

Mary Galligan: Good afternoon. I'm Mary Galligan. I serve on the board of the Kansas Oral History Project. Today is August 14th, 2026, and we're here at the studios of High Plains Public Radio, HPPR, in Garden City, to interview Kathleen Holt and Quentin Hope about their roles in founding this community radio station.

As we sit down for this interview, Kathleen is involved with HPPR as the producer of two regular programs, "The Radio Reader Book Club" and "Poets on the Plains." Kathleen grew up in western Kansas and has been active in community development and historical preservation for many years. Among her other activities, she serves as vice president of the Kansas Oral History Project.

Quentin, who serves as the executive director of HPPR, is a nonprofit leader, author, and organizational strategy consultant best known for establishing this station. Born and raised here in Garden City, he now lives in Denver, Colorado, but he's referred to the High Plains as his "home country."

This interview is part of the Oral History Project's collection that preserves the experiences of Kansans who work and live and shape the rural communities in our state. These communities and their residents have contributed to every aspect of life in Kansas including government, education, and economic development. In these interviews, we learn how those contributions came together in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Our videographer today is Michael Quade. Michael, thank you for being here. We're grateful to HPPR for allowing us to conduct this interview at their facility.

The Kansas Oral History Project is a nonprofit corporation created to collect and preserve oral histories of Kansans. Recordings and transcripts of these oral history interviews are accessible at KsOralHistory.org and through the Historical Society and State Library of Kansas. The project is supported by donations from generous individuals and occasional grants. Thank you, Kathleen and Quentin for being here with us today and agreeing to talk to us about your experiences. I'll give you a chance to expand on those extremely brief introductions, knowing your long careers. Kathleen, let's start with you, a little bit about growing up in western Kansas?

Kathleen Holt: Yes, I was actually born in Dodge City, but lived in Cimarron, grew up there, spent my first [grade] through high school years in Cimarron in a family that was very involved in my community. My dad was the fire chief and served on the City Council for years. I always tell the story that my grandfather was on the City Council during the Depression. During that time, we built a free public swimming pool and added two ball diamonds to the city park. I asked my grandfather one time, "How could that happen during the Depression when times were too hard?" and he said, "You know, when times are hard, that's when people need to come together in a community, and we need to pool our resources," which he always called taxes were just a pooling of our resources to create the communities that we want to live in.

And I think that's why my biography includes such a wide spread of activities and different ways of making communities better. So, I've been involved most of my life—I did go away for the

obligatory fifteen years and returned to my hometown. Since that time, I've helped the small communities build houses. I've become somewhat of a wastewater lagoon expert. I can do public water projects. I can help people build senior centers, nursing homes, and a number of moderate-income houses amongst other things, as you mentioned, historic preservation. I think if there's a driving theme to my work in communities, it merged very well with Quentin's when I met him in the late seventies, and that was to pool our resources and make our communities into the kind of communities that we want to live in, rural or not.

MG: And Quentin, a little bit about your path and what brought you into this community radio space.

Quentin Hope: Well, there are parallels there with Kathi. I was born and raised in Garden City—the fourth generation—in a family that I would say combined law, politics, and journalism, which led to a lot of interesting and ongoing conversations at the dinner table that as a kid you kind of listened to and picked up on, but it was just the conversation that was provided. I was born and raised here, well grounded. We still have the family home, which my father was born in and died in the same room of the house. It was only by comparison to others who say, “Well, let's see. That was about the eighth home we had when we were growing up,” you realize just how well rooted that was.

Through that mix of background, obviously, not only very involved in civic activities, but always thinking of it, just sort of, as being a way of life, whether or not it was politics and campaigns or my mother worked for the *Garden City Telegram* for pretty close to sixty years. [She] came to Garden City as a reporter, fresh out of KU Journalism School, having never thought she'd have a chance to go to college, let alone journalism school, came out here as her first job. But then even when all of us were growing up, she did a daily column. She just kept the typewriter there in the pantry. She'd knock out a paragraph whenever she wasn't doing some other chore. Part of the task as kids was answering the phone because people were always calling her up with some items. It was a kind of a this or that column. It might be something that she got from an article she read in *The New Yorker*. It might be someone who called up and said, “Did you know this had happened? This would be an interesting person to talk to.”

The one thing, I hope this isn't too much color, but at one point—I said it was this and that—she drew a line though when she closed the Cat Placement Bureau because one of the regular things in the column was if you had kittens—I think it was only kittens, no dogs—to give away, you called. So, at some point in time, this is quite a ways on, she basically said, “You know, I just think there are probably more important things that I could be doing.” Actually, the paper never liked it because people didn't run want ads then. So, she wrote a column officially closing the Cat Placement Bureau. It's probably worth mentioning just because I think it's a part of community life, right? Everything from how do you feel about the bond issue for the new high school to “I wonder who could take some kittens.”

MG: That's really interesting. So, with both of your grounding, and I'm not going to point at who might go first on this one, what needs did you see in this community that led you to think a community radio station would fill?

QH: Well, I'd say just to pick up what we were talking about, part of growing up, the felt needs came directly as the experience of growing up. I'd say two things about it. One is, and I think part of it had to do with growing up in good families, but you did have access. There was the library. You had a library, and you could read *The New York Times*. There was one copy there. It was a week late, but it was there. Schools had lots of activities, the Community Concert Association. It was not as if there wasn't an arts culture, if you will, intellectual, but it was periodic. You had to go someplace for it. What seemed to be missing was just sort of a daily, hourly, any time, day and night, whether you're out in the field or at home or at work, presence to feel like it's part of your life as opposed to something that's occasional or scheduled. That's one of the wonders of radio. It's sort of like the ubiquitous presence of those things in your life, particularly if they mattered to you.

