A Conversation with Erik Barnouw

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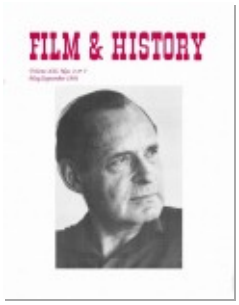

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Erik Barnouw at the September 27, 1991 conference held to honor his contributions to broadcasting history by the Media Studies Project of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, D. C. Photograph courtesy of the ©Woodrow Wilson Center.

A Conversation with Erik Barnouw

[*Erik Barnouw was born in The Hague, Holland, June 23, 1908.*]

My mother was English, my father was Dutch and a schoolteacher in Holland. We had a large house and we took in students. When World War I broke out, heaps of Belgian refugees came across the border. There was a sudden influx of women fleeing the war and if you had room for somebody, you had a maid or a governess. So throughout those years we had two Belgian maids and a Belgian governess who all talked French to me. And my mother sometimes spoke English to me. And we had a student living with us who was German. So I learned all these languages. [The family moved to the United States in 1919.]

My father was a considerable scholar and hoped I would be one. When I graduated from Princeton, the head of the English department said, "We'd like to give you a graduate fellowship and you could become an instructor and a scholar and professor here at Princeton." I said, "No, that's not what I want to be. That's one thing I know I don't want to be." I had been active in drama and had written poetry for the literary magazine so I wanted generally to go in that direction.

Now, this was in 1929. Nothing could go wrong in 1929. It was a tremendous boom period; everybody had a job waiting for them. Most of my classmates were going into Wall Street or their fathers' businesses. I didn't worry very much about what I was going to be. I had three offers on the basis of what I had done in college:

I was invited by Time, Inc. to become a writer on a new magazine to be called *Fortune*.

I had an offer to become an assistant stage manager in a stock company run by George Cukor and George Kondolf, and also to play small parts in Rochester, New York. Cukor, by the way, had just left for Hollywood. They were just switching to sound and were desperate for people who had experience directing dialogue. So they were hiring people who had a reputation in the theater.

I also had won a fellowship to travel abroad for a year without any strings attached. It was paid for by a lady in Princeton whose husband had built the stadium. She wanted to do something a little more cultural and so she had established a fund for this fellowship enabling you to stay abroad a year with the promise that you would mix with people of other cultures and not just sit around the Left Bank drinking with other Americans.

These were all marvelous and I decided I wanted to do all of them.

This Conversation, *edited by Lawrence L. Lichty, combines the recollections made by Erik Barnouw at the end of the Conference and an interview Barnouw conducted with George Liston Seay, the next day, for "Dialogue," a Woodrow Wilson Center radio production.*

The day after graduation, I joined the Cukor-Kondolf Stock Company in Rochester. For eight weeks I worked very hard as Assistant Stage Manager and played two parts--a marine in *Rain* and a juvenile lead in *The Kibitzer*. There was a show every night and four shows in the afternoon, and all that time, we were rehearsing next week's show. This was a thoroughly wonderful eight weeks. Then, because they didn't have air conditioning, they laid off for the summer.

So, I went to Time, Inc., reported to the editor of that proposed magazine, Parker Lloyd-Smith, and I said, "I'm ready to begin work as a writer." I became a writer for *Fortune* for another eight weeks, sharing an office with Dwight McDonald. Every month we did a complete issue. We wrote a lot of articles which then went into the files as the first issue wasn't to start until February, 1930. After about a month I said to Parker Lloyd-Smith, "Look, I have this scholarship to go abroad for a year, I think I better do that now." And he said, "Oh, that's fine. You'll be more valuable and when you come back there will be a job waiting for you here."

So, I went off to wander around Europe for a year. I landed in Vienna, which was in the lowest possible financial situation. I mean, nobody expected to find a job anywhere. I was wandering around the Schoenbrunn Palace one day. There were old women selling slices of bread and butter, just like people in New York who sold apples, for a few *groschen*. I bought a couple of slices of bread and butter, and was sitting on a park bench. There was a person of student age sitting next to me, we got to talking, and he found out I was interested in theater. In fact, he was a student of the Max Reinhardt School of the Theater. And I said, "What is that?" And he said, "The old Imperial Theater here in Schoenbrunn Palace has been assigned to Max Reinhardt to run a school of the theater."

