



Streeter Stuart: NEWS VOICE OF NEW ENGLAND

*At OU his interests were modern languages and music;
he intended to be a college professor.
Then somewhere along the way,
someone sat him behind a microphone.*

By PAUL SPIERS



WBZ Radio's Streeter Stuart (left) interviews movie legend Jimmy Stewart during a Boston visit in the late 1940s to plug his latest film, "The Mountain Road."

University of Oklahoma alumnus Streeter Stuart adds luster to the definition of Renaissance Man.

The boy who traveled across the prairies in a covered wagon also has distinguished himself as radio's "News Voice of New England," one of that area's first television newscasters, professor of romance languages, World War II propagandist, religious mission organizer, photographer, book translator, world traveler, nutrition expert, proud father—and a man of scruples.

This remarkable octogenarian, who received a B.A. degree from the University in 1932 and a master's in 1936, explains that he has had a "broad sweep" and "life has not been drab for me."

Physically and mentally spry, Stuart took a break in the health food store he owns and operates in suburban Boston for a recent *Sooner Magazine* interview. He concedes that he has had a "pretty good perspective of what's happened in the news business" over almost half a century.

"I seem to 'feel' the news. I had traveled a lot, and when I'd read those international stories, I'd be thinking 'that's where I was;' I could visualize it. That gave a depth to my reporting;

other people could feel it, too.

"I nearly always wrote my own news copy. I knew pretty well what was important news, and what seemed important to me seemed to coincide with the thinking of most of the people. I still have people come into my store and say I was their favorite newsman. That's a satisfaction."

Among those who admire Stuart's talents is Daniel J. Finn of Boston, long associated with Boston University as a graduate, vice president and trustee. "You trusted Streeter," Finn says. "He was a pro's pro. He was the tops for a long time."

A colleague who knew Stuart well at WBZ—for decades a dominant 50,000-watt New England station—is Iran Berlow, who later joined the faculty at Boston University and is now retired in California.

"Streeter was a little more intelligent than his peers in the sense that he had a broader cultural perspective," Berlow recalls. "He was very articulate, affable and always dressed impeccably. A very meticulous gentleman. Just first-rate all-around. He was one of the very best."

Stuart, who looks and sounds today as if he could still credibly present a

television newscast, didn't get into the news business the routine way. His start on the curiosity trail came as a five-year-old on the family trek from Oklahoma to Colorado in 1913.

"We were living in Oklahoma City," he recalls, "and my father discovered that he could file for government land in Colorado—320 acres just by filing and then cultivating it. He had a team of horses, and he built a covered wagon.

"Before we left, my mother baked a lot of cookies and bread and stored them in the wagon in a huge lard can. In the covered wagon, there were two mattresses for my parents and my older brothers and myself. We had a monkey stove, a small cast-iron potbellied affair for heat and cooking.

"We'd stop along the way and build a fire at the side of the road to cook. Usually I would get sunflower stalks and break them up to make the fire. My mother would cook graham mush or something like that, and, if we went by some farmer's, we'd get some milk. I thought that was just great.

"A lot of the time we were not traveling on roads—there just weren't that many roads—but rather right across the prairies making our way through the blowing tumbleweeds. We finally made it to Chi Chi Flats—now called Branson, I believe—where we were going to settle. My father and older brother dug blocks of earth to make adobe, and we set the framework of the covered wagon on those adobe blocks. Later we built a real house with a packed-earth floor and a tin roof."

As he grew to young manhood, Stuart followed an academic route to a professorship in romance languages. He attended Anderson University in Indiana for three years, then transferred to the University of Oklahoma.

"My life was entwined by a lot of the life at the University of Oklahoma," says Stuart. "While there I was president of the Spanish Club and a member of the French Club. I played first trumpet and then flugelhorn in the Pride of Oklahoma marching band and the concert band and was a vocal soloist in the concert band. I was baritone in the University male quartet under the direction of Earl Virden and sang in the glee club."

He proudly recalls working in the biology department laboratories under George L. Cross, who later became president of the University, and being soloist in the Baptist Church choir. The congregation included OU President William Bennett Bizzell and University secretary Emil Kraettli.

His later studies included two years at the University of Toulouse in France, where he was awarded several certificates for French language studies, and graduate work at Tufts, Boston and Harvard universities. He found academic life so satisfying that he taught four years at Southeastern Oklahoma State University in Durant as professor of modern languages. While at Durant, he reviewed scores of books in Spanish and French for *Books Abroad*, the OU international literary quarterly (now *World Literature Today*), and mainstream books for *The Daily Oklahoman*.

Admittedly happy as a professor, constantly surrounded by books, Stuart launched his New England broadcasting career in 1940 by happenstance, his only training being one course in basic public speaking.

"I came to Boston as a result of having visited Westinghouse's KDKA in Pittsburgh, the country's first radio station. The news director learned that I was a professor of modern languages, and he said, 'Hey, we're starting a new short-wave station up in Boston. It will be 50,000 watts.' Westinghouse had never had a 50,000-watt short-wave station.

