

San Francisco Film Society
Oral History Project

Interview with Ernest “Chick” Callenbach
Conducted by Lee Amazonas
Berkeley, CA
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LEE AMAZONAS: It is Saturday, August 12th. I'm in the Berkeley home of Ernest (Chick) Callenbach. My name is Lee Amazonas, and I will be doing an interview with Mr. Callenbach for the San Francisco International Film Festival Oral History Project. First I wanted to ask you a little bit about your background and what brought you into film, your education, and what brought you to the Film Quarterly.

ERNEST CALLENBACH: Well it's a long and possibly tedious story, but I'll try. I came from a virtually film-free environment in central Pennsylvania, a very small town near the college town where Penn State was, State College, and had hardly seen any films when I went to the University of Chicago. And there, in a kind of reaction formation, I guess, I got very, very interested first in documentary and early comic films and a lot of other obscure genres through a group called the Documentary Film Group, who were otherwise known as "Docfilm." Incidentally, its history is now being written by a very assiduous young man of this curious organization going way back to, I think, 1938 or something like that; probably the longest continuing film society in the country, in fact. After I finished my undergraduate studies there, I had become hooked on film through this experience with Docfilm, and went to Paris for the winter to study at the Sorbonne's, as it was called, Institute of Filmology, and saw four films a day all winter, then went back to Chicago and finished up my studies there. After that I migrated to the Bay Area, which I had long had my eye on as a place to live the next phase of my life, and I came out here without a job or any real connections. I envisioned myself as a budding screenwriter for documentary films and so on. And there was a lot of small sponsored film work going on in San Francisco, particularly. I did one job for the University Extension. I edited and wrote the narration for a film called **Reinforced Concrete Construction**, (LAUGHS) which was the building of the Donner Lab on campus and a very classic example of that method of construction, actually. That didn't come to much of anything, so I worked for a while for United Airlines and finally got hired by the University of California Press to write jacket blurbs and flyers and catalogue copy, which I did for a couple of years until the editorship of the old **Quarterly of Film, Radio and TV**, which was published by the University Press—owned by and published by the University—fell vacant through the retirement of the managing editor. And this was the successive journal to the **Hollywood Quarterly**, formed by the Hollywood Writers Mobilization and the University after a big confluence in the postwar era in Los

Angeles. The old journal died for lack of circulation and interest, really. I think it had become very oriented toward mass communication studies or sociological studies of media, and its subscription list was only a few hundred, mainly libraries. The director of the Press was kind of interested in reviving it, but on a more commercial level, so he approached me about it. I said, well, there was somebody in town who was rather more equipped to do this than I was, namely Pauline Kael, who had become to be somewhat known at that time through writing in **City Lights** magazine and a couple of other pieces, and also through her radio program on KPFA, which was a very star operation; it was the thing that people listened to most of all on KPFA. She didn't want to do it. She wanted total control of the magazine and of course, as a university press operation, there's no such thing as total control, so she turned it down. The director, I think, was rather glad to see her do that. (LAUGHS) He then went back to me and if I'd do a prospectus for a possible magazine, which I did. And he agreed to do it for a year. So at the time I began the magazine, we were looking around for friends and allies.

How I first became aware of the San Francisco Festival, I'm not sure. I went to, of course, lots and lots of movies and hung around with people, and it must have been discussed a lot at the time, but I can't recapture a memory of when I first got involved with it. It may have been through Albert Johnson, who became the assistant editor of the magazine when it was founded, or it may have been through Herbert Feinstein, a professor of English literature then, I believe, at Berkeley, and then later at San Francisco State, who wrote quite a few things for the early issues of the magazine and knew Bud Levin, I think, by connections I'm not aware of. I remember we were watching to see whether the Festival that had begun in a fairly bush-league way was going to turn into a genuine international festival that could command some real world attention, which, of course, we thought would be very nice from the standpoint of the magazine, since we were here in the same physical place. I can't remember literally how I first met Levin, and I never saw that much of him, actually, or any of the other people involved with it, but I did go to many, many screenings as a member of the selection committee. I think I maybe did that for a couple of years, but to tell you the truth, I can't remember exactly.

