

Oral History Interview Transcript – Enola-Gay Mathews

Subject: Ms. Enola-Gay Mathews

Interviewer: Savannah Owens

Interviewer: Ok, so I guess we'll start with where and when you were born?

Ms. Mathews: I was born in Odessa Texas in 1953 and one years time we moved to Longview where I went to school and stayed there till I was sixteen and got married. But one of the reasons we left Odessa was that my dad had been an oil field, but the polio scare was huge in the more populous cities in Texas that for a couple of years there it was intense. So intense in Odessa that my mother was so afraid that she actually fled. She took me to her hometown of Ector in Ector County, which was just a rural place, and we stayed there for a few months. My dad found a way for us to move to Longview, which was also populous. There was a big polio scare there too.

Interviewer: Oh my gosh.

Ms. Mathews: I remember as a young child knowing all about this polio and what happened to little children. On the posters you'd see the children with their crutches and wheelchairs and it was the March of Dimes raising money for research for this. But I would be so afraid that while I slept at night I would wake up paralyzed. The polio scare struck suddenly, but that's how we got to Longview. And my uncle was already in Longview. He was a businessman and was going to employ my dad and put him in the restaurant business.

Interviewer: So how was your childhood like?

Ms. Mathews: Well, I was alone. My brothers and sisters were older, and so I was mostly alone. I had cats, and wanted to have a horse but never got one [laughs]. And just pretty much a lot of play and imagination, until I was nine when we moved into a neighborhood. When we moved into a neighborhood near the school I went to, then things, something happened there that really was an influence over my life. And that's one thing I want to tell you about. It was very minor when it happened but somehow it has affected me.

Interviewer: What was that?

Ms. Mathews: Well, I belonged to a book club. Me and the little neighborhood girls and one was a daughter of a professor at LeTourneau

College, which our neighborhood was right behind. We could walk into the college campus; I mean the outskirts of it. We played over there a lot and LeTourneau, just everybody did something or the other at LeTourneau back then. And so, they were studious people and so she organized the book club and meets and talks about all the books we read. So somehow this lady that lived in our neighborhood invited us over for tea.

Interviewer: That's so great.

Ms. Mathews: We knew that she was kind of somebody important, but we didn't know much about her. Her name was Ms. Estes and driving through Longview you may see the Estes Parkway. There are a lot of things about Longview that was influenced by the Estes family. But this graceful and gracious important lady took time on a Saturday morning to invite us, little grubby girls, over but we didn't put on our best dresses. And to have a sit-down conversation with and so we all kind of knew where she was but she couldn't have known us individually and that impressed us. It impressed me that she would treat us like adult women, like peers. It kind of taught me that even if you have a modest job before the public life, like even a school janitor or a lunch lady, you know your daily actions can make a lasting impression on the children anyone that you are exposed to. And that is what I wanted to do and I have gotten to do it. One reason why I know this is, just last week, two different people told me, 'I've listened to you all my life'.

Interviewer: I mean, I would agree with that. I grew up listening to you on the radio too. I totally get that.

Ms. Mathews: These were people older than you though, Savannah!

[Both laugh]

Ms. Mathews: But I treasure that. It makes me realize how long it really has been but I do really really treasure hearing that. And so I hop that it has all been good but.... maybe I forgot where we were there.

Interviewer: Can you tell me the story behind your name?

Ms. Mathews: My mother named me for the plane that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima. The first atomic bomb ending World War II, in effect. Another plane flew, very few days later; I think six days later and it also dropped a bomb on Nagasaki. So between the impact of those two, Japan did surrender. They were failing but they were just so tenacious to hold onto the war effort. That got me. So my mother had not been in service

her decision was not influenced by anything military related she thought it was pretty. She saved that name for me.

Interviewer: How was being a journalist, with you know, that name. Do you think that has helped you at all?

Ms. Mathews: Absolutely. It helped me to get my job here. I had applied for work at KSST and, probably one opening as you know here there is never a lot of openings. People stay. One lady had been here fifteen years and had put in their notice. And I did not know her. Nor any of that but I had applied right about that same time. And so they had a stack of applications. They didn't go through them until the last minute. They had to find somebody. So I know, I just know, that my boss went through, he saw (he was a World War II pilot), he saw the name Enola-Gay. I know that's why. Probably. I came in and did, a you know, sound check, but I didn't know anything about being on the air.

