

# The Legend of 'Pioneer' George Spelvin

Phantom member is a footnote to history, but a colorful one

BY K.C. NEEL

Of the hundreds of cable executives inducted into the Cable TV Pioneers over the last five decades, no one has caused as much of a stir as George Spelvin.

Spelvin was added to the Cable TV Pioneers roster in 1968 by Ben Conroy, a Texas-based operator and one of the initial 21 Pioneers. (Conroy died this past February.) Spelvin's entry into the group immediately caused concern, havoc and ire among the group's other members.

After all, this guy was allegedly tangled up in some pretty egregious activities, including accepting telephone lease-back agreements, permitting illegal tap-off, installing faulty TV translators and delivering spurious emissions. In short, he was engaged in just about everything that cable executives hated and fought against at the time.

## A PAPER TRAIL

Bill Adler, who started Weston Television Cable Corp. in 1953 and was very much aware of Spelvin, wrote a letter in response to Spelvin's initiation to the 40 or so Pioneers at the time and stated, "If I had known that George Spelvin was a member of this organization, I would not have consented to join."

Other letters soon followed. Some executives wanted to know who this Spelvin character was while others recommended Spelvin be booted from the group post haste.

In addition, people were irked that Spelvin always seemed to be a no-show at every cable event.

Of course, Spelvin couldn't attend any events because he never existed. He was the brainchild of jokester Conroy. And it didn't take long before Adler, also a member of the inaugural Pioneer class, jumped on the bandwagon to foment the kerfuffle over Spelvin.

In his oral history, Conroy said he added Spelvin's name to the roster of Pioneers "just for the hell of it and no good reason at all." Conroy and Adler were having too much fun with this hoax to let it die, so they created letterhead stationary with the SpelCo Corp. name and the tagline "A George Spelvin Enterprise — 'Anything in Electronics.'"

They even secured a P.O. Box in Reno, Ohio, so they could receive letters from written to Spelvin from various industry members.

Spelvin was a voracious correspondent and he received almost as many letters as he wrote. Adler had a friend who lived near Reno who picked up the letters and forwarded them to Conroy. Bill Arnold, the former Texas Cable TV Association president and a good friend and former partner with Conroy, recalled that Conroy's memorial in March that Arnold used to get off airplanes when he was traveling so Spelvin letters could be postmarked from all sorts of out-of-the-way spots. This way, no could track down where Spelvin was located.

After dropping the Spelvin letters off, Arnold would get back on the plane and go to where he was headed in the first place.

## AN OPINIONATED MAN

Spelvin was shameless in his demands and opinions. He asked for money. He maligned industry convention at every turn. He once wrote a letter to the NCTA complaining about being left out of the industry's history, which was egregious considering he started his first cable system in 1944.

Fred Ford, who was the president of the NCTA at the time, had his staff comb through the association's archives to see whether they had somehow missed Spelvin's contribution to the industry. He forwarded Spelvin's letter to Adler in hopes of getting some advice about the situation. Adler responded, "My advice is to ignore the lying son of a bitch."

In his oral history, Conroy recalled one letter he wrote to an industry colleague: "I remember writing a letter as George Spelvin to Tubby Flynn saying, 'It will be good to see you



Charter Cable TV Pioneers member Ben Conroy (c.), with Frank Thompson (l.) and Sandford Randolph at the group's 1969 dinner. Not pictured: George Spelvin.

again in Boston. Didn't we have a wild time down at the meeting in Greenbrier, West Virginia? When I get up there, I'll pay you back the \$20 I owe you.' So Tubby called me and said, 'Do you know this fellow Spelvin?' I said, 'Yeah, I remember him. He created quite an uproar at Greenbrier.' He said, 'He claims he owes me \$20.' I said, 'Well, hell, Tubby, he owes me \$50, so I hope you collect it.' This just went on and on."

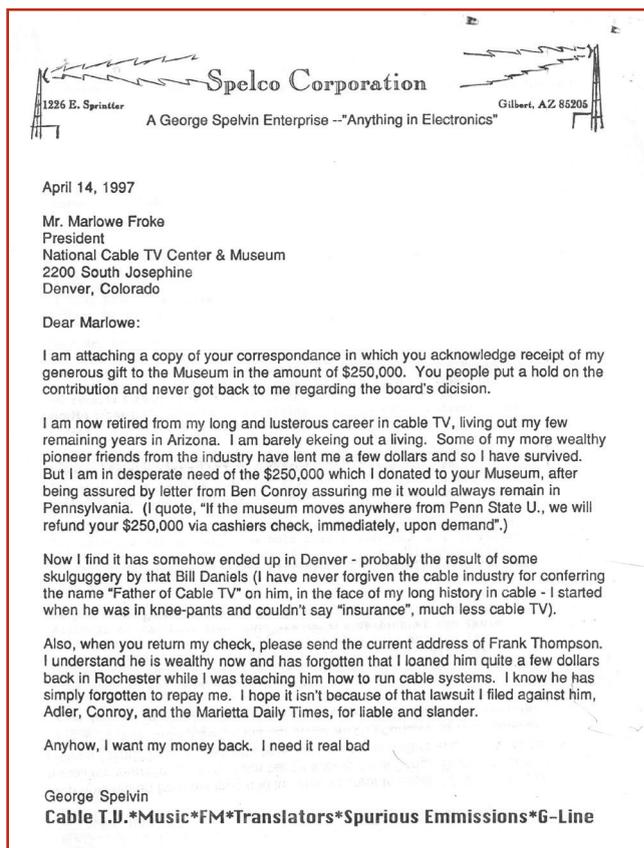
Eventually, the hullabaloo over Spelvin died down but every now and again, Conroy and Adler would stoke the fires by rattling off a nonsensical letter to keep the Spelvin myth alive. In 1997, he wrote to Marlowe Froke, who was at that time running the new Cable Center in Denver, and asked for the \$250,000 he donated to the museum because he was broke and needed the money.

## WANTED HIS \$250K BACK

He claimed he was promised that his donation would be refunded in full if the museum ever moved from Penn State. "Now I find it has somehow ended up in Denver — probably the result of some skuluggery (sic) by that Bill Daniels," he wrote. "(I have never forgiven the cable industry for conferring the name 'Father of Cable TV' on him, in the face of my long history in cable — I started when he was in knee-pants and could say 'insurance,' much less cable TV)."

To this day, Spelvin is listed as a Cable Center donor, although his donation was closer to \$250 than \$250,000. The Cable Center has a special George Spelvin collection with many of the letters he sent and received over the years. Like many operators, Spelvin has left the building — but he won't be forgotten. ◉

For more about the "real" history of the Cable Television Pioneers, see this week's issue of Multichannel News.



This 1997 letter to Cable Center director Marlowe Froke demanded a refund for George Spelvin.