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An Introduction

The Museum of Broadcasting's exhibition "KTLA: West Coast Pioneer" presents a historical overview of an independent station that has earned a reputation for innovation in programming and broadcasting techniques. KTLA was the first station licensed west of the Mississippi and has been a pioneer in the live coverage of important events occurring in the Los Angeles area. "KTLA: West Coast Pioneer" is part of a series of Museum exhibitions that examines the vital contributions independent stations have made to the development of broadcasting.

The exhibition encompasses more than 40 hours of programming that document KTLA's enterprising spirit. The first broadcast of KTLA was seen on January 22, 1947, featuring Bob Hope as host, and a rare clip of that initial program survives. The telecast that helped forge KTLA's local identity was the unprecedented live coverage of the attempted rescue of a little girl who fell down an abandoned water well. KTLA interrupted its regular schedule and remained on the air continuously for 27 hours until the body of the girl, Kathy Fiscus, was recovered.
KTLA pioneered several technical advances that facilitated live reporting of breaking stories in a topographically diverse region such as Los Angeles. It was the station's founder, the legendary Klaus Landsberg, who personally conducted a geological survey and set up his own microwave unit to relay the first live telecast of an atomic blast in 1952. KTLA's local coverage of the explosion was given to all the networks, another first, and the nation was given an eyewitness view of a nuclear explosion. The haunting image of a desolate Nevada landscape entirely enveloped by the intense heat and light of an atomic test was preserved on film by the kinescope process and serves as a testament to Landsberg's perseverance in developing live remotes.

KTLA expanded its remote capability by designing and operating the first flying news unit, appropriately called the helicopter. This converted helicopter allowed instantaneous access to unexpected events. The unique flexibility of KTLA's airborne reporting is most apparent in its wide-ranging coverage of the Los Angeles area's 1961 Bel Air Fire that devastated about 500 homes, the Baldwin Hills Dam break in 1963 that resulted in three fatalities and extensive property damage, and the 1971 earthquake, the catastrophic effects of which were first made known by KTLA's transmission. The policy of continuous coverage was sustained, and each broadcast built to a dramatic intensity unmatched by any Hollywood spectacular. The coverage of these disasters has been condemned into an hour-long documentary, but what still remains is KTLA's commitment to in-depth journalism of remarkable pathos and realism.

KTLA's adventures in live production also spilled over into the entertainment field. During the Fifties, KTLA originated its own nighttime schedule of live programming, quite a feat for an affiliated independent. The programs featured homes of California's most popular musicians, ranging from the Western swing of Spade Cooley to the champagne melodies of Lawrence Welk. One of the most intriguing live specials was the vast by Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev to the set of Cavalcade of the United States. Khrushchev was ceremoniously greeted by members of the cast, including Frank Sinatra and Shirley MacLaine.

KTLA has not forgotten its Hollywood setting or consternation. One of the station's earliest children's shows, KTLA-School Studios, Inc., portrayed the adventures of a group of children who start their own movie studio. As it only happens in the movies, one of the characters, ten-year-old Jill Oppenheim, grew up to be actress Jill St. John. KTLA's entertainment specials reflect an interest in the lore and lore of the Dream Factory. Hedda Hopper narrates her own tour of "her town" and chats with such legends as Francis X. Bushman, Ramon Novarro, Walt Disney and Gloria Swanson. John Wayne gives a guided tour of the real Alamo in a 1959 special promoting his movie, The Alamo. Stella Adler is on the defensive as she tries to explain and teach "The Method" to a group of young students from Los Angeles in the 1965 documentary Stella Adler and the Actor: KTLA's most recent production, Hollywood, the Greatest Story Ever Told, gives a history of one of the town's most exported items—bikes.

KTLA has developed its scheduling of programming oddities. One very popular show in the early Fifties was Musical Adventure with Karla Pandit. Pandit was billed as an Indian mystic and played divine melodies on his organ. In over 900 episodes he never spoke a word and his origins were always in doubt. Appearing on KTLA at the same time as Pandit was Renzo Cesana, who developed the art of the romantic monologue. Playing "The Continental," a suave bachelor, Cesana sat at a table for two and wooed his female following.