LEE AMAZONAS: At this point, could I clarify which years you actually had that role? In the research I did, I found that you were on the Film as Art Committee with James Broughton and Jacques Faber in 1963, which was still during the Bud Levin years. There's a bit of a question mark about 1958. For some reason, I had it in my mind that you were involved then.

ERNEST CALLENBACH: I doubt whether I was actually involved. I probably talked to people about various things connected with the Festival. I do remember, one of my few very clear memories is that there was a little publicity office, possibly in an upstairs of Levin's theater—I'm not sure—and there, an old friend of mine, Bob Greensfelder, who was earlier the owner of a distribution company called Kinesis, which was down on Commercial Street—where the Embarcadero Center now is. He and Jerry Mander were working for a living doing publicity of various kinds. Jerry had been a publicity man and an advertising man in New York, and later became quite famous as an advertising person in the Freeman, Mander & Gossage firm in San Francisco, and then later still, as the founder and, to this day, president of the International Forum on Globalization; one of my oldest and dearest friends. So I remember going into their office, and they were both sitting there at ancient finger-operated typewriters, whacking away on publicity releases and so on, trying to get the local press, which was glad to help out to cover what the Festival was up to and deal with the crises that seemed to be endemic to every film festival: people who are initially expected to come and then don't come for one reason or another, and various scandals and confusions that arise because of that.

LEE AMAZONAS: Then, 1965 through 1969, you're on either the Feature Film Selection Committee between '65 and '68, and then the Short Film Selection Committee in '69.

ERNEST CALLENBACH: Yeah, Film as Art. There was this wonderful organization called Art in Cinema that Frank Stauffacher had; I think we had that in mind in giving it that name. And the Bay Area was then, as it remained for quite a while—maybe still is, for all I know—a considerable center of so-called underground or avant-garde filmmaking, and Broughton, of course, was one of the leading lights of this epoch. I think we also spent a certain amount of time with Jordan Belson. In my mind he's a genius filmmaker, but he was very shy, and he was sort of very, very peripheral. And also, he didn't see that many films, but he was peripherally involved with it, I think. What this involved was an awful lot of screenings, where I would go over there, and Broughton and the others would assemble. Where these were held, I don't remember. But we would sit down with a 16mm projector and just look at a lot of films, some of them very interesting, some of them terrible that we would turn off after a few minutes. I think we gave every film five minutes, and if it hadn't grabbed at least one of us by that time, we would move on, because there were far too many to look at in their entirety.

LEE AMAZONAS: How did those films get there? Were they by invitation?

ERNEST CALLENBACH: I think it was a fairly open thing, that notices went out that films were welcome, and people would send them in. It was then, and I guess still remains troublesome, to keep track of things that are submitted to make sure that they actually get looked at and don't get lost and get sent back again. And who did all this, I'm not sure.

LEE AMAZONAS: Was there a significant difference between the way you did your work on the committee in 1963 from what you did later? I'm thinking more in terms of the overall structure of the Festival.

ERNEST CALLENBACH: Well, the feature part was, of course, the big league, and that was much more exciting. And some of the films were somewhat controversial, especially the **Night Games** episode that you're probably going to be told about a dozen times. But we got quite a few good films. Even from the first year on, just the films that actually came in were pretty impressive. I mean, they were able to get films that were not on a par with what Venice and Cannes got, but they weren't bad. And this was a period when we didn't have the plethora of festivals that evolved in later years, so that you had the European festivals; you had the Edinburgh Film Festival, which I wrote about in the **Quarterly** very admiringly, which was mainly about documentary, but I don't think the documentary festival at Oberhausen had started. The Toronto Festival had not started, the Chicago Festival had not started, and of course Sundance was way, way off in the future, and Telluride, and all those things. So it was a relatively solitary beacon in the darkness, and I think there was a lot of hope. San Francisco was always a pretty good film town, but there was hope that this would stir up a lot of local interest in exotic films that weren't being distributed in the theater nearly as well as we would have hoped. Most people who were serious filmgoers had long lists of films that had been seen in Europe, at Cannes and Venice, that we never got to see.