And the second, I think related to it was, and I think anyone who's grown up here or spent time here actually is you can start to feel very isolated. You may feel physically isolated because you're in a small town, and there aren't many people around, but I think you can also feel isolated in a sense there's no one else—I've got friends. I've got neighbors, but there's no one else that's got my interests. I feel isolated that way or is as engaged in the things that I'm—kind of my mental life or my reading life.

Again, there are things for that. There have always been book clubs and things like that. Even then, you might feel like, "I'm tired of my book club," my local book club, and I'd like to know—what I'm missing are other people in other communities who I can relate to who I have no connection with because I don't know they're there. I don't know they're out there. I guess overcoming isolation and something that is a daily, hourly presence in lives.

KH: I tell people I grew up with one foot in the fifties and one in the sixties. I graduated from high school—I don't know if I should tell—in '65, so very much mid-decade to mid-decade. What I noticed was a profound change in mobility. When I was in high school, we rarely went to Dodge [City] or Garden [City] from Cimarron. It's located right between the two. But my youngest sister had friends in Dodge and Garden and Ingalls and took the car and went all over, and that was just the period of the eight years that it changed so much.

Part of that same isolation was resolved when we saw that this was a way for people to connect. I think to some degree because we had had it demonstrated, if you want things to happen in your community, you just get busy and get together and find other people who will help you put it together, and you put it together. There was no sense of "Well, that can't be done here." It was very much, "Oh, this would be good. Let's do it."

QH: Like the swimming pool in the thirties.

KH: Yes, like that, like "Oh, that's how you make it happen."

MG: I think both of you in those descriptions sort of wove in where your upbringing just created a frame within which this opportunity was able to find those needs and fill them.

KH: I just think the one thing I would add is, I think that's a trait of rural community. What I notice in looking back at my own background with such a varied span of expertise from sewer lagoons to housing, I think that's something in a small town, you're connected to people. You know your neighbors. You know the people in the community.

Now, that's changed a lot as I've aged in Cimarron. I don't necessarily know everyone in Cimarron anymore because mobility has very much changed from the way it was when I grew up. But on the other hand, I've still felt that sense of connectedness and that ability to make something happen by identifying people all across the High Plains who kind of share that perspective. Let's get busy, and let's do it, that kind of rural leadership that I think is very local.

QH: Replicated in one community after another.

KH: Yes.

MG: Well, and to come together to fulfill those needs that are identified in the community.

So, how did the idea for a radio station come about? Why a radio station and not, I don't know, another newspaper or some other medium?

QH: Well, there was a trigger for that. Kathi, you made reference to it. I think you said your obligatory fifteen years away.

KH: Yes.

QH: I think part of what makes things happen in communities and in rural areas is time away because you can also become overly self-sufficient or self-presumptuous in assuming that my little cocoon and my wonderful community is all the world needs. I graduated from high school, and I was so ready to get out. I sort of looked for a school that would be just as on the other extreme of things. I went to Antioch College. The school itself at that time was—I put it on the liberal to radical spectrum. That's where I realized that I was kind of conservative about some things. But the important thing, the trigger event was they had what was originally just a campus radio station, but it really had evolved into the whole area and was in the process of becoming an NPR affiliate. It was kind of a combination of what was known and is still known as community radio—lots of volunteers, many people involved, very tied to the community, but also sort of the classic public radio, NPR sort of notion.

Having done some work part time for commercial radio and TV stations, there were two revelations. First, you get noncommercial media. Having grown up with all media was commercial. It was a business. It ran as a business. It might be very community oriented; it was a business. Then secondly, just the range of music, of discussions, of ideas. I mentioned to Kathi a minute ago, it was like walking into an art museum for the first time in your life and a good art museum, realizing there's all these kinds of art. It's there for you to take in. There's incredible

talent that goes into this, and there's something not just about the individual art pieces but about the whole experience.

So, that just sort of blew me away, and I think the connection was, and this is probably where it does go back to what we're talking about, what's your mindset. Well, your mindset is, you grew up from family, always thinking about "What can I do to contribute to community?" or "How can I further traditions that I certainly grew up with?" and it was, "Boy, if this makes sense anywhere," and at that time, most public radio was in large urban areas or based in universities. If it actually makes sense anywhere, it makes more sense in a rural area in terms of its potential value. So, that was kind of the key idea of what we needed, this needs, this entity, this medium, what it can do, just to have that much more value in a place—at that time, southwest Kansas, but the High Plains in general.

KH: I think it took a lot of courage on your part at that time. There's a famous photograph which we'll have to get to include with this oral history of Quentin and his friends around the table the night they formed and signed the articles of incorporation. In addition to the fact it was the mid-seventies, most of them had cigarettes, but they also were very young "hippie kids." To come back and make the connection to contribute to our rural lives, I think it was really important to realize at that time, you brought an idea that wasn't easy, but it resonated with people of all ages. It wasn't just the young people who wanted public radio for whatever reason. It was also older, established people. Those initial boards had very many community leaders—attorneys, doctors, professional people from the community right alongside some younger musicians and "artsy people" as some people used to say. But I think that that shared vision resonated with people and not just in individual communities. I think it's very important that from the beginning, those of us involved in this station saw the region in a different way.

We perceived the region to be connected, and that sense of isolation that I talked about, the isolation was still very real, but the developing communities were at that time in the late seventies becoming more regional, and people were trying to figure out "How do we create a region? Is it a retail thing? Is it the region, people who shop in one of the larger towns versus people whose retail is served by another large town, or is there something broader? Is there a way to have a library or a museum that served a region?" Our initial region was sixteen counties of southwest Kansas.

