

This basketball broadcaster is truly 'The Real McCoy'

By Jeff Stein

For more than a half-century, sports fans in the Valley of the Sun have called Al McCoy their own. He has been the "Voice of the Phoenix Suns" pro basketball team for more than 40 years and called games for baseball's Arizona Diamondbacks in their inaugural season.

But the National Basketball Hall of Fame member credits his Iowa upbringing, including coming of age as a student at Drake University, with making him a success.

In his autobiography "The Real McCoy," written with Rich Wolfe, McCoy recalls growing up on a farm two-and-a-half miles from Williams, Iowa. His memories of rural life — from air conditioning being an open bedroom window, to living without electricity or running water — will no doubt resonate with an older Iowa audience.

Like many a young boy, a trip to the Iowa State Fair would be pivotal in McCoy's life.

"As an eight year old, I am walking around and I see up ahead that there is a booth from one of the local radio stations in Des Moines. It happened to be KRNT. One of the radio personalities was standing out in front doing a 'man on the street' live broadcast," McCoy recalls in the book.

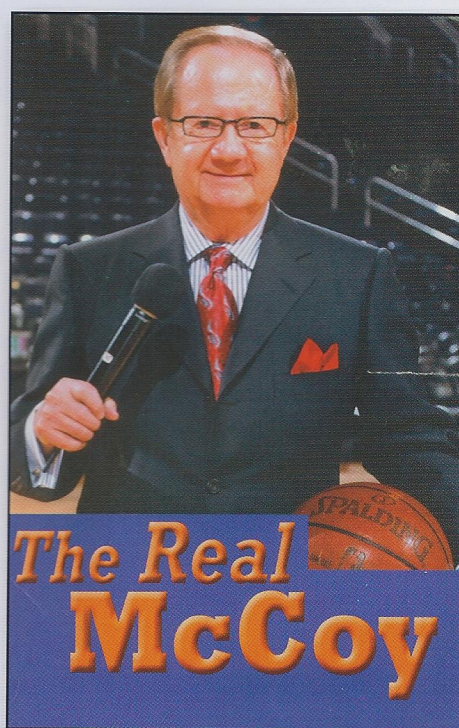
"As I got closer, the radio personality saw me, walked over to me with a microphone in hand and said, 'We have a young fellow here. Son, what do you think about the Iowa State Fair?' I reached up and took the microphone from him and went into a disc jockey routine, saying 'We're here at the Iowa State Fair ... and let's talk about hits and our hit parade!'"

"This radio personality finally reached out and took the microphone from me and said, 'Well, I guess I know who is going to be replacing me here in a few years!' That was my first time on live radio, and it was an unforgettable moment," he recalled.

Sports played a large role in the young

boy's life. McCoy remembers that when he was not playing in a game, he would sit on the bench and pretend to be broadcasting the game.

Those two loves — sports and broadcasting — merged to create a hall of fame career.



While most of the memoir focuses on his career covering all manner of sports in Arizona, the tales the now-80-year-old McCoy tells of his college life in Des Moines are written with an obvious love for, and devotion to, his birth state.

After earning Division I ratings in speech contests in both his junior and senior years of high school, McCoy received a partial scholarship to attend Drake University. But adapting from a high school graduating class of 15 to living in the metro area of Des Moines was no problem for the gre-

garious McCoy.

He quickly found a mentor in legendary Drake broadcasting professor Jim Duncan, who let the eager freshman check out a wire recorder to practice doing basketball play-by-play. (A wire recorder was the precursor to audio tape, where the sound was actually recorded on a tightly wound strand of wire.)

McCoy recorded his game call and gave it to Duncan for critique. After waiting several weeks, Duncan finally summoned McCoy to his office.

"I listened to your recording," Duncan told McCoy. "You do a better job than anyone who is working professionally in this city right now." That forged a lifetime relationship, leading to McCoy being one of only three individuals invited to speak at Duncan's retirement ceremony years later.

After his freshman year in college, McCoy got a summer job at KJFJ radio in Webster City, just 15 miles from his hometown. That fall, powerhouse radio station WHO in Des Moines was seeking new announcers. McCoy was hired as a college sophomore, at first working the overnight shift on the 50,000-watt AM station.

But a career in broadcasting almost took a back seat to another of McCoy's passions: music. By age 14, McCoy would spend many an evening traveling to play with bands in ballrooms. He writes that during World War II many musicians were being drafted into the military, so bands were looking for piano players. He parlayed that into regular paying gigs during college, playing with the Eddie Allen and Don Hoy bands and traveling throughout the Midwest. The money was good, but the lifestyle was grueling.

As evidence of the Iowa work ethic, a typical day for McCoy as a junior in college was to take morning classes starting at 7 a.m., stopping by the school cafeteria for a sandwich at noon, then working at WHO

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 32]

from 1 to 6 p.m. Then it was home to change clothes and play in a dance band at least four nights a week, often not returning nightly until 2 a.m. McCoy notes that despite the schedule, he earned his best grades that term.