LEE AMAZONAS: Did you or any of the other members of the committee travel to other festivals to see the films?

ERNEST CALLENBACH: Well, in the beginning I don't think Albert was teaching at Berkeley; how he was living, I don't know, but he managed to go to Europe every summer. He would do Cannes, and he would do Venice. Then later he would do Berlin and maybe one or two others. So essentially Albert was kind of a scout, which all the festivals had to have; going around, looking at things and trying to finger ones that would be good prospects. But I never did, and I don't know if other people from the Festival did or not. They had a lot of lines out to people. And we had connected with the **Quarterly**, a man named Gideon Bachman, who had run his own magazine *Cinemages* in New York for a while, and lived in Rome and all over Europe, and knew a lot of filmmakers; was a documentary filmmaker himself. And through Gideon, I think, later he became a selection person for the San Jose Festival in relatively recent times, maybe eight or ten years ago. I'm not sure where he is now, if he's anywhere. So it's always a process of just casting a net and hoping that you can figure out what are the decent things. Of course, the film festivals got written up in great detail, above all, I guess, in **Variety**, which probably covered nearly everything. But there were other ways, more extended and more serious coverage, that could be looked at and, to some degree, figure out what was worth trying to get hold of.

LEE AMAZONAS: Did the foreign language films come with subtitles?

ERNEST CALLENBACH: Normally they did. I can't think of any that didn't, actually. They probably made that a prerequisite, because they were going to be shown in large theaters.

LEE AMAZONAS: Well, I meant even for your committee, which was considerably before the showing.

ERNEST CALLENBACH: I think they all were titled back then, yeah. My recollection is that the distributors or producers, if they had any ambitions for international distribution at all, would have done that quite early on, either during the actual final editing process or very soon thereafter.

LEE AMAZONAS: How did the Feature Committee operate? Did you kind of split up the films, or did you all watch the same films and duke it out?

ERNEST CALLENBACH: I think there was an attempt for everybody to see pretty much everything. The directors of the Festival—Claude Jarman is the one I remember the most, because that was during the later period—they would get rid of some on their own, I think, that they just decided were not really competitive, because it was, after all, a competitive festival. And then we would see very large numbers of films. I seem to remember going over there every couple of days for weeks on end and seeing a couple of films. And we would either then throw them out via sort of a majority vote or consensus operation. It was never very acrimonious, except on that one occasion of the **Night Games** controversy. And it's a tricky process because you're aiming at a number of films to be shown, and you don't want to be reckless about getting rid of things that you might later decide you want to be included for one reason or another. But there was a certain amount of horse-trading. And some people would take fairly strong exception to films, but then the majority would think they were pretty good, and so they would go in. Should I tell a story about **Night Games**?

LEE AMAZONAS: That was my next question.

ERNEST CALLENBACH: I'll preface it by saying that as a boy I was, like many young American lads, in desperate love with Shirley Temple. In fact, I entertained a fantasy that we were exactly the same age, because she was born on April third, as I was. But it turned out that the studios had lied about her year of birth by one year, so she was actually one year older than I was. And Shirley, who was by then a matron, married to a PG&E exec down in Saratoga or somewhere down that way, was—I can't remember what her official role was—Assistant Director or something like that. At any rate, she sat on the Selection Committee. And when **Night Games** came in, which was a very Freudian film directed by Mai Zetterling, an extremely good Swedish actress; a study of adolescent angst and family dysfunction and so on, in a highly expressionistic visual style, very nicely shot, in the opinion of most of us. But it had one controversial scene, and the relation between the mother and son was rather Freudian in its implications. In one scene, the boy is in bed, lying under a sheet, and the mother comes in and sits next to the him on the bed and notices this lump sticking up in the middle of the sheet and draws the sheet back, whereupon we, through the camera, see that he has an erection, and she, I think, throws the sheet back over him with horror and exits. And Shirley, who herself had a teenage son, took strong exception to that scene particularly, and also, I think, to what she thought was the overwrought psychology of the film. Well, we were sitting around on this very rainy day—Albert, myself, Claude Jarman sitting in kind

