1-1-1982

Reflections on "An American Family"

Craig Gilbert
Reflections on "An American Family"
Reflections on "An American Family"
Craig Gilbert

In the late fall of 1972 I was engaged in a dispute (though not many during this period) with the top management of WNET/13, the Public Television Station in New York City. At issue was how many episodes there would be in An American Family, a series about the William C. Loud family of Santa Barbara, California, which I had conceived and produced. After many tense discussions, the station executives decided on twelve hours instead of the fifteen I was asking for. When he broke the news to me, the vice-president in charge of programming said I shouldn't be too upset. "After all," he reasoned, "you have made a series about real life, and real life can end anywhere." The absurdity of the statement was enhanced by my realization that the vice-president was also a novelist who would, I was sure, scream loudly if his next "real life" novel was shortened by two or three chapters for the same reason.

An American Family was, of course, about real life, but it was about real life with a difference. What we had made was a series of films about real life, and films about real life (as well as novels about real life), if they are any good at all, have a form and a coherence and a meaning that real life as you and I experience it does not have. That's one of the reasons for taking the time and trouble to make them.

I do not want to get into a discussion here of whether or not the making of documentary films is a major art or a minor art or even an art at all. What is important is that those of us who take documentary seriously work within a discipline that has its own demands, its own forms, and its own special qualities that are quite different from the demands, forms, and special qualities of the lives all of us live every day. Real life depiction is not the same as real life itself.

Early in January 1973, when An American Family began appearing on the air, I was forced to face the fact that the novel-writing V.P. was not alone in his ignorance of most aspects of documentary filmmaking. Before you could say "Corporation for Public Broadcasting," literally hundreds of self-styled experts were rushing into print and onto the air to express themselves on the subject of the series and its portrayal of "real life." TV critics, talk show hosts, columnists of every stripe and persuasion, social historians, freelance intellectuals, and even the Louises themselves could not wait, it seemed, to educate the public about "truth," "reality," and "objectivity" and warn that the sanctity of these concepts was being seriously threatened by An American Family.

This barrage of comment was directed not only at the series. As its producer, I was accused of being a Svengali-like manipulator, a crass invader of privacy, and a brooding East Coast neurotic with a compelling need to foist my twisted vision of life on an unsuspecting public.

I wish I could say I was able to ignore all this. But that would be untrue; it hurt too much to laugh and I was too old to cry. There was no way I could deal appropriately and rationally with all the inaccuracies, all the half-truths, and all the misconceptions. There were simply too many of them, and they came too quickly from too many sources. The torrent of words—written and spoken—was overwhelming (at least it felt that way to me), and I could not figure out how to put an end to it.

Perhaps if I had been a different kind of human being I might have been able to convince myself that it didn't matter and gotten on with my life. But it did matter. No matter how much I tried to pretend otherwise, I did care—deeply.

Since I could think of no satisfactory way to deal with my feelings, I kept them to myself and they paralyzed me. I retreated from life. I told myself this retreat would be temporary; I would lick my wounds, regroup, and come out fighting. But of course that didn't happen. Finally, and perhaps inevitably, I discovered that the sheer weight and intensity and scope of the criticism leveled against An American Family had affected me to such an extent that there was nothing about the making of documentary films or television or my own life I did not end up questioning.

A cry for sympathy at this point would, at the very least, be inappropriate. Most of what I have done (or, more accurately, not done) since An American Family is my responsibility and mine alone. If that period of my life was barren and unproductive (as it was), there is no way in the world I can shift the blame for that from my own shoulders.
The Idea

On my personal happiness scale of 1 to 10, the winter of 1970–1971 rated a 2 or 3, and even that was perhaps on the high side. In the first place, my marriage was breaking up. I was aware that I was at least 50 percent responsible for this. For most of my adult life I had been successfully able to ignore certain destructive forces in myself; now these forces could be denied no longer, and I didn’t have the slightest idea how to deal with them. I could only stand by, depressed and angry, as the relationship with the woman to whom I had been married for 16 years and for whom I cared deeply descended into chaos and silent hostility. I was also drinking too much; it was the rare morning that I woke up without a searing hangover. And finally there was no work for me at NET where I had been on staff since 1964 after working for 10 years as a free-lance writer-director-producer with all three commercial networks.

The work situation was one that occurred annually at NET. Every February or March the Ford Foundation would come through with its $8 million, and production would start on the season’s new shows. (At this time, prior to the creation of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and PBS, NET produced the prime-time programming for all the 200 or so public television stations around the country. However, in 1971 they were called educational television stations, and NET stood for National Educational Television.)

Invariably, by fall all the money would be used up and production would grind to a standstill. Between May and September of 1970, I had made a film called The Triumph of Christy Brown, about an Irish writer in Dublin. It had gone on the air in October and then for almost 4 months I had sat around twiddling my thumbs. I was not in much of a thumb twiddling mood.

To make matters worse, NET was in the process of being phased out of existence. No one would come right out and say this, but it was clear that that was what was happening. The coup de grâce actually came in June 1972 when it was announced that NET would merge with Channel 13, New York’s local public television station, creating what is known today as WNET/13. Despite the merger, NET was to retain its independent status as a producer of national programming. This pretense was maintained for a while—for just how long I can’t remember—until finally NET disappeared without a trace except for those of us working on An American Family.

The agonies of NET’s slow death in the winter of 1970–1971 were intensified by the spectre of Richard Nixon doing his best to mold public television in his
own political image—an accomplishment he came perilously close to pulling off. In fact, when the Ford money did come in and the program executives decided what shows would be produced for the coming year, there was nothing, in deference to Mr. Nixon, that sounded even vaguely interesting, much less politically controversial.

It seemed to me I had reached the end of the road. With my marriage disintegrating and no work to lose myself in, life seemed hopeless. There appeared to be no alternatives; I had to leave my wife and I had to leave NFT.

As a first step in severing my connections with NET, I met with my boss, Curt Davis, who was the head of the Cultural Affairs Department of NET. I told him my feelings and that I would appreciate being fired so I could get severance pay and unemployment insurance. Curt was an incurable optimist; this had served him well during his embattled tenure as head of the Cultural Affairs Department. Against impossible odds, not the least of which were ridiculously low annual budgets, Curt managed to coax an impressive number of distinguished television programs from a small staff of outspoken and eccentric individuals.

For a week Curt tried to talk me out of quitting. From his fertile brain came a whole series of bizarre plans, all of which would somehow or other result in my being able to do some satisfying work. Many of these plans sounded fairly reasonable while I was under his spell, but an hour after leaving his office I knew that, despite his good intentions and superb skill at juggling, none of them would materialize.

At the end of the week—a Friday afternoon in late February 1971—I pleaded with him to stop trying; to please let me go without putting either of us through the agony of more pipe dreams. He agreed but, true to his character, not without one last reservation.

He would agree to fire me if I would do him one last favor. What he wanted to do, he said, was to pick my brain. Over the weekend I was to write an outline of the TV program I most wanted to do. I was to pay no attention to the normal restrictions of time, money, or practicality. Since this was only a game there were to be no limits. He just wanted to find out, he said, the subject that was closest to my heart. I agreed.

As usual that weekend I drank a lot and wallowed in self-pity. The focus of my thoughts was my failing marriage. Sometime on Saturday I began to realize I was not alone, that most of my friends' marriages had come apart, were coming apart, or, at best, were in extremely shaky condition. And even the younger men and women I worked with seemed, as I thought about it, unable to maintain relationships for very long periods of time.

"What is going on here?" I asked myself. "Why are men and women having such a tough time?" The question caused goose pimples to break out on my arms and the back of my neck, a sure sign for me that buried somewhere here was the germ of an idea for a show I would really like to do.

I grabbed pencil and paper and started making notes. The most obvious way to deal with a question like this would be to travel around the country interviewing people—all ages of married and unmarried women, all ages of married and unmarried men, therapists, marriage counselors, religious figures, anthropologists, sociologists, and so on. Even in my vodka-induced haze I knew this wouldn't work, or if it did it would be so boring that no one would watch it.

The problem seemed a simple one. How could I discover what women were feeling as women and in their roles as wives and mothers and what men were feeling as men and in their roles as husbands and fathers without doing a typical "investigative report" kind of documentary? The answer was not long in coming. The most obvious place in the world to find a man and a woman, a husband and a wife, and a father and a mother is in a family. There were more goose pimples, and I knew I was on the right track.

Curt Davis had admonished me to set no limits, so I had another drink and let the vodka take my imagination where it wanted to go. I knew the shooting schedule for what I wanted to do would have to be longer than the 3 or 4 weeks for the normal documentary. For anything to be revealed about the man-woman, husband-wife, father-mother relationships, I knew I would have to be around for a considerable length of time. But for how long? Since this was only a game, I decided that a year would be just about right. I had no idea how much this would cost, but I knew it would be a hell of a lot of money. If Curt really wanted to know what I wanted to do, then this was it. I had done what he asked me. I had several more drinks and went to bed.

The next morning, Sunday, I sat down and wrote the three or four pages which ultimately resulted in An American Family. I have no idea what has become of those original pages, nor can I reproduce from memory the actual words that appeared on them. But I can recall quite clearly the general outlines of that fateful proposal and the thrust of its basic premise. After explaining that my instincts—and the increasing evidence all around me of broken and disintegrating relationships and marriages—told me some disturbing force was at work between American men and women, I proposed that I find a family and film, within reason, its daily life for the period of 1 year. I freely admitted I didn't know what this marathon filming would reveal, but I was sure that, given this amount of time and based on my knowledge of the quality of American life in the early seventies, something of in-
terest and importance would be revealed about how all men and all women relate to each other.

The decision to ask for a shooting schedule of a year was not a whimsical one. If this project ever came to fruition (and of course I knew it never would) it would be necessary to allow for enough time to let things happen.

Anticipating an objection to my idea of having the man and woman of one family represent the men and women of all families, I spelled out my thesis: there are powerful myths, attitudes, conventions, pressures, and standards in American culture which have to do with how we see ourselves as men and women. These cultural forces are part of our national heritage; they cut across economic, racial, and regional lines. It makes no difference whether we are black or white, rich or poor, easterners or westerners. Every day, in thousands of subtle and not so subtle ways, we are told what a man is expected to be and what a woman is expected to be. In other words, the cultural forces I have mentioned unite all American men and women in certain recognizable commonalities. I proposed investigating those commonalities and suggested that the best way to do this would be through the medium of one family.

By the time Monday morning rolled around I was torn by conflicting emotions. On the one hand, I was enormously excited by the possibilities of the series I had conceived, yet at the same time I was absolutely convinced that nothing would come of it. I handed the outline to Curt when I got to work and sat in his office while he read it. When he had finished, he picked up his phone and called James Day, the president of NET. From what I could decipher Jim Day was not in, so Curt made an appointment for us to see him the following morning. I thought Curt was being silly and told him so: there didn’t seem to be the remotest possibility that Jim Day would go for such a proposal. Curt’s reaction was typical: “Don’t be so sure. At least it’s worth a try.” The next day Curt and I met with Jim Day at 10:30, and sometime before 11 the president of NET had committed himself and the resources of his organization to the production of An American Family.

Curt, having pulled off another of his miracles, took the decision in stride and rushed off to tilt at more windmills. I was flabbergasted; I walked around in a state of shock. When the shock wore off, I realized Jim Day’s assurances were no guarantee that the series would actually be made. It was still necessary to get the project approved by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and once this was accomplished it would be necessary to face the serious problem of where the funding would come from for such a major undertaking.

I found myself half hoping that one or both of these problems would be insurmountable. To be asked to put one’s dreams on paper is one thing; to be told to make them come true is quite another. I panicked. Suppose they actually told me to go and do it? The enormity of the prospect was overwhelming.

Within 10 days the Corporation gave its approval and $600,000 was found to finance the project. When I was asked if I thought the series could be produced for that amount, I had to answer that I honestly didn’t know—there were so many unknowns. “O.K.,” I was told, “Let’s start by finding the family.”

Again panic swept over me. How in God’s name was I going to find a family; where would I even begin the search? A small town, a big city, the east, the south, the midwest? Just finding the family, I thought to myself, might take 6 months. And maybe I would never find one.

Over the next few days I forced myself to calm down and start thinking coherently. If my premise was correct—that the cultural forces which determine how we feel about ourselves as men and women are the same for all of us—and I believed then and believe now that they are, then, in theory, any family would do. But, as I thought about it, I realized there was another factor I had to consider. And that had to do with what the family looked like. Since the inception of television there had been a large number of family shows on the air: Make Room for Daddy, Father Knows Best, Ozzie and Harriet, to name just a few. In all these shows, the family was middle-class, attractive, and lived in a house (as opposed to an apartment) in what appeared to be a suburb of a large city.

