

## THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

October 26, 1950

Description: In this segment, ER interviews Douglas Lee, the creator of many of Broadway's electric signs.

Participants: ER, Elliott Roosevelt, Douglas Lee

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[ER:] I think this is a good time to tell my listeners that one of the reasons I enjoy my program is that I am continually learning about many things. Some are new things and some are things that are just new to me because I did not know about them before. Today is no exception, because I am going to have an opportunity, right here in my living room, of asking a young man whom I've known for some time but whom I've never had a chance before to really question about the things that he is doing, because he has created for himself an extraordinary career. It gives me great pleasure to introduce Mr. Douglas Lee. (1:02)

[Douglas Lee:] How are you Ms. Roosevelt, so glad to see you.

[ER:] Nice to see you again, Mr. Lee. You are the creator of the majority of the enormous animated electric signs on Broadway. They've won for you the accolade of the "King of the Spectacular." What are some of the signs on Broadway that are yours?

[Douglas Lee:] Well, Ms. Roosevelt, the um man who blows smoke rings out over the street is one of the signs we are most proud of. Uh Camel put that sign up with me nine years ago, and it's been there ever since, and the man has blown many millions and millions of smoke rings across the street. Uh another sign that uh most of your listeners probably recognize is the Everready spectacular that shoots a beam of light five miles into the sky. Another one uh is one that has the claim of the largest electric letters in the world, for REM at 42nd and Broadway. Another one is the Chevrolet spectacular at the top of Time Square in the center, the center island there. Um the Gillette spectacular has been uh waving its uh moving pendulum and neon lights uh for fourteen years. (2:32)

[ER:] Good gracious, did you --were you doing it as long ago as that, I thought you were too young to have done anything so long ago.

[Douglas Lee:] No, we've been--we've been in this business since um, [Douglas Lee laughs] interesting day in your life, uh March 4, 1933.

[ER:] You started on that day, that wasn't a very auspicious day for you to start.

[Douglas Lee:] It didn't bother me very much, frankly, because there was little to lose and an awful lot to win ahead of me from there on. Uh -- [ER: Well--] Excuse me.

[ER:] Is it the kind -- was it the kind of business that required a good deal of capital to start? (3:08)

[Douglas Lee:] Well, I'm afraid uh, ma'am, if it had I never would have started it. It uh, we started that on a shoestring like so many American businesses have started and have grown on the return from each

spectacular: from one we built the second, from the two we built the third, and so on that's been our growth.

[ER:] And that- that was the way you did it. Well now, did anything in your schooling uh lead you into this sort of business, or how did you happen to come to do this sort of thing. What suggested it to you?

[Douglas Lee:] Uh Mrs. Roosevelt, I um have always liked advertising, one form or another. I worked on the college-- on the uh high school annual in high school when I lived in Greenville, South Carolina. Then I worked on the college yearbook when I went to school at the University of Florida, and I always liked the unusual in advertising. And um thereafter, after leaving school I went to the uh Atlanta and got a job, I won't call it a position, a job with [Douglas Lee laughs] the General Outdoor Advertising Company, and uh selling billboard space. And I always wanted then to put the something to a dimension beyond the norm, you know, to-to-to demand attention, and um from that you know one idea leads to another and-and it just was a --(4:42)

[ER:] That's how you got started, just worked up so to speak.

[Douglas Lee:] Well, it uh, I don't know. You - most of us are giving some one thing in life that uh might be called a flair or something, and mine, I guess, if I have any gifts is the idea of developing something unusual that causes favorable comment and people to um appreciate the thing advertised because it is favorably presented to them.

[ER:] Well, um what's the very -- do you do most of your signs for New York or are they outside of New York too?

[Douglas Lee:] Uh our main bailiwick is right here in New York, and more particularly in the Broadway Times Square area, which um as you may know this interesting statistic um a million and a half people from all over the USA tried that eight block area from Forty-Second to Fiftieth each day. You might also be interested to know that 265,000 average, average throughout the year, 265,000 visitors per day from all over the USA and the world for that matter uh visit that zone of Forty-Second to Fiftieth on Broadway and Seventh Avenue. (5:59)

[ER:] I had no idea of that, that is a [Douglas Lee: It's a, It's a fabulous amount] terrific number isn't it.

[Douglas Lee:] It's as big as the population of many a uh good sized-city!

[ER:] Why yes, I never -- it never crossed my mind it was that big. [Douglas Lee: That many people, yes] So that's the audience that you play to everyday.

[Douglas Lee:] That's right, the-the million and a half and-and about another two-fifty to three hundred thousand are- are people who live within a fifty-mile zone of here, you know, commuters and the like.

[ER:] Well now, how do you get your ideas for these signs, and do you carry them through to completion, do you think about them all-all the way through?