Soon, another student joined us, and pretty soon the first one went away, and went into the building, and then came back and said, "The frau professor would like to talk to you." The lady professor, it turned out, was the administrator of this school. And she said, "I hear you are somebody from the United States and you are interested in the theater." And I said I was interested in the theater, and I had produced some plays. In fact, I had published a play. So she said, "Would you like to attend the theater school?" And I said, "Well, I'm travelling on a scholarship and I don't think I can afford to pay tuition." She said, "Well, we're under a difficult situation: because of our government grant we are not allowed to advertise outside of Austria. And Austria is so impoverished that there is no possibility of our making a go of it if we can't attract students from outside. So we would love to have you attend the school, as long as you would like to, and perhaps when you get back to the United States you will write an article about us." Which I said I would be very glad to do. So I suddenly became a student of the Max Reinhardt theater school, a division of the University of Vienna. Max Reinhardt himself had been criticized for not paying that much attention to this. He had been stung by this criticism, so about this time, he arrived and gave all his time for about two months to this school.

While I was in Morocco, there was the stock market crash, but I didn't hear about it and didn't know anything about it. When I finally came back to the U. S. a year later, the theater was dead. All the stock companies like the Cukor-Kondolf Company disappeared and there was almost nothing going on Broadway.

I went to Parker Lloyd-Smith and Time, Inc. He seemed to be kind of distraught and he said: "Things haven't gone quite well, there's been some difference of opinion about what we should do, but I'll give you an assignment to keep you busy for a few weeks and probably everything will have been clarified by the time you get back."

He liked to think of his staff as "industrial amateurs." This was not going to be a puff magazine but was to be intelligently critical about the world of business--about which I knew nothing. Anyway, he sent me to Poland Springs, Maine, to write an article for a series he had in mind about feudal cities of New England, those controlled by one family. I spent a very interesting several weeks there, wrote the article, and came back to find the office in a state of chaos. I learned that Parker Lloyd-Smith had jumped out of an eighteenth-floor window to his death. There had been a complete turnover in the staff with a new editor. Nobody was there that I knew and I quickly sensed there was no place for me either. So, I suddenly joined the unemployed for a while.

Radio Advertising and Directing

I discovered I wasn't really trained for anything and I wandered around for several months. Then one day in a speakeasy I ran into a girl I had known at Princeton. She said, "What are you doing?" I said, "Well, I'm unemployed and looking for a job." And she said, "Why don't you go into advertising?" I said, "Advertising? I never thought about that. I don't know anybody in advertising." I really had never even thought about it. And she said, "Well, my husband is in it. He's over there. Charlie Gannon is his name and he's with one of the agencies, Erwin Wasey and Company, one of the big ten. They've just won the Camel [cigarette] account." So, she introduced me to her husband in this speakeasy and two days later he called up and said: "Would you come and see me in the Graybar Building?"

I did go to see him and this illustrates the extraordinary situation of radio at that time [1931]. He said, "We just won this big account. They want to go on the air and we've pretty well decided what we're going to do on the air, but we have to build staff and we need a director for the Camel program. What would you need to come aboard?" At that time, when you left Princeton, you expected to start at about $25 a week. I had received $25 in Rochester. *Fortune* gave me $30 a week which was unusual. So, I said, "Well, I could live on $30 a week." And he said, "Well, Erik, I wouldn't do anything like that to you." So, he didn't tell me what they were going to pay me, but as we left I said I would come to work on Monday and he said, "Say, you know music don't you?" I said, "No, I don't know much about music," and he said, "Well, you wrote the *Princeton Triangle Show*, didn't you?" And I said, "Yes, I wrote the book and lyrics with a collaborator, but I don't know much about music." He says, "You know enough."

I had never had a radio. I went out and bought a radio. I listened to it all weekend, so I could come to work Monday knowing a lot about it. Here I was being hired without any idea about radio to be the director of one of the big accounts that this agency had just won. It was just absolutely absurd and ridiculous.

For seven years I worked for advertising agencies [Erwin Wasey & Company, 1931-35, and Arthur Kudner, 1935-37]. Suddenly there was a shift to dramatic programs and I was directing seven dramatic programs a week. If a script was three minutes too long, I cut it. If I didn't like a part, I rewrote it. I did everything with great speed, on the spur of the moment. It was just a marvelous learning experience. There was no set business about routing scripts around to the sponsor for approval. Nothing like that. So, I spent most of this time in studios at CBS and NBC directing these programs. I started at $65.00 a week, although I had asked for only $30, plus an expense account because I spent every evening at CBS or NBC. I ate my meals there and I was told I should charge for my dinner. So, I used to put in for 75 cents and sometimes I worked it up to $1.25 and nothing seemed to matter.

