

**Transcript of “Larry Birleffi, Voice of the Wyoming Cowboys”**  
*An Oral History Presentation by the Wyoming State Archives*

*Disc 1*

**Track 1**

COWBOY JOE MUSIC OPEN AND UNDER...

ANNCR: Welcome to “Larry Birleffi, Voice of the Wyoming Cowboys”. Nearly 20 years ago, Larry Birleffi sat down and interviewed with Mark Junge, former State Historian for page in the book “The Wind is My Witness,” published in 1989 by Roberts Rinehart in association with Wyoming’s Department of State Parks and Cultural Resources. In three 90-minute audio cassettes, Larry mused over his life from his early beginnings in Hartville, Wyoming to his passionate love for the Wyoming Cowboys. We’ve edited the tapes down for your listening pleasure so sit back and listen once again to the voice and remembrances of Larry Birleffi, Voice of the Wyoming Cowboys, an oral history presentation produced by Wyoming’s Department of State Parks and Cultural Resources.

COWBOY JOE MUSIC UP AND UNDER

**Track 2 – The Interviewer is Interviewed**

MARK JUNGE: Today is Friday, the 3<sup>rd</sup> of February, 1989 and we’re in the conference room of KGWN studios in Cheyenne. I’m Mark Junge and I’m in the room here with Larry Birleffi, a longtime sports announcer, sports writer, sports aficionado, a longtime Cheyenneite and Wyomingite. True?

LARRY BIRLEFFI: I guess you’ve covered it pretty well, Mark.

JUNGE: How many times has the interviewer been interviewed?

BIRLEFFI: Not very many times. I’m generally on the other side of the spectrum. But, it will be fun. I don’t know how this will work out but I’ve never sat down with anyone and just start talking, reminiscing. Never have. No one has ever...I can see why....

JUNGE: You can see why?

BIRLEFFI: Because I always like to ask the questions instead of answering them.

**Track 3 – Early Days in Hartville**

BIRLEFFI: I was born in 1918, April 17<sup>th</sup> in Hartville, Wyoming. Most people in Wyoming don’t even know where it is.

JUNGE: It's kind of tucked up into the hills...

BIRLEFFI: It's tucked up into the little valley, the hills there five or six miles northeast of Guernsey. Hartville, of course I guess what made Hartville was Sunrise and the iron mine. At the turn of the century, it was a rollicking, bawdy frontier town. They say there was a many as 25, 26 saloons there along one street. In fact, I can remember growing up in the late 20's and early 30's remnants of the old frontier town -- boardwalks and the chains and the things that you tied your horses to with the rings. It's just too bad that back there that wasn't all preserved. It's sort of a tombstone of Wyoming. It really was. It has great history. Captain Hart, as I understand it, was one of the first pioneers there -- the town was named after him. I can still remember by grade school Mr. Brott. Bless him..taught me everything. I guess I didn't learn too much.

JUNGE: You had to be --I mean, I take it by what you've said in your articles in the paper and just by what I've learned about Hartville and it's motley group of...it's this flux of ethnic groups -- that you had to be tough.

BIRLEFFI: That's right. And I don't know where I lost that toughness but I had it as a kid, boy.

JUNGE: You think you lost it?

BIRLEFFI: Oh, a little bit. I think I've lost it physically, uh, a little bit, as you grow older. I've never been real tough on infighting and bargaining and dealing with people. Not tough enough as I look back.

JUNGE: What about physically? Did you have to defend yourself a couple of times?

BIRLEFFI: Yeah, there was always the bully on the block. But not that bad. I was always the smallest kid in the group -- I weighed about 118. My nickname in Hartville was "Shrimp." Isn't that awful? About 5 feet one or two, weighed 118 pounds.

JUNGE: And yet, you played football.

BIRLEFFI: Played football. Played basketball. Softball in the depression years was big. Played softball.

JUNGE: What position did you play in football?

BIRLEFFI: In football, I played quarterback.

JUNGE: You were the quarterback?

BIRLEFFI: Yeah. Two years.

JUNGE: Could you see over the line?

BIRLEFFI: Yeah, but all I did was hand off the ball and then run for cover...that's the system we had.

#### **Track 4 – My Italian Heritage**

BIRLEFFI: My mother's parents' was named Vicari. (sp?) My grandparents, we called them "Nonno" and "Nona." And they had quite an influence on my life. He immigrated – or course I'm not clear on all this – but landed in Colorado – Georgetown where they ran a boarding house for the miners there. Then he moved to Denver where he went into business and owned some property right in the heart of Denver and he decided there wasn't too much future there in Denver so he became the postmaster at Hartville, Wyoming. He was the postmaster there for thirty-five, forty years. I still retain the memories of his little grocery store and post office where I would go in...I was kind of a pain, I guess, but he tolerated me. I had deep affection for my grandfather. And then I would stick my finger in and grab some licorice on the way out. He had candy there, I remember that. He'd sort that mail faithfully, year after year. That was his life. My father, an immigrant, went to Georgetown – a group of them, you know, found a job and that's where he met my mother. Married shortly after that. He first went to Butte, Montana and worked for a buck or two a day. The story of the immigrants, miners, Staten Island, the whole bit. They moved to Hartville when her folks did and that's where I was born.

JUNGE: Did they speak Italian?

BIRLEFFI: Oh yeah! When Dad and Mom wanted to maybe keep things from us or maybe got a little irritated with each other, they'd go, as you know, speak Italian. But then, they kind of got out of it. In fact, I spent a year in Italy during the war, the 92<sup>nd</sup> Division, and I picked it up. I could get a tenor or flow of a conversation because of my background but I've never been able to speak it. I could understand it but now today, I've lost the flow of it. Now my grandparents, the Vicari's, they lived right across the street there in Hartville, they spoke it all the time. My grandmother had the two cows and my job was to herd the two cows after school. Buddy and Bossie – that was one of my exhilarating moments of my life when I'd spot those cows out in some little ravine. I'd herd them back and she'd milk 'em. No, we had a very tough, spartan life when I grew up through the Depression years. All of us got these stories. I can recall Dad had a tough life with those labor years. I can remember him putting a "blackjack" in his lunch bucket – this is right in Wyoming. I can remember crosses being burned by Ku Klux Klanners on our hill in Hartville, Wyoming. We had a little hill there – us kids would race up to it. We went through those years. Labor strife.

JUNGE: Labor strife?

BIRLEFFI: Labor strife. And, uh, probably a little racial bias. I think we had maybe ten, fifteen ethnic groups. A lot of Italians and Greeks. We got along pretty well.

JUNGE: The Italians and Greeks got along.

BIRLEFFI: There are a lot of Greek families that played an interesting part in Wyoming. The Christopulos', the Pindaras'. (sp?)

JUNGE: Which groups would have been a loggerheads with each other?

BIRLEFFI: I would suppose what we call the "foreigners" and maybe the rednecks..what we call rednecks today. Just recently, we were going with a couple to the Dominican Republic. I didn't have a birth certificate or my pass – visa. So I got one out of Platte County in Wheatland. And, this is one of my favorite stories in a way and it shows how we've come so far. It had "color," "race," "birth" – it had "Color – Italian" on my birth certificate. So, you can see how it was back then.

### **Track 5-- Catholicism**

BIRLEFFI: My religion was very close in our family. Catholicism. It was kind of a ritual. Couldn't tell it by now. Was an alter boy. And it was kind of a ritual that the priest would have breakfast after mass at the Birleffi house.

JUNGE: Why was that?

BIRLEFFI: Well, 'cuz my mother, I think, was so active in the church.

JUNGE: Was she a sociable person?

BIRLEFFI: Very sociable. She had quite a personality. My mother Louise – she was very likeable woman, very popular in the community...doing things all the time for people.

### **Track 6 – Writing – Like Moving a Piano**

JUNGE: Well then, in baseball, what were you?

BIRLEFFI: Baseball, we had then, we had what we called a "rover. We had ten men and I played the roving shortstop or something like that. This was the Sunrise Miner Hartville Softball Team. Big. See, we'd import all the ore out of Sunrise goes to Colorado Fuel and Iron. Pueblo. And Pueblo was sort of our father image so when they'd get a good pitcher or two, they'd send them to Sunrise. We had a great pitcher.

JUNGE: What they called a ringer.

BIRLEFFI: A ringer. A great pitcher by the name of John Benadetti, a familiar name. In fact, he was the grand-uncle of the Benadetti years later that played football for Wyoming. We reminisced...

JUNGE: The guy that picked off the pass in that game and ran all the way, Benadetti.

BIRLEFFI: Right, that was his grand-uncle.

JUNGE: These guys – were they pretty good ball players?

BIRLEFFI: Excellent!

JUNGE: For the time?

BIRLEFFI: We went to major tournaments. Amateur, but they were good. And then baseball – I have only dim memories of that because I must have been in grade school or even younger. It had its era in Sunrise. In fact, the late judge John Pickett who came out here to play baseball – and other people in Wyoming can tell you – we had a priest named Father Bruno who played pitcher on the team.

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BIRLEFFI: I got interested, finally in my senior year, in writing a little bit. And then, I got interested – I wouldn't miss I guess a fellow named Graham Macnamee, Bill Stearn..no Bill Stearn wasn't there then, Ted Using ?? , I started to get interested in announcing. But I got interested in writing. Through George Howshar. Howshar was the publisher of the Guernsey Gazette –his son finally took it over. I was the Guernsey Gazette stringer for Hartville-Sunrise in high school in my senior year. Then, I got to be a correspondent for the CF&I Blast. The CF&I Blast was a well-done weekly done by Colorado Fuel & Iron people for all of their employees. They had a number of coal and iron mines in Colorado and Wyoming where they would get all of their coal and iron ore for all of their steel. People never realized until they get up there what an operation at the height that was. I'd imagine – it would have to be checked – but I would imagine maybe 600-700 employees, maybe a thousand, maybe two-three thousand people in the valley. I'm including Fort Laramie, Lingle would commute, Wheatland, Torrington, Guernsey, Hartville, Sunrise. I can recall then, I'm skipping around here...but I used to when I got immersed in sports at Wyoming in that great era of Ev Shelton, Milo Komenich and three or four of them, through my dad, we would put them to work. They worked what you called "on surface" not in the mines at Sunrise. I'm going ahead a few years. What I'm trying to tell you, Wyoming students -- notably some of the outstanding athletes such as we had then, we had some good ones through my dad would get them jobs. That was my first exposure to writing and I can recall..whenever I could get... Does this ring a bell? Grit Magazine?

JUNGE: Sure.

BIRLEFFI: That was the only paper delivered..a little bit, the Denver Post. I'd read everything I could get a hold of -- sports mainly. Letter Go Gallagher, (sp) early sports editor of the Denver Post. See I majored in journalism when I went to the University of Wyoming, such as it was.

JUNGE: Larry, why sports? You could have been...you had an interest in electrical engineering, mechanical engineering coming from the mines, your dad was miner. You could have been a priest; your mother was close to the church, obviously. Why sports?

BIRLEFFI: All good questions. Maybe I could try to explain it. I know that my life..was so interested in sports, in football, basketball. We'd go onto the hill and play touch football until mother would come after you..in the sand, in the lots, in the sagebrush. And anyway, I got wrapped around it. And, then I got fascinated by sports words and descriptions in print. I always thought that was something – "The courageous Hillsdale Five came back in the final minutes..." All that drama... And, I would see these strange terms and I'd write them down in a book. Now, they're so hackneyed and terrible but I know that I was frustrated. I knew that I wasn't big enough or quick enough or had the ability, but I wanted to be in that environment. I wanted to be exposed to it. It's a different world and I didn't want to give it up. And, then as I got into it I really got hooked immediately. Although, then I tried to get a job on the Branding Iron. I remember George Gurley was head of our journalism curriculum. Uncle George. My first assignment, I forget what it was. I don't know if it was sports or not. I did a paper for him. I'll never forget this. I should have saved it. He had written in red, folded like this. He had written in red, "Your English is atrocious. I suggest you change your curriculum. And, I don't mind tell you, I cried that night, because I don't know about you, but writing is difficult for me. And, I think, bless him, it was my background. We had very little English in high school. The sentence construction was all wrong.

