

We're eager to hear about TV in your household in the 1950s and 1960s. Send us your response to the ideas and images on the next several pages.



When Television Entered the Iowa Household

by Ginalie Swaim

My family's Philco television from the early 1950s now sits in the basement of my mother's suburban house in Davenport. It doesn't work and has long since been replaced by a color set in a colonial cabinet for her den. But I remember the Philco in its upright mahogany cabinet in the farmhouse where I grew up. That was the set on which I watched *The Mickey Mouse Club*—though it interfered with late afternoon farm chores—

and *The Ed Sullivan Show* in the evening with my family.

Many in my generation grew up with television and can't recall home *without* a TV set. In fact, "between 1948 and 1955, television was installed in nearly two-thirds of the nation's home, and the basic mechanisms of the network oligopoly were set in motion," writes television historian Lynn Spigel. "By 1960, almost 90 percent of American households had at least one receiver, with the average person watching approximately five hours of television each day."

Early 1950s Iowa newspapers attest to this consumer rush. Multi-page sections of the newspapers were devoted to TV information (how to use all the control knobs—there were more than on radios), advice (how much light was needed in the room), and ads—and more ads. TV meant a "changing way of living" and "a closer knitting of family pursuits," one ad promised. "Everyone wants to see top sporting



What kind of set did you first own? These four are in the collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa. Six-inch circular screen on this 1946 or 1948 Hallicrafters was watched by a Webster City, Iowa, family. Hallicrafter sets could be purchased assembled or as kits, attracting technologically oriented consumers.



This 1947 Admiral has a brown Bakelite cabinet and a whopping 9-inch screen.

Crow Radio Repair in Muscatine first used this Motorola as a demonstrator in 1949. Inside the "chippendale style" cabinet is a 10-inch TV screen, an AM/FM radio, and a phonograph that played 78 rpm records and "the new long-playing microgroove records." Cover of owner's manual



also shows a black ceramic panther TV lamp on the set. Inside it advises viewers that picture interference might be caused by car ignition systems, electric razors, and vacuum cleaners, and to place antennae accordingly.

events, Milton Berle, Howdie Doodie, Hopalong Cassidy, Kukla Fran & Ollie or a favorite movie on home television." Therefore, the ad reminded the consumer, "You'll require new versatility in your homefurnishings . . . larger sofas, lounge chairs that pivot easily from a conversational grouping to the receiver screen, subdued lighting arrangements." The ad pictured a "TV mantel lamp"; one wonders if the TV set was to become the hearth for the 1950s home.

But the circle around the TV would include more than the family. The Sidles Co. in Des Moines announced that a model with a "12 1/2-inch screen is ideal for viewing by the whole family plus the guests that will certainly drop in." A survey noted that 26 percent of the "set owners" polled had more new friends, and 24

percent were visited by old friends more often. A General Electric ad took advantage of this phenomenon: "Plan a Television Party in Your Home," the ad urged, and "We Will Furnish the Television Set Free!" "The only stipulation is that you must invite ten or more adults to your home to view the shows . . . and furnish the dealer with a list of your guests' names and addresses. INVITE your relatives—your neighbors—you'll have lots of fun . . . they'll appreciate your thoughtfulness."

Despite limited programming, TV ads boasted that "there are programs for every member of the family." An ad for Crosley sets listed "the children's hour packed with thrills and delights of wonderland . . . the homemaker's hour filled with 'how to' information by experts in homemaking . . . sports with husky thrills . . . drama and variety to give Mother and Dad or the whole family a theatre date at home!"

Even the set itself had something for every-

This Du Mont Teleset was used in 1954 by the Coonradt family in rural Osage, Iowa. Du Mont was



an early network and manufacturer. The manual promises "a full range of picture tones—deep, rich blacks, blending grays and crisp clear whites."

FOUR COLOR PHOTOS: SHS (PHOTOGRAPHED BY CHUCK GREINER)



JOAN LIFFRING-ZUG COLLECTION, SHSI (IOWA CITY)

Minnie D. Adams in her home in Newburg, Iowa, 1957. Note reflections in TV screen.

one: The "Ultra Fidelity" TV, for example, had all parts "designed from the Family Angle. For the lady of the house—there's cabinet beauty that will harmonize with her carefully selected furnishing. For children—bright, clear pictures that are steady and so easy on the eyes. For the man of the house—a marvelous piece of electronic engineering."

These Iowa newspaper advertisements echo locally the national research of Lynn Spigel in her book *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (University of Chicago Press, 1992). Spigel combed mainstream publications and professional journals to find out what they advised their 1950s readers about this new technology.

