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the  
cradle  
of  
PBS

by jerry landay

# the cradle of PBS

Bob Underwood guides you through the ground floor of Gregory Hall, filling in some historic gaps about how the national public broadcasting system was born at the University of Illinois forty years ago. Back then, when Underwood was involved, people called it educational radio. He is one of the few around campus who recall the story.

Underwood is now assistant director of admissions and records at the University of Illinois. In the '50s, he worked for the small headquarters staff of the National Association of Educational Broadcasters, a dedicated group of educator-broadcasters who were shoe-horned into a bustling basement corner of Gregory Hall. From there in 1951, the NAEB had begun delivering programs to noncommercial radio stations across America. Underwood ran the operations of that "network." It would be the forerunner of NPR and PBS. He recalls the challenge of his job. He calls it "the best I ever had."

It was not what we now think of as a network. It ran on audiotapes, duplicated on two noisy machines that could grind out twenty-two copies at a time from original masters.



For thirty-five years, Mrs. C. C. Wiley conducted the Parent-Teacher Forum, a weekly program for WILL radio.

The tapes were mailed from Gregory Hall to about one hundred radio stations around the country. Once aired, the tapes were "bicycled" by mail to the next station, and then shipped back to Urbana for re-use. The network went into operation in 1951. By 1958, it had filled 125,000 hours of air time, distributed 7,400 programs and was supplying twenty hours of programming a week.

The radio affiliates were licensed to colleges, universities, municipalities and school boards — the voice of a vague but struggling entity called educational broadcasting.

On his Greg Hall tour, Underwood points to the old shipping area where postal trucks arrived every morning. "They'd dump out bag after bag of tapes with a clatter, then pick up the outgoing bags of fresh programs. It could be hectic."

The stations on the network contributed the majority of the programs. For the most part, they bore little resemblance to modern fare. They were literally instructional in nature — dry and pedantic. But a few foreshadowed the concepts to come.

Underwood recalls one of the most popular — a half-hour children's show produced at WILL five days a week. It was called *Stories 'N Stuff*. Somehow, host **John Regnell '50**, M.S. '57, Ph.D. '66, WILL's program director, managed to perpetuate the series for years, with the help of campus actors and musicians.

An old program log provides a sampling of the network's varied fare. There was the *BBC World Theater* from Britain, bringing listeners Shakespearean plays. There was *The Chicago Roundtable*, produced at the University of Chicago; *Great Writers of France* from the French Broadcasting Company; *Document: Deep South* produced by the University of Alabama and the University of Illinois *Festival Concerts* from WILL.



From left to right, **John Regnell '50**, **Bob Campbell '58**, **Marg Walton Goralski '49** and **Harold Hill '40** were among those who produced the prize-winning program, *Stories 'n Stuff*.

The University of North Carolina's station WUNC produced *Listen, America* — readings, talks and original works by writers such as Carl Sandburg, Daniel Boorstin and Archibald MacLeish. From WNYC New York came the *Cooper Union Forum*, a public affairs roundtable.

Major figures in education and early broadcasting were part of the NAEB brain trust. There were pioneer communication scholars Wilbur Schramm and Marshall McLuhan. The first director of the NAEB was Professor Harry Skornia, now recognized as a founding father of public broadcasting. Pioneer educational broadcasters and teachers are closely identified with the Urbana-based achievements of the NAEB.

**Harry J. Skornia was the first full-time staff  
director of the National Association of  
Educational Broadcasters.**



The work of these men helped secure the channels on which public broadcasting stations operate. They spearheaded research on how to use the new medium to teach and enlighten. From the NAEB in Urbana, the institutions of public broadcasting evolved, as well as the shaping of the federal laws that govern them and the underlying, though often clashing, philosophies that try to define what the system is, does and ought to be.

When Wilbur Schramm, the founder of the Institute of Communications Research in the College of Communications, gave the NAEB a home here in 1951, it had already been in existence for twenty-six years — a loosely-knit organization of managers of college and university radio stations, most of which were in the Midwest.

NAEB leaders had been vainly struggling to save their stations from being strangled by the Depression, from the raids of commercial broadcasting interests that coveted their spots on the dial and from a dearth of programs.