During the Sixties KTLA's coverage of Los Angeles events with national importance had a great influence beyond the local transmissions. KTLA earned a Peabody Award for its reporting of the Watts riots. Police throughout the country were so impressed with the aerial coverage of the telescopet that helicopters have since become standard law enforcement vehicles. In 1968 KTLA was the only station on the air when Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated at the Ambassador Hotel in downtown Los Angeles.

Recently, KTLA has commissioned a series of award-winning documentaries that break new ground in television's ability to cover social issues. KTLA premiered Scorched Straight!, an inventive documentary which records a new solution to juvenile crime. Produced and directed with gritty realism by Arnold Shapiro, the film documents the confrontation of hardened criminals, "the lifers," with young delinquents who are forced to hear about the realities of prison existence. Shapiro also used cinéma-vérité techniques to document the vigorous training methods of the Los Angeles Police Department in The Real Booties.

KTLA has employed the team of Diana Buchhantz and Benjamin Glyn Moses to investigate the other side of the Los Angeles dream. In Hunger in the Promised Land, the team discovered a city of dazzling wealth and extreme poverty, where hunger and unemployment are a way of life for many. Buchhantz and Moses also recorded the untold story of the Hispanic community in East of the L.A. River.

Los Angeles has more independent television stations than any other city. KTLA has achieved recognition in that crowded marketplace by developing innovative programming that reflects the diversity of its audience. KTLA has maintained its illustrious tradition of live news coverage while exploring new forms of the documentary. KTLA has retained its pioneer spirit.

Ronald Simon Curator, Television
Klaus Landsberg

Klaus Landsberg, born in Germany in 1916, early proved himself an electronics genius. At nine, he was building radios in matchboxes; at sixteen he built the most effective shortwave receiver ever designed. In 1937, he escaped from Nazi Germany with a secret invention that led to radar. Soon after he arrived in the United States, he was assisting with NBC's first public demonstration of television at the New York World's Fair. After a stint with Du Mont Laboratories, Landsberg headed west to set up Los Angeles' first television station for Paramount Pictures.

Under Landsberg's visionary direction, KTLA developed an unrivaled reputation for on-the-spot news coverage of major events. KTLA's ability to scoop Los Angeles' newspapers was demonstrated in 1947 when Landsberg rushed his cameras to the scene of an electroplating plant explosion. In 1952, Landsberg oversaw the construction of a remote hook-up to the Nevada desert for a live broadcast of the first atomic explosion seen in the nation's living rooms. Half a month before the blast, AT&T had announced that it would take eight months to set up the remote connections. Landsberg went into action. Using Marine helicopters, he ferried specially modified equipment to an uncharted mountain peak for the feedback to Los Angeles, where it was then picked up by the networks.

As program director, Klaus Landsberg kept KTLA first in the Los Angeles ratings despite competition from six other stations and four networks. (In fact, Landsberg himself created the first West Coast network in 1948 with a link-up to San Diego.) From the inception of the Emmy Awards in 1949, KTLA won more than any other two stations combined. Programming on KTLA consistently reflected Landsberg's ability to develop new show formats and tap new sources of talent. *Time for Beany,* a fifteen-minute daily children's show, won three Emmys. *City at Night* was another award-winning show broadcast live from unique Southern California locales. Producer and director over 3,500 telecasts, Landsberg gained a reputation unequaled in the television industry. Despite his untimely death from cancer in 1956, Klaus Landsberg will be remembered as early television's foremost and finest executive.

Cleve Landsberg's Recollection of KTLA and His Father

As a child growing up, I could never have hoped for a more intriguing playground than the television station laid before me. Constantly I was brought to this wonderland to explore, and wreak havoc on those who were busy with the operation of KTLA. To most I must have been the worst kind of brat with the pranks I would pull, but to my dad, Klaus Landsberg, I was wonderful amusement and my being there was the only way he could spend time with me.

I was carted off almost everywhere to my great joy—City at Night, Remotes, Yucca Flat, preparing for the atom bomb test, ice skating at Frosty Frolics, and innumerable other stage and remote telecasts. To help “entertain” me, I was even given my own headset so I could plug into any camera and listen to the PL conversations [between the director and the camera operators]. Fortunately for them, there was no microphone on my headset. They knew I was dangerous when I sprayed a Ray Hutton and her all-girl band with an emergency fire hose during one show. Dad got a good laugh out of that one.

