

UFA 8

Interviewer: Dr. Michael Gannon

Interviewee: William "Red" Barber

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G: Hello, I am Mike Gannon [Michael V. Gannon, retired Distinguished Service Professor of History, former director of Early Contact Period Studies, CLAS] and this is *Conversation*. Walter "Red" Barber came out of Sanford, Florida, and went to Gainesville as a student at the University of Florida in 1928. In 1930 under unusual circumstances, he became a staff announcer at the infant radio station WRUF on the campus of the university. As such, he broadcast the first ever college football game at Florida Field -- a twenty to nothing loss to the Crimson Tide of Alabama. From Gainesville he went to Cincinnati, [Ohio], where he broadcast games of the Cincinnati Reds baseball team and from there went to Brooklyn where he achieved national fame as the voice of the Brooklyn Dodgers for over fifteen years. And there followed twelve years with the New York Yankees. In 1978, as many in our viewing audience are aware, Red Barber was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. He is one of the great people of Florida and has wonderful stories about his life in Gainesville and subsequent years.

Red, I want to welcome you back to campus. It is good to have you here at the University of Florida, where you started your career many years ago. I know that you are here, among other reasons, to help celebrate the second anniversary of WUFT/FM and the twenty-fifth anniversary of WUFT/TV on which we are appearing now. So thank you for coming back to campus.

B: Mike, it is a pleasure to be back on campus and to be in these wonderful television facilities. I might say this is a little different than the facilities of WRUF in March of 1930 when I first stuck my head in over there.

G: Those studios are now being used as the police station on campus. They sat out in the middle of agricultural fields at the time you first came on the air.

B: That is right. There was just a sand road from what we called the Ocala Road that led up to it. We did not have air conditioning, and in the summertime it got a little hot. You would have the windows open, and it was not unusual for a cow to put their nose in and see what we were doing.

G: When you came to the university in 1928, what did the student body number?

B: When I got here in 1928, I think the student body, all men of course, was about 2,000. That was the year that Dr. Tigert [John. J. Tigert, president, University of Florida, 1928-1947] first came. That was also the year that Charlie Bachman [Florida head football coach, 1928-1932] came...

G: As football coach.

- B: Yes. They scored more points than any other football team and finally lost thirteen to twelve to Tennessee up at Knoxville, [Tennessee]. The star of that team, who was not recognized at that time -- sometimes stars are covered up a little bit -- was Carl Brumbaugh. Rainey Cawthon, who along with **Ed Skars** was the fullback, is over in Tallahassee where Lila [Red Barber's wife] and I live, and we see him [over there]. Rainey always talks about Brumbaugh, and Rainey says, he was the master. Clyde Crabtree was the quarterback, and Brumbaugh was a halfback, meaning he ran from the halfback position. Royce Goodbread was another halfback. And you had Dale VanSickle and "Dutch" Stanley as your ends. That was a great collection of football players.
- G: And Dale VanSickle was our first All-American.
- B: That is right. There are lot of people who think that "Dutch" Stanley was a better end. "Dutch" stayed on here [at the university].
- G: Yes. [He was] a great athlete and a great representative of the athletic program here.
- B: VanSickle had the ability to make certain key plays. [For instance], in one football game he just took the ball out of the hands of the forward passer who was going to punt and kept on going for a touchdown. It happened that the right newspaper men were there. That is how life goes. [laughter]
- G: Everybody was in the ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corp] at that time.
- B: Oh, yes. 1928 was the first year of the artillery. They just put you [where they wanted you]. I happened to get into the artillery, and 1929 was the first year we had horses -- Mountie drill. And that was interesting too, because they brought a bunch of halfbroken horses from some army post in Texas. They were not, should we say, ideally tamed creatures. **Captain Barko** of the regular army lined us up and explained the character or lack of character of each of these horses. Then he said, I am not going to assign you boys to these horses. [If] any of you want to volunteer, fine. [laughter] There were enough of us who did.
- G: You got a job as a janitor and worked your way through much of your college years.
- B: Not as a janitor, Mike. In my freshman year, I was a part-time table waiter. I started staying in the commons. When some boy wanted to go away, I would wait his spot for meals. And I did odd jobs. I stacked stove wood, cut grass, anything that would come up for thirty, thirty-five cents an hour. All the time I was working toward getting a regular job waiting tables, and I finally got one promised [to me] my second year at \_\_\_\_\_. So at the beginning of my second year, I had that; I was able to eat. [But] I did not have any money for a place to