QH: Nineteen.

KH: Nineteen counties of southwest Kansas, but that was a very small population base. Basing things on population was very standard for how you evaluated things. Even Kansas Art Commission grants in the beginning, their evaluations used to say, "How many people came to your event?" Well, if you had an event in Wichita, you were going to have a lot of people. If you had an event in Dodge City or Garden City, you were going to have much fewer people. However, you might have a much greater percentage of people. So, the way we thought about things structurally in terms of community development was different from the beginning, I think.

QH: And going back to the question, I think that one other, speaking for myself, really important factor, and this goes back to the scene you set—I believe it was in 1975. We were all back from school and worked in the area. We were still in first, second year college. Naivete and nothing to lose, which I think helped a lot because you had no idea what it would take. So, it was just ideas and kind of—I suppose it was kind of like thinking about coming out to settle the plains and saw them and all the wonderful stories, right, having no idea of what it would take. And it was a pretty simple act because my father told me, “Well, anybody with \$50 can form a nonprofit.” So, how big of a deal is it?

KH: That’s how it started.

QH: Yes. It really did help to be pretty naive.

KH: Yes.

MG: So, you come back from college. What were the pieces that you had to pull together to do this? The fifty bucks for the incorporation, but what else to secure a license and sort of get started?

QH: First and foremost, it was just community organizing, right? It could have been anything, but getting people interested, sharing ideas. In this case, there were some real elements, everything from yes, we had a nonprofit corporation. We didn’t have IRS tax exempt status. So, getting that established.

The FCC license, which at that time was a very, very involved process, about a two-year process of all the technical exhibits you had to have. You had to do a comprehensive community survey, legal requirements. It’s entirely different now. So, all the engineering studies, finding a tower location, figuring out where studios could be built. There was a lot of processing. Then, of course, raising both the capital to build it and enough operating money to at least get through the first few months. It was all of that, including just funding. We had pretty much an all-volunteer operation that actually went on the air, but even then you had expenses to cover. That was the part you had to learn, but again, it was new things to learn.

KH: Yes. We signed on June 29th, 1980?

QH: June 29th or 30th. It was a Sunday evening. Then that Monday would have been the first day of broadcasting. We really got started on it in 1977. It was pretty close to a three-year process, working part time on the side. It built momentum. That first year was pretty slow.

MG: I’ve seen two different dates for the founding of the station, one 1977, the other 1980. 1977 was the beginning of the process?

QH: ’75 was the incorporation. ’77 was amending the articles of incorporation to operate a public radio station because that became—the FCC required that, your entity authorizing, and then the on-air date that we were just talking about. Those are kind of the hallmark dates.

KH: I'm the detail person here, storyteller here. What I remember is that at one point, you had asked a consultant from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, CPB, to come out and do a feasibility study. When that consultant came out, his report was that you need a base population of something like 300,000 in order to sustain a public radio operation. I believe that with our Grade B signal, which is not the good one and reliable one, we had 65,000—maybe. His response was, "There's no way you can sustain the operation with that." So, the board was at a point, the board at the time, which was another development as things went on—who was on the board and what their role was—I think at that time they had to decide, "Do we go on? Can we raise that much money? Can we sustain that? Is it possible?"

QH: It was more than a report. It was sort of a presumption at the time of where you could have [success], particularly as an independent nonprofit. But to CPB's credit—this is where we get our lobbying thing, as I mentioned—this is the same time where lots of public stations were first going on the air and really becoming a national system. Most of them were in urban areas or coastal areas or university communities. They basically made the case, "Look, if you're trying to build," this is the Corporation of Public Broadcasting's mandate, a nationwide system, "you've got to figure out how it's going to happen in rural areas" because that Congressional mandate was there. And we did end up getting a \$20,000 seed grant from them, which at the time made all the difference in the world, which we basically invested in promotion and awareness. But going back to Kathi's point, there were assumptions and presumptions. But to their credit—and maybe our working on them—they realized, "Okay, we'd better make a bet here."

KH: I do think it was a bet. I came early on as a fundraising staff member, and we truly were one of the first rural stations as a nonprofit, not licensed to an educational institution or Native American reservation or tribe but licensed to the people of High Plains. Quentin and I used to say we were the only two people that we knew in southwest Kansas that spoke in counties because we knew how many people were in each county. We had a membership goal for each county based on 1 percent of the population, and we saw as our mission to take this out to the rural community. I think that was another turning point for us. Sometimes we talked about the first year with equipment grants that we got. We had 80 percent federal or—

QH: Seventy-five percent. That was the other major grant we got, federal money actually.

KH: Yes.

QH: But it had to be matched.

KH: Yes. Then the next year, that flipped. We had to raise more locally.

QH: We had to raise operating money, too.

KH: Yes, in addition to that. How do we do that? I look back on that time period. First of all, FM radios were not standard fare in vehicles. My parents were car dealers. When Quentin got a new car, my mother was stunned. The factory called her and said, "He wants this blank, blank, blank

dollar FM radio in his car, and the other accessories cost less than that.” But FM radios were not standard fare. So, we had to sell a service.

QH: For part of the coverage area, kind of the further out of it, we were really the first FM signal on the air.

KH: Yes.

QH: Another anecdote, before we officially went on the air, we were doing transmission tests. We actually had a lot of technical problems. The transmitter would be on for a couple of hours. I think I let my mother know, “We’re testing some classical music.” “I can never pick it up.” I said, “Do you have 91.1 on the dial?” “Yeah.” She hadn’t flipped it over to FM because never in her life had she had a reason to flip over to the FM signal. That’s kind of where we were starting.

KH: Yes.