of ex-officio, Shirley, and I think there were one or two other people, whose names I confess I can't remember—I believe upstairs in the Bank of America building somewhere, in quarters that had been donated to the Festival. Claude was very persuasive in getting people to do things for the Festival. And we were lining up and talking about the pros and cons of this film. And a call comes in from the lobby down below, saying that Shirley's mother-in-law, Mrs. Black, was down there and required Shirley's presence. So Shirley excused herself and went down—or maybe it was across the street or something, because I think she got wet on the errand—and she came back and had apparently slipped on the wet terrazzo in the lobby and fell down and made a run in her stockings. So she came back up rather disheveled. And in the interim, Claude Jarman, who was a diplomatic fellow, looked around the room and said, "Well what are you guys gonna do if I say we can't show this film?" And many of us had pretty decent connections with the **Chronicle** and, I think, the **Examiner** also, at that time, had a fairly serious film critic. We said, "Well, we're gonna blab to the press. It's gonna be a terrible stink." And he said, "OK, OK." So he came back in and managed to talk Shirley into it. I can't remember whether she thereupon resigned in a huff—I think maybe she did—and took her leave of the Festival. And we showed the film, which by then had become to seem not terribly risqué or anything, to no mass protests in the street or anything, and the whole thing blew over. But it may have helped the Festival a little bit to have a controversial film on its list. (LAUGHS) It showed films that were much more risky. I remember going to the screening of **Viridiana**, for example, which to my mind, at least, is far more full of sexual innuendos and subversive thoughts about eroticism than anything Mai Zetterling could dream up, and nobody batted an eye. Anyway, as the years went by I got more and more involved in doing both film book production at the Press and also doing various other things. So I probably bowed out of the Festival, when did you say it was?

LEE AMAZONAS: From '65 through '68, feature film selection, and then in 1969, short film selection.

ERNEST CALLENBACH: Yeah, which was mostly documentaries. It took up so much time, and of course, going over and back across the Bay was problematic, too. I think I finally just decided I couldn't do it anymore, or maybe I had gotten tired of it. It's a burden to have to look at bad films. Any daily critic feels that, too. You feel, well, you have to give them the benefit of the doubt until proved guilty, so to speak, but it does get wearing. And I thought I had put in my time.

LEE AMAZONAS: There were a number of people I wanted to ask about that you started with, certainly with Albert. One thing I wanted to ask is if you know at what point he proposed the idea of staging tributes to filmmakers and performers.

ERNEST CALLENBACH: I'm not sure. It was something that Albert was very, very prepared for and very good at, because he knew a lot of these people from his expeditions to Europe for festivals, and from hobnobbing with people in this country, too. He used to spend quite a bit of time in Los Angeles. And I'm not even sure it was before the Jarman era. Do you know when Jarman came in?

LEE AMAZONAS: Jarman came in '65, but not as Executive Director. That was a few years later. But he was there. That was the year when Albert did a tribute practically every day, so he seemed to already be ready for it.

ERNEST CALLENBACH: Though there may have been ones before that occasionally. I'm not sure. They were very, well, they tended to go on too long, but they were wonderful for people who were knowledgeable about filmmaking. And there were a lot of people who would come very religiously to them. He got a wonderful collection of people to come. I think many people get approached by some nitwit journalist who doesn't know what their previous work is like or anything about them, really, and they're pretty turned off by it, but to talk to Albert was a really charming experience for everybody, I think. And he made it his business to be really well informed beforehand, if he wasn't long before. The whole staging of the thing was very— Did you ever attend one?

LEE AMAZONAS: I wasn't living here then, no.

ERNEST CALLENBACH: Well, Albert was incredibly suave and had a lot of stage presence. You probably know the famous story that his classes in musicals would always try and get him to sing and dance, which he did incredibly well. So, on the stage at the Festival, he was a real presence, and good at bringing people out. Maybe one could say that there wasn't enough attention paid to high aesthetic strategy or anything, but for what they were, they were very, very well done indeed. And he may have inspired similar things elsewhere. I'm not sure whether other people had been doing things like that before him or not.

LEE AMAZONAS: The one thing I had wondered was whether he had even suggested them to Bud Levin earlier.

