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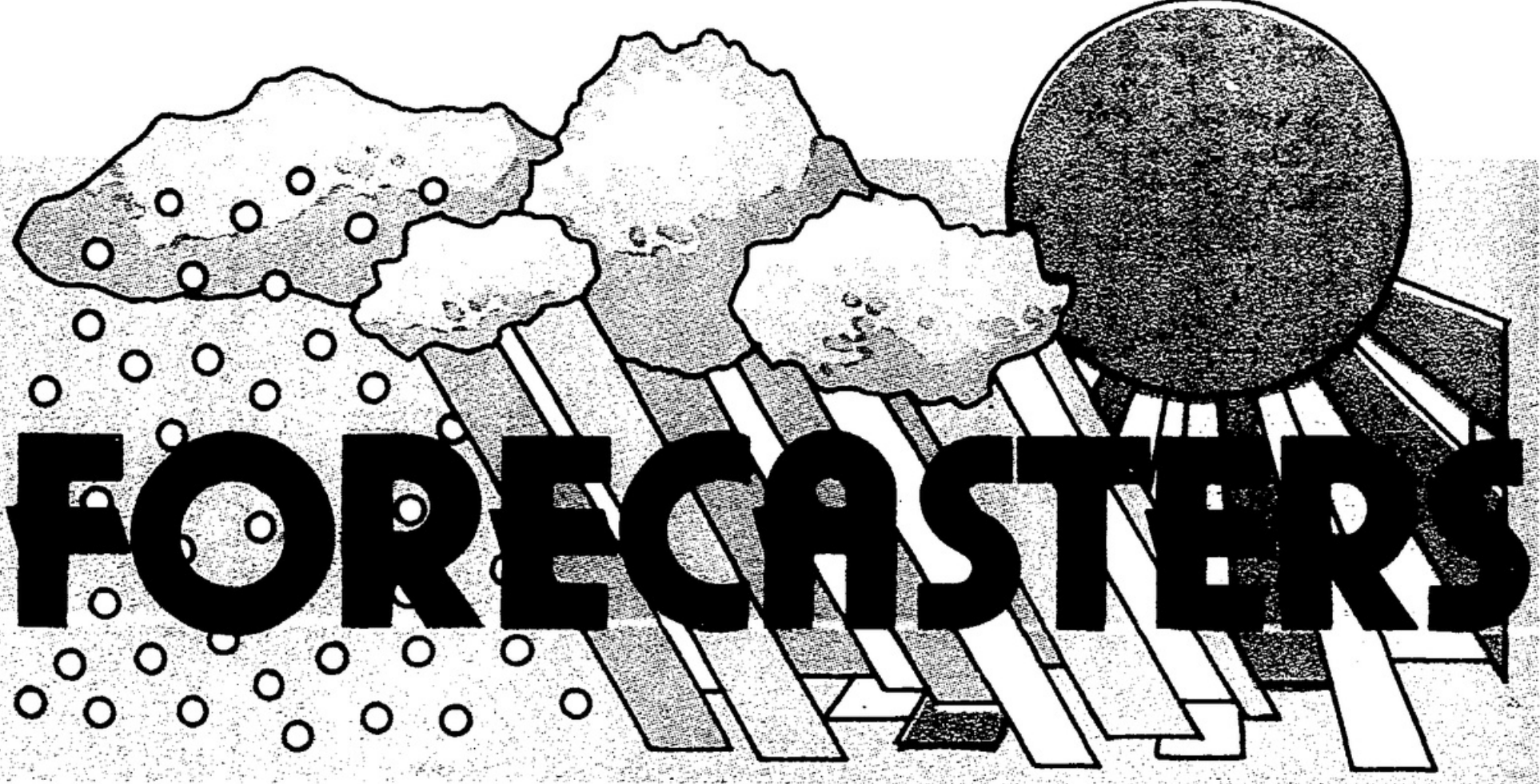
LEISURE

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Information interpretation is key to predicting weather

By Douglas Durden
Times-Dispatch staff writer

This is a true story.
When Jim Duncan, WWBT-TV meteorologist, was a little boy in upstate New York, he used to keep track of the weather, especially snow.

When Duncan grew up, he studied atmospheric science at the State University of New York in Albany. One day he met a TV weatherman who offered to give him a tour of the station. That's when Duncan decided he'd like to take his forecasting skills to television.

