

I Miss That Packard-Bell

By Dennis Knight

Dad ushered us into the era of high technology with the purchase of the first television on our block, a 21 inch Packard-Bell. He seemed particularly taken that it would swivel, to be viewed from the dining room at supper time, and then swing about to point to his easy chair in the living room after dessert.

Of many old things I miss, I include that television set, because its delivery was to me a defining moment of my generation. It came with the same disappointment we find in television today, the utter lack of anything to watch, but in 1952 there actually *was* an utter lack of anything to watch. We could get a signal in Laramie from channel five which was trying to find its way onto the air over in Cheyenne, but for the most part they were still broadcasting a test pattern.

At the age of nine, and as a new aficionado of the industry, I spent hours appreciating the intriguing subplots echoing through *Test Pattern*, confident the writers and engineers were soon to bring it to a full and complete circle. It was history in the making, and I was happy to be part of it.

Soon came community antenna television, or CATV, the forerunner of cable, bringing us four glorious channels of Denver broadcast television captured and piped all over town from a five-hundred foot tower at the city limits. Stunning scenes and human images now appeared in our home, if slightly distorted and in a myriad of muddy grays.

We spent family evenings glued to Ted Mack's Original Amateur Hour, Ed Sullivan, Bishop Sheen, Arthur and Kathryn Murray gliding through a hazy ballroom, Speedy Alka-Seltzer, a corny Guy Lombardo, the gorgeous Liberace, and way too much of Gorgeous George, a professional wrestler with curly locks and a bad script. Saturday afternoons brought us Captain Video and his Video Rangers, Sky King and his lovely niece, Penny, and plenty of low budget cartoons.

My fascination with the Packard-Bell was matched by Dad's frustration. He called the repairman time and again, and by various names, to stop the screen from rolling vertically and/or losing its precarious horizontal hold. He soon learned to do it himself and just as ineffectively, even removing knobs to access the secret, delicate adjusting screws behind. He would yank out vacuum tubes and take them to the shop for testing. The battle consumed Dad for a year until he eventually came to accept as inevitable some overall distortion, if the screen rolled and fluttered only for commercials.

Our neighborhood soon caught up with the Knights, and next door they even transformed their new set to a color television by covering the screen with a multi-hued cellophane panel. I wasn't buying that trick. I could laugh at a colorfully striped Arthur Godfrey, but I could not accept Sky King's niece, the lovely Penny, in a green face and blue hair. As it turns out, that would all be quite normal in 2014, but that's another story.