"Telegraph, telephone, and radio were all met with a mixture of utopian and dystopian expectations," Spigel reminds us, and so was television. This ambivalence about TV was manifested in contradictory predictions. For instance, pundits told Americans that television would improve women's homemaker skills with its how-to shows; or, conversely, television programs would tempt women to interrupt or abandon their housework. TV would add to housekeeping chores as people began to eat in front of the set; yet TV would bring the family closer together. Television would keep the husband home; or, distract him from his wife and family; or, disrupt his authority (just regained after his absence in World War II). To find out what the theories on young viewers were, see our article on children's local TV shows, starting on page 68.

While it's easy to find the newspaper and ad coverage of TV in 1950s Iowa, it's harder to find its impact in the individual home. We began by looking in the photo collections here at the State Historical Society of Iowa for images of Iowans watching television—and soon realized that people seldom photograph other people watching TV. (Would you?)

But what we did find were interior shots where the television is part of the "domestic environment," to quote Spigel. We see what room the set is in, what furniture surrounds it, what knick-knacks rest on it. In fact, Spigel notes, "The attempts [recommended by interior design magazines] to render the television set invisible are especially interesting in the

light of critical and popular memory accounts that argue that the television set was a privileged figure of conspicuous consumption and class status for postwar Americans."

Spigel acknowledges that while historians can uncover what Americans were advised about TV—whether to embrace it or be wary of it—it's much harder to find out how Americans really responded to its arrival in their households.

This is where you come in. *The Palimpsest* and the State Historical Society of Iowa are interested in what you remember about early television in your household or community. Even though television is part of the recent past, there is a surprising lack of documentation. On the following pages, we present a handful of photos and questions to jog your memory about early TV. If the questions don't address your experience, please tell us your own account of how TV did—or didn't—become part of your household. The questions are repeated on the tear-off mailing cover. We hope you'll take the time to answer some or all of the questions, briefly or at length, and send them to us. Consider turning on a tape recorder at a family gathering for generational perspectives of TV's impact on the household.

We're eager to receive your accounts. With your permission, the State Historical Society of Iowa will preserve your responses in the archives so scholars and students may use them as research material in the future. And we hope to publish some in *The Pal*. Please include your name, address, age in 1994, and phone number. Mail them to *Palimpsest*, 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, Iowa 52240.

Spigel concludes her book by reminding us that "a history of spectators in the home" is "a history that is only beginning to be written." Please help us gather that history.

—The Editor

Please turn the page to find the first questions.





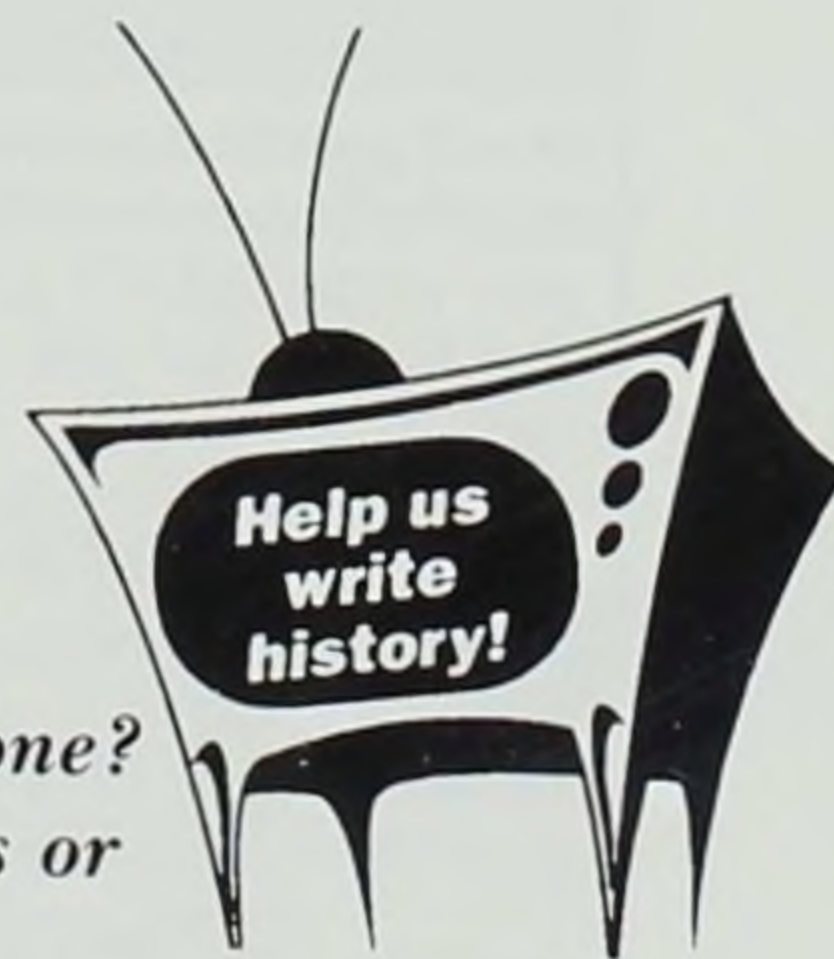
As TV sets begin to appear in homes, they also begin to appear in family photos. Here David and Anne Pickford pose with children John, Elizabeth, and Louise.