If I was going to do a series with a real family living a real life, I had a sneaking suspicion that I was going to caucusc une uneucienese to the millions of viewers whose comfortable fantasies had been fed by those fictional shows. Despite what has been written about the series and my motives I did not set out to do a hatchet job on men or women or on the American family or on the middle-class way of life because of the recent unhappy circumstances of my own life. But I had lived long enough to know that the real lives of men and women and families were a far cry from the way they were portrayed on television. And I knew that if my camera crew lived with a family—any family—long enough this fact would become disturbingly evident. So for these reasons I wanted a family which, at least in the beginning, looked reassuringly comfortable and familiar to the people who I hoped would be watching. In short, I wanted to hook viewers before they began to realize they were in for an experience considerably different from the one offered by Father Knows Best or Ozzie and Harriet.
The Search for a Family

I decided that I would limit my search for a family to California. In the early days of our country the quest for happiness and fulfillment had led men and women toward the West and I felt, to a certain extent, that movement was still going on. I had a hunch that the dream had only slightly dimmed in the past 200 years.

There was another reason. In 20 years of making documentary on all sorts of subjects, I had learned things were easier to get at in California; people there tended to be more open than in other parts of the country. At least that had been my experience. And finally, from a practical point of view, I knew the series was going to be difficult enough to do without having to cope with the blizzards and freezing weather that are the hallmarks of the American winter in most parts of the country.

For all these reasons and perhaps several more of which I was unaware, I flew to Los Angeles and, with the help of friends, began interviewing families. I stayed there for about a month, during which I interviewed about 20 families, until finally it began to dawn on me that Los Angeles was not going to provide the kind of family I was looking for. This was not for any lack of interesting or attractive families in the city. Rather it was because the city itself was so spread out and fragmented that the sense of community which I felt was important to the series seemed to be lacking. I never knew quite where I was, I always seemed to be losing my bearings. So I moved on to Palo Alto.

The only honest reason I can give for doing so is that I was operating almost entirely on instinct. In college I was an English major. I had, of course, taken single courses in anthropology and sociology, but by no stretch of the imagination did I consider myself an anthropologist or a sociologist. Nor did I have anything more than the most superficial knowledge of the research methods employed in those disciplines.

I was well aware that instinct had very little to do with the scientific method, but then, as I have said, I did not even remotely consider myself a scientist. And what I was after had nothing whatsoever to do with the scientific method. Two years later, when An American Family was on the air, many members of the academic community criticized the series for not being in the mainstream of existing studies of the family and me for not being an accredited authority on the family as a social institution. That struck me then and continues to strike me now as nonsense tinged with more than a little outrage at an outsider with the temerity to poach on a private preserve.

At any rate instinct (which in this instance proved to be wrong) took me to Palo Alto, where, over a period of 3 weeks, I interviewed about 25 families. Some were more intoxicating than others, a few came quite close to satisfying the demands of the series, but none seemed exactly right.
As the days turned into weeks in Palo Alto, I became more and more convinced that I was on a wild goose chase, that I would never be able to find a suitable family, at least not in the foreseeable future. One night, sitting in my motel room, I almost talked myself into accepting the fact that the whole project was hopeless. It had looked good on paper but in reality it was beginning to look more and more like an impossible dream. If there had not been a 3-hour time difference between Palo Alto and New York, which would have meant waking him up at one or two in the morning, I would have called Curt Davis to tell him I was giving the whole thing up. Instead, I had a couple of drinks and went to bed.

The next day I flew back to New York. For a week I stared at a map of California. At some point in this process I found that I was concentrating on a tiny spot called Santa Barbara. I asked around the office and was told that Santa Barbara had a population of some 70,000 and was about a 2-hour drive north of Los Angeles. For my purposes this was ideal. It would be easy to get our "dailies" processed and back again for viewing without undue delay, and the problems of extra equipment and equipment repair could be handled with relative ease.

Having satisfied myself about these practical considerations, I sought more information about Santa Barbara. It was a lovely city, I was told. The weather was perfect and the environment was aesthetically pleasing. There were also a lot of interesting things going on in Santa Barbara. There was the Santa Barbara campus of the University of California, which meant there would be a large population of young people. (In the back of my mind I always had the vague notion that if I couldn't find interesting parents I would look for interesting children and work backward.) There was the Institute for Democratic Studies and other think-tanks. There was a large Mexican-American population and small black population. There was a radio station and a daily newspaper. In short, Santa Barbara seemed worth looking into.

And indeed it was. For climate, charm, and ease of life style, the city was a revelation to me. The air was sweet, the people were pleasant, and the beach was one of the most attractive I had ever seen. But, I had to keep reminding myself, I was there to find a family. After about a month, despite enormous help from the staff of the Santa Barbara News-Press, I was still searching. I had come close several times, but close was not good enough. I knew what I was trying to do was very hard and it wouldn't work unless I had a gut feeling, an absolute conviction, that I had chosen the right family. I had done enough documentaries to know there were always problems and pitfalls: I didn't want to get underway with reservations about the subjects.

Inevitably, the feelings I had had in Palo Alto returned in spades. It was like looking for a needle in a haystack. I knew that in theory it was possible to do what I had proposed to do; in fact, however, there were limits to my endurance and I was beginning to have a sneaking suspicion that even my strongest supporters at NEI were beginning to have second thoughts. Since I had scheduled interviews for another week, I decided I would go through with these out of respect for the families and for my friends on the newspaper who had arranged them. Then I would fly back to New York and admit defeat.

Sometime during this week one of my newspaper friends noticed I seemed somewhat depressed. I explained my decision and with very little prodding, and a few drinks, went on to tell him I had separated from my wife 2 months earlier and that the only thing NET had to offer for the future was severance pay. His response was that I needed a date. Before I could protest (or even discuss it), he had gone to the phone and made all the arrangements. It was out of my hands.

The following evening, at the appointed time, I took a cab to the house of Mary Every, the editor of the woman's page of the Santa Barbara News-Press. It was abundantly evident that Ms. Every had had several drinks before I arrived. She offered me one and then demanded that I tell her what I was up to; she had only heard bits and pieces. It sounded fascinating, she said, but she wanted to hear the whole story from me.

Under normal conditions I enjoy talking about myself and my work as much as the next man. But I had been doing this now for more than 2 months and was rapidly reaching the point where I could not stand the sound of my own voice. Over the weeks I had developed a series of set responses to questions like Mary Every's—responses which, to my ears at least, sounded like the proverbial broken record.

But, out of politeness, I forced myself to go through it all again. In the process, my hostess downed several more drinks. When I had finished I noticed she was perceptibly less steady on her feet than when I had arrived. I had premonitions of the entire evening turning into a nightmare. I began, in my head, to form excuses for getting out of there and going back to the motel to watch television.

"That's an absolutely fascinating project," said Ms. Every. And then she added, "Would you mind if I make a phone call? I think I know a family that would be just right."
A thousand reservations flashed through my head. I had serious doubts about Ms. Every's ability to put me in touch with the "right" family. On that particular evening I didn't feel like interviewing anybody. And finally I realized that, if we did go to see the family, Ms. Every would have to drive—a prospect which, considering the amount of liquor she had consumed, I found absolutely terrifying.

So, of course, I said I wouldn't mind at all if she made a phone call. She disappeared into another room. In a matter of moments she was back with the information that she had talked to the family she had in mind and they were expecting us.

With fear and trembling I sat beside Ms. Every as she maneuvered the car over an incredibly twisting road in the Santa Barbara hills. I was drenched in sweat when we finally arrived at 35 Woodale Lane, the home of the William C. Loudes. Within 20 minutes I knew I had found the family I was looking for.

Finding the Louds

On that first night at 35 Woodale Lane, there were drinks and a pleasant conversation. I met all the children except for Lance, who had gone to New York to work on a new underground magazine. We talked about television and the series and the practical considerations of how it would all work. After about an hour the family agreed to participate. As a matter of fact my private feelings were that they had agreed a little too rapidly, that they did not fully realize what they were letting themselves in for. I thought it would be good for them to experience being followed around for a day by a camera crew. On the following day there was to be a run-off election between Kevin Loud and another student for the office of president of the student body at Santa Barbara High School. In anticipation of Kevin's winning the election, a party was planned at the Loud home. This sounded like an ideal situation in which to introduce the family to the conditions of cinéma vérité filming. They agreed, and I returned to the motel to make the arrangements.

After several phone calls I contacted a Los Angeles film crew (unknown to me) who were willing to come to Santa Barbara the following day. Once the shooting started it became quickly apparent that the crew was not very skilled at cinéma vérité filmmaking, a highly specialized technique which demands a kind of sixth-sense understanding between the person who is doing the shooting and the person who is doing the sound. Much of what was interesting that night was missed, and most of what was shot was badly framed and included not only the microphone but the man holding it. However, I really didn't care. I had no intention of using the footage; I just wanted the family to know what it felt like to be followed by a camera, lights, and a microphone.

My suspicion that the Loudes had agreed to the project without really knowing what they were getting into proved to be correct. Around midnight Pat and Bill asked if we could talk for a while. Their first question was whether they could have final approval of what was included in the series. It was clear what they were concerned about. Liquor was flowing quite freely at the party, and I had noticed the cameraman getting quite a few shots of both Pat and Bill serving drinks to kids who were both underage and already quite obviously drunk. Two years later when the Loudes were claiming publicly, on television talk shows and in newspaper interviews, that they had shown only the bad times in their lives and none of the good times, they always mentioned this party as an example of the happy life that we had excluded from the series. I allayed their fears about the party footage by explaining that none of it was going to be used. But I made clear that in the future, when the shooting got started in earnest, I would have to retain the right to make that decision. However, I agreed that before any of the episodes were "locked up," the family or any member of the family would be allowed to see it and raise objections, which, I promised, would be listened to seriously and discussed fully, and changes would be made if they were warranted.

There were other problems, but the party was still going on and I wanted the children to be involved in any further discussions. So I dismissed the camera crew and suggested we all get some rest on Saturday and I come back on Sunday to discuss the matter thoroughly. When that was agreed on, I went back to the motel and slept for almost 36 hours. It had been a little more than 2 months since I had started the search for the family, but I still did not feel secure enough to call Curt Davis and tell him the search had been successful. With a day's rest and plenty of time to think over the pressure of Friday night, I had no idea whether the Louds would change their minds.

Setting Ground Rules

The discussion on Sunday centered around three main points. The first had to do with privacy: where would the camera go and where would it not go? In this respect I promised the camera would never go through a closed door. If the family or any member of the family wanted to be alone, all they had to do was go into a room and close the door. In addition to this I explained that a normal shooting day would begin around eight in the morning and end around ten at night. There might, of course, be exceptions to this, but generally that would be the schedule. If the family
wanted to talk over anything they didn't want us to see or hear, it should be before or after those hours.

The second point had to do with what would happen if the family collectively came to the decision that they had made a mistake, that the whole thing was too much for them, and they wanted to quit. I said that if this happened I would of course want to talk it over with them to find out what was bothering them. If possible, whatever it was would be eliminated. If that could not be done, I said, the family would have the right to call it quits and that would be it.

The final point revolved around how much the filming would interfere with their lives. This was a difficult thing to talk about since there were so many imponderables. Obviously, it is not normal to have a camera crew following you around all day. For a while at least, I explained, it was going to feel strange and awkward. But my hunch was it wouldn't take long for the new circumstances of their life to feel reasonably comfortable. How quickly and how easily this happened would depend on the skill of the camera crew and the ability of the members of the family to get used to their presence and go on about their lives without feeling self-conscious.

My instructions were that they were to live their lives as if there were no camera present. They were to do nothing differently than they would ordinarily. This would be hard at first but would, I promised, become increasingly easier. We would never ask them to do anything just for the camera. In other words, we would never stage anything and we would never ask them to do or say something over again if we happened to miss it. To the best of our ability we would not become involved in the family's problems. By that I meant that as far as was humanly possible we would not intrude our feelings, opinions, or personalities into family disputes, discussions, or relationships. This last restriction became, as the filming progressed, the hardest restriction to live up to.

I wish to make it clear that at no time did I bring up the subject of payment nor did any of the Louds ever ask for any compensation for participating in the project.

After we had talked about all these problems, the unanimous decision of the family was that they would participate in the project. We now had to set a date for when the filming would get started in earnest. Pat Loud said she would be flying to New York the following Saturday to spend a week or so with Lance in New York. We decided to start the shooting officially then. Pat said she would call Lance at the Chelsea Hotel and tell him what was happening, and I said I would go back to New York and get in touch with him sometime before Saturday.

I spent the rest of the day with the family, eating and talking and just getting acquainted. The next morning, I called Curt Davis at NET and told him I had found the family. He said it was a good thing I had because he had decided to give me only one more week and then was going to call a halt to the whole undertaking. I told him I was going to fly back to New York on Tuesday and asked if he could set up a meeting with the appropriate production executives for Wednesday morning. He said he would.

Establishing a Budget

Back in New York, the major production problems were the budget and the fact that in 2 days' time I wanted to start shooting. Most of the production people took the position that this was impossible. They were adamant that there would be no shooting until a firm budget had been established. I was just as adamant in maintaining that Pat Loud's visit to New York to see Lance had to be covered.

As I mentioned earlier, before I left on my search for a family, $600,000 had been found somewhere to fund the project. I now discovered the money had come from canceling a series called Priorities for Change, a public affairs series scheduled for production in the new season. When I found out about this, Priorities for Change had been dropped from the schedule, its budget had been made available to the project, and its six producers had been given notice. Needless to say, this did not make me very popular with the Public Affairs Department or with Bill Kohn, the vice-president in charge of programming, whose background was hard news and whose relationship with Cultural Affairs had been strained over the years.