Interviewer: How did you get into radio? What first got you into journalism?

Ms. Mathews: I was working at a fast foods. I didn't really go to college and have skills outside of that I had some children. Two of us working, my husband and I. So I did weekend work at a fast food. There was a man here who managed another radio station, the FM across town. He spoke to there, as he was eating his hamburger. Again another day he came in. "We have an opening you should come in." And I said to myself, "I don't know anything about radio." But I was hired. To do sales and write commercials. I did that at two stations before I came here, but it was Bradford who taught me everything I needed to know about being on the air.

Interviewer: Have you had any mentors? And how have those mentors impacted your career?

Ms. Mathews: I would say absolutely so. Yeah. Bill Bradford was the biggest one because of his huge background, and what he chose for his age thirty new careers after he got out of the military. But his wife Patsy, she was a big influence too. They were the mom and pop of all of us that worked here. Over the course of time and their work, many people who, you know, their lives brought them through here and many other places. She took care of the employees. Now she was tough, but he didn't have to deal with the day-to-day stuff the way Patsy did. His mind was on another level.

Interviewer: He was doing the radio broadcasts and she was managing.

Ms. Mathews: She was managing us.

Interviewer: I can see how she would have to be tough to put up with running a radio station.

Ms. Mathews: There were a lot of young people coming into a job that she had to be happy for.

Interviewer: Yeah, definitely. So how has radio changed in the years that you've been working here?

Ms. Mathews: Oh, it has changed one hundred percent in the way that things are done. When I first got here, in 1989, we were largely live. We had DJs every four hours. The shift would change and they could play records off of the turntables. We had music on carts, news stories, and the things that fill up a day. We did get a computer; this computer is as big as one entire expansive wall that regulated the cart machines and all the music reels and all the things. We were more automated, more advanced at that time. But largely live at any time. The moments we had power failures, which were kind of frequent back then, lightning or whatever, then we had to go live. So you had to be in place or hurry over from home and get here and tell the people that are listening what the storm was going to do, or momentary, you know.... What do you call that, the equipment failure-- you know some nice way of putting it. "No worries everything is alright." And fill with music or a chat. That is one of the major things the way the music is heard by listeners, we don't play on turntables anymore. We use music service and everything is digital everything, almost everything, is automated.

Interviewer: Would you say that it has gotten easier?

Ms. Mathews: It has gotten easier for the DJ.

Interviewer: Do you still prefer playing on turntables?

Ms. Mathews: I feel less contact with the people. And I feel that there's, that we become more like everything else there is to choose from. Where even if we were sometimes corny, that still it was real and it was live and it was something that people liked.

Interviewer: Definitely, I agree. I remember when I was interning this one time you had me pick a song, and I was so excited because everything else was automated but I got to pick one song to play.

Ms. Mathews: Do you play on turntables?

Interviewer: No, no, I'm used to playing automated songs. Not as exciting as a turntable.

[Both laugh]

Interviewer: What are some obstacles that you have overcome in this field? Do you feel you have had many obstacles that you had to overcome?

Ms. Mathews: This is a little bit personal. And there is not a lot for me to say about it. But I did not have formal training in broadcast, and I did just kind of learned on the job. Sometimes I'd feel like, you know, I couldn't be.... Well I don't know. That's something less for me, although I've had a long career doing what I love.

Interviewer: I mean you taught me, and I feel like everything that I know is attributed to you teaching me.

Ms. Mathews: Thank you, Savannah.

Interviewer: Would you say that you've had any obstacles or have people have treated you differently because you are a woman versus if you had been a man learning the same stuff?

Ms. Mathews: I'd say no.

Interviewer: Ok. What is your favorite part of radio?

Ms. Mathews: Talking to listeners. Hearing back from them on the phone or getting letters. I thought I saved all that stuff but tubs full are at home, as my desk would get full I'd have to take it home. Some of these days I'm going to go through all of that stuff. The way that life has changed for people in our rural town, I'd say, when I get this all mapped out, will be so crystal clear to anyone and I think fun to read how life changed from then to our more sophisticated selves now that were informed because we had more than just our Dallas TV station to get the bigger news from along with our local radio station and local newspaper. The whole world is at people's fingertips now but still, I believe this so strongly that the local touch and the personal touch will never go out of style.

