

# Quality alternative is quest for NETV

By Peg Sheldrick

Once upon a time, in 1954, the Fetzer Broadcasting Company acquired the licenses of two television channels in Lincoln. One was Channel 10. The other was Channel 12.

Fetzer donated the Channel 12 license as well as a transmitter and studio equipment to the University of Nebraska. Channel 10 remained a commercial channel and is currently the local affiliate for the CBS television network.

Channel 12, on the other hand, has grown into the flagship station for the Nebraska Educational Television Network, a nine-station statewide system dedicated to the proposition that viewers are capable of enjoying something more useful and challenging than *Flying High*.

From its rather modest origins (lodged at one time in the Temple Building on campus), Channel 12 has burgeoned into a major public station, now housed in the very modern Nebraska Educational Telecommunications Center on east campus. The network will turn 25 in 1979. In its relatively brief history the network has gained national attention, and not always for its programming.

In 1975 NETV filed suit against NBC TV in the celebrated case of the identical logos. Both networks were using the same geometric "N" design, and NETV claimed they used it first. The out-of-court settlement netted NETV \$500,000 worth of equipment (including a mobile unit) and \$55,000 cash for the expenses of designing a new logo.

## Seventh oldest

Channel 12 is the seventh oldest public TV station in the United States. According to Ruthanna Russel of the information office there are not many statewide networks comparable to NETV.

"We have an excellent state wide facility," she said. "People are very impressed with this facility. Actor Will Geer (*The Waltons*) said this was better than some places they worked in Hollywood."

NETV is the point of origin for programs that go out to the 24 stations in the Central Education Network. For transmitting within the state the network has a system of stations and translators (which boost the signal). This last summer the network began using a new satellite receiver-transmitter. It is a "link" in a nationwide system of 149 public TV satellite facilities that receive signals from Western Union's WESTAR I satellite.

Until now, public TV programs had to be distributed via phone lines and microwave links, so that only one program could be broadcast at a time. The new system can run four programs simultaneously, allowing the network to reduce distribution costs, improve audio and visual signals, and offer a wider variety of programs.

## "Heart" in education

The heart and soul of NETV is quite naturally education. Toward that end the network provides all manner of instructional programming for every age from preschool to college. Fifty percent of the programs broadcast are instructional. There are also the State University of Nebraska courses that combine television lessons with other media to offer classes to those who cannot conveniently attend courses on campus. Students in the School of Journalism get first-hand experience at the center by operating the closed circuit system that telecasts in-class and extra-curricular materials to both Lincoln campuses.

Some of the programs broadcast by NETV are produced locally. *Agri-Scope*, *Grand Generation*, and *Dateline Nebraska* are a few of the series made out at Channel 12. *Anyone for Tennyson?* was produced locally and distributed nationally. Many of the local shows are aimed specifically at Nebraskans and their concerns. Phone-in programs such as *University on Call* offer viewers a chance to respond. "We do try to be of service to Nebraskans in presenting these programs that are citizen participation," Russel said.

The station offers a whole range of

cultural programs. "We offer the best of what there is to offer within the capacity of what we can produce," said Russel. "We present alternative programming to the commercial networks." These alternatives can include anything from music at Kimball Recital Hall to *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. NETV doesn't use any ratings service because, "we're not really in the numbers game," according to Russel. Nonetheless, they are careful about tapping viewer opinion. "We try to be in touch with the people of Nebraska," said Ron Hull,

(and some of the funding). The show will also deal with the sociological problem of how to use historical resources so that the public benefits but landmarks aren't damaged. All of these series have one thing in common: they all need money through grants in order to be produced.

Funding is always a concern for the public television network. The primary source is what the state authorizes for NETV each year. UNL contributes as well because of its connections. The state money pays for operating costs