This is also a true story.
When John Bernier, meteorologist for WXEX-TV, was a little boy in Boston, he had a bad case of hero worship for WBZ-TV weather caster Don Kent. Little John's favorite hobby was drawing weather maps — everywhere.

When Bernier grew up, he went off to the University of Lowell in Massachusetts and studied meteorology with plans of ending up on television.

And this is also a true story.
When Lori Pinson, WTVR-TV's forecaster, was a student at Cass Technical High School in Detroit, she took a course in television to help get over her shyness. Television, she discovered at an early age, "would never be boring." So she majored in electronic journalism at Wayne State University in Detroit.

However you wind up doing the weather on a TV newscast, the end result still boils down to the same things: Who the viewers like, who the viewers trust, who the viewers think hit upon the right weather most often.

It also boils down to this: The weather report is unlike any other part of the newscast. Reporters and anchors report what has happened or what is scheduled to happen. Weather forecasters predict — without a script and as close to their broadcast as possible.

And they're not always right.

Duncan can remember the time in Greenville, N.C. (his first job) when he told the folks at home it was partly cloudy. When he opened the studio door, it was raining. Ouch.

Bernier remembers the 8 inches of snow he predicted while doing weekend weather in Cleveland (his third TV job). The city got 3. Double ouch.

But that's what you get for going into a job where you can have all the equipment your budget allows, all the data available through a variety of weather services, and it is still up to what weather casters say is personal interpretation.

Meteorologists, people who study the science of the atmosphere, are relative newcomers to TV news, especially in this market. Not so long ago, most of TV's weathermen and women were personalities, on-air types who depended more upon charm and presentation than a degree in a science.

Then, and no one seems to have an easy answer why, many TV stations decided they needed a person who has a degree in meteorology, or someone who can sport the American Meteorological Society's seal of approval behind their name.

(Having an AMS seal doesn't necessarily mean you're a meteorologist, although both Duncan and Bernier have the degree and the seal. Miss Pinson is an associate member of the AMS, meaning she has paid her dues to the society, and says she is working toward certification.)

Maybe, suggests Bernier, meteorologists became important because people discovered weather was serious business. "A lot of people don't care about news or sports, but if it's raining, you're going to know it."

"Stations started discovering it was a profitable part of the newscast. So you want people that can give you the best information."

Maybe, as Duncan suggests, it depends upon the market. New York, where people don't spend much time outside, didn't have any TV meteorologists until recently. Los Angeles, where it's usually sunny, still isn't interested.

But Bernier and Duncan agree that Richmond, with its weather extremes, and surrounding counties, many of them agricultural, is an area with a high degree of interest in what is happening outdoors.

With the explosion in meteorology has come an explosion in equipment.

When you walk into the office or work area of Richmond's weather casters, the first thing you notice are the machines. Data machines that spit out weather maps, computers that can call up images of weather maps across the world — in color.

Despite the computers and the variety of weather services, when Bernier, Duncan and Miss Pinson talk about their weather reports, they all use the word interpretation.

"I don't necessarily agree with the way the weather service does all of its forecasts," Bernier says. "Everybody's looking at the same thing, but it's their interpretation."

"It's interpretation and immediacy," Duncan says. "Every meteorologist will make his own forecast. We have the freedom to interpret the same information every meteorologist gets anyway we want. TV stations are banking on the fact that with meteorologists, they have their own forecast, not a recitation . . . It's important to the station's image."

"Immediacy in a severe weather situation can let people know about it right away and not wait for [a weather service] teletype. It means you can change a forecast at 10 after 6."

Forecasts can vary from one forecaster to another, he acknowledges. "It's up to the viewer to decide, 'Who do I trust?' . . . We can spend half a million on equipment, and another station can spend half a million on theirs. It still boils down to human interpretation."

And, Miss Pinson might add, human communication. "I have all this information," Miss Pinson says. "I try to tell viewers how this weather will affect their day in the simplest terms possible. The equipment enhances what I can tell them."

"When you put forecasters head to head," she continued, "the title of meteorologist doesn't mean that much. You can't get a grip on the weather, only Mother Nature has that. It's how you interpret the information and how you tell it to the viewers. You could be a meteorologist, but not have good communications skill. . . . The main thing is getting information to the viewers."

One thing that these three weather casters agree upon is that snow is their biggest challenge.

As a matter of fact, New England is one of the hotbeds of meteorology because most meteorologists love snow, Bernier says. "Snow is fun to forecast. Snow is challenging to forecast. So much can go wrong."