Interviewer: I agree. What was the most proud moment of your career? Did you have a moment where you thought, "I've made it. This is it."

Ms. Mathews: There are two and both of them are just on a small level. There is an organization called The Academy of Western Artists and it does

have members from all over the United States as well as other countries. DJs and recording artists, and people like that are members of the AWA, but when I was selected as DJ of the Year, I think it was in 2012 but I'd have to check. That was a very very proud moment. I had my Will Rogers statute that will be mine forever more that's on my credenza, and that's one thing I am very proud of. But another came, I believe it was in...I wish I could tell you the dates right now so that you don't have to insert them later but--

Interviewer: That will be fine.

Ms. Mathews: This is definitely at a local level. I got selected by the Chamber of Commerce of Hopkins County as Woman of the Year. The rules had been that the Woman of the Year must be selected because of things that she does outside of her paying job. So if you only do things that you get paid for you really weren't to be, you know, a nominee. Somehow or the other they did find a few things that others had documented. I am always doing things that I can do to help people. To have that recognized was my very proudest moment. And then while I was sitting there, I had just come off stage, I was holding my award and I was on top of the moon actually. The way I felt, here comes my boss, who had been broadcasting in the corner of the stage, he put his headset down, walked over and kissed me on the cheek. Well that was my prize, better than the trophy.

Interviewer: Oh my goodness. Classic Bill.

[Both laugh]

Interviewer: If you could change one thing about your career what would it be and why?

Ms. Mathews: What I would have like to have done would have had a longer leash. I use to say, "I'm tied to the control board." I was never able to get more than about three minutes away from it because at the end of each song, or the end of each commercial set in the early days, I had to be nearby. I was here every morning at 4:30 to open, and going out of town for the weekend was not an option. But what I would have loved to have done in corresponding with work of playing country music on the air, would have been to have gone to the places these recording artists were appearing and get to report on their concerts or meet them. Get pictures made with them, all which but I had to do everything from right here in the chair. That was a big limit, if I had the freedom to go and maybe be a resident sort of DJ, DJ in residence or something and be gone for some time.

Interviewer: How is it working in broadcasting in a small town?

Ms. Mathews: I am fortunate that I work for a station that still has a live presence in our town. KSST is over seventy years old and still holds an important place here as far as information for people. Many many stations that you listen to are completely automated, there's just not the personal touch anymore at all. But we do have portions of the day that are live and the morning show that I get to do is largely live. It's a huge blessing for me. A lot of people that get to be my age are already finished with their careers but I hope that I can continue because I think I have things to share that are important for people.

Interviewer: I do too. Have you ever thought about going to a bigger market?

Ms. Mathews: No.

Interviewer: [laughs]

Ms. Mathews: One time an opening came up for a station over a station over a weekend at WBAP, and I asked my boss if I could go over there and try out for that. He looked at me for a few minutes and said, "If you want to drive to Fort Worth after a week of work, then knock yourself out and drive back and be here, go for it."

Interviewer: [laughs]

Ms. Mathews: See I thought he would tell me no. He said, "Go try it, if you think you are up for that."

[Both laugh]

Ms. Mathews: Of course I didn't.

Interviewer: Can you describe your typical day? What do you do in a day in the life of Ms. Mathews?

Ms. Mathews: Well, it's so much easier now, so much easier. I do my recording the day before; my morning shows play while I am here listening to it and getting the next day's work done. But to take you back, the day would start prior to 4:30 am when I would come in unlock, turn the lights on. The first thing I would do is flip the big massive switches for the transmitters to get it started warmed up. You couldn't go on the air immediately, those big glass tubes that looked like something from Frankenstein that were inside that thing, had to begin to glow. Fully glowing and vibrating and then we would have our full power and we

could go on and say good morning and give the weather forecast or whatever. Then through the course of the day a guest would come in and we would do an interview with them for whatever stuff was going on in the community they were involved in. We had a lot of politicians all through the years however that is usually handled, not by me, but by the management here -- the most important interviews. The daily interviews I did and take a lot of pride and fun in doing. Then mid morning all kinds of preparations work for noon, that noontime deadline kind of gets into your blood. When you have to get your news ready, all the important obituaries and other bits of news that goes into noontime broadcasting. The award winning local news here at KSST so that noon time deadline had everybody on edge and then once that was over it's time to, you know, go eat lunch and come back at it for the afternoon.

