



DAN CERVELLI



Class of 1990

Silver Circle Profile
By: Kevin Wing



One of the many fond memories I have of **Dan Cervelli** during the 11 years I worked with him at KTVU in Oakland were his regular daily visits to the newsroom. He always checked in on us at the assignment desk to be sure we were doing alright. It was not only his genial, friendly personality that we loved about the station's engineering veteran stopping by to say hello, but it was Cervelli's genuine concern to see how we were doing — usually first thing in the morning, and especially during those first years in the 1990s when the station's *Mornings on Two* and *The KTVU Channel 2 Morning News* were just taking off and giving the *Today* show and *Good Morning America* a run for their money.

"Everything okay?" is what Cervelli always asked when visiting the desk before heading to his office down the hall. Besides wanting to check on our general well-being in the newsroom, he, of course, always wanted to know if any problems arose with the morning live shots or the ENG trucks; and if there were issues, he'd take care of them. Our day in the newsroom wouldn't have been complete without his checking in to see what was new.

Those 11 years that I worked with Cervelli at KTVU were only one-fourth of the four decades he spent at the studios in Jack London Square. In fact, the 1990 *Silver Circle* Inductee of the San Francisco/Northern California Chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences was one of KTVU's first employees. He helped put the station on the air. He was hired in February 1958, one month before Channel 2 took to the airwaves.

Cervelli's career in Northern California television actually began a few years before KTVU, when he was in his mid-20s. It could be said that Cervelli is a true television pioneer in the region. While he is generally associated with KTVU because of his 40 years of outstanding service to the station, KTVU was not the first station he helped launch.

More on that coming up later.

The Bay Area native, who was born in San Francisco's North Beach neighborhood in 1931, later grew up in the city's Bayview District. Cervelli graduated from St. Ignatius High School, then attended

the University of San Francisco for a year before being drafted into the Signal Corps, based out of San Luis Obispo. He eventually returned to the Bay Area and decided to enter a school dedicated to the television industry, the John O'Connell Technical Institute.

"It was located down at 21st and Harrison streets in San Francisco," Cervelli recalls. "On the top floor of the school was the department dedicated to radio and television."

Cervelli credits two instructors who were instrumental in his education about the broadcasting industry.

"**Ken Nielsen** and **Ken Dragoo**... they were very well-respected with the Bay Area TV and radio stations at that time," Cervelli says.

In his early 20s, Cervelli's experience with the school soon opened doors. He and his fellow classmates would handle operations at KALW Radio, which was based in the same building as the school. Also, KQED-TV aired a live symphony hour using the students and the studio on Friday nights.

Cervelli eventually joined KSFO Radio on a part-time basis, where he went to work as an audio technician for the legendary **Del Courtney** from the Tonga Room at the Fairmont Hotel on Friday and Saturday nights. Cervelli spun 45 RPM records on Courtney's immensely popular radio program.

Cervelli's TV career was about to begin, but not before he married **Shirley** in 1954. She had a full-time job working for a doctor, and Cervelli was helping with part-time work — while he was still in school — doing anything he could to make ends meet. Soon, the young couple would start a family, eventually having three children: **Gerry, Denise** and **Patrice**.

In 1955, television came calling in the form of KNTV in San Jose. The station was preparing to sign on the air for the first time, and Cervelli was a part of the engineering staff that flipped the switch, launching what has been 55 years of broadcasting (and counting) for what is known today as NBC Bay Area.

"I went to work there (at KNTV), and later, the chief engineer who hired me went back to Sacramento to work at KCCC Channel 40 (now KTXL),"

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Cervelli says. "He told me there was a job opening at KCRA, so I went for an interview, but it didn't seem too promising. Right at that time, an engineer at Channel 40 quit to go to (KXTV) Channel 10, so my old boss hired me to work at Channel 40."

"We did some great things in those early days at Channel 40," Cervelli says, recalling the dedication of Folsom Dam, which he and his fellow engineers brought to Sacramento viewers in a live telecast in May 1956. "It was a double remote. It was no easy job, but we got it done."

Soon, though, Cervelli's future at KCCC would reach a fork in the road. With KCRA and KXTV now on the scene and affiliated with NBC and CBS, respectively, ABC decided to move its affiliation from KCCC to KQVR, a VHF station, leaving UHF-based KCCC with no network affiliation.

"So the owner (of KCCC) says to us all, I'll pay you all for four weeks, then I'm shutting down the station," Cervelli says.