JUNGE: What did you do when you got that...when he bled all over your paper?

BIRLEFFI: Well, I had a good friend named Keith Osburn, (sp) He works at the state; we roomed together and we talked about it. He's from Pine Bluffs. I said, "What can I take, what can I do, I'm terrible in math." And my older brother encouraged me: "Don't let it bother you. Hang in there." So, I did that year and don't know exactly what happened except that I got a job on the Laramie Boomerang, Bulletin. And, so I only took part in college work -- it took me six years to get a degree. Because I working. When I was not watching practice or watching Kenny Sailors dribble a basketball, or at the Boomerang. Maybe I'd get in at 4 or 5 in the afternoon and then we wouldn't leave until one in the morning putting the paper to bed. That left me little time to go to school.

JUNGE: Did that early criticism make you redouble your efforts to become...?

BIRLEFFI: I think it did. Although, I've been conscious of it ever since.

JUNGE: It's never left you?

BIRLEFFI: It's never left me. Because I read a lot and some of these great writers...it frustrates me. You kind of wonder.

JUNGE: You still have trouble? That surprises me.

BIRLEFFI: No, I write and rewrite and rewrite and then when I finish it, there's nothing happens. It still isn't good. I don't know how other people are, but it's the most frustrating... Writing and broadcasting are the most frustrating and hardest, most demanding thing you can get into. To write something good or to do an excellent broadcast, you get a limp when you're through...believe that or not...it's like moving a piano!

### **Track 7 – Brothers and Sisters**

JUNGE: How many kids did they have?

BIRLEFFI: There were three boys and a daughter. Daughter Evelyn, who is now Evelyn Johnson, lives in Billings, Montana. John Birleffi, raised in Wyoming, went to school at Wyoming. Coached in Douglas for 13-14 years and then went to Greeley where he lives now and coached there for a number of years.

JUNGE: Were you close to your brother Art?

BIRLEFFI: Art and I were close. See, we were only two years apart, where John was ten or eleven years...so you can understand that from growing up. I spent ..let's see... from the years I can remember, the formative years were tough years, before and during the Depression. There's nothing as boring, I suppose from our era as to talk about the Depression but I think Dad was one of the few employed there for four or five years. We were trying to live on \$150 a month. I hold that figure...it sticks with me ..that was a pretty good little chunk of money then. There pride and joy was there first son, Art. Art was an engineering student at Wyoming and one of the first graduates of Randolph Kelly Field at the outset of World War II where we trained our pilots. But anyway, he was in the Battle of Midway – a squadron leader which wouldn't ring a bell with you young guys but that was the first time we used low-level bombing. He came back and trained pilots, cause we needed them bad. He'd check 'em out at Wendover Field in Utah. They were practicing low-level bombing...there were nine of them killed. His remains were found in the bomb bay or the bombing part ..he wasn't flying the plane, he was checking out the crews. The reason I tell you that is that,,it was a very...it changed all our lives. When you lose a son at 23 or 24 -- especially in closely-knit families. That was a terrible experience. I know Mom and Dad were never the same again. They took it ok on the surface but it hurt them deeply. It was always what might have been if Art were still there.

### **Track 8 – Larry and Lois Team Up**

BIRLEFFI: Now we're back in '49. I started here in '47. I went into the service. I was taking ROTC and going to switch to the Air Force. I was to get married June of '42. Meanwhile, my brother was killed and my parents warned me to stay in the Infantry, get out of the Air Force. We delayed our wedding until that August or September and I went into the service at Fort McClellan, Alabama. Lois joined me there where we got married.

JUNGE: How did you meet her?

BIRLEFFI: I think I met her....see we had to everything on the “Bulletin.” They had something about bees, some problems with bees on the campus. So, I went up to talk to the head of the bee department, an entomologist under the agriculture department.

JUNGE: Is this true?

BIRLEFFI: Yeah. True story. Stately looking man out of New England. Dr. A.P. Sturtevant and what a guy. Real devout, I mean, tea-totaling gentleman, you know. Later I was invited over for dinner. It was all very circumspect and carved and served... But anyway, he had a daughter named Lois Sturtevant who was fairly popular at the Kappa House. She wandered through and I just met her briefly – it was a casual meeting but I was kind of impressed. So that summer, there’s nothing duller than a summer in Laramie and summer school. Keith Osborne and I decided to call a couple of the native babes to go to a dance at Elitch Gardens where one of the big bands, Ted Williams or somebody was playing. And, they agreed to go with us...Mary Margaret, what was her maiden name? And Lois Sturtevant...that was our first date...Elitch Gardens.

JUNGE: Did you know when you saw her walk in the room, you were going to marry her?

BIRLEFFI: No, not really. I didn’t think she’d really give me much of a go because I was kid from a small town and she was a popular sorority girl and I was a little intimidated by her dad, formality and all. That’s how me met.

JUNGE: Well, Larry, what did she see in you?

BIRLEFFI: That’s a damn good question. I don’t know. I was a little different, I guess. But that was in ’42. In a couple of years, I’ll be married 50 years to the same woman. ’42..and then stationed ...went to McClellan as an infantry, as a platoon driller, lieutenant, second lieutenant.

JUNGE: Where was McClellan?

BIRLEFFI: In Alabama. She joined me there. We had an aunt in the Nursing Corps, a major. Lucille Vicarri, getting back to that name...an aunt of mine who has since passed on. She was the best woman...and my dearest friend, Buck Buchanen of the Cheyenne Buchanen family; his dad had some State job and his brother-in-law was fire chief for many years –a well-known family here. My age...was my best man, he flew in, he was in the Air Force. A year or so later, Buck was flying planes across the Pacific and was never heard from since. But they were the only two people at my marriage. And then we were assigned this 92<sup>nd</sup> all-Negro division and shipped to Fort Huachuca, Arizona which is quite a place in itself. And, then my wife got pregnant just before I was sent overseas...and about three or four months, Lynn was born. First daughter. And we were



there, I was there over a year in Italy and when I got back...I had established some friendships and contacts because I'd go into Tucson to print the weekly newspaper – the Buffalo, we called it -- it was the Buffalo Division.

JUNGE: You worked for the newspaper there?

BIRLEFFI: No, no. I was under G-2 which was intelligence under General Allman, a Virginian. He was a commanding...and he loved this newspaper and he wanted to show where this black division had all the talent to do other things..and this newspaper was a good window piece for us and he was interested in it, you know. Anyway in my travels to Tucson, once in awhile to Phoenix, but Tucson -- I made some contacts and they said when you get out of the service, you come see us for a job. They kind of liked my vitality, I guess. So, that's where I was headed in a beaten up old Chevy after I got mustered out. Went up to Hartville to see my folks. Had Lynn in the backseat, she was a toddler. Lois and I were headed for Arizona when I got this call, we stayed overnight, from Keith Osborne, my college roommate who was on the Eagle who said, "Before you go on, why don't you talk to Tracy McCracken." So, I went down before going on and got me right in the next morning. And he said listen – and this fellow was very persuasive, an impressive guy, had a white mane, you know, right out of Norman Rockwell's cover as a publisher. And he said "lot of opportunities here. I can put you on here. Not only that, I'm starting newspapers and buying them in Worland, Rawlins, acquiring the one in Laramie and boy, he gave me a good pitch. "This is the place for you and we'll start you at \$47.50 a week." So, we talked it over and we unpacked and I've been here ever since. Never did get to Tucson. That was in 1946. I was rich. I had about \$2,000 in mustering-out pay. I couldn't find a place to stay here, so Lois and the baby lived in Laramie and I commuted everyday until I found a place for eight months. And, then I made that trip for the next 46 years two or three times a week. That's why I hold the dubious distinction of traveling between Cheyenne and Laramie back more than any Greyhound bus driver or any living soul in America. Forty-six years, that's a great honor. But through the years of the two-lane highway...oh, some of the blizzards and some of the nights, we were traveling bumper-to-bumper.

JUNGE: You wrote in a column not too long ago, how many miles...you've been to the moon five times and back....

BIRLEFFI: Something like that, somebody who helped me figure it out – I don't know how accurate it is. It has to be four or five hundred thousand miles.

JUNGE: There must have been a Larry Birleffi groove in that road.

BIRLEFFI: You know, I have one story. Ron Long, who was a basketball player at Wyoming and coached at East High and is in business now. These were the rough years..bad storms. He was the only one that would go over with me so we were coming back going about 85 miles an hour. The night was clear. Those were the days of 65 miles speed limit. I'm going back about 20-25 years. Here comes the patrolman, lights and sirens, and wheels me over. Barely happens to recognize me and he says "Boy, that Stan

Dodds!” He’d get 31-points, kid from Green River. “Really had a great night. I was listening to you on the air.” I said, “Boy, he sure did.” He said, “You know, he lived down the next block from me. Boy, he’s a great kid.” So we visited a while and he said “Hey, uh, Ok, take it easy!” That was only one of a great story. Ron Long still tells it.

### **Track 9 – Larry Recreates Baseball**

BIRLEFFI: I re-created major league baseball out of the Plains Hotel Studios for six years to as many as sixty some stations in this part of the country. I’ll tell you how that came about. These were the days of anti-trust and they were on baseball -- of course a monopoly today like they are today..but it was worse. We had a senator, all of Wyoming remembers – Senator Joe O’Mahoney was a trustbuster—good friend of Tracy McCracken, democratic buddy. Bill Grove concocted the idea – he says “I think Tracy, through Senator Joe, could get us the rights to broadcast major league baseball. Do you think you could do it? I’ll whip up a gadget for you.” I said, “Sure.” This sounds fantastic but it’s true. We got the right from major league baseball, Will Harridge, president. We got American League first and then we got the National League for an eight or nine-ten state area exclusively to broadcast – to recreate major league baseball out of Cheyenne, Wyoming. Bill Grove, about the size of this table, maybe larger, I wish I had it today, put up a gizmo where it had three or four turntables, I had pedals, I had the steady noise backgrounds, I could bring up the applause, I could bring up booing. And I tell you, when we got it going it was pretty realistic and I had the crack of the bat. The United Press roll – the tubing underneath it and a pencil gave me the sound of the crack of the bat. I did the game of the week and once in awhile when the races got hot, I’d do a night game or two. I had a Western Union telegrapher –what a character. He’d be sitting there and I’d be here with all my gizmos. And “Musial, 342 up -- top of the first” see. And it’d drive me crazy. I had to have pitches fowled off. I’d already start thirty minutes behind, but in my impatience, I’d catch up with them about the third inning. One time, I don’t know if you’re familiar with where the studios were in the Plains Hotel and that was really pizzazz up there, boy. Big glass windows. And people would knock on windows. There was some party my wife was looking forward to going to. And we had the St. Louis Browns, I’ll never forget. And it when ten innings, eleven...and I was late for the party which was right up there at the Plains Hotel on the upper floor. And people would come by and pound on the window. Fourteen innings. So, in the fifteenth inning I signed it off and had the Browns win. It came out the next day it went 17 innings and the other team won. I’ll never forget that one! I got a call, couple calls. I remember getting postcards from all over Utah and Montana – “Do this game this week, do that one.” “Please pronounce....it’s not Two-elle, it’s Tooele, Utah” And, “Thanks, I hope Herman Jack is enjoying the game in Tooele in the old barber shop. The next pitch, ball one low.” And I’d work in those names and they loved it!