And that wide margin for error is what the viewers love about the stuff. Notice how it seems weathermen are always calling for more snow than Richmond gets? Bernier, Duncan and Miss Pinson would like to explain why.

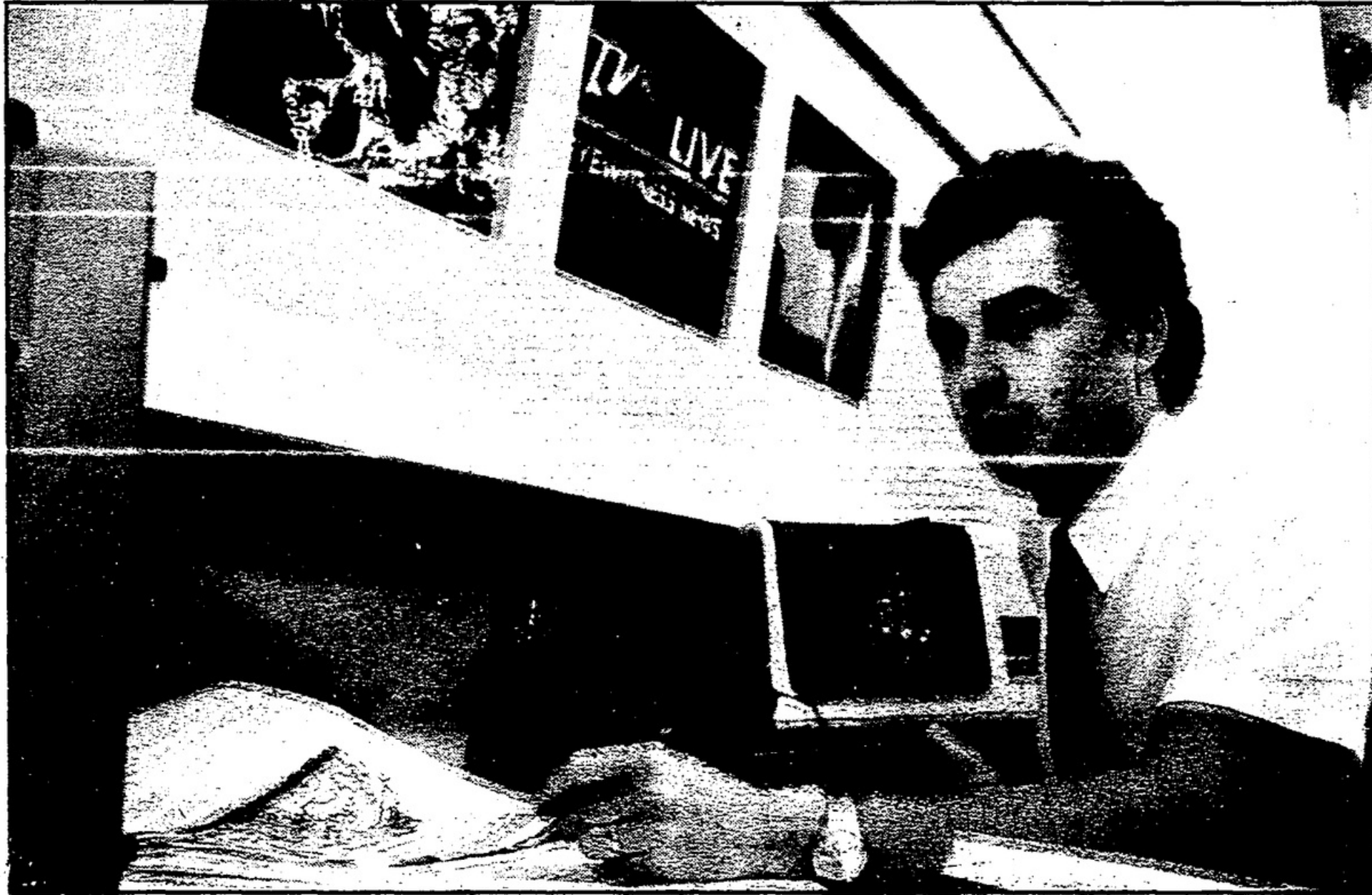
Richmond is on the borderline between rain and snow areas. Because of its equal distance between the mountains and the ocean, you have to choose between rain,