ERNEST CALLENBACH: That I'm not sure about.

LEE AMAZONAS: There hadn't been any. '65 was the first year. The one thing I wanted to ask was whether Pauline Kael reviewed the Festival and Festival films on her radio show, if you recall.

ERNEST CALLENBACH: I don't remember whether she did that explicitly. Perhaps not, because she was living in Berkeley, up here on Oregon Street and may not have gone to the Festival much. And after a while, of course, she had the Cinema Guild and Studio to take care of, and that probably would have occupied all of her available energy. Also, you know, Pauline was not that interested in foreign films. She was an American film critic. Like **Marienbad**, for example, until the day she died I think she didn't understand why **Marienbad** was an interesting movie. Also, she appreciated American dialogue—snappy, short, witty, if possible, back and forth play and so on—and she didn't appreciate the languorousness of European cinema by contrast, or Asian cinema, for that matter. She would have gone crazy at some of these Korean films. But I imagine she must have been sympathetic to the general establishment of the Festival, and maybe particularly to its attention to avant-garde films. After all, she had been living, or at least had a child with James Broughton, and had helped on one or two of his early films, and knew about the whole underground film scene in San Francisco very intimately at the beginning. But I don't recall her participating in anything at the Festival. I'm trying to think when she actually got her job. She wrote probably until '63 or '64 or something like that, and I believe that's when she got her job at **McCall's** and moved east. And after that, we only saw her on rare occasions. The radio program was a very large cultural force. And I think everybody who listened to KPFA—and that included practically everybody who was intellectually alive in the Bay Area at that time—really missed it when she quit in a fit over not being paid. She used to make her living by answering telephones. She had a telephone answering service, which you could do out of your home. And since she was bringing up a young daughter, she couldn't go out to work every day. Her solution was to run a phone answering service. And nobody was paid at KPFA, but she was their biggest star, and people would be glued to their radio to listen to these programs that stimulated a lot of intelligent movie-going. Finally she said,

“Look, you know, I can’t afford to go on doing this free. You’ve got to pay me.” And they said, “Well, we couldn’t possibly pay you because then we’d have to pay everybody, and we’d be broke in a day.” And so she said, “Well, in that case, I quit.” And I don’t know if this is still remembered or not. She made a farewell address that was really scathing to the station, attacking them as a bunch of cultural nudniks kind of thing, sort of in the same vein as when Kenneth Rexroth’s book of translations of Japanese poems was submitted to the University Press. The University Press, as it always does, solicited evaluations of these translations from people who were conversant with both English and Japanese. And they said, “Well, they’re very nice, but you know, they’re not translations.” And so the Press rejected them. And he launched into this tirade where he said, “The director of the Press should be selling tires!” (LAUGHS) He went on and published them to considerable acclaim somewhere else. But she was very angry at the situation. I think that’s what drove her into thinking that there must be some way to get paid for her work, and what the contact was that took her to **McCall’s**, I don’t know to this day, although I remember people thinking that it was extremely bizarre for this quite highbrow, although populist-inclined, critic to be writing for a women’s magazine. I think she lasted for about six or nine months, until she wrote a very savage review of **The Sound of Music**, pointing out that the critics who had been praising it up and down had probably been taken on all-expenses-paid junkets by the studio. The studio got back to **McCall’s**, and they dumped her. But that sent her to the **New Republic**, which was a much better fit for her talents. At the time that Pauline was asked whether she might want to revive the **Quarterly**, I think she had no gainful employment really. Maybe she was already helping Landberg at the Cinema Guild and Studio, but I don’t think they were married or living together at that point.

LEE AMAZONAS: You mentioned before Frank Stauffacher. Did you know him?

