

Screen test: Who invented TV?

By Frazier Moore
The Associated Press

Philo T. Farnsworth is hiding in plain sight wherever you look. He is unseen yet impossible to miss.

Unknowingly, the average American home affirms Farnsworth eight hours each day. When he died - March 11, 1971 – millions paid their heedless respect by watching "Ironside," "Bewitched" and "The Jim Nabors Hour."

Philo Farnsworth, you see, invented television.

And in this 75th anniversary year of TV's first successful demonstration (when, on Sept. 7, 1927, he transmitted the image of a horizontal line across the room in his San Francisco lab) the secret is starting to get out.

Some may yet dispute Farnsworth's status as the father of television, but any lingering doubts reside in the misconception that the Radio Corporation of America was TV's creator. This is a version of history RCA was promulgating even as its boss, David Sarnoff, was trying to crush the former Idaho farm boy who stood in his way.

It's quite a tale, vividly told in a pair of new books: "The Boy Genius and the Mogul," by Daniel Stashower, and "The Last Lone Inventor: A Tale of Genius, Deceit and the Birth of Television," by Evan I. Schwartz, who, in an interview, concedes that until a few years ago, he, like nearly everyone else, was unaware of Philo Farnsworth.

"I had heard the name. You can't forget the name," Schwartz says. "But then I had these questions: Who was this guy? How could you invent the defining technology of the century and remain virtually anonymous? That's quite a trick."

Schwartz, a Boston-based journalist, couldn't get Farnsworth out of his mind. With the same relentlessness he displayed in life, "Farnsworth just wouldn't let go of me."

One story will suffice to explain his hold on Schwartz and fellow Philo-philes.

Plowing his father's potato field in 1921, the 14-year-old lad, already dead set on inventing TV, was lost in concentration as he pondered the next piece of the puzzle. Suddenly he saw his answer in the parallel furrows he was carving: A TV image likewise could be electronically scanned, row-by-row, onto a picture tube.

TV still works the way Farnsworth imagined it that morning.

Of course, even in the 1920s, other theories for creating "telegraph pictures" were afoot.

The chief rival was "mechanical television," which proposed a rotating disk punched with holes to codify an image in motion. But despite the best efforts of research engineers at General Electric and AT&T, it led nowhere.

Ultimately, Farnsworth would go head-to-head with RCA's chief television engineer, Vladimir Zworykin, and the vast resources of a company whose boss had no intention of losing either a financial windfall or eternal bragging rights as the father of TV. 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, invented 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 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, the clock ran out on Farnsworth's patents before he could profit from them.

"Someone armed with a good idea can change the world," says Schwartz. "Farnsworth didn't get the credit for his invention, but it was a hell of an idea."

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