

Bob Arnold
June 30, 2000

Interviewed by Hilary Hilscher

Hilary: I'm talking with Bob Arnold on the 30th of June in his house in Olympia... talking about bicycling [video tapes around to bush villages.]

Bob: We obtained a Bowoc transmitted approval to try this experiment of bicycling tapes from Public Broadcasting into the villages and for the part that I [was discussing that] brought us onto the tape recording is that I became the beneficiary because I would receive the tapes and mail them. Then they went from one village to another, maybe a half-dozen villages -- I've forgotten. Programs like Sesame Street and Masterpiece Theater -- much better in those days than it is now.

So I purchased one videotape player that were about that big in those days, and so, either at the beginning of the cycle or at the end of the cycle, I could watch the Dorothy Sayers series with Lord Peter Wimsey. I liked it so much that I ended up reading every one of her [books] ... comedy of manners.

Hilary: They're wonderful. Oh, that's great. So you ended up actually getting a lot of those too.

Bob: Now we can do it in whatever order you want to.

Hilary: Yeah, yeah.

Bob: What should I do?

Hilary: Well, you were commissioner of what was called then... or the executive director what was then called the Educational Broadcasting Commission.

Bob: Educational Broadcasting Commission. My predecessor, a very able person, I see is on your Advisory Committee, Charlie Northrip. And he was both director and director of the university station. I recollect this would be 1971.

Hilary: Right.

Bob: My recollection is that... whether the University should own and operate and be the licensee or whether they should be community controlled? I favored community control, but I think most of the board did. I mean, that's the direction they went. And I had the occasion to question that decision from time to time over the next couple of years, particularly when self-dealing on the part of a member of the Bethel broadcasting board, Walt _____.

Hilary: When you were there, there weren't a lot of stations on the air at that point?

Bob: Charlie and the people in Bethel had done all of the [work for] what became KYUK.

Hilary: Right.

Bob: So that my timing was good in that, in the few months as I recall, a few months after I became executive director, KYUK-radio was brought on the air.

Hilary: Right, which was an AM station at that point.

Bob: I think the reason for that, I wasn't in that decision as the AM has a greater reach

Hilary: Exactly.

Bob: to an audience, but I had the... a lot to guide. These stations didn't require any local match. Of course we're talking about a community like Bethel and resources weren't there. So, one of the main jobs of the broadcasting commission director was to obtain funding for the operation of the station and working with the local board. Later, of course, George Hohman, the state legislator from Bethel, added money to the budget to allow the establishment of the television station and it was to be guided... governed by a community board, at least the members.

Hilary: That the issue of community control? And then what did that mean? Community influence to the station?

Bob: Well, we believed that despite the University's fine management and operation of the station in Fairbanks, that it was a very different thing to decide what should be programmed. As with the local school board, or any other local [board] governing sorts of things that a radio or television station do... would be depended upon... the things.. I surprised myself by finding regulations I drafted. Because, of course, state legislators want to know that when state funds are going in, there is some kind of state guidance. I wrote them and they were adopted by the commission, and very quickly I had to provide sort of maximum freedom but pursuit of state goals, I said -- something like this: That the purposes of broadcasting in Alaska are to inform, educate, and culturally enrich -- to be determined -- defined, then -- by the community itself.

I remember, the "culturally enrich" is very broad. Oh, if you're going to have the control ... and I remember, when we brought on KOTZ, how surprised I was that the music preference in that area was Country and Western.

Hilary: And Bethel.

Bob: And Bethel too, but somehow Kotzebue jumps out at me. But we had employment of the Yup'ik language in Bethel, which was, I think, thrilling. I'm not a Yup'ik speaker, but one of the things I had done before I had gone into educational broadcasting, well, I was a commercial broadcaster at KHAR, I mean, news director, at a commercial station in '62. It was a very good station in those days. Owned by Bill Harpel. It hadn't been on the air very long, but I quickly gained status as a good news station -- wide music sounds, show music, folk music, popular music -- from surveys they do. But I was news director, so I had sort of paper qualifications for the position. I had been a teacher for four years and I had been a broadcaster and then I read books on the subject, of course -- dealing with the early development of Public Broadcasting.