Every once in a while my boss, Charlie Gannon, would come into the studio with some sponsors in tow and he would say, you know, "That's the control room, and that's the director," and he explained something about the sound effects. He would entertain them, and then they would go out again. He kept the sponsors out of my hair; I had nothing to do with them at all. I was in the studio learning what to do with this medium. It was just a marvelous experience, though it was very exhausting--absolutely exhausting. I did auditions all the time and built up a card file of 1,000 actors. For a while, anytime I heard anybody on the air, an actor, I knew who it was instantly. I became very attuned to this business.

Just after Radio City [in Rockefeller Center] was opened in 1933, we moved to the thirty-second floor and I had a corner office there. I was called into Charlie Gannon's office and he said: "Erik, there's been a little reorganization going on in here. I'm being moved to "new business" and my idea is that you should move into my job here as vice president in charge of programming. You know everything that's going on in the studio by now and you're ready to deal with the sponsors and the clients and so on." And it was the first time I had thought, "My God, what am I doing? Where is this leading me?" And it was just absolutely a catastrophic notion and a week later I resigned. I thought, "I've got to get out of this. This is not what I want." I was really physically exhausted. So, I went up to a lake in Maine, read books for a summer and thought about what the heck I was going to do.

Teaching and Writing

Then came a telegram from Hatcher Hughes, professor in the University Extension of the School of General Studies at Columbia University. He was in charge of a group of writing courses. The telegram said, "Would you like to teach a course in radio writing? Please answer by telegram by so and so." So, I replied, "I'll be in your office at such and

such a day to discuss this." Hatcher Hughes was a playwright who'd won a Pulitzer Prize for *Hellbent for Heaven*. He had been persuaded by somebody from the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency, who was a production man on the *Rudy Vallee Variety Hour*, to let him teach a course on radio writing [in the drama department in the Adult Education Division] because they used a lot of sketches on that program. And in August [1937], this man suddenly informed Hatcher Hughes that he was being transferred to the West Coast because it was a better place for guest talent for variety shows. So, Hughes was suddenly left with Radio Writing I and Radio Writing II in the catalog and nobody to teach them.

Hughes lived at 39 Claremont Avenue, the same building as the Barnouws lived in, and he knew that somebody up there on the 11th floor had something to do with radio. He didn't know what. Actually I had written a few scripts in emergency situations--a couple of writers kept having nervous breakdowns. But I had been directing programs for seven years. So it was a place to begin and it was a change. I didn't approve of how-to-do-it courses, how to write. I didn't think that was a particularly good thing. I mean, I sort of looked down on what I was being invited to do.

My father [Professor Adriaan Barnouw, Queen Wilhelmina Professor of Dutch language, literature and history] was pleased that I was going to do this. He never said anything about it, but he hated my being in the advertising business. So, I started to teach radio writing and it happened to be an extraordinarily good time to start to do that because this was the late 1930s and suddenly the networks were beginning to use sustaining time for worthwhile programs of one sort or another. They had been lambasted for years in the press [and there was increasing pressure from an FCC dominated by Roosevelt appointments] so they had said that they would use unsold periods of time for worthwhile purposes. There was the *Columbia Workshop* and a few months later the Orson Welles program [*Mercury Theater on the Air*], and Norman Corwin's productions. So, there was suddenly an extraordinary number of really good students trying to get into courses of this sort.

In my first class I had a young man from Brooklyn, Bernard Malamud. I gave him an "A." I recommended him for a job and he was absolutely overwhelmed. A little while later he wrote *The Natural* and decided to concentrate on another medium. The second year I had Eslanda Robeson, the wife of Paul Robeson. Paul Robeson had tremendous success singing *Ballad for Americans* on CBS. She was a brilliant person, a Ph.D., and she wanted to work on possible radio formats for him.

