

BAIRD TELEVISION



Dr. Alfred Sommer's Autobiographical Notes

Dr. Alfred ("Al") Sommer was one of the leading contributors to the development of modern television – in particular the production of efficient photoelectric surface coatings for television camera tubes. Technically this was a combination of fundamental chemistry and sheer trial-and-error, and it very well illustrates Thomas Edison's comment that successful research is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration.

Alfred Sommer was born into a middle-class family in Bavaria, a few years before World War I. As he rose brilliantly through school and university, Germany fell into turbulent times. Sommer was fortunate to get out of Germany in 1935 and his first employer in the UK was Baird Television Ltd. (BTL). Sommer gives us useful insights on what it was like to work for the Baird company in the 1930s. In 1939 television broadcasting was shut down and most of the staff of Baird Television (including J.L. Baird himself) were let go. However, some sectors of BTL were absorbed into Cinema Television (CinTel) and Dr. Sommer's special skills placed him among the fortunate who kept their jobs.

We do not get much information about John Logie Baird, but we do hear much about Captain A.G.D. West who also stayed on in CinTel, as Technical Director. The most vivid parts of the notes are the extracts from Sommer's diaries of the period 1939-41 which tell of what it was like to live through almost nightly air raids and yet go in every day to his exacting – and absorbing – research. On top of all this, Sommer was under police restriction as an "alien" and the threat of internment hung over him throughout the war. And yet, a happy domestic life went on with Alfred and his new wife Rosemary and they even managed the occasional holiday in the quieter country areas just outside London.

Sommer was always a company man. His outstanding skills were in demand throughout his career and he never had to face the challenge of being an entrepreneur. Having spent most of the war years with Bairds (as CinTel was informally known) he moved to EMI, the great former rival of BTL, at their research department in Hayes, Middlesex. The Sommers had endured years of wartime restrictions and they had started a family. For years after the war, rationing stayed in force in the UK and the standard of living was low. America beckoned in the form of RCA and its magnificent new research lab at Princeton, New Jersey. It was there that Dr. Sommer spent the last 20 years of his salaried career. He was a quiet-spoken individual, well-liked and much respected. A photograph from 1964 shows Sommer receiving an award from RCA head David

Sarnoff. This was at the peak of RCA's wealth and power. Standing at one side of the picture is the bearded figure of Dr. George Brown, RCA's vice-president in charge of research. I remember meeting Dr. Brown in 1976; his memoirs of RCA (published privately as "And Part of Which I Was") make a very good read.

Alfred Sommer passed away in 1994. His old friend Gilbert Tomes (another former Baird employee) and later Dr. Douglas Brown of Strathclyde University, took on the massive job of editing Sommer's memoirs and adding appropriate pictures – not only ones of Sommer himself, but also people in his circle, and well-chosen news pictures of the turbulent events that swirled around him. Alfred Sommer's memoirs are a valuable part of TV history in which technical work is described as well as personal details and the background of world events. He was the typical dedicated technical person with a low-key personality on contrast to the industry's leadership figures who tended to be ruthless prima-donna types. Sometimes the memoirs give us a cameo picture of the rivalries and petty dislikes that can crop up even in the best-run of organizations, as for example the animosities that swirled around Dr. J.D. McGee of EMI.

It is important from the historical point of view that these memoirs should be published and archived.

Malcolm Baird
December 2008

The happy group shown below is attending the Baird Television Ltd. annual dinner, March 1938. In the back row, Alfred and Rosemary Sommer are numbered 12 and 13. Gilbert and Mary Tomes are numbered 11 and 10. Captain West is near the front, number 5. Sir Harry Greer is in the 2nd row, No.3. T.M.C. Lance is No.14. No.15 is probably Jan Forman who went on to do secret work on proximity fuzes during World War II with Pye of Cambridge. After the war he joined Adalia, the electronic consulting company headed by Sir Robert Watson Watt.

John Logie Baird was not at the dinner as he and his wife were on an invited visit to Australia.

This picture is by courtesy of the Alexandra Palace Television Society.

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