But one event stands out particularly in my mind. It was one night in 1952 when I was awakened and just as quickly my Dad and I were speeding at 90 miles an hour to Tehachapi where a devastating earthquake had virtually destroyed the town. There I was, a wide-eyed six-year-old in the back of John Polich's pickup truck feeding cable out the back as Robin Clark shot camera, and we slowly patrolled the devastated main street sending those live pictures back to Los Angeles. That's what television was all about. I loved every second of it and I loved my dad.

* A brilliant scientist and a bold, imaginative entrepreneur, Klaus Landsberg produced more than 3,500 telecasts in his short lifetime and gained a reputation unequaled in the television industry. His enthusiasm for the new medium and his dedication were boundless. Landsberg died of cancer in 1956, at the age of 40.
They Said It Couldn’t Be Done

The Story of the First Live Television of an Atomic Detonation

It has been my privilege to be a participant in a recent event that made television history. This was the first live televising of an atomic detonation, which was brought to the living rooms of millions of Americans, thanks to the raw courage, physical endurance and technical brilliance of a single individual who, in turn, inspired a great crew of engineers and technicians.

The event took place at a rocky butte on the Nevada Proving Grounds of the Atomic Energy Commission, which newsmen promptly dubbed “Nevada, Nev.” Some 200 representatives of all media covered this story on the morning of Tuesday, April 22, 1952, but no other medium had the heartache and backache packed into its story as did television.

Our story really begins on June 13, 1951, when the AEC and the Department of Defense held a joint news conference in the Pentagon, Washington, to give out such news as could be released about the atomic tests held that spring at our Pacific Proving Grounds in Eniwetok Atoll in the Marshall Islands.

Newsmen became insistent that they be let in on one of these detonations. They said it was unfair that some members of Congress and of the Armed Services were allowed to see these “shots”, as we call them, and then have their stories printed, broadcast and televised. The AEC recognized the persuasiveness of this argument . . .


Opposite: One of the camera positions on a mountain peak for KTLA’s “Operation Big Shot,” the first live telecast of an atomic bomb test. The truck had to be fastened down because of the strong winds that swept through the Nevada desert. Photo: Bureau of Land Management, 1952.
However, we had to be absolutely certain that, in allowing live coverage by all media, the AEC would not expose restricted data to the news media and thus run the risk of classified information being made available to [an unfriendly] power.

Slowly, step by step, we were able to approach complete coverage. Live television was the hardest problem of all. Actual tests were made with various types of cameras. (We use television extensively in our scientific work, especially for remote control operations in weapon testing.) At one time, TV was out—completely. However, at the distance finally agreed upon—from eleven to twelve miles from ground zero—and from a study of firing done by all types of cameras set up in the Charleston Mountain Range, some 45 miles away, it was decided that live TV would be possible. All this took much time.

Running one of these tests is a big electronic operation. The ABC uses many frequencies. One of the requirements was that no frequency be used by any medium interfering with the ABC Test Organization. Careful check showed that this could eliminate some 70 percent of all the commercial equipment licensed by the FCC to radio and television.

Then, the Test Organization would have to test fully with all media equipment in operation some days before the detonation. Our scientists remembered that an electric razor once almost delayed a shot. That's how fine we slice the electronics out at the proving gound. So—and all this before I could call the media—we decided that all equipment would have to be in place and ready for a full "dry run" with the Test Organization by Saturday, April 19th—three days before the scheduled "open shot" set for Tuesday, the 22nd.

Finally, on the afternoon of Friday, March 29th, the green light was flashed. All approvals were in; the President had been notified in Key West. At 4:30 that afternoon I got the four TV networks and one Klaus Landsberg—the hero of our story—on a conference call. Remember, now, this was just twenty-one days before complete installation and "dress rehearsal" would be required.

Why Landsberg? We knew there were three independent stations in Los Angeles, which city regards the Nevada Proving Grounds as its home territory. Landsberg had put cameras on top of Mount Wilson and opened his station, KTLA, at 5:00 a.m. one day in February of 1951 to telecast the bloo of light visible from that distance. It was estimated that more than 30,000 Los Angelesans got up that morning to see this event. So, playing a hunch, Landsberg was included on the call to the network.

