Andy Rooney

By Mel Lavine

Special to the Times

In my time at CBS I saw a lot of Andy Rooney around the network but I didn't know him. A nod in the hallway or street, a word in the elevator was about it, except for a chance encounter and the time he took me and a reporter to dinner.

The encounter was just outside the Broadcast Center on 57th Street. I was returning from lunch with a colleague and Andy was leaving the building.

"Say, fellers," he stopped us. "Is your show (Sunday Morning) going to repeat yesterday's

segment by the new culture editor?" He was referring to the review of a new book or movie or TV show (I don't remember which it was) by the intellectual John Leonard, formerly a book critic at the New York Times.

"Repeat?" we asked ourselves. "What's he talking about?" The show never recycled reviews, certainly not so soon after a broadcast; unless in extraordinary circumstances, but we knew of none in this case.

So we shook our heads in bewilderment, and said, "Why are you asking?"

"Well," said Andy in the manner of the national curmudgeon he was, "if you did run it again I might understand what he was talking about."

The second time was in San Francisco when I was editing a piece for Sunday Morning at the CBS News bureau with the correspondent Terry (Terrence) Smith. A disgruntled Andy Rooney walked in. A blizzard back east grounded his New York flight. He couldn't get out until morning. Hungry and tired, and, I suspect, a little lonely, he invited Terry and me to join him for dinner at the trendy, now long gone Washington Square Bar and Grill in North Beach.

I learned in the obits (Andy died last Friday at 92 in New York City “after developing ‘serious complications’ from an unspecified operation,” according to the New York Times), that he avoided autograph-seekers and the attention lit by fame. No doubt, but when we entered the North Beach establishment, people stood up, amazed and excited to find him in their midst, and eager to shake his hand. I’m not sure but he may have even signed an autograph or two.

Andy had come up to San Francisco from Bakersfield that night where he’d attended a convention of ranchers. I remember little more of that night other than his telling us he was paid $20,000 for the talk. In the same breath he said his great friend, Walter Cronkite, had addressed the same group for $40,000. But he wasn’t grumpy about it. Andy knew Walter’s was a bigger name than his, and rightly so.

Mel Lavine was a television producer for many years with NBC News and CBS News in New York. Contact him at his e-mail address: mellavine@aol.com.