In preliminary conversations with the production people it soon became clear that $600,000 would not be enough to cover the cost of An American Family. To find out just how much more would be needed, I was told to sit down with a production manager and figure out a realistic budget. One of the barriers that stood in the way of doing this quickly was the question of the camera crew and what their individual salaries would be. On the last film I had made I had used the camera and sound team of Alan and Susan Raymond. When that film was completed, I had promised the Raymonds they would work on my next project.

After The Triumph of Christy Brown, and to a certain extent on the strength of that film, Alan Raymond and his wife had gotten several assignments from other producers at NET, in the course of which they had dealings (most of them fraught with antagonism and anger) with several of NET's production managers. In fact, on one of those films Alan had managed to antagonize the very man he would now be negotiating with about his salary and the salaries of his crew. It was a very delicate situation, and I told Alan as much when we met in my office prior to our first budget meeting. That meeting proved to be a
disaster whose ramifications continued to be felt for
the first 2 months of shooting. Alan's initial request,
or, more accurately, demand, caused the meeting to
end almost before it had started, just short of a fist
fight and generated so much anger that no progress
of any kind could be made for almost a week.

What Alan wanted, before the specific question of
salaries even came up, was an advance from NET so
he could buy his own camera and thus eliminate the
expense of renting one. On the face of it this did not
seem an unusual request; in fact it made sense. Inasmuch
as NET would ultimately have to pay the rental
fee anyway. The problem was the way in which Alan
demanded this concession. Something in his voice
and attitude touched off a lingering dislike of him, and
within minutes the two men were glaring at each
other, all pretense at maintaining the ordinary amicities
out the window. When Alan called the production
manager every obscene name he could think of, the
meeting ended abruptly. The result of all this was that
Alan Raymond wasn't close to having an agreement
with NET, and Pat Loud was scheduled to arrive in
New York in 2 days.

Some NET production people took the position that
there would be no filming until an agreement was
reached with the Raymonds, no matter how long it
took. This of course was totally unacceptable to me. It
was finally agreed that the Raymonds would be
allowed to shoot for the length of time Pat Loud was in
New York at a rate which, it was understood, was for
that week and that week only and would have no
bearing on the long-term agreement if and when it was
ever worked out.

With this first problem at least temporarily solved
we turned our attention to the coverage of Pat Loud's
visit; this meant contacting Lance at the Chelsea Ho-

tel. Numerous phone calls by Alan Raymond and myself
had been unsuccessful—Lance was never in and he never returned our calls. About 3 hours before Pat
was due to arrive, Alan reached Lance who said yes,
he had been told what was going on by his mother
and sure, the camera crew could come down to the
Chelsea to meet him and to see what problems might
be encountered in shooting in Lance's room.

At this meeting it became clear for the first time that
Lance was a homosexual and was not in the slightest
way ashamed of the fact. One of the more idiotic
charges leveled against An American Family was
that, through some strange alchemy, the process of
shooting the series induced Lance to reveal his hitherto
hidden sexual preference to the American public.
This is pure nonsense. Lance was a homosexual before the shooting, during the shooting, and after the
shooting. The fact that we didn't find out about it until
we did neither excited nor depressed me. In my origi-
nal talks with Bill and Pat in Santa Barbara it had
been agreed that whatever happened would happen,
whatever came up in the course of the filming should
not be considered a good thing or a bad thing but simply another thing that occurred in their daily lives.

Pat's visit to New York ended up as episode 2 in
An American Family—an episode I have always con-
sidered one of the best in the series. From New York,
Pat went to Baltimore to take care of some business
for her husband, and the Raymonds and their assis-
tant were allowed to follow and film her at the same
temporary weekly rate which had been agreed to for
the shooting at the Chelsea Hotel.

As I write this I have my notes from that period in
front of me and, as if it were happening all over
again, I can feel the incredible frustration of trying to
mediate the salary dispute between the Raymonds
and the people at NET responsible for agreeing to a
final budget. The NET position was that the Ray-
monds could continue to shoot on a weekly basis but
I could not leave New York until the dispute was set-
tled. This meant that, when Pat Loud flew back to
Santa Barbara on June 9 accompanied by the Ray-
monds, I was not on the plane. For the first crucial
week of shooting with the entire family I was 3000
miles away.

My absence, of course, naturally disturbed the
Louds. I had entered their lives out of the blue, asked
them to take part in this crazy undertaking and then
disappeared. Why? What had happened? Could they
really trust someone who acted so irrationally? The
Raymonds did nothing to help the situation. Although
they knew perfectly well I was being kept in New York
to try to write a budget that could include their salary
demands, they never volunteered this information. To
questions from the Louds about why I wasn't there,
they would shrug their shoulders and claim they had
no idea.

After long hours of pleading with NET executives
and several quick weekend trips to the coast to re-
assure the family that I was not a figment of their
imagination, I was finally allowed to conduct the end-
less budget negotiations from Santa Barbara. I say
endless advisedly. According to my notes, the first
meeting at NET about the Raymonds' salary (the one
in which Alan Raymond and the production manager
almost came to blows) was held on May 27. A deal
was finally made with the Raymonds around the mid-
dle of July.

Much has been written about how unnatural it must
have been for the Louds to have a camera crew fol-
lowing them for 12 or 13 or 14 hours a day and how
difficult, if not downright impossible, it must have
been under these conditions to lead a normal life.3
Citing the Heisenberg principle became a favorite
gambit for all manner of critics, columnists, and fea-
ture writers who felt the need for scientific justifica-
tion to question the worth of the series.
Shooting

In point of fact, on a normal day the crew (Alan and Susan Raymond and an assistant) would arrive at the Loud home at about eight in the morning and would leave at about ten at night. Sometimes they would get there earlier and leave later, but not often. While they were at the Lounds, the Raymonds obviously would not shoot continuously. When, in their view, something interesting was going on, they would shoot; the rest of the time they would put their camera and sound recorder down and, in effect, become two more members of the family, talking, listening to music, or watching television. And some days they did not shoot at all.

When actual shooting was going on, the Raymonds were the only outsiders present in the house. The assistant remained outside loading fresh magazines with film and I was hardly ever present, having decided, at the beginning of the project, that the fewer people standing between the camera and the Lounds the better. A director or a producer or anybody else on the production staff, for that matter, would have been merely a distraction to the crew and to the family.

After the crew departed at night I would try to spend an hour or so chatting with the family to keep in touch with what its various members were up to and to try to get some idea of what might be happening in the next few days. I also tried, in this way, to stay in touch with the emotional state of the family, without, as I have said earlier, becoming involved in its affairs. On those days when the crew was filming Bill Loud at his office or at a business meeting, I sometimes spent the whole day at the house.

When the Raymonds were not shooting I would talk to them in person or on the phone about what was happening in the family, what we felt was going on, and what kinds of things to pay particular attention to. Despite this day-to-day communication with the Raymonds and despite their apparent understanding of my basic premise for the series, Alan’s perceptions about the family and its individual members were not always my perceptions; his view of what was important was not always my view.

Since the moment-to-moment decisions as to what to shoot and what not to shoot were up to the crew, the arrangement was not always a happy one. Indeed, from time to time, it was the cause for some serious and painful disagreements. But there was no viable alternative, and in the long run I think the Raymonds did a remarkable job. Because life has a tendency to repeat itself—which meant that if Alan missed something I wanted the first time, he could get it the next time it happened—I think that over the 7-month period he and Susan recorded an extraordinarily accurate picture of how the Lounds lived.

As for lights, whenever possible the Raymonds relied on natural light and sensitive film. For night shooting, they substituted photo flood bulbs for the regular bulbs in all the lamps and overhead fixtures in rooms where shooting was likely to take place. These photo floods stayed in place for all 7 months so, as a matter of course, there was enough light for evening shooting in the house without any frantic last-minute preparations. This also meant that the Lounds soon got used to living in a house that was somewhat more brightly lit than usual. There were no reflectors and no yards of black cable winding sinuously through the living quarters.

I do not want to imply that having their daily lives recorded for 7 months was easy or normal for the Lounds or without problems. It wasn’t. I am simply trying to point out that it was not as disruptive as many people, including the critics, believed.

For the production staff, the period from the end of May 1971 to January 1, 1972, was hardly problem-free. Almost every day there was a new crisis—personal, emotional, logistical, technical. Some of them—those that shed light on the filmmaking process—are worth mentioning.

Crises during Shooting

One of the early crises was caused by Lance’s announcement that he was going to spend the summer in Europe. It was imperative to cover his trip, but the budget, in its final, approved state, did not allow for a second 16-mm crew to wander around Europe for a couple of months. Our problem was finally solved through the good graces of Richard Leacock, a pioneer cinématé vérité filmmaker in the fifties and early sixties, who had started an 8-mm film department at M.I.T. He and his students had spent a good deal of time trying to develop a super 8-mm recorder and camera rig that could shoot acceptable cinématé vérité film with synchronous sound in the field. He agreed that Lance’s trip would provide an ideal test for the equipment. I do not remember what the exact financial arrangement was, but I do know it was reasonable enough to pass the careful scrutiny of the zealous guardians of the budget. The result was some marvelous footage (shot by John Terry) which, when blown up to 16-mm, added immensely to the overall interest of the series.

Pat Loud’s trip to Taos, New Mexico, with her daughters Michelle and Delilah triggered a whole series of problems. Pat and the girls had not been gone for more than an hour before Bill was quite openly making arrangements to fly to Hawaii with his current girl friend, the manager of a boutique in Santa Barbara. The fact that he made no attempt to hide
these shenanigans put an enormous burden on all of us. As I mentioned earlier, I had tried to impress on the entire production staff the importance of not getting involved in the family’s affairs. This was, of course, an extremely difficult ideal to live up to, and none of us was totally successful at it. The very fact of living as close to the Lounds as we did for 7 months made it humanly impossible to remain completely detached and unaffected by what was happening in their lives.

Like most of us, Bill Loud was a complicated man; he could be devious, irritating, and breathtakingly obtuse; he could also be astonishingly sensitive and quite perceptive. And when he wanted to, he could be irresistibly charming. So when he went out of his way to introduce his girl friend to me, as if to do so was the most natural thing in the world, it was very difficult to know exactly how to act. I didn’t want him to think I approved of what he was doing (which is what he wanted), nor did I feel I was in a position to lecture him on the subject of infidelity.

Bill’s flaunting of his relationship with the boutique manager also created filmmaking problems. Once the shooting of the series got underway, it didn’t take long to realize that Bill was a compulsive woman-chaser; from time to time he would allude to the affairs he had been involved in over the past several years. But to be faced with his current girl friend in the flesh was quite different from hearing about his conquests of the past.

In the days following Pat’s departure for Taos and preceding Bill’s departure for Hawaii with his girl friend, the question arose as to whether we would shoot them together having drinks at her house and dining at various restaurants in Santa Barbara. I made the decision not to. God knows I was tempted. But in the final analysis it seemed to me that doing so would put us in an impossible position with Pat and seriously endanger the completion of the series. From time to time Bill and Pat and the kids would ask to look at various pieces of film, and I didn’t want to have to lie about what we had shot while she was away. After Bill and Pat separated, there was no need to continue this self-imposed limitation.

The Raymonds and Susan Lester, the production assistant, flew to Taos to cover what was called Pat’s “vacation,” but which, in fact, turned out to be an intense period of soul-searching during which she made up her mind to ask Bill for a divorce. This decision was reinforced by a phone call from a well-meaning friend in Santa Barbara informing Pat that Bill had flown to Hawaii with the boutique manager.

One night, 3 or 4 days after the crew arrived in Taos, I received a phone call from Alan Raymond. He complained that he was getting very little on film. For one thing, Michelle and Delilah hated Taos and sat around all day complaining about what a dull town it was. And for another, Pat seemed very uptight and nervous and spent most of her time talking to Susan Lester, thereby making it impossible for him to do any shooting. Alan ended by asking me to get Susan Lester out of Taos so Pat would not be venting all her emotions in conversations which could not be filmed.

I told him to do the best he could and said I would speak to Susan when the crew returned to Santa Barbara. (Incidentally, the best Alan could do, in this instance, was very good indeed. Somehow or other he managed to get on film a portrait of a woman at the end of her rope, trying to divert herself by attending art classes, engaging in aimless chitchat at dinner parties given by people she hardly knew, and wandering, under threatening skies, through Indian ruins with a sullen and alienated Michelle.)

When the crew returned to Santa Barbara I had a long talk with Susan Lester. Susan is a bright, talented, ambitious young woman. An American Family was the first major film project she had ever worked on. Her reaction to Alan Raymond’s criticism of her conduct was not unexpected. As she reminded me, she was one of the members of the production staff who felt strongly that not to get involved in the affairs of the Loud family was not only unworkable but inhuman. From the very beginning of shooting Susan had developed a close relationship with Pat which I attributed to their both having an affinity for humor and a sharp eye for the ironies of life and the pomposities of people. Evidently, Pat had slowly but surely opened up to Susan about the dark side of her life, and Susan had proved a willing and intelligent listener. In Taos, while Pat was wrestling with the painful question of divorce, she depended heavily on Susan for advice, support, and the understanding of a trusted friend.