And then, right after that I got a phone call from Pearl Buck saying would I come to have lunch? She'd just won the Nobel Prize and was the most in demand of any speaker, but she always refused speeches. I had no idea why she should be calling me. I assumed it was a lunch party of some sort. It turned out it was Pearl Buck, her husband and me--salad and a sandwich. "Mr. Barnouw, could I enroll in your course in radio writing?" I could not think of any reason why she should not qualify. I said, "Yes, absolutely. This could be arranged." She explained that she had been asked by the State Department to write some things to be beamed to China but she didn't want to do it until

she had learned a little bit about the medium. She was very anxious to enroll in my course, but didn't want a fuss made over her. So, I said, "Well, why don't you just register under your husband's name?" I think that would work out all right. "Maybe somebody else could go through the registration line for you." My mother volunteered to do that. There were no photo ID's in those days.

I was very curious as to whether she was actually going to turn up in the class and at the last moment there she came in the door with a hat pulled down over her head and sat in the back of the room. She became the most hard-working student I ever had. She was there every day, punctilious. She was always ready with the deadline for an outline or other assignment. I didn't want to read her scripts in class because she wrote little sketches about various Asian countries and they always had this kind of quasi-Biblical dialogue and I thought that people would recognize it as Pearl Buck's, so I sent her critiques to her farm in Perkasie, Pennsylvania. At the following class she would come in with a corrected script. She had rewritten it along the technical lines that I had discussed. [See "Will this Earth Hold?" in *Radio Drama in Action*.]

It was quite extraordinary. The University never knew that there was a Nobel Prize person in my class. It was a pretty exciting kind of thing. She missed one class and let me know ahead of time that she was going to miss because of a long-standing obligation. I assumed that nobody in the class knew who she was, but the one time that she missed a class she was very amused by the fact that she received, in the mail from somebody in the class, notes on what had happened in the class that she had missed. So, somebody had recognized her, but never surfaced.

It was really a marvelous time to teach. I wrote a book from my notes. I had no idea about how you did research. I simply went to NBC and CBS, went through the studios and picked up scripts left by actors. I had a tremendous bunch of scripts, all of which I used pieces of in the book without asking anybody's permission. But nobody minded. Anyway, as a result of this I began to be asked to write scripts. As I started to teach writing, I did more writing for radio myself. I worked with Norman Corwin at CBS, I was script editor at CBS for one of their series for a while [CBS writer and editor, 1939-40]. I did a lot for *Cavalcade of America* and later on I got a lot of assignments from the *Theater Guild*--for twelve years I was adapting classics for them. [And was president of The Writers Guild of America, 1957-59.]

During World War II, I was, for a time, script editor at NBC, because this was a time when key executives were suddenly going into the armed forces. Somebody at NBC called up and said, "Our script editor, who was in charge of all public service programs, is going into the Navy; would you like to take his place?" And so I became script editor at the National Broadcasting Company [1942-44], in charge of a group of six or seven writers who sat in little cubbyholes, and I had control over all the public service programs that were being done at that time, which expanded enormously during the war.

As a result of that, I was asked to come to the War Department in the Pentagon to take charge of educational programs to be inserted in the Armed Forces Radio Service [1944-45], which had grown up overnight.

After the War, I went back to Columbia University. At that time, television was beginning, and NBC was making its television studios available to Columbia University to start television courses because NBC had big plans for television, but they very much needed people who understood what it was all about. Since I had worked both for NBC and Columbia, I was asked to take charge of an enlarged group of courses which had to do with radio, television, and later on, film. At the time when I was with the agencies, they controlled the industry. The advertising agencies decided what programs were going to be on. We were very arrogant. We just simply said to the network, "We want to buy 8:30 to 9:00 on Tuesday and we'll let you know later what we're going to do with it." And the networks had really surrendered control over their time almost entirely; but by a little later on, we were suddenly in a situation where the networks were trying to recapture control over their own schedules. And that was the time when I was at the network. And when I was at NBC every non-commercial program passed across my desk.

People sometimes refer to me as a media historian, which is nice and I like that. I'd never heard that term until I heard it applied to myself. Well, I didn't prepare for it. I couldn't visualize it. Nowadays, people are constantly being told that they should have a career plan--to define their career goals and the steps they're going to take toward their career goals. I can't imagine how people can do that. I couldn't have. I just happened to be somewhere each time where somebody offered me a job that turned out to be more interesting than I expected.