In 1922, when WILL, originally WRM, began offering regular service, two hundred noncommercial stations like it were on the air. By 1936, only thirty-eight remained. The NAEB was helpless. It had no staff, no cohesion. Members were driven by the idea that the voice of education had a collective place as an alternative service to commercial programming. But they couldn't keep the vision alive.

Then they encountered Schramm. He had come to communications in an odd way. Educated at Harvard for a teaching career in English, he was handicapped by a speech disorder. He sought help at a speech clinic at the University of Iowa. There, Schramm developed an interest in speech science. That inspired him to carry out a series of eminently original studies in communications, leading to his founding of a new branch of scholarship.

Schramm defied pigeonholes. He was a musician, a writer and a journalist. He founded the Iowa Writers Workshop. In 1947, he was invited to the University of Illinois to establish a center of communications study — the first of its kind. To Schramm, communications as a process lay at the heart of all human enterprise. On a practical level, it was a potent social tool for getting things done. Schramm saw radio, and later, television, as instruments of teaching — in the classroom and the home.

"TV is a powerful tool of large-audience instruction," he wrote in 1953, "perhaps the greatest such tool of all time. It offers a way to share the best teachers and the best demonstrations, to carry extension services beyond the farthest dreams of the founders of American extension services, to offer more people more learning in less time.

"The very existence of man," he wrote, "may depend on the quality of communication on earth."

Schramm saw the electronic media as the outstretched arms of great educational institutions. That squared with Midwestern traditions of educational broadcasting as a university extension service to farm families, isolated by bad roads, cultural deprivation and poverty.

These stations served regular farm-to-market reports, "how-to" programs and generous doses of culture. Regular programs aired by WILL in 1936 included *Rural Life Review*, *Markets and Agricultural Topics*, *Theater Chats*, *Language Lessons in French and Spanish* and *Parent-Teacher Forum*.

But after World War II, the federal government made FM frequencies available to educational institutions that wanted stations. FM was a new form of radio, transmitting signals of higher quality than AM.

But after the war, listeners were slow to buy FM sets. There was still a shortage of quality educational programs.

In the early '50s, television arrived. But the government had reserved no television channels for educational broadcasters. They hadn't bothered to lobby for them.

Three decades after the birth of commercial broadcasting, Schramm and others agreed that it was high time for educational broadcasters to organize, to define their mission, to produce and distribute good programs and to attract substantial funding.

How were educators to reconcile "mass versus class"? Could large audiences be attracted to programs of quality? Where would such programs come from? Who would build, pay for and operate the new educational radio and TV stations?

Schramm decided to host a high-level dialogue at Illinois about these issues. He brought the 1948 NAEB convention to Urbana. The next summer, he convinced the Rockefeller Foundation to underwrite an ambitious two-week seminar at the University's Allerton House Conference Center. He invited twenty-two educational broadcasters from campuses across America.

They met with educators, public servants interested in education, commercial broadcasters and scholars. Anthropologist Robert Redfield of the University of Chicago, noted historian Allan Nevins and musicologist David Randolph, intermission host for the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts, were among the guests.

Little was understood about who was out there listening. Sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld of Columbia University had conducted audience studies, including early work on radio's effects on children. The Allerton group reviewed his research on audience wants and needs.

They met during a prairie heat wave that ended the day after everyone left. "You either generated all that heat," Schramm commented, "or brought it with you." In the first two fiery days, they threw out his detailed agenda and focused on a single question: What is the job of educational broadcasting? They argued at rump sessions, at meals and at a nearby Monticello tavern late into the night.