Susan readily admitted to all this. She also agreed that, very likely, her long conversations with Pat had made it difficult for Alan Raymond to do his job. She added that if there had to be a choice (as there appeared to be in Taos) between maintaining a friendship and the integrity of a film, she would opt for the friendship every time.

We talked for many hours. I sympathized with her point of view, indeed there were times during our discussion when I felt her point of view was the only sensible and decent one. But in the end I held to my commitment to make An American Family, as far as possible, a series of films about the Lounds and not about how the Lounds were related with a film crew from NET. I knew damn well that no matter how we
conducted ourselves we could not avoid having some effect on the family. But I was adamant about trying to keep that effect to an absolute minimum.

There was no question about firing Susan; she was much too valuable a member of the staff. We worked out a reassignment which was mutually acceptable, and in the final credits for the series Susan Lester’s name appears as associate producer. Today Susan is a producer in her own right, and though we are still friends, I have no idea what her position would be now if faced with the same problem.

One evening early in September, while Bill Loud was away on a business trip, the Raymonds returned to the motel and told me Pat had announced she was going to file for divorce. They added that the following day she was going to drive to Glendale, a suburb of Los Angeles, to inform her brother and sister-in-law of her decision. I asked the Raymonds if they had made any plans to go along. They had not talked to Pat about it, they said.

I phoned the house and told Pat I had just heard about her decision and we discussed it for a couple of minutes. I tried to be as noncommittal as possible. After a while I mentioned her planned trip to Glendale and asked if we could film it. She said it was all right with her but that it was really up to her brother and his wife, since any shooting would have to take place at their house.

Pat planned to reach Glendale late the next afternoon. I told her that I would get there earlier to talk to her brother and his wife. If they didn’t want their talk with Pat filmed, I would be gone by the time she got there. If it was all right with them, I would meet her at the house with the crew. Pat agreed to the arrangement.

Her brother and sister-in-law not only agreed to the filming, they were enthusiastically in favor of it. Although they were against the divorce and planned to tell Pat as much, they felt the series should include Pat’s side of the story if the divorce actually took place. When Pat arrived, however, she had a change of heart; she no longer wanted the discussion to be filmed.

This was a moment I had dreaded; it was the first and last time anyone in the family objected to our shooting a sequence which I felt was absolutely necessary for the series. I asked Pat if we could talk privately. She agreed and requested that her sister-in-law be present. Now, almost 9 years later, I cannot possibly re-create that conversation. But at the end of half an hour Pat consented to have the film crew present.

(Left to right) Michelle Loud, Pat Loud, Susan Raymond, and Alan Raymond.
In interviews after the series was on the air Pat sometimes said I had talked her into letting us film her explanation of why she was getting a divorce. And sometimes she said it was her "best scene." Because of these apparently conflicting statements, I could never figure out whether she was condemning me or thanking me, whether she was angry or happy that the scene had been filmed. I'm not sure she knew herself.

When Pat actually confronted Bill with a request for a divorce and asked him to pack his clothes and leave the house, one family became, in effect, two families, and I had serious doubts about whether the Raymonds could cover both of them. It did not take long for my doubts to crystallize into a conviction; I decided to hire another camera crew. First I had to convince NET this was an absolute necessity and the expense could be accommodated with a certain amount of budgetary juggling. As hard as this was, it was nothing compared to the problems which arose when I broached the idea to Alan Raymond. He hit the roof and didn't come down for a couple of days. When he did, he threatened to leave the series. (He did in fact disappear for several days, after which I received a phone call from him in which he said if I wanted to talk he would meet me in a Hollywood restaurant. I met him, we talked, and he returned to Santa Barbara.)

I had been through a less intense version of this dispute with Alan during the making of The Triumph of Christy Brown in Dublin. Then I had let him have his way, and I had lived to regret it. He had badly botched the shooting of a key scene simply because he could not be everywhere at once. I had learned my lesson the hard way and was not about to let it happen again. His position, of course, was that he could cover Bill's life and the lives of Pat and the kids perfectly adequately by himself. I was convinced there was no way he could possibly pull this off. I knew what was going on in his mind. He simply didn't want to share his credit with anyone. And there was nothing I could say that would get him to budge one inch. He knew he had me over a barrel; after almost 4 months of shooting he was indispensable to the series. There was no way I could fire him (I considered this option through many sleepless nights) without seriously jeopardizing the delicate personal and professional balance that had been established with the Lounds.

Finally I had no choice but to ignore his objections and hire another crew and try my best to keep the whole undertaking from falling apart. And it almost did. Faced with another crew on what he considered his territory, Alan submitted an ultimatum that included the following points: (1) under no circumstances was the new crew to be allowed to shoot in the Olds house; (2) he would not consent to communicate with the new crew in any way whatsoever, and (3) he would not attend any screening at which "dailies" shot by the new crew were shown.

Luckily, the cameraperson of the new crew was an understanding, intelligent, easy-going woman named Joan Churchill who, though she thought Alan Raymond was crazy, agreed to go along with the restrictions. In fact, Bill's social activities increased to such an extent once he was on his own that there was more than enough to keep her and her crew busy. And from time to time, when Alan was busy elsewhere, she even shot in the house.

Finally, there is one more production crisis that should be mentioned, not because it is of any earth-shaking importance but because it graphically illustrates how convictions, deeply held in theory, can evaporate in a minute under the pressure of actual shooting conditions.

It occurred on Thanksgiving Day. Alan and Susan Raymond were at the house filming and I was at the motel feeling sorry for myself. It was the first Thanksgiving I had been alone in 16 years (in my life as a matter of fact); memory and desire were giving me a hard time. Suddenly the phone rang; it was Alan complaining that Thanksgiving dinner at the house was turning into a disaster. It was the first major holiday without Bill, and although nobody was actually crying as much, it was clear, according to Alan, that he was sorely missed. I was nothing to film; everyone was sitting around looking gloomy. He and Pat had talked and agreed it would be a good idea if I rounded up as many production people as I could find at the motel and brought them up to the house for some turkey. Alan said he would not get the production people on camera and that it might make Pat and the kids more animated.

This was a total reversal of the position Alan had taken in Taos (I thought this but didn't mention it). For reasons which even now I cannot quite be sure of, I agreed, thereby also completely contradicting the position I had taken in my discussion with Susan Lester.

I rounded up five or six members of the production staff and we went to the house. It was clear from the minute we got there that it wasn't going to work. Everything was strained and artificial. After a while, if I remember correctly, before the turkey was actually served I told Alan it wasn't going to work and that I was going to leave and take the production people with me. He didn't object strenuously.

It was a sad day all around. It was a sad Thanksgiving for us at the motel, and it was a sad Thanksgiving for Pat without her husband and the kids without their father. But at least it was an honest sadness and not a phony gaiety.
Editing

The filming of An American Family ended in the early morning hours of January 1, 1972. On or about February 1 the editing of An American Family began, a process that lasted a full 12 months and strained the patience and taxed the talents of almost twenty people.

In the 7 months of shooting we had accumulated 300 hours of film. The first thing we had to do was look at every hour of that film in chronological order (i.e., the order in which it had been shot). When I say “we” I mean the two editors, David Hansen and Eleanor Hamerow; their two assistants; Susan Lester; Jacqueline Donnet, the coordinating producer; and myself. Of the seven people in the screening room, only two, Susan Lester and I, had been involved in the shooting and had any day-to-day relationship with the Lounds. This was purposeful; I wanted to guard against the possibility of reading anything into the film that wasn’t there. The five pairs of fresh eyes were a guarantee that this would not happen. The possessors of those eyes had never met the Lounds and knew next to nothing about them. Unlike Susan and me, they could view what was happening on the screen with something approaching reasonable objectivity.

For almost 3 months—5 days a week, 6 hours a day (more than 6 hours was intolerable)—we sat in a darkened screening room and watched as the Lounds lived their lives from the end of May 1971 to January 1, 1972. To put it mildly, it was a strange and unsettling experience. Slowly but surely, the lives of the people on the screen started becoming more real than our own; without even being aware of it we found ourselves using words and phrases common to the Lounds and talking about family situations as if we had actually participated in them.

Finally that purgatory was over, and then for a week, in a bright, sunlit room, we discussed at length what we had seen, our individual reactions to the footage, and the best way of turning that footage into a series people would find interesting. In the discussions that arose I tried to make one point over and over again: what we were dealing with was a record (not complete by a long shot, but certainly representative of the major events) of how the Lounds had lived their lives for a period of 7 months. Whether we liked or disliked individual members of the family, or whether we approved or disapproved of how they lived those lives, or how they dealt with those events was irrelevant. Our job was to put this film record together in such a way that it would not violate the characters of the individuals, the lives they led, or the events they participated in.

To put it simply—in practice it turned out to be a very hard thing to do—I was asking the editors to let the material speak for itself rather than, as editors are trained and paid to do, create something out of the material. A couple of examples: if, for reasons of clarity or some other reason we decided to use a sequence that was filmically dull, we should not, through tricks of editing, try to make it less so; if a family member had a certain speech habit, we should not, simply because we were tired of hearing it and thought it repetitive, try to minimize it through editing; if we decided to deal with a particular event, we should deal with it (as far as humanly possible) in its entirety and not compress it, through editing, to a more manageable length. During the week we discussed all these things and much much more. We also agreed that each episode would be 1 hour long and that the episodes would run chronologically.

Then I went home and faced the problem of breaking down the 300 hours into episodes. I worked with a log listing the contents of every roll of film that had been shot—a log, incidentally, which was as thick as those enormous dictionaries in libraries that have special stands of their own. As I remember, the first breakdown I came up with had about thirty episodes. This was obviously an unworkable number, and I enlisted the aid of Susan Lester to sweat the total down to twenty-four.

As I mentioned at the very beginning of this account, the problem of how many episodes there would be in the completed version of An American Family continued to plague me and the editors and the management of WNET/13 even after the series had started to appear on the air.

Now, 7 years later and under no constraint to be scrupulously fair (at least in interviews) to my employer, I can also say it is a classic illustration of the penny-wise pound-foolish attitude that continues to prevail, up to the present time, in public television. The final budget for An American Family was $1,200,000. In other words, each 1-hour episode cost $700,000, which was dirt cheap when you remember that, even in those days, it was not unusual for a single 1-hour documentary to cost anywhere from $150,000 to $200,000.

The three extra episodes (13, 14, and 15) would have fulfilled the artistic unity implied in the structure of the series. The cost for all three of the extra episodes, the total cost of three more hours, would have been somewhere between $40,000 and $80,000—a small price it seemed to me then and still seems to me now to make a logical and aesthetic whole out of something that had already cost $1,200,000. After the final decision was made to spend no more than was necessary to finish episode 12, I asked management if I could try to raise the money outside the station for the last three shows. They gave me permission.
Bob Shanks, who at that time was in charge of the late night 11:30 to 1 A.M. time period at ABC, was very interested. We started to talk after the series had been on the air for 2 or 3 weeks, and he was intrigued about the possibility of getting some cheap shows that would cash in on all the publicity being generated by *An American Family*. What he wanted was four shows. The first would be a recap of the highlights of episodes 1 through 12, and the others, of course, would be episodes 13, 14, and 15. He was very excited about the possibilities of this arrangement. I wasn't very happy about the recap idea, but I did want the money to complete the series properly.

Our talks proceeded smoothly, so smoothly, as a matter of fact, that one day Shanks announced that the next step was to get top management at ABC and WNET/13 involved in the discussions. (I should point out that I did not own the rights to *An American Family*. I was functioning as a salaried staff producer. I had been given permission to look for money, but any deal had to be signed by Mr. Iselin and his lawyers.) Shanks said he would call me in a couple of days to let me know how negotiations were progressing.

He was as good as his word. But when he called me the news was bad. It seems that when he had contacted the proper executives at ABC to get them involved in the project, he was told they were not interested. They gave him two reasons for this decision, and I set those reasons down here exactly as Shanks repeated them to me: (1) if the programs were successful, they (the executives) would be asked why they hadn't done them in the first place, and thereby been able to avoid having to buy them from public television; and (2) if the programs were successful, they would be asked to do more of the same, which they (the executives) agreed unanimously they did not want to do. In other words, from the executives' point of view, it was a no-win situation. It seemed to me then, and even more so now, that the reasons they gave are a pretty good indication of the kind of thinking that prevails in commercial television.

In addition to the dispute over the number of episodes, there were other disagreements with the management of WNET/13 during the editing period. Any fairly frequent viewer of public television cannot help but be aware of how often a host is used at the beginning of a program to tell you what you are about to see and at the end of a program to tell you what you have just seen. One day I was called to a meeting in the office of Jay Iselin, president of WNET, to discuss the advisability of having such a host for *An American Family*. When I asked why such a person was needed, I was told it would help to set the program "in context." At the time I honestly didn't have the slightest notion of what "in context" meant and I objected to the idea strenuously. It was finally abandoned.