### **Track 10—The Skill of Writing**

BIRLEFFI: Fred McCabe was quite a newspaper man. Fred came off of United Press. He was a character and the wire god. He was a tough, likeable, interesting character. He kept the newspapers humping. He loved controversy. He got mad once, I think it

was...oh dear. I think it was Ike Eisenhower turned down riding the Treagle Train. He couldn't get away but he gave orders to our little newspaper to keep Eisenhower's name off the front page. Fred gave me some help that was so right. He said, "Unless it's something compelling, stay away from the heavy stuff, especially in sports. Try to be light, try to be satirical." And there not easy to do, but try to be funny. But that's what I tried to do, not all the time, but in most of it. One of the great sportswriters of today, and I don't get to read him, I read Murray on Sunday, is a fellow named Blackie Sherard of the Dallas Times. He was on the Dallas morning news and the image of writing is that there's no money in it. Sherard has built up – he's in his 60's --such a following in the Dallas area and he travels and chooses his subjects. But anyway, the evening paper – it might be vice versa – hired him away from the morning paper. They are oh – fierce competitors! They hired him away. This is a sportswriter who writes four a week – one is a name/trivial/memory thing. And, I write three a week –I don't know why I'm comparing him – he's great. Anyway, he gets a million dollars a year writing a sports column. I'm glad to see that because -- here I am rambling again. But I have done, by way of bragging, about everything in the media. I've done radio for over 20 years – I started by accident. "Cheyenne Today", the first of call-in shows that I can remember in the late '50's – that was an hour a day for years and years. So, I've had exposure to radio – I've managed and owned a radio station. I worked over 20 years out here in television. I did two sportscasts a day. The radio station was physically out here too after we moved from the Plains Hotel where we started. So, I was on the air radio, did two TVs a day, and tv specials and later got into some network stuff. And, then I wrote for over 20 years and then when I got out to get into my own radio business, I dropped the call-in for six or seven years. Now, I'm into my fourth year of resuming it again. I think I've been writing with a little more depth, a little more meaning since coming back. And, I've done some Wide World of Sports – ABC. I've done some regional football for ABC. I've received as much as \$1,500 in expenses for an afternoon of work for ABC. Doing the Ruidoso Downs quarter horse race. Did the Pendleton Roundup– co-hosted it with Jim McKay. I did three or four regional TV games – and as I said, my fee was over \$1,000, as much as \$1,500. But I think after all these years, 40 years, it takes as much skill to write a readable, good popular sports column. Or, to write anything that's really readable. Specially, now you've around, I see you everywhere with that camera at all of the Cowboy sports events. And Mark, to pound out a good lead in fifteen or twenty minutes on the bowl game or a sports event requires about as much skill as Phil Donahue and those guys who are making a million bucks a week. Now, I know they've got personality, etc., they've got a lot to them. But do I have a point? This is what I believe...

JUNGE: Maybe broadcasting came easier to you.

BIRLEFFI: Yeah, it came easier to me and I saw where the money was. I'm only human, I was raising three children. Let' face it – there's no money in writing in our markets – I don't think there ever will – maybe there should be.

### **Track 11 – Broadcast Beginnings**

BIRLEFFI: See Bill Grove himself, who was a tremendous engineer, he helped build KLZ in Denver. Knew all about remote units, fought for legislation, established remote transmitting buildings. He was a true pioneer in the industry. So, he built his own equipment -- I could never run it. He had a huge, heavy amplifier. He had backup -- you'd think we had retinue of visitors from Russia. More of our equipment -- we'd go into these things and set up an hour before, even basketball -- maybe two hours before. He'd check it out and oh, it was a heck of a ritual. I wound up, before it was all over doing it all myself on a little piece of equipment no bigger than your tape recorder.

JUNGE: Well, how did you used to come on? Can you re-enact that for me?

BIRLEFFI: Yeah, I used to come on with the same line for 25 years. "The Cowboy Sports Parade is on the air! Hi everybody, this is Larry Birleffi speaking to you from Tucson, Arizona." That's how we came on. Is that what you meant?

JUNGE: Yeah.

BIRLEFFI: "Cowboy Sports Parade is on the air! Ah ha! Brought to you by Sinclair Refining Company, Cheyenne Light Fuel and Power, "-- something like that "and these local sponsors." You know, an interesting thing, 45 years ago or whenever it was, they used to really make fun of the old cronies about how I'd have 55 sponsors and I'd mention them "Make sure to drop into Sinclair in 17 locations." And, by god, we'd mention them all if I had to. Do you know that they are getting back to that on television today, a little bit? Do you know Budweiser actually sponsors the kick-off of a game? Ford might have one half. Chevy might have the second half. Look at the battle between Coke and Pepsi-Cola diet! And they're slipping in quickies and sponsors. There are over 75 different sponsors in a game. Nobody understands it but I'm getting a private chuckle out of all that -- we're getting back to how we started, trying to raise all the money!

JUNGE: How did those early broadcasts go? Did you ever have a moment when you were totally at a loss?

BIRLEFFI: The early broadcasts, the amazing thing about it and then we'll get on to the commercial aspect of it. I had a friend and a competitor named Mike Reed, one of the first pioneers from Rock Springs broadcasting games. Mike had a list of sponsors three or four sheets long. It's the truth. It ought to be in a book! Whatever the place was named -- "Aunt Mabel's" or "Aunty Lily's" or the local house of ill repute. He had them on. He had everybody on! Ole' Mike had everybody on! Mike and I used to compare lists -- who had the most sponsors. You'd get ten dollars or twenty-five dollars, whatever you could and you just read them off

My early broadcasting days were horrible! It was tough. I mean I enjoyed it, it was my life but it was difficult. I remember one of the first games that I did in '48 or '49. We played at Tucson at the University of Arizona. Wyoming was on the climb. And, it was filled with penalties -- looked like a flag on every play and I staggered through the thing. I thought that this was the broadcast that deserved the Pulitzer Prize. And, I got back and

there were a couple of telegrams. One was from Cheyenne from Jack McGee and Howard Hansen. Howard ran the Plains Hotel and Jack McGee ran the theaters in town – those were big jobs. As I remember it said, “We can’t tell whether you were at a football team or a bull fight. Please come home.” Boy, it deflated me. That was the first major football game that I did. Bill Grove and I really went into this thing in a big way and the people were really appreciative! And although I would get excited, it was hard to understand me, I was so wrapped up in it -- people accepted me because they appreciated being able to follow the game. There was a closeness then. We’ve got a bigger turnover of people but they were so loyal and faithful, I was their boy! Although I took a lot of ribbing. I took a lot of razzing, I think it was done in a friendly way.

JUNGE: But you were still the Voice of the Cowboys.

BIRLEFFI: The Voice of the Cowboys. I think around 42 or 43 years, I didn’t miss very many games. We never missed a game. In fact, there were three or four that I missed when I got the ABC assignment and I was a nervous wreck trying to get the score – it was during football. I’ve been lucky that I’ve been healthy, for the most part. Now I did amaze myself ---when I had many more years or maturity – when I went over and did ABC, I did it down the middle because I really didn’t care who won. I was doing a Utah-BYU game – I didn’t really care. You can’t really think about much when you’re doing play-by-play.

### **Track 12 – UW Sports Move Forward**

BIRLEFFI: Took me six years to get a degree finally, and then remember my first byline when they put my name on it. I was certain, and nobody knew me from a hill of beans, but I was certain that I was the hero of the town. It’s a fact – everybody would say hello to me – he wrote that story in the Bulletin! They didn’t pay any attention. I was always wanting to be accepted like an established broadcaster or newspaper writer today. It might be the other way around – they might want to be accepted by the big critics. But, I always wanted to please the coaches, the athletic directors—get in next..to be accepted by the jocks. So, everything was pretty much favorable. It was poorly written, not very well done. Well, not poorly written but superficially done. It was just straight news. Not many feature angles..

JUNGE: Did it thrill you to be next to the Wyoming coaches, the Wyoming players? These were the big guys!

BIRLEFFI: Oh you bet! Milo Komenich, Kenny Sailors, Bill Strannigan. Football was nothing – there were few names, not many I can recall, I’m sorry. Football was something you played between basketball and the summer. We had two or three thousand kids at the game at Corbett Field. Played seven or eight games a year. It was struggling. First coach was Bunny Oakes. Came up from the University Colorado to try and resurrect it and he didn’t get anywhere. And Oakie Blanchard was hired, taken out of high school. He won his first game and we thought we’d found our new leader, climbed the holy grail or whatever and lead us out of football abyss and then he never won

another game. A few board members got mad at him and he was gone after a year. Oakie didn't get a fair chance. And then Oakie was followed by Joe Hunt who came out of the south. Joe was given – I don't know boy, you talk about how now you have to win, how about back then as you think about it? And then Joe Hunt was fired after a year! His wife divorced him and he lost his job in a year. But anyway, those were the years, and then after Joe Hunt, then came the new era. They brought in Duke Humphrey from the south as president.

JUNGE: What characterized the new era from the old era?

BIRLEFFI: A board that understood. A president that wanted winning sports in addition to a good university and understood how to go about it. They brought in Duke Humphrey from Mississippi. They added Milward Simpson -- can you imagine this, as president of the Board, he was a real gunner! They had Tracy McCracken, posing, looking brilliant, a publisher -- very successful.

JUNGE: You were there then at the change.

BIRLEFFI: I was in college at the change. Red Jacoby, a colonel just made for Wyoming, a native of Idaho. He was a colonel in the services at the Air Base too where he got a good background. That's where Tracy McCracken met him and said "When you get out, we want you as our athletic director." Thus formed a great combination – Duke Humphrey, Milward Simpson, Tracy McCracken and Red Jacoby.

JUNGE: Who was the key?

BIRLEFFI: Well, of course the man - - the hands-on guy of day-to-day was Red Jacoby. But I think the key was the Duke, the president in getting the Board to work for him – they gave him everything he wanted. And they brought in Bowden Wyatt, a great all-American player under Bob Neyland, hard-nosed football from Tennessee. Bowden brought in first nationwide recruiting and I imagine they got away with murder. There wasn't any proposition 48 or 42 or SAT tests. He had a first rough year or two and in '49, he lost one game – in '50 he went undefeated. Went to the Gator Bowl and it's like anything else, once you taste a certain type of victory, it's never been the same again.

### **Track 13 – Season of '49**

BIRLEFFI: In 1949, we had a great season going. John Pilch, Loy Doty, they won 26 games and boy, you got over those to those games except for that four-or-five day blizzard.

JUNGE: You were living in Cheyenne and commuting to Laramie?

BIRLEFFI: Yeah, but that didn't last less than a year and I moved Lynn and Lois over here.

JUNGE: Were you the editor of the sports department?

BIRLEFFI: Then, my first job was...we had more titles. I was sports editor and promotion manager. Promotion – the big duty of that was to put out the annual Wyoming products edition during Cheyenne Frontier Days, which was a pain in the neck. God, I hated that. Then, to cover the sports but in a limited way. I wasn't too happy. They wouldn't send me other than to Laramie. I didn't cover, as you do now, I didn't travel with the team or as you would broadcasting. So, I went through '47. There was a fellow here succeeded Curt Gowdy at KFBC called Larry Munson. And he was good. Loved baseball. Was an excellent announcer. He lasted a year and went south somewhere for a minor league. But Bill Grove, who was really the founder of KFBC radio and television called me and said, "I read your stuff, you seem to know sports -- would you like to try the world of broadcasting?" I said, "Sure." So, I went through a year of that trying to keep 'em happy even though it was under joint ownership. Newspapers had Bill Grove -- owned most of the stock. I'm talking about '47 not '48. I had some problems, so I finally in '48 made a decision. I wound up working here more or less full time as a broadcaster and doing the column on the side. Then, I swung over there in '48 and certainly in '49 where I was only writing a couple of columns, maybe three a week and that's all I had to do at the newspaper. I quit everything else and I was out here. See, in those days, broadcasting sports announcing was pretty much in it's infancy in this area. I remember I'd have to sell all my games, get my sponsors before Bill Grove would let me broadcast em. I sold, in those early years, I was selling football, certainly a basketball game on Sunday, on the day of the game. Used to get \$35 and \$50 from my sponsors. I can remember – now this will ring a bell with the old timers. . In those years, we had a great thing going between the Mayflower and the Valencia Café. The Mayflower was where it is now. Greek families. Boy, they went at it hammer and tong. Hatfield and McCoys. You ever hear about 'em? How competitive they were?

JUNGE: Not really.

BIRLEFFI: They were both great places –a lot of atmosphere but boy did they battle for business. So, I went into Gus Andrews, he was a Greek Adonis. Handsome guy, wore \$400 suits which is like thousand dollar suits now. He was well-dressed, impeccable man. Talked broken English. And he was back there – he had an apron over this, was stirring chili. And I said, "Gus, how are ya?" and I tried to explain. "What do you want, kid?" I said, "Listen, you know, the Mayflower Café..I want to put you on the game." "What do you mean, put me on the game?" "I want you to sponsor." "What do you mean sponsor?" I said, "I'll put a commercial on there..." "You mean, you talk about me? You say something about the Mayflower during the game?" I said, "Yeah." "Ah," he says, "Nah, let me think about it but I don't think I want it." So I walked out. He says, "Where you going?" I said "Ah, I think I'll go over to the Valencia Café." There'a big pause and he says, "Hey kid, wait a minute -- why don't you putta me down. I'll go for it." And, so that's how we got these games going, they didn't know what you meant....