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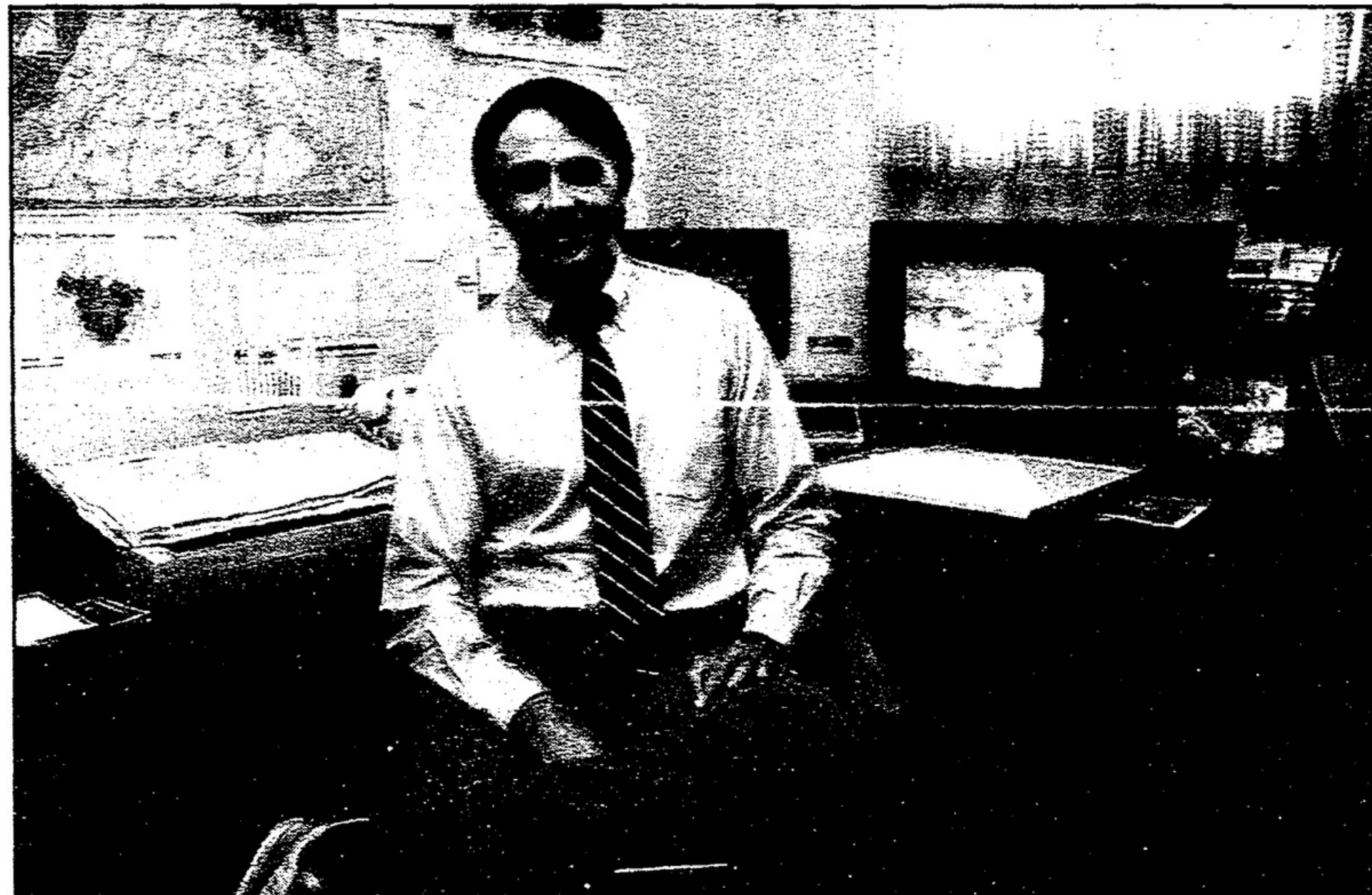


Staff photos by Clement Britt

COMMUNICATOR — Lori Pinson of WTVR-TV believes communication is essential to forecasting. "I try to tell viewers how this weather will affect their day in the simplest terms possible," she said.



POINT OF VIEW — John Bernier of WXEX-TV says he doesn't always agree with the weather service because, "Everybody's looking at the same thing, but it's their interpretation."