It was that same work ethic that led to McCoy's amazing streak of missing only a single Suns NBA game due to illness during a 40-year stretch behind the mike.

McCoy left WHO while in college for KWDM radio in Des Moines. The latter station gave him a chance to do extensive sports play-by-play, an opportunity not available at WHO due to the presence of legendary Iowa broadcaster Jim Zabel.

"I realized I was never going to take his job because he had been there many,

many years, and would be there many more," McCoy writes. He and Zabel did work together during that time in the early 1950s, and remained good friends years later while both men lived in Arizona, until Zabel's death in 2013.

After graduating from Drake in 1954, McCoy began graduate studies at the University of Iowa ... just in time to experience the Hawkeyes Final Four basketball team firsthand. From there it was off briefly to Buffalo, N.Y., and then to his career-making stop in Phoenix, Ariz.

While the book is full of sports anecdotes, particularly those concerning professional sports in Phoenix, there is plenty of material that brings back great memories of the time McCoy spent here in Iowa. Names

like Babe Bisignano, Andy Williams and Jim Zabel grace the stories McCoy relates. He still makes regular visits back to Iowa. In fact, parts of the proceeds from *The Real McCoy* have been earmarked for the public library in his hometown of Williams.

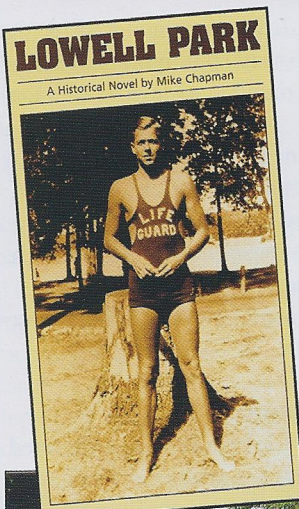
This book will likely cause a reader to exclaim McCoy's trademark three-point-shot call of "Shazam!" more than once, in recognition of an amazing life and career, which started in a central Iowa town of 600.

(Jeff Stein is a national award-winning broadcast historian and the author of "Making Waves: The People and Places of Iowa Broadcasting." A lifelong Iowan, he is a frequent contributor to Iowa History Journal.) ■

[HISTORICAL HAPPENINGS / FROM PAGE 31]

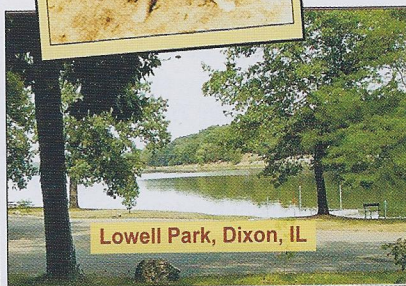
The museum's focus is on William Frederick "Buffalo Bill" Cody who was born Feb. 26, 1846, on a farm outside of Le Claire, Iowa. It also highlights the "historical timeline of Le Claire's role in the economic growth of the region via shipyards, button factories and river pilots, whose skills opened the river for commerce," reported the *Times*.

An unforgettable journey through time into the very heart of American history!



Jenny Brix, a college student in Iowa, travels back in time to meet a young lifeguard named Ronald Reagan and a young soldier named Abe Lincoln!

LOWELL PARK, written by Iowan Mike Chapman, is being developed into a made-for-TV movie. Now you can read the book first!



Just \$10 plus \$4 S&H
Call 641-791-3072
or send a check for \$14.00 to:
Culture House
P.O. Box 293
Newton, Iowa
50208

Smith was Iowa's 'Mr. Country Music'

No other Iowan achieved more success; earned more respect from his peers, fans and artists; and impacted the country music business in Iowa more than the renowned radio disc jockey, television personality and concert promoter Smokey Smith, who died Feb. 3, 2014, at his Des Moines home at the age of 91.

Smith was born in Missouri and started his career as a recording and touring artist during the 1940s in California before he moved to Des Moines in 1950 and became a popular entertainer and broadcaster on KRNT Radio. In 1955, he hosted the first primetime country music television show for KRNT-TV (now KCCI-TV).

Smith is best known among traditional country music fans for promoting concerts at KRNT Theater in Des Moines for 24 years, where legends like Hank Williams, George Jones, Johnny Cash, Merle Haggard, Buck Owens and Loretta Lynn performed regularly. Smith's shows there earned KRNT Theater national acclaim as the unofficial second home to the Grand Ole Opry.

In addition to his concert bookings, Smith achieved iconic status in country music circles in Nashville and around the world for providing leadership during the creation of the Country Music Disc Jockeys Association in 1953. By 1958, he encouraged the organization to disband in favor of creating the Country Music Association, which continues to thrive today.

Among the awards that Smith won included induction into Nashville's Country Music Disc Jockey Hall of Fame. ■



Smokey Smith (left) with Johnny Cash.