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by Larry A. Quinn

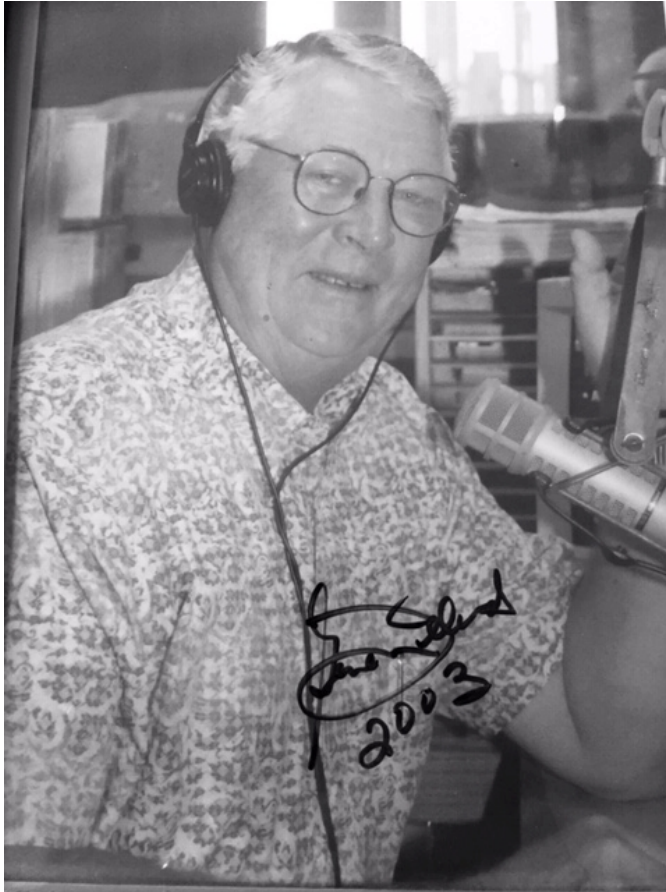
END OF AGRISHOP ERA — After more than 55 years of radio broadcasting and nearly 20 years of weekly hosting the Agrishop Saturday morning live program (in post-retirement), **Gene Millard** announced that he was “hanging up the headphones” as of February 22, 2020.



Agrishop has been a live Saturday telephone-interactive broadcast that originally started with host **Ken Root** as an appendage to his AgriTalk program more than 20 years ago on a network of stations in Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, and Colorado. In the early years, when Root was called to greener pastures, Millard was often called upon to “fill in;” and in 2002 when Root went full-time to be the executive

director of NAFB, Millard assumed the weekly duty of hosting the show.

Agrishop is simply a “tradio” type of programming that allows only items of an agricultural nature to be listed. The network has grown to 15 affiliated stations that have carried the program live from 8:06 a.m. to 9 a.m. Central time each Saturday.



Millard's long history in farm broadcasting, as well as owning and operating a family farm with a long and deep memory of farm equipment and culture, created a loyal following of farm and urban listeners. They often called to just chat with a friend who understands what they want to buy or sell.

"It's been an amazing adventure into the culture of the farm and ranch community that often connected people in a diverse geography," said Millard. "While most of the callers are wanting to sell some item, antique, or perhaps equipment worth over \$100,000, we also visited with farm women who may have chickens, dogs, or even a donkey needing companionship that they wanted to sell. Every week is a new and unique mix of callers who we just chat with and find out what's happening in their worlds from Oklahoma, Nebraska, Wyoming, Colorado, Kansas, and Missouri. Some are surely real characters, especially

Fred from Diamond, Missouri, who wanted to sell a pile of dirt!

"We've been blessed with terrific affiliated stations and an audience that is active and engaged. Over the years, we've had several of our listeners who will call to let the audience know that a frequent caller has passed away. It might have been **Johnny** in Oklahoma, **John** in Colorado, or **Jerry** in Kansas. Yes, all these true farmers are culturally interconnected in a personal way via the power of the human voice found only in live radio."