The Trilogy

When I'd been at Columbia for a while, I suddenly had a call [1959] from Sheldon Meyer of Oxford University Press, who asked me to have lunch with him at the Princeton Club. He said, "The London office has commissioned a three-volume history of British broadcasting [by Asa Briggs] and they think we ought to do something like that over here. So, we want to have a three-volume history of American broadcasting. I wonder whether you would like to have a commission to do that?"

I was not connected with history in any way. I would never have dreamed or suggested such an arrogant thing. I didn't ask how he had happened to come to me or whether he had asked six people before who had turned him down. Anyway, this absolutely changed my life because suddenly this enormous project drove me.

Once I got started on this, my life was completely planned around it. I had a long list of people I wanted to interview in various parts of the country, so interviews were always combined with taking the children somewhere and taking my wife somewhere.

I had won a Fulbright Award to go to India for a year [1961]. So, I said to him, "I'm about to go to India for a year and I've made an arrangement to write about the Indian film industry for Columbia University Press, so I can't do anything on this for quite some time." And he said, "Well, we can set a date far enough away. What about 1964 for the first volume? The books could come out in '66, '68, and '70." So, I did go to India and I wrote the Indian film book. That was sort of practice. I began to think

of how to handle the history project. I was thinking about it all the time. Studying the Indian film industry gave me a lot of angles on the American film industry and about American media in general.

I was a year late in handing it in and I worried about it all the time. Finally, I called up Sheldon and said, "Well, the first volume is ready." And he said, "What? Already?" And I became known at Oxford as the writer who gets things in on time.

I was terribly lucky that way at Columbia University. In 1948, Allan Nevins started an oral history project. I had read about it. I knew there was such a thing, but I didn't know anything about it. He decided to concentrate on a lot of famous people, especially in two industries that had grown up in the twentieth century--aviation and broadcasting. He and his various graduate students had for several years done interviews with people going back to the beginnings of wireless. An extraordinary collection, but when I went to look at them they were absolutely idle. Nobody had done anything with this material. In my first volume I used seventy-one of those interviews.

I discovered that the interviews with the most famous people like, say Herbert Hoover, were all very useless because they were well-trained in dealing with interviewers and I found Herbert Hoover in this saying exactly the same thing as I found in a newspaper item about Herbert Hoover. But the middle-level people that I had never heard of, who knew things, but who were never famous enough to have been asked to write or give their recollections--those were the valuable people. And some of them were just extraordinarily enlightening. Nevins had done a lot of work with things like the Adams family who wrote thousands of letters. But nowadays nobody writes letters like that and they communicate with telephone and the records of those are lost, so he felt that it was very important to sit people down and get them to talk. I managed to make an arrangement with the oral history collection that I would tape-record interviews and I would say to the people I was interviewing, "I would like to have this go into the Oral History Collection at Columbia where it will be available to future historians and this means that you will get a transcript to correct if you want." And so, this made people feel much more important somehow; this somehow put the whole thing on a different footing.

I remember one writer whom I admired very much and I had gone to interview him about his work. This is a little later on, and I had given him this preface. He said, "I've been thinking about this interview and I want to talk. I've decided to include about my work with the CIA. I'm not supposed to tell this, but I feel I'd like to get this weight off my shoulders." He had been hired by the CIA to go down to Mexico and write an anti-Russian feature film that was secretly being financed by the CIA. The Mexican producer didn't know. I was scared for him, so I sent him the transcript and he approved it. I called him up before we went to press and said, "Do you really want this?" And he said, "Yes, I do. I want to get it out." And you'll find it in one of the volumes.

I had taken very few history courses and had never taken a course in the use of the library or research. In fact, having been an immigrant the language of the family was

Dutch until I was eleven. It wasn't until my late teens that I ever read an English book for pleasure because it was very difficult.

There was one book that I read while I was in college that really began to excite me about novels, in general, and that was *U.S.A. [Forty-Second Parallel, Nineteen-Nineteen, and The Big Money]* by John Dos Passos. You may recall that it has little biographies all the way through and it has the headlines from papers and things like that and it has accounts of various individuals that appear and just reappear and reappear, and suddenly, this seemed to be the pattern. The pattern that was in the back of my mind, although I didn't realize maybe until later, was not a history book, but a novel. And people sometimes said later it reads like a novel. Well, there was a good reason, because I was writing something that was really built on a novel. You know, just the kind of condensed little biographies that Dos Passos had about people like Frank Lloyd Wright; I had one about Sarnoff and various other people all the way through. I had headlines and program ratings at various points. I had subjects that appeared and reappeared and disappeared. I'd left them at certain odd moments and I brought them back a little later. It was a lot of fun. I enjoyed every minute of it.