I have thought quite a lot about "in context" since then, and I think today I have a better idea of what it means. It is a euphemism for blunting whatever uncomfortable impact the program may have on the viewer, relieving viewers of the necessity to think for

(left to right) Pat Loud, Alan Raymond, Craig Gilbert, and Susan Raymond.
themaclevsa about the content of the program; and getting the station management off the hook if the program should turn out to be socially, politically, or historically unpopular.

Although I argued successfully against the use of a host on An American Family, I lost my battle to prevent an hour long discussion by assorted "experts" from being aired immediately following the broadcast of the final episode. I watched this discussion at home and then had drinks with several of the participants. One of them, an anthropologist, asked whether I had heard his perceptive remark about the credits in the last episode. It seems that he alone had noticed that the credits seemed to be dissolving, a subtle and telling commentary on the breakup of the family. He congratulated me on this deft touch. When I told him this deft touch was wholly unintended, that it was simply the result of a technical problem called "tearing," he was taken aback for a minute and then quickly recovered, giving the opinion that, intended or not, the effect was the same. Until then I had never been overly fond of panel discussions by experts; at that point my opinion of those television mutations reached a new low.

Perhaps the most violent argument I had during the editing period with the men who ran WNET/13 was over the question of an Executive Producer credit for Curt Davis. When the credit list was submitted as a matter of course to the proper executive, the uproar was such that you would have thought I was suggesting the series acknowledge its indebtedness to Adolph Hitler and Joseph Stalin, with perhaps a bow in the direction of Jack the Ripper.

As I pointed out earlier in this account, An American Family would never have been made had it not been for Curt Davis. In addition to prodding me into coming up with the concept and having the faith to pursue the possibility of what, in the beginning, seemed to me like a pipe dream, Curt had been enormously supportive of the project through all the shooting and the early months of the editing. At that point, as part of the phasing out of NET, he had been fired.

We had never discussed what his credit would be, but there never was any question in my mind that the one he deserved and the one he would get was Executive Producer. When I was told this was out of the question, I exploded. There were extremely heated words, and at one point I said that if Curt's name did not appear as Executive Producer I would destroy the series and the station would be left with the task of explaining why it did not appear on the air. The battle continued for over a week, in the end Curt got his credit.

You may well be asking why the station had such strong feelings about what seemed, on the surface at least, to be such an insignificant issue. The answer, which has been confirmed many times since then, has to do with the politics of public television. By the time An American Family appeared on the air, NET, which had been responsible for the series, had disappeared without a trace. Its functions, on a national level, had been taken over by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and on a local level by WNET/13. Jim Day, the president of NET, and Curt Davis, the head of the Cultural Affairs Department of NET, were no longer on the scene. A revisionist history of public television in which the dirty word, NET, would never appear was in the process of being written. Three years later, while I was sitting in the waiting room of the Corporation in Washington before an appointment, I leafed through the coffee-table literature that told the history of public television and listed its triumphs. Nowhere was there any mention of NET or An American Family. Quite simply, the intensity of the fight over Curt's credit had to do with the issue of whether, for those who cared and remembered, there would be a lasting reminder that before the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, before PBS, and before WNET/13 there had been another organization which, for all its faults, had represented courage, freedom, and a tentative, but growing, integrity.

The actual editing of the series was a long and laborious process, but it went well except for a difficult problem which arose quite early in the process. That problem had to do with the inability of one of the editors, Eleanor Hamerow, to live with the editing guidelines I had tried to establish.

I liked Ellie very much; she was an interesting, intelligent, warm woman. From the very beginning we got along well together. For many years she had been employed as an editor on issue-oriented documentaries—what recently have come to be known as "investigative reports." These documentaries are put together by shooting as much material as possible on both sides of the issue being examined within the time allotted by the budget and then bringing the footage back to the cutting room where it is given its shape by the editor. In other words, Ellie had spent a great deal of time creating interest, tension, conflict, and drama from footage which, in its original state, was essentially devoid of these qualities. She was an expert at "making something" out of interviews, silent footage, stills, stock material, and other random film.

Her first assignment on the series was to cut episode 1. After a reasonable length of time I asked her how it was going. She said she was having some trouble but thought she knew how to solve it. Days and weeks went by, but still there was no rough cut of the episode. I began to get frightened and went to
the cutting room to talk to her. To my horror she said she was having trouble "making something" out of the material. When I asked her what she meant, she explained that she was trying to make Pat Loud a little more acceptable as a human being. In the next few days we talked at length about the problem, and slowly but surely it became clear that Ellie not only didn't like Pat but that she didn't like the entire family and was trying to make them less objectionable through her editing. Finally, regrettably, I had to let Ellie go. It was difficult for both of us.

Ultimately the series employed three editors: David Hanser, Pat Cook, and Ken Werner. A large part of whatever distinction the series has is due to their skill as editors and to their decency and compassion as human beings.

On the Air and the Reaction

During a 12-month period in 1967–1968 I made a documentary called Margaret Mead's New Guinea Journal. In the course of that experience I became a friend of that remarkable woman, and we remained friends until she died. Shortly before An American Family went on the air, I invited her to a screening of the first couple of episodes. Her comments were perceptive and flattering, but she also added a realistic warning: "There are going to be a lot of people, Craig, who, after they've watched the series for a little while, are going to ask themselves: what would a camera crew see if they lived with my family for 7 months? This thought is going to make them very nervous and it won't be long before that nervousness turns to anger and they turn you off."

As was usually the case, Margaret Mead was extraordinarily accurate in her prediction. But I think we were both more than somewhat shocked (I know I was) by the source of the anger she had predicted. By and large, viewers all over the country liked the series, although perhaps "liked" is not the correct word to use. In the incredible amount of mail generated by the series, the writers said they found the series "painful but true" about many aspects of their family life, that they appreciated seeing "something
on television that portrays family life the way it is," that the series helped them to feel that they were "not alone." There were viewers, of course, who did not like the series. But the source of most of the anger I was aware of came from the Loud family and the critics. By critics I mean not only the reviewers of television programs but the men and women who write articles and feature stories for newspapers and magazines.

It is hard for people to believe I did not anticipate the anger of the Louds. Perhaps I was naive, perhaps I chose to ignore that it was a very real possibility. Ultimately I understood, even sympathized, but when it first broke around my head I was puzzled and hurt. Throughout the shooting we had been good friends, and we remained so during the year it took to edit the series. As I had promised, we screened every episode for a member of the family (usually it was Pat, sometimes Pat and Bill, and occasionally one or more of the kids would be present) before it was "locked up." There were very few objections, certainly none of any substance."

After one such screening, the staff of An American Family received a letter from Pat. I quote from her letter as a contrast to her and her family's future anger. It said, in part:

I think you have handled the film with as much kindness as is possible and still remain honest. I think you have put it together in such a way and with such fine pacing that a vast audience, quite unknown to us, will find enough in each program to look forward to the next. I am, in short, simply astounded, enormously pleased, and very proud that your collective wits have collaborated on this venture. You have eminently justified the faith my family tacitly put in you when we started this series and, my dears, we shall keep the faith. . . . Believe me, if anyone ever wants to muck around in my life again, it has got to be you.

The lives that Pat and Bill and their children had lived during the 7 months we filmed them could not be called unusual by any stretch of the imagination. Although I never regarded any of the Louds as typical or average, I did suspect that the emotions they felt, the problems they encountered, and the pressures they attempted to cope with were fairly representative of those experienced by members of millions of families all over the country. The Louds didn't see themselves as unique or in any way out of the ordinary, and neither did I.

(Left to right) Susan Raymond, Alan Raymond, and Kevin Loud.
But it was precisely this ordinariness and our faithfulness to it in the filmmaking process that caused all the trouble. Because, in the recording of it over a 7-month period, something extraordinary was revealed. It took me a long time to understand what I am now about to say, and an even longer time to face the implications of it. And I may not be able to say it very well. But I will do my best.

As you remember, at the very beginning of this account, I theorized in my proposal for the series that if you could stay with a family, any family, for a long enough period of time something interesting would be revealed about why men and women in their various roles were having such a difficult time in America of the early seventies.

The operative words here are "difficult time." Yes, I am guilty. I had a point of view. My senses, my perceptions of what was happening in my life and in the lives around me led inevitably to that point of view. No, I did not think men and women were blissfully happy; no, I did not think relationships, by and large, were mature, mutually satisfying, and productive; no, I did not think family life was the endless round of happy mindlessness pictured in television commercials or a convenient cornucopia of serious problems which could be resolved neatly and joyously in the space of an hour as the television sitcoms and dramas would have us believe. If I had felt all this, if I had felt that Ozzie and Harriet, The Brady Bunch, and Father Knows Best were accurate portrayals of the way American women and men were living their lives, I would not have spent 2 years of my life making An American Family.

Yes, I thought that what I was proposing would reveal some unpleasant, disturbing, depressing things. Yes, what I found was unpleasant and disturbing and depressing, but not because I or anyone on the staff manipulated the Louds' lives as they lived in actuality or on film. I found these things and they appeared in the series because they were there.

And what I wanted to say was that, because of the very ordinariness of the Louds, the universality of the problems they faced, the emotions they felt, and the pressures they had to cope with, this is a series about all of us, you and me and every man and woman, young or old, rich or poor, white or black who lives in the United States in the second half of the twentieth century.

I hoped that viewers would sense the universality and understand it and in the course of experiencing the "shock of recognition" begin to realize that many of the things they felt were also felt by millions of other men and women. I was not foolish enough to think that An American Family would solve any problems, but I did hope it might be the beginning of a small awareness. And I hoped this awareness might be the beginning of something more.

And it was. Several families on a block would get together to watch the series and talk about it afterward, schools assigned classes to watch the series and prepare for a discussion the next day, clergymen gave sermons on the series and suggested their congregations turn it on. I know this is true from the mail the series generated and from talking to audiences in several lectures I made around the country after the series was off the air. In short, and I know I have said this already but it is important to emphasize the point, millions of viewers were pleased that An American Family was on the air; they found it interesting, helpful, and positive. In their letters they found the Louds courageous, understandable, likeable, and more than a little similar to them or someone they knew.

Some of the critics (not too many) felt the same way and said so in print. As a matter of fact, the trouble (my trouble) started with a review by a critic, Fred Maynard, a free-lance writer whose piece, An American Family: The Crack in the Mirror, appeared in Image, WNET/13's membership magazine, a couple of weeks before the first episode of the series appeared on the air. The following are some excerpts:

They could be the Geritol couple. He's handsome, charming, sexy, a good talker. She's beautiful and elegant, with legs a twenty-year-old might envy and a kind of total calm. But he never says "Honey, you're incredible!"

In fact, he seldom speaks to her directly. From the first breakfast scene of an American Family you sense that these two decorative people lost each other a long time ago. Most viewers will experience the shock of recognition. There we are, and our friends and neighbors. . . . Flying, partying, quarreling, just talking, the Louds reveal a peculiarly American faith in simple solutions, instant cure. Unhappy? Take a trip. Lonely? Give a party, set your hair. Pat's instinct in a crisis is to reach for a drink. . . . The breakdown of communication so striking in the Loud family is perhaps a typically American disease, the result of disproportionate emphasis on maintaining surfaces, keeping cool. These people touch without meeting, meet without touching. . . . Again and again a single scene encapsulates the family tragedy. . . .

Lance, after his mother leaves, climbing what seems an endless flight of stairs. Bill turning on the charm over cocktails—"Have you been in a wreck lately?"—and revealing himself more than he knows as he plays out the line. . . . What went wrong? What does it mean? As the camera searches for answers—the fault is everyone's and no one's—something remarkable happens to the viewer. He finds himself thinking not just about the Louds but about families in general and about himself.
When I read this review I was very pleased. It was the first outside professional evaluation of the series we had received, and it said all the things I had hoped it would say. In 7 months of filming this decent, ordinary family something indeed had been revealed and Fredelle Maynard had seen what it was.

My joy was short-lived. Lance, who loved to cause trouble, got hold of the article and read it over the phone to his mother in Santa Barbara. And of course she hit the ceiling. (I say "of course" now, but it wasn’t so easy to say "of course" at the time.) Pat’s anger stemmed from a conviction that I had betrayed her and her family, something I had promised I would never do. And I didn’t think I had, either in the 7 months of shooting or the 12 months of editing. Her letter, it seemed to me, was proof of that. Pat Loud and Fredelle Maynard had looked at the same 12 episodes; the problem was that, inevitably, they had seen them in different ways. The old cliché that we never see ourselves the way others see us had come home to roost with a vengeance.

Eighteen months earlier, during the shooting in Santa Barbara, an incident had occurred which Pat’s anger now triggered in my memory. One night, Pat and I and several members of the production staff were sitting around having drinks when, out of the blue, she turned to me and asked, "Listen, Craig, what the hell is this series supposed to be about?"

She had asked the question several times; the first time of course had been when I met her and her family and told them about what I was planning to do. I have tried my best to remember what I told her then and on the other occasions, but I honestly can’t. However, I do remember what I said this time.