QH: People might have had FM radios, but they never listened on the FM dial.

KH: Yes. In fact, in one of our early fundraisers, we gave away FM radios for a \$50 pledge. “We’ll send you a radio so you can listen. Pledge first and get the radio second.”

QH: Boy, that does date us, doesn’t it?

KH: It does, doesn’t it?

MG: I think this conversation sort of makes me think one of the big challenges was sort of creating your audience. Once you got through sort of the technical organizational hurdles, then you had to create an audience.

QH: Or build an audience.

MG: Or build an audience.

QH: We had members. We’re always thinking about being a member of a public radio station at least two years before there’s anything to listen to, asking for annual donations to support the operation. I think we referred to those as our “blue sky members,” nothing to listen to. It’s a membership on a promise.

MG: Wow.

QH: Not lots of them, but there was that base. They were ready, but a relatively small base.

KH: Yes, and I think it’s that when we began to realize that if we were going to develop this community, it cannot be these seventeen, nineteen counties. We are going to have to capture everyone, every population center that we possibly can and then expand that notion to regional.

QH: That was sort of two-way. That first 100,000-watt station more or less covered southwest Kansas, but even then, like the signal in Dodge was a little ratty. The signal in Liberal was because it was further out from where the transmitter site was. But it was two-way in a sense that someone driving through from Colby or from Midland or from Hays would hear the signal, “Oh, can we get that in our community?” So, it was sort of an organic growth, both people becoming aware that there was public radio at least in part of western Kansas and basically replicating the same model: form a local group, add members from that community to the board of directors. [We] did a lot of mini-capital campaigns because even though, again, at that time there was federal money available for like three-fourths of the equipment costs, we always made a point of making sure there was local money raised. If someone would have contributed the other 25 percent from somewhere else, we’d take it, but we still need to raise 25 percent in that community because otherwise you haven’t built that tradition. This is something that you don’t build it and leave it. You build it and nourish it and keep funding it day after day, year after year.

KH: Right, which I think was central. I always struggle when I say the word “success” because it did provide for longevity, but success in this case was very measured along—I can’t remember which governor, maybe Governor Carlin talked about budgets that were austere but adequate, and we said, “Ours were austere but barely adequate.”

QH: Maybe we said “marginal.”

KH: Maybe it was because we had staff members who moved back in with their parents and lived with their parents. We had a mothers’ club that was very big on feeding us.

QH: Yourself included.

KH: Myself, yes. I sort of inherited the position. But there was a very good reason for that. It really was important that people contribute to the in-kind commitment and contributions. To me, I could see that we were thinking about regional in a new way. I don’t know if we’re to that point, but one of those was technical in nature: How do we get this signal? There was a very strong element of community development. We needed people from the community committed to the service. In fact, when we used to do community organizations, one of the things that we did was identify those one or two people who would invite us to their community, and we would sit down and have a talk about what was needed, what was available, what could happen.

QH: And the phonebooks.

KH: And we took the phonebook, and we had—at that point—

QH: This was back when there were phonebooks. Everybody was listed.

KH: There were no cellphones at that time. We took the phonebook and went through the phonebook, so it was very local.

QH: And asked people to mark names of someone you think might be interested or open to the idea. Then we would have several people do that. That built the mailing list.

KH: Yes. Then we typed those names from the phonebook, and we said teachers, librarians, people interested in the arts, people interested in music, piano teachers.

QH: Who you'd naturally think about.

KH: You got all the community leaders that you knew if they weren't already there. Then oftentimes that same group would arrange for space at a bank with five or six telephone lines, and we would call people and tell them.

QH: And find out what clubs to talk to. That's what I mean. There was radio and you had all the technical things; it really was just community organizing in terms of the basics of what we had to do.

MG: And it sounds very organic in a whole series of ways. Somebody hears about it; they tell somebody. They talk to you guys.

QH: Which was especially important, as you mention that, because one of the underlying factors is just credibility. Is this a credible idea? It is a little different, a radio station. Most people would assume a radio station is a local, private business. Why would we be building for the community a radio station? I think people who could lend their credibility to the idea was really important. There was some suspicion. There were those who were actually actively opposed. It was perceived as government radio.

KH: Yes. I think also along those same lines, and I don't think it was a reason, but Quentin, your grandfather was our US Congressman for how many years? I've forgotten.

QH: Thirty years.

KH: He also was well known, and the Hope name was well known, which did not bring us any money *per se*, but it did bring us some credibility.

QH: At least you could get invited in, so to speak.

KH: Yes.

QH: And I give my parents—they always sort of operated very quietly. I think they had a strong hidden role just in lending their credibility.

KH: Yes. I do think that, too, your dad was in public service, too, and I think that played a big role in access. It also gave us some confidence and credibility at the same time. So, as we began—in the beginning, the state didn't really know what to do with us much because we were

the only community licensee. All the other radio stations were connected to educational institutions.

QH: Again, that's where some individuals, Dave Heinemann being a lead among them, sort of taking to the idea and beginning to understand it and really being a champion early on and getting early on some of the initial state support.

MG: So, you're referring to Dave Heinemann who was the [district's representative in the Kansas House of Representatives].

QH: He was a very young representative. I think he was elected when he was still—Dave obviously could tell you this story—when he was still in community college.

KH: Yes.

QH: Very young, but I think well respected and hard-working. His support very early on and actually all through his career for public broadcasting has been sort of critical.

KH: Yes.

MG: One of the things that's occurred to me as you guys have talked is that there must have been some key partnerships. It's probably what we'd call them today. I'm not sure if that's would you would have called them back then, that really helped pull this thing together. You've mentioned sort of in general, but were there, I mean, you had a partnership in essence with the federal government, right?