This was quite agreeable to the networks. In fact, during that conference call, the four nets named Klaus Landsberg as technical director to deal with the telephone company, get prices, and investigate feasibility... We agreed to meet Tuesday, April 1, in Chicago... April 1, 1952

We met practically all day Tuesday. The telephone company was still hemming and hawing but had said it would require from ten to twelve relays and cost between $60,000 and $70,000 for their end of the work. Since the AEC had turned down a request for sponsorship, this began to look like a lot of money. The networks were hesitant. By the end of Tuesday, April 1—just eighteen days before the test deadline—it was pretty much up to Landsberg... April 4

I took a train for Las Vegas and next board from [Landsberg] on Friday, April 4. The telephone company had definitely said no. In fact, their experts and some from the television industry had said the job—setting up the 250 to 275-mile relay—just could not be done in the fifteen days remaining before the test deadline...

Landsberg had the gamble up to his boss, Paul Raibourn. If they failed to make the grade, it might cost KTLA up to $40,000 because no one would share the expense unless Landsberg got a picture through. But Raibourn had faith in his man. He said, "Go ahead and try it."

The 3,000 people at Camp Mercury—scientists, military people, technicians—and all the rest quickly took an avid interest. We ate at a common mess hall and cafeteria—no private eating places for any brass at Camp Mercury—and I would be besieged at every meal for the latest news on TV coverage. "Is he going to make it?" soon was the query on many lips.

Friday night, April 4, Landsberg reported his first start. He had found a spot on San Antonio Mountain above Wrightwood, California.
A shabby relay was

where we decontaminate vehicles used by
the radiation monitors.

So Landsberg placed two cameras on the
Spring Mountain peak in the
Charleston Range with orders—and
these proved to be all-important—to feed
the relay whenever there was no signal
from the proving grounds. This was a
precaution against the shock wave from
the atomic blast putting his parabolas—
the dishes—on the Site out of
to the tens of thousands of
boxes and trucks became.

By 5:00 a.m. the shaky relay was

in the Nevada desert. He learned
that the D-5 was due to

and the snow
pack was some eight feet but he had put
up the plywood— the big dish—and hauled
up the rest of the equipment, and was in
contact with Mount Wilson.

April 5

Landsberg turned up at the Site, as we
call the proving grounds, on Saturday
afternoon, April 5. He was stumped for
his next relay. The maps showed that
he could go above 6,500 feet, he could
try a daring thing, something never
before done in TV.

He could span the
California desert country with a single
140-mile relay. The books said this was
not feasible. Equipment was guaranteed
to boost a signal only 40 miles. Well, that
Saturday we picked out a location on
News Nob for his mobile unit and for his
initial relay, and tested some locations for
this first big jump, from a spot that we call
Control Point—the nerve center of all
weapon tests— to a 9,000-foot peak on
Spring Mountain in the Charleston
Range. This was going to be tricky.
KTLA had only one frequency it could use,
7000. The beam had to go through two
small “saddle,” one of them only 150
feet wide. But this didn’t seem to worry
Landsberg. What he needed on that date,
just fourteen days before testing, was the
northern end of that 140-mile relay.

April 6

I shall never forget Sunday, April 6. We
took a heavy power truck and drove 285
miles across Clarke Mountain—elevation
10,000 feet—looking for a shelf on that
mountain where we might put a relay.

We were 60 miles below Las Vegas. Riding
in this truck was like being in the
cockpit of an old DC-3. Our ears rang for
an hour after our 12-mile search. And it
was fruitless. That night we did not have
a location. I was to try aerial recon-
naissance in a liaison plane or helicopter
on Monday, but 60-mile winds “scrubbed
it out,” as they say in the airport opera-
tion rooms.

Landsberg took his big black Chrysler
and drove around mountain after moun-
tain. At his side was an amazing, dour
55-year-old man, Raymond “Pappy”
Moore, the chief engineer of KTLA. We
were out of touch with them for two days and
wondering if they had given up the whole
thing as a bad dream.

April 9

Then he called on Wednesday, April 9.
It was now only nine days before test
hour. He had found a shelf on an unnamed
mountain. It could only be reached by
helicopter; it was 6000 feet up. He
had hooked up with the U.S. Marines at El
Toro base in California. They had two
big Sikorsky helicopters and, although they
had never been higher than 5000 feet, the
Marines general in charge was willing
to take the chance.