Hilary: Which was still fairly new at this point?

Bob: Yes, it was. In fact, people think that I'm really an old-timer when it comes to Public Broadcasting even though it was called educational broadcasting in those days. I don't know if it still exists -- something called Education Broadcasting Review, something like a quarterly, to which you subscribed.

Hilary: And that was quarterly?

Bob: That's my recollection.

Hilary: Uh-huh. About that period, what do you think... what do you remember as being the biggest challenges that you faced, or your stations faced, or the whole idea of broadcasting at that point?

Bob: Though I developed -- and the commission approved -- a six-year plan for the development of the broadcasting facilities in Alaska, we did that against the backdrop of legislative decision-making, which decided where stations would go. The Bethel station had its existence thanks to George Hohman of the Appropriations Committee...the radio station. It's amazing when I think back on these numbers. I think Willie [Hensley] put in \$15,000 to start a radio station in Kotzebue. Then, of course, there was a federal grant program and it amounted to 75% of the equipment costs. I'm not exactly sure where all the money came from, but I know that we... the Kotzebue station was built on... we built, they built it in the basement of the BIA School in Kotzebue.

But answering the question directly, kind of regressing from that subject... so when we had our grand opening, in addition to ceremony there in the school, I sort of talked for a few hours, not a long-term course, on radio news writing and radio delivery.

Hilary: Nellie Moore?

Bob: No.

Hilary: No?

Bob: David Moore.

Hilary: David Moore.

Bob: David Moore was the first manager. Nellie Ward

Hilary: Nellie Ward, of course, yeah.

Bob: She was a teenager and she was going to the station, but we had a lot of fun there. Then of course the legislature was pretty good in approving funding for the operation of the stations. And even though our priority was to serve rural areas that were unserved -- I mean, out west there was just the Nome religious station.

Hilary: KNOM was on the air.

Bob: Right, religious station. Could be listened to in parts of the state where there wasn't the facility, I guess. But we were also under not "pressure," but public demand, let us say, for a public television station in Anchorage. So it became, well, I mean, government agencies try to respond to demand and you have a certain kind of vision. For instance, we had no station in Barrow at the time and no station in Dillingham, but in Fairbanks we had a station.

So we developed a proposal with the strong support of Augie Hiebert, a commercial broadcaster in Anchorage, for an Anchorage station. I think it's the only time I ended up getting in trouble with the commission and in trouble with Augie. From the time we had our first plan of developing a station for Anchorage, Franklin Butte was the engineer, a wonderful person. As he developed the engineering materials for the Anchorage station, it became clear that we needed to go to a higher power than we had originally envisioned. So Frank and I developed the application to the federal funding agency and the FCC, based on this new conclusion he had reached and I had concurred in. I'm not blaming Frank that we needed a higher output to reach the audience. So, without returning to the commission to ratify the higher-powered transmitter, we went ahead and filed the paperwork. It's a very big document you prepare for a station, and I, of course, wrote all of the parts dealing with the administration and programming and so on, and Frank did all the technical work. And I mailed it off.

We had attorneys representing us in Washington. At a subsequent meeting, reporting on the progress of the Anchorage application, I made a reference --- I've forgotten these numbers now of powers to this application we had filed. And I think it was Augie who asked for an executive session. First they asked why did you do this? I explained that Frank had told me about reach to the audience. And they said so it didn't cross my mind or some answer like that, you know. I went away. But after the executive session, they

decided they wouldn't take any disciplinary action against me, but it served Anchorage well because, not because of me, but because of the engineering information, which Frank had compiled. And we finished, including Augie Herbert, approving the application voting not to back away from it but to allow it to go forward.

One thing about the Anchorage station that is interesting...

Hilary: The Anchorage TV station?