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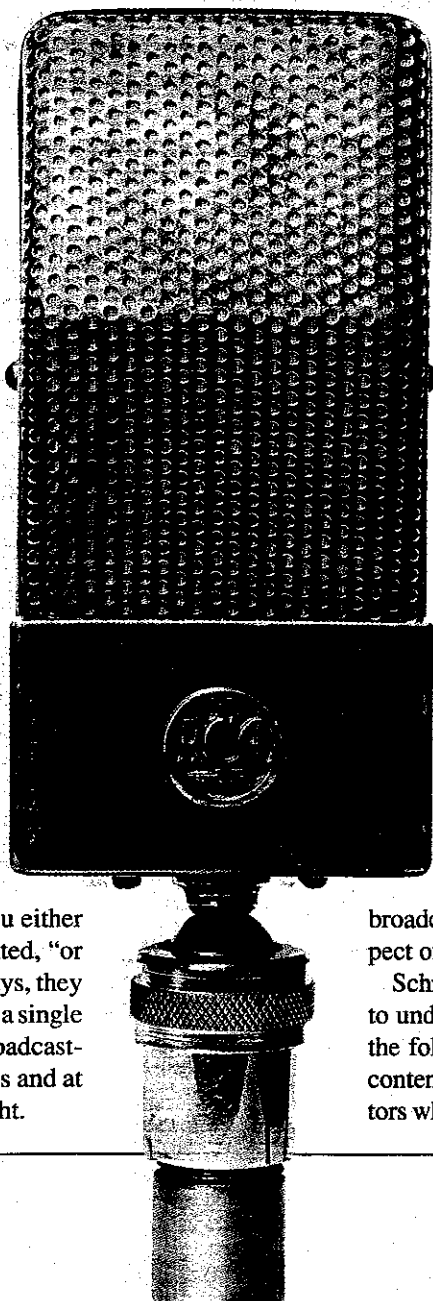
**and TV sets could be another.**

Their conclusions remain the philosophical cornerstone of public broadcasting, though, like the Constitution, they are endlessly argued about. The purpose of educational broadcasting, they decided, was to serve special audiences not being served by commercial programs, to temper concerns over ratings with the need to serve special interests, to draw programming from the wide spectrum of human affairs and to make education widely available. Formal classrooms were only one place to teach effectively. Radio and TV sets could be another.

Allerton I, as it would become known, proposed a permanent NAEB headquarters on the Urbana campus, along with a program production and distribution center or "network." Schramm, an able fund raiser, persuaded the Kellogg Foundation to underwrite the proposal with a \$245,000 grant.

Robert Hudson, a former CBS official who became director of broadcasting at the University, exulted in a subsequent appraisal that Allerton I convinced the participants that educators on the air were "not faint, isolated whispers in the broadcasting world." They now had "some prospect of controlling their own destiny."

Schramm convinced the Rockefeller Foundation to underwrite a follow-up conference, Allerton II, the following summer. Its business was program content. The invitees were broadcasters and educators who would make and produce the programs for



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During seventeen days at Allerton II, programmers and scholars tackled fundamental questions. How could educational broadcasting escape the fragmentary "quarter-hour" mentality of the commercial system? Should great literary works such as *War and Peace* be adapted in their entirety or in installments? What was the most effective length? Could educational radio and television create new forms for the broadcast of poetry, dance, social satire and drama?

Allerton programmers chose three ambitious radio concepts to be produced by the NAEB. The Fund for Adult Education, an arm of the Ford Foundation, agreed to serve as patron with a \$300,000 grant.

One series was called *The Ways of Mankind*—thirteen programs on world cultures, customs and folkways. A second series, inspired by the cold war, *People Under Communism*, examined the nature and history of the Soviet Union. The third, *Jeffersonian Heritage*, produced in New York and written by Jeffersonian scholar Dumas Malone, examined the life, ideas and writings of the third president. The thirteen-part series starred Hollywood dramatic actor Claude Rains.

Significantly, critic Jack Gould of *The New York Times* called it a production "of the highest network calibre." That opinion was shared by the board of directors of the Ford Foundation. William Harley, who served as president of the NAEB in the 1960s, recalls that it was the success of the Jefferson series that convinced the Ford Foundation that NAEB-produced programs could compete creatively with commercial network productions. Thus persuaded, the foundation went on to become the principal patron of public broadcasting as it evolved in the '60s and '70s.

In June 1953, the NAEB, now established at Gregory Hall, acquired its first full-time staff director, Professor Harry J. Skornia. Schramm had met Skornia at Allerton II and had read his articles about the social mission of the new media, notably as an agent for promoting world peace. As a student tour leader in Europe in 1939, Skornia had been an eyewitness to the start of World War II. In 1947, in an open letter to the networks and their advertisers, published in the "bible of show business," *Variety*, Skornia proposed a series of thirteen programs in prime time dedicated to winning the peace. Edgar Kobak, president of Mutual Broadcasting, formally presented Skornia's ideas to the Advertising Council, where they languished.

