DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR
ROBERT FREDERIC SCHENKkan

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Robert F. Schenkkan, professor, radio-television-film, has filed with the Secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

Sue Alexander Greninger, Secretary
The General Faculty

IN MEMORIAM
ROBERT FREDERIC SCHENKkan

Robert Frederic Schenkkan, former professor in the Department of Radio-Television-Film at The University of Texas at Austin, died in Austin on February 9, 2011, at the age of ninety-three. From 1955 until his retirement in 1976, Robert Schenkkan was also the director of the UT Austin Communication Center, the president and general manager of KLRN-TV, the general manager of KUT-FM, and the director of the Texas Educational Microwave Project and the Southwest Creative Film Project.

Bob married Jean McKenzie on August 26, 1944. Jean preceded him in death on January 3, 1985. Bob is survived by four children and their spouses: Pieter and Frances Schenkkan of Austin, Texas; Dirk and Patricia Schenkkan of San Francisco, California; Robert Schenkkan Jr. and Maria Headley of Seattle, Washington; Gerard “Tex” and Judith Schenkkan of San Francisco, California; and by twelve grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. In 1989, four years after Jean’s death, Robert married Phyllis Rothgeb, and he is survived by Phyllis; her sons, John Reese Rothgeb Jr. and David Rothgeb; and two grandchildren.

Robert was born in Manhattan to Joseph and Flora Schenkan, who were Dutch immigrants, on March 4, 1917, and grew up in Brooklyn and Long Island, where he graduated from Sewanhaka High School. After working four years in Manhattan, he received a scholarship from the University of Virginia, where he graduated with honors in 1941. Robert subsequently enrolled at the University of North Carolina (UNC), but left to volunteer for military service. Robert served in the U.S. Navy, primarily in the Pacific, and later retired from the Navy Reserve with the rank of commander. He returned to UNC and completed his M.A. degree in drama in 1947. He taught there until the fall of 1955, when he was recruited by UT Austin President Logan Wilson to come to Austin to found public radio and television stations and to teach as a professor of Radio, Television, and Film.

In 1958, Schenkkan helped launch KUT Radio and then, in 1962, he started KLRU Television. According to Jim Lehrer, “He [Schenkkan] was the first to understand the immediate meaning and ultimate importance of public broadcasting. He really got it.” Robert Schenkkan became a national force in organizing educational TV stations into the PBS network and worked with President Lyndon Johnson on passing the Public Broadcasting Act in 1967, which established congressional funding. He was a fierce defender of public broadcasting when President Richard Nixon loaded the Corporation for Public Broadcasting with partisan appointees who threatened to stop government funding for public affairs programming.

“Bob Schenkkan was a quiet warrior for an independent press,” according to Dean Roderick P. Hart. “He stood among a few men and women who helped create the Public Broadcasting System we know today. His leadership role continued as he helped preserve a national treasure when political forces tried to dismantle it.” Bob Schenkkan was one of the three founding fathers of the College of Communication and, as such, his legacy will forever be a major part of The University of Texas at Austin.

When Robert Schenkkan retired from UT Austin in 1976, he was recruited by the Agency for International Development in Washington, D.C., to promote educational television in developing nations. He ended his career completely when his wife Jean became ill.
Robert Schenkkan received three Ford Foundation grants to study and extend public broadcasting programming, and he was a Fulbright lecturer at the University of Chile in 1969 and 1972. His list of consultancies, professional assignments, and other study grants, both in the United States and Latin America, is extensive. Robert also served on a number of non-profit organizations. He supported the arts, Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic, and Planned Parenthood. He also continued to serve on the Board of Directors for KLRU and KUT after his retirement.

Bob Schenkkan was a visionary and an innovator. His legacy is more than a station, a network, or even public broadcasting itself. His legacy includes millions of people whose lives were enriched because of his courage, persistence, and imagination. For his ninetieth birthday in 2007, KLRU and KUT hosted a tribute that brought together one hundred and fifty friends and family members. Written and filmed accolades included messages from Bill Moyers and Jim Lehrer, as well as former Federal Communications Commission Chairman Newton Minow and legendary public TV and radio executive Ward Chamberlain. The University of Texas, the College of Communication, and, indeed, the whole nation owe Robert Fredric Schenkkan a great debt of thanks.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Isabella Cunningham (chair), Wayne A. Danielson, and J. Stewart Vanderwilt.

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