Millard said it's been his privilege to have had more than a 55-year radio broadcasting experience, and he has never moved from St. Joseph's KFEQ or his farm east of town. He and his wife, **Sharon**, and their dog, **Rose**, look forward to sleeping in on Saturday mornings for a change.

Root told Millard the program was started as a release valve to do something humorous after a five-day round of hard news on AgriTalk.

"Yes, Ken was full of humor and often found a way to weave sometimes uncomfortable humor into the phone calls," Millard said. "When I assumed the program, I knew I was no match for Ken's quick wit and had to rely upon my decades of living and knowing farming (with dirt under my nails) and the significant number of tractors, combines, and various equipment that I had either purchased or driven. Most of my tractor and machinery inventory over the years would make **Max Armstrong** proud as it was red! It's been a kind of hobby to remember tractor

models and some of the specifications associated and some of the challenges that can relate to the callers to the program. Many callers do find real results from their conversations with me and call in the following week to express their appreciation for selling or finding the item they described. It's amazing that so many folks will travel hundreds of miles to find exactly what they want from some other farmer who may be 250 miles away. Several of the Agri-Shop affiliates have very large signals that reach hundreds of miles. Recently, I had callers listening to KFRM call in from northern Oklahoma, western Kansas, north central Kansas, and southern Nebraska. KFEQ in St. Joseph gets callers from Missouri, Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska. KKOW in Pittsburg, Kansas, gets callers from southeast Kansas, southwest Missouri, and northeast Oklahoma. The Nebraska stations in Alliance and Chadron get callers from Nebraska, South Dakota, and eastern Wyoming."

Millard started his broadcasting days in 1964 as the assistant farm director for KFEQ radio and TV. KFEQ radio split from TV in 1969, and he continued with radio and was named the farm director in 1973.

"I was asked by the ownership to assume the responsibility of general manager of KFEQ in 1976 and elected early retirement in 2003," Millard said. "It was certainly an exciting and challenging career, and I am so pleased that we were blessed with some terrific staff, especially farm broadcasters. I was so very proud of all our farm broadcasters over the years — **Bob Azelton, Bryce Anderson, Gene Williams, Mike Railsback, Sam Knipp, Gary Wergin, Tonya Wilson, and Tom Brand.** All were true to their profession and their passion."



SPECK IS NEW NAFB MEMBER — **Sam Speck** is a new member of NAFB, now in his first full year of working at the Mid-America Ag Network in Wichita, Kansas.

Speck grew up in Fort Collins, Colorado, with his father, **Mickey Speck**, mother, **Barbara Speck**, and his older sister, **Molly**. Speck was born into a house of passion for sports and baseball, and he played his way through childhood into the high-school level. It was at that point he hit a crossroads as to what to do. He loved playing baseball, but he did not have the drive to continue through to the next level. Shortly after making the decision to step away from sports, he quickly realized

he needed a new focus.

Broadcasting was another profession that caught his eye. Speck realized he had a gift in the field and saw his way back into the sports world through media. He graduated from Fossil Ridge High School in Fort Collins, Colorado, in 2014; and one year later, he enrolled in the Colorado Media School in Lakewood, Colorado. To this day, Speck said this move to the media school was one the best decisions of his life. The school exposed him to industry professionals,

taught him what it felt like to fail but also succeed, and truly turned him into a true radio person.

From there, Speck went on to graduate with 3.8 honors with an associate degree in sports broadcasting and has never looked back. Speck started with a seasonal job in Bismarck, North Dakota, and spent some time working down in Coffeyville as a news and sports director; he recently has been brought into the Steckline Communications family for the Mid-America Ag Network as the farm news director.

Knowing Speck's focus to get back to the ballfield one day, he now thinks as a radio person, realizing there are many aspects that go into making a network successful. He mentioned some things like filling in for positions, having technical issues and still having to go live, and trying new things within the industry.