Bob: The Anchorage television station. It is that, I think it was Dick McVeigh who telephoned me, on the appropriation I had asked for -- it was four hundred some thousand -- had been approved. But he said it had been approved -- but, he said, it's really for the cost of this television station in Alaska, for sure. I said, "No, these numbers are in line." "Well, no," he said, "What I mean is this: In order to get the \$400,000 you need, I had to put in money for this and this and this and this." I have forgotten the numbers now. But so, he was saying, the cost of the television station was the other things he put in for other members outside of Anchorage -- [in order] to get the four hundred plus thousand.

Hilary: That's great. That's great. Now this was the legislative money, not federal money?

Bob: Right.

Hilary: At this point. Uh-huh. Then there was federal money as well that went in as well.

Bob: My memory is that, on the construction, it was something like 75% from the federal government and only one-fourth from the state.

Hilary: You're right, that was that... you could get that amount from the Corporation [for Public Broadcasting]?

Bob: Uh-huh.

Hilary: Yeah.

Bob: While I was with the commission, we began planning for a Barrow station, and for a community board to plan for itself. It may have been, not an anti-government view, but may have been just a sense that we want to do it alone. It's 30 years later -- I've forgotten now. But they did it. They brought together KTOO, technical assistance, and my commentary or something like... essentially Juneau developed its own. But it became part of the broadcasting commission's duty, from the standpoint of searching for funding, to notify the stations and how much they got. So, of course, one of my jobs was to prepare the budget and to testify at the legislature, along with others, for the expenditures.

Hilary: When you -

Bob: A number of things were happening. I glanced through that speech I drafted for Egan. I'm reminded of that -- the need for satellite technology and I had... because at that time the state didn't have a telecommunications advisor, though as a non-technical person, I had kind of a continuing role from the policy standpoint. John Havlock was assigned the -- I mean Governor Egan looked to John Havlock for advice on the state's policy with regard to telecommunications -- and I was one of two, maybe more, persons who became advisors to John. Sandy Gibbs in the Attorney General's Office -- I met with him numerous times as he prepared comments for the state. I didn't write the contents but I was a contributor in some way. So I had a sense of the larger scene and the developments that were sort of out there that we wanted to hasten though -- yet my principal focus was radio and television stations.

Hilary: Uh-huh but just that you were a member. To what were some of the satisfactions that come to mind when you think back at that period? What was most rewarding work that you...?

Bob: Well, I would say, I need to go back to the fact that I was a teacher and it sort has permeated everything that I've done, whether it's broadcast commission or Native claims or any of these other activities so that, for me, it was the purpose that I had drafted that became part of the regulation. Things, I think, are terribly important to human beings, to humanity, to inform them fundamentally. I think of people getting that. To educate in a sense -- we didn't ever get into any sequential instruction sort of thing. Though we sort of looked into it, the need was so great for the other aspects -- like just the news.

So very broadly the idea of making information available to people who didn't have it before was enormously satisfying. Speaking of villages, the second thing I would mention is we tried -- and found some success -- in obtaining information **from** the villages. You see, you can live a long time in Anchorage and not even know they are out there -- what they faced by way of opportunity or sorrows and tragedies. So that news-gathering didn't really take place unless you had a volcano or something like that happen in Bethel or Kotzebue or Nome or Barrow. So I would say, to the extent we made some progress there, that would be enormously satisfying.

Then I thought my aspirations for what public television would be -- much higher (tape skip) until it became equated with that, and is now turning to a kind of disappointment. Our first manager for the Anchorage station had many skills, Will Jackson, I think, and talents -- and probably was the right choice. But fundamental to public educational broadcasting or public broadcasting is the idea that you (*interruption*).

Hilary: Bob, I want to go back to - well we were talking about rewards and we were talking about public television a bit.

Bob: Right. In addition to feeling rewarded over my complaints about public television or about Bill Jackson -- and his name is not important -- but though the philosophy behind educational broadcasting is and, I think, should be -- public broadcasting is that, instead of trying to maximize the audience every hour of the day, we try to serve the children at this time, and the people who want opera this time, and the people who want information at this time, and so on. See those succeeding audiences. But it was very clear. almost from the first day. that Bill wanted a big audience all the time and that has a corrupting influence and it becomes much more like a commercial station. I would say I watch more C-Span and Book TV than I watch public television. In fact Masterpiece Theater -- I'm not against crime drama, but I mean it's not the same.