Q: *Did your household own a TV in the 1950s and 1960s? In what year was it purchased? What brand, size, and description?*

*What prompted the decision to buy, or not buy, a TV?
What was the occupation of the adults in your household?
Where did you live at that time?*



Photo from scrapbook kept by Alice Mary Gifford, in Iowa City, shows components of many an American home—family pets, fireplace, and television.



Q: *Did people in your household watch television alone? With other household members? With other adults or children from outside your household?*



Two TV sets (below bookshelves and through arched doorway) take their place amidst books, instruments, records, and skateboard, all enjoyed here by the Cecil and Evelyn Reed family.

Q: *In what room did you place your first TV? Was furniture rearranged or moved out of the room to accommodate the TV set?*

Did you later move your first TV, or other sets, to other rooms? What rooms?



Q: *Do you remember concerns or cautions about watching TV? What were they and who told them to you?*

What member(s) of the household decided what shows would be watched?



Trophies adorn TV set as Gordon and Susan Dehay have a father-daughter conversation.



Editor's note: All photos are from the State Historical Society of Iowa collections; see credit lines for specifics. Half were drawn from the extensive Joan Liffing-Zug Collection, a rich source of Iowa images in the last half of this century. For decades, Liffing-Zug has photographed Iowans in diverse settings. The nine Liffing-Zug images here, generally of Cedar Rapids families in the 1950s and 1960s, were culled from the negatives, contact sheets, and prints. *The Palimpsest* thanks SHSI archives assistants Kurt Berge, Vicki Schipul, and Paula Smith for help in selecting these images.



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JOAN LUFFING-ZUG COLLECTION, SHS (IOWA CITY)

Flanked by traditional furniture, the TV takes second place to dominoes and chess, played by William and Jane Bergman and children Billy and Lolly.

Q: *How did TV affect other leisure pastimes in your household? Did it replace certain activities?*



JOAN LUFFING-ZUG COLLECTION, SHS (IOWA CITY)