Perhaps it was my mood, perhaps it was the several drinks I’d already had, perhaps it was the knowledge (always with me) that only recently I had failed in my own marriage. Whatever the reason, I blurted out, "You know what this series is about, Pat? It’s about how you and I and everyone in this room and everyone in the country is floundering around trying to make sense out of their lives." Pat’s response was immediate and understandable: "I’m not floundering, for Christ’s sake. That’s a lot of shit."

None of us likes to be told we are not in complete control of our own destinies, at least not in front of other people. On the other hand, sleepless, at three in the morning, most of us have felt the gnawing fear that all is not right with our lives. I had a strong suspicion that Pat Loud was currently experiencing many of those fears. In this sense, her response, though consistent with her character, was not entirely honest. But then neither was my answer to her question.

Unless you are doing what I have referred to earlier as an "investigative report" it is hard to explain, with absolute truth, what your documentary is about. If what you are doing is concerned with an "issue," it is
easy and accurate to say "I am making a film about the dangers of nuclear energy" or "I am making a film about how nursing homes mistreat old people" or "I am making a film about the spread of terrorism in the world." But if what you are doing is concerned with more general questions of human behavior, it is a good deal more difficult to give a specific and satisfactory answer without either misleading or antagonizing the subjects of your film and in the process endangering the life of the project.

Having read thus far in this account, you are well aware of my desire, in An American Family, to explore the reasons why, in the early seventies in the United States, it seemed to be so difficult for adults to get along with each other in their roles as men and women, husbands and wives, and fathers and mothers. However, I was well aware that the so-called cinéma vérité technique of following the members of the Loud family as they lived their lives for 7 months could produce a series of films which would touch on many aspects of those lives in addition to the ones I consciously set out to explore. The cinéma vérité net invariably comes up with much more than the fish you are trying to catch. So for this reason, a precise, definite, conclusive answer to Pat's question would have been misleading. But there were other reasons not quite so altruistic.

Human beings do not like to be treated like guinea pigs. If you tell the subjects of a documentary their behavior and their lives are being used to make a larger statement about human behavior and human lives in general, they are more than likely to be highly insulted. We all tend to think of ourselves as special and unique, with problems, fears, likes, and dislikes different from every other person in the world. Of course this is not true, and the discrepancy in perception between the way we see ourselves and the way others see us always comes as a distasteful shock when we are forced to confront it. Incidentally, it is also this discrepancy, if the proper subject is chosen, which makes the cinéma vérité technique such a powerful and exciting form of filmmaking.

Finally, people have a tendency to idealize themselves. If, for instance, I had told Pat I was trying to do a series of films about how men and women feel about themselves and their various roles, I'm sure she would have said something like, "Listen baby, we're perfect," and considered me crazy for trying to compare her family with any other family in the country. At the very least she would have been more self-conscious, and she might even have considered backing out of the project.

If Bill had asked what the series was about (he never did and didn't seem to care), I would have been in even more trouble. After An American Family was on the air, he stated publicly that one of the hardest things for him to understand was why his family had not been perceived by viewers and press as the West Coast Kennedys.

At any rate I know there were problems in responding to Pat's question with complete honesty, and I also know those problems were not limited to the special conditions under which An American Family was filmed. More often than not, and certainly more often than has been admitted, documentary filmmakers are unable to tell the whole truth about what they're up to without running the risk of being told to peddle their papers elsewhere. It is not that we are liars or more inherently dishonest than anyone else; it is simply that the nature of the business we are in makes it impossible, a good deal of the time, to be absolutely candid.

The bottom line, as they like to say in television, is that we are using human beings to make a point. To invoke the harsh but accurate word, we are "exploiting" them to make our films, and no matter how sensitive, caring, or understanding we may be, the fact is that our incomes and our careers often depend on our ability to conceal the truth of this exploitation from our subjects. That some subjects accept this exploitation and others even revel in it does not alter the fact that documentary filmmaking poses very real ethical and moral questions which must be dealt with carefully and compassionately.

In retrospect it is clear that Pat would have been angry with any comment which implied less than total approval of the way she, her husband, and her children conducted their lives. Understandably, she was happiest with those reviews and feature stories which accepted her violent protestations of betrayal and manipulation as the gospel truth and went on to denigrate the series as a malicious put-down of the essential nobility and sanctity of the American family and definitive proof of the docility and viciousness of Craig Gilbert, the filmmaker.

This was the beginning but not the end of my disillusionment with American journalism. Faced with a difficult, complicated story that had great bearing on a number of important issues—not the least of which was television's ability or inability, willingness or unwillingness to deal with certain kinds of reality—reporters chose to take the easier and more salable road of sensationalism. And the great majority of them, deeply dedicated to fairness and objectivity, never even bothered to pick up the phone to get my side of the story. As an example of this kind of journalism I quote from an interview with Pat Loud by Kay Gardella in the New York Daily News of February 20, 1973, as follows:
"If Craig Gilbert gets an Emmy for the American Family Series," said a disturbed Pat in a call yesterday, "then I guess we get the brass garage can. I feel like Joan of Arc on a jackass riding backwards!..." Pat, the 45-year-old divorced mother of the Loud family of Santa Barbara, feels betrayed by the series' producer and WNET and she's not sure how to react or what to do about it. ... "I was assured by Craig that everything would be handled with great delicacy, taste and sensitivity. Instead it has been handled with enormous sensationalism and cruelty. ... I don't understand why WNET and Gilbert permitted the printing of Fredelle Maynard's article in the station magazine when they promised there would be no editorial comment on the series. ..." I don't know how scientific such a series can be. Anyway the people making it aren't scientists, although Gilbert is claiming now to be an instant anthropologist. Pat has been doing television appearances and will be seen with members of her family on tonight's Dick Cavett show. If she resents exploitation and editorial comment, why, we asked her, is she going on the talk show? "I want people to see us as we are on a program that won't be edited or shaped to a concept. We've had everything said about us and have been treated with such cruelty that I think it's time we stood up and defended ourselves."

I am tempted even now, 8 years after this appeared in print, to offer a rebuttal, point by point. But I think it would be a waste of time; I have already explained the state of mind Pat was in when she gave the interview. For those interested in trivia, however, I should point out that I did not get an Emmy for An American Family; I was not nominated for one, nor was the series, nor was any individual who worked on it. During the award ceremony, the series was dismissed with a rather snide joke in an exchange between Hober MacNeil of PBS and Walter Cronkite.

A couple of weeks before An American Family went on the air, a few of us who had been involved with the series for 2 years were sitting around the production office talking about nothing in particular. At one point someone asked, "What do you think the critics are going to say about the series?" I won't pretend the question had not occurred to me as the air date drew closer, but there were many other things to worry about and I had never given it much serious thought. Now, without even thinking, I said, "I really don't see how anyone can review the series without reviewing his own life." I cringe as I write this because it sounds pompous and arrogant and not a little bit sanctimonious. But what I meant was this: We had filmed the Lounges for 7 months and had put together a 12-part series showing what their lives had been like during that period. We had done this as honestly as possible. We (and I don't mean the editorial we—I mean everyone who worked on the series) had all been keenly aware that we had a responsibility not to play fast and loose with the trust the family had placed in us. The fact that the family had approved of each and every episode was proof enough for us that we had lived up to their trust.

Those of us who had worked on An American Family were not new to the documentary form. We had no illusions that we had put together a complete record of the family's life during the shooting period, nor did we kid ourselves that what was up there on the screen was the total truth of who the members of the family were and why they felt and behaved the way they did.

Within the limits of the documentary form and the time and money allotted to us we had tried to give some indication of the characters of the various members of the family. We had tried to show how the members of the family related to each other and how, singly and together, they dealt with some of the daily events of their lives.

We knew that to some extent the family had been affected by the presence of the camera despite our best efforts to minimize this effect; we admitted this in a statement that appeared at the beginning of episode 1.

Finally, we knew that An American Family was firmly rooted in a well-defined tradition of documentary filmmaking which had existed in the United States since the late 1950s and early 1960s. In his book Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film, Erik Barnouw characterized this tradition, in part, by commenting:

the special glories of the genre were its unpredictability and its ambiguity, qualities that scarcely made for comfortable relations with sponsors.9

Barnouw further states:

One of the problems hanging over observer-documentarians was the extent to which the presence of the camera influenced events. Some practitioners—Lesleop, Malle—worried about this. Others—Maysles, Wiseman—tended to minimize it. Some filmmakers, notably Jean Rouch, held still another view. Rouch maintained that the presence of the camera made people act in ways truer to their nature than might otherwise be the case. Thus he acknowledged the impact of the camera but, instead of considering it a liability, looked on it as a valuable catalytic agent, a revealer, of inner truth.

Because of the relatively long and much-written-about history of this kind of filmmaking technique and its general acceptance by the profession and the public, it didn't seem to me the critics would consider it worth more than a passing mention. The problems we had faced in the making of An American Family were the same problems that had been faced for the
past 20 years by every filmmaker who made a cinéma vérité or direct cinema film. By 1973 there was nothing startlingly innovative about the technique. It was employed wholly or in part in most documentaries appearing on television and had been for some time. Except for the length of time spent with the subjects and the creation of a series rather than a single program, we had done nothing new.

Since An American Family had not been directed, at least not in the usual sense, direction was an aspect of the series which the critics could not evaluate. And they couldn't praise or find fault with the acting or screenwriting since neither of these disciplines was involved in the series.

For all these reasons I felt, naively, that the critics would have no choice but to deal with the material that was up there on the screen, and that in doing so could not avoid dealing with their own lives. If they found anything in the series that reminded them of their own childhoods, their own relationships with men or women, their own marriages—if, in short, they found any similarities between themselves and the Lounds—then, I thought, they would like the series or at the very least treat it with respect. If, on the other hand, they could find nothing to identify with—if nothing on the screen evoked echoes or resonances in their own circumstances—then, I was afraid, they would not like the series and dismiss it as a commendable but unsuccessful effort.

I couldn't have been more wrong. Kay Gardella’s mindless and exploitative acceptance of Pat Loud's understandable and inevitable anger was the most obvious example of the use of sensationalism as a way to invalidate the content of the series.

Other journalists, though appearing to be more thoughtful than Ms. Gardella, discovered equally irrelevant reasons for avoiding any serious discussion of what they had seen on their television screens.

Now and then: Some critics stung the Lounds by identifying their central problem as an inability to communicate with each other. In at least one sense, however, they were perhaps too good at communicating. Their impromptu remarks in the film often seem improbably articulate, as though they had been scripted ahead of time.

National Observer: An American Family is a monument to Heisenberg’s Principle of Indeterminacy—that the mere fact of observation has an influence on the observed. There is no pure data gathered by the motion-picture camera, and it is a slick deceit to pretend otherwise.
The Nation: An American Family was a bad idea. It is not art, because art does not use people, but rather celebrates them; and it is not fact because man, for all his compulsive display, is essentially as secretive as the toddler crab.

Commonweal: So, on the Cavett show for example, they [the Louads] try to fill in the gaps and reveal what the film ignored. . . . Craig Gilbert the producer is there. He is now an essential part of the drama. Not only has the New York Times linked him with Pat, but now the whole family angrily wants to know why he took out one sequence and left in another. He stutters and stumbles. The audience is getting a glimpse of this character who has been so much a part of the whole process.

New Republic: . . . what we have in the end is a long way from the thing-in-itself. Which means, inevitably, that the series on one level has to be judged as a work of art or artifice, and there it fails rather badly. Art enhances life. This replaces it. And something of the preciousness inherent in all experiment clings stickily to these films, partially barring sympathetic entry. It's expressed in the glib satisfaction the producer feels in the series (which the Louds, incidentally, largely hate). Craig Gilbert has patted the family in a condescending way, calling them "incredibly human" (maybe he was expecting mandrills?).

I do not mean to imply that no one had anything nice to say about An American Family. For example:

Time: An American Family is extraordinarily interesting to watch.

Newsweek (Shana Alexander): Their [the Louads] candy-box ideal of 'family' is something all Americans to some degree share. Why do we sacrifice so much on this altar? Why do we exhaust and consume ourselves in the struggle to create and maintain the nest? Partly we do it for the children, believing that in this way we can pass along the finest part of ourselves. But partly we do it for us, to prove to ourselves that we have worth, that we are good. . . . And so the silence of the Louads is also a scream, a scream that people matter, that they matter and we matter. I think it is a scream whose echoes will shake up all America.

Esquire (Merle Miller). I felt that the Louads emerged as very human and that the series is one of the most remarkable achievements ever. I think all kinds of important things will come out of this new way of looking at ourselves, and when the series is repeated, as surely it will be, we may even be able to set our personal discomfort aside and learn something from it.

New York Times, March 4, 1973 (John O'Connor): Whatever its faults An American Family is posing serious questions. About values. About relationships. About institutions. About a constantly consuming society. About accelerating treadmills of meaningless status. About avoiding, at any cost, problems. . . . Those questions, in turn, are now being avoided as the massive publicity entertainment mills devour the Louads. If the series and the reaction to it have been painful for the family, let's reduce it to a joke!