Interviewer: That's a full day.

Ms. Mathews: Fielding phone calls from back then it was lots of phone calls. Now the phone doesn't ring that much because people communicate through email and all that and lots of communication that way. Back then the phone, I was always supposed to answer line 4, and it was almost always, the lady who lost her dog or "are we going to have school tomorrow", if it was about to snow or rain or something. Just everyday things like that from people that wanted to put something on the trading post.

Interviewer: How was your favorite person to have interviewed? You've mentioned that you've interviewed a lot of people. Who would you have to say is your favorite person?

Ms. Mathews: I interviewed this person by phone because he was not here. He was in Wichita Falls; he was visiting Wichita Falls. I found out that the pilot from the plane, Enola-Gay, was going to speak at a veterans' convention, which was to be held at Wichita Falls. There is a military base up there. I read about it in the Dallas Morning News. I wondered, "How can I just reach out to this man and tell him the impact that, naming the plane what he did, and his work flying that plane has had on my life and probably every other little girl that was named Enola-Gay in the whole United States. I pursued a little bit by finding out what hotel the speakers were going to stay at. I took a chance and called the hotel. They said, "Yes, Mr. Tibbett is here; registered here." So I asked if I could speak to his room and she said, "Yes, you can, but you will be speaking to a lady because he is almost deaf and cannot hear. And she translate phone calls for him." So I had already asked my boss, Bill Bradford, if I were be able to speak to Paul Tibbett what questions I should ask him. Because of course when it happened I was not even born when his flight and the A-Bomb. So he gave me a list of questions,

so I was very well prepared. I had my script and I had everything I needed, I was so...I hear my recording and it still plays today just a few bits of it. But I said, "Good morning, I want to speak to Paul Tibbett. She asks him the first question, yells it across the room. She had to repeat it and so he said something back and she tried to tell me what he was saying. I don't even remember the question, the first question. I heard him say, "Give me that phone!". So she hands him the phone and gets on there and says, "Young woman". I said, "Yes?"

Ms. Mathews: He says, " You don't anything about war! I know, the question you're going to ask me is, 'how do I feel about pressing the button that dropped that bomb that killed all those people. I know you're going to ask me that!" He said, "Young woman, there is no morality in war! You cannot understand this if you haven't been through it!" Shouting at the top of his lungs.

Interviewer: Oh my gosh.

Ms. Mathews: Well I said, "Yes sir, I know, yes sir yes sir...." And it was recorded on the phone for radio. He had me, and I never did recover in that interview. I didn't get him to listen to me. But he got his point across and it may be something that you and I, Savannah, still have to learn about war. I hope we don't face it personally like the people did in 1945, but if so, he would be the voice to tell you how it's going to be.

Interviewer: I know that you were also in charge of the Hopkins County Jamboree. Can you tell me a little about how you started that, what is involved?

Ms. Mathews: The Reilly Springs Jamboree is held in a little small community of Hopkins County that used to be, you know, populous with people and a cotton gin and things like that. But now it's just a quiet place where a lot of people still live and make their homes. The old school house where the kids went to school is still standing. It was a WPA project actually, a work progress where men who were unemployed because of the war, there were no jobs. The government put them to work building bridges and buildings and things like that that were needed. From that old school house, a country music show started in 1956 and its when, actually Savannah you don't know this, but there hasn't always been country music. It developed out of hillbilly and bluegrass music, which were mountain styles, and it's still evolving as we know, but it evolved and that's when radio came in strongly and it was heard then it became a form of music. A lot of the big early stars were on that stage at Reilly Springs Texas like Johnny Cash, George Jones, June Carter, so many of the big name stars that would be on Grand Ole Opry or the Louisiana Hayride stopped there and put on a show on a Saturday

night. Everybody went from all the surrounding towns. Maybe they had some shows going on in their counties but you don't hear about them.

