

The Line That Moved

September 7, 1927 · San Francisco, California

Philo Farnsworth was twenty-one, three weeks past his birthday, when he pointed a camera tube at a glass slide with a single line drawn on it and turned it on.

He had worked out how to do it in the summer of 1921, just before he turned fifteen, standing in a field in Idaho. A farm boy watching a plow go back and forth, cutting the ground into lines, is not an obvious inventor of television. But that is where the idea came from: an image is just lines, scanned one after another, fast enough that the eye forgets it is being lied to.

On September 7, 1927, in a laboratory at 202 Green Street, the line appeared in another room. No film, no spinning disk, no moving parts. Current, arranged into a picture.

His assistants went quiet. Farnsworth broke the silence himself, according to his wife Pem: *"There you are — electronic television!"*

Seven years later RCA sued him, and his old high school chemistry teacher walked into a courtroom carrying a chalk sketch Farnsworth had shown him in 1922. The sketch won. The boy who got the idea from a plowed field held the patent against the largest radio company in the world.

Television became the thing everybody remembers. The line is the thing that happened.

Checked at the source: Wikipedia, "Philo Farnsworth" — citing Abramson, *The History of Television*; Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*; Lovece (1985). Facts verified September 2026.

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