stay. Life deals you so many cards. No one can say that you are self-made. Take one person out of your life or one event out of your life and the whole thing is changed. So I was walking down the street, and I ran into Professor Wallace Goebel, who was my new professor in a social science course. He was just stopping to talk, and he said, I am looking for a janitor at the University Club. I said, what? He said, I am looking for a janitor, somebody to sweep out the club and make the beds, etc. I said, you found him.

G: The University Club was what?

B: The University Club was in a two story framed building on University Ave directly across from the Law College. It was for about a half dozen bachelor professors. They stayed there; they did not eat there, but they slept there. My job as janitor was to keep the place reasonably clean. They were not too particular. I would make the beds and gather the laundry. And in return, I got my room. When you have got a room, a job eating, and you have got your uniform from the ROTC, you are pretty well in. You could go to the library for books. I mean they could not get you out if you really wanted to stay.

G: I heard you caught a lot of criticism from some of the students who would see you going in and out of that University Club.

B: The school was so small that we knew everybody on the campus. They had a tradition then [that] you had to speak to everybody. I noticed walking around here today that they do not have that [tradition now] because there are too many people. But back then you had to speak to everybody, whether you knew their names or not. So you knew who everybody was. Before long, somebody came up [to me] and said, do you know what they are saying about you? And I said, what? They are saying that you are really sucking in with the professors. I said, what? He said, yeah, they say you are going in and out of that University Club. Is that the way you get your good grades? [Laughter.]

G: Was it about this time that you were approached and asked to give a ten minute talk or so on WRUF?

B: One of the professors at the University Club was Ralph Fulghum, and he was in the School of Agriculture. WRUF put on the farm program, which started at noon and lasted forty-five minutes. It was up to Fulghum to run it. One morning at about 11:00 or 11:30, I was sitting there doing some work, tending to my business. It happened that school had not resumed after the Christmas holidays, so I did not have my boarding house job. I was faced with the problem of trying to scrounge a dinner someplace. And Fulghum walked in and he said, look, I have got three ten minute papers and all the profs who wrote them have left town. He said, come on and go over to the radio station with me and read

one of the papers, but change your voice. I said, no. He said, why? I said, I have never been over at the station; I have not lost anything over there. And second, can't you see I am busy? He said, come over and read this one paper, it won't take you long, and I will buy your dinner tonight. I said, I will read all three for that. He said, no, one is enough. So I went over and read the paper. It was a very precise paper on bovine obstetrics. I can imagine why the prof left town and did not want to read it himself. But I read it. I came out of the studio and a gentleman came up and said, did you just read this paper? I said, yes sir. And I started to go. He said, wait a minute. I am Garland Powell. I am the new director of the radio station. Your voice registered very well, and we need a part time student announcer who we will pay thirty-five cents an hour. I said, thank you very much Major Powell, but I am not interested, and I cannot take the job. He said, why can't you take the job? I said, I have got this job as a janitor. I have got the job waiting tables, and I have got to be there at noon and in the evening. And I am taking all that they will let me take -- twenty-one hours. There is no way I can do it. And I left. Well, Fulghum kept coming back to the University Club and saying to me, Major Powell keeps saying to me, when is that boy coming out here and going to work? Fulghum kept saying to him, I got no control over that boy. He then said to me, will you go out to the station and tell Major Powell once and for all that you are not going to do it, so he will leave me alone; he is bothering me. I said, fine. So I went out there. I said, Major Powell, I just want to get this straight. I cannot do it. He said, how much did I say I would pay you? I said, thirty-five cents an hour. He said, how much would I have to guarantee you a month? I could do quick arithmetic when it comes to basic survival. I figured, gee whiz, twenty, twenty-five dollars a month, and I can eat. For another ten [dollars], I can get a room for myself. That would leave me ten or fifteen dollars spending money. You got to remember that hard times were on. This was the Depression. I thought to myself, I will ask him for all the money in the world. I will fix him. So I said, fifty dollars a month. He said, okay. My heart sank. Here my hard earned security was gone. I had never been around a radio station. I had read just one ten minute paper. So this is how life goes.