## **Track 14 – Half-Acre Gymnasium**

JUNGE: Did you ever go to games at the Half-Acre Gym?

BIRLEFFI: Oh yeah! I have many fond memories of the Half Acre Gym. The crowd was pretty rowdy but maybe in some ways, not as bad as they are now, but we were so packed in there. You know, you've got the balcony and the legs hanging over and the sidelines. I'll tell you, it was tough to get in the old Half Acre for a number of years there. In fact, in 1948, '49, '50, '51 – the days of John Pilch and Loy Doty, Kenny Sailors. That was always the nights we lived for. You look back and think by golly, was that your whole life? The Half Acre became sort of a symbol – a very colorful, exciting place. And, it had a lot of color and history before my time. I can go quickly back to 1932, 3, 4, 5 when a fella named Dutch Witte came out of Nebraska and his brother Les Witte. Then, Wheatland High School had a great era of high school sports and won the championship in the Big A's, big division. Doc Rogers was the coach and built this great colorful team – I can remember driving from Hartville to Wheatland just to see the games, my Dad and I, through the terrible roads. Anyway, they became our idols – little Eddie McGinty and the Dearingers, Sam and Hill Deringer, Casey Rugg (sp??), who later became a good fundraiser and a leader, the foundation and the University. But anyway, they went on and here's Dutch Witte with brother Les and they picked them up. Ed McGinty and the Dearingers. And, they became the scourge of college basketball in that time nationally. If they had weekly ratings then, they would have been in the top ten. People forget that. That's what really gave us a taste of basketball. I was a little kid then, in junior high and then high school. Boy, I'll tell you..going to the Half Acre to watch Dutch Witte, Eddie McGinny and the Derringers – that's where it all started – at the Half Acre. You know, I think maybe, that's the thing that kept me in there and got me hooked and fascinated was the color of the old Half Acre. I guess, maybe stretching it a little, we had 4,500 people in there, but they were jammed in there like sardines. You had to be somebody to really get a ticket in the old Half Acre. And, they fought all the elements here. We didn't have the four-lane highways. But you know, as I look back now...they were noisy. One day, one game, somebody threw a little apple core on the floor, I think against the University of Denver. One little apple core. And you know what happens now, not only in Laramie, but all games...they'll throw stuff out, and there's some abusive language at times. And we had a lot of noise and shouting, but we didn't have..maybe as I think about it, they weren't as rowdy as they are today at the Half Acre. Anyway, this apple core was splayed up all over the Denver Post. Jack Carberry, the editor, wrote up big column about Wyoming fans, how bad they were. But that was back '40 years ago. Actually, they get away with more today than they did back then at the Half Acre. Not diminished excitement and the total ambiance of that whole that Half Acre – that was something.

## **Track 15 – The Field House Move**

BIRLEFFI: They moved from the Half Acre to the Field House. That deserves a niche in history. That was a terrible, demanding, controversial move. Why do we need a huge place like this Field House in this little state? And, we formed committees and trooped



the state and Ev Shelton, bless him, who's gone, had all those great years. I think 17, 18, 20 of them. And, Wyoming including the National Championship team..And Ev, like a lot of us, stayed too long. He had some bad years in the end. He personally helped. He traveled the state organizing fund raising committees. As I recall, the Legislature did come up with some money but a lot of it came from the private sector. There are always those who don't believe that it's needed, they'll never fill it and the money involved for something like sports, athletics, has always been something of a challenge. Building and enlarging the stadium to it's present capacity, as I recall.

### **Track 16—Ev Shelton Era**

Ev Shelton came in 1939, 40, yeah, the last year. He had some reputation but we thought that like you do right today, it was going to take years...the era's over. See, we didn't have recruiting like we did and there wasn't the emergence, frankly, of the black player...changed the whole sport. You didn't have to compete against in those years. A lot of people don't realize this. Wyoming might have had the first black player in America in a young man, a good strapping athlete, a basketball player by the name of Taft Harris. Boy, that name comes back to me. I can recall him faintly...I think he played in '34, '35 or '36. But see what people don't realize, Wyoming's great basketball era – the early years under Shelton when he went all the way to win the national title – true it was in the middle of the war – but with the exception of Milo Komenich, who came out of Gary, Indiana – how Everett Shelton found him – but he was a giant in those days. He was massive, but not that tall.

JUNGE: How tall?

BIRLEFFI: 6' 6". The tallest player and one of the biggest in the country. And, then look who else you had. Kenny Sailors, grew up in Hillsdale. Played high school ball in Laramie. Self-made guy. I used to go out and watch him dribble and I played one-on-one with him. He was so quick. He perfected the first jump shot in basketball. Reportedly, and I saw reports on this. Bob Cousy became a great player, all-time great player in Boston Celtics patterned his style after Ken Sailors. First jump shots. He always used to stop and shoot a two-handed set shot. By the way, I just received a tremendous four or five spread from the Anchorage page on Kenny Sailors, who's now in his '60's, nearing 70. A revered citizen of this community. He's the girls' basketball coach. Can you imagine that? He's spent 18-20 years in Alaska in the guide business. Then you add Jim Weir who came out of Green River, Wyoming, big, husky. You had Floyd Volker who came out of Casper. You had Lew Roney, the father of the present coach, came out of Laramie. Jimmy Collins, who died young in years, eight or nine years later, in a tragic automobile accident. He was of Greek extraction – Jimmy Collins from Cheyenne here. And that's the way it went, it was all from Wyoming with the exception of Milo Komenich. It was a team that could rebound --they were very rugged. Komenich and Jim Weir, Volker and Roney were all husky kids of that era. They were tremendous rebounders. I don't think the shooting was great but they could rebound and get shots underneath. Sailors could make his own shots. He dribbled quick and jump. He averaged 13-15 points and that was good. And that was the team that was just a

tremendous era! That's the team that won the National Championship. And, then in a Red Cross wartime benefit they beat Georgetown –they won the National Championship and then beat one of those eastern teams in a benefit game. The winner of the NIT is what they call it now. They beat everybody. Then, there was no basketball in '44 or '45. Some of those people, I think virtually all of them, came back –they had a year of eligibility left. I know they won the championship but they didn't go all the way. Then they'd all gone – the great heroes were gone. And then we had the years of John Pilch, still lives here in Cheyenne, out of Thermopolis. And the great dribbler from Greeley named Loy Doty. Little Jimmy Reese from Rock Springs and they carried on! Won championship after championship. One of the great games, one of my disappointments – I don't mind telling you – thirty years later, unabashedly, I cried. We were in Kansas City playing Oklahoma A&M they were called under the great Hank Iba who had great teams, won the national championship – playing in what we now call the “Sweet 16” or the “Final 16” in the regional round. And we were leading -- these weren't high –scoring games – still had the center jump. Can you imagine? We were leading by nine points with two-and-a-half minutes to play and lost the ballgame! A real heartbreaker! You know, Ev Shelton, bless him, you know, he never did quite recover. He tried to protect the ball but he lost it on the steal and he lived with that doggone thing. He had a few great teams after that but boy that was a real breaker! And then, another one that followed that added to...a great St. Mary's team playing in Seattle, Washington at the regional NCAA playoffs. These kids were seniors and there were new ones. We led St. Mary's 21-3 if you can believe this one or not. Twenty point lead and Ev believed in the platoon system of substituting by fives and units and he had a pretty good sophomore crew. They came in and before we knew it they had hacked away at the lead and the regular team couldn't get going and we lost that game. And Ev came in for a lot of criticism then but Shelton is an historical figure in his own. He was immaculately dressed, never used a cuss word, never drank – he was a tea-totaler. Respected by his players and my heart kind of bled for him in his last eight or nine years, when he couldn't win. He lost the touch. He couldn't recruit. Ev Shelton went out to coach in a small school in California and then became in the same Pacific coast -- a commissioner for four or five years before he passed away.

### **Track 17 – The Strannigan Years**

BIRLEFFI: Then he was succeeded by Strannigan who was a great All-American player at Wyoming himself. Strannigan took over when the program was down and I think Bill was there 16 years. Significant though but Strannigan was coaching at Iowa State and was having great success and we all felt it was time for Ev to move on and turn it over to Bill but why would Bill leave the Big Eight, whatever it was called then, Iowa State. His team was the only team to beat Wilt Chamberlain that year at Kansas and he was really established at Iowa State. So, I'll never forget this night, we didn't have “con-calls” then but Mr. McCracken – Tracy McCracken's home here in Cheyenne. I was on one phone, Tracy was on one and Curt Gowdy who played with Bill Strannigan – who went on to become a national famous sports announcer – he was on that team of '41 and '42 before the national championship team – they'd all left and gone onto the service. Their eligibility had gone and didn't come back. Willie Rothman, Bill Strannigan, Curt Gowdy Stretch Brown, another Cheyenne kid – ring some bells. They were on that team, but

anyway there we were – we had Bill Strannigan from Ames on the line – “Bill, you gotta come back, boy, it’s great here.” Never forget this – Gowdy the old college buddy gave him the pitch; Tracy, the more serious type told him what he could do for them, possibly financially, long contract. Anyway, he came back and who can look back and it was a cruel (life? lie?) maybe he shouldn’t have because Bill took over when it was down. He didn’t have much recruiting money, he had a tough time through those winters in Laramie. Then, his lovely wife, a campus queen, took her own life and they had three children. He went through some tough years. However, he produced some great teams. They were up and down but he had three championships. He produced players like Leon Clark, Flynn Robinson whose scoring still stands. Amazing. You look at Bill Strannigan’s score when they didn’t have the thirty-second ruling – you didn’t have to shoot within thirty seconds. He had ten, twelve games over 100 points. Flynn Robison was a great shooter. And, he developed Dick Sherman who’s now here in Cheyenne at the Air Guard – was a great player. Then, he had two or three tough years. I remember this – one of my great, dear friends – Randall McDonalds, that died last year. Ken Riley and I said, “Bill is down, we just got the pants kicked out of us” Got kicked out of us against Arizona State. So, Ken picked up the bill for a pretty nice dinner at one of the famous places. And Bill says, “I gotta tell you guys something, I’m resigning.” And I said, “Bill, listen. Don’t resign. Remember that time we called you twenty years ago and said come back, take another job. If you really want to get out, the school owes you this. The athletic director, assistant or something.” “Nah.” And see, he shouldn’t have because he wound up without anything. Without a job, no retirement pay, anything. But he did resign. He finally came back as a boarded? deal – a fund raiser for the Cowboy Joe Club for a year or two and then he quit that. Bill is now retired and lives in Fort Collins. Amazing, excellent coach. One of the great all-around athletes I’ve ever known. Typical Norman Rockwell – if the Saturday Evening Post did a typical Saturday Evening Post cover on the all-American boy, it’d be Bill Strannigan out of Wyoming. He’s 5’11, handsome guy, apple-cheeked, not a great student but everybody liked him. He had a great way about him. Fiercely competitive – all the natural ability you’d want.

### **Track 18 – Johnny Winterholler**

BIRLEFFI: Probably, uh, I have two of my favorite all-around athletes at Wyoming over the 45-50 years. This is difficult to do but Bill Strannigan is one and the other one is Johnny Winterholler. Johnny Winterholler played in virtually the same years, I think he’s a little older than Strannigan. He came out of Lovell, Wyoming. He had the moves running a football – change of a jackrabbit. He could change..he was 180, 190. All-conference football player. All-conference basketball player and he played baseball. I think he made all-conference in baseball. He then went into the Marines and was in the Bataan March – you guys are all too young, but it was a part of history. The MacArthur and the Corregidor thing. And he incurred an illness between diarrhea and all the hardships he went through and he’s a paraplegic. His campus sweetheart stayed with him and they’re still married today. I went up about three years ago to go to Lovell and they named the high school gymnasium the “Winterholler Gym.” Not because of his great war record or anything but because he was a great...I don’t know of anybody who was a

better all-around athlete than Johnny Winterholler. And, then he became instrumental and active in developing wheelchair basketball in this country.

