Mr. Carson, who popularized amateur astronomy, owned several telescopes. Here he is shown in this interview with his Unitron Model 114 telescope. This scan of an original in Company Seven's archives supports the Unitron 114 telescope displayed in our museum collection.

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THE GREEN LIGHTS ARE FLASHING

ALL THE WAY

Johnny Carson, third engineer to run the crack train that is ‘The Tonight Show,’ has kept it highballing along right on the rails.

Some weeks after Johnny Carson became the host of The Tonight Show—an event handicapped like a horse race, as is the avid, uncomfortable habit of show business (Will he wind Paar? Can he go eight furlongs with Allen?)—an NBC executive said something that made such bookmaking seem either irrelevant or the height of romantic foolishness. His observation revealed as much about the nature of television as it did about the three men. The implication was that the personality of the performer, whether it was Allen’s humane sophistication, Paar’s fascinating megalomania or Carson’s unflagging professional aplomb, was very nearly a secondary consideration. At least of equal importance, he said, was the high degree of technical proficiency of the three.

“It’s anything but an odd set of coincidences,” he remarked, “that all three choices were broadcasters, men born and raised in the radio business who then moved over to television. When we were launching the show all those years ago”—actually, it was eight years, which is a lifetime in television—“we knew it couldn’t be done with a comic per se, that it would have to be someone who knew something about the business. When that red light goes on and the cameras start grinding, the man running The Tonight Show is going for 105 minutes, practically without a script.

“In effect,” he went on, briskly analytical, as though he were discussing the merits of different computers, “he is producing and editing as he goes along. Now, a Carson, like a Paar or an Allen, is at home thinking about the program, his guests and his commercials all at once. He does it automatically. It’s like driving a train and it takes a broadcaster to do it.”

The analogy of the show to a train and of Carson to the engine is a felicitous one, as even a cursory examination of the way he has handled himself shows. To carry the figure further, there was a cautious opening of the throttle on his opening night last fall, a slow threading through a maze of tracks (only one of which could be the right one).

Thus, to the women in the audience, Carson confessed, with a kind of boyish, toothy charm peculiarly suited to notably regular features, that he now knew “what you ladies must go through in a pregnancy.” The only difference, he added, easily resolved, was that “I didn’t get sick.”

The pseudo-naughtiness aroused the maternal permissiveness of every woman in the audience. At that juncture Carson delivered the punchline which endeared him at once to the ladies, the gentlemen, the network and the pros, in that order: “I am,” he declared, “the only performer ever held up and spanked by General Sarnoff.”

Independently, too, he arrived at the same conclusion, although in a more amusing way, that the NBC official had. “If I don’t come from a show-business background at all,” Carson said, “in that I wasn’t born in New York on the Lower East Side.”

The tenor of the reviews in following performances made it evident that everyone was approvingly aware that Carson had left the terminal at a careful quarter-speed, that daylight could be seen at the distant end of the tunnel and that eventually he would be bucketing headlong over the countryside whistling for crossings (or station breaks) when...
Johnny Carson / continued

Then, in some chitchat about dogs, he noted that attempts had been made to set up comfort stations for dogs. He appeared gratified that they had been unsuccessful and remarked on the irony that in the matter of comfort stations, dogs fared better than humans. Finally, he said that he lived on Manhattan's East Side, where a lot of people walk their dogs, and that he enjoys doing that work. "And that's where," he said, "the Twist started. Everyone enjoyed the deft descent into schlocktology."

The NBC executive also asserted — his reasoning may have been conveniently after the fact — that in the seven months or so between Paar's departure and Carson's advent (Carson had to finish his contract with the daytime quiz show Who Do You Trust?) we found that controversy is not the key to the show.

This was curious, since Paar, of course, had been overpoweringly, even tearfully, controversial; a not incon siderable part of his audience tuned in to savour the sheer pleasure of either disliking him, disagreeing with him, or both. Nevertheless, suddenly the network discovered that the "key" was "the same expectancy a reader might find in opening a magazine: he never knows what's going to be in it."

More guests than Paar

"Tonight," it could now be seen — by the NBC man, at any rate, "is really a kind of newspaper, a source of information on the world of entertainment. The eavesdropping technique is what the public's always been interested in."

He said, and the facts bear him out, that Carson delivered more guests per program than Paar had and that whatever it was Paar had been doing so well, Carson was running "not just a TV show, but a big business, and his knowledge of the crowds stands him in good stead every night."

"Once they like you, it's amazing what you can get away with."

As to the reason he took on the show, Carson said that for him it represented "the last area in television that is what the medium was originally supposed to be — live, immediate entertainment." As to where it might lead him, "he was unable to speculate. "There's always been a sequence of events for me in which everything seemed to fall into place," he said. "One show kicked me into another; the last one kicked me into this."

Out of the corn country

Carson had no intention of stopping Buttons. "Paar might have; Allen probably would have pinch off his raptures before they bubbled." He was simply giving both Buttons and the audience notice that he didn't find the proceedings particularly interesting; view ers might have, however, and so he was staying his hand. This was not lost on Buttons, who became measurably funnier from then on.

By the time Halloween came around, Carson was under a full, if controlled, head of steam. In a discussion of Halloween customs, for example, he informed watchers that when he was a boy he tipped over outhouses. (Audiences have not been permitted to overlook the fact that, slick though he looks, his 37-year-old boy was born in Cornig, Iowa, which is re asoning rural for those who cherish agrarian myths. He spent part of his boyhood in Norfolk, Neb., and was graduated from the University of Nebraska, an English major, in 1948, after serving in the Navy.)

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