QH: That's true in terms of at least sort of a well-structured, very standard grant program. I don't know if you'd say partnership, but at least an opportunity. I think it developed with the Corporation of Public Broadcasting over time. Although it's interesting that you asked that question, it is true that sort of those outside entities were important, but it was almost more a matter of key partners but each one of them on a small scale. So, libraries and librarians as partners, but it was for this county or these two counties, like Southwest Kansas Public Library System, I would say, was a way to kind of amplify that as opposed to being one big partner, one big foundation. It was really sort of the pattern of replication of the same types of partners and lots of communities, if that makes sense.

MG: Sure, yes. I think that's very consistent with what you've described.

QH: The organization and operation made it more complicated. It's always been more complicated to operate over a wide area. It's only complicated in the sense that it's a lot to keep track of, a lot of people to know, a lot of relationships to think about.

KH: One of my biggest struggles was trying to figure out how to get twelve different frequencies on a mug. [laughs]

QH: This was when we were starting to expand with low-power stations, right?

KH: Yes.

QH: And the hourly IDs were pretty long.

KH: Yes, and to just name all the IDs for the station IDs would be like, “Hurry up.”

QH: On the other hand, all those communities got mentioned.

KH: Yes, they did. One thing before we move on from that, Quentin, I’d like for you to talk just a little bit about how we literally expanded the signal in terms of looking at the map, looking at the counties, figuring out how can we capture every population center that’s conceivably possible in an area that’s largely rural and frontier.

QH: There are two aspects to that. One was the one we talked about, is there interest there? Someone who kind of knew what we were doing or knew someone here or a listener there. The technical aspect of it, and it started off pretty primitive. So, for example, you basically relied upon picking up the off-air signal from our main station, KANZ, the 100,000-watt station as far as you could get it.

I’ll pick Colby as an example—and then also finding at that time—we couldn’t really afford tower rent. We would usually locate on top of a grain elevator. You basically put out just a huge receive antenna, a receive array designed to be able to pick up the faintest of signals. And then that then fed the signal into basically what was called a translator which basically then would repeat the signal on another frequency. They’re only ten watts in power, so think about a five-to-ten-mile radius which usually would cover the town. It was a pretty ratty way to do things because when conditions were right, which was most of the time, it would pick it up, but thunderstorms coming through, atmospherics, it could get noisy. Somedays, it just got lost. And then Goodland was a little too far away. So, it picked up Colby. You’re daisy-chaining. So, any problem with Colby’s reception would just amplify in Goodland.

I think we managed up to three hops at that point. Those were the physical limits. Then when we put the second 100,000-watt station on the air, KZAN at Hill City, we built a microwave system, which required I think four hops. In other words, a microwave would only go like thirty, thirty-five miles, and then you’d have a repeater. So, the maintenance on that, just keeping it up and any one of those could go down. Which of the microwave hops was down?

But I think there was such eagerness and interest to have the signal that people put up with it. It was not until, and this would have been ’95, ’96, we went on satellite system. So, we had an uplink here, which uplinked the signal to a satellite, and then you had downlinks in all the communities. That enabled two things. One, it really cleaned up the service and the reliability. Second, it allowed us really to put a signal anywhere in the continental United States, which enabled the expansion into the Texas Panhandle. We could have done it with microwave, but it

would have been one really ratty microwave system and just too expensive. That's the basic technical change that really started to open things up.

KH: Too expensive, and I also think the staffing—we had one engineer, and we had facilities in Goodland and facilities in Lamar, Colorado and Guymon, Oklahoma.

QH: Equipment-wise, things just weren't as reliable then.

KH: No.

KH: Well, I want you to just tell at least one story of who put those antenna and translator equipment on top of the elevator because I think that's a public radio pioneering story in itself.

QH: Well, who would it be, it was always a volunteer crew. We had some individuals who were local, basically someone who was on good terms with a grain elevator manager and things, and then just some people who kind of became professional volunteers in the sense that they kind of liked doing it and would just kind of be the traveling crew to put one of these translator stations up on another site. We did at the time have one paid engineer. But, you know, a lot of it was hauling things up and bolting them down, just straight physical stuff. But it took a crew.

KH: And more than once, a new elevator employee would not know what it was, and they would unplug it. They would think whatever this is, it's eating power.

QH: In the end, we did that because it was a way to get free rent, rather than paying rent on a tower. But a grain elevator is a horrible place to put radio equipment. There's vibration, and there's grain dust. They're difficult to access. I mean, we learned some of that the hard way. When you step back to think about it, it wouldn't be your first choice.

KH: But how emblematic of western Kansas, right?

QH: You did want height.

MG: A great picture.

QH: You needed height to get the signal out and receive the signal.

MG: As you look back on those early years, the grain elevator days if you will, were there decisions that you made then that you look back on now and go, "Boy, we were darn lucky" or "We were awfully smart" in terms of paving the way for the station as it exists today.

QH: That's a relevant question. I'd say there were two things. One was I think we touched on already was the fact that we decided to do it as an independent nonprofit. There'd been various initiatives around public radio/TV, it should be a statewide effort. Nebraska has a statewide public radio and TV station. It was a state initiative, a state agency. As I mentioned, a lot of stations started at universities. But by just doing it as an independent nonprofit, we didn't have

anything else to do, no other agenda, right? Kind of like we're going to succeed or fail on our own. We don't have to wait for someone to approve something or to fit into some other agenda. So, I think being independent from the start was really important.

