

'Our ticket to 1950s culture'

Accounts of early television in our readers' households



by Ginalie Swaim, editor

The summer issue of *The Palimpsest* asked our readers to "help us write history" by sending in accounts of early television in the 1950s and 1960s. We're delighted to announce that to date we have received twenty-six responses. Although we wish we could print each in its entirety, we present here excerpts of all of these candid (and often witty) looks at television's arrival in the American household. The complete responses will be housed in the archives of the State Historical Society of Iowa, where researchers can tap into them as they begin to document television history from the viewers' perspective.

One might ask: Does it matter why we bought a TV, where we placed it in our home, or who came over to watch it with us? Yes, it matters, because it provides insights and perspective on how American families in the Fifties and Sixties spent leisure time, arranged households, negotiated family issues, defined neighborhood, and adapted to new technologies. With something as pervasive as television today, it is useful half a century later to step back and consider American life pre-TV.

In the February 1994 *Vanity Fair*, Kevin Sessums writes about television today: "We treat it with intimacy. It is the third spouse." According to our readers, did the television become a member of the family? Here's what you told us.

We asked: 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?

Many of our writers have a crystal clear memory of their first television set. For instance, Virginia Becker recalls that her husband, Robert, bought a set for Christmas in 1953 for their rural Plainfield farm family. "That Motorola TV cost \$430 plus tax of \$8.60."

Edwin Lowenberg also has precise details: "By the time I left Collins [Radio Company in Cedar Rapids], many of my co-workers had early TV sets and used to talk about programs and unusual events which then occurred on live TV. . . . I bought [my] first TV through one of the dealers on December 1, 1950. It

Loretta Young's Swirling Skirt

From Joy Neal Kidney and Doris Wilson Neal:

"We remember George Gobel's, 'Well, I'll be a dirty bird'; the McGuire Sisters singing 'Sincerely'; Betty Furness stating, 'You can be sure if it's Westinghouse'; Loretta Young's swirling skirt;

Tennessee Ernie Ford singing 'Sixteen Tons' and saying, 'Bless your little peapicking heart'; the excitement of *The Millionaire*; the haunting theme of Adam Troy's *Adventures in Paradise*; the 20-Mule Team Borax ads for *Death Valley Days*; and Bishop Sheen's blackboard being erased for him by 'an angel.'"

was a 17-inch Sylvania console. With my discount it cost \$253 including a one-year warranty that also included the picture tube. This was about one year before Sylvania came out with the 'halo light.'

George W. Hinshaw, who was in law school in 1949/50, writes that his father purchased a 14-inch Admiral. "My dad was a state employee and they were purchasing a number of TV sets at a 'bargain price.' He was prompted to buy the television set because of the opportunity to watch sports events. We lived at that time in Marshalltown in the Iowa Veterans Home."

Joy Neal Kidney and her mother, Doris Wilson Neal, sent in their joint memories of early TV: "We were one of the last in our extended family and in our rural neighborhood to get a television. The neighbors' sturdy white farmhouses along Old Creamery Road in Madison County's Penn Township south of Dexter had sprouted antennas on their roofs. [My father] Warren Neal farmed and [my mother] Doris was busy with farm housewife chores and they were content with radio (WHO and KMA). But their daughters, Gloria and I, in grade school at Dexter, felt left out when the kids at school talked about things they'd seen on TV and we knew nothing about." Kidney continues, "But about 1954, [my parents] talked over their daughters' dilemma and decided to surprise us with a TV set. They drove to Ernie's in Earlham and picked out a 24-inch RCA television in a blond mahogany console. It was delivered while we were at school but we knew about the surprise as soon as we got off the bus. The sun glinted off the antenna on our roof. We ran up the steps to the porch and burst in the house wanting to see our ticket to 1950s culture, and to being 'in' at school."

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

Marlene Metzgar (then of Knoxville) answers: "Other household members. Interaction with neighbors was not as 'free' [or] 'acceptable' in the mid-50s."

Esther Charlotte Smith, who lived in Swea

Watching Grandparents' Sets

From Marvin Bergman:

"My family was probably the last on our block to purchase a TV. . . . The absence of a TV in our home [in a rural town in northwestern Ohio] in the late 1950s and early '60s does not mean the absence of TV-related memories for those years. Most of those memories are related to visits to my grandparents, both sets of whom had television sets. Among my most vivid preschool memories are of scrunching in front of my maternal grandparents' TV for hours on solitary visits, watching *Captain Kangaroo* and *Romper Room*. . . .