“I have never been afraid to try new things in broadcasting, and when I was given the opportunity to begin as a farm broadcaster, I took it right away,” Speck said. “I have worked several positions within both the TV and radio industry, and trying something new such as an ag broadcaster would be a great challenge.”

Speck mentioned his grandfather was an Iowa farmer, but growing up, he was never naturally surrounded by agriculture. Recognizing the challenge of not having natural knowledge and generations of family farmers behind him, Speck knew it would be a challenge and took it upon himself to learn as much as he can about the wide world of agriculture. He was confident in his broadcasting skills but he said it's been a long, fun few months building relationships with others around the industry through NAFB and other conferences and becoming more confident as a true farm broadcaster.

“I love radio, every aspect of it,” Speck said. “I never thought I would enjoy the ag side of things as much as I do, particularly since I was not surrounded by it as a kid. But it has been very informative for me. I’ve gained so much respect for our American farmers and producers, and I have thoroughly enjoyed telling their stories through my work. And if there is one goal I hope to get out of this, it is that ag news gets transferred to the public in a correct and truthful and reliable way.

“Being 24, my mind races as to what I would like to do at the end of it all, hopefully sports or something like it. But my short time working with ag broadcasting and being a new member of NAFB has opened my eyes to a side of broadcasting I never thought I would enjoy so much and hope to only grow from here. Of course, the end game would be around sports one day, but I am grateful for the broadcasting opportunities I have been given through my prior stations and this network. **Greg Steckline** has continually had confidence in me and has helped me through the learning process of becoming a true ag broadcaster. I can’t wait for what the future holds, and who knows, I may be in ag a lot longer than you think because I’ve enjoyed it so much. Having great support from both my parents, my sister, and my beautiful fiancé, **Amberly**, plus all the help from my colleagues, and lots of hard work, I am very excited to see where this ends up,” Speck added.

NORDLUND WINS SHEPHERD’S VOICE AWARD — Montana Farm Broadcaster **Lane Nordlund**, of the Evan Slack Network, recently was awarded the 2020 Shepherd’s Voice Award for broadcast media.

The award was presented during the 2020 American Sheep Industry Association’s (ASI) convention this January in Scottsdale, Arizona. The accolade recognizes outstanding year-long coverage of the sheep industry by a broadcaster.

“I’m truly honored by this recognition,” Nordlund said. “The ASI convention was one of the first national meetings I ever attended. The sheep industry took me under its wing and supported a young and inexperienced broadcaster. Not to mention, I grew up raising cattle. I’ve learned so much from my friends at ASI.”

ASI President **Benny Cox**, of Texas, said Nordlund was very deserving of the award. Cox told the crowd of several hundred during the convention’s award luncheon that “Lane seems to be everywhere covering agriculture events while carrying our message, which he does so well.”

“It’s so important to share the successes and challenges that the nation’s wool and lamb producers face,” Nordlund said. “It’s a privilege to help be a voice for them.”



In his acceptance speech, Nordlund thanked the industry for its friendship and support as well as fellow Farm Broadcaster **Rick Haines** for showing him the ropes at his first ASI convention. He also thanked his mentor and fellow Farm Broadcaster **Russell Nemetz**, also of the Evan Slack Network, for his continued encouragement and guidance.



IRLBECK NAMED DISTINGUISHED TEACHING AWARD RECIPIENT — Dr. Erica Irlbeck (NAFB Allied Industry Council Member, Lubbock, Texas) is an associate professor of agricultural communications at Texas Tech University. She was one of seven top faculty members presented 2020 research and teaching awards by Texas Tech University Chancellor **Dr. Tedd L. Mitchell**. Recipients received a \$5,000 stipend and an engraved medallion.

“It is a huge honor to be recognized by Texas Tech. I love being at this university, and one of the many reasons is that they place such a high emphasis on quality teaching, then they recognize us for our work,” Irlbeck said.