Ironically, his next stop was KQVR, where he remained for a year and a half. Cervelli says the station needed engineers, so they hired him. Part of his responsibilities at the time were to assist in the installation of a new transmitter in Jackson for the station. The transmitter was being moved from Mount Diablo — which is located in the Bay Area market. KQVR could only become an ABC affiliate for the Stockton-Sacramento market, but it had to move its transmitter from Mount Diablo to Jackson so as not to interfere with the signal from the San Francisco ABC O&O, KGO-TV.

The assistant chief engineer at KQVR was **Jim Von Striver**, who played a pivotal role in Cervelli's career and eventual return to Bay Area television. Von Striver eventually went to start up KTVU. He called Cervelli to ask him to come down for an interview.

Cervelli got the job, and his first day at KTVU was Feb. 24, 1958. The day before, wife Shirley gave birth to the couple's second child, Denise. Needless to say, Cervelli had a lot on his mind during his first week at the station. The following week, he assisted in putting KTVU on the air.

Cervelli was among KTVU's original staff to launch the station, which began operations the next month, originally broadcasting from Oakland's Paris

Theater while the new studios were being built along the city's waterfront at Jack London Square.

"We did everything," he says. "I was an engineer, I did camera work, I did film projection, and audio. Essentially, everything in operations. When we were broadcasting from the Paris Theater, the control room was beneath the stage. We did live shows from there."

Equipment to launch a TV station was primitive compared to the technology of today.

"All video selection was handled from a field video switcher, which was about the size of a suitcase," Cervelli recalls. "We operated three cameras on the stage for the live shows."

In addition to the shows, the first incarnation of KTVU's 10 p.m. newscast aired from that same theater stage.

"**Les Nichols** did the news," Cervelli says. "We also did the *Captain Satellite* show from that stage, with **Bob March** (SC '90)."

Cervelli was in charge of doing all of the station's live remotes, including Giants telecasts (which began when the team moved to San Francisco from New York, the same year KTVU went on the air), Cal and Stanford football games, roller derby, Western shows, live Friday night wrestling from the station's studio, and remotes from the Cow Palace.

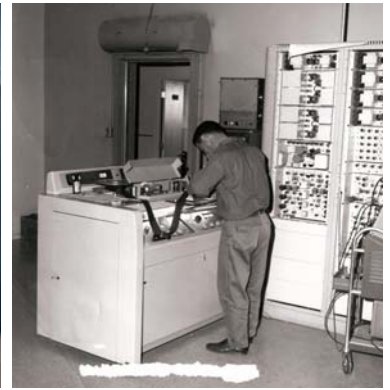
In 1960, Candlestick Park opened as the new home of the Giants and the San Francisco 49ers. "Channel 2 was one of the first stations to broadcast from the new stadium," Cervelli says.

As the 60s rolled along, Cervelli was also involved in other shows at the station, including children's shows like *Romper Room* with **Nancy Besst** (SC '88) and *Charley and Humphrey* with **Pat McCormick** (SC '94), who later would become the popular weatherman for the station's newscasts. The station also aired *Creature Features* at 11:30 p.m. on Friday and Saturday nights. **Bob Wilkins**, who later would do weekend weather for the station's newscasts, was the wry, cigar-smoking host who admitted his job was to show "bad horror movies to Bay Area insomniacs."

"Those live remotes in the 60s were so fun," Cervelli says. "We did the first live broadcast from what's now called the Oakland Arena. We did remotes from Kezar Pavilion for the roller derby, and

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we did live horse racing from Bay Meadows."

As the 1970s arrived, and as the Vietnam War continued, it offered some touching moments for Cervelli, who, by that time was in his 40s. In February 1973, Cervelli drove KTVU's remote truck (the station supplied the vehicle as the pool truck for ABC, CBS and NBC) to Travis Air Force Base to broadcast pictures of the homecoming of the first prisoners of war — POWs — to return from Vietnam.

"To watch those families on that tarmac.. that was an experience. To watch those families reunite with their fathers, brothers and sons. That was something, and it's something I've never forgotten," Cervelli recalls.

With the decade came new technology. Switching from film to videotape was the big deal in those days.

"We augmented the use of film with the introduction of 2-inch and 1-inch videotape for programs and commercials," Cervelli says. "Next came an automated cart machine that would hold 2-inch videotape cassettes and play commercials after an engineer would enter the commands to sequence the commercials. We had a machine made by Ampex called an ACR-25. We had a second machine as a backup."

Live-color technology at KTVU also came when the station purchased Norelco color cameras for studio and remote use. "It took two people to carry them. It's just the way it was then."

