

Watching Television in the 1950s

By George Evans Taylor, Jr.

Television came to the Malvern, Arkansas area about 1951. Back then most everything on TV, except the movies, was live. Most programs were westerns, singers, games, comedy, wrestling and cartoons. Channel 11 in Pine Bluff was the first area station to go on the air. The first commercial I remember seeing was of a moving company in Pine Bluff. Channel 4 and channel 7 in Little Rock went on the air shortly thereafter. In the early days of TV there just wasn't much to see. The TV stations would go on the air about mid-morning with a feathered Indian Head test pattern so you could adjust your set's gray values and also adjust the picture size. For many months programming began in mid afternoon and ended at 9 or 10 PM. They showed serials so that you would be sure to watch the next day! While TV didn't begin in the Fifties, practically no one had a set before then, there were few shows, and people looked to radio and newspapers for entertainment and news. In the fifties, young people in homes with a television watched TV more hours than they went to school, a trend which has not changed greatly since that time. What was seen on television became accepted as normal.



Perhaps the greatest change in communications worldwide was the advancement of television broadcasting. During the 1950's television became the popular mass media as people brought television into their homes in greater numbers of hours per week than ever before. The effect on print news media and entertainment media was felt in lower attendance at movies and greater reliance on TV news sources for information. News broadcasting changed from newsmen simply reading the news to shows which included video taped pictures of events which had occurred anywhere in the world, and then to more and more live broadcasts of things happening at the time of viewing.

All TV sets would receive only twelve channels, 2 through 13. These were VHF frequencies and are still in use today. Signal converters that enabled you to view the UHF channels became available in the mid to late 50s. These channels are now available in all TV sets.

As the TV "warmed up", adjustments had to be made to the set. All TVs would roll up and down at times, also "pull" horizontally. Everything was in black and white but adjustments were made to obtain various shades of gray. Problems with the old TV sets were tubes getting weak and burning out. Typically each set contained twenty-one tubes. The channel selector knob turned the troublesome electro-mechanical turret tuner to

change the channels. Many times when cars drove by, especially Fords, there were white streaks across the picture.

Antenna masts were bought in ten foot sections, pushed together, and fastened to the edge of the house. Some people used guy wires for extra support of the antenna. Bought antennas were fairly expensive. Some people used two antennas, one pointing toward Pine Bluff and one toward Little Rock. Most just went outside and turned the antenna support pipe to point the antenna to the desired station and best picture. From Malvern most pictures were snowy but viewable. There are now few of the old type outside antennas in use.



The first TV shows included about 120 westerns. In black and white, cowboys set the standards of right and wrong. “The Kate Smith Show” was the first daytime show to become successful. Here are some of the people and programs of the era: Arthur Godfrey and Friends, Candid Camera, Ed Sullivan Show, Herb Shriver Show, The Lone Ranger, Perry Como, Paul Whitman, Martin Cane Private Eye, Milton Berle Show, Ripley’s Believe it or not, Ellery Queen, Arthur Murray Party, Buck Rogers, Cisco Kid, Dick Tracy, Jackie Gleason, Sid Caesar, Bert Parks, Art Carney, Frank Sinatra, Garry Moore, Lonesome George Gobel, Gene Autry, Steve Allen, Truth or Consequences, Vaughn Monroe, Hit Parade, Dean Martin and Ralph Edwards. Do any sound familiar to you?

Television in time:

1950: APRIL: 5,343,000 TV sets are in American Homes, MAY: 103 TV Stations in 60 cities, Margaret Truman signed a contract with CBS for a weekly TV show.

1951: JUNE: 13,000,000 television sets in the USA, SEPTEMBER 4th: First coast-to-coast telecast (President Truman speaks), OCTOBER 15th: *I Love Lucy* show premieres on CBS

1952: JANUARY: *Today Show* begins with Dave Garroway, APRIL 14th: UHF Channels (14 through 83) approved by FCC

1953: 50% of Americans now have a television set (25,233,000 homes), Apr. 3 First issue of *TV Guide* is published, with 10 editions and a circulation of 1,562,000 copies. The first program to be broadcast in RCA electronic compatible color is the November 22nd showing of *The Colgate Comedy Hour*

1954: JAN 1st: The first national coast-to-coast colorcast takes place, with the broadcast of the "Tournament of Roses Parade" from Pasadena, California to 21 network stations.

There were only 200 RCA electronic color television sets (Model 5 - experimental) able to view the show. This is acknowledged as the first day American television officially changed from black-and-white to color, MARCH: First color commercial by Pall Mall cigarettes

1955: SEPTEMBER 10th: *Gunsmoke* begins a 20 year run on television, OCTOBER 1st: *Honeymooners* begins a long run with Jackie Gleason
1956: APRIL 2nd: The #1 Daytime Serial starts: *As The World Turns*, AUGUST 13th: All three networks cover the Chicago Democratic Convention
1957: Hungarian TV Broadcasting Begins
1958: SEPTEMBER 22nd: *Peter Gunn* begins on NBC, OCTOBER 17th: *An Evening With Fred Astaire* telecast on NBC
1959: 42,000,000 American homes have television, some have 2 sets already, SEPTEMBER 12th: *Bonanza* becomes the first Western in color

Boston University President Daniel Marsh warned that “we are destined to be a nation of morons” if programming is not improved.



Many ministers, including some in Malvern, preached to their congregations that watching TV was of the Devil and was a sin!

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