As part of the nation’s top undergraduate program for agricultural communications, Irlbeck teaches courses ranging from video production to strategic communications. She has focused on expanding her pedagogical base by participating in the design of the agricultural communications senior capstone experience, developing online courses, creating a resident course on agricultural advocacy, and continually refining the content quality of her courses. Her program’s undergraduate degree was rated first in the nation by an independent study in 2015.

Irlbeck’s research focuses on agriculture in television media, risk and crisis communications, and science communications. Through a grant from BASF, Irlbeck developed a program to train agricultural scientists in communications and advocacy. Now in its fourth year, Irlbeck plans to expand the program into a course for all graduate students in the College of Agricultural Sciences & Natural Resources at Texas Tech.

Irlbeck serves the industry at local, state, regional, and national levels. She is superintendent of the Texas FFA Agricultural Communications Career Development Event, vice president for the Western Region American Association for Agricultural Education, and a committee member for the National FFA Agricultural Communications Career Development Event. She also is a member of the Lubbock County Farm Bureau board of directors. Previously, Irlbeck worked in agricultural television news for AgDay Television and KLBK-TV, farm radio for Clear Channel Networks, public relations, and advertising.

Irlbeck received her Doctor of Education in agricultural education from Texas Tech in August 2009. She received her bachelor's degree in agricultural communications from Oklahoma State University in 1998 and her master's degree in agricultural communications from Texas Tech in 2007. Erica is married to **Scott**, who farms wheat and grain sorghum in the Texas Panhandle. They have one son, **Jett**.

NEW NAFB MEMBER IS RFD-TV WASHINGTON BUREAU CHIEF — Farm Broadcaster **Corryn La Rue** is settling into her leadership role as the RFD-TV Washington, D.C., bureau chief. Just five months after joining the rural television network as a reporter, she shifted into the bureau chief role in October 2019. Aside from providing daily reports on agriculture policy in D.C., she



broadcasts live from RFD-TV's D.C. studio, the White House, and the U.S. Capitol. As a California native, she knows firsthand the agriculture industry is vast and ever-changing.

“Growing up as a sixth-generation farmer’s daughter, I always knew I would have a career in agriculture, it’s part of who I am,” La Rue said. “But I knew my strengths weren’t best suited at home, helping with the family operation. I knew I wanted to tell stories about this industry, and that’s what eventually lead me to farm broadcasting.”



La Rue is a familiar face in the NAFB community, as she’s been involved since her freshman year of college in 2015.

“The moment I walked into my first NAFB Convention, I fell in love with it,” she said. “I remember sitting at the banquet table, getting hit in the head with a bread roll, and thinking, ‘These are my people.’”

La Rue served as a social media corps intern with NAFB during her time in college. Also, she was honored as a **Glen Kummerow** Scholarship recipient. She found her passion for reporting on agriculture policy during an internship with Agri-Pulse, saying it was one of the most rewarding internships she did in college. She graduated from Utah State University in 2019, with bachelor degrees in agriculture communications and journalism, with an emphasis in broadcasting. Also, she minored in animal science.

Following her passion for television, she accepted a position with RFD-TV as a reporter directly after graduation. She’ll celebrate her one-year anniversary at RFD-TV in May 2020. She plans on continuing to cover agriculture policy in Washington, D.C., and staying an active member of NAFB.

“I’m excited to continue my growth as a broadcaster and expanding my involvement in NAFB,” La Rue said. “I appreciate this community so much, and I’m looking forward to giving back to the organization that really helped me find my purpose in life.”

Second photo: La Rue interviews Iowa Senator **Chuck Grassley**

WE WANT YOUR NEWS — Send us your stories and photos for future newsletter issues.

Contact Larry Quinn at larryquinn@outlook.com or phone at **703-819-6532**. *Airing on the Side of Agriculture* is included in the blog section of NAFB.com. For an archive copy of any past issues, go to **Membership** and click on *Airing on the Side of Agriculture*.

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