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OFF CAMERA

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By Kevin Wing
Editor, *Off Camera*

Fred Van Amburg, Jr., arguably the most renowned, most legendary newscaster to ever grace Bay Area television screens, has died at the age of 86.



Fred Van Amburg
1930-2017

Van Amburg -- who dropped his first name and became well-known on-air by using only his last name when he joined San Francisco's KGO-TV in 1969 -- was a Bay Area institution, a multiple Emmy® Award-honored anchor, reporter and managing editor, who dominated the airwaves through the mid-1980s.

Inducted into the *Silver Circle* of the San Francisco/Northern California Chapter of The National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences in 1988, Van Amburg left KGO-TV in August 1986.

His death, on June 22 at his longtime home in El Cerrito, was announced June 30.

To read more about Van Amburg, his life and his career in television, please read the obituary and a special *Gold & Silver Circle Profiles* tribute in this issue of *Off Camera*, directly below our 2017 Emmy® Awards Gala coverage.

A special tribute to Van Amburg is also posted on the Home page of our Chapter website, emmysf.tv.

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KGO-TV's "News Scene" Anchor Team

Jerry Jensen (left) and Fred Van Amburg pose for a quick photograph in the early 1970s before going on the air with their immensely popular evening newscast.

Photo Courtesy of: George Lan

By Kevin Wing
Editor, *Off Camera*

Fred Van Amburg, Jr., who shepherded what was considered the most-watched television newscast in the San Francisco Bay area at a time when local TV newscasts reigned supreme, died June 22 at his home in El Cerrito.

The Emmy Award-honored television journalist was 86.

Known on-air on KGO-TV as "Van Amburg", he and co-anchor **Jerry Jensen** led the station's News Scene newscasts to phenomenal ratings success from the late 1960s until the mid-1980s. Jensen died of pancreatic cancer in 1984 at the age of 49, and Van Amburg left KGO-TV in August 1986. But, during the 17 years that Van Amburg commanded the Bay Area's attention from his anchor desk, he was considered king of Bay Area television. In the years that followed, Van Amburg never anchored another newscast in the market. Many in the television industry and longtime Bay Area residents considered him legendary.

Van Amburg was born in Fresno on Oct. 20, 1930. His family eventually moved to the Bay Area during World War II, settling in the East Bay, where he attended Berkeley High School. He was athletic as he was intelligent, becoming a standout athlete and going on to play baseball and football at Santa Rosa Junior

College before joining the Air Force. He was stationed in Minneapolis during the Korean War.

It was in Minnesota that he met the woman who would become his wife for the next 63 years. Van Amburg married Minnesota native **Lois Jurgens** in 1954.

The couple returned to the Bay Area, where Van Amburg worked nights operating cranes at Judson Steel in Emeryville while putting himself through San Francisco State University, where he studied broadcasting. It was during his years at the university that he had an opportunity, in 1956, to cover the Republican Convention held in San Francisco that year. From there, Van Amburg knew that broadcasting and journalism was for him.

Prior to breaking into television in 1960, Van Amburg worked for small radio stations in Merced and Salinas, honing his craft along the way. Then, in 1960, KPIX in San Francisco hired him to be sports director. In those early years on the air there, Van Amburg was still using his first name.

But, it was his work as a radio talk-show host at Oakland's KNEW that earned him serious name recognition. He became known as the "Militant Moderate" for opposing the Vietnam war but also violent protests. KNEW also gave him the opportunity to broadcast the early days of Oakland Raiders football in the mid-1960s, providing the color commentary to **Bill King's** play-by-play.

In 1969, he left KPIX to join KGO-TV, where he reported and anchored the station's weekend news. It was during that same year that Jensen joined the station after working as an anchor at KBHK-TV and KRON. Station management, and news director Pat Polillo, put the two together as weeknight anchors, Van Amburg stopped using his first name on the air, and with meteorologist **Pete Giddings** and sports director **John O'Reilly**, the era of "happy talk" was born and the start of many years atop the Nielsen ratings.

Beginning in the 1970s, Van Amburg covered a number of major Bay Area news stories, including the kidnapping of **Patty Hearst** in 1974, the rise of the Black Panthers, the Jonestown massacre and the assassinations, in 1978, of San Francisco Mayor **George Moscone** and Supervisor **Harvey Milk**. He was there, too, in the early 1980s when the AIDS epidemic began making worldwide headlines.

For years, the man known simply as Van Amburg to his audience would begin each KGO-TV newscast with his trademark opening: "Good evening... here's what's happening." Throughout much of the 1970s and into the 1980s, Van Amburg's newscasts were seen in as much as 70 percent of Bay Area homes with TVs on the time. Van Amburg was also the highest-paid anchor in the Bay Area, reportedly earning close to \$1 million per year.