G: And then you were assigned to sports. Was everybody in the station assigned to that? How did that happen?

B: No, no. The fellow who did sports at that time was Jack Thompson, whose father was the Thompson of Thompson and Smathers -- a big law firm in Miami. That was the father of Senator [George] Smathers [U.S. senator from Florida, 1951-1969]. Jack Thompson was up here taking law and was at the station. He was very good. He was a crackerjack, and he loved it. He did all of the sports. He did the basketball tournament, and he would do the baseball games. Then one day Jack Thompson's father pulled a string on him and said, I do not want you fooling around up in Gainesville anymore spending that time at the

radio station. I want you to come down here, read law in my office, and pass the bar exam. In those days you did not have to have a law degree. You could pass the bar exam and be admitted. So Thompson went to Miami and became a lawyer. I think to his dying day he always regretted that he did not stay in show business. Major Powell used to say, gee, Jack was a marvelous talent. He [had] a marvelous voice and had the instinct, the flair, to do it, and he loved to do it. And he loved to fool with the piano. He really was a show-business fellow, but because his father was a lawyer, he had to be a lawyer. Anyhow, Thompson left. You have got to remember these were the very early days of radio. [There was] no staff, so there was nobody to do the football games when they came along that fall in 1930. I had played high school football down at Sanford, so they let me fool around [with it]. And I just finally got to doing the football games. You think about Wallace Goebel and Garland Powell and Jack Thompson and all the opportunities that opened up [for me]. Actually, Mike, it should make you feel very humble.

G: Because there were a lot of things that happened in your early life that one could attribute to chance.

B: That is right. There is a sentence in the Book of Common Prayer; it is an old, old prayer.

“Amid the changes and chances of this mortal life.” I think that we need to get this idea over to your students and have them buttress it with a strong ethical feeling, which you are teaching in your ethics class. That is what young people need.

G: Red, when you went up to Cincinnati and began broadcasting baseball games, you were broadcasting a game that, to many people, seems complicated and in its way it is, of course. Yet, I have heard you say that broadcasting baseball was easier than broadcasting football. Why was that?

B: Baseball is a completely orderly game. You have nine men on each side, and they stay in their same positions in the field. If there is going to be a change, it is announced. [There is] no problem of identification. There is no change in the batting order, unless there is a mistake made, and you pay a penalty if you bat out of turn. You have time after every pitch, and you have time after every out. Three outs is half an inning. You have easily an opportunity, without any problem of name identification, of describing the ball game. Also, because the game is orderly and fixed, your listener on radio understands [what is happening on the field] when you say, [for example], a high fly to short right field. [The listener knows] that the right fielder is coming in and the second baseman is going out. In fact, a lot of people say they would rather listen to a ball game on radio, where they can use their imagination and participate, than be force-fed

television pictures which the director controls. He sends the picture that he wants to send, not what the audience wants to see necessarily. Football is just organized confusion. Today the ball changes hands [in a football game] and you have forty-four men change the field, and there is a big mess. The football coaches never knew what was going on with their teams until the development of motion pictures. They could take motion pictures, slow them down, stop them, play them back, and study them. Today a football coach cannot tell you very much about a football game until he gets the film. The whole coaching staff lives for the film. You do not have to wait for the film to see a baseball game.

G: You are right about the imagination too. The imagination is sometimes richer than the vision. Seeing something on television does not have quite the impact as the imagination with which you recreate a game in your mind from listening to it on radio.