Now in retirement in Fort Walton Beach, Florida, Skornia recalls, "I saw noncommercial radio and television in the role of helping us define our culture and our values in a useful way, a role the networks had rejected."



chamm shared Skornia's outlook about the new media and invited him to Urbana. Raised in near-poverty on a farm in Michigan, Skornia brought to the NAEB the passionate idealism of Midwestern progressivism.

He graduated at the head of his class from the Michigan State in 1932 and undertook a career as a teacher of French and German. He earned a doctorate in romance languages at the University of Michigan, but was lured into radio as program director of an Indianapolis station. Skornia disliked commercial radio and left it to found Indiana's Department of Broadcasting. After World War II, he went abroad to help overhaul the broadcasting systems of Germany and Austria, devising procedures and programs for their postwar operations.

In 1953, Skornia arrived at UIUC to offer a course in media studies and to become the first full-time employee of the NAEB. He held the post for seven years. His son, Lee, remembers that Skornia was "totally devoted" and spent "terribly long hours" on NAEB business. There hardly seemed to be a time when he wasn't travelling to conferences, foundation meetings and programming sessions.

There was also the task of advising the new television stations that were going on the air. NAEB leaders had been instrumental in establishing a consortium of educational broadcasting organizations based in Washington, D.C. In 1951, it persuaded the FCC to set aside the first two hundred nine television channels for educational television.

In Urbana, the NAEB was deeply involved in that historic television start-up while continuing to operate the radio tape network. Fourteen people shared the cramped space in Gregory Hall with those two noisy duplicating machines. Skornia complained constantly about the lack of privacy. The area is now a journalism lab area.

Underwood recalls an exotic stream of "pilgrims" who came to call on Skornia — musicians from Africa, radio producers from New York, officials and international broadcasters from virtually everywhere. Underwood remembers, too, the dream that Skornia and his people often talked about — the evolution of a "live" network operation.

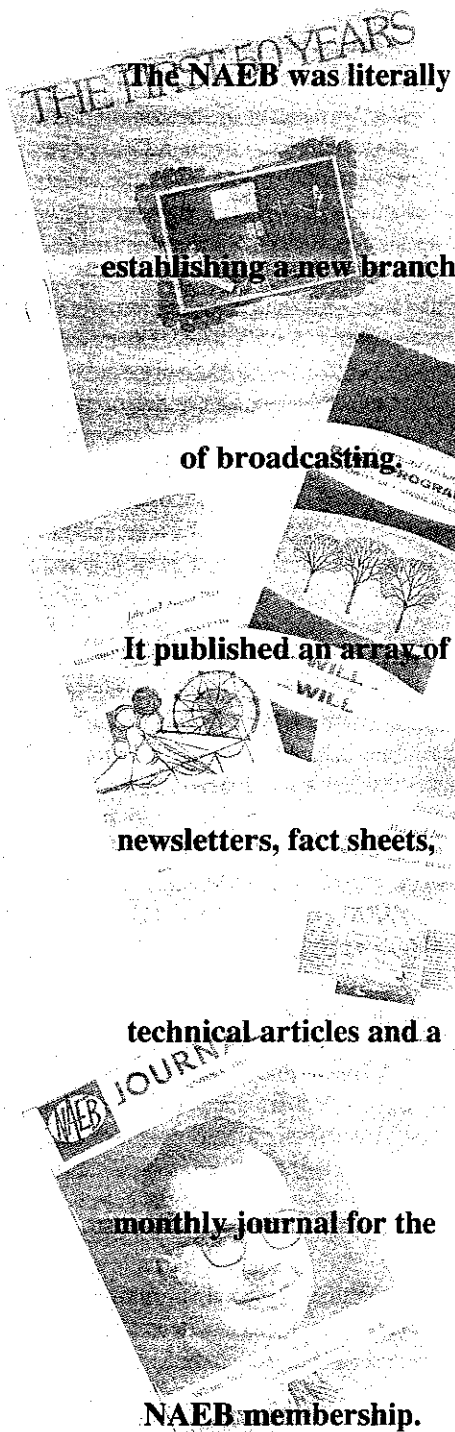
The NAEB was literally establishing a new branch of broadcasting. It published an array of newsletters, fact sheets, technical articles and a monthly journal for the NAEB membership. The NAEB technical staff carried out early research into applications of fax and satellite technologies, and provided engineering and technical training support to the new TV stations. One of the first was WILL-TV, which went on the air in August 1955 from makeshift studios under the stands of Memorial Stadium.

