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# Rube tube : CBS, rural sitcoms, and the image of the south, 1957-1971

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RUBE TUBE: CBS, RURAL SITCOMS, AND THE IMAGE OF  
THE SOUTH, 1957-1971

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
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in

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by

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## Abstract

This dissertation examines the factors that led to the creation of the CBS rural comedy boom in the 1960s, as well as the reasons for its demise. For years, historians have dismissed the rural comedy craze as the networks catering to the growing number of southern viewers in the late 1950s. However, there were not enough southern viewers to dictate a network's programming schedule for almost a decade. Also, rural comedy was the domain of a single network, CBS. Had it really been a major thematic trend, all networks would have at least attempted to follow suit. Therefore, other political, social, and economic factors besides the rising number of southern viewers made rural comedy uniquely suited for CBS in the 1960s.

In the late 1940s, during the Red Scare, CBS developed a reputation as the "Communist Broadcast System." The network spent most of the 1950s attempting to dispel that nickname through a series of quiz shows and westerns. Both genres ultimately backfired and drew negative attention for the network. When rival ABC introduced rural-themed programming to cater to the burgeoning southern market, CBS quickly joined the fray. By the mid 1960s, it had not only stolen ABC's hold on the rural market, but also re-established itself as the "Country Broadcasting System." CBS' stable of rural comedies dominated the ratings throughout the 1960s, a phenomenon not entirely explained by southern viewers. Rural sitcoms brought in viewers from all over the country, indicating universality to the programs that superseded their regional appeal.

This dissertation discusses the factors contributing to the appeal of rural comedy in the 1960s, and addresses the factors that led to the genre's abrupt demise in the early 1970s.

This study not only provides insight into the role that the southern image played in entertaining and reassuring Americans in the turbulent 1960s, it also demonstrates that television is not made in a vacuum. Television trends are the result of specific political, social, and economic stressors placed on the network and the larger population, and therefore provide a living time capsule into the era they were created.

## Introduction

Over the past thirty years, classic television shows from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s have developed into a major industry in the United States. Given our nation's obsession with celebrating its past, it is not surprising that the trend extends into our entertainment viewing preferences. Entire networks are devoted to reruns of *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, *Leave it to Beaver*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, and other programs from that era. Whether a traditional family sitcom, a so-called "idiot" sitcom, or a rural comedy, classic programs remain some of the most beloved in television history and still maintain a loyal fan base in the twenty-first century, as a new generation views them through the mediums of video and cable television. Viewing clubs abound online, with people all over the world logging on to discuss their favorite episodes. An industry exists just for the marketing of paraphernalia related to classic shows, including thermoses, lunch boxes, cookbooks, action figures, and t-shirts. There are numerous books devoted to cataloging and dissecting the characters and themes of specific series. One company sells a series of Bible study kits called Primetime Parables, which are based on episodes of popular shows like *I Love Lucy* and *The Andy Griffith Show*. Primetime Parables draws parallels between the morals of particular episodes with Bible verses, thereby elevating the programs to the level of religious instruction.

The irony of the classic television industry is that the original television producers were not concerned with the legacy or permanence of their product. When television was first introduced, programs were not even filmed, but aired live and then never seen again. The original creators of television did not intend to preserve their product for posterity;

indeed, they were literally creating throwaway entertainment.<sup>1</sup> Producers assumed that home viewers would not want to watch the same program more than once, but they soon saw the error of their ways. As television technology became more sophisticated and networks started to realize the profit potential for semi-permanent syndication, networks started to archive their programs in the 1950s. So-