ERNEST CALLENBACH: He had just died when I came out here from Chicago, so I knew him only by reputation. But it was a very considerable reputation. I was very interested in underground films, and Bob Greensfelder had been instrumental in the founding of the American Federation of Film Societies. He came to Chicago, where we held our founding convention. So I knew him quite well, and to this day, a wonderful man. And Frank had been close to him. Many of the films that Bob distributed through Kinesis had been made by Stauffacher and his friends. He had run the Art in Cinema program at the Museum of Art, which was at that time in the top floor of the Marines Memorial Building, next to the Opera House. He had a widow, Bobbie Stauffacher, who was also a filmmaker, and I believe an interior

designer or something, and a brother, whom I did get to know quite well; actually, a topographer. I believe he's still alive, if you wanted to talk to him. He dabbled a little bit in filmmaking, I believe, also. But the Art in Cinema program had proved, I think, that there was an audience for underground film in San Francisco. It was part of that huge renaissance of culture that took place after World War II, a lot of it done by conscientious objectors who had been imprisoned in some place in Oregon. But Adrian Wilson, the print designer, a very brilliant guy who worked for the Press for a while and had an independent press called the Ariel Press, I think, was part of that. And there were theater people whose names I didn't particularly recognize. So after the war there was this big efflorescence of attention to culture in San Francisco that had all been pretty well stifled during the war itself. Many things bubbled up out of that.

LEE AMAZONAS: And talk about having a film festival, too, I imagine.

ERNEST CALLENBACH: Yeah, ultimately.

LEE AMAZONAS: And that's one of our interests in Frank Stauffacher, is that there is some evidence that early on, he was talking about the possibility of having an international film festival in San Francisco.

ERNEST CALLENBACH: I didn't know that, but it would make sense. He did a very nice little film that you may have seen, called **Notes on the Port of St. Francis**. It's a sort of a poetic city-symphony film. And some of it was shot, actually, in Sausalito. But it's very atmospheric and very beautiful.

LEE AMAZONAS: Bud Levin, did you know him?

ERNEST CALLENBACH: I never knew him much. You know, he was the mover and shaker and everything, but he was very busy. And in a certain way, he wasn't even that interested in films. He was an exhibitor. And to him, films were, well, on the one hand, product, you could make a living out of exhibiting to people, and on the other, I think he was a social climber, that he thought that through the Italian Consul and various people that he met through that kind of connection, he could really become a big cheese in San Francisco, a big frog in a modest sized pond, which was not an unreasonable ambition.

Maybe it worked for him; I don't know. He lived in Seacliff. He had a big house out there somewhere. And I don't think he ever became terribly wealthy, but he did manage to move in fairly elevated circles. And hanging around with movie stars lends a wonderful luster to one's life anyway. (LAUGHS) I guess the greatest luster that ever came to my life from the Festival was, Sophia Loren came, and I believe it was the year of **Two Women**, which in my opinion is a very first-rate film, and her performance in it is probably the best thing she ever did, although she was a very good comedienne, too. But I think among the serious films, that was the best one. Her rotten husband, what was his name? Squat guy.

LEE AMAZONAS: Carlo Ponti?

ERNEST CALLENBACH: Carlo Ponti has a lot to answer for, for wasting her talent, really. She came, and there was a reception after the showing of the film. Could they have been in the Palace of Fine Arts by then? I think perhaps so. At any rate, it was a very large room. And there was a reception line with, I think, Irving and Sophia and the mayor, and various other dignitaries. She was wearing this white sheath dress and looking at the top of her form. She was a ravishing woman. Every time we put her on the cover of **Film Quarterly**, it sold out. Her image was really an intimidating force. So we were all going along and shaking her hand, which I believe was gloved and white also, and I will never forget exactly what she said. Somebody said, "This is Mr. Callenbach from the journal **Film Quarterly**," and she said, "How nice," and clasped my hand, and then, the way they do, you know, sort of shoves you on to the next person in line. (LAUGHS) And I was overcome. There are some things in this history of Docfilm, about the **Cahiers du cinema** gang, which was on the distant horizon in those days, coming out and saying, "Cinema is really all about sex." It's about Ava Gardner or Rock Hudson, or somebody or other. And I have to confess, here I'm telling you these stories about Shirley Temple, whom I actually got to hug early on in the proceedings of that terrible year of the Mai Zetterling film, so in my career as a film critic I've gotten to actually be in touch, physical touch, with two major movie stars, (LAUGHS) to my glory or shame, I'm not sure which.

LEE AMAZONAS: Did you have any other people— For instance, William Boyd, who was the Executive Director during some of that time, who in an interview said movies were never a burning passion, and here he was, Executive Director of the Festival.