But I think, yeah, the very largest reward was the idea of bringing information to people in the Bush, and having people in the cities learn -- depending on the effectiveness of those who manage the stations -- about the rest of Alaska so that they become sources of "Bethel Dateline" without a tragedy -- or Nome or Kotzebue.

Hilary: Something earlier that ties in with this I want to go back to and that is how did the stations serve their community in their unique - in the community's uniqueness? I mean, like Bethel obviously had some Yup'ik programming. Were there special ways that the station sort of adopted the personality of the village or the regions that you can think of?

Bob: I think I could surmise they did. I made trips to the stations to talk about what their problems were and that sort of thing, but I don't really have a good sense of their programming. One of the most... I mean, they had telephone phone-in shows. They would sometimes cover a council meeting. They had too little [money] to staff themselves appropriately to full-time news director or something like that.

In fact, when I would go to Bethel -- this is kind of funny to think about -- they would say, "If you have time, Bob, would you run around and pick up some news?" While I had done that in '62 -- I would go around and find out what was going on in town and then write news stories. And then one time, well, I had problems with Bethel because of the "self-dealing" that was occurring but I did have to - the place is less important but just for your information -- sort of review what they were doing. It was state money and I had to have some oversight of it.

But one day in Bethel the manager said he felt very ill. He used to do the evening news. Would I mind doing the evening news on television? And I said, "I'm not going back until tomorrow so I'll do that." I think that may have been one of the days that I wrote some news stories. So I went along with some wire stories and this local news I had written. And I handed it to Henry Ivanof who was to do sports. He did sports. Then he handed it back to me to do the weather. This is not like a big television studio. One guy here with the camera, you know. So then after, let's see, after I did the weather, apparently there was still a little time left and Henry said, "I suppose you're wondering what Bob Arnold is doing here. Well. he's out here to investigate us." I nearly tumbled

out of my chair. That was not entirely true. I was there to review their operation, but to have him announce that I was there to investigate..! And I mean... it was the funniest thing ever happened to me.

No, another funny thing that happened was on Election Day, the Mayor or the election official of a small village had been stuck by a blizzard in Bethel and the ballots were in the city safe. And so he went on the air in Bethel to announce the combination to the safe so that they could get the ballots out and have the election.

Hilary: This brings up the whole issue of Tundra Topics or Mukluk Telegraph -- that purpose that the station

Bob: Well, there was lots of that.

Hilary: bush sort...

Bob: Oh, yes, because those places didn't have telephones. They had the short-wave radio, as it was called. Some section of each day on those radio stations in the early days was devoted to messages from one village to another, from one member of the family to another member of the family. In Bethel, the manager later -- no, before --[Tape off.] Jim Croll started a newspaper. One issue that Jim brought to me was, "Is it all right if we run a commercial movie once in a while?" And I said I thought it was okay, you know, still consistent with this general guideline. And then one day he called and says, "Okay, can a nonprofit operate a newspaper for a profit -- sell advertising, employ people?" I think I concluded that was okay too. And they had a very successful paper much bigger than the old paper they had there -- Tundra Drums-- and sold quite a lot of advertising. My memory is it was 10 pages or something. Interesting thing to have a public radio - public radio-television station in that kind of operation.

I left not out of dissatisfaction, but over that little collision I had because the Native Foundation had failed to find a Native to write a book on land claims. A book that would be used in high schools and be a very generalized work, not a work of high scholarship. It should be scholarly in the sense that it would be accurate, but generally teach people about -

(Former Alaskan and friend of Bob's, Neil Johannsen, was listening to the interview and interjected.)

Neil: First time I ever ran across your name was associated with the book.

Bob: Hope you bought one. I didn't get anything out of it, you understand. I mean, I was paid to do it. It wasn't a royalty. The reason I hope you bought one is I checked and it is \$60 now.

Hilary: It is, what, the third or fourth printing at this point?

Bob: No, there were only two printings.

Hilary: Only two printings, but there was a revision.