"My mother's parents lived 7 1/2 miles away, while my dad's parents lived a block away. We visited the latter every Sunday evening until my grandma died when I was six. The visit was timed so we could watch *Ed Sullivan*, though I remember more distinctly the box of cars and trucks at the end of the long hall in their house. . . .

"Once we got our own TV [about 1966], we stayed home on Saturday evenings so the whole family could watch *Lawrence Welk* (yes, even the kids) and *Hollywood Palace*, a variety show. We also watched Andy Williams's show as a family during the years it was on. Otherwise we watched singly or in pairs or threes. Despite my parents' fears that TV was a waste of time, they did not establish rigid rules about how much TV we could watch. The TV was in the basement, so it would not interfere with visiting. . . . The only rule was that we could not simply decide to watch TV; we had to choose a show intentionally that appealed to our tastes. . . .

"Gradually, even those rules loosened up, and as usual my younger sister reaped the benefits. The photograph of the boy sitting behind the TV tray [Summer *Palimpsest*, page 63] reminded me that my sister would get home from school, grab a large bag of potato chips, go downstairs, turn on one of the old movies (with Shirley Temple, Fred Astaire, Bing Crosby, or Bob Hope), and eat a whole bag of chips while she watched. The rest of us would yell at her the next time we wanted a snack."

City, seems to agree: "We watched TV alone and together, but seldom with outsiders."

John A. Harnagel recalls that his Des Moines household normally "watched television as a family. Sometimes the dog was in the act but he would usually stand and stare, thus cutting out our view of the screen. We also watched with friends and relatives, though most of them had televisions, too."

Eleanor Otto of Storm Lake writes: "Our family did not watch TV too much at first as the pictures were not always very good. When Dad came home in the evening he would always turn on the TV just to see if there were any programs on that could be seen."

We asked: 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?

Betty and Henry Ankeny, who purchased their blond console in Atlantic, tell us, "We placed it in our living room, but it had casters on it so we could turn it around into the din-

ing room and watch during mealtime."

The Harnagel family kept their set in the living room, but moved it from one corner in the summer to another in the winter, "based on the location of the furnace thermostat." Harnagel recalls "the backs of TV sets being quite warm."

According to Joy Neal Kidney and her mother, Doris Wilson Neal, "Our TV was first in the dining room because the living room wasn't used during the winter. The rest of the year it was moved to the living room and eventually stayed there when we used an oil-burning stove in there." When the family built a new farmhouse in 1964, they designed it "with an area for the TV where it could be turned to be seen from the living, dining, or family room."

Eleanor Otto remembers "that we put it in the corner so that more of the family could watch it together."

Mildred F. Steele was "bedfast, due to a difficult pregnancy" when she and her husband, a clergyman, received a used Admiral TV as a gift from their parishioners in Stratford.

"Privileged Character" Picks Shows

From Margaret Hedges:

"It was peer pressure that produced our first TV in 1956: Day after day our five children, aged seven to seventeen, came home from their various schools saying, 'We've got to have a TV, Mom (Dad), because that's all the kids talk about at school. We can't talk with them; we're outsiders. We've got to have a TV.'"

"So in late fall a plan of action was made: It had been a miserable, cold, rainy fall in the Iowa farm county where we struggled to raise our family on a 'family farm' (1940s terminology) of 180 acres, about 60 acres of it in corn. The two-row picker had knocked over more wet, crumpled stalks than it had picked. So my husband, who was inventive when it came to chores for the children, told them that if they hand-picked the corn lying on the ground in those cold, sodden fields, they could have the money it brought for a TV set. That's all it took—the

magic words TV sent them out everyday after school for nearly two weeks, and, sure enough, there was enough money for a Sears TV set and a revolving stand to put it on.

"In our cramped six-room farmhouse, it stood in a place of honor in the living room, visible from almost every part of the room. A plan for choosing programs was devised by the children: There were seven of us and seven days in the week, so one night a week each person could be what they called 'privileged character' (PC) and choose the programs from 6:30 to 9:30 p.m. They assigned Sat. night to Mom, who didn't much care what she watched, and Sun. night to Dad, who was busy most other nights. Also, the children made elaborate arrangements for trading nights with each other, and a lot of bargaining went on among them, but whoever was PC made the final decision on his night, and they settled it all among themselves.