JUNGE: How would he, Winterholler, Strannigan, how would people like this compare if they had t play today.

BIRLEFFI: In basketball, for example?

JUNGE: Sure.

BIRLEFFI: They could have played, you know. They could have played. They were such great shooters. They'd have to change their styles. It was very difficult to compare but they could have played.

JUNGE: Are you ever called upon to make comparisons between the old and the new?

BIRLEFFI: Yeah. All the time and it's very difficult because of the rules changes too and it's hard to put into perspective. I'm not dodging anything but it's very difficult. Especially, 35 or 40 years apart.

JUNGE: And the training?

BIRLEFFI: That's another good point! You've got all the training facilities now. All the weight rooms. You used to have steroids – hope we don't have those anymore.

## *Disc 2*

### **Track 1 – Offers and Kudos**

BIRLEFFI: Things have changed. There's been an evolution in broadcasting – sports broadcasting. In Wyoming, which is interesting history in itself, I think one of my biggest thrills was doing the Sugar Bowl Game – I split the broadcast—did half the play-by-play with the LSU announcer for NBC. That was a thrilling moment in my life when we were down there before 68,000 people. I think it was January 1, 1968. Another thrilling game was the UTEP/Wyoming game that we needed to win to get into the Sugar Bowl and nobody knew about it except Red Jacoby, Duke Humphrey and the people I mentioned. Things change, but I was very close to the athletic family and traveled with them. Red was a close and dear friend – in fact we often roomed together on trips. Played golf with each other so he confided in me. He didn't want it on the air. He told Loyd Eaton the coach but he didn't want the players to know because they had enough pressure. They had a sneaking hunch there would be something good if they could win. And there were two field goals – one that was close and was good by Jerry DePoyster that won the game -- and one by UTEP that was so close – one waved it on, one waved it off. The one that would have won it for them was waved off. Those were exciting moments. I wouldn't have given them up for anything. It was my world, my life! In fact, when we got known a little bit after the Sugar Bowl game, that's when I began to get a

little attention. You know, you're connected with the team. You know, I don't want to put this in the wrong perspective or overestimate it but then I did a Frontier Days thing, I interviewed people and apparently, they were impressed a little bit. Boone Arledge, who was on the ascendancy then has become quite the famous television – I think was the ABC Sports Director, now head of ABC news was out here a couple of times. He asked me back and that's when I got those assignments and if I wanted to..... He said, "Don't give me an answer – think about it and I'd like to talk about a contract for you to do stuff out in the west and around the country to do stuff for us full time." I can't look back – I mean I have my regrets but I didn't want to give up the years I was having with Wyoming. It was my life. I wasn't ready to leave it. We never talked money. I didn't know what it would be. Never got that far. I don't know if I'd have made it. Tough competition. Maybe I lacked confidence. I'd be living probably somewhere back East.

## **Track 2 – Relationships**

BIRLEFFI: Well, I did room with Bill Strannigan on the trip. And, Red Jacoby, a personal friend, the Director of Athletics there, when we'd check in – the teams and everything -- I always roomed with Red. It was a different thing then. I don't feel like I've been that close through the turnovers in later years. I was part of the team, which is really unfair to the viewers and the readers. In a way, maybe I didn't give an objective report. I remember, Bob Wyatt – if you didn't -- he wouldn't speak to you for two weeks if you said one little thing that was wrong. In those years, not only was I broadcasting but I was writing regularly, three times a week for a number of newspapers. I was kind of the big frog in the little pond, you know. We didn't have all the fragmentation of all the sports on the TV. We had control of everything. I had columns going in the Rawlins Daily Times, the Laramie Boomerang, the Worland paper and Cheyenne. In other words, the kids read it. The players read it so it was important what I would say to these coaches so we developed quite a rapport. There were years – a decade maybe and certainly four or five of them when we played what we called "double round robin" in the old Skylight Conference. I used to go by train to Logan, Utah and take a bus to Butte, Montana and take another bus – this is with the team and Red Jacoby and the coaches. We lived with each other. We played gin rummy. Red Jacoby and I had a 15-year gin rummy game going. He would never quit. You couldn't beat him. But anyway, my point is – you spend all this time – it's not like turning on the TV and you see these big name stars interviewing a coach after a Superbowl game – they'd know them and they act like they know them better than they do but we truly were one family. I was thinking the other day – the hours of my life I spent on railroad club cars and on buses and in more recent years, flying. But going to Salt Lake and Provo, busing to Butte up to Missoula and playing in Logan. We went twice and played in the double round robin -- we played twice there and twice home. It was my life. I enjoyed it! I did have some compunctions -- I would miss things at home with the kids. I remember even that I missed a junior high graduation. You know, I was gone too much. Even the fans understood me, I think. "That ole' Birleffi – he went crazy during that game..I couldn't understand what he was saying, but boy, his heart's in the right place!" I think maybe the fans suffered but now, it's changing a little bit –today we have more of a turnover of people, but I don't think...I hope not...I don't think the fans suffered. In fact, I think my

closeness...and I would battle to get some stuff out that they were trying to keep – in a friendly way. But I think I gave them a lot more information than they ever would have gotten in a system today where a fellow from the news or the Post flies in, interviews the coach and he's gone. And, we have a turnover of announcers. You know where I used to get the feedback? From my superiors, not from the fans. Tracy McCracken, my biggest boss, head of the newspapers and owner of the radio and TV, called me and I think several occasions and he'd do it very nicely and he was on the Board of Trustees and he was a great fan, but he says, "You've got to be a little more critical at times – tear after them a little bit once in a while." So, I tried to and then I couldn't sleep the next night because I didn't want to hurt the ball club that I loved so much. But anyway, it was a lot different back then. I had to travel with them the next week and be around them. Bowden Wyatt – we traveled by train to play at Tempe, Arizona State – one of his first, I think his second year. And, they dumped us off – we had to go through LA. Can you believe that? This was a whole week, you know. And the train stopped and we all get off at this little depot at Tempe, Arizona and we're standing around there and it was raining and I was tired and I had the little portable typewriter I remember carrying. And I turned and I said to somebody, wasn't a player, and I said "I'm going to get the hell out of here, I'm going to catch me a cab. I'm not going to wait for the team bus." And all of the sudden, "Boom!" Somebody grabs the back of my neck and he says, "You little SOB!" It was Coach Bob Wyatt. "I don't want you here if you talk that way again." And I says, "Coach!" And he says, "Some of these players will pick it up and pretty soon they'll get restless and you're going to break the psyche of my whole team." I couldn't get over this. So, you can see that it was a different time but up until the late 1960's, Wyoming University had a rule against flying. We went by trains until the airplanes got rid of their props. It was a feeling on the Board, they didn't want to assume that responsibility if a plane went down. I remember Phil Dickens, always one of my favorite characters. Had the southern accent dripping with hominy grits and he would try to be a little Knute Rockney. I don't know if I told you this story. We were playing Utah and the first year, he wasn't doing too well. They were on his case a little bit and going on the club car he says to me, "I guess they're on me a little bit." I said, "Ahh, not bad Phil" and he says "I tell you what you should do. "Would you send me a telegram? You write it and I'll read it –compose it and make it hard-hitting and sign it maybe, from the Kemmerer alumni and say that 'Phil, if you don't win today, you're through' or something like that." So, I wrote that down and he read it. This is a true story. "Men, we play Utah today and we want to show the fans, the people of Wyoming..." Phil Dickens, I couldn't be as dramatic as he is – "I just want to share with you this telegram I just received. It said, "Dickens – either win today or you're all through, fired signed Alumni of Kemmerer of Wyoming." And they busted the door and went out and they won the game for ole' Phil. In the club car coming back, I said "Nice going Phil! He says, "Yeah, I wonder what those damn Kemmerer fans are thinking of now." That's a true story!

### **Track 3 – Cowboy Recruitment Woes**

**BIRLEFFI:** Since the days of Bob Wyatt where we kind of reached for the major league and then we'd get there and then "Boom, we don't quite make it." Like the Holiday Bowl. And it's been the pattern of our sports story at Wyoming. And, it's kind of tough

to compete with those same perennial contenders year after year. They have factories. To be somewhat brutally rank about it, I've watched it all these years. I don't think you'll ever...now there's enough fine young people to go around – but you're never going to out recruit Notre Dame or the University of Nebraska because it's so deeply instilled that the good kid out of Omaha, the top kids...first of all, they're going to go to Nebraska because of their traditions and the possibilities of playing in the pros and winning national championships. You can look this year alone, just take a look at the recruiting rosters – one of the top quarterbacks in the country is going to the University of Nebraska. Notre Dame got about six or seven of the top 125 high school kids alone. Wyoming got down to, uh,...see what Wyoming is doing now, they're upgrading their recruiting a little bit. They're going after the same high school kids that Nebraska and even Notre Dame is – the Big Eight Schools. So, they're losing. I don't know what the story or announcement will be in a few days but it seems like we're losing more kids because they're going after a higher, tougher or a better type of high school kid. You can dream a little bit. What if, after that UCLA game we'd have caught fire and beaten UNLV up there at...they're only a couple games away, so you gotta think somehow, someway, even if you fantasize, it keeps you going. It could happen sometime. Look at Paul Roach. The last two games killed him. He was that far away from being national Coach of the Year. Wyoming was high as tenth or eighth in the ranking and then we suddenly realized as he says to me, "We're not there yet, are we? We've got to get a few bigger, quicker kids." Whether you believe in all this or not – see whether you want to give up this quest for the holy grail that's continued for 45 years. All in all, you don't want to give up that tradition. Wyoming has the edge though on other schools if you're interested in major inter-collegiate athletics. Why don't you ever hear of South or North Dakota or the University of Montana or Idaho U? Because of what we've discussed and it started back in the 1950's. There's tradition, money for recruiting and the interest of the backing of its' fans that support it. What I'm fearful of and what we've never been able to overcome is to each a level of consistency and being able to maintain. We went to the Sugar Bowl and first there was the Black 14 but it was another ten, twelve, fifteen years. Almost the Lakers had a bowl here but ...basketball, you know Ev Shelton went to the top? Do you know he had twelve, fourteen, fifteen losing seasons before Strannigan brought it up for a few years. And, it was a project for Brandenburg. Just think what happened. He found a kid named Garnett out of Denver that was injured, nobody wanted. Dembo wasn't highly recruited. He picked up these other kids and worked with them but it took five or six years. There's a good question today. The Louisvilles and Kentuckys and the Indianas – I'm talking basketball now. You look there year after year – there's hardly a change in the top twenty -- you get three or four intruding – can Wyoming ever maintain on that level. That's what I'm asking.

#### **Track 4 – Curt Gowdy and Others**

**BIRLEFFI:** Curt Gowdy didn't jump from Cheyenne to the big time. He went from Cheyenne to Oklahoma City as another sports announcer. He told Bill Grove and Tracy McCracken he was leaving and I think one of the two, I think it was Tracy who said "You're making a mistake. You'll never make it. Stay here where you're happy and etc." Words were exchanged. Curt has repeated that story thousands of times in the following

thirty years so there is truth to that, it was his bosses. He went – now this is a little remnant on me, not Curt Gowdy – but let me tell you. He went to Oklahoma City and got a break. Hank Iba was on the climb with his great basketball team. He was at Oklahoma State – won a couple of national championships. Curt became a legend. We didn't have tapes then, we had discs. He took a couple of samples of his broadcasting, went back to New York City – very aggressive, very confident guy. Badgered Mel Allen into listening to it. Finally got on as assistant with Mel Allen of the Yankees. Then he was hired by the Red Sox as the chief announcer. Then he went to the networks and then came a great career! He did a number of World Series, Superbowls, Olympic games – that's the story of Curt Gowdy. And then we stayed in close contact over the years. He call me – flattery or not – he'd call me an hour after a .. in Cheyenne, Wyoming, after a World Series game. “What do you think? I want a critique. Did I do this or do that?” Many times, he called me. I'd say, “Well, I thought you shoulda loosened up some more and I think you did....” Actually, it was pretty good but I would tell him and he'd listen. “I thought maybe you shut Garragia(sp) off a little...loosen up a little Curt...I thought you could have maybe dramatized William's hit a little more when he singled in the right field, bring it up a little more.”

