What are your earliest memories?

The earliest memory I have is a trip to Atlantic City in 1956. We stayed in a hotel and I remember going up in the elevator. I don’t think I had ever done that before. I also remember looking out the window at the ocean. We walked on the Boardwalk, and in those days they had these booths in the penny arcades (usually near the photo booths) where you could make a short recording, and it would be pressed onto a little record that would be delivered to you at the end. It was essentially a portable recording studio for only a couple of dollars. My mother sat me down in the booth and told me to sing what I assume was my favorite song at the time—Patti Page’s “How Much Is That Doggie in the Window.” I remember that I had the record for many years and would play it on my phonograph. Unfortunately, it was lost somewhere along the line. (It is not beyond the realm of possibility that I grew embarrassed by it and destroyed it.)

That same summer I remember that we had our first air conditioner installed. My mother was pregnant with my brother and she requested what was at the time a luxury. The air conditioner was installed in the kitchen, which was the biggest room in our house and located at the center. By that I mean that every other room in the house was reached by a door off the kitchen. That meant that by setting up fans in each doorway, we could cool the entire house.

Another memory of that year was the purchase of our first television in September. It was a 12-inch portable black and white (of course) TV that was put in my parents’ bedroom. Before this, we used to go upstairs to my grandparents when we wanted to watch television. But mostly I think my mother listened to the radio, which was on in the kitchen all day long. Radio was still the primary method of entertainment in the 1950s, although television was fast eclipsing radio, which was limited to the AM band at the time.

In the morning there was music and news on WNEW. I remember that in the afternoon, my mother listened to Art Linkletter’s House Party on the radio. Interestingly, when we got the television, she would often watch the same show on the TV that she had been listening to on the radio. In the 1950s it was common for networks to simulcast shows on the radio and the television. People were making the transition from radio to television and simulcasting created a ready audience for the television version of the show. We made that transition late in 1956.

Once we got the television, I would watch Captain Kangaroo every morning until I started kindergarten in the fall of 1958. I also watched Romper Room. I was not a fan of Howdy Doody or the Mickey Mouse Club, very popular children’s shows of the time. But I was a fan of Disney TV shows about Davy Crockett and Zorro. I had a Davy Crockett coonskin hat that I wore all the time.

Just before my fourth birthday, in March 1957, I remember when my brother was born. My first memory of seeing him was asking my mother why he had this big scab on his belly button. I also remember that my mother was using cloth diapers and we had a stinky diaper hamper that would be picked up by the diaper service, who would clean them and bring back fresh diapers.

My final memory of the first four years of my life was in the fall of 1957 and all the grownups were talking about the launch of the first satellite, Sputnik, by the Soviet Union. I remember it was all over the newspapers and on television. People were worried that the Soviets could use the satellite to attack the United States. It prompted the founding of NASA and the birth of the U.S. space program.