Once there was a time when engineers and technicians manually switched to commercials or put on the next TV program. Automation would take over in the 70s. Syndicators used to bicycle programs to KTVU through the mail, but the advent of satellites would change that forever.

And, with electronic news gathering — ENG — KTVU joined other stations by placing repeaters on mountaintops, tall buildings, towers and bridges in an effort to provide live coverage of a breaking news story no matter the location.

In the 1980s, KTVU outgrew its original studio, so a new, larger facility, also located in Jack London Square, was constructed down the street past what

was then the Jack London Village Shopping Center.

"We called it 'the House that M*A*S*H* built,'" Cervelli laughs, referring to the immense revenue the station earned by broadcasting the popular, long-running series in reruns.

"Moving to the new studios was a huge, huge undertaking," Cervelli says. "The move from the old studio to the new building was done flawlessly."

The station's engineering and news departments successfully dealt with two big challenges that arrived with two catastrophic news stories: the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake and the 1991 Oakland Hills firestorm.

The earthquake temporarily knocked the station off the air. So, the station's engineers worked fast to put KTVU back on the air with the help of portable generators. Anchors **Dennis Richmond** (SC '94) and **Elaine Corral** reported on what KTVU knew about the quake and its aftermath by broadcasting live from the station parking lot with live ENG trucks. Soon, the studios were working again, and news crews were broadcasting live from wherever the destruction was — Oakland's collapsed Interstate 880 Cypress Structure double-decked viaduct, San Francisco's burning Marina District neighborhood and, of course, Candlestick Park, where Game 4 of the World Series between the Giants and the Oakland A's was cancelled immediately after the quake hit.

There were other challenges as well for the station's engineering department, including broadcasting countless live reports from KTVU reporters sent to Los Angeles in 1992 and 1994-95, for the **Rodney King** beating and the ensuing riots that followed, and the criminal trial of **O.J. Simpson**, respectively.

In January of 1997, after nearly four decades with KTVU, Cervelli decided it was time to retire. He and his wife lived in Danville for a few more years after his retirement. They eventually sold their home and moved to Rocklin, east of Sacramento, where they remain today.

These days, instead of thinking about live trucks and repeater dishes, Cervelli thinks more about

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KTVU The 10'Clock News



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getting that proverbial golf ball in to the cup. He and his wife belong to the Sierra View Country Club, and are on the fairway two or three times a week.

When the Cervellis can't be found on the course, look for them tending to their vegetable garden and doing the many necessary chores around the house, such as mowing the lawn. They also cherish their many friendships, such as the new ones started when they moved to Rocklin, or the longtime ones they have kept through the years, either those spanning KTVU, or going back to the Cervellis' early years in San Francisco's Bayview District.

The Cervellis have six grandchildren, and they are getting ready to welcome their first great-granddaughter, due to arrive into the world July 4.

While he is enjoying retirement, Cervelli still misses KTVU.

"KTVU was a great place to spend 39 years," he says. "I was ready to leave, but I missed the people, and I still do."



(Kevin Wing pens Silver Circle and Gold Circle profiles each month for "Off Camera." The two-time Emmy® Award-winning Bay Area television journalist is a freelance news writer at NBC Bay Area/KNTV in San Jose and a freelance field producer for ABC News. E-mail him at kevinscottwing@gmail.com.)

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Gold & Silver Circle



Class of 2010 Nominations are in! Election Pending

Nomination applications have been submitted, candidates have been selected and ballots are in the mail to current members of the *Silver Circle* whose votes will determine the 2010 inductees. Ballots must be postmarked by June 8.

The inductees for both *Gold & Silver Circle* will be announced in late June and posted in the July edition of *Off Camera*.

The Gold & Silver Circles are not awards, they are societies of honor.

Silver Circle nominees must have been actively engaged in television broadcasting for 25 years or more (with at least half of those years in the Chapter region), made a significant contribution to Northern California television and distinguished themselves within the industry and the community.

The Gold Circle honors individuals who have been actively engaged in television broadcasting for 50 years or more and fulfill the same criteria as *Silver Circle* nominees stated above. *Gold Circle* nominees are nominated at large, reviewed by the *Gold & Silver Circle* Committee and elected by the NATAS Chapter Board of Governors.

Don't miss this opportunity to honor the careers and contributions of our Chapter's most distinguished colleagues.

SAVE THE DATE!

Gold & Silver Circle

Induction Luncheon

Saturday, October 23, 2010

11:00 am – 3:00 pm

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