JUNGE: Do you think Curt Gowdy's style has more or less gone by the boards now?

BIRLEFFI: Yeah, I do. I think that like the clothes we wear or anything else. His is more stilted, more objective. Less verbose. Didn't talk as much. Down the middle, accurate, historical. In fact, I don't think they'd let him..in those years – we're talking about the '60s now. Maybe early '70s. They wouldn't even let him do...and he wasn't the type that would do it – they wouldn't let him be John Madden. And, even the play-by-play guys cut up and give their personal opinions, missed the plane and all that vacuous talk and all that inane stuff and people enjoy it and they are big heroes but you couldn't do that anyway. See, Curt is from that old school and there were three or four of them in there and I thought they were all good in their time. We had our models, Curt and I compare a lot. One of my idols in broadcasting that I'm embarrassed to admit because I tried to imitate him when I did recreated baseball was Red Barber, the guy in the catbird seat. Red Barber. I loved Red Barber and Ted Musing, the mellifluous smooth...you ever remember him at all as a kid? He was great. He could make a game live. That was before television And of course, with his voice, I couldn't forget Bill Stearn – were all models. Stearn, Musing (sp??), Gray McNamee before him, but not much. I thought – will you forgive me for this – I was driving from Denver last year, my wife and I and listening to Irv Brown's call-in show and he started talking about some Wyoming sports – basketball – he got all screwed up. He had the dates and the names wrong. We had to get a sandwich in Fort Collins – so I called him. I'd never called anybody in a call-in show – got right in. He gave me kind of a short shrift, ole' Irv did. I said, “Hey that wasn't Gowdy at all, it was Kenny Sailors” and he seemed to take a little offense. But I know him quite well – his son coaches and so we hung up. But then the phone calls – I was really pleased. He got one – “Hey! Was that Larry Birleffi?” Then a caller in Denver, “Was that ole' Larry Birleffi you had on there? I thought he died! I can remember him. He used to -- I was out at the Air Base and he made a game live! Boy, he could make a basketball game live better than any coach.” Ole' Irv – he didn't



pick it up too much. And then another call – and there were about three of them and that REALLY made my drive to Cheyenne!

### **Track 5 – The Season of Change**

BIRLEFFI: Let me get back to Mr. Jennings because this cut my career short – it was time anyway. I still do all the radio and television writing that I want. I never have made any big money. He said, “We’re going to bid it.” (He is speaking of the University of Wyoming’s radio and television contract). Consulting with my co-partners and everything we thought we were going to come out on this thing – we bid up \$90, \$95 and \$100,000 escalating \$5,000 a year. We got the bid, but then I got into doing television shows with the coaches and they were murderous because of the expenses involved in televising them. We’d produce three or four live telecasts a year. We produced darn good television. I hope some people recall it. Professionally done, weekly television shows – well produced with a football and a basketball coach. We did every game and then they hired a guy by the name of Bob Hitch as the athletic director. He was something else. He came into my office—my little office downtown said, “I want to talk to you.” I had the franchise for a year but he says, “You’re doin’ fine but I want you off the air.” I said, “You want me off the air?” “Yeah,” he said “I’ve been traveling around the state and there are people I think who have gotten a little tired of you and we want to kind of jazz it up a little with some pro names.” Well, I shouldn’t have listened to him. I wasn’t ready for a battle. I was getting tired anyway, so I brought in Billy Van Heusen, a former Broncos star in to do the games. And Billy’s a nice guy but he was very undependable. He’d show up maybe ten minutes before the kick-off. So, I went through that mess and they brought a nice guy in from UTEP, from El Paso to do the play-by-play. And that’s when Dave Walsh came in after him. Dave is doing the games now. But anyway, he (Hitch) said, “I want to televise some of the games.” I said, “You can’t do that over us....I’ve got sponsors on the radio.” This is getting a little technical, but he was violating our contract and wanting me to step aside only he wanted me to pay the \$100,000 a year and thank god he left or that would have been in a mess. I never would have taken legal action against my own university but I had something there maybe to do it because he helped ruin us. So after four years of that – fighting and working to break even – we because we were selling it for three or four hundred thousand and spending that much in rights fees and traveling, TV production costs and battling all these problems so that’s when Curt Gowdy came in and took it over for three years. Curt Gowdy who graduated from Wyoming is a little bitter about it today. After three years, he gave them about three hundred thousands. So in all those years, together we gave them about seven hundred thousand dollars – the University got. And then, he put a bid in, I understand – I’d have to have figures to back this up – was probably better than the Casper group that got it today but the Casper group was given the bid on what they called a joint venture where there are no guarantees. In other words, whatever’s left over – the broadcaster or the franchiser or the vendor which is the Casper-KTWO now – would split – that’s what they are doing, they’re finishing their second year -- I’ve been unable to get any figures. I imagine the University’s getting something. But, I thought it was very unfair – just speaking frankly. After we had to give for seven years, and I did for four years – not only guarantee the coaches \$10,000, \$20,000 apiece a year for their radio and

TV which we produced good shows – gave them the money plus the \$100,000 and then they let somebody come in and do it on a joint venture with no guarantee. That rankles me. Then they say this was a foregone conclusion to finally, understandably in a way, appease the Casper media and the broadcasters who never felt a part of it – to finally give them a chance. All right but they should have given them a chance on the same ground rules that we had. The thing that is a mystery and baffling to me as far as the University and some respects in the State, is why we can't take a look first at the people who are available – in-house people – and move them up. I could never understand the process of search committees at State institutions and universities. I can see some justification but they go on and on – one search committee to another one – a year-and-a-half and they generally come up often with people that don't have the background to do the jobs. You see, that's why I tried to elaborate a little on the Jacoby/Duke Humphrey/McCraken/Simpson years when they had more control of it. I went through years when they hired—I don't want to mention names – a very incapable AD from UTEP where the program never succeeded. He hired coaches through Arkansas, Frank Broyles and other contacts. And we brought in the Fred Akres and the Bill Lewis', the Al Kincaids, the Pat Dyes that were on their way elsewhere. Al Kincaid stayed but they were just using Wyoming as a stepping stone. We went through a decade of terrible years. Well, look what happened. We had a guy we should have hired 20 years ago -- Paul Roach. A guy that's indigenous, he knows the territory, he knows the problems, he was here six years, he's from the Dakotas and look what he did in two years. In justification, those were the years when he didn't recruit, didn't know how to, didn't have money to. Of course, that has gone on since the days of Bob Wyatt where we'd kind of reach for the major leagues and then we'd get there and “boom” we don't quite make it like the Holiday Bowl and it's been the pattern of our sports story at Wyoming. It's tough to compete.

### **Track 6 – The Importance of Cowboy Sports**

BIRLEFFI: I think there are many who doubt the importance of it all. It isn't going to change our culture or lifestyle, never will. I think that those people are silenced in the successful years. I think the bottom line at the risk of being prejudiced, it's been very helpful salutary thing for the State of Wyoming. It brings people together -- I was noticing this thing the other day telling about Wyoming – it was a national story in the Washington Post. And there was one line in there told how rough things are out here and it says the only thing we got going is our winning football, the interest and excitement, the winning football and basketball teams. What's the value of all that? I hate to say this but I really don't know – I just can't picture Wyoming without it. When eight or nine thousand go to a basketball game and when what? Eight or ten thousand follow it to San Diego for a football game – you can't get people to agree on everything. There is proportionate to our population capita wise a lot of interest, don't you think?

JUNGE: What about the statement that one of our football coaches made that rodeo is bigger than football?

BIRLEFFI: Well, that was Pat Dye that said that and he's been trying to compensate for that ever since. He came down here one day and spent four or five hours out at the museum, out at the park and really enjoyed it. He really did and then he got to be a pretty good rodeo fan. Whether they're more interested in rodeos than Wyoming football – you know I'm a rodeo fan too but I don't think there is. Do you? Everybody has their different tastes and different lifestyles. Is there any one thing that's more important than getting a job, the health of our family and the economy? We all agree that's more important. I think it does a lot for the psyche but you forgot the other pragmatic approach – there's the money involved. It's gotten to be big business and when you can get a cut of that pie. Let me put it this way to put it in the proper perspective. I think college sports is a mess right now, it's a mess. There's no doubt about it. With the 27 schools on probation, the drug problem and the NCAA, I think has made some strides of stopping the abuses, of cheating. If they want to push rodeos that's fine.

### **Track 7 – Philosophy**

BIRLEFFI: In essence, I was raised in a small Wyoming town, a mining town in Hartville adjacent to it – a frontier town. It was a tough life, long cold winters and I was a happy kid because that was our world and we didn't know much about the outside of it. And, it was a life of close family closeness. It was a life of neighborhoods – you shared all your problems. It was a life of a lot of problems as I look back now. You know, we had kind of a microcosm of what was going on in the world. We had some racial problems, family problems, union problems. You know, they were all there. I mentioned the ku kluxers and the tightly-knit people with the Catholic background. I don't know but I think that my background instilled something in me good or bad. I think a hard work ethic. I think my dad's insistence that you be honest with other people and honest with yourself. One thing he always –he wanted to raise children he could be proud of and he insisted we get an education and I've always admired him for that. A man who came here and he was homesick and 15, 16 years old and cried before he went to work for a dollar a day and you've got to kind of hand it to people like that. I'm sure there are thousands of us who have been through that. This is America, you know. My mother was that way – she was born in Georgetown. I don't know what a Wyoming native is, but I think I'm a Wyoming native. My mother and grandparents on my mother's side lived in Wyoming for 40, 50 years. My parents have lived here 40, 50 years and I'm livin' here forever and all of my children were raised here so ....

JUNGE: Was you mother raised the same way as your father – very hard working?

BIRLEFFI: Mom was a very compassionate person. She believed in religion and worked hard with other people all the time. Always interested in the welfare of others and how they're getting along and doing.

JUNGE: And you think you picked up more from your mother than your father, when you think about your personality?

BIRLEFFI: I think so. I'm always worried how other people feel. I really am. I think maybe to a point of fault. Sometimes, mostly in writing and certainly in broadcasting too, sometimes you've gotta be critical and incisive. Sometimes as I look back, I lacked a little of that. Always afraid to hurt people. Maybe it's because I can recall being hurt myself. But, when it comes to high school youngsters, even the college kids – I've seen what it does, I mean even it's a line or two – their parents read it and it hurts them. And, I say what the heck, is it really worth it. And, I know that's wrong when you put that up against the so-called big time writers who are syndicated. Not that I idolize them or there's hero worship – it's just that it can be so devastating to them. I just think of those five or six people who are involved. There's a lot of things that I could have revealed over the years – kids getting in trouble in the early years of football and basketball. And I think coaches making mistakes – I could be more critical. Many times the University – in fact I'm still a little upset and bitter about some of the things they've done in broadcasting rights but I've never hit hard on that stuff.

JUNGE: But you're not the type to write a kiss and tell book at the end of your career?

BIRLEFFI: No, I don't think so. I've been grappling with a book. Bobby Ann, our middle daughter, is in documentary and has done real well. She thinks that on a sports book particularly, I ought to stick on one subject, on one season. Bobby Knight's book "On the Brink of a Season" was a bestseller. Maybe take, which I don't think I'd do, getting back to my problem with compassion, maybe the Black 14 when the kids all walked out – just a book on that subject and what it left in its wake. She's grappled with all kinds of things. She says you can't just sit down and write about 50 years of history. It's too dull, it won't sell. Just getting started. I'm having a difficult time. I keep putting it off. I'm still under three or four deadlines a week as I have been my entire life – I'm in human bondage. It would seem to me it takes some real discipline. I've got to change my sense of urgency about it. For example, what's today, February 4<sup>th</sup>? I've got a column to wrap up and do before the day's over and I've got to punch it into the computer myself. And, I wrote it last night and it didn't come off, but I got a good idea. I grapple with everything. I'm comparing the Blizzard of '49 with the seismic blast of today but I'm trying to be off the cuff where, casual with satire. For example. You think it's tough now? We – in the Blizzard of '49 00 this is pretty corny – in the Blizzard of '49, we used cable jumpers to start our electric blankets. You think you've got it tough now? When the car got stuck, we didn't have all these fancy tow trucks and things. They told you to let it rest, feed a lot of fluids and then call us in a few days if it doesn't start.