ERNEST CALLENBACH: I don't remember him clearly, but I remember that's a fitting quote, actually, because I forget what his background was, but I think he was hired because he was good at administering things.

LEE AMAZONAS: He was from insurance. In fact, I think he came from the same company Claude Jarman came from.

ERNEST CALLENBACH: Well that's an interesting coincidence. Yeah. Claude was genuinely interested in films in his special way. And I thought he did pretty good; I mean, it's a horrible job to be the director of a festival, but I thought that he acquitted himself quite decently. And it may have been Claude who got them in touch with George Gund. I'm not sure how that connection was made, but that proved to be very, very supportive over the years.

LEE AMAZONAS: To this day.

ERNEST CALLENBACH: Even now, yeah. Good.

LEE AMAZONAS: And then there were people you served on committees with, like Barnaby Conrad.

ERNEST CALLENBACH: Yeah, he was on the Selection Committee, as I recall; the features. And I didn't know anything about North Beach nightlife or anything, so I wasn't entirely sure why he was so important, but I remember he was always in Herb Caen's column and the Festival was terribly, terribly glad that he was willing to come around and serve. What Herbert Feinstein did with the Festival, I'm not sure. He may have been one of their scouts, because he also had the habit of going to European festivals. And one of the few perks that I had to hand out at **Film Quarterly** was accreditations to festivals, so Gideon Bachman, who lived most of the time in Rome, and Herbert, and a couple of other journalists were eager to be able to go to film festivals representing the **Quarterly**, which got them in free, and they would, then, be willing to not only give us reports, but I think be helpful to San Francisco people. The **Quarterly**, by the way, initially believed that it would be nice to give coverage fairly often to film festivals of one kind or another. And we had people who were supposed to give us the down and dirty about Venice and Cannes, I think, and maybe later, Berlin and some others. But we discovered that the

experience of going to a festival for a critic is a kind of a numbing thing, where they see so many films that they kind of lose their perspective on the really good ones. At any given festival, after all, there are going to be maybe two or three films that are really, really top notch, and the rest are going to be either—some of them—downright awful, or things that won't be long remembered. But there's so much gossip about the negotiations and the things that go wrong, and so on and so forth, that these pieces got more and more bilious and, we thought, less and less critically useful. Finally, we would tell people, "Well, go to the festival, but we don't want a report on the festival. We want a review of the film that you think is the most important film at that festival. You can throw in along the way some gossip toward the end of the piece; you can get that off your chest, but don't bother us with trying to make the whole picture..." **Sight and Sound** for a long time did festival coverage that was very comprehensive, but they had a lot more space at their disposal, and perhaps more writers that were able to keep their perspective on what mattered and what didn't. So gradually we sort of backed out of the festival coverage, and to this day, we're not very interested in festivals as such.

LEE AMAZONAS: Well, speaking of festivals, there are a few articles from the early years of the San Francisco Festival written in **Film Quarterly**, a couple of them editorials that are signed by you, and some of them unsigned, about the goings on at the Festival. The first one, from '58, is kind of, well, we're hopeful. And then there're a few others afterwards that are critical. Do you want to talk about those at all?

ERNEST CALLENBACH: I didn't have time to look at them all before you got here, but I remember the feeling at the beginning being guardedly optimistic that this might really amount to something that was of modest, at least, world significance. And then, I think, what turned us off, exactly, I don't know. And it may not have been entirely the Festival's fault, either.

LEE AMAZONAS: The one thing you mention in, or in the unsigned editorial is the lack of proper kind of publicity. That was the first.