"The TV was in our bedroom, since that was where I spent my time, of necessity. The television was placed on top of a chest of drawers. Later, after we moved, we continued to keep our TV in the bedroom, because we didn't want it to dominate living room conversations."

Miriam Baker Nye (who lived in Merville, Woodbury County) tells us, "In 1963 we added a 16x26 room to the farmhouse, and promptly christened it 'The View Room.' There we saw a beautiful view from our picture window, viewed TV, and expressed views. Since we ate at our dining table in this large room, it was our habit to watch the news as we ate."

We asked: Do you remember concerns or cautions about watching TV? What member(s) of the household decided what shows would be watched?

Several readers echo the warning that



James M. Otto recalls: "I can remember my parents advising us not to sit too close to the TV because it would hurt our eyes. Also, we always had to have a light on in the room for the same reason." Joy Neal Kidney remembers that "instructions cautioned us to stay ten to twelve feet from the TV." Kathy Waldo-Gilbert (raised in Eldora) remembers her parents' fears about blindness and radioactivity.

Most respondents indicated that no one in particular had this power (today this might be decided by who holds the remote control). Mildred R. Steele writes, "There were so few channels at first that there was little cause for friction."

John A. Harnagel recounts, "Our father forbade us to touch anything on the TV set except the On/Volume knob and the channel knob. Dad fiddled with the other knobs and that big thing sticking out of the back that had something to do with the pic-

"Dad worked a full-time job in addition to farming, and [I] had gone back to school to renew a teaching certificate, so the children watched what they chose with only one restriction—nothing with bad language (four-letter words, etc.), and that was an absolute. As I remember, they watched a lot of cartoons, *Road Runner* comes to mind; there were some nature shows; just a few sitcoms; the popular comedians, especially Red Skelton, Jack Benny, and The Three Stooges. And we all watched the classic movies like *White Christmas* and *The Wizard of Oz*. Occasionally, the children would be watching a World War II movie (with the sound turned way down so Mom and Dad wouldn't notice). And always we tuned in on local ball games if they were available.

"Definitely, TV in our family was recreational, and it always came after farm chores and homework were done, and done right. We never ate in front of the TV except for the occasional bowl of popcorn. Snacking and soft drinks were not

part of our life style, not even for teenagers. News for all of us came from the daily newspaper and from little radios in kitchen, barn, and workrooms. I can't even remember evening news, as such, on TV. It was entertainment and relaxation that pleased the children and gave them things to talk about with their friends. Actually, there were many evenings when they were busy with ball games, band practice, 4-H projects, regular chores, playing with friends, and it was only the youngest boy who watched very consistently.

"Family group watching on holidays was a real pleasure. We had the New Year's parade, Valentine specials, a July 4th spectacular, Halloween shows, Macy's parade at Thanksgiving, and all the various musical and other shows at Christmas. Oh, yes, we always watched the Rose Bowl games; Iowa went twice in the 1960s, I believe, and one son was there with the marching band."

ture tube. He would turn something and then walk across the room, look at the set, and then walk back and turn something else. We kids would laugh to ourselves. Our mother would become so frustrated with him that she would sometimes find something else to do during those times. What we watched was up to us during the daytime unless our mother wanted to watch something special. At night, our father determined what we watched. My mother's nemesis was Milton Berle. She would throw balls of yarn at the TV set when his show was on. She also threw things at Floppy when I was watching that show. I don't know whether I watched Floppy to enjoy his show or Mother's show!"



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

Mildred Steele quips, "What leisure?"

Betty and Henry Ankeny note, "It did replace the old radio shows, and playing of family games." Kathy Waldo-Gilbert remembers

"less family discussion." George Hinshaw says, "I suspect that my father read fewer books because of the sporting events on TV." Olga Lutz (from Andrew, Iowa) recalls "less attention" to reading, games, and hobbies, although Miriam Baker Nye remembers TV as "an occasional pleasure," and that table games and reading books aloud continued.

John Harnagel writes: "We listened less to the radio once we had a television set. However, I was very fond of *Our Miss Brooks* and would sit in the kitchen and listen to it while the TV was blaring in the living room. Television was, in our family, an additional leisure pastime. It replaced nothing. It was simply added."

