that. I started to say, "I'll tell you the truth." Like, up until now, everything I've told you is a lie. But, I'll just give you a little insight. When, when I was trying to sell to the then partners in the management of the station, the concept that I had that I wanted to go news talk, one of the mission statements, to a certain extent, that I said, you know, KMOX at that point in time was, and had been, and continued to be for many years the number one station in the St. Louis market. And my positioning statement was, "I want to be, I want the Big Z to be to the Riverbend what KMOX is to the entire region." But our focus is going to be, simply, the Alton-Godfrey-Wood River-Bethalto area. Back then, we didn't even call it the Riverbend, but, you know. Our local community. We want to be to our local community what KMOX is to the entire St. Louis region. So that was our mission statement. We tried to emulate what they did, but do it on a local basis, and I think we did a pretty good job of it, because people started to take notice.

JM: Has the audience changed over the years?

SS: Well, yeah, a lot of the old listeners died, and some of the new ones have come along. Um, I don't think it has, because I think that the audience is the same now as it was before, and it's basically people that are interested in their community. Um, and, and I'm shocked, to this day I'm still shocked sometimes,

because, you know, after a while, what you do in your vocation, what you do for a living, is just what you do and you don't think too much about it. But I just get shocked sometimes like I'll be at the supermarket and I'll say something to the checker, and a total stranger behind me is like, "I know you." You know, and it just kind of, kind of shocks you. But you know I know people at church, and I know people in my family, I know total strangers who come up to me that, and they're from all walks of life, and they listen to the radio station. And what they have in common is nothing more than the fact that they're interested in, it may be their only source for news, or they might like, you know, to hear the local talk, or they might be interested in listening to the Alton High or the Marquette football game, or. So, you know, the audience is local people who want to know what's going on in their community. You know, and a lot of times, advertisers say, "well, what's your demographic?" You know, well, what we know is generally talk radio tends to skew, in terms of demographics, to an older audience, slightly more female than male. It's more highly educated than the average radio listener. But I think a lot of that goes out the window when you're talking about local radio. You haven't asked this question, but it's a question that comes up a lot of the time. Well, "who's your primary competition on the radio dial?" And the answer is, we don't have any. There's nobody else doing what we're doing. You can't turn on any other radio station that you can receive over the air here in the Alton area and, and hear the local news that we're doing or hear the local talk or hear the high school football games that we're, or basketball, or baseball, or softball, or soccer. Um, and so when it comes to competition, who do we compete with? We compete with the newspaper, we compete with Riverbender, we compete with the Advantage, and that competition, primarily, is for advertisers, because, you know, just because somebody listens to the radio doesn't mean that they don't read the paper or don't log onto Riverbender or don't take a look at the Advantage when it shows up in their mail box. So, you know, the audience is pretty much defined by, um, the fact that it's local and that it's people who are interested in the community. And sometimes, nowadays, I told you earlier in our talk that in 1987, when I went to work for WBGZ, people'd say when I'd tell them what I was doing now, they'd say, "'W' what?" You know, and now, on the rare occasion when I tell somebody, I'm shocked when they don't know what I'm talking about. And that happens every once in a while, it's like, "what do you do?" "Well, I own WBGZ." "What's that?" But that doesn't happen very often. That was the common response in '87 and now it's like almost immediately, you know, most people don't even ask me what they, what I do because they know, because they've heard me on the radio.

JM: So, one thing a lot of historians have said in recent years is thinking about the role that talk radio has played in politics. I think especially among conservatives and the Republicans with big syndicated folks like, especially Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, today. Uh, it strikes me, as a local news radio person, you were maybe, had some perspective on this. And I guess I'm just wondering your thoughts on that and whether or not WBGZ was involved in any of that, sort of the politics of talk radio.

SS: Well, yes. We get involved a lot in the local politics, and from the time I was made general manager up until the present day, I've always done a two-hour open line on Fridays with our news director. Now the news directors changed a couple of times over that time period, but I haven't. And, you know, we get into the local politics, we get into the national politics, and, um, I don't know if I have an explanation. It's almost somewhat of a mystery and there are a lot of theories out there as to why, but it's somewhat of a mystery as to why conservative talk does so well, and progressive talk doesn't. But it's just a fact. I mean, there was a, I'm trying to think what the name of there was a conservative talk network, I think it was called Air America. That debuted back in maybe the late '90s, and I think Al Franken was one of the talk show hosts.

JM: This was a progressive, or liberal, leaning network, correct?