Bob: First one was 5,000 and the second was 5,340. So that over the years AFN contacted me, "What do you think about rewriting?" I said in a way it ought to stand alone, but I think you ought to write a sequel, the second 20 years and then maybe do

Hilary: A two-volume set or something.

Bob: But let that stand alone because it was written in '75 and to rewrite all those things, you know...

Neil: And who wrote the new book? The... Mitchell, Don Mitchell wrote a book.

Bob: That's a terrific piece of work. I've read volume 1.

Neil: Yeah, it was going to be two volumes.

Bob: Yeah.

Neil: Has he written a second one?

Bob: He has written it and he has been revising it. I haven't been in touch with Don for over a year. He came through once but ...[Tape off.]

Hilary: Yeah for just a minute, just for you... remember about that, which was the Applied Technology Satellite, the first one.

Bob: Correct. And I think it had both education and health, as I recall, experiments. This is sort of the justification of the funding, that demonstrations... it's another word...it might have been called an experimental satellite to allow a doctor to talk with a health aide.

Hilary: Hold on just a second. (*Adjusts microphone.*) Okay.

Bob: My recollection is that, even in those days, formal evaluations of a product, projects like this, were pretty much required. And [to the extent] that the evaluation showed how effectively -- how much more -- she could carry out her activities, the [Indian Health] Service was very strongly supportive. And, oddly, I don't remember the duration. I think that the Broadcast Commission might have been the vehicle to sponsor it, and then they had a project director. So I wasn't that close to it.

Later, I sought funding under a demonstration project for ATS-F, which was television.

Hilary: Which then became ATS-6 once it became operational.

Bob: Yes. I obtained funding of about -- some number of people, including Charlie Northrip -- and we had, I thought, a good program of funding of it. The State of Alaska check of \$43,000. It was made out to Robert B. Arnold. I remember calling Juneau and saying, "Do I get to keep this? Or how do we deposit in the State Treasury?"

[Tape off]

Hilary: This is an interview with Bob Arnold on the 30th of June. One thing you mentioned earlier that I want to go back to was even though ATS1 was a huge step at the time, now we look back at it -- and it looks fairly "primitive", I think is what you had characterized it.

Bob: Also, though it was called a demonstration -- I mean, since it could be done by telephone, -- I mean, you know -- you're demonstrating something that could also be done in a slightly different way. It wasn't that profound a difference, but I think those words "demonstration" or "experiment" had to do with...

Hilary: ...the use of the satellite. I mean, the fact that you were doing this by satellite...

Bob: Yeah, NASA -- very much. If there was any push for these things, it was NASA, which had the technical ability to build equipment and do these extraordinary things, but in order to... one of the proposals, one of the projects that I proposed was computer-assisted instruction. And that seems kind of strange since it was 20 years ago, or 25, but I don't think that I mean... although computer assisted instruction... we had good controls. Charlie might have written that part. I don't remember. And I don't really know... -

Hilary: Interesting how that sort of came up and engulfed the educational.

[Tape skips, comments not transcribed]

(Break)

Hilary: Think about the stations that came on the air during your tenure and the growth of public broadcasting, particularly in the Bush or in the cities too. How would you characterize that, the contribution that it makes to -- sort of -- our community lives?

Bob: Well I think again it's most important for those who lack the information they need to... not just as citizens...

Tape 1, Side B

Bob: It's terribly important in -- sort of -- instructing us how to be prepared for the future... articles which I don't read any more because I've read them over and over during the

years. But this flow of important information dealing with economics of a household and childrearing or health -- all those things that you know -- that you take for granted in the city or in a newspaper or broadcasters -- those, I suppose are my greatest satisfaction.

Hilary: I have to say without NPR I would be lost. I listen to BBC. I listen to Marketplace. I listen to all of that, but nothing on commercial broadcasting touches what they're doing.

Bob: I know. I really should... one was really instructional and the other was more commercial, I mean, a more popular sort of entertainment, as I remember. And the legislature, when it cut back, cut back on instructional. You need to verify that with someone who knows it more vividly. That's my recollection.

Tape ends.