B: This brings up a thought about school again in Gainesville. I had a course in education under Dean Norman [James William Norman, Dean Emeritus of the College of Education and professor of education, 1916-1955]. He used to always be talking about the difference between a static and an alive society. From the standpoint of the audience, you are alive when you are listening to radio, because you have to participate. You are given the chance to participate, and you want to participate. You are participating whether you realize it or not. In television, you as the audience are strictly static. I personally am concerned with the enormous increase of sports on television and with our national static audience. And I am serious about this. People can sit hour after hour looking at one athletic event after another, and they only break it to go down the hall or go back to the refrigerator.

G: Yes. Not even the active imagination is at work. They are just mute, passive spectators in front of the television.

B: They are. They almost become stunned.

G: Also, television has an incredible power over what happens in sports today, including the college game.

B: Of course, it does. It has the power of vision. Radio has the power of hearing and the imagination.

G: I remember Roman Catholic Bishop Fulton J. Sheen [religious leader, author, 1895-1979] once compared radio to the Old Testament, because it was hearing without seeing. And then he compared television to the New Testament, because the Word was made flesh. He had a very gifted way of using allegory.

B: Yes, and using television. He was a powerful man on television.

- G: What role does television have now over collegiate athletics? I say "over" because I seem to think television is controlling in great part what happens in intercollegiate athletics, particularly the major sports.
- B: When television began, it began as the tail of the dog. My analogy is that television now is not the tail of the dog; it is the whole dog. I have said this many times. They change games out there at Florida Field if television wants them changed. Is that your answer?
- G: Yes, it is.
- B: Why? Money. Exposure.
- G: I believe you would say that is not good for the game.
- B: I do not think it is good for the game; I do not think it is good for our society. I think we have become indeed a society that is rapidly losing its way, becoming, as Dean Norman said, static. There ought to be better uses of people's free time than endless hours of looking at a television box. I say this as a person who has worked for years in television. I did the announcing of the first telecast of a major league baseball game.
- G: When was that?
- B: It was in August of 1939 at Ebbets Field [old home of the Brooklyn Dodger baseball] team. It was a first game of a doubleheader between Cincinnati and Brooklyn.
- G: How about football? Did you not also do an early football game on TV?
- B: Yes. I did the first professional football game. It was of the then Brooklyn Dodgers in the National League. This was experimental TV in the fall of 1939. I did three or four games at Ebbets Field. Then World War II came along, and the military powers that be then could not see a use for TV. So because of shortages of everything including manpower, television was put in the deep freeze. People wondered how television came so fast. Well, suddenly after WWII, the restrictions were lifted, and boom, there it came.
- G: Television does not leave much to the imagination; radio certainly does. On a light note, I would like to ask about the second no hit/ no run game of Johnny Vander Meer. Certainly people's imaginations were running strong [at that time], and they congratulated you for years afterwards on the wonderful job you did broadcasting his second no hit game.
- B: The three New York teams -- the Yankees, Giants, and Dodgers -- were so afraid

of the effect of radio broadcasting. They were afraid that radio broadcast of games would keep fans from going to the park. So they had a five year anti-radio ban. They would not allow any of their [games] to be broadcast for those five years, and they would not allow even a Western Union report from an out of town station. 1938 was the fifth year of that ban, and that year was [Larry] McPhail's [baseball executive, 1890-1975] first year at Brooklyn. He put in lights, and in the first night game at Ebbets Field, which was the first night game in New York, Vander Meer pitched his second no hitter. I had broadcast his first in Cincinnati [which was] against the Boston Braves. So now Vander Meer pitches [his second no hitter], and of course, nobody broadcast it. What you are referring to is that over the years people would come up [to me] and say gee, I sure enjoyed hearing your description of Vander Meer's second no hitter. For awhile I used to take time to try to explain that I did not do it -- nobody did it. People still come up occasionally, but now I just say, well, thank you very much. That also had another impact on my life. When WLW broke the news at about 10:45 at night with a newsflash that they got from the Associated Press -- Vander Meer's second successive no hitter, etc. -- the whole town full of Dutchmen went wild. I think they started to try and drink up all the beer in Cincinnati in one night. They must have stayed up all night and marched all around the **Rhine**. I had my telephone number listed in the book: Walter "Red" Barber. I had then the idea that I owed something to the public. If they wanted to reach me, they could. I had no sooner hit my head on the pillow when the phone rang, and a voice said, I want to talk to Old Red about Vander Meer. This went on all night. You cannot believe it. So when we went to New York a few months later, I said, I cannot put my name in the phone book anymore. People who know us know that my wife's name is Lila. So our phone number from Vander Meer's second no hitter on has been listed under Lila M. Barber.