SS: Yeah. And it failed dismally! I mean, it went belly-up in nothing flat. You know, but the concept was, "hey, we're going to go out and put the antithesis to Rush Limbaugh," Sean Hannity wasn't even a baby back then, I guess, but, you know, "we're going to go out and we're going to counter-program, and we're going to sign up all these radio stations." And lots of radio stations signed up, but it just failed dismally because nobody wanted to listen to it. And, you know, to this day, I don't know that anybody really knows why. But conservative talk does well. I think, I have this theory that part of the reason conservative talk does well is because conservatives like to listen to it and cheer it on. And I think liberals like to listen to it because it gives them something to hate. And for whatever reason, conservatives aren't going to waste their time listening to a bunch of progressives because they already, they've already heard it. That's just my opinion. But, you know, it's really never been much of a factor for us, because quite frankly, when I program syndicated programming, I've always tried to shy away from the political stuff as much as I could. Sometimes, you didn't have any choice because for technical reasons early on, you could only take what was being made available in that time frame. Now, the technology gives us the ability to time-shift programs, and we can digitally record it and spit it out of the satellite receiver at the time that we actually want to air it, so there's a lot more flexibility now. But I always tried to do more consumer-focused things and kind of just stay away from the political stuff, but not to the total exclusion of political talk. And I can tell you, when there are hot political races locally, yeah, on our local talk station, talk shows, we talk about that, and of course when, this is especially during some of the most contentious national political things, you know, on our local talk programs, there's a lot of that as well. But it is certainly true that talk radio really made its mark with, with political talk. And of course, Rush Limbaugh was probably the leading pioneer there. And there were some that said, you know, Rush Limbaugh was part of the reason Ronald Reagan got elected in 1980 and part of the reason that, you know, conservatives have done well from that point forward. I don't know, that might be an overstatement, but maybe not. But, you know, to this day conservative political talk continues to thrive.

JM: Related to that, uh, just given that you've covered so much local politics here, I know it's hard to generalize, but what would you say is the political character of Alton and the Riverbend area, from where you sit?

SS: Wow. It's changed. You know, there was a time when this was just a staunchly Democratic area, and you could forget about, you could forget about running for anything as a Republican, but that's changed somewhat over time. We now have a Madison County Board chairman who's a Republican. That would have been unheard of even a decade ago. Interestingly, um, in each of the last two national elections, Madison County went for the Republican Presidential candidate: Mitt Romney carried Madison County in, I got to remember my years, in 2012. And I believe Trump carried Madison County in 2016, so. Um, and our U.S. Congressman from this area is a Republican and has been for a couple of cycles now. That was all, would have all been completely unheard of. So, you know, politically I think we've changed in part because socioeconomically we've changed. You know? We're no longer an industrial powerhouse. And so therefore I think a lot of the union representation, the union vote is not as strong as it was at one time, which traditionally would go Democratic. In terms of local politics and Alton or Godfrey or Bethalto, most of that's nonpartisan. Well, all of it's nonpartisan. You know, they don't even go on the ballot representing a party. So that tends to be, you know, on the county level, Democratic, Republican, and we've seen the county swing from just, you know, almost one hundred percent to now Republicans

have a fighting chance, and in some place, cases, surprisingly strong. But in terms of local elections, I think that changes from election cycle to election cycle depending on who wants to run and I do think the one thing that I've looked at, I think, locally, whether it's local races, whether it's county-wide races, whether it's state-wide races, it's national races, I think the voters are much more cynical than they used to be. I think there was a time when people were idealists and believed in who they were electing as their leaders, and now I think a lot of times, it's like, "well, I'm going to vote for the lesser of two evils, and I don't have a whole lot of hope that the one I'm voting for is going to make anything better than, than it has been." And I think that continues and I think some of that is part of the reason that we have the current resident of the White House that we have. I don't, I don't know that a lot of Trump voters were sold on Trump, I think they just saw it as, "well, here's a way to upset the apple cart and maybe something will change. Then again, maybe it won't." You know?

JM: The last question I have for you is, just from your perspective, how has Alton changed, in your lifetime? What stands out to you in that, in those changes?

