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You may not know him, but he invented TV

Philo Farnsworth
did it first, but
RCA got the glory

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The Associated Press

Fish don't know they're living in water, nor do they stop to wonder where the water came from.

Humans? Not much better, as we share a world engulfed by television. And the deeper our immersion becomes, the less likely it seems we'll poke our heads above the surface and see there must have been life before someone invented TV.

That invented someone was Philo T. Farnsworth, who was fated to live and work, then die, in sad obscurity. Now, on the centennial of his birth on Aug. 19, 1906, his invention plays an increasingly powerful role in our lives — with less chance than ever of his being recognized.

How ironic. In this media-savvy age, not only should his name be as widely known as Bell's or Edison's, but his long, lean face with the bulbous brow should be as familiar as any pop icon's. He should be the patron saint of every couch potato. Instead, we regard TV not as a man-made contraption, but a natural resource.

Nonetheless, it was Farnsworth who conducted the first successful demonstration of electronic television.

The setting: Farnsworth's modest San Francisco lab where, on Sept. 7, 1927, the 21-year-old self-taught genius transmitted the image of a horizontal line to a receiver in the next room.

It worked, just as Farnsworth had imagined as a 14-year-old Idaho farm boy and math whiz already stewing over how to send pictures, not just sound, through the air. He had been plowing a field when, with a jolt, he realized an image could be realized by electrons the same way: row by horizontal row.

The prodigy at his plow already had made a fundamental breakthrough, charting a different course from others' ultimately doomed mechanical systems that required a spinning disk to do the scanning. Yet Farnsworth would be denied credit, fame and reward for developing the way TV works to this day.

Even TV had no time for him. His sole appearance on national television was as a mystery guest on the CBS game show "I've Got a Secret" in 1957. He fielded questions from the celebrity panelists as they tried in vain to guess his secret ("I invented electronic television"). For stumping them, Farnsworth took home \$80 and a carton of Winston cigarettes.



AP FILE / 1930

Philo Farnsworth fought bitterly with RCA. He won the patent war in the 1930s, but RCA's clout denied Farnsworth credit, fame and profit.

In 1971, Farnsworth died at age 64.

But his wife, Elma "Pem" Farnsworth, who had worked by her husband's side throughout his tortured career, continued fighting to gain him his rightful place in history, until her death earlier this year at 98.

Fleeting tribute was paid on the 2002 Emmy broadcast to mark TV's 75th anniversary. Introduced by host Conan O'Brien as "the first woman ever seen on television," Pem Farnsworth stood in the audience for applause on her husband's behalf.

It was a skimpy challenge to the stubborn misconception that the Radio Corporation of America was behind TV's creation. This is a version of history RCA already was promulgating as its president, David Sarnoff, was plotting to crush the lonely rival who stood in his way.

Ultimately, Farnsworth would go head to head with RCA's chief television engineer, Vladimir Zworykin, and a vast company whose boss had no intention of losing either a financial windfall or eternal bragging rights. With that in mind, Sarnoff waged a war not just of engineering one-upmanship, but also dirty tricks, propaganda and endless litigation.

In 1935 the courts ruled that Farnsworth, not Zworykin, was the inventor of electronic television.

But that didn't stop Sarnoff, who courted the public by erecting a wildly popular RCA Television Pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair and, after announcing that the RCA-owned National Broadcasting Co. would expand from radio into

TV, transmitted scenes from the fair to the 2,000 TV receivers throughout the city.

Thanks to Sarnoff, money woes and the lost years of World War II (which put TV broadcasting on hold), the clock ran out on Farnsworth's patents before he could profit from them.

Now, few even working in the industry that Farnsworth sparked know who he is. But one who does is Aaron Sorkin, the playwright, screenwriter and creator of "The West Wing" (as well as "Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip," a TV drama that probes the inner workings of a fictitious TV series, which premieres next month on NBC).

A decade ago, Sorkin briefly considered scripting a Farnsworth biopic. Later on, he opted to write a screenplay that instead would focus on the battle between Farnsworth and Sarnoff.

Then he decided a play would be the better form for this tale. The result, "The Farnsworth Invention," will have a workshop production at California's La Jolla Playhouse next winter, with a possible New York staging in fall 2007.

It's unlikely such a theater piece will make Farnsworth a household name. But as Sorkin wrote in a recent e-mail, "The story of the struggle between Farnsworth and Sarnoff seemed like a nice way to invoke the spirit of exploration against the broad canvas of the American Century."

The struggle between them was fierce and unfair. But in his sad fashion, Farnsworth won: The force unleashed as television was his doing, however blind the world may be to what he did.