The second thing, Kathi and I were talking about this earlier, was we could have positioned this as "Public radio is the new thing. Urban areas are getting it. We ought to be up to date. This is something we ought to have." Just like "We ought to have a Walmart," right? But instead, we really did position it. It wasn't a marketing ploy. It was just kind of in our background. We positioned it as "This is just a continuation of the pioneering tradition of rural communities." It's no different than when people in a township got together to get that first one-room schoolhouse or the people in the cities said, "We need a free public library. We need to get it started. We've got immigrants coming in. We need a social service agency." No different than that. It just happens to be that media and communications is another important infrastructure thing for us to have and can serve well, but it's not—people in generations have been doing this for a long time. It's just the next thing to do for the community. And definitely we call it pioneering public radio because it was in that tradition.

I think that helped—one, it was very true, as Kathi was saying earlier, it's kind of the source, the energy that we needed to draw on, but it also I think made people feel like, "Okay, this isn't such a strange idea." Again, I never thought about radio being something that a community owned as opposed to a regular local business, but I can kind of see that. And I can kind of see why, how it would be like a library that's available wherever you are, twenty-four hours a day. I can see that. Maybe it is the next thing we should do.

MG: It's interesting that you bring up schools and libraries as two examples of those things because you've been housed in an old school, and now you're housed in a former library, a former post office, former library.

QH: And a post office is another public gathering place.

MG: Another public gathering place. There's interesting physical continuity in that too that sort of goes along with the mission, doesn't it?

QH: Well, the first school in Pierceville, there was a partner there, the Unified School District had been abandoned for some time. They were willing to lease it to us, and it was easy enough to do. But also, it's sort of like, "Are there liabilities to this? Are we going to be associated with this group?" that sort of thing. And then Kathi can talk about how we got into this building. She really drove that effort. This was when Pierceville was pretty much collapsing.

KH: It was collapsing.

QH: It had roofs and things like that.

KH: As I recall, our financial commitment to this studio renovation was \$5,000 outside the equipment.

QH: In Pierceville.

KH: Pierceville. Yes.

QH: At that time, it was a \$100,000, \$125,000 renovation, and we ended up paying \$5,000 for cash I think because the air-conditioning unit, we couldn't get that donated. But volunteer electricians who brought materials from their job sites I think legitimately, or we talked their vendors into donating materials, lumber from lumberyards, just a whole crew of carpenters, electricians, everybody.

KH: Yes, lots of work weeks, and people volunteering. In fact, the office carrels, some of them had "boys" and "girls" [signs on the doors] because they had come from the boys' and girls' restrooms in the school, and they formed our office carrels, and lots of boards and bricks. I think all of the desks were donated doors from the lumberyard, sawhorses.

QH: Or we could drive to State Surplus in Topeka and for five dollars get one of those great classic metal desks that weighed a ton, but we still have some upstairs.

KH: As a matter of fact, we were required to use [mimeograph] paper, which we purchased for fifty cents a ream at the State Surplus. Mimeo paper was 8 x 10-1/2 rather than 8-1/2 x 11, and we were required to use both sides, and we were required to use that for the second page—

QH: Who's requiring this?

KH: I believe you were the requirer or the budget required that. [laughing]

QH: I think it was a mutual understanding.

KH: I think it was. But, for example, we got all of our paper clips from various banks that were friends.

QH: I didn't know about that.

KH: They had manilla envelopes taped to the desk at the drive-through window. When people brought deposits, they just dropped the paper clips into the manilla envelope, and then we would go through once a month and pick up the envelope.

QH: Is that true? I missed that part.

KH: Yes, it's true. You probably never had to pick it up. We got our letterhead for the first few years from friends that we would take a master copy, and they would run off a hundred sheets of letterhead for us. So, we had lots of good friends and contributors that made this community effort happen.

But I want to go back to the Pierceville [facility], as we realized that that studio was not going to make it anymore, and that was about the time Quentin left to go back to school, we did a capital campaign. We did a search for a studio. We had five or so communities in the area.

QH: Kind of like a request for proposals.

KH: Yes. Interested in the station relocating to their community. It was a very lengthy and detailed process that ended up coming to Garden City, which the studios that we're in now we were in. We did a capital campaign. As I recall, it was maybe two or three years, but we raised about \$650,000 or \$700,000 because we wanted to also start an endowed fund at that point. So, the renovation wasn't quite that much.

But at the day of the move, we had lots of volunteers. People donated trucks for moves and things like that, and we were all at the station. It was completely empty. The next morning, as I drove in from Cimarron, I stopped at the Pierceville studio to pick up the brooms and rakes and things that we had left there to bring them in here, and it was a very emotional, sad thing for me, that ending to that period of our existence. When I went into the air room to get the brooms, the ceiling had caved in overnight on the main broadcast board.

QH: Where the main broadcast would have been if it hadn't been moved.

KH: Yes, it was on that desk. It was not even twenty-four hours, maybe twelve hours that we were out of there before that although I kind of thought of that as the building saying goodbye to us, take it and leave it. You couldn't have stayed one more day. [laughs]

So, we moved into this studio. I've blocked out the actual date, but I do remember the big dedication and all the people that came. Luther and Ardis Fry were our co-chair for that. They're philanthropists, well-known all over southwest Kansas and the region. And then Patti Hayden, who was the governor's first lady at that time, was our honorary chair. We did have a translator then in Atwood, the Hayden's hometown, and she served as our honorary chair for the dedication of this building and the capital campaign. So, that started our next generation.

QH: And the city of Garden City was an important partner in that. We basically still leased the building from them for a dollar a year. They helped with the outside maintenance of it.

MG: That's this building that we're in this afternoon.

QH: It was built in 1924 as the post office. I think it served until 1964 as the post office, then became the public library. That was the first renovation. Then I can't remember the year, but the city library became a county library and built a whole new library. It stood empty for a while.