- B: I heard that you do a re-creation of the game on tape. Had you broadcast it, it would have sounded like this [re-creation]. And you did the last out of the ninth inning of the second game. It was used here at the College of Journalism and Communications two years ago in a very effective way. At a luncheon the tape was played, it was very exciting. And then the emcee said, and now ladies and gentlemen, we would like for you to meet Johnny Vander Meer. He lives in Tampa and came up for the day, and it was quite a thrill for him to hear that.
- B: In those days until 1946, you broadcast the out of town games of the team you were following from Western Union re-creations. So you had to develop in your imagination mental pictures of what was going on from the just the physical skeletons. What I did was get the physical skeleton of Vander Meer's ninth inning and went back there with former technique which, of course, we do not use anymore.
- G: I am going to ask a football question before we have to close this fascinating

conversation. One of the first games you did was in 1935 -- Notre Dame and Ohio State. And Notre Dame scored two touchdowns with about two minutes to play to win.

B: Nobody knows exactly how many seconds. We did not have electric clocks then. Notre Dame and Ohio State had never met. Along with Michigan, they were the big football powers out there in the Midwest. The stadium was sold out [for that game] before the season ever began. As it happened, up to that game Notre Dame had not lost a game, and Ohio State had not lost a game. Francis Smith had that ball club, and Ohio State was busy making a lot of points. They were called the Scarlet Scuds. So their meeting was tremendous enough, but now they both come [to the game] unbeaten, and it captured the fancy of everyone. The NCAA recently, when it was 100 years old, formed a committee and asked members of that committee to select the single most exciting college game in the first 100 years of the NCAA. They selected this one without any argument. It was simply an enormous game. Ohio State went ahead thirteen to nothing in the first half. Just as the third quarter ended, Notre Dame got a touchdown, missed the extra point, and made it thirteen to six. Then in less than two minutes, or closer to one minute, Notre Dame scored a touchdown and missed the extra point. So now it is thirteen to twelve, and of course, it is all over -- Ohio State is going to receive [and win the game]. They received the ball, and on the first play from scrimmage **Dick Velts** fumbled it and **Poorman** of Notre Dame was the last man to touch it. If the rules were the same today, Ohio State would have had the ball back. But the rules were not, they were different. So now it is Notre Dame's ball. **Shakespeare** fades back and attempts a forward pass which is incomplete. Remember nobody knows how much time is left [in the game] except the fellow down on the field with the actual watch. So now he fades back again and throws to **Wayne Melnor** who catches it for a touchdown. It is now eighteen to thirteen. Notre Dame wins. I am telling you, you have never heard such silence in a double deck football stadium in your life. In less than a minute, Christmas had come and gone in Columbus, Ohio.

G: Who was coaching Notre Dame?

B: Elmer Layden, former fullback of the Four Horseman [of Notre Dame].

G: He had directly succeeded Knute Rockne [Notre Dame head football coach from 1918 to 1931]?

B: No. He did not succeed Rockne directly. I think **Anderson** did. But Laden was the coach.

G: Wonderful stories, Red, and a wonderful career. We are all proud of you here at the University of Florida and very grateful to you for coming back to campus to

help us celebrate these anniversaries.

B: My life is a testament to an unbroken string of blessings.

G: I know you count it as such, and we do too. We thank you so much for being with us. I thank you personally for joining me on *Conversation*.

B: Thank you, Mike.