### **Track 8 – the Black 14**

BIFLEFFI: It was a tragedy in our sports history and it could have been so easily avoided. They were no different than our kids today. It got to be the time, the unrest and everything all over America. You're familiar with BYU's, at the time, their edicts that no blacks can be a bishop or whatever it is. Some leader of this unrest got to these kids over there and said, "Go to your coach – we're going to wear black arm bands in protest of that tenant in the church." And you've got to understand Lloyd Eaton, out of the South Dakota farms, a tough stock. Single-minded, he lived his team. He cared about

his kids and he ran them with an iron hand and probably the most stiffest disciplinarian of any coach they ever had over there. He was ultra-conservative. Absolutely wrong at the time, maybe. At the time! Certainly wrong as you look back at it but now terribly wrong. Could have been avoided. He got them together and he said, "You're not wearing any armbands in protest of anything at this football game where we're playing BYU Saturday." He said, "You go back to your dorms now and you'll all be back home...some of you will be driving cabs again, if you don't take those armbands off." And something hit them the wrong way and it immediately polarized –this is where the tragedy came. And I'd have to guess there are still people, and they're disappearing – I was kind of in the middle of it – before great smoother-overs like Red Jacoby could get in there and get a hold of it, it polarized. And they just gritted their teeth. Nobody would give. It wound up in courts. It was just a great, great tragedy. That team – you talk about teams? I could unequivocally say it might have been the best team in the first four or five games Wyoming ever had. They just came back off the Sugar Bowl. They were better. They led the nation in points yielded, defense yards. Great defensive team. Tony McGee with the Washington Redskins. I don't think they were scored on in the first four or five games and the emotion when those 14 kids quit carried it through the BYU game and then they lost every one after that. I tried to do some ambivalent columns on it – very difficult to write. In fact, the people – 70% were behind the coach, at the time. Tough story. I liked the kids and I had my following – it was one of the toughest moments, toughest week in my sports reporting history, I can tell you that.

### **Track 9 – The Downside of Loyalty**

**BIRLEFFI:** I broadcast and followed teams over four or five years to finish the summer in basketball or football three times in 8<sup>th</sup>, two times. I went through one year when Mo Radovich's team won 6 and lost 22. Bob Devaney, who went on to great success, in his own cornpone style, had a way of motivating players. His own little way. Not with any dynamic voice or anything. Probably the greatest of all is there right now – not because of his great success but the kids listen to and admire Paul Roach. He's a great motivator. I watch him. He kids them and then he gets serious and then he kids them. He has a great way about him. I think that is Paul Roach's great underestimated assets. Red Jacoby was a great organizer. In gin rummy, he reduced everything to a science. He had a great sense of humor. He played hard. Like his Jack Daniels but he ran a great ship. I'm telling you – he made nearly every football and basketball trip himself. And let's say you arrived at LA to play USC, which we did – it takes some logistics. He was in complete control. Cabs were right there at the precise moment. All the facilities - the meals. Boy, he just ran a great ship. And he knew coaches and how to pick them. Great athletic director. Regardless of how good they are, there's always somebody else around better. It's a matter of picking them and finding them. Personally, I don't like our system of picking people anymore. These search committees. And the search committee leads into another search committee and the you've got to check with this committee and you get down to where you really don't get the qualified guy. I've seen it happen everywhere and certainly at the University of Wyoming. It just gets too unwieldy. And that's what happened. You know, I keep getting back to this – we had that success because Red Jacoby and Duke Humphrey ran it through that board and knew where the good coaches

were and got close to them and there was loyalty developed and then we lost that. Went to search committees. It was one of the reasons and then we'd go through coach after coach after coach. And that's one of my big disappointments in life. I tried to express this loyalty that I've had over the years for the University and what I've tried to do for them. But when I needed some help in the later years, this new crowd picked by these committees turned against us and they didn't support me. I don't mean as a frontline play-by-play broadcaster, but where I wanted to continue to be involved in the franchise and the bids or in the color of the games, doing some things like I'm doing now – they turned their back on me. They went elsewhere. Part of it because maybe I didn't go about it right. Secondly, they had new people that didn't know the history or background. Ed Jennings became the president from Iowa and he put it all on bids all through those little comfy deals with Red Jacoby. He let anybody in. He couldn't keep them out but he charged \$3,500 – just a token fee. Jennings put it on bid. We got the bid for the first three years with escalating clauses at \$90, \$95 and \$100,000 which is a lot of money in Wyoming. Plus, it assures that we pay the coaches another \$20,000 a year apiece, football and basketball for radio and TV. And, I was foolish to bid that high on it. I was ok the first few years because I'm talking about the '70s because now we're having pretty good times. The economy wasn't bad. We had the connection that was then known as the Intermountain Network. Telephone lines established. Sixteen, seventeen stations headquartered out of Salt Lake. Sixteen, seventeen station in Wyoming. So just with the matter of a plug-in, I could feed out of Cheyenne sixteen, seventeen stations in Wyoming. So, we had the Cowboy Network – part of the Intermountain Network. That gave us an advantage because anybody else who wanted to establish a sports network in Wyoming had to order these lines week-by-week to be established by Mountain Bell, see.

JUNGE: If you had it to do over again, would you do it again the way you did it?

BIRLEFFI: Well, I'd hate to give up all those wonderful times, memories and everything. I think I would except financially. That's what hurt us, hurt me. I wouldn't have bid that way in the later years. I don't think that I would give up all those earlier years. No, I don't think so. I think often of the late 1960's when I thought I was going big time, and maybe I should have pursued it – I touched on that earlier – when the Wyoming success – the Sugar Bowl and all those years under Lloyd Eaton, brought me...all of us additional exposure and a little notoriety. I got exposed to the networks and with Curt's help and I mentioned Roone Arledge, I got to do some rodeos nationally – I was the anchor guy. Then I did a couple events –the Ruidoso Downs and three or four football games. Maybe I have my moments that I regret not pursuing them when we were up there, but other than that, there are very little of them, very few of them.

Track 10 – What Made Me Stay

JUNGE: What basically kept you from going to the big time? Was it your commitment to the family?

BIRLEFFI: I think that was part of it. They were established in school. “Oh, let's wait 'til they get out of grade school. ‘Til they get out of high school.” This happens to

everybody. We're inclined to embellish all our chances during those years a little bit, you know. And, it might not have worked out like you thought so all those things figured in. But I think the real reluctance was the family plus giving up this great world that I lived in here. I can remember years – didn't last too long – Ev Shelton's early years, we traveled by train. We'd always stop for ten or fifteen minutes in Rawlins, Wyoming – the years of the Pilches....Please don't misunderstand –it'd happen to anybody in there – you want to remember that I was pretty much the sole reporter on radio and television just coming in and in the newspapers - -year after year. I was a pretty good figure in that area and in some parts of the state. In fact, I was approached two or three times to run for national office and state office. Anyway, there was always a crowd of several hundred people. Soon as we'd get off, two or three people ...I'd give autographs all the time. Well, the reason I point that out is that it all adds up to this ego thing and your importance in your world, it's pretty tough to leave, I tell ya.

### **Track 11 – My Daughters**

BIRLEFFI: My wife's maiden name is Lois Sturtevant. It's a Dutch stock, New England. We touched upon her father and the campus, how we met and all through that. Lynn was born just before I shipped overseas and after I got back home, Bobby Ann, our middle daughter, and then our trailer was Laurie. I have three daughters – all my three. Laurie is kind of is our pride and joy. She's got a great personality. She puts up with Al Simpson in Washington, D.C. She's in her sixth year. She and Al get along great. Of course, Al's got a lot of people working. She's the scheduler. In other words, she's got to get Al where he's supposed to be and she's got an interesting life going. She's getting married in the spring. She met a fine, young handsome guy out of Yale, swimming captain of the team. One summer, they were going with each other two years and he jumped off a diving board and broke his neck and she stayed with right with him. He's now in a wheelchair, a paraplegic. I admire her courage. She knows what she's doing. Our middle daughter, Bobby, is a filmmaker. Probably, as far as communications and so forth, maybe takes after me but I think my daughters have taken their initiative to do things and organize themselves after my wife. I'm not saying that to be – she raised them with a lot of pride and they were in the middle of this sports milieu too. Competition. I don't want to get into bragging about my kids but there have been ---something – always got good grades. Bobby Ann is right now in the middle of the biggest project of her life. She's done some things I think she can be proud of -- I don't know if you've seen her documentary for PBS – it's on Mormon religion. She did one on Home on the Range – she got some critical acclaim. The one she won an Emmy on has not even had much exposure out here – it's on men who abuse children. It's not a pleasant things but done brutally frank. Now she's in the middle of eight thirty second documentaries on American women which might sound dull to you but boy, I'll tell ya, they're plugging into this thing and making it .. what I read of the prospectus .. she's got some of it – great writers. One was on the scriptwriters for *Roots*. She's got 18 people, she's the executive producer. Lives in Seattle, commutes between Seattle, New York and Washington is now in the middle of that. Came back here briefly for the local mayoral campaign but that's Bobby. And Lynn is on with her life, doing real well. Married to Phil Noble. Lynn, probably...personally, I guess...part of that is one of my biggest disappointments

in life, but she was beaten for mayor here in Cheyenne. I don't say that as a rejection because I didn't run for mayor and it's not a rejection but I think she worked so hard for it and she is tremendously qualified. The campaign is over, I can say this now. She had ten years of traveling to many parts of America for this tourism stuff for the Hitching Post – started a lot of bus tours out here, a lot of contacts. Several years in the legislature and familiar with the important reforms in municipal and state government and I think that - you know, I've very biased – she would have been a tremendous person in that position. If you don't mind me saying, that was a very keen disappointment to me. I think I took it harder than she did.

JUNGE: Well, yeah. You've got a lot of friends here and you can't help but think 'my friends let me down. My daughter was qualified for this job and ---'

BIRLEFFI: Yeah, you can't help but think that. It's only been a few months but some of these friends, I know, worked for her opponent. We're back friends again though. The stiffness is gone but I never quite feel the same way...

JUNGE: Well, it hurts! I feel the same way you do about her. And I'll put this on tape – I voted for her!

BIRLEFFI: I had a couple of calls "I didn't vote for your daughter but you're to be congratulated for not getting in the campaign." Maybe if I had of ....maybe something like I just expressed to you because there's only –we could have turned three or four hundred votes around. You could take it philosophically and this is for anybody who has their ups and downs – it always happens for the best, you know, really. And fact, I didn't know why she....until last January a year ago when she and her husband said "Lynn would make a good mayor and she wants to run for it ..' Of course, we couldn't believe it. Why would anybody want to be mayor? But then after she got into it and how the image of mayor is wrong. I mean the mayor can be – not the all-important – but can do more things for a city image-wise. See that gets me, to wind it up, where Wyoming is going ecomically. I 've got a theory they laugh at and say it's a pipe dream but I saw one way Wyoming developed – marketing – in the early years, was contacts. I saw what Milward Simpson and the Tracy McCrackens and the Governor, Ed Herschler before him....they knew that Percy Spencer was the head man at Sinclair. He loved Wyoming. He really did. Union Pacific Railroad, the president of Union Pacific would come in and really enjoyed Wyoming – would go to football games. Came in two or three times a year. I'm not blaming anybody – we've lost that. We lost – maybe there's a reason. My theory, then is, we've got to make the contacts again and maybe get a break. We need somebody – that dramatic contact – the dynamic guy to get .... I know this sounds like a far-fetched dream but it's there. To get somebody to get something started in Wyoming. In addition, this is no criticism, all committees and all development agencies and everything we're doing – again we might be overlapping – but we still need that one extra dynamic push.



## Track 12 – Life’s Highlights

JUNGE: Tell me what your greatest moments were. If you had to point to all Wyoming sports, exciting moments, memories, that one thing that just will always, ‘til the day you die, always stick out in your mind as the most exciting thrilling moment.