The excitement to me of working on the three-volume history was that, to be specific, when I was at NBC as script editor we were suddenly told, "The two networks [NBC Red and Blue] are going to be separated. It has something to do with some silly decision of the FCC." We had to divide up the people, the desks, the offices, everything; so, we were literally spending months deciding who gets this desk, who gets this file. It was a strange period. I knew nothing and nobody else was told anything about what had happened at upper levels. All the time I was working on the books, I was really reliving the years through which I had floundered without knowing what I was doing. Now, I was finding out what was happening on the other side of the wall or at the different levels. This is what excited me about it.

I was reading Mark Woods's weird description of being ordered by David Sarnoff [longtime head of NBC] to sell the Blue Network and he labored at it for a long, long time, with great difficulty. Finally, Mr. Woods thought he had put together a package with a banker and few other people for the purchase of the network and then he got a phone call from Sarnoff. Sarnoff said, "Mark, I want you to come up and I want to discuss with you the sale of the network." Mark said, "How did you know, sir? I have almost got it ready, but...." He said, "Oh, no, Mark, I just sold it." So, Sarnoff had forgotten that he had told Mark Woods to sell it and to find a buyer. And that's marvelous to find in an oral history collection.

Everything I read in the Oral History Collection mentioned other people, so I had a list of people I wanted to reach sometime, and some radio stations, and so on. But as I kept on going to this and that place to visit people the list got longer because everybody mentioned other people that I ought to see.

Also, I composed a letter and sent it to a lot of radio stations I knew had been important in broadcasting history. I had come across several that had published histories of their station. So, I wondered what others had. I wrote to say, "Do you have a history

of your station? Do you have photographs of the early period, etc.?" For instance, I went to Cedar Rapids [station WMT] which for some reason had a wonderful collection of photographs of the early days. Some didn't answer. Others were eager to have me come. So, I spent literally more than ten years on this project, travelling around the United States.

At one point, I got a Guggenheim to spend some time in Hollywood. Not everybody gets a Guggenheim Fellowship to live at the Beverly Hills Hotel. Which I did do, and I was quite frank that it was in order to do the interviewing for the third volume in which Hollywood played a major role, because they were gradually taking over the broadcasting industry. For the first volume, I was working mainly in the East, in New York and Washington and so on, and then I visited a lot of stations and people around the country. It really took control of my life. During the summer, my wife would say, "I'd like to visit my sister in so-and-so," and I'd say, "Fine. Well, we'll combine that with a visit to station so-and-so." And then on the way to so-and-so, I always was stopping at some other place to interview somebody.

I've been involved in creating archives, starting new ones, etc., and on committees to decide on this and that, and I sort of feel that if all the facilities had been available to me that are available now, I could never have written the three-volume history of American broadcasting. It would have just been impossible. I wouldn't have known when to stop. There was no way that I could go and hear a recording of a radio program of the past except for the fact that many people who directed programs had recordings made. Often I asked, "Do you have a recording of this that I read about?" And they would say, "Yes."

Then, due to the fact that I had been among advertising agencies and then at networks and so on, I knew an awful lot of people. They began to feed me little things. For instance, Bob Landry, who was editor of *Variety*, thought I should know how low the pay of the writers was at CBS. He was director of program writing at CBS for a while, so he gave me a memo that listed the salaries of all the writers. People began to give me things like this that were out of the files, things they thought were interesting. Incidently, when I started, I put a little notice in the *New York Times Book Review* saying that I had been asked to do this three-volume history of American broadcasting, if anybody had interesting things to communicate, I wished they would get in touch with me. And the first person who got in touch with me was Edward Bernays, the public relations person. And he sent in a letter, "I was public relations counsel to Mr. Sarnoff and also to Mr. Paley at different times and I would be very, very glad to talk to you about them." He was in retirement, living in Boston writing his memoirs, and just loved to tell about his former clients. You know, about the number of neckties that Paley had and so on. He was really quite petty and interesting.

People gave me little memos and things that they thought were particularly interesting. So, a lot of things came in that way. If there had been an archive I could have gone to, I would have gotten utterly exhausted before I'd have gotten half way through. There were few archives. Not many people had started to give their papers to

collections. So, practically everything was done by interview and if I had more resources available, I think I would never have gotten it done. Nobody now has the advantage of not having archives and I think I was probably very lucky.