Eleanor Otto relates: "In our local paper (the *Pilot Tribune*) there used to be a section entitled 'Personal and Social News.' Many people wrote to that paper and told of their social events. Most always they said the evening was spent watching television. I think

Crowded KDPS

From John van der Linden:

"The first TV I saw, and many other people in Northwood, was at Doug and Florence Pangburn's gas station and sandwich shop on Highway 65. . . . Doug got a small TV and put it on a high shelf, and changed the name of his business to 'Doug's TV Grill.' Most everybody in town went up there sometime for a bit of lunch or supper and to watch the TV.

"...We used to drive around town and count the number of antennas sprouting from residential roofs, and we'd say, 'Well, so-and-so has succumbed and got TV now.'

"And finally about 1958 . . . we also succumbed and bought an RCA set. . . . We moved to Sibley in 1960 and traded out for advertising in the *Sibley Gazette* [for which I was the editor] with

the local Gambles store a handsome Admiral 'home entertainment center' in a beautiful long maple cabinet, TV in the center, radio on one side, and LP record player on the other. It stretched clear across the room, it seemed!

"In 1967 the Iowa legislature voted to support an educational TV program in the state and created the 'State Educational Radio and Television Facility Board.' In September that year the board was created and I was appointed one of three 'public' members of the nine-member board by Governor Harold Hughes. (Three members were named by the Board of Regents and three by the State Board of Public Instruction.) . . . We bought KDPS from the Des Moines Public Schools. It was a tiny operation, crowded into a couple of rooms at Des Moines Tech High (the one-time Ford Assembly plant)."

that this was more of a prestige item. They were just showing the rest of the community that they had a TV set."

We asked: What was the reaction of children in your household to TV?

"They loved it!" Kathy Waldo-Gilbert says simply. "Couldn't watch too much!"

"It was exciting and puzzling to watch the set," John Harnagel notes. "I often wondered about the waves that sent pictures to our antenna in the attic (the attic because our father thought they were ugly on top of houses—a good reason I guess, for a man who did not like heights and would not have wanted to install one three stories up) and then to our TV in the living room. I was further puzzled when, while I was sick at home, Miss Frances of *Ding Dong School* inevitably and daily asked us how we were and I would say I was sick again and she would say, 'Well, that's nice.'"

Verl L. Lekwa (Columbus Junction) writes, "I first saw television in a man's front yard. WOC in Davenport had just gone on the air and our local radio repairman purchased a set from a hardware store. The antenna was in place when we boys came past, walking

home from school. The proud owner asked the installer if the picture would get fuzzy when the weather got bad, as AM radio crackled during storms. He was assured it wouldn't. Will the antenna attract lightning? He was assured it wouldn't.

"The antenna was wired to the set," Lekwa continues, "a drop cord gave it power, and we watched . . . test pattern. We stared at the screen for a quarter hour. There was no sound. Satisfied that it worked, the owner had moved inside. We boys went home, not convinced that television had much of a future."

We asked: What were the parental attitudes towards children's viewing habits?

"I was in high school when we got our first TV but watching TV became a reward for finishing homework [and] housework," writes Marlene Metzgar of her Knoxville household. She notes that television was allowed only after work was completed.

Virginia Becker, who recalls that their family appreciated "*Captain Kangaroo* for the children and Leonard Bernstein's explanations about music," writes that "watching television was limited to good programs, and chores

Cooking for the Camera

From Mary K. Riley:

"I worked in the Home Service Department of a utility company (then called Oklahoma Natural Gas Co.) from 1946 to 1952. It was about 1949 when the first TV station came to Tulsa. We were asked to put on a half-hour cooking program. It was called *Lookin' at Cookin'*—and they put a kitchen set up at the TV station.

"We did everything, from scrubbing floors to sending out recipe sheets to viewers. The girls practiced for the show at our office and then everything had to be cooked and carried several blocks to the TV studio. . . . Usually we timed the girls through the program once—then we had to add or cut depending on time. They also had to do the commercials as well as cook. It wasn't easy.

"No one had any experience because TV was so new. They had to learn how to talk and work at the same time and not move too fast or talk too fast and keep your head up—what to wear and not to wear—busy designs, etc. There were all sorts of rumors that TV made you look fat, that food had to be tinted blue to make it look white, etc. One girl would always have a case of nerves—she was tall and would break out in giant hives as soon as the cameras started rolling. So they had to avoid all close-ups. . . . [Another girl] was from Minnesota and when she first started, the southerners had difficulty understanding her because she talked so much faster than they were accustomed to and they'd call the studio and tell her to slow down.