ERNEST CALLENBACH: Well, I wrote all of those. I think we felt that there was sort of a star struck quality about a lot of the stuff that went out, which may have been thought to be necessary to get people to come and pay the admissions, and maybe it was. I don't know. But it did tend to detract from the high

critical tone that we would have liked to see, probably. (LAUGHS) And there was a certain social side to it, also, that I may have mentioned, or at least I remember it personally turning me off, that they would recruit these legions of society wives to come around in their fancy clothes and entertain visiting dignitaries. And there were some horror stories where serious filmmakers would be picked up at the airport by some totally uninformed person whose only claim to fame was that her husband had a lot of money. Mostly it was women, unfortunately. And then they would be bored to tears at a dinner at somebody's house, and then finally, deposited at the Festival to do something sensible. We thought that it would have been possible to do something better. But in the Festival's defense, there was a lack of people available to do that, and people who really know a lot about films tend not to be very presentable socially - I mean, myself and the others I worked with. I think Irving, particularly, wanted to keep things looking pretty good for the newspaper photographers and so on. So he thought this was glamorous. I remember thinking that was kind of beside the point. Some very good filmmakers were coming into town, essentially wasting a day or two on this kind of thing.

LEE AMAZONAS: Well, you mentioned there were a couple of horror stories. Do you remember any of them?

ERNEST CALLENBACH: I don't remember particularly who was involved, but people would be just subjected to suburban dinner parties where nobody knew that much about them or anything that was going on in the movies, good-hearted sort of culture vultures who probably spent far more time at the opera than at the movies. It was not too film-savvy.

LEE AMAZONAS: The years that you were on the Film Selection Committee, did you go to any of the parties or the openings?

ERNEST CALLENBACH: Well I generally went to the opening parties. There were a couple of parties that I went to. But I was a family man in those days. Part of the time I was a single parent, and I had families and a lot of obligations connected with that, so I was not in the habit of doing a lot of partying. There were quite a lot of social events connected with the Festival, but I don't think I went to very many of them.

LEE AMAZONAS: Do you have any other recollections of the Festival; either your role in it, or what it was like attending, the people you met?

ERNEST CALLENBACH: Well I remember that in general, the audiences—at least of the films that I went to—were large and enthusiastic. They did a good job of filling the Metro when it was at the Metro, and then later, when it was at the Palace of Fine Arts, I'm not sure what the relative sizes of these halls are, but they would generally be full. And attendance at afternoon events of documentaries and experimental films and so on were much smaller, but also kind of like the audiences at the Archive, filled with people who were knowledgeable and had pretty good questions to ask, and clearly cared. So the Festival, in balance, looking back at it, had, like festivals everywhere, a really important educational effect on what you might loosely call film culture. It's helped people to broaden their experience with film, sometimes films from countries you would never probably think of seeing a film from Uzbekistan or Inner Mongolia or somewhere else, but at the Festival you think, "Well, some people think these are worth seeing; maybe I ought to give them a chance." And of course, there's a class of people who go all the way to Europe just to go to festivals because they're anxious to see what the new thing is going to be. And they are willing to see large volumes of films just in case they will turn up something really unusual and really interesting. And there are a certain number of people like that around here, too; always have been. That's wonderful when an institution exists that can make this kind of broadening possible.

It's so weird to have Ann having a successor at the **Quarterly**, but I'm going to meet Rob White next Saturday, see him in action for the first time next week at our board meeting in Los Angeles, if we all manage to get there through the airport security. (LAUGHS) He's very enterprising. He wants to make some big changes in the magazine and make it much livelier and more, in a way, going back to some of the features that it had in the beginning, before film writers became so academic. He would like to make some splashes. But one of the articles we've been thinking over the years of doing and never have found anybody to do it right is a survey of world film festivals; not in a sense of just ticking them off, because there must be hundreds of them by now, literally, but trying to figure out what roles the most successful ones really do play, and how that could be improved, maybe, in some cases, and also kind of distinguishing genuine festival from just kind of pre-release exhibition circuits that don't really have

much significance. Maybe we'll find somebody who would like to do that job. I wish I remembered more. I have such a terrible memory.

LEE AMAZONAS: Oh, it seemed pretty good to me.

ERNEST CALLENBACH: Well there are people—Pauline, for example—who had an incredible memory not only for films but human events, also, which I just can't approach. Maybe it's just I'm always interested in the next thing that's coming along or something. You know the Sherlock Holmes theory about memory? "The mind is like an attic which is well stocked with unused furniture. And if you push a sofa in at one end, several chairs are going to fall out the other." (LAUGHS) And I think my mind has been overstocked with chairs for a long time.