I was lucky to have been in advertising agencies when that was really the center of the action. They were one industry that didn't suffer from the Depression. I was also lucky to be at the network at the time when they were making a counterattack. I worked for the Theater Guild for twelve years at a time when independent producers were taking over. I just happened to be in all these places when they were the center of the action. I was very lucky. I never looked for a job, each of these things just came along. I feel absurdly favored by it.

The Documentary, *The Sponsor*, and The Library of Congress

While I was still reading proofs on the third volume, Sheldon Meyer said, "What do you want to do next?" And I said, "Well, I would like to do a history of the documentary film, but I don't want to do it until I have a chance to go around the world and visit film archives in countries that had started film archives since the war." Then I thought, I don't see how I can ever find enough money to go around the world; but then came the Bancroft Prize which was $4,000 tax-free. So, this was enough to take me and my wife around the world [20 countries in 1971-72] at the time when my three children were all in college or ready to go to college. We also got a grant from the JDR 3rd Fund which was interested in the arts in Asia and said, "We'll give you a *per diem* for every day you spend in an Asian country examining film history."

The Library of Congress also was one of those things that came out of the blue. I'd finished being here [at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, writing *The Sponsor* in 1976] at the time when Congress had just passed the new copyright law which required the Library of Congress to start a radio and television archive. It was "to preserve the broadcasting heritage of the American people and to give access to historians and scholars"--that's an interesting phrase--historians *and* scholars--"without encouraging or creating copyright infringement." Those are the very words as I remember them. The Librarian of Congress, Daniel Boorstin, said, "We're trying to figure out how to organize this at the Library of Congress. Why don't you come in and be a consultant." And it was understood that only half of my time would be spent being a consultant. It seemed an awfully good time to write something I had been wanting to write [*The Magician and the Cinema*]. It was sort of a final outcome of having gotten at the age of fourteen a job cataloging a magician's library. He hired me because I knew Dutch, German, and French, having grown up in a household which people talked all these languages to me. He paid me so much per card to catalog his library. I went every Saturday to his apartment and sat there and browsed through books and got very involved and it was marvelous. And later on when I became interested in film history, I suddenly realized I was running across names that I'd also run across in his library. I never could get a student interested in that, but I was interested in it, so when I got into

this situation at the Library of Congress, I thought, "Well, this is ideal," because by that time the Houdini Collection was in the Library of Congress.

I had planned to go back to India to update the Indian film book. Boorstin said, "We've decided to combine the recordings of the Music Division and the motion pictures of the Prints and Photographs Division with broadcasting." For a long time you had to go to the Music Division if you wanted to hear a Roosevelt Fireside Chat because they're the only ones that had kept recordings. Now, that seemed a little crazy, because a lot of the recordings were not musical records. He said, "We had this order to create a television and radio archive and we decided to take all the motion pictures out of the Photograph Division and all the recordings out of the Music Division and put them together with this new order and create a Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division. Would you like to be the chief of it?" And I said, "God, no, I'm going to be 70 pretty soon." He said, "What's that supposed to mean?" So, I said, "No, besides I'm going off to India in a month or so." He said, "Well, why don't you take the job and spend a couple of months working out a plan of action and you go ahead and take your trip to India, come back, and carry on." So, that's what we did. And I would say it was a very exciting three years [1978-81] of being Chief and it's such a new experience that nothing prepares you for it.

First of all, I was immediately involved in labor relations and budgets for the coming year. Then, we were going to move to a new building but that building had originally been designed without knowing they were going to have this division. So, they were redesigning part of the building and involved with architects. There had to be new equipment. I was learning more every day, you know; but it was quite exhausting. I did it for three years and I didn't regret one minute of it. I lost weight.

[Since then Erik Barnouw has been editor-in-chief of the massive *International Encyclopedia of Communications*. He has prepared two revisions of the condensed version of his history of television. It is a standard text for media history courses. He has also written a history of his home, The Temple School House, in Vermont. A new edition of *Documentary* will be available in August, 1992.]

For a cassette copy of "Remembering Radio," an interview with Erik Barnouw, write to "Dialogue," The Woodrow Wilson Center, 1000 Jefferson Drive, S.W., Washington, D.C., 20560, or call (202) 287-3000.