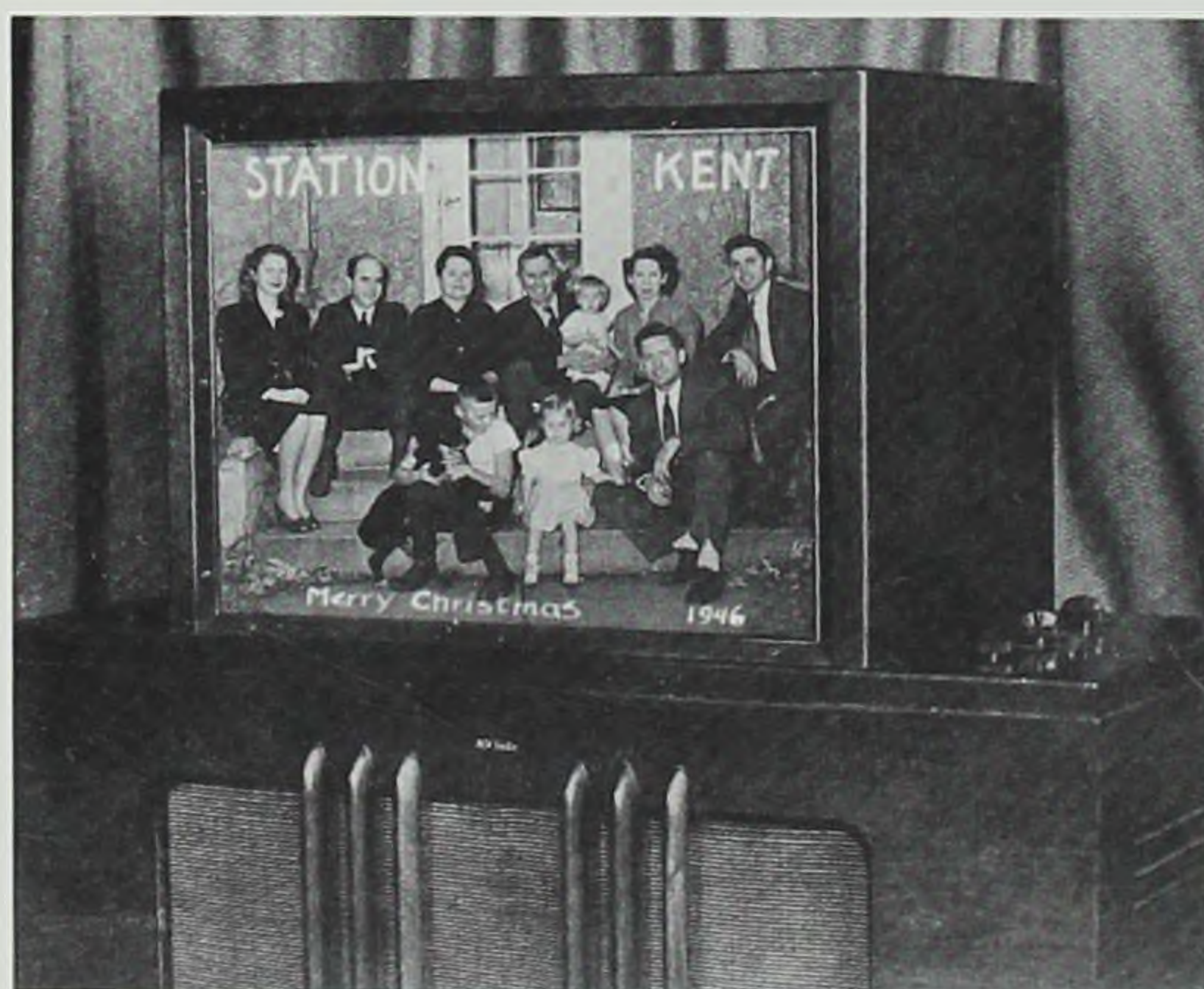
Music is the obvious focus here, as John, Elizabeth, and Louise Pickford perform, and parents David and Anne listen from the couch. Nevertheless, a portable TV set appears in the background, upper right.

Q: *What was the reaction of children in your household to TV? What were the parental attitudes towards children's viewing habits?*



Q: *In what ways did TV or its programs in the 1950s and 1960s influence children's leisure or what toys they played with in your household?*

Q: *Did any household customs and habits develop around TV watching? At holidays or other special occasions?*



Iowa City photographer Fred Kent made the family RCA radio look like a TV screen showing "Station Kent" for the family's 1946 Christmas card. Although impressed with the idea of television, he resisted buying a set for fear his wife would spend all her time watching it.