[Douglas Lee:] Well, I don't think of them all. I have some awfully capable uh people around me and uh many of them have been with me for years. Have a chief engineer named Fred Curwell, who's been with me since the start, and we've never developed anything -- an idea that he hasn't been able to see through completion. And um we-we develop these ideas, and sometimes I think he's going to throw me out of my own office for some of the things that he thinks are a little bit fantastic, but if you leave it to him he'll come through with them, some way or another. [Douglas Lee laughs] (7:17)

[ER:] He puts it -- he actually builds them and puts them into practice.

[Douglas Lee:] That's right, he-he um guides the development of the special effects that we dream up and -- hate to use that word dream up, but sometime people think they're dreamed up. [Douglas Lee laughs]

[ER:] Well now, tell me in your business sign, um which is your biggest sign?

[Douglas Lee:] Well, the biggest one I guess is one that is not stationary on Broadway that's our uh two hundred forty foot trademark that I believe you have seen and uh that flies around the sky for Flamingo, it's a product we're very proud to have on your good program. Uh the bird -- uh the flamingo-- is a tropical bird, as you know, and uh its pinkish, uh reddish, uh crimson, I don't know all the colors mixed up together give it a flamingo color all its distinct own. And uh it flies around the skies all over the eastern seaboard, and there are eighteen thousand lights in that um --[ER: Eighteen thousand lights!], eighteen thousand yes. (8:26)

[ER:] That has more lights than any other sign that you have?

[Douglas Lee:] That's right, eighteen thousand.

[ER:] Isn't that extraordinary, and uh I--that must have been a sort of difficult thing, what gave you the idea of having a flying sign like that?

[Douglas Lee:] Well, uh actually the idea of a flying spectacular display is not brand new, but our treatment of it, we think, is-is-is the new part of it. Uh before the year, the Goodyear Company used to fly smaller blimps than these, about one-quarter the size of these around the skies with six foot letters. We developed this technique of um of the bulbs and the light from one shines so close to the other that it looks like neon, it isn't, it's actually bulbs. And uh this-this invention really of um flexible wiring around the ship, uh allowed us to put our minimum-sized letter of eighteen feet, we've had them up to fifty-three feet in height, and that um -- well, I lost my point a little there, but that has aided us in building these fabulous displays to have such a new invention of lighting. (9:45)

[ER:] Well, that's really what makes your things so remarkable, the-the way in which you light them, doesn't it, and the way you use your lights.

[Douglas Lee:] Yes, ma'am, the lighting and the animation. Uh animation, proper animation where uh it is illustrating the trademark of the product is-is ideal, yes, ma'am.

[Break 10:05-10:16]

[ER:] You spoke of the flamingo, Mr. Lee, and that brings me to a question about your new business. Will you tell me about it?

[Douglas Lee:] Well, uh Ms. Roosevelt, having had some part, small or large whichever it was, um and building other products, I thought was about time we tried one of our own. I've always had a yen to have a product of our own and to see if we could put one over as we've aided in the success of others, so we looked into seven or eight different type products, and the one that stood out and a more -- and-and many natural reasons for this one standing out in our particular minds was that I had the advertising facilities and services to put behind a product. I realized one needed to build a trademark first and then the question of what type of product this should be. Well, having been to school at the University of Florida, uh the subject of oranges was very close -- [ER: Came easily to mind.] came easily to mind, yes -- and so we uh

decided well that is probably the product and also the phenomenal growth of the orange concentrate idea. You know the uh only five years ago a total of 225 gallons -- 225,000 gallons of this product was sold in the USA. This year there will be twenty million gallons of that product sold, or nearly a hundred fold growth in five years. (12:08)

[ER:] That's astounding!

[Douglas Lee:] It is a - it's a-it's a phenomenon in the food industry, and it's -- there's every reason why that type product should be a success , it saves time, uh housewives' time in the kitchen, there's equal amount of uh vitamins in it, the color is fine --

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Wait a minute, Doug, that's my selling story. You can't go start giving my commercials. [All laugh]

[Douglas Lee:] This is one thing I could really give a commercial on.

[ER:] Well, Doug you know -- [ER: Well this is really what makes you a part of our program.] but Doug you know uh I think that uh I have a right to be an expert too, you remember uh when you before you ever got into this business you and I had long conversations as to whether we were going into it together, remember that?

[Douglas Lee:] I know you, you uh you had uh you were being in the business too.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] I was following on an independent investigation of the orange concentrate business of my own, and uh our paths crossed, and I think now that maybe I made a mistake, maybe I ought to own half of uh Flamingo Frozen concentrate instead of just uh having the opportunity to sell it. [ER laughs]

[ER:] Well I'm -I'm interested in-in the fact that you have developed a business of your own and are using your original business uh to promote your second business. (13:36)

[Douglas Lee:] That uh is a little new. I don't know when that's been done before, but it's an interesting attempt to do something, Ms. Roosevelt. Uh you know you can't always succeed, I intend to succeed on this.