"I was the first one hired for the announcing staff. I translated and broadcast daily programs to Spain, Europe and South America."

In 1941, the State Department asked Stuart to work for Nelson Rockefeller, the coordinator of inter-American affairs. "They offered me double the salary I was getting, so I went to New York where I supervised a number of people broadcasting in Spanish to Latin America over the short-wave facilities of CBS and NBC."

Returning to Boston and WBZ, Stuart announced the first live FM broadcasts in New England on a series of concerts by Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops Orchestra.

Primarily a newscaster on WBZ-AM, he also had to spin records. "They

hadn't invented the disc jockey yet. Later on they divided the staff, and we had to choose whether to be a regular announcer or a disc jockey. I always felt closer to the news than spinning records, so I became a full-time newsmen, commentator and correspondent. Because of newscasts to the national NBC network, they called me by such prominent news names as 'the Lowell Thomas of New England' or 'the Walter Cronkite of New England.'"

Among the announcer competitions Stuart won at the station was the "Esso Reporter" — "as far as I know I did the first full commercial radio broadcast from an airplane."

Stuart attributes his meticulous enunciation and pronunciation to his participation in OU's male singing quartet and glee club.

"We paid attention to enunciation because people in the audience usually have no idea what the singers are singing about."

Despite a 40-hour-plus week at WBZ, Stuart managed to teach Spanish and French at Boston University for five years in the late '40s and early '50s and also took course work there himself. "It was very satisfying at Boston University, although I was always pressed for time."

The pace quickened. Television reached Boston in 1948, and Stuart and the late Arch McDonald were the first two television news personalities on the air in New England. Stuart never says "TV," it is always "television" — endowing the medium with a certain dignity.

"We didn't have any film," Stuart recalls of television's embryonic days. "We used slides and a rear screen projector. The announcer had to pick out the slides to go with the news, then time the program before going on the air.

"For Washington stories, about the only thing visual we had were pictures of the White House and the Capitol. It was really crude."

Undaunted, Stuart tried to enliven his newscasts a bit. "I remember doing a story on UFOs. I took a kitchen saucer and threw it in front of the camera and said, 'This is a flying saucer story.'"

Fifteen years ago, at age 65, in good

health and doing well, Stuart was forced to retire by Westinghouse's employment policy. When numerous offers to join smaller radio stations failed to entice him, a change of emphasis seemed to be called for in Stuart's life, this time as a religious mission executive.

He joined the World Radio Mission, headquartered in Lancaster, New Hampshire, as international coordinator. His language background fitted neatly into translating literature into Spanish and French and arranging translations into other languages. He traveled around the world twice for the mission and coordinated a crusade in India.

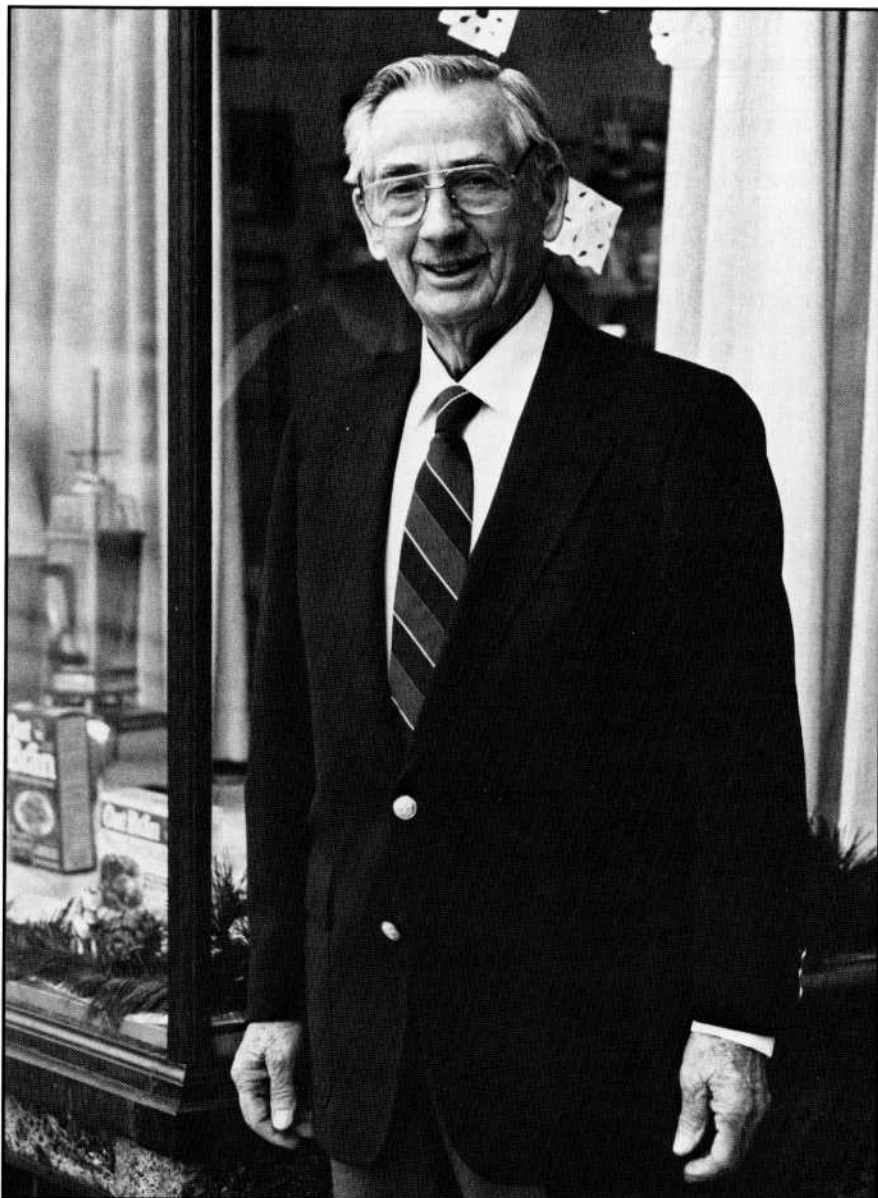
After two years, Stuart resigned to begin a new career working eight-and-a-half-hour days, six days a week at his own nutrition store.