COURTESY BARBARA BUCKLEY

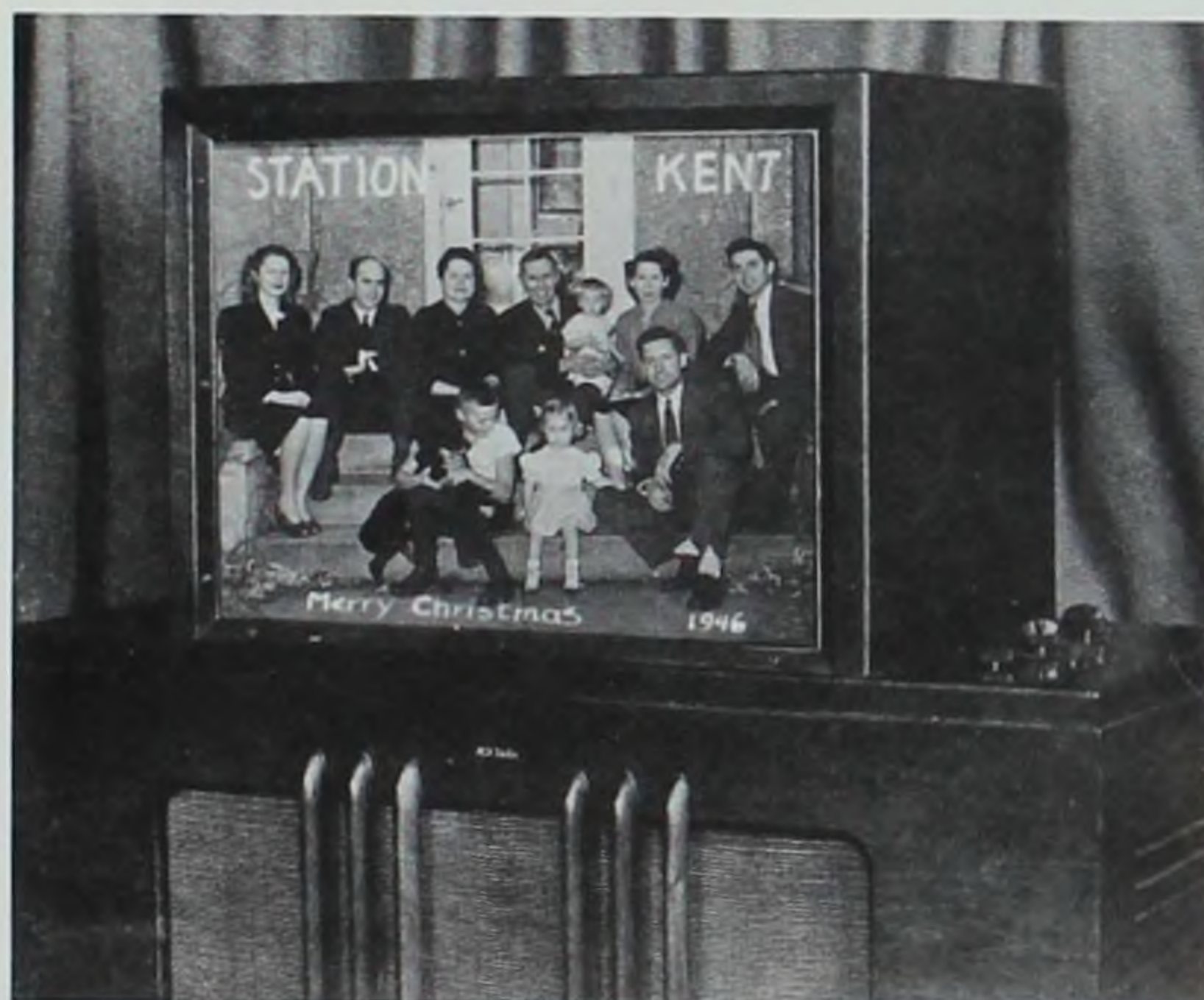


Wearing Western garb, Molly, Mike, and Tom Evans and friends work on log cabin playhouse in 1959.



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JOAN LIFRING-ZUG COLLECTION, SHS (IOWA CITY)

Wearing Western garb, Molly, Mike, and Tom Evans and friends work on log cabin playhouse in 1959.

for the genial host
who loves comfort...it's
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A truly big-hearted chair for the host who likes to entertain...built for solid comfort, better tele-viewing, and good conversation. A beautiful piece of furniture, too, that will add new sparkle to the living room.

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- PIVOTS EASILY IN ANY DIRECTION!
- LEANS BACK FOR SOLID COMFORT!
- MAKES ENTERTAINING MORE FUN!

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Open
Evenings
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Saturday
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Arranged

Newspaper ads featured TV lamps and furniture for "better tele-viewing."

Q: Did your household purchase other furnishings or accessories to use with your TV (such as television clocks or lamps, furniture or TV trays), or devices to improve reception or enhance viewing? Describe them.

Q: Did television affect housework—how, when, or where you did certain tasks?

TV LAMPS

Your Choice

\$8⁹⁵



High gloss TV Lamp shown at right comes in Chartreuse, Gray and Oxblood. It's 3-Way.

3-Way TV Lamp shown at left in crystal and metal. Choice of Green or Black. Tole finish.





JOAN LUFFING-ZUG COLLECTION, SHS (IOWA CITY)

Fork in one hand, glass in the other, Randall Bezanson snacks from a TV tray.

Q: *How did TV affect dining patterns? Cooking? Where and when people ate? Cleaning up? Snacking?*





WORTHMAN COLLECTION, SHS (IOWA CITY)

A quiet moment at the Horton Rest Home in Mills County, Iowa, April 1951. From left, John Worthington (of Clarinda), Morris Evans (Oakland), and Levi Patton (Glenwood),

Q: *Did TV affect socializing—with others in your household, or with relatives or friends? In what ways?*



SPH (DES MOINES)

Counting this TV, in January 1951, the Des Moines Veterans Hospital now had sets in four of its six wards. Edgar Musgrave, Salvation Army board member, instructs World War I veteran H. H. Guernsey of Waterloo.

Q: *Besides inside your home, where else do you remember watching early television?*





As members of the "television generation" grew, so did the size of the screens. Here, a son of Virginia and Richard Evans, years after he and siblings "played cowboys and Indians" (see page 61).

Q: *Who repaired your TV if it broke? Where was it repaired?*
When did you get a color TV? What prompted that decision?