An NAEB consultant advised first-time managers on the complexities of running their stations — how to build budgets and work with unions, negotiate music licenses and hire professional staff. Urbana headquarters ran a job-placement service for educational stations, seminars on station management, on production, on script writing, on communications law and on teaching broadcasting courses.

Many future leaders attended NAEB seminars early in their careers. They included James Day, who became chief executive of National Education Television, later to be called PBS; Hartford Gunn, who established WGBH-TV Boston and became the first president of PBS; and Jack McBride, founder of the respected Nebraska Educational TV, operated in conjunction with the University of Nebraska.

The NAEB oversaw start-up grants to member stations, conducted key content studies of network programming and administered international exchanges of scholars in educational broadcasting.

It was as a communications researcher that Skornia met Marshall McLuhan — an encounter that helped establish the reputation of the Canadian scholar. The first contact was a scrawled note from McLuhan at the University of Toronto in April 1957 to NAEB headquarters promoting a subscription to his periodical on culture and communications, *Explorations*, along with a personal testimonial to "a magazine of great relevance."





The following year, Skornia heard McLuhan lecture at a meeting of the Modern Language Association. The obscure Canadian scholar impressed him. Skornia recruited him as principal investigator on an NAEB research project funded by the U. S. Department of Education, Understanding Media.

Its purpose was to apply what was known about the effects of mass media to the use of educational television, to define standards for measuring program effectiveness and to create a "grammar" of the new media for teachers.

McLuhan was given to flights of obscure thought which, someone said, "he uses like a blackjack." Skornia spent sleep-shy hours in his Urbana home helping McLuhan rewrite the final report to render the findings digestible for the Washington bureaucrats who paid for it. "I was sometimes asked," Skornia says, "if I wasn't promoting 'that crackpot' too much." McLuhan incorporated the findings of Understanding Media in his best-selling book of the same name, published in 1964. It was the work that established him. McLuhan proudly called himself "Harry's protege."

In 1961, the NAEB moved its headquarters from the Urbana campus to Washington to be closer to the campaign to win federal support for the creation of a public television and radio system. Twenty years later, in 1981, it closed its doors, a victim of success. Congress passed the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, creating the corporation for Public Broadcasting. Many of NAEB's activities were absorbed into the new system.

When the NAEB went out of business, eighty percent of American homes were being served by full schedules of PBS and NPR programs. It was the realization of what Schramm, Skornia and others had worked for in Urbana.

The history of public broadcasting, published by *Current*, the public broadcasting periodical, celebrates the NAEB as "public broadcasting's primary forum and voice" for sixty years. It was the "rallying point" for the frequency and channel battles that created the building blocks of the system. It hosted the meeting that launched the Carnegie Commission in 1965, which created the blueprint on which Congress acted. Then-University President David D. Henry was one of the fifteen commission members.

In Florida last September, Skornia, now eighty, was exulting over the success of PBS's Civil War series. "I recalled the old tape network and the dream it represented," he said. "I was very proud."

The NAEB community in Urbana was unique. It combined scholarship with activism. It brought an extraordinary mix of vision and elbow grease to the building of the alternative broadcasting system.

The journey that began in Urbana is not over. Public broadcasting is still not fully free of its governmental gatekeepers. It is kept on a short financial string. There is excessive dependence on corporate underwriting of the programs carried by its six hundred stations. Public television has no news organization.

The ten thousand stations of the commercial system specialize in amusement programming, more often honoring the principle of public service in the breach than the observance.

The American future, as NAEB's leaders foresaw, is inextricably linked to the question, "What is broadcasting for in America?" Skornia and others believe, with characteristic passion, that it's time for Allerton III. IQ

Copyright 1990, Jerry M. Landay. Jerry M. Landay is a visiting associate professor at the Department of Journalism in the College of Communications. He is a former news correspondent for ABC and CBS and served as co-executive producer with Nebraska Educational Television of the PBS Earth Week documentary "Profit the Earth."