KTLA trucked its equipment to Valley
Well, a tiny mining settlement at the base
of Clarke Mountain, where the Marines
set up a temporary helicopter base. The
large Sikorsky HRS-1 helicopters landed
12,000 pounds of equipment, food, gaso-
line and supplies—six tons—plus four
men, including Landsberg. The men
were parachutes. The big eight foot dish
could not be gotten into a “copter and had
to be tied on with rope. Great credit
goes to the four pilots who alternated on
the trips. The delicate receiving and trans-
mittting gear was deposited in good condi-
tion on the top of Mountain X, as we call
it—it wasn’t shown on the maps.

April 11

Landsberg called me jubilantly on the
night of April 11 to tell me he had a signal on his 140-mile jump from
Mountain X to Mt. San Antonio, although it was not yet strong enough
to carry a picture. He also was able to use powerful Motorola Walkie-
Talkie equipment and talk between the two points.

April 12

Landsberg worked all night on Moun-
tain X, getting his signal up to strength, and then it faded out shortly after sunrise, about 7:30 a.m.

April 15

No word on Sunday or Monday, but on
Tuesday night, April 15—just three full
days before testing—Klaus had solved
his technical troubles. He was ready
to line up the Spring Mountain site with a
relay he had put on Stone Mountain, just
18 miles from Las Vegas. The boys on
Stone Mountain were to start flashing a
light five times a minute at 10:00 p.m.
and we were to pick it out from the
9,000 foot perch on Spring Mountain, 56
miles distant.

I joined him Tuesday night. There was
a beautiful starlit sky and a clear
moon lighting up the terrain for a hun-
dred miles or more. We could see every
light in Las Vegas—even pick up the
clubs and hotels and all the lights at Nellis
Air Force Base, northeast of Vegas. We
could spot lonely ranch houses. But in all
those tenuous of thousands of lights, no light
from Stone Mountain.

A ranger with us figured out the
answer. A ridge, not shown on the map,
was blocking line of sight. And only three
days remaining to complete the relay. I
was praying for a postponement. But the
second shot had gone off on schedule and
the “open” shot was on the books for
April 22, with that all-important test
now set for early Sunday morning, the 26th.
This still meant that the TV relay had to
be working by Saturday...

April 18

Landsberg called me Friday morning,
two days before the “frequency rehearse-
ral,” to say he had found a “hole” in the
forbidding, 11,000-foot Charleston range,
got line-of-sight from the 9000-foot peak
in this range to Mountain X and thus out
two relays. He was now planning to set
up at Las Vegas for a build-up show on
Monday night and had started a mobile
unit and two trucks to the Site.

They arrived late Friday but ran into
trouble with that narrow 130-foot saddle.
They worked all Friday night.

April 19

Saturday morning, I worked with
them. They couldn’t use the Motorola
Walkie-Talkies because the frequency
was barred. So I acted as a human relay,
sitting in the radio room of the ABC control
building and listening via a headset to
members of the receiving crew on the
radar phone and speaking to them in a little
Walkie-Talkie that covered the three-
tenth of a mile to where Landsberg was
trying to get his last relay in tune with
Spring Mountain.

Other weary but still enthusiastic
engineers were hooking up the
mobile unit. We put a 600-watt generator
to give power and put a 15-kw set behind
it as a spare.

We warned Landsberg repeatedly
about the shock wave. His last relay
was on top of a truck parked precariously
on a concrete apron outside of a building
where we decontaminate vehicles used by
the radiation monitors.

So Landsberg placed two cameras on
the Spring Mountain peak in the
Charleston Range with orders—and
these proved to be all-important—to feed
the relay whenever there was no signal
from the proving grounds. This was a
precaution against the shock wave from
the atomic blast putting his parabolas—
the dishes—on the Site out of
to the tens of thousands of
boxes and trucks became.

