

Remember TV's Golden Years? Those Were the Days

By Irv Sternberg

A remarkable thing happened in American living rooms in the late 1940's and early 1950s. After witnessing and participating in the most horrific war the world had ever known, we looked forward to an enjoyable evening watching our new favorite people entertain and enlighten us in the comfort of our homes. Starting in 1949, those of us lucky enough to own a television set and close enough to access a signal, could feast on the comedy of Uncle Miltie, enjoy Howdy Doody, Amos and Andy, and Jack Benny. Thoughtful news reporting was delivered by Douglas Edwards and John Cameron Swayze. We were mesmerized and enthralled.

Electronic television was first demonstrated on Sept. 7, 1927 in San Francisco. RCA invested \$50 million in TV development. In 1946, only about 6,000 people had a TV set—with a 5x12-inch picture tube. Two years later—with the advent of commercial television—that number began to grow steadily. I recall my own family acquiring one in 1951 because I worked part-time in an appliance store and used my employee discount to buy a set at a wholesale price by picking it up at the manufacturer's location. By now there were about 12 million sets in use.

Within two more years, a period now known as The Golden Years of TV began. Viewers were treated to new programming called "spectaculars." We saw productions such as *Peter Pan* with Mary Martin, and dramatic shows like the *Kraft TV Theatre*, *Studio One*, *Playhouse 90*, *Twelve Angry Men*, and Paddy Chayefsky's *Marty*. And we laughed ourselves silly watching hilarious Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy* and Jackie Gleason in *The Honeymooners*. We followed Dave Garroway and Steve Allen on *The Tonight Show*.

Maybe it was the novelty that made those early shows so popular. Most were performed live and without canned laughter. Even the commercials were live, sometimes creating hilarious moments when the demonstrations failed utterly. Then came *Dallas*, and the entire country stopped whatever it was doing to watch the Ewing family's trials and travails.

Eventually we became bored with conventional network offerings, and eagerly accepted cable TV and its more adult, compelling and current offerings like *The Sopranos*. I find today's TV less entertaining than it was in its pioneer years. Occasionally, there is a fine show like National Geographic's recent series on Albert Einstein's life and, of course, the excellent series of specials produced by Ken Burns. My favorite current series is *Blue Bloods* because I'm fond of Tom Selleck, the cast around him, and the well-told police stories about New York City.

For the most part, however, I find myself viewing too much cable news because it's like watching a reality show that has meaningful consequences. I admit I'm addicted to it, even though it sometimes makes me feel ill. On those days, I turn to my remedy of first resort—professional sports. I can always watch the Rockies. And soon the Broncos.

Thank God!