KH: Yes, it was.

QH: So, I think the city was also thinking about it, an important downtown building. What do we do with it?

MG: So, the building has a long public service history also.

QH: Entirely public service. I think it's one of those cases, are you imagining it? But I think I have early memories of it being the post office, a long row of post office boxes and counters. I certainly have memories of it as the public library.

KH: One thing we haven't talked about, I want to talk about the important role of state funding in all this. Early on, we knew we were going to need some state funding. In a way, because we were the only community licensee, that was a hard message to get in a broad way.

QH: Along with Smoky Hills [public TV]. Smoky Hills was getting started.

KH: Right. We were even a little bit prior to that originally, but then there was no vehicle in the Kansas legislature to hear our request.

QH: Other than doing a line item, which again Dave Heinemann, initially you could get a line item, and it was \$35,000 a year. It was kind of a one-off thing. There was no entity really other than a one-off appropriation for funding public broadcasting.

KH: They ended up kind of pushing us over to the subcommittee on public television because weren't we there with KPTS, community—

QH: There had been at one time early on, there had been an initiative for it. There was a state public television commission, kind of a state initiative, which didn't end up building a state system. It was really the formation of the Kansas Public Broadcasting Council, which is a consortium of all of the public radio and TV stations, both the university and community licensees like Smoky Hills Public TV or the other TV station in Wichita. That is authorized by the legislature as an entity to receive and distribute state funds.

KH: Right.

QH: That created the entity as well as the statewide organization, not an agency but an organization of basically separate stations.

KH: And that was sort of developmental as we went through so that Dave wasn't out by himself, asking for this appropriation every year for us. I also remember at that time, public affairs programming was really important. We had one news and public affairs staff person, and at one point in one of the gubernatorial elections, we were the only station in the state to have all of the candidates on one stage.

QH: That was a remarkable organizing feat, too. It was held in a large, circus-like tent in the back yard of the studios in Pierceville.

KH: Yes, like a very old-fashioned campaign rally under a tent. So, in some of those days, I look at all the connections that we made. At one point, Melvin Neufeld—who was later Speaker of the House—in his first run, we covered the local election so thoroughly. We had like fifty stringers in fifty courthouses, and we had big maps up on the wall and our stringers would call in, and we would post returns so we could tell you how you were doing and share it in county or wherever. We had stringers and a translator. I had gotten a number from the Secretary of State's office. Of course, those stringers knew earlier than the Secretary of State's office.

QH: This was pre-Internet.

KH: Yes, pre-Internet. I called, and this kid answered, gave me his name, and I said, "Wait, are you from Cimarron? Are you my distant second cousin or something?" It was. He was doing an internship in the Secretary of State's office. So, we got really up-to-date information from him. In fact, in Melvin's first term, he learned he won from us about two hours before everyone else. As a consequence, his wife donated cheesecakes to our auctions every year, and Melvin became a good friend to us in the legislature, moving on, which may or may not have been a natural partnership or connection.

But all the way through, people like Dave Heinemann and people have been supportive because those people that came from our rural area understood what we had built and the way it had been built. I think that when you talk about community organization of rural communities, I think you look at what HPPR is today across the entire western third of the state. We really see how those partnerships, whether it was with the Kansas Legislature, the federal funders, the NPR, APR, all of those organizations, they had to learn what their requirements were.

I remember the year that—initially we were the rural station, and then one time they changed the definition, and—they said we weren't rural anymore. We were like, "What? We have to be rural." It was just that there were more services. I think all of those partnerships had to change our identity, change their perception of our identity as we grew as well.

MG: One of the things that comes to my mind at this point, as individuals, what about this experience, this long history with this station, has given you the most maybe personal satisfaction or professional satisfaction? What has made you feel fulfilled by your very long and diligent involvement with this station?

KH: For me, it's people. It's the people who have been involved that have become lifelong friends, but also that connection that Quentin mentioned about how life can be isolated out here, not just because of your perspectives on life, but just that sometimes you feel like you're the only one that's read that book or that's thinking about this or has concerns or ideals about this. For me, it was that. I remember going into an elevator, talking to the elevator owner. He had said that he wanted to see me in his office. It reminded me of getting ready to go to the principal's office, which I never had to do, but I was a little worried going in there that he was going to unload his opinions about public radio on me.

But when I went in, he said, “I want to thank you.” He said, “I get up every morning to the news on NPR.” He said, “My son lives in California, and he rides a bicycle to work, and he listens on his headphones to NPR, and we have developed a whole practice of talking about the news later in the day because I know as he’s biking down a coastal road looking at the ocean, I’m in the middle of the High Plains, and I hear the exact same stories that he hears, and it’s given me a whole relationship with my son that I have.”

It’s the friends of ours from Liberal who became friends with a New York City guy who did a program—

QH: On western swing cowboy music.

KH: Yes.

QH: One of the Brooklyn cowboys.

KH: Yes. As a promo one year, he gave away pictures of him sitting on a horse, and I mean sitting on a horse, and our friends in Liberal had him come to Liberal and took him around. His big joy of the day was going to garage sales to buy used jeans so his jeans would not look new in New York City. I mean, it’s stories like that from Orpha Stormont and her friends from Dighton and Lakin who spent weeks making cookies and then came and spent the day at the station, stuffing envelopes and things like that. When you hear people come up to you and say, “It’s made all the difference. I listen on the tractor. I listen, and I’m driving through. I can’t believe your station. It means so much to me.”

For me, we did create that invisible network that made a network of small communities across a rural area, and we tied it together with a region that’s more similar north and south geographically and socially and economically than perhaps we are east and west.