The most difficult criticism for me to understand consisted of articles which took the position that the Louads were some strange mutation of human animal, certainly not American and very possibly not of this earth. An overwhelming majority of the critics and columnists chose to admit no kinship whatsoever with the Louads. As a matter of fact, they took quite the opposite view. When they wrote about the members of the family, they described them as strange creatures who bore little if any resemblance to any human beings the critics had ever known. It was strange to read the daily outpourings of these writers, in which the Louads were described as "foolish," "pathetic," "uncommunicative," "spoiled," "superficial," "stupid," "insensitive," "unaware," and embodying a long list of other qualities, none of which could possibly be attributed to the families of the critics or to any family, in fact, residing in the United States. In short, the Louads and the series about them could be dismissed as having no bearing whatsoever on any aspect of life in the good old U.S.A.

On the other hand, letters by the hundreds were being sent to the series production office by viewers describing the Louads as "courageous," "likeable," "sympathetic," "representative," and "recognizable" and their problems as "painful but true," "the way it is in my family," and "similar to the way it is with our friends and the people we know."

It was strange, to say the least—the same series provoking such widely divergent, indeed diametrically opposed, opinions. In honesty I had trouble seeing the Louads as anything but a normal upper-middle-class family; during all the months of shooting and editing there were moments of intense déjà vu when I had the eerie feeling that what I was seeing or hearing in Santa Barbara I had seen or heard many years before when I was growing up in Woodmere, Long Island.

By no stretch of the imagination, however, do I mean to imply that there were no legitimate grounds for a critic to dislike An American Family. Some considered it boring; others found it difficult to listen to because of inferior sound. There were those who considered the series superficial and pretentious and those who felt that, though the series conveyed a
good idea of what the Lounds were doing, it didn’t
convey very much at all about what they were think-
ing.
Although I did not agree with these opinions I
understood, at least during my calmer moments, how
they could be held. What I couldn’t understand was
what appeared to me to be an unreasonable hostility
toward the Lounds and an need, almost an obsession,
to deny their membership in the human race. Cou-
piled with this was an equally strong need to ignore
what was on the screen in favor of the filmmaking
methods involved. If any or all of these methods
could be proved invalid or sleasy, the critics seemed
to be saying, then the series itself could be disquali-
fied from any serious consideration.
Toward this end, they concentrated on five main
points:

1 The presence of lights, cameras, and microphones,
etc., influenced the Lounds to such an extent that their
behavior on the screen had no relation to the way
they would have behaved under normal conditions. I
will add only the following to what I have already said.
Even if people can change their behavior or their life
style or their way of relating to people for a week or
two weeks or perhaps a month, they cannot keep this
up for 7 months. Sooner or later, they will have to re-
vert to living their lives the way they have always lived
them. This is one of the reasons I insisted on such a
long shooting period.

2 Without manipulation the Lounds would not have per-
mitted the filming of such a revealing portrait of their
family life. A corollary of this charge was that many of
the scenes would not have happened without being
staged. I have already said quite enough about these
charges. I would add only this: there is more manipu-
lation and staging in one 20-minute segment of 60
Minutes than there is in all 12 hours of An American
Family.

3 The invasion of the privacy of the Loud household
was unethical, immoral, and outside the limits of ac-
ceptable documentary filmmaking technique. When,
every night on every local news show in the country,a
reporter shoves a microphone in the face of a
 grieving mother and asks how she feels about her re-
cently killed child, I suggest it is about time to rede-
fine “invasion of privacy.”

4 The editing process by which some 300 hours of film
were cut down to 12 is proof positive that the series
was dishonest or at the very least a highly prejudiced
account of their lives. All television critics should be
required to take a crash course in documentary film-
making. One of the things they would learn is that the
cinéma vérité or direct cinema technique is a very
wasteful one. Since nothing is scripted and since
there is a commitment not to manipulate or stage, a
great deal of useless footage is shot. The ratio of film
shot to film used on An American Family was 25 to
1—a normal ratio for this kind of shooting. Unlike
most of us, television critics seem to be ignorant

(left to right) Ken Werner,
Pat Cook, and David
Hanser.
of the fact that most of life is dull, boring, and uneventful.

5 Heisenberg’s Principle of Indeterminacy—that the mere fact of observation has an influence on the observed—undermines the validity of the entire series. This is sheer nonsense. But let’s for a moment suppose it’s true. Then serious doubts would have to be entertained not only about An American Family but about all documentarics.

As a matter of fact, the same thing can be said about the other points on which the critics harped. If, indeed they applied to An American Family, which they most certainly don’t, then they also apply, like the Holoenberg principle, to every other documentary which has ever been made.

It seems to me that the critics’ preoccupation with these points is an excuse for not dealing seriously (favorably or unfavorably) with the real content of the series, a tacit admission that there was something about it they didn’t want to confront, something about their own lives they didn’t want to face up to. I know that sounds self-serving, but after 6 years it is the conclusion I have come to.

About 6 months ago I was asked to participate in a series of discussions about the documentary and television. First there was a screening of episode 2, and then there was a question-and-answer period lasting almost 2 hours. A week or so later I received a letter from a woman who had been in the audience that night. I did not meet her then nor do I know whether she asked any of the questions which I tried to answer. Her letter says in part:

I went back to a different college library this time and re-read some of those 1973 articles.... In those articles I picked up a peculiar note of hostility, the same feeling I picked up at the Walnut [Street] Theatre [in Philadelphia where the discussion was held] last month. What people were saying was "It’s your fault I’m in pain." And relatively trite issues, "It’s not a scientific sample," etc., are offered as evidence of the pain. Clearly nobody is asking why they were so bothered.

It seems to me what the woman is saying, and what I have finally come to believe, is that an awful lot of time and energy were spent trying to find scientific or moral or technical reasons for invalidating An American Family, for doubting its integrity, for questioning its conclusions. In short, there was a great deal of effort to avoid having to deal with the content of the series, and when all else failed, the last resort was to reduce it to a joke.

I said earlier that the only innovative aspect of An American Family was the length of time spent with the Louds. However, there is something else about the series—perhaps the most important thing—which sets it apart from most of the documentaries being made today. And that is its subject matter.

Craig Gilbert and Pat Loud (writing Pat’s narration about her mother and father and her childhood).
Because of considerations of time and money most cinéma vérité filmmakers like to hedge their bets by picking subjects which promise, ahead of time, excitement and dramatic conflict. *Primary,* in which two men battle for the presidential nomination; *Happy Mother’s Day,* in which a family fights for its dignity and survival against the onslaught of commercial exploitation; and *Salesman,* in which gullible believers are hustled into purchasing Bibles, are but a few examples of subject matter that guaranteed interesting films before shooting began.

Another way in which the cinéma vérité filmmaker traditionally hedges his bet is to choose as his subject a celebrity involved in a glamorous occupation. In this way, even if nothing happens in the time allotted for the shooting of the film, the inherent interest in watching the celebrity perform the routine functions of everyday life will be enough to hold the attention of most audiences.  

There is nothing wrong with this kind of filmmaking. Indeed for almost 20 years I made films in exactly the same way, carefully picking subjects which had obvious interest and built-in drama. Some succeeded and some didn’t. But whether they succeeded, whether they communicated to the viewer what I hoped they would communicate, their subject matter was foreign, to a greater or lesser degree, to the experience of the people who viewed them. I am proud of *Margaret Mead’s New Guinea Journal,* which was a film about how people change and a portrait of a great and fascinating woman, but I don’t think too many people who watched it were able to see similarities between their problems and the problems of the people in the tiny little New Guinea village of Peri. I am also proud of *The Triumph of Christy Brown,* a film about the necessity of establishing some sort of human contact and communication no matter how isolated and imprisoned we are in the cage of our own emotional fears and physical intimacies. But I have a sneaking suspicion that comparatively few viewers saw this film as anything more than a portrait of an Irish novelist with cerebral palsy who taught himself to use a typewriter with his big toe. A film about courage, yes; an inspiring film, yes; but not a film, I am afraid, perceived by millions of Americans as being relevant to their own daily lives.

But *An American Family* was something different; it was based on the belief that there is considerable drama in the daily lives of ordinary citizens. The citizens themselves may be unaware of this, as the Lounds were, but it is there just the same, waiting to be captured by the peculiar alchemy of the camera in the hands of anyone with the ability to see and the patience to wait.

Had Jim Day or Curt Davis asked me what I expected to find by filming the Lounds for 7 months I would not have been able to answer with any degree of certainty. But they didn’t ask that question because they shared with me a general vision of what life is about and a specific vision about the quality of life in the United States in 1971. They were as convinced as I that if we could afford to spend the money and the time—time to let things happen—something fascinating would be revealed. None of us had the slightest idea what the something would be, but we gambled based on what we knew of our own lives and what we sensed about the life of the country—that whatever it was it would say something important and revealing about all of us.

Many critics dismissed the events in *An American Family* as “lucky breaks.” In their view it was “lucky” that Pat asked Bill for a divorce; it was “lucky” that Lance was a homosexual; and it was “lucky” that Delilah was experiencing the joys and sorrows of first love. The implication was that if none of these things had happened, particularly the divorce, there would have been no series.

My answer is that television critics, like most journalists, wear blinders which limit their perceptions and keep them from any true understanding or identification with the people they write for and about. They tend to see themselves as slightly apart from the rest of us and better able to cope with, if not entirely immune to, the passions, fears, hopes, and disappointments that motivate their readers and the subjects of their articles. By calling Bill and Pat’s divorce, Lance’s homosexuality, and Delilah’s romance “lucky,” they not only demean those individuals, they miss completely the point of the vision behind the series. That vision was that something would happen. If it hadn’t been a divorce, it would have been something else. It might have been a serious illness or the loss of a job or a birth—or all three. Whatever happened would have revealed, within the context of the Lounds’ daily life, as much about how men and women feel about each other as those events which actually did occur.

I feel strongly that the television documentary, if it is to have any future, must go in this direction. It must be in a series form—repetition and involvement with characters is what holds viewers—and it must be concerned with the events in the daily lives of ordinary citizens.

In a proposal I wrote for another project 3 years after *An American Family* I tried to explain one of the reasons why I feel this way:

A documentary series that deals with how we Americans live our lives—how we relate to each other, how we earn our livings, what we think of our institutions, our government, the way we deal with our hopes, our fears, our disappointments—has a very special ability to break through the aching sense of being alone that most of us feel even though we are surrounded by friends, neighbors, relatives and hundreds of fellow citizens.
The cumulative effect of the events of the past thirty years, the death of the Dream, and the resulting sense of hopelessness, have caused us to draw into ourselves, to feel threatened by and alienated from other human beings. There is an ever-increasing sense that we can depend on no one and no thing, a conviction that it is every man for himself.

A documentary series, like the one I am proposing, can help alleviate this sense of being alone, can convey to millions of viewers an awareness that, to a remarkable degree, the great majority of us share the same hopes, the same fears, the same doubts, the same frustrations, the same insecurities. It can show us, in fact, that we are anything but alone. 12

Despite these high-sounding words about what I think should be the future course of the television documentary, I honestly don't feel that the documentary in any form has very much of a future at all. There are numerous reasons for this; I will mention just a few.

Every year the race for ratings and the advertisers' dollar becomes more intense than the year before. In this competitive climate, air time is perceived as being much too valuable to waste on documentaries which traditionally rank near the bottom of the Nielsen listings. If, under these conditions, there are fewer and fewer normal 1-hour documentaries on the air, it would be approaching insanity to expect that a documentary series could even be considered.

In a futile effort to improve the low ratings and prove to the powers that be that their films deserve air time, the makers of television documentaries and the executives who employ them are taking a position diametrically opposed to the one I feel would work. Instead of making films about ordinary people, they are making films about people who are wretchedly poor, terminally ill, or violently rebellious. They are making films about the disenfranchised, the bewildered, and the angry in such a way as to emphasize the symptoms of the problem and not the causes. They ask us to look at these horrors, but they neglect to give us any insight into how these horrors came about. I insist that it is possible to make films which are not specifically about these people but which would explore the reasons for their plight in much more interesting, understandable, and meaningful ways. Poverty, sickness, and violence are not the special preserve of the poor, the uneducated, and minorities. You and I are touched by these conditions every day; the potential for them exists in every one of us, and so does the understanding required to deal with them in our own lives and in society.