"The weatherman existed on the food that was cooked on the program."

had to be finished first.”

Verle Reinicke (who lived in Grundy Center) relates, “We were not allowed to watch *The Big Story* . . . with Patrick McVey. It was considered too violent, I think. Also there was bedtime for us, 9 p.m. later on. But I remember sometimes sneaking back downstairs to watch it through the keyhole in the hallway door.”

Joy Neal Kidney says, “Because of the mainly wholesome programs, our watching wasn’t restricted. We were in band and vocal, 4-H, youth choir, and had to spend time practicing the piano. Little was said about watching TV since we were on the honor roll at school.”

We asked: 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?

Kathy Waldo-Gilbert thinks TV affected children’s leisure “tremendously,” noting Mattel toys, GI Joes, and breakfast foods. Betty and Henry Ankeny relate that their children “wanted all the toys they saw adver-

tised, but of course, they didn’t get all.”

“I continually had an overwhelming urge to have Welch’s grape juice, thanks to *Howdy Doody*,” John Harnagel confesses. “Sometimes the neighborhood kids would assume roles from TV programs and act them out—Roy Rogers was a favorite.” He recalls a Hopalong

Cassidy belt and holster as a gift, and a “plastic screen and erasable crayons to help a character named ‘Winky Dink’ in his adventures.”

George William McDaniel grew up in Washington, Iowa. He comments, “I was eight years old when we got television so it is correct to say I grew up with it. It is difficult, however, to know the precise impact it had on my life. I liked news programs, documentaries and Walter Cornet’s *You Are There*. Did that influence my decision to

become a historian? Possibly. Did television become my sole source of entertainment? No. I remember great neighborhood games and adventures. And before we had sandwiches in the living room on Sunday evenings



Television Versus Clothes Drier

From Kenneth L. McFate:

“As an early 1950s Iowa State Extension Service agricultural engineer, I was ‘performing’ on WOI-TV long before our young family owned a television set. At that time, a majority of Iowa farm homes had no running water, which meant hours and hours of time-consuming housewife drudgery, especially on washday.

“With the help of WOI-TV Farm Director Creighton Knau, our agricultural engineering-home economics team was using this new educational tool to help Iowa farm families better understand how a pressure water system would allow use of an electric water heater, clothes

washer, and clothes drier, each of which could reduce drudgery and help the rural family live more like their city cousins.

“By 1955, our family (myself, my wife, and two children under three years of age) was one of the few in the ISU Ag Engineering Department without a television set. And one day, with a good offer and a snap judgment, I set out to change that. So, when I returned from an educational meeting near Waterloo, I proudly uncrated my newly purchased TV and ‘presented’ it to my wife. Having just finished a full, hard day of washing clothes, hanging on and removing from the line, folding, ironing, etc., when she saw the new TV set, her first and immediate comment was, ‘I wish you had bought me something that would save my time instead of something that expends it.’

I probably had gone to the movies. Did television make us prisoners of our living rooms? No. I remember pleasant evenings with neighbors in the front yard."

For Joy Neal Kidney, "None of our toys were influenced by TV but *American Bandstand* taught us to dance." But for Miriam Baker Nye's son, television gave a nod to reading: "As a third grader [my son] Kent won the opportunity to appear on the *Book Bandwagon*, a program during which children discussed recommended books they had read."

An anonymous reader thinks viewers "spent more time inside," and "often bought what was advertised, within means." Virginia Wadsley (raised in Early, Iowa) recalls "practicing musical instruments" and doing "homework in front of TV." And Mildred Steele remembers the night her five-year-old ended his prayers with: "Amen. This has been a recording."

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

Kathy Waldo-Gilbert "always watched Sunday night," and our anonymous reader "arranged other things to watch favorite shows."

For John Harnagel, eating crackers and cheese while "watching weekend afternoon TV" became a household custom. "Food in the living room," he adds. "What a treat."

"Watching *Wizard of Oz* became a tradition in our family," writes Mildred Steele. "Later as a university professor, I discovered that the film was the only thing that all my students could relate to, whenever I made a passing reference to it."