QH: This would be a great occasion to highlight what different people Kathi and I are.

KH: Yes.

QH: And how actually that complementarity, sometimes friction, but ultimate complementarity has worked, and I’m not at all surprised that it’s people and stories for Kathi. So, I’ll give the more abstract answer, the “it’s in my head” answer. I think, and it’s not dissimilar, I think satisfaction in the fact that we framed it right at the start, and by that, I mean, we didn’t frame it as public radio. We framed it as community-building and building community through shared information and news and music and arts and culture. That framing meant that—again, it didn’t have to be public radio. It didn’t have to be radio. So, when digital media came along, it was just a natural extension of the same thing. I think the validation of framing it right really is so unique today because the other thing, we just changed so much is just the whole media environment, not just on the technical side, the coming of the Internet and streaming services and going back a longer way, cable news and now influencers, and anyone can be their own, that, and so there’s many more places to get news and information, but it’s not grounded anywhere necessarily.

Then also the extreme changes in commercial media, which used to be by regulation, it was a locally run business with a lot of public service in it. TV stations were owned locally within the region. Radio stations were local. That is so changed now where there's not a single TV station owned by any entity anywhere near the region. Radio is consolidated. They may be in the region group owners, but the formatting and the programming is not with some rare exceptions, some notable exceptions. It's not local anymore.

So, if anything, the need has only grown over time despite all the changes, which is why we are now focused on—although the national programming got us started, the future and the role is just more and more regional programming, whether it's news and information, arts and cultural programming, but again building that regional identity and making it feel local and staying locally controlled and oriented.

We're regenerating just this week, starting with an initial staffing of the High Plains Civic Media Network, which will focus on increasing news and information, not just on radio, but heavily on digital. It's a natural extension, and it goes back to the same need and the same purpose. It just feels like we kind of got it right. Unfortunately, if anything, the need is greater now.

MG: Would it be safe to say that need is almost the need for shared reality?

QH: That's part of it.

MG: In order to feel part of a community?

QH: I think just the fact that, one of the overlays is the fact that the media has become so nationalized and polarized. You just think of it this way—the other day, I was thinking about it. If I go back to my parents' generation, let's say we go back thirty years, forty years, an individual is involved—how much time would they have spent in a day focused on local news? Well, they would have sat down with the local paper, and there would have been enough there to read probably for an hour, between maybe the daily or the weekly in their town, and you've got one from [Hutchinson]. You've got one from somewhere else and the local radio. Live and local, there was news on there. You spent time listening to a local station, which truly was local.

And then what did you get for national news? Well, you might subscribe to a larger regional paper, and you had three network stations to listen to for a half hour of news. So the proportion might have been 80 percent local, 20 percent national. Today, if you think about where people spend their time listening, whether it's to talk radio or on the Internet doom scrolling, it's probably 90 percent national, maybe 10 percent local.

When you think about “What does that do to a community's infrastructure?” and what is local might be largely Facebook, and the reliability of that—you might be fortunate to have someone who volunteers doing a pretty good Facebook page, but it might also be just filler or stuff and very polarized. That's something which has changed besides just the change in ownership and things like that, both a common voice or a shared voice and just civility, too, for that matter. But,

again, that's all in the tradition of building community whether it's a library—libraries are always civil places, and meeting in the post office, you were civil. I think that's all part of it. If anything, the need is greater, and the challenge is greater.

MG: What would you want future generations who are looking at this interview, looking at what HPPR has accomplished, to pull from this experience that you've described here this afternoon and that manifests itself as the radio station changes and goes into new areas?

QH: I think the take-away would be it's not finished, and it's going to be up to you to take it to the next generation and the next form, the same thing, but it may be different media. It may be in different form, but it needs to continue, and it's yours to continue it, to figure it out, not to prescribe exactly how, but the same impulse, the same need, the same role to be played in building community. So, start thinking about that.

KH: I think about that twofold. One is I encourage people our age to do legacy giving. We've committed all of this to this point, and in small communities and in agriculture, we're going through the largest transfer of wealth in history. We've certainly seen that where we have people who were committed to this station, who funded this station, who gave very generous annual contributions to keep the operations going, and then they pass away, and their children are spread out in five other states, and they may send us a memorial \$500 gift, and then that's all we hear from them again. So, I think if you're in that stage of life, think about how you will give or leave a legacy that will help whatever nonprofit it is or ever community endeavor that you invested in, how you can make the decisions that will do that.

And I think for the young people involved, get involved in a way that keeps the organization going that's meaningful for you because we won't be here to do that forever. When we're not, we hope that the transition to whatever comes next is smooth. And that's why I get excited when I see young people involved and young people either participating—someone's doing a New Age music or something like that late on Saturday nights, I heard the other night. I don't stay up that late usually, but I think that's what the future is for this. I think that we created something—I do what I do now because I enjoy that. I like it. It's been a very meaningful retirement for me to do the book club and the poetry series. So, that brings a lot of people, interesting people to my life, but that would be my hope for the future is that this gets passed on in a smooth way—

QH: And in new ways.

KH: Yes. Who knows what that will be like?

QH: Things that we can't imagine, but again, filling the same need, building the same sorts of community.

MG: Well, I think that brings me to the end of the things I wanted to explore with you guys. Is there anything I missed that we need to talk about?

QH: I'm sure we'll think of this or that, but I think that the underlying value and themes, I think you did a nice job queuing them up for us and making us think about them because a lot of it is getting through the day.

MG: Thank you both. It's really been a pleasure to talk with you this afternoon. The Oral History Project thanks you, and I thank you. And we look forward to listening to more High Plains Public Radio over the Internet out east. Thank you.

[End of File]