BIRLEFFI: I guess I won’t forget the night, with my mother there – bless her, and she never understood all my love and devotion to sports. But it was at Little America ten or eleven years ago when five or six hundred people turned out and honored me. I think that night was very memorable. You don’t need history to say this but I don’t think I’ll ever forget Wyoming’s comeback against the Air Force. To me, that was a great game and little things stand out. My wife and I still talk about this...we were both on the bus again, this is how we all traveled together. We took the team bus. Not the players – the team family bus; the wives and the kids and some of those close back from the stadium to our hotel after losing to LSU in the Sugar Bowl game. And tears that no one could suppress. Wyoming acquainted themselves with pride. Proud. They were good. But that moment, that twenty or thirty minutes, that drive back...for some reason .... The looks on those kids faces and the wives, for some reason just stands out. I think another one was the game that we played against UTEP – I’ll never forget the field goal that Jerry Depoister and one official was going to wave it on and the other wave it off – that won Wyoming the game in the Sugar Bowl. I’ll never forget those moments. I think the night Wyoming beat UCLA brought back a lot of thrills. It was a great night when Dembo got 41 points and I think the atmosphere in Seattle in the first round against UNLV – it wasn’t like “hey, you’re on the air.” I didn’t have a microphone in front of me. I wasn’t that involved or that steamed up about it but those were memorable nights. There was Wyoming in the Big Apple back in New York a few years ago. They all rank among the top twenty or thirty. The night that projected Wyoming in to the national – we were all to see this on the Sports Illustrated cover which gave us all the recent great exposure was Dembo’s 40 points a game against UCLA. You know they live in their own worlds in the UCLA’s and the Syracuses’ – they’ve got this nobility of sports but when you crack that one with some kid who’s kind of colorful – that’s what touched things off basketball wise.

JUNGE: Who were two or three really important people in your life?

BIRLEFFI: Well, we’ve always had a sort of supportive role among mother and father and three daughters. In her own soft way, my wife, I listen when she criticizes. She’s been very important. Red Jacoby was an impact in my life. There’s been so many people that I’ve had heart-to-heart talks with, you know – it’s our way of life here. The early years, of course, my mother and father and the family priest must have had a lot of impact on those early years. I think nothing but fondly of my father working in the mines and that way of life, how difficult it was to try to feed us and then help educate us.

JUNGE: Gotta ask you this. What do you feel is the place of sports in Wyoming? How important is it to our history?

BIRLEFFI: I think at the risk, again, of being biased. I think it's very important to Wyoming because of our makeup economically and geographically in bringing us together in being a vehicle for us to feel a little proud. I think as long as it doesn't hurt somebody financially, taxpayer-wise, as long as it's self-supportive -- not entirely, but as it is now. I think it's well worthwhile. I really feel that way. Of course it helps to win. That's where you get the glow from. You were up in Seattle -- you see the people, the fun and pride. Though we got clobbered, the two Holiday Bowls and that great unforgettable trip by train when we tossed out silver dollars and went to the first bowl, the Gator Bowl back in 1950. We went by train and we had a limited number of 'em but we'd stop and people would come around and we'd throw out silver dollars from Wyoming which was rare back then.

### **Track 13 – On Aging**

BIRLEFFI: I can feel it. I get tired but I'm afraid to face the fact that I'm getting old. I don't want to be regarded as a legend. I look forward to everyday just like I did back there. I can contribute something. I have much concern, I've seen it. You never hear of it but the kid whose life is sports and he's gotten all this attention and boom -- tomorrow it's gone. There's only one out of one-hundred thousand that get into the pros. That's why it's so important that they latch on to something they can follow other than sports and latch onto that in college, academically the best they can.

JUNGE: In terms of what you were talking about before, there was this comforting belt around you, the warmth -- the security of knowing that -- it must be real difficult...

BIRLEFFI: It has been. To be honest here -- maybe not as much. It's getting better each time. For example, I went in yesterday during the storm to Buttreys and I had fifteen or twenty dollars worth of groceries and I didn't have the money so I had to write a check. The young clerk says, "Do you have any identification?" So I had to get out a couple of credit cards, my driver's license. She kept looking at the name and -- this is a great story -- she says, "Where did I see this..." And, remember here's a guy talking here, 45-50 years in this community on radio, television, newspaper, media. She says, "Seemed to me....Oh, I've seen that name before. Was that your daughter that ran for mayor of Cheyenne?" So, she knew my daughter. She didn't know me. But, there's a good point there -- face it -- regardless of what work you're in, it's going to hit all of us. People get older and the people that come up are younger and you've got to prove yourself regardless of what you're in tomorrow and the next day and the next day. You can't live on past reputation -- it's a corny adage but it's very true.

### **Track 14 – Joe Evans**

JUNGE: We're sitting in Joe Evan's car in the St. Mary's parking lot and Joe's going to tell me a couple of quick stories about Larry Birleffi, the Voice of the Cowboys.

EVANS: Ok. Favorite Birleffi story. A player named Randy Richardson who had the all-time rebound record for the University of Wyoming in the old Field House. Twenty-three rebounds in one game. He used to be a tremendous leaper. One night, Birleffi described one of his rebounds like this: “And then Randy Richardson skies for the rebound—and he comes down.”

### **Track 15 – Mickey Powers**

JUNGE: I’m in the office of Mr. Mickey Powers at Powers Builder’s Supply and you are the sole owner and boss?

POWERS: Yes. It’s a family business and you were talking about Larry Birleffi. I think my dad was the first sponsor on his radio broadcast from the 1943 NCAA championship and you know, Larry was the promoter of the Wyoming Cowboys in those days. He was an enthusiastic guy that put together the first broadcast and probably did as much, other than Red Jacoby to put Wyoming on the map athletically.

JUNGE: Would you say that he really was the “Voice of the Cowboys?”

POWERS: Oh absolutely. I grew up and when I was a little kid our family always listened to the radio broadcast and Larry’s voice as well as his name were household names in our home.

JUNGE: I gotta tell ya, I got a chance to interview Jerry Buss, you know of the Lakers. And Jerry remembers growing up outside of Kemmerer when he was growing up – parking his car up on a hill overlooking the highway in the valley and picking up the broadcast from Wyoming and listening to Larry Birleffi. He remembers Larry and Larry remembers him.

POWERS: You know, Larry and I have had some great trips, great times on the golf course. You know, he’s a lot of fun on the golf course. Not a very good swinger or anything – real loose and real long. The club just kind of actually wraps all the way around him and lots of times when he gets it unwrapped it really isn’t square to the ball and doesn’t move it out there the way Jack Nicklaus does but Larry has a good time on the golf course.

JUNGE: And he putts the same way?

POWERS: Yeah, he does. He takes the putter back for ...oh, a one or two-foot putt, he probably takes the putter back three feet and decelerates through the ball which is just the opposite of what you’re supposed to do. But I’ve actually seen Larry, amazingly, make some pretty good putts. But it was normally a great match with Ken Riley and somebody and it was really heated. The famous golf foursome was Larry Birleffi, Ken Riley, Carl Occhipinti and Carlin Smith. Normally, if more than a dollar changed hands, there was utter chaos in the parking lot and only the winners would go in for a beer and usually the two losers headed for home.

## Track 16 – Jack Speight

JUNGE: I'm in the office of Jack Speight, an attorney in Cheyenne.

SPEIGHT: A couple of quick stories. Maybe eight or nine years ago when Wyoming still competed against Arizona, Arizona State – they were in the WAC. I was with Larry on a basketball road trip. We were down at the University of Arizona in Tucson. The broadcast table or bench was about three rows up from courtside which meant that you had some of the partisan fans seated in front of the announcers' booth. Larry was calling the play-by-play and there was a particularly exciting occurrence down at the Wyoming end and Wyoming fouled or least the fans thought they fouled and they stood up in front of Birleffi. Birleffi took the old hand mic and put it under his arm pit to muffle the sound and says "Sit down, you SOB's!" Started ragging the fans! Another time was when Larry was announcing football and was talking about so-and-so who was returning a punt, a kick-off and he was at the 30, the 35, the 40, the 45, the 50, the 55, the 60. And he got him up to the 65 yard line before he stopped and realized they really weren't marked that way. And then, his famous one-liners – his two-hand running set-shot. You've gotta think about that a minute but it's hard to do a two-hand running set-shot. Yet, he would have people like ? doing the two-hand-running set-shot. There was one anecdote about when he was in the Army. He was the head of a black regiment in Italy – WWII. He was captain. He was the public information officer and he had a colonel or general by the name of Alman who always mispronounced his name – he couldn't pronounce his name. Well, evidently, General Clark, who was the big general in WWII was flying in to their particular location on the Italian front and General Alman wasn't there so he sent Birleffi up to greet General Clark. And he went up to greet General Clark and when General Clark got off the little puddle-jumper plane and Larry went up saluted and introduced himself and kind of standing around making small talk. At that time there was a guy by the name of Joe Horn who was Lena Horn's brother who did caricatures of people and he had done a caricature of General Clark and Larry wanted the general to have it and autograph and give it back to Joe Horn and some of the photographers were snapping pictures as Larry was bent over the hood of the jeep concentrating and General Clark was concentrating and the Cheyenne Tribune picked one of the photographs up and reported it with a line on the photograph of "Captain Birleffi planning the Italian warfront strategy with General Mark Clark and it make him a hero back here in Wyoming and in truth and in fact, they weren't looking at anything but a caricature of General Clark drawn by Joe Horn. When I was in school in my young days as a democrat doing some work for Gale McGee and we're talking '58, '60 right now.

JUNGE: Were you a Democrat?

SPEIGHT: Yeah, believe it or not, before I started paying taxes. In fact, I headed up the campaign – the young Democrats for Jack Kennedy on campus in the 1960's. In those days, McGee was always concerned about anybody running against him as a Democrat or on the Republican side. And there was poll done and Birleffi was one of the most popular people in the State in the late '50's and early '60's. There were some people, always

looking to get a viable candidate to run – they don't care if they could be a good whatever...but they want to get a name that they can elect. And there was some talk about trying to encourage Larry to run. I'm glad he didn't. He's too good of person, enjoys people too much and too many people would have taken advantage of him had he run. He's just one of those unique characters. There's not another one like him.

### **Track 17 – Kevin McKinney**

MCKINNEY: Well, it was just some of the most fun times I've ever had in the business was the time I got to spend with him. He and I roomed together for ten years. He was, of course, doing the play-by-play and I was traveling with the team. He was just so much fun to be around because we never went anywhere when somebody didn't know who he was. He was a passionate, loyal fan. Really. Whatever Larry was, I know he had his broadcast, wrote for the newspaper, but he was a great fan and loved the Cowboys! And that always came through whether he was writing or broadcasting. We were at El Paso and he was doing the play-by-play and I happened to be doing the color and he felt that the public address announcer at the events center was being too much of a "homer" which is hilarious because Larry was the biggest "homer" of all time. He actually left our broadcast position and went over and told the guy and they literally had to get between them -- this is during the game and he just left the broadcast area to go over and do that. I'll never forget him doing that because here I was sitting there stunned and trying to keep the broadcast going until he got back. But that's the kind of passion he had. He felt like the Cowboys were a team that people picked on and he fought every battle he could fight as far as Wyoming was concerned. The guy that everyone has to thank for where broadcasting is today and where the network is today is thanks to Larry. I was raised listening to him on the radio and I know hundreds of other young people were and probably could have made a career on a national basis but he loved what he did and he loved Wyoming. I think he made the right choice because I would have hated to see him leave. He was THE voice of Wyoming. He always will be. Dave is the voice to the Cowboys now but he would say the same thing. There was only one voice of the Cowboys and that was Larry Birleffi because he'd spend so many generations, so many highs and lows of football and basketball. He was our voice. He was our expert. He was our eyes. You know, we didn't have television games in those days – we only knew about the Cowboys through Larry. That says something very special that will never happen again.

### **Track 18 – Ragtime Cowboy Joe music**

**This is a production of the Wyoming State Archives, the Department of State Parks and Cultural Resources. Produced and edited by Sue Castaneda.**