Assisting in the store are his wife, Merle, 84, and their daughter, Twyla, who has a B.A. from Boston University and a master of divinity from Princeton Theological Seminary. The Stuarts' other two living children are Streeter Stuart Jr., professor of Greek and New Testament at United Wesleyan College in Allentown, Pennsylvania, and Douglas Stuart, professor of Hebrew and head of the Old Testament department at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Wenham, Massachusetts.

His business doesn't leave him time to see movies anymore — not even "Broadcast News." However, he does watch one or two network television newscasts each evening, then turns to his evening reading of *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* or *Orthomolecular Medicine* or *The International Journal of Applied Nutrition*.

Stuart does find time to accept invitations to speak at service and women's clubs, often about the old days of radio and television. He obliges because, "I really enjoyed broadcasting."

Occasionally Stuart broke out of the Boston and New England news scene with trips to Central and South America, the Middle East and Egypt, shooting feature films and making travelogues of each trip. On one Central and South America trip, he conducted three hour-long background interviews with U.S. ambassadors and spent several hours with the then-



In the midst of yet another career, Streeter Stuart stands in front of the Belmont Nutrition Center, the health food store he owns and operates in suburban Boston.

president of Guatemala. But the highlight was being detained by the Paraguayan police for unknowingly sitting in the theater seat of the dictator, President Alfredo Stroessner. The next day when Stuart left for Brazil, Stroessner was at the airport to shake his hand and wish him well.

As he looks back over the years, he considers many broadcast professionals on the national level to have been capable, especially Robert Trout of CBS ("a good newscaster with a voice, presence and dignity") — and most especially Walter Cronkite "because he seemed to take everything in stride. He was very serious. I felt he didn't

have any particular irons in the fire. Cronkite presented the news as he saw it. He spoke distinctly and didn't race."

On the regional level, Stuart is equally candid. "Not to be egotistical, but I didn't think anyone at WBZ—and we were always a step ahead of everybody in town—was a better newsmen than I was."

It may well be that no broadcaster in Boston had more integrity. At the height of his popularity, he was asked by a major wine company to be its exclusive announcer on all radio and television commercials. He declined.

"As a teetotaler, I felt maybe it would not be a good influence for the kids

and some other people. I told them I'd rather not. They couldn't believe that. Here was a chance to make a pile of money. They finally were reconciled to the fact that I had some scruples."

Stuart views changes in the media since pre-World War II as good news and bad news.

"There's good technology now. Video taping was a good step forward to get stuff faster. Now, television is not too much slower than radio. That is good.

"I think most people try to do a good job. However, some do not really bother to polish their English. They don't enunciate as well as they could, and their pronunciation sometimes is just wrong.

"I'm not a purist in that I pick up the flaws in everything I hear, but there are a lot of announcers who might not have made the grade at one time. You might think it would be more select now, but there are so many stations that sometimes they get people who are really not top quality. I see some guys who actually look like they're asleep on television. I wonder about that."

Another problem that disturbs Stuart is "racing."

"A lot of the announcers are being prodded to race. You notice especially when they're doing long items that some of the announcers are going to the very depths of themselves to try to speak as fast as they can. Well, that's wrong because the people listening catch some of this tenseness. It is not as enjoyable because the announcers don't integrate what they're saying into their thinking.

"Part of the problem, of course, is time restraint. The administrators over them like to hear it zipping off whether anybody understands it or not."

As Stuart looks back on the media from his "broad sweep" since 1940, he is proud of the "somewhat major role" he played in the history of radio and television in New England. "In fact, my life has been very interesting to me. I've enjoyed it thoroughly and still do.

"I'm not one who is ready to quit. One of my professional friends asked me, 'Are you just going to keep going until you fall over?' My answer is, 'What's wrong with that?'" 