Ms. Mathews: But the Reilly Springs Jamboree remained a force. When I came here work here in 89' at this station, I noticed a few bits of memorabilia: a record or letter or something mentioning the jamboree. I was curious about that. It was not going on at that time. After two or three years of that I saw some old pictures and I thought to myself, "Wouldn't it be great if that could be revived?" KSST is the one that carried it live on the air on Saturday nights. I asked my boss, he was not particularly inclined, he was busier doing other things and that was not on the top of his list, but he didn't forget me. So I kind of researched it and reached out to some of the people who had appeared then and been part of the bands that played for all these entertainers and got them together and held a Reilly Springs Jamboree reunion in 1995 at the VFW because they have a big ball room over there. There was standing room only. There was Tammy Wynette's guitar player who was with her for all the years of her career came. All kinds of people who had some notoriety in country music.

Ms. Mathews: And so we could see from that, that there was some promise in it. There was a band already playing at the VFW and they agreed to be our jamboree band and we went ahead for a couple of years putting it on once a month at the VFW. Eventually we went back to the old school house at Riley Springs were we still are. A very historic old venue, very warm, people love coming in and just to hear the floorboards creak and see the pictures on the wall, and the music we have on stage.

Interviewer: That's awesome. Is there anything else that you would like to add about your career in radio or your life?

Ms. Mathews: I want to tell you about my dad. And if this is long you'll cut it down to what you need right?

Interviewer: Yes

Ms. Mathews: I got on a ramble because I didn't have any idea what you would want to know. My father was from an educated family. All his siblings and their families had gone to college we had several that went to TCU and other colleges in Texas. Except for him. He went to the oil field and got an injury early on so then he went on to restaurant work, and that's one of the reasons we ended up in Longview, Texas. But he knew everybody in Longview. He was known as Mr. Bill. He rubbed elbows everyone who was anybody in town, from bankers to politicians on down and he pointed me in the direction of meeting and being on friendly terms with some of the guiding families in our town. He was the

one that had told me that the Estes lived in our neighborhood and that's how me and my book club friends got that invitation by Mrs. Estes.

[Pause in Ms. Mathews retelling]

Ms. Mathews: I'm going to leave out a whole bunch of this because I don't see how it fits in right now.

Interviewer: What's it about?

Ms. Mathews: It's about my childhood. I'll tell it if you want me to.

Interviewer: Yeah!

Ms. Mathews: Well in the 1950s, actually it was the 1960s when I began to remember anything because I was born in '53, but the Roy Rogers Riders Rules were on the wall. And these bespoke the values of times like honesty, integrity, and character; things that children needed to know. I'm not sure we have a poster on the wall proclaiming this anymore but Roy Rogers was a good role model. He and Dale Evans were on TV and the very first television movies, Savannah, that ever came out was called Saturday Night At the Movies. And I was probably seven or eight at the time and I could tell the TV industry was moving ahead and kind of learning the Gunsmoke and Bonanza atmosphere behind and moving to something more sophisticated. Saturday Night At the Movies had big theme music and you could see the movie reels turning and the picture on the screen. And those programs have enjoyed immortality that old westerns and the movies and the classics. I went to one of the six or seven elementary schools in Longview and I lived in a nice neighborhood near LeTourneau College. Families kept their yards nice and got a new car every few years.

Ms. Mathews: We had a 1959 Chevrolet with the biggest fins, outlandish fins, of any car you'd ever seen. I was proud of being driven to school in that car and I was starting to become aware of my peers and I knew I wanted to become a writer. I imagined that I would like to become a writer because I loved to read. I read everything in our house from catalogs on down; they couldn't keep enough stuff in the house for me to read. But one of my neighbors, Dale Crane, was a professor of aviation at LeTourneau and we wrote some instruction manuals and he was also a role model father. And my father was rarely at home, to tell the truth; he was always at the restaurant. So getting involved with this family who took me with them on vacations and took me with them to church was a turning point in my life.