Van Amburg left KGO in 1986, following a disagreement with station management. His final newscast came on Aug. 29, 1986, after which he never took another broadcasting job. In the ensuing years, he was known to be extremely reclusive, regularly turning down interview requests. In a rare on-camera interview in 1992 with friend and colleague **Dave McElhatton** of KPIX, Van Amburg said he was involved in creating and producing long-form documentaries.

In 1988, the San Francisco/Northern California Chapter of The National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences inducted Van Amburg into the distinguished *Silver Circle* for his more than 25 years of contribution to the Bay Area and northern California television industry.

In a statement released by KGO-TV following Van Amburg's death, the station remembered him fondly.

"KGO-TV is saddened to learn that a legendary member of the ABC7 News team passed away last week," the statement read. "Van Amburg was a local television icon and a respected journalist who Bay Area viewers trusted for decades. We extend our sympathy to his family during this difficult time."



Fred Van Amburg, Jr.

1930-2017

Gold & Silver Circle Profiles



GOLD & SILVER CIRCLE PROFILES

by Kevin Wing



Fred Van Amburg *Silver Circle Class of 1988*

I first watched **Fred Van Amburg** on the news on KGO-TV when I was 10 years old. It was the day my dear Mom kept me home from school because I had a bad cold. So far as I can remember, that day was the very first time I ever watched a television newscast. I only say that because I remember that day so well, as best as anyone can recall something when one is 10 years old. Call it fate, perhaps. The day was Feb. 4, 1974. That was the day **Patty Hearst** was kidnapped. Little did I realize how important that would have on

my life, nor the kind of impact Van Amburg would have on my ultimate decision to pursue a career in television news.

But, "Van" did have an impact on me in a great many number of ways when it came to my one day making a decision on what I wanted to do with my life. And, of course, like most people, I had no idea that "Fred" was Van Amburg's first name.

It certainly helped that my Mom's favorite news station was Channel 7, or as it's called today, ABC7. But back then, it was Channel 7. They were the news team to watch, and in our house, it was "News Scene" all of the time. So, it seems only natural that Van Amburg was someone that I would idolize as a boy who loved to tell stories and write.



And, once again, I think about fate because my parents knew Van Amburg's family in the years before I was born, when my family lived in El Cerrito, not far from where Van and his family lived. As my Mom used to tell the story, my parents and my older brother and sister often visited the coffee shop in El Cerrito that was owned by Van's family. My Mom used to say that Van's father would tell them to watch Fred on KPIX, where he was the sports director and did the nightly sports reports. Somehow, through it all, this soaked into my head as did the notion of growing up in front of the TV to watch him on Channel 7.

I never worked with Van. I had always wanted to. My career began three months before he left KGO-TV, back in the summer of 1986. I would one day go to work for the station, but it would be two years later, after I left.

Through the years, I became involved with the San Francisco/Northern California Chapter of The National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences, and in 2007, began penning this

column, known today as "Gold & Silver Circle Profiles". To date, I've interviewed some 125 inductees. It has always been a tremendous honor for me to tell their stories. I truly mean that.

Van was someone I always wanted to write about. But, as you either know or have read in these last couple of weeks since his death that he was a very private person, it was difficult to get Van to say yes. One day, back in 2007 or 2008, I called Van to ask if he'd be interested in my writing a profile about him. When I got on the phone, I was practically speechless. I was talking to my idol. I wanted the call to last forever. We had a nice chat, actually. I want to say our call lasted almost 30 minutes. The reason it did was because yours truly was doing my best to regale him with the fact that my parents knew his family from way back in the day. He loved hearing this, to the point that he started asking me questions. I suppose he could tell that wasn't making anything up. We had a good laugh, and a nice conversation, and he said to call him back about the story idea. He wanted to think about it.

Since that day, I spoke with him, perhaps, two or three more times, and we exchanged emails several times. I can say this now, but I almost got close. It was last year. I thought, "Oh, God, please let this happen. How I would love to meet Van and tell him in person how much influence he had on my

career." It was during the spring of 2016, and he said, "Let's get back in touch, and maybe we can meet up this summer". I was so encouraged. I kept my fingers crossed. I kept praying.

Sadly for me, it never happened. We never got together. But, I will always remember Van, and I will always remember what he wrote to me in his last email: "Keep up the great work." He was a big fan of "Off Camera" and my "Gold & Silver Circle Profiles" column. I will always be grateful and thankful that Van -- the man I grew up watching on Channel 7 -- told me that I was doing a "great job".

So, I know that I have been blabbering on here for awhile about Van, and how he really made a great impression on me to want to be a television reporter and anchor. I know he was a very private person, a humble man, and truly modest. But, I wanted to figure out a way to dedicate this month's column to him. I am certainly going to respect his wishes for privacy and write about what most of us may already know. All I want to say is that Fred Van Amburg was one of the greats in our business. In our day and age now, we use the word "legend" very loosely. Van was definitely a true legend. A Bay Area television legend. And, some have also said that I was an institution. I would like to say that he was definitely a legend AND an institution.