Verle Reinicke's mother and a "neighbor lady" always watched the girls' high school basketball tournament. Several readers recall special televised events, such as the Queen Elizabeth's coronation, Eisenhower's inauguration, and the Nixon-Kennedy debates. Such occasions didn't please all viewers; Joy Neal Kidney remembers the disappointment of coming home from school in 1954 "to find Mom watching the Army-McCarthy hearings. That meant our favorite after-school programs had been preempted."

We asked: Did your household purchase other furnishings or accessories to use with your TV, or devices to improve reception or enhance viewing?

"TV trays came into our lives in the 1960s," John Harnagel remarks. "That was it!"

"We purchased TV trays, as did most every-

"The TV set went back into the box without my even plugging it into an outlet. Later that evening, I telephoned one of my ag engineering associates who I thought might be interested in joining the TV-owner group. After all, I was planning to sell it to him at my good discounted price.

"Upon arrival at our home in Gilbert, Iowa, my fellow ag engineer, his family, and my family all gathered around for 'the great picture.' I plugged it in, turned it on, and the screen lit up—for all of ninety seconds when the picture tube blew up.

"With my wife's remarks cast in my mind, within days I arranged with a Des Moines appliance wholesaler to trade that TV for an electric clothes drier. And my wife lived happily ever after—at least for the thirty-year life of that drier, and as used in three different homes in two states.

"Our family had no TV set until 1956 when I moved to the University of Missouri in Columbia. While our family enjoyed the old family-oriented shows and the children's shows, that trouble-free drier outlasted our first three TV sets.

"There is a good deal of irony in this story. While I was using this new educational television medium to show and tell farm families how to reduce water-using and washday drudgery, it was my wife's denouncement of my TV purchase that led to [the] purchase and long-time use of her work-saving clothes drier. I must admit that her priorities were better than mine, especially at that point in the life of our family."

one we knew," writes Eleanor Otto. "People thought that they had to watch TV while they ate." In fact, she and her husband, Earl, sold them at their Storm Lake furniture store. "We sold TV trays at our store and sold lots and lots of these tray sets," she remembers. "These were metal trays with metal folding legs. Also many people had to have TV lamps. These would sit on top of the TV set and most of the time this was the only light that was used while the TV was on. We sold various TV lamps, such as glass blocks with artificial flowers in them and a light below. Some of these lamps had shades, others with partial shades, and some had revolving shades that went around by the heat of the bulb. TV lamps were a very popular item in our store for many years."

George McDaniel describes his neighbors' set: "The screen was round but you could turn a switch to make the image rectangular." George Hinshaw tells of his father "acquiring a wheel of some sort that was supposedly go-

ing to furnish color pictures by constant revolutions of the wheel, which consisted of red, green, and blue plastic inserted in lightweight cardboard." Verle Reinicke apparently has a "scanning disc" in his attic: "It's a big and cumbersome device and not so good looking, but it worked. It . . . goes over the front of the screen and spins, controlled by some electronics in a separate box that synchronizes it electronically so that a color picture results."

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

Doris Wilson Neal "combined monotonous housework—shelling peas, snapping beans, ironing, folding clothes—with watching TV," and still does, according to her daughter Joy. "After supper she stacked the dishes to wash in the morning so she could watch the good evening programs with her family."

Miriam Baker Nye admits, "I can't say that

Freakish Atmospheric Conditions in Ames

From Irene Crippen:

Irene Crippen and her husband, Harold, were deeply involved in early television in central Iowa. Here she shares with us newspaper clippings and excerpts from her family records.

By 1945, Crippen Radio Service was "looking to the future," the *Ames Tribune* reported, and planning to "sell and service television and FM receivers when those services become available in this area."

"In April 1948," Irene writes, "General Electric Company in Des Moines telephoned Harold saying they had received a General Electric TV set. They didn't know what to do with it and asked Harold to come to Des Moines." Harold brought the set home to study it.

That June, according to the *Tribune*, "Ames had its first television reception last night because of an extremely freakish atmospheric condition that may not be repeated for weeks."

The article continued, "Two of the programs

[broadcast from Boston, New York, and another city] were commercial, one being sponsored by a cigarette company, the other by a tire company. The third program was a sports broadcast showing a diver in action from a high board.

"The programs were received at the Crippen home, 710 Carroll, where employes, relatives and neighbors gathered as quickly as word could be circulated that the television set was receiving clearly," the paper noted. "The set is a General Electric, 21-tube model 802."