It does not take great genius to make films which will say these things, but it does take a certain amount of courage and understanding to allow them to be made and shown on the air.
Appendix 1

"An American Family" Credits

Conceived and produced by Craig Gilbert
Filmmakers:
  Alan Raymond, camera
  Susan Raymond, sound
Coordinating Producer: Jacqueline Donnet
Associate Producer: Susie Lester
Film Editors: David Hanser, Pat Cooke, Ken Werner, Eleanor Hamerow
Additional Photography: Joan Churchill
Additional Sound: Peter Plafian
Super 8 Footage
Produced and filmed by John Terry
Sound—Al Mecklinberg
Assistant Cameramen: Tom Goodwin, Peter Smokler, Mike Levine
Assistant Film Editors: Janet Lauretanio, Joanna Alexander, Bob Alvarez, Ernie Davidson
Sound Editor: Thomas Halpin
Assistant Sound Editor: Pete Begley
Editing Assistants: Tikki Goldberg, Dan Merrill, Joe Lovett, Sue Steinbera
Editing Apprentices: Jesse Maple, Hannah Wajshonig, Harvey Rosenstock
Production Managers: Kathleen Walsh, Michael Podel, Hai Hufkott
Assistant Production Manager: Janet Freeman
Location Unit Managers: David Burke, Bernard Katz, Peter Scarlet
Production Assistants: Kristin Glover, David Henry
Research: Will MacDonald
"Vain Victory" Sequence:
  Adam Giffard—camera
  James Ricky—assistant
  Jack Hiedel—gaffer
  Mark Dichter—sound
Series Title Film: Elinor Bunin
Title Music Supervision: John Adams
Production Secretary: Alice Casey
Engineering Supervisor: Ed Raingold
Senior Video Engineer: Art Emerson
Sound Mixer: Richard Vorisek
Sound Mixes (Episode 17): Lee Dichter
Funding Provided by:
The Fund Foundation
Corporation for Public Broadcasting
Executive Producer: Curtis W. Davis

Appendix 2

The Credits: A Few Notes

More than 50 people were involved in transforming An American Family from an idea into a series of 12-hour-long films. For a variety of reasons (including time and space) their names have never appeared before in one coherent list. This has always bothered me. This is a chance to set the record straight—a chance to correct an omission that has nagged at my conscience for the past 8 years.

Credits, while serving the purpose of designating a specific function, do not always tell the whole story of a person's contribution to a project. The credits for An American Family contain several such examples.

Jacqueline Donnet is listed as Coordinating Producer, a title which, although not unknown to films, is not all that common. What it meant on An American Family was that while the rest of us were filming in various parts of the country and Europe, Jackie ran the series production office at NET headquarters in New York. One of her most important jobs was keeping close tabs on the budget. In this capacity she had to answer, on almost a daily basis, a never-ending series of questions from NET executives about why we were spending certain sums of money. She did this with good humor, accuracy, and an understanding gained from long experience in the business. In doing so, she took the heat and allowed those of us in the field to devote our full energies to filming the daily life of the Lounds. Jackie also paid the bills, saw to it that salary checks were for the right amount and mailed out on time, and on one occasion acted as the producer of the "Vain Victory" sequence which Adam Giffard and his crew shot at the La Mama theater in New York. In addition, Jackie was intimately involved in the editing process, and her spontaneous reactions helped to focus the mind to what was, for her, fresh footage guaranteed that the rest of us did not lose sight of the humanity of the Lounds and the universality of their joys and sorrows.

Four film editors are listed in the credits, but David Hanser was the only one who was around for the entire year that it took to put the twelve episodes that make up An American Family together. He was the only one who never walked out on the story that had been told. The others had left before the series was complete. But, in all honesty, I had never been totally comfortable with the customs. To say that an unsung film about how people live their lives—whether those people be rock stars, patients at an emergency ward, or New Guinea natives—is directed in the generally accepted sense of the word always struck me as somewhat misleading. Not misleading enough to prevent me from taking the credit, but misleading nevertheless. To be sure, in any kind of film there has to be a single vision that prevails, and from time to time I had asked myself what the possessor of a cinéma vérité vision should be called. Needless to say, I had never come up with a satisfactory answer.
And the experience of making *An American Family* did not provide me with one. Yes, I had had the vision for the series; yes, I had picked the family; yes, I had modeled the large, general scenarios about what to film and what not to film; yes, I had given instructions to the editors and approved their final versions of each episode—but I had not directed the series in the conventional sense of that word. And I was afraid that television viewers would be hopelessly confused by seeing “directed by” in the credits for a series which claimed to be a recording of real life as it actually happened.

Two or three months before *An American Family* was to go on the air, I sat down with Jackie Donnell to make up the credit list. As we were in the process of doing this, Alan Raymond appeared in the office and objected strenuously to being designated “cinematographer.” Since that was exactly the function he had filled on the series, I was somewhat perplexed. Surely he would rather have “cinematographer” than “photographed by” or “filmed by.” Yes, that was true, I said, but none of these was satisfactory. Well then, what did he want? What he wanted, it turned out, was “filmmakers” for himself and Susan. We discussed the matter for some time and finally I gave in. This argument with Alan came after a long and difficult 2 years, made longer and more difficult by the many nasty confrontations with him. At the time of this particular disagreement I was battling with the executives of Channel 13 on several fronts, and I was simply too exhausted to engage in a long, drawn-out war of attrition with Alan Raymond.

In giving him the credit he asked for—but which he did not deserve—I made a mistake which will plague me for as long as *An American Family* lives in the public consciousness. By not taking a “directed by” credit, by giving Alan and Susan Raymond credit as filmmakers, and by retracting from the controversy generated by the series, I created a situation in which a man who had held a camera and a woman who had held a microphone could, by capitalizing on public misunderstanding and journalistic sloppiness, slowly but surely begin to take credit for being responsible for *An American Family*. They never actually came out and said as much. They simply talked in such a way as to lead whoever was interviewing them into naturally assuming that *An American Family* was their vision, their creation, their “baby.”

Nothing could be further from the truth. The Raymonds had absolutely nothing to do with conceiving the series, nor were they involved in choosing the family. They did not participate in producing the series, directing the series (in the sense I have discussed above), or editing the series. In short, they were hired as a camera and sound team, and that is the function they performed.

**Notes**

1. In an article entitled “The Lourdes of Santa Barbara,” in the March 23, 1973, issue of *Commonweal* magazine, Michael Murray wrote, “The publicity release does come off as a technique [used in *An American Family*] as a television version of Oscar Lewis’ painstaking researches into Mexican life.” Oscar Lewis is the famed anthropologist who used hundreds of hours of audio tape interviews as the basis for his classic *The Children of Sanchez*. I have no idea who dreamed up the Oscar Lewis reference for the WNET/13 publicity release; one thing I am sure of, it did not come from me. In general, the publicity for *An American Family* was inaccurate, misleading, and highly exploitive.

2. There were two departments at NET: the Cultural Affairs Department, headed by Curt Davis, which promoted shows having to do with the arts, history, literature, music, etc.; and the Public Affairs Department, headed by Don Dixon, which produced shows on politics, social issues, and topical news subjects. Priorities for Change was to have been produced by the Public Affairs Department, which several months earlier had been responsible for an NET Journal called *Banks and the Poor* and an installment of *The Great Ameri-

3. In an article entitled “Spy Drama,” an unsigned writer in the March 5, 1973, issue of *The Nation* had this to say: “Further, anthropologists have long known that even the most factful and unobtrusive intervention in the life of a social microcosm significantly changes the phenomena under observation; so that if one wished to generalize from the behaviour of the peculiarly uncritical Louda, it would be necessary to ask first how natural was the presence of Gilbert, his中心城区, lights, reflections, and yards of black table-cloth sinuously through the living quarters?”

4. For those whose ideas of how a cinema verité team works have been formed by movies and television, it should be noted that the new 16-mm technology has eliminated the old slate/clapsticks method of identifying the shot and providing a sync mark for the editor. To start shooting, a sound person simply flashes a light which is recorded as a beep when the tape is rolling; the cameraperson photographs this light and continues shooting. All the editor has to do is line up the beep on the sound tape with the light on the film and he is “in sync.” This effectively eliminates the necessity of an assistant’s standing up in front of the camera with a small blackboard and announcing “*An American Family*, scene 10, take 1” and then clapping the sticks; it can be done so unobtrusively that it is sometimes hard to tell when shooting is actually taking place.

5. In a memo dated June 20, 1972, to a WNET/13 executive, which accompanied our list of episodes I wrote, “...this does not mean, by any stretch of the imagination, that this is the correct structure or the proper breakdown of the material. All it represents is our best guess as to how to solve the problem. I know that you are aware of this, but I am still reacting to the knowledge that—for a long time around here—guises tended, in a remarkably short time, to be regarded as positive statements of opinion.... The only positive statements I or anyone else will be able to make about the structure will come out of working with the material in the cutting room.”

6. In an article which appeared in the *New York Times* on January 22, 1973, John O’Connor, the television critic, succinctly explained the background and nature of the problem: “*An American Family* began as a project of NET: Curtis W. Davis, no longer with public television, receives credit as executive producer. Last year, however, the New York operation was given a new executive regime headed by John Jay Iselin, now acting president of WNET/13, and Robert Kotowitz, senior executive editor. "As the programming focus switched from national to local levels, the nationally oriented NET was absorbed into WNET. Mr. Iselin and Mr. Kotowitz were then faced with a decision on what to do about the 300 hours of material already filmed but not yet edited for *An American Family*. At one point it was thought 8 hours might be enough. Mr. Gilbert objected strongly and the 12-hour format was accepted by all parties. Now Mr. Gilbert says that, as the editing evolved, it became apparent that 12 hours would be inadequate for his creative purposes. Under the old NET regime, in which the film maker frequently prevailed, the producer may have had his way. But the current WNET management, acutely more concerned about costs and limited funds, insists it is not about to be swayed. "The result is a cavalier illustration of the broadcaster versus the film maker, the editor versus the creator."
7 The first half of episode 1 covered New Year's Eve at the Louds' house at 35 Woodale Lane. The kids are having a party and at one point Lance calls from New York to wish his brothers and sister Happy New Year. We hear his voice but don't see him. We briefly see Bill, who has been living in a motel for 3 months. Halfway through episode 1 (as the kids and their guest are singing "Auld Lang Syne" to Pat) there is a slow dissolve to the entire family having breakfast 7 months earlier. The narration says, "Our story begins on a bright spring day in late May."

From that point on we planned to move chronologically from the end of May to New Year's Eve again. The New Year's Eve footage in the final episode would have been some of the same that was used in episode 1. But there would have been no new footage of how Lance spent his New Year's Eve in New York, including the circumstances under which he made the call to his family. And although there was a little footage in episode 1 of how Bill was spending his New Year's Eve, there would have been a lot more in the final episode, including a phone call which he received from Lance while having dinner at the home of the boutique manager.

8 As an example, in one restaurant scene Bill thought he was shown drinking too much so we eliminated a round of drinks. A little bit later in the same scene a male friend of Bill and Pat's in Santa Barbara walked by with a woman who was not his wife. Bill made some comment like "There goes John Doe with Jane Smith." He asked us to eliminate the name of the woman, and of course we did. Those changes were other changes that were asked for, but I can't remember them. And whatever they were, they were very very minor.

9 It might be of interest to point out here that although An American Family was entirely financed by Public Television funds, an effort was made to recoup some of this money from corporate underwriting. The series was submitted for this purpose to some of the largest corporations in the country. None of them, of course, wanted to have anything to do with it. The reaction of the representative from the Kraft Food Co. is indicative of the general feeling. He said, "I think the series is, perhaps, the most important thing that has happened in television in the past twenty-five years. But, having said that, I must also tell you that my company wouldn't touch the project with a ten-foot pole."

10 Not long after this series began appearing on the air, I received a telephone call from the publicity office at WNET. It seems John O'Connor had called to check out the rumor that I had had an affair with Pat Loud. It was suggested I call him right away. I did and we got together for lunch. I told him that I had definitely not had an affair with Pat Loud, that I had never even considered it, and that I was sure she never had either.

11 There were many such films in the early days of cinéma vérité: Donn Pemmbaker's Don't Look Back (1966), a profile of singer and songwriter Bob Dylan, and Monterey Pop (1968) about the jazz festival in that city; and the Mayales' Showman (1962), featuring movie producer Joseph E. Levine, What's Happening! The Beatles in the USA (1964), Meet Marlo Brando (1965), and Gimme Shelter (1970), following the Rolling Stones on tour. The 1981 Oscar for Best Documentary was From Mao to Mozart, a film record of Isaac Stern's trip to China.

12 The following quote is from a letter written by an executive at one of the networks in response to the proposal from which I have quoted above: "I'm not quite sure how to put my finger on the problem. I think perhaps it is that you and I have been discussing ideas that are not very 'journalistic,' although perfectly respectable as documentary subjects and treatments. We have really been discussing a way of pushing back the frontiers of normal news documentaries and exploring more intimately ordinary human life and finding there the drama that others seek in news activities—reporting big events, disasters or wars. This I warmly welcome as an approach. However, I think in order to sell such a notion both to [name of network] and to the American public we need to come up either with a new idea so startling that it cannot be resisted or with a proposal that is not too extravagant in terms of money and time. A lot of the work you and I have been discussing would necessarily be highly experimental in that we would have to be ready to abort if we did not get results. I write all this with some diffidence, because I greatly enjoyed your series on the family [he screened two episodes—1 and 9—and told me he looked at nine before he looked at one, but he didn't think it made much difference] and would dearly like to find other applications of the same technique. In short, I would be most happy to continue our dialogue (and this I would not say if I did not sincerely mean it) but I would not raise your hopes too high and prevent you from pursuing discussions elsewhere, because I'm not too sure that [name of network] is quite ready yet for the approach that you and I have been talking about."

The project we had been discussing was a series which, through the lives of eight or ten or twelve people living in a medium-sized midwestern city, would tell the story of what has happened to this country between the end of World War II and the present time.