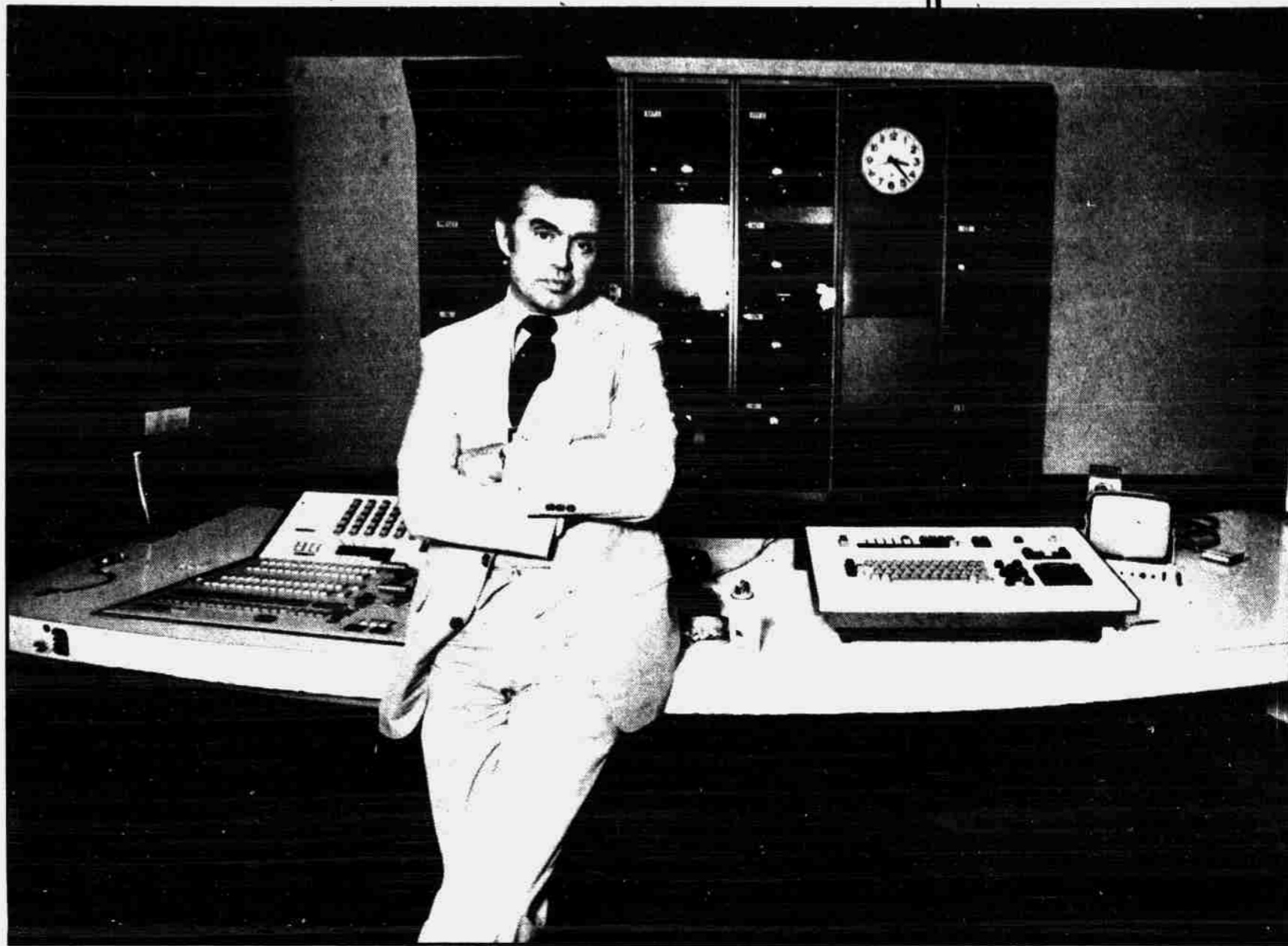


Photo by Mark Billingsley

## NETV Station Manager Ron Hull

programming manager. "But we also have to lead." Decisions on what to produce and what to present are arrived at by Hull and the senior producers in the various areas of programming (instructional, cultural, public affairs, and special events). Hull has sources in major and minor communities all across the state with whom he consults to find out what the people in a given area like.

He also uses these advisory committees to sample opinions on series he is considering for the network.

Favorable response to a tape was what brought *Monty Python* to Channel 12. Hull has to answer to the Nebraska Educational TV Commission as well as to the public for his choices, so he arrives at them with a good deal of care. Calls and letters are given attention in judging viewer response.

"We want to produce excellence on TV," said Hull. "Not everyone will like or understand modern music, for example. (But) we have a responsibility to lead people along to higher levels of the arts. That's one of our goals—to expose people to the very best. "Our job is to provide excellence."

## National programming

He also sees NETV's task on a national basis. "One of our goals, in our five-year plan is to always have in some stage of planning or implementation a national program. I see us as serving Nebraskans but also presenting quality national programming on a consistent basis."

Projects currently in some phase of planning include a seven hour production of Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks*, a series Hull thinks will be "a major project in accurately presenting that great book." The works of Mark Twain are the basis for another possible series. Author Kurt Vonnegut has already been approached to host it. *Hidden Places* is a program that will explore little known areas that were once important in the development of the country. Nine western states will provide the locations

and running the transmitter. Grant money for community service is available from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. With all that, it may seem strange that the network is still trying to raise money.

## Money problems

The problem is that the money from the state doesn't include much money for programming. Contributions from individuals are thus a necessity. The Nebraskans for Public Television is an organization that helps NETV raise funds. According to Paul Few, the NETV business manager, the amount NPTV contributes is proportionately small compared to other sources, but it is very important because it pays the out-of-pocket costs of programming. Ron Hull says the network will continue to solicit funds from the public through NPTV and in general.

"We have to continue doing that," said Hull. "Everything costs more. . . I feel we are in good (financial) position because traditionally we've had such good support from the legislature. Having committed some money to it, people take more interest in programming. People are motivated to make their opinions known. Participating financially brings more of a commitment. We want what we do to be a participatory thing."

## Belongs to people

"This network belongs to the people of the state of Nebraska," said Russel. "That's what the 'public' means. She considers the network a resource for the university and for the state "in the true sense of a land grant college—a means of sharing."

"Our ongoing goal," said Hull, "is to produce excellence, to produce programs that have ideas that will improve people's lives. It's a complex world we live in; we need help to adjust to it. Diversity of ideas is our strength. Persons must be exposed to them to make their own free choices."