There is a very good likelihood that we will not see the likes of Fred Van Amburg ever again. He was one a kind. This Emmy Award-honored journalist, anchor and reporter was just the very best.



Early 1970s: On the set of "News Scene", with co-anchor Jerry Jensen

Photo Courtesy of: George Lar

For news they're the only team in town!

Van Amburg, Pete Giddings, John O'Reilly and Jerry Jensen

7 news scene Weekdays 4:30, 5:00 & 11 PM

Born Oct. 20, 1930, in Fresno, he was the first of three sons to **Fred** and **Jessie Van Amburg** and grew up in a close-knit famil of aunts, uncles and cousins who often lived together to take care of each other and make their way through the Great Depression. This stro sense of family, of supportin others in need and taking on issues together would define his life and his unique approach to news.

A stellar athlete in baseba at Berkeley High School whe the family moved north durir World War II, he played baseball and football at Sant Rosa Junior College before

joining the Air Force during the Korean War. Stationed in Minneapolis, where he also played on semi-pro and Air Force baseball teams, he met and fell in love with **Lois Jurgens**, a native Minnesotan and flight attendant for Northwest Orient Airlines. When talking of his own life, he most wanted to be remembered for his love of "Loey", his wife of 63 years, his children and grandchildren.

He played third base in the Air Force World Series in 1953. but a chance at a professional career was cut short by injury. After marrying in 1954, he and Lois moved to California where Fred attended San Francisco State University by day and worked at Judson Steel in Emeryville by night. He learned the craft of broadcasting at school, but got his taste for journalism when school brought a chance to cover the 1956 Republican Convention in San Francisco in support of legendary radio commentator

H.V. Kaltenborn.

And, a professional journalist was born.

After radio stints in Merced and Salinas, Fred landed his first TV job at KPIX in San Francisco. The year was 1960. He was hired to be the station's sports director and anchor.

But, it was his 17 years at KGO-TV -- from 1969 to 1986 -- that solidified Van as a legend of Bay Area television news. His unique personal style and visceral concern for the people behind the headlines made him and the team of **Jerry Jenson, Pete Giddings** and **John O'Reilly** nightly touchstones for people in the Bay Area of that era. His trademark nightly introduction, "Here's what's happening," is still widely used in the industry. In this age of streaming video and 500 channels, it is hard to understand the impact of a single

nightly newscast that often attracted a 70 share - in broadcast lingo, 70 percent of all the televisions in the region turned on at that time. His championing of people in need or being wronged served as a community conscience and united viewers in common cause. While memories of his work often focus on the relaxed comradery of the team, he was most proud of work to unmask the dark world of local cults, organize and carry Bay Area drought relief supplies to Somalia and bring Bay Area quake relief supplies to Guatemala. With his family, he produced documentaries on the Berlin Wall before it came down, on the on-going legacies of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombs and on the forgotten plight of U.S. citizens made victims by living "downwind" of nuclear testing.



With ABC's Peter Jennings, in 1984

Van's final broadcast came on Aug. 29, 1986, after a disagreement with management over the direction of TV news. He was honored multiple times for his work over the course of his long career, including being inducted into the Silver Circle in 1988. However, while multiple offers came to return to the air, he chose to spend the next 30 years serving and spending happy time with his family, including working with his wife, Loey, to maintain her family farm in Minnesota.

When news of Van's death on June 22 made headlines around the Bay Area when it was announced June 30, I was, like so many others, shocked and saddened. I had always hoped there would be a day that I could take Van to lunch, sit down with him for a couple of hours to speak with him about his life and career. It was meant to be. But, I am so glad that I had a chance to speak with him, to make a connection with him. That, through it all, the man I grew up watching, the one who inspired me, and the one who, in later years, would tell me to "keep up the great work", well, I am so grateful for the opportunity to get to know him, if only for a little while.



Thank you very much, Van. Without a doubt, I know that you inspired many of us to want to be like you someday, to follow your footsteps, to do the great work that you did. The truth is, no one can ever be like you. And no one ever will be. You were one of a kind. And your kind is going to be missed. Tremendously, and forever.

May you rest in peace, sir, and may your family and all of your many friends find comfort in remembering you, and your wonderful life.

Kevin Wing authors "Gold & Silver Circle Profiles" each month for "Off Camera" and has been penning the feature series since 2007. A two-time Emmy® Award-honored assignment editor, reporter, writer and producer and a 2013 Silver Circle

inductee, Wing is a journalist with KNTV NBC Bay Area. He is also principal of Kevin Wing Media Communications, a Bay Area production company specializing in public sector and corporate video documentaries. He also serves on the Board of Governors of the San Francisco/Northern California Chapter of The National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences.

McNamara Steps Down as KITV General Manager



KITV General Manager **Joe McNamara**, in the KITV studio.