

Another Network Doubted Kennedy Book's Validity

NBC Halted Documentary on Ex-President

By BILL CARTER

After agreeing to pay more than \$2 million for the rights to make a film based on a book on John F. Kennedy, NBC abruptly ended production on the project last spring because of "serious questions" about the authenticity of documents on which part of the book was based, an NBC executive said yesterday.

ABC subsequently bought the rights to the same book as the basis for a planned documentary, only to disclose this week that it will revise or perhaps shelve the documentary after it decided that some of the documents unearthed by Seymour Hersh, the author of the book, were forgeries.

Thursday night, ABC News took the unusual step of broadcasting a report on how the network found what it called a hoax relating to one series of documents, which purported to prove that Kennedy had agreed to pay off Marilyn Monroe with a trust fund for her mother in order to secure Ms. Monroe's silence about a love affair they had had.

Warren Littlefield, the president of NBC Entertainment and the executive who originally bought the rights for NBC, said that in a phone conversation with Mr. Hersh after NBC's decision to cancel the project last spring he told the author "in our investigation of the documents, serious questions that have been raised that we cannot answer."

Mr. Littlefield also said, "Our attorneys were far more specific with his attorneys about what the difficulties were."

Mr. Hersh, a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter, angrily disputed last night that NBC had given him any reason for pulling out of the film it intended to make on his book, "The Dark Side of Camelot," to be published Nov. 10.

"I have no idea what Warren is talking about," he said. "I'm agog. I couldn't be more numbstruck if you stood me on my head."

Tom Hoberman, a lawyer who represented Mr. Hersh on the NBC deal, said, "I do not recall having any conversation with NBC's lawyers."

Mr. Hersh said he was especially offended by an implication that he had deliberately not told ABC that NBC had serious reservations about his material.

Mr. Hersh accused NBC of spreading "malicious gossip" that he had been less than candid in his dealings with ABC about the documents.

"It's absurd," he said. "Do you think I would put my 35 years of being a reporter at risk by trying to peddle these things after they had been discredited?"

A forensic expert hired as part of Mr. Hersh's \$2.2 million deal with ABC found that the typewriter used to type some of the disputed documents was made after 1970, and thus could not have been used on a docu-

ment dated in 1960.

NBC settled its contract with Mr. Hersh, paying him a kill fee of \$400,000. Along with a start-up payment of \$600,000, Mr. Hersh and his partner, Mark Obenhaus, an independent television news producer, received a total of \$1 million from NBC.

Mr. Hersh quickly sold the project to ABC after NBC dropped out in a new deal for more than \$2 million.

David Westin, the president of ABC News, said ABC had not been given a reason for NBC's cancellation of the project and was unsure whether ABC asked NBC for an explanation. But he said, "I know we didn't know NBC settled the things for a million bucks."

Mr. Hersh said that once he learned the documents about Kennedy and Monroe were likely forgeries, he excised that chapter. But he said the book still contains a wealth of new information about the former President.

Sarah Crichton, the publisher of Little Brown & Company, which is

An author accuses a network of spreading 'malicious gossip.'

preparing the book, said she had complete faith in Mr. Hersh's work: "The book stands just as strongly without that material in it," she said.

Mr. Westin said ABC was continuing its work on a documentary based on other material in Mr. Hersh's book though a final decision had not been made on whether the program will be broadcast.

The new information on the Kennedy-Monroe relationship was "a significant selling point," Mr. Westin said. Much of that material was based on documents Mr. Hersh had obtained from a man named Lex Cusack, who claimed to have found them in the papers of his late father, Lawrence X. Cusack.

The latter had been a New York lawyer who represented the archdiocese of New York.

Mr. Hersh said it was "categorically untrue" that NBC had ever raised questions about his material.

He accused NBC of "trying to discredit me" and suggested that the network's real purpose was to "try to get at ABC."

He continued to challenge Mr. Littlefield's account of their phone conversation. "I can't begin to understand why Warren would say this."

Mr. Littlefield said, "It would be very hard to imagine that he didn't get the message."