[ER:] You can't always succeed for yourself when you have succeeded for other people, so I think it's interesting that you should be um now succeeding for yourself, and I also think that um one thing that brings me right back to your first business, which is really tied up with your second. But still I want to come back to that first business because there must have been a time when you met real difficulties during the war with that business, what happened when we had the blackouts? (14:28)

[Douglas Lee:] Well, the blackouts were rather devastating-- uh had-had a rather devastating effect on us. But I um will always uh be very happy and appreciative of the fact that in the three years ten months and eight hours, no eight days and two hours that we were blacked out, only one client left us. Now mind you they buy the bright lights, that's the main thing they buy, so they accepted the daytime value, at a naturally a reduced amount because we didn't develop the kind of service we had been delivering, and of our clients on the Great White Way, one left us during the war.

[ER:] Why that is extraordinary. They-- uh of course, you must have made much less, but still furthermore to have stuck through that time was wonderful, I think.

[Douglas Lee:] That's what happens when you have a good bunch of clients.

[ER:] [Laughs] I think that's really um a very great compliment to your clients, well now I hate to think that you might ever meet similar situations again, but as everyone is planning what we do in case of atomic um attack, have you made any plans according to that I -- those lines? (15:50)

[Douglas Lee:] Well, if an atomic attack happens I hope to be near a very deep cellar along with my ever-loving wife and-and child, but um I-I'm um -- who was it recently the writer who said, "As long as you livin' you ain't dead." [ER laughs] Well, I think he had something huh? I frankly uh, I'm not-I'm not worried about that.

[ER:] You're not worried about that.

[Douglas Lee:] I think we -- people are good and there's still a way to find a solution for our problems, some way or other.

[ER:] And you're not uh you're not planning uh what will happen to your signs in case of an atomic attack, you think it would be too devastating to plan for [Douglas Lee laughs]. Well, you're-- you having actually been through a war, you probably realize more than most people do um what could be done in the last war, and therefore don't want to contemplate the next. (16:50)

[Douglas Lee:] Yes I had a stint in the navy in the last unpleasant situation, and uh it's uh it's-it's not something really to look forward to. I don't know I'm a little lost for words. I can talk signs, but what this situation is I don't know. I don't get it. I do think --

[ER:] Well, you were still thinking about your business uh even in the last war, and your- your partner, uh I understand, got a message from you telling him to come home as soon as he could, uh you had new ideas, was that so?

[Douglas Lee:] That-that was the dirigible, that's the idea.

[ER:] That was the dirig -- ha! I think that's very amusing that you were um thinking even while you were still in the service um new ideas for advertising things. (17:46)

[Douglas Lee:] I think uh that's true of so many of the -- uh of most of the fellows uh, Ms. Roosevelt, they were, they were looking forward to their future. They realized under our system that this is the one best place in the world to really achieve and-and to be from nothing to great, and uh that they were looking to the day when they could get started on their real business of-of what they grew up [ER: Of living.] to be men for, that's right uh

[ER:] I'm told that back in 1939, you were thinking of going into politics, what happened? Did you decide not to or what?

[Douglas Lee:] No, um that-that was uh an era somewhere along the line that's a [ER: You didn't ever think--] Business is my forte.

[ER:] Business? You're like my youngest son who says that nothing would induce him to go into politics, that he is going to stick to business, and you feel the same way.

[Douglas Lee:] Bright lights and orange juice take up my time. I-I--enough good politicians without any help from me. (18:45)

[ER:] You do not intend to um to go into politics then or to do anything of that kind.

[Douglas Lee:] Well, no I wouldn't quite say that. If after I've succeeded in what I'm aiming to do and I can afford in both time and-and having earned my niche in this way and I can go onto it on a basis that I did not need the job, I would like to do it.

[ER:] Well, that of course is the best way to go in uh to politics, I think. If you go in uh having enough uh security so that you can [Douglas Lee: That's right. That the income is not necessary, that's right.] be sure that nothing will influence you because you-you have both a business that interests you to go back to and you have enough to live on, and if you have those two things, uh then you can be perfectly free in politics.

[Douglas Lee:] That's- that's right.

[ER:] Isn't that right?

[Douglas Lee:] I-I believe that, [ER: And that's what you like to do.] That's why I think of it to be made more of uh-uh a career for after achievement. You know, where some people turn to philanthropy and others turn and-and to be able to turn to working for your government and not needing the remuneration from it I think would be an ideal uh situation, yes.

[ER:] Well, I hope someday you'll be able to do that and thank you so much for being with us today.

[Douglas Lee:] Thank you for asking me to.

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