SS: Uh, it's changed dramatically. How it's changed? It's changed in its perception of itself, it's changed in its perception to those from the outside. Um, but in many ways, it's retained some of its strengths. From a media perspective, there's one thing I always like to point out to people, is that Alton is just so incredibly unique. You cannot find many communities our size that have a quality daily newspaper, a quality local radio station. And, you know, some of the other media opportunities that exist. Look around, there was a time when Belleville had that, they don't anymore. There was a time when Granite City had they, don't anymore. Ah, Edwardsville never had it, Collinsville never had it, and so, you know, from the media standpoint, you know, we've got, we've got some resources there that other communities don't have. But, you know, Alton changed from being that industrial town that, that was always going to be a good source of jobs, you raised your family here, your kids graduated from high school, and there was going to be a job for them in the factory, and they were going to live a good life, and they were going to get a good pension when they retired. That all went away. But our perception of ourselves, our recognition of our history, and we have great history here, we haven't touched on any of that, but, you know, historically, Alton is a very important point on the map. And I think we've started to cultivate some of that, and started to appreciate some of that, and started to recognize some of that and some of the service clubs that I belong to or am aware of are doing things like putting historical markers out there and noting, you know, the statues of Lincoln and Douglas at the Rotary Club erected back in 1995 to commemorate the site of the final Lincoln-Douglas debate and what an important chapter in American history, and it's all right here in our backyard. We don't, you know, the Lovejoy monument recognizing the martyr to the first Amendment, Ken Burns called the assassination of Lovejoy the first shot of the Civil War. And what a lot of people don't recognize is that the Lovejoy monument is the tallest monument in the state of Illinois. And, you know, we drive by it and don't even pay any attention to it, it's just always been there, and yet. So, you know, the recognition of our history and our natural resources, the, the three great rivers here and the history tied in with Lewis and Clark and Marquette and Joliet and, you know, the steamboats. And I was involved in the Rotary project that put the steamboat mural on the side of the Family Services building down here to, to pay homage to that chapter in our history. I live in a house that was once the home of Frank, Captain Frank Tesson, who was a steamboat captain on the Mississippi River. And in Middletown Alton, there are many, many homes with the widow's walks up top and the steamboat captains could go up on the widow's walks and look down and see their steam ships being loaded or unloaded and then they'd know when it was time to go down to the wharf. And, you know, so, how has

Alton changed, well it changed from those days into a great industrial power and now, and now, you know, we're recognizing our history and our tradition and, um, I'm a member, a longtime member of the local Rotary Club, and one of the things we've started doing is recognizing young business people who grew up in Alton, went away to get their education, and then came back and put their roots back down in Alton. We call them the "hometown heroes." It's like, this community is worthy of coming back to, and it is worthy of, you know, establishing your business or your professional career here and raising your family here, because, you know, we, do we have problems? Yes, but do we have a vision for the future? I think we do as a community. And I don't think that vision for the future has been articulated by city government, I think it's more of a grassroots thing. People that have gotten interested in the history, gotten interested in, in the culture and the possibilities for the future, and, you know, we try and embrace that. And the only thing that I regret is, you know, I may not live long enough to see what it all eventually leads to, but it's been exciting to see the transformation begin to take place. It was depressing to see the death of the industrial factory town, and the, the heartache that that caused, and the decay that it caused, and the despair that it caused. But it's also, you know, it's almost like a phoenix rising out of the ashes to see what the possibilities are for the future. And this, you know, small business revolution that Alton just recently won, what a great burst of energy that was for the community, all pulled together. And, you know, now we're going to be featured in a, in a TV mini-series and hopefully they portray us kindly, but if nothing else, it really did show the possibilities that we as a community have when we work together, so.

JM: Well, those are all the questions I have. Ah, but is there anything we didn't get a chance to cover that you wanted to mention?

SS: Oh, my. I don't know. I probably, I have a pension, as you can probably tell, it's probably good that I went into radio because if I'm doing a talk show and nobody's calling in, I don't have any problem filling the time. I could, I could tell lots of stories. You know, I have some stories, some family stories, let me share just a couple of things that I think are interesting. My great- grandfather on my father's side was a bootlegger back during the Prohibition. And my grandmother, who was a little girl at the time, always used to tell the story of one day Grandpa had a batch a-brewing in the bathtub, he'd brew, I don't know how you brew moonshine, at any rate, I didn't follow in that line of the family business, but he had a batch of moonshine in the bathtub, and somebody knocked at the door and Grandma, it was actually my great-grandma, thought it was the revenuers so she went and pulled the stopper out of the bathtub, and drained the, drained the batch of brew. Well, it was just a neighbor coming over to borrow a cup of sugar or whatever, and my grandmother was told the story, then, when her dad got home that day and found out that my great-grandmother had pulled the plug on the batch of moonshine, he was none too happy. So that's always a story that's been told in the family, and it just kind of tells the story of how people adapt to the times, that jobs were tough, that was Depression era, and Grandpa was doing what he had to do to get by. And Grandma messed it up because she didn't want him to go to jail if it was the revenuers checking to see if there was any moonshine in the bathtub. Ah, but that side of the family, my dad's mother and her family, they all grew up in north Alton. And that's the one thing about Alton, historically, you know, it was a lot of different communities. North Alton, also known as "Bucktown," and, you know, people were from north Alton or there were from upper Alton or they were from Milton or they were from the East end or the were from Christian Hill or they were from Middletown, and a lot of times families didn't even criss-cross within, within town. The other story I like to share, because I think it's, it really illustrates how our norms as a society have changed. But, on my mother's side, my grandparents raised a family of five children, lived in meager, middle-class neighborhood. This would have been in the '30s, Depression era.