Irene relates, "We had the set in our upstairs bedroom most of the time [the closest spot to the backyard antenna]. Some times ten to twenty neighbors and friends would be in the room watching the new miracle."

That summer the Crippens traveled to Canada, taking the set along so Harold could test reception at an earlier stop in St. Paul. "When crossing the border," Irene writes, "Harold told the customs officials that the object in the trunk of our

TV interfered with my teaching preparation, my housework, or my writing 'From the Kitchen Window' (a weekly homemaker column) for the *Sioux City Journal*, 1953-1981. Many programs I never saw in their entirety, but only in snatches as I went to and fro while others of the family were watching."

For Marlene Metzgar, television didn't interfere much with housework in her family's Knoxville home because "programming was very time limited in the 1950s in central Iowa." She adds, "The town we lived in was small and we had access to only one channel, which did not come on until 5:00 p.m."

Verle Reinicke tells us that he and his brother often arranged vacuuming and housecleaning duties "around certain programs. . . . Washing dishes was also often done on the fly or postponed briefly until a

certain dinner-hour program was over."

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



Betty and Henry Ankeny observe, "We snacked more at night." And John Harnagel writes, "All meals were eaten either in our breakfast room or the dining room, no exceptions."

For Mildred Steele, "TV had little effect on dining patterns at our house. Occasionally someone got excused from a meal if a particularly important program was on, but this was a rare occasion."

George McDaniel notes, "We rarely were allowed to eat in front of the television. The only exceptions I remember were during the World Series when my dad would eat dinner and watch the ball game. And on Sunday nights we would have a sandwich in

car was a television set. 'A what?' demanded the official in disbelief. He hadn't heard of the invention. We met the same response from the American officials when crossing the border at another city on our return."

Irene relates another TV episode that summer: The Crippens "traveled to Arlington, Wisconsin, to Harold's Grandmother Gundlach's funeral," Irene writes. "Milwaukee had a television station and Harold hoped to see what reception he could get. Television was hardly considered part of a German funeral. Harold's cousin, Robert Gundlach, had a room on the second floor of his home. Bob was interested as was Harold so they sneaked the set upstairs into a room to the back of the house—as it had a door out over a back porch and Harold could string a wire for his antenna on the roof. It was all supposed to be a secret. The evening of the funeral, the first political convention ever televised was of great interest to Harold. The large family had all gathered in Bob's home for food. Harold was certain senior members of the family would not appreciate or ap-

prove TV interest on the eve of the funeral.

"Secret, it was to be," she continues. "Harold and I went into the dark room and after a few minutes there on the small TV screen was the political convention from Philadelphia.

"In what we thought was an inconspicuous place, in an upstairs bedroom we saw the first televised convention. . . .

"One by one another person sneaked into the room. Soon the room was so full, we were afraid we would all fall into the kitchen. We had to get organized and take turns so everyone there could see the first television.

"The grandmother they buried that eventful day was born in Germany on November 16, 1855. She lived to be 92 years and 7 months. Even up to her last day, she cooked, she tended her big garden and she enjoyed life. I believe she would have approved the excitement of the TV event on the eve of her burial," Irene comments.

Harold Crippen helped found the Television Servicemen's Association of Iowa, and served as first state president in 1957.

the living room and watch *Lassie*."

Verle Reinicke mentions that a favorite show, *Captain Video*, "came on during the evening meal, and I can remember being frustrated that we had to eat at that time. I would watch around the corner from where I was sitting at the table, or I would get up and watch briefly and then return to the table."

Finally, in the Neal farmhouse, "when extra men came for noon dinner, the TV was turned on during the news and market reports, then turned off for conversation."

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

"TV didn't affect our socializing very much," Eleanor Otto tells us. "We turned the set off if friends came as we couldn't watch TV and visit at the same time. This is one of the reasons that the TV was moved from the living room to the den—so that some members of the family could watch TV while the adults visited in the living room."

For John Harnagel, "socializing with friends and relatives was not affected by TV in our house. I think the doors on the Capehart [television set] helped—out of sight, out of mind. My young friends and I would often watch television after school together at one another's houses—usually the one with the best snacks."

Mildred Steele notes, "Occasionally we called on an individual who would let nothing interfere with the TV show she was watching. We thought this was odd."