Ms. Mathews: My dad though, kind of pointed me to the social aspect of our community. When you were at our restaurant, which was called The Triangle, one of those full service, sit-down type of restaurants, everybody would come (it was very popular) and you could socialize get to know the mayor to the local plumber and anybody else, the current state representative, the highway patrol would be a lot there eating, local law enforcement -- everybody was in there during a typical week. I got to see and meet a lot of influential people kind of up close that way, but I was rather anonymous because I was just Mr. Bill's daughter. But dad would tell me who they were and fill me in and I also learned about customer service there. My dad watched everything that went on and was there if you needed whatever. The waitress was there for you to make sure your cup of coffee or you glass of iced tea was filled, but he talked with them chatted, conversed and made sure they were comfortable, and took their reservations for next week when they had company coming to town, or their kids graduation. That is on the endangered list of skills today, this one-on-one people feeling what business and personal contact. A smile and a friendly word went a long long way back there. My dad enacted this before my eyes every day.

Ms. Mathews: About this time I was in the girls' book club, Ms. Estes had invited us over. She wanted to know who we were and about our school and our families. We used our best manners and enjoyed that our with us she told us she was a writer for the paper, local Longview journal, her personal interest with us really made an impression on me. I mean she cooked, she kept house, and she dressed up and went to work, when most of our moms were stay at home moms. She was graceful and gracious and entertained us that day. She was Mrs. Carol Estes. Whom I didn't even know how important she was until very recently when I looked up her biography. Of course she passed away now. She was the first female publisher of the Longview Morning News or News Journal and wife of a giant in American journalism Carl Estes, and she took time for us that summer day. She lived into her 90s she was also a veteran of the Navy herself and in naval intelligence back in her earlier days but she was known for her philanthropic efforts in East Texas. And even though I didn't know all that, just the lady who had us for tea, was a person I wanted to be like.

Interviewer: Wow.

Ms. Mathews: And I'm not like her, I haven't done big things. I've done small things. She taught me without knowing it that the interest of every little person really matters to them, and it ought to matter to us too. We are not too highly developed human beings now to leave that important factor out in one-on-one, looking at people in the eyes, and caring about what they say.

Interviewer: I remember you once told me, "In every interview it's a journalist's job to make the interviewee feel like they are the most important person in that room." Since, I remember that, I think you've done big things.

Interviewer: What advice do you have for young journalists? Or for people looking to get into the radio industry?

Ms. Mathews: I fear that young people are not taught about people skills. I fear that they are not exposed to people that they could learn it from just by watching. I hope I am wrong. Your family, I can say Savannah, is very people oriented and common sense and all that is easily seeing that it has passed on to you. But I fear that there is a whole generation of students coming along; that this would be a rarity for instead of commonplace.

Ms. Mathews: I don't know how to give advice except that; I'm not sure how this will sound. I think all of us are born with a natural instinct in others. And yes you can sit down and coldly interview someone, get the facts and the figures and write them down, and thank them for their time. But when a person says that they are a veteran that served in WWII, lets say, or Vietnam or where ever -- there is a story behind that, that may not be the subject of your interview that day but this is a person who has endured and served and sacrificed and persevered. They are due respect and that could just titillate your imagination and your curiosity find out a little bit more because it may help them to put their name in an article but it will help you a whole whole lot more by learning about people.

Interviewer: I agree. Is there anything else that you would like to add about radio or your expansive career over the years?

Ms. Mathews: There was a little saying I heard one time, I don't even know when or where it came from but it says, "Bloom where you're planted." And so if you have a little job in a small market or something maybe even rural you can still do a lot for yourself in that environment as well as maybe others that you're exposed to. Bloom where you're planted.

[Both laugh]

Interviewer: Thank you very much! I appreciate this.

Ms. Mathews: Thank you, Savannah. I feel of course, like, well I've read some of the things from the link you gave me. I read some of the things;

there are big name people that are interviewed in there. I read about five. That's what made me feel like my contribution could also be included because there are others who are no more famous than I am and no more wide in their reach than I have been. At first thought, "I don't know why I said yes, I'm not a journalist".

Interviewer: I disagree. I think you know, if you look around at Sulphur Springs and the community, you can definitely tell the impact that you've made. And the lives you have influenced and changed so much so from you just working at KSST. I mean from stories from like my grandparents and my family, but also other people out in the community. I've been fortunate enough to have had the opportunity to observe you in action, follow you around for a couple of years and just being able to watch how you interact with people. And I think all of the things your were telling me about, you believe that, you do the things you tell me to do. You genuinely try to have that genuine human connection with people and I think that you have definitely made a huge impact in Sulphur Springs. You may not see it, but I think you have.