But Grandpa was one of the lucky ones. He had a job. He worked at the steel mill. And he would get up every morning, and the first thing he would do is go down and put coal in the boiler and stoke the fire so that the house would warm up so that when Grandma and the kids got up and started getting ready for school, the house was warm. And Grandpa would get dressed. And their home was on Royal Street, which is here in Middletown, for those who may not know, it's in the vicinity of Haskell Park. And he would walk to Laclede Steel. And I've often said, because they didn't have a car, I've often said I was going to go up there to their house and drive down to Laclede Steel and look at the odometer and see how far it is, but it's probably a walk of a couple miles. And it didn't matter if it was a hot day, a cold day, didn't matter if it was raining or snowing, or icy, or whatever, that's what he had to do to get to the job so he could support his family. And he would get up and he would walk to Laclede Steel. And he would work by the blast furnace all day and, you know, that's exhausting work. And then walk home. And get cleaned up and have dinner, and after dinner, then, he would walk to downtown Alton where he had a part-time job in a shoe store. And the shoe store stayed open until, like, ten o'clock at night and he would walk from downtown Alton back up to Royal Street, go to bed, and get up and do it all over the next day. And I think what that story illustrates, and I'm fully aware, I have young family members, twenty-somethings, who, if you told them that that's what they were going to have to do to get a paycheck, "You're going to have to get up at five o'clock in the morning and walk down to Laclede Steel and work in the steel mill all day and walk back." "I'm not doing that." But it shows the difference of, you know, 1930's Alton Depression era, the value of work. The value of a job, a job was something to be treasured. A job was something that you would Heaven and Earth to have because that was the difference between you and your family having a comfortable existence or perhaps living on the street or having to live in a relative's basement, or whatever, you know. And it just pains me, here in this era, in the twenty-first century, that I don't think, I don't see work given that same status. And I don't, I guess we could get into a lot of sociological discussions as to why that is. But I, I was, I grew up in the '50s and '60s and I had the advantage of having grandparents who survived the Depression and I, many times, was told by a grandparent or another, you know, "you need to cherish the good times," because, you know, the sixty, '50s and '60s were good times compared to what the '30s were. Because "the good times are a blessing." And you know, when you have an opportunity to earn a living, that's something you cherish because it's not, it's not a given. I don't know if, hopefully, we never have to go through another Depression, but that certainly was something that was indelibly marked on them, and something they passed on to me, but I think maybe younger generations now have no sense of what that's like. So that's kind of something that made a mark on me. I always felt like whatever endeavor I was involved with, I was going to give it my all, because it was a privilege that I was given to be able to do this. Somebody's writing me a paycheck to do it, and I owe them my very best, and it's something I should cherish. You know, that's part of what having been born and raised in Alton gave me, as well. And something about having a strong extended family to lean on and knowing some of the history of the family that gives me, you know, some appreciation for the blessings I have had. And then the final thing I'll say is, when I set out, I told you I had no idea coming out of high school what I wanted to do. And then, you know I had to change mid-stream in college and I still wasn't sure. And then when I got into radio, and then I got out of radio, I never set out, I never set out with a career goal to manage anything, let along my own business, and I never set out to own a radio station. But those opportunities presented themselves and I think it was through a strong work ethic and through being excited by being given a challenge and meeting that challenge that those opportunities presented themselves, I embraced them, and now as I look back, or even as I look at my current situation, I can't imagine anything that would have been more exciting than

the opportunities that I've been, been given and the enjoyment that I've gotten out of it. And I'm proud to say that I've lived here all my life and I appreciate the opportunity to share some of my remembrances.

JM: Okay. Well, thank you very much. Thanks for contributing to the Madison Historical Oral History Project, Sam.