For Joy Neal Kidney, this was part of family life: "We usually turned the TV off when someone came to visit, but if we visited Grandpa and Grandma Neal when their favorite game show was on, we'd have to watch it with them. At Grandma Wilson's, she and her mother hated to miss Art Linkletter's *House Party*, *Queen for a Day*, or the fifteen-minute 'soap operas' they watched mid-mornings."

We asked: Besides inside your home, where else do you remember watching early television?

Our anonymous reader says succinctly, "After we got our own, nowhere else." But Vir-

ginia Wadsley remembers watching TV in waiting rooms at stockyards, and Eleanor Otto of Storm Lake remembers watching the Rose Bowl parade in color at the local Cobblestone Ballroom and restaurant.

"My first view of a TV picture was [in] the spring of 1938," writes Edwin C. Lowenberg. "This was a demonstration using the old flying spot scanner in the Department of Electrical Engineering at the University of Iowa in Iowa City. There was an open house for the people who were taking the final tests in the Iowa Every Pupil Test Program." Lowenberg, who was from Donnellson, later enrolled in Electrical Engineering, was hired at Collins Radio in Cedar Rapids, and then was an electrical engineer at the university's Medical College. "The second time I saw a TV picture was walking with my older daughter down Market Street in Iowa City and looking in the window of a tavern," he writes. "A friend . . . from Collins came along and we talked about this new marvel."

Lowenberg, as well as D. L. "Lee" Wood, reminds us of the pioneering work of electrical engineering professor Edwin B. Kurtz in educational television and Station W9XK at the University of Iowa in the 1930s.

Genevieve Slemmons McLaughlin also had a connection to Kurtz: "His daughter, Jeanne Kurtz, was a friend of mine in high school at University High School [in Iowa City]," she writes, "and I will never forget seeing their television set in their home in the '30s. . . . My memory is that it was a large cabinet and a very small screen."

Joy Neal Kidney recalls an early TV at her sister's classmate's home: "We were invited in to admire the tiny nine- or ten-inch marvel." When she attended college in the mid 1960s, students "had radios in our rooms and some had stereos, but the only TV was in a room in the basement of the dorm."

Mildred Steele relates, "In 1949 (or 1948?) we were living in New England, and during the World Series, the city placed TV sets around the Boston Common so people could watch the game. During these years, we were occasionally invited to someone's house to watch *Perry Como* or *Jo Stafford* or *Ed Sullivan*, and there we would file in and sit in the dark

(people thought watching TV was like watching a movie) with little conversation. It was eerie. When we moved to [Stratford,] Iowa in 1951, a neighbor often invited me over to watch television while I did our baby daughter's diapers in her automatic washer. TV was such a status thing that some people who didn't yet have a TV allegedly installed a fake TV antenna on their roof—but I don't know of anyone who actually did this."

Steele adds yet another early TV-viewing location. "When our daughter was four, we drove to a funeral out of town. Soon we were seated in the funeral home, waiting for the service to begin, and the silence was heavy. At that point our daughter noticed a television set over in a far corner. She looked at her watch and whispered to me, 'Do you think they'd mind if I turned on *Howdy Doody*?'"

Finally, we asked: Who repaired your TV if it broke? Where was it repaired? When did you get a color TV? What prompted that decision?

For Verle Reinicke's family, repairs were convenient. "Within a year or two [after the family purchased our first television, my father] took a correspondence course from DeForrest Institute in Chicago and went into the radio/TV repair business." He had been an auto mechanic.

Esther Charlotte Smith tells us that the "repairman from the furniture store" that sold the set repaired it in her home. Her family



"got color TV about 1975—friends were buying, or already had bought, color sets."

Readers, thanks for "helping us write history." Your responses are important because they are detailed and candid first-hand accounts of domestic life at a pivotal point in mass consumerism and technological history. Housed in State Historical Society of Iowa archives, the complete surveys provide the raw material that historians can tap into when asking, "What was the impact of early television on American households?"

Several responses express appreciation for this personal opportunity to look at television historically and to share memories with other household members. As editor, I want to express my immense appreciation for the responses received. It's been great to hear from you, and as you can see from the photo below—I've been all ears. —*The editor*



Television's influence on your editor's childhood is apparent in my headgear. While my brother Gary Bein obviously had work on his mind this summer day in the mid-1950s on our Scott County farm, perhaps I had other things on my mind, like: "Am I missing *The Mickey Mouse Club Show*?"

COURTESY THE EDITOR