

## Boob Tube Boomer

Uncle Bob

Recollections of early family life.

Our TV was on for virtually 18 hours a day, and for about six of those hours there were actual people watching it. I intend to set down my strongest memories of what I saw. To narrow the focus, I'll stick to the 50s, and I'll mention or comment on just a few examples in categories of my design. I'll finish with some personal recommendations for the younger folks who might be able to catch some of these shows on YouTube, you YouTubers you.

The family sitcoms that I think best known were *Leave It To Beaver*, *Father Knows Best*, *Honeymooners*, and *Ozzie and Harriet*. Three were simpy. The *Honeymooners* was a little more edgy with the regular threat of a wife-beating ("right in the kisser"), but nothing like its modern imitator "*Family Guy*," the lower than lowest common denominator tripe; and besides, Ralph Kramden, after having his bacon grilled and rescued, always made up with Alice. "Baby, you're the greatest."

For cowboys and other adventure series, we had *Lone Ranger*, *Gene Autry*, *Roy Rogers*, *Hopalong Cassidy*, *Ramar of the Jungle*, *Robin Hood*, and *Sky King*. None were very believable even for young viewers. The cowboy shows would run the same 4-second chase clip over and over, rounding the same rocky bend past the same sagebrush. The *Lone Ranger's* horse's clops made indoor studio-type echoes. And what did Niece Penny do besides talk on the radio to Uncle Sky? That's what I wanna know! I was so glad when Sky got a new plane — the old thing was a crate. I have caught some *Robin Hood* episodes on YouTube. Richard Greene manages to avoid the arrows shot point blank from five or six crossbows, and the castle gates always go up and/or down on cue.

Notable toons and puppet shows were *Kukla*, *Fran and Ollie* (that's two puppets and a person), *Howdy Doody*, *Woody Woodpecker*, and *Tom and Jerry*, but none of those could touch *Looney Tunes*, *Merrie Melodies*, and later, *Rocky and Bullwinkle*. More on them in a bit.

I liked the quiz and game shows for the challenge of, for example, solving the rebuses on *Concentration* – we had a home version that you could scroll to a new rebus. Oh, and also finding out the phonies on *To Tell the Truth* (Does he really look like a guy that could invent *Silly Putty*?). And I just couldn't get enough Groucho on *You Bet Your Life*. "Say the secret woid and win yourself two hun-ed dollahs." According to tv.com, "a dilapidated stuffed duck (bearing a strong resemblance to Groucho himself) would descend into their midst with the secret word around his neck and [the] extra prize

money would be granted." I couldn't have said it better. Other viewers were loyal to What's My Line and Beat the Clock.

Finding out the phonies was also my pre-occupation with the Perry Mason cases. Other cops and lawyer shows were more straightforward, including Dragnet, Highway Patrol ("10-4, 10-4," and why didn't Brod Crawford just say 20-8?), Boston Blackie, and Sgt. Preston of the Yukon. Peter Gunn merits a special mention not due to Craig Stevens but rather to songstress Lola Albright. Oh, I guess I just gave away my (coming of) age.

In comedy and variety, Ed Sullivan had something for everybody. I liked the Russian Army, the crooners, and the contortionists. I also allocated regular slots to Jack Benny, the Three Stooges, and Uncle Miltie.

And then there was Winky Dink. Now I must tell you, I've been holding out my all-time favorite TV shows for the end, and also I must tell you that Winky Dink was not one of them. But it was unique. Here is the description from Wikipedia:



Praised by Microsoft mogul Bill Gates as "the first interactive TV show," the show's central gimmick was the use of a "magic drawing screen" which was a large piece of vinyl plastic that stuck to the television screen via static electricity. A kit containing the screen and various Winky Dink crayons could be purchased for 50 cents.... Winky would arrive upon a scene that contained a connect the dots picture. He would then prompt the children at home to complete the picture.... Another use of the interactive screen was to decode messages.... the show's production was halted despite its popularity because of concerns about x-rays from TV picture tubes.

Well, yeah!!

Now we come to my top recommendations. Please keep in mind that a 68-year old is recommending TV that he saw when he was ten or younger. True enough, but the cathode rays (not the x-rays, I hope) made very strong impressions. As proof, upon request I can finish the "Crest has been shown to be an effective decay preventive dentifrice ..." spiel. My top picks follow and are based on either of two criteria — quality or wackiness.

**Sitcoms:** I think I Love Lucy episodes were consistently entertaining. Lucy, à la Ralph Kramden, had a hare-brained scheme to carry out. If Fred and Ethel got a little stale, and I think that was, for Fred at least, the idea, then Ricky and his band would get the blood up again with a rumba. Runner-up is Burns and Allen. What the world needs today is a steady diet of Gracie's logic — or any logic for that matter. For a lesser known rival, check out a young Gale Storm in My Little Margie.

**Comedians:** I think the funniest, most talented comedian was Sid Ceasar, who was backed up by Imogene Coca, Carl Reiner and Howard Morris. Phil Silvers as Sergeant Bilko and Ernie Kovacs also provided the offbeat humor that appealed to me.

**Cowboys and Adventure:** I liked Gene Autry's horse Champion over the others, and, sorry, that's the deal maker. How about Flash Gordon? Athletic Buster Crabbe, always surrounded by beautiful women in futuristically tight suits, is up against the evil Ming from planet Mongo and his master computer equipped with the beta version of GoogleEarth, and his Nitron Lamp, the real cause of our current climate convulsions. I liked it even though I could see the strings that suspended the rocket ships. A host of other Flash-type adventure stories were serialized and presented as segments on kids shows. Each episode would end with the hero or his main squeeze in a life-threatening quandary, and every succeeding episode would begin with an enormously disappointing and non-believable escape.

Sometime back in the early 60s I read a review extolling the adult themes and controversial social issues addressed in Gunsmoke. I started watching the reruns. What seemed like a very dry hour-long show to this hop-along ride-along fan of ten, became much more interesting to the thirteen-y me.

**Toons:** Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies ran from the 30s through the 60s. They featured iconic characters like Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, and Elmer Fudd. The stories could take place in a carrot patch or on a Hollywood studio lot. They delivered satire and other adult humor with a wink; they poked fun at culture both haut and pop, and yet they provided kids exposure to those worlds and always kept them in the laugh loop. Rocky and Bullwinkle later in the 60s made similar contributions. Porky's "Th- th- th- That's All, Folks" meant that folks of all ages had just had a ball.

Reflecting on this chapter, I was struck by a couple of thoughts. These shows that were etched in my brain dated back to 1954-1956, when I was younger than ten. I don't think our family had a TV before 1954, and this is indicative of the power of this medium. Honeymooners ran for just two seasons, even though Gleason had an hourlong show that ran many more years. Another thing — these celebs that I couldn't get enough of — Bilko and Colonel Hall, Caesar and Coca, Kovacs, Gleason, Norton (played by Art Carney), and Milton Berle — were not beautiful people. They had faces only their mothers could love. Hollywood and TV went off the tracks in foisting glamour and spinoffs and other mass-pro tripe on us. In this era of self-publishing on Facebook, Twitter, and in myriad other media, we're finding out that original, true-to-life content has always been possible and even marketable, and — that's all folks.

Photo: Brendan Riley

February 2016