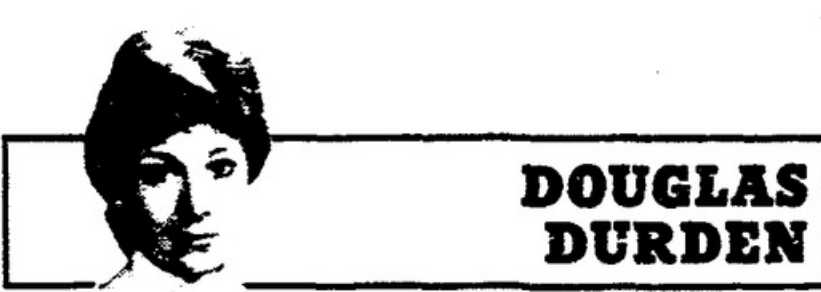


PREDICTING — Jim Duncan of WWBT-TV says there will be forecasts for snow that are wrong because Richmond is on the line between snow and rain zones.

After talk show failure, Thicke tries sitcom format



READY FOR FALL — Alan Thicke and Joanna Kerns will star as Jason and Maggie Seaver in the ABC comedy "Growing Pains."



**DOUGLAS
DURDEN**

Two years ago, the great Fred Silverman (former CBS, ABC and NBC programming chief) said: Let there be a show to rival "The Tonight Show," a show that offers a late-night alternative and keeps viewers awake, a show that will bring all who follow it fame and fortune.

And Silverman, who also talked NBC into exhibiting Teri Copley in "We Got It Made," created "Thicke of the Night."

And many TV stations (about 120) were impressed. So "Thicke of the Night," featuring affable Canadian Alan Thicke and his sidekick, comedian Richard Belzer, went on the air.

And the viewers were unimpressed. Silverman and Thicke learned what Joey Bishop, Dick Cavett and any other talk show host who has tried to take on "The Tonight Show" has learned. You can't beat Johnny Carson by trying to copy Johnny Carson.

But, in a medium that changes drastically every six months, "Thicke of the Night" is history. Today, Belzer has his own show, "Hot Proper-

ties" on cable's Lifetime channel, and Thicke is on his way to becoming a sitcom star.

This fall, Thicke will star in ABC's "Growing Pains," an inoffensive half-hour comedy whose hook is a wife who goes back to work as a newspaper reporter and a husband who moves his psychiatric practice to the home.

"This is something quite different from what I've done before," Thicke recently acknowledged to TV critics. "I've had to begin my life again both personally and professionally."

In the personal department, Thicke was referring to his divorce from soap opera star Gloria Loring. In the worst tradition of bad news, Thicke says his divorce and the series cancellation came through on the same day.

Thicke's start in the business was as a comedy writer. His numerous credits include "Fernwood 2-Night" and specials for Flip Wilson and Richard Pryor. Later, he became host of a highly rated talk show in Canada. In his spare moments, he wrote theme songs for television series, including "Diff'rent Strokes" and "The Facts of Life."

The failure of "Thicke of the Night," which would have needed to be the Second Coming to match Silverman's drumbeating, took its toll on its most visible component. "Working that hard on success is fine," Thicke said. "Working that hard on failure is a struggle."

But the failure of his talk show also taught him a lesson. Even if "Growing Pains" doesn't make it, "I

can't see that anything could be more difficult for me than last year. This is better because it allows me to be more anonymous, part of an ensemble cast. It's not the 'Alan Thicke Show.'"

"Growing Pains" isn't particularly unusual, depending upon those twin favorites of the family sitcom, the generation gap and the gender crisis.

The kids talk a lot and cause their parents to worry. Husband and wife (played by Joanna Kerns, sister of swimmer/sportscaster Donna de Varona) carve out time for themselves while juggling careers.

Thicke's co-star was willing to put a lot of personal insight into her role as a working mom.

"For as long as I can remember, the man went off to work. I think there was a lot of guilt from men for what they missed. Now it's the women who feel guilty. We're in a society where we are a two-income family."

"I know I'm a better person for my work," said Ms. Kerns, who has a daughter. "But it's hard to balance out because there's this tape in the back of my mind that says, 'This shouldn't be.'"

Thicke, befitting his new cautious attitude, was more low key. "I don't see us breaking any new ground," he admitted.

At the same time, however, he says the series should be realistic enough and close enough to his own philosophies that he will be comfortable — more comfortable than he would be with an action show. Or, Thicke would be the first to add, a late-night talk show.

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