By 5:00 a.m. the shaky relay was
From a 1985 Museum of Broadcasting Book

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operating and the picture was good. The weary men dropped almost in their
tacks for a few hours' sleep. I arrived at
8:30 a.m. and set up communications
with Dr. Jack Clark at the Control Center.
Of course, it was equally important to
Landberg that the feeds of AEG High
and to high frequencies did not mess up
the picture. At 9:30 a.m. Jack Clark
phoned down to News Nobs: “Here we
go.” The next hour seemed like a day.
The silence was deafening, although I
know that hundreds of radio waves were
bouncing around in all directions and on
a hundred frequencies.

Finally, at 10:35 a.m. came Jack Clark’s
telephone: “OK, on television.”

Immediately after ordering Land-
berg’s engineers to stand by and one
to stay awake to keep the relay in operation,
we went into Las Vegas to plan the pro-
grams. The Los Angeles pool had asked
for an hour show from Las Vegas on Mon-
day night. The last KTLA mobile unit left
Los Angeles for Las Vegas. I suspect that
by now KTLA was being run with a
telephone operator and an office boy.
The second mobile unit broke down and
did not reach Las Vegas until 6:00 p.m.

April 21

Monday night, at the El Cortes Hotel,
AEG headquarters, a completely
unrehearsed 60-minute show kicked off
on the roof at 10:00 p.m. Pacific Time.
This first live telecast out of Nevada used
the longest single relay—140 miles to be
exact—over attempted thus far in televi-
sion. Los Angeles raved that the pictures
were almost studio quality. We ran in all
the AEC, Civil Defense, and Department
of Defense brass, and then brought in
Vaughn Monroe, Tony Martin, and some
other show celebs who were playing Las
Vegas that week. I did not know how it
ended, for I had to get back to Camp Mer-
cury, 70 miles away, to be ready for Shot
Day, and the first bus of cameramen and
still photographers was due to arrive at
8:45 a.m.

April 22

I had gotten into my barracks and was
sound asleep when one of the AEG
Chief Engineer was flashing a light in
my face. I thought I had taken care of all
the necessary passes. But on Shot Day,
special orders are in effect at the second
gate, the one opening directly to French-
man’s Flat, beyond which is Yucca Flat.
Landberg and his entire crew, who
were to attempt the telecast, were blocked
there. Their passes weren’t good until
7:00 a.m. It was 1:15 a.m. I put a topeos
over my pajamas, raced the government
Ford at what I fear may have been an
unauthorized speed for the intervening
five miles, and personally vouched for
the mine-tired men, some of them growing
respectable beards by now.

Finally came the zero hour. KTLA
started feeding pictures at 8:45 a.m. to
Los Angeles. I do not know exactly when
the men started taking the feed. The shot
was set for 9:30 a.m. I have been told that
the picture started feeding to the coaxial
cable at 9:00 a.m. Things were going fine.

Then came a moment I have not been
able to fix exactly. But information now
is that it was about 9:15 a.m. Remember
that Landberg’s communication with
his vital Spring Mountain relay went
silent at that moment as per orders. But
his instructions to his cameras on Spring
Mountain were to feed the picture at any
time there was no feed from the Site
observation point, North No.

Well, the AEG power failed! When the
news was relayed to me, I felt an awful
sick feeling in the stomach. I couldn’t
leave my communications post, for I was
operating the loudspeaker for all the 200
newsmen and 100 civil defense and
other invited guests. I do not know how
long the power was off. I do know that
the power failure led to rumors that there
had been a general failure and that the
test might be delayed. I corrected this
over the loudspeaker. I do know that the
power for TV was not enough for the
delicate tubes and other apparatus to
cool off. And that Landberg went to
work frantically to get back on the air
from News Nobs. His cameras on Spring
Mountain caught the initial fireball.
Seconds after the burst, which was on the
noise at 9:30, he was sending pictures
to News Nobs.

It was a great achievement. It made
television history. It was a miracle that it
happened at all.

*Mount Wilson stands high above Los Angeles, and it was from that vantage point that the unin-
visible (landberg) was able to capture the dim
Touchable of this nuclear test. There were sixteen such atomic tests before the media were officially
allowed to cover one.

**Their hope had been to send the television signal
over the telephone lines, certainly the best
way to send over long distances in those pre-
wireless days. But there were no telephone sta-
tions in Nevada to hook up with telephone lines.
The only alternative was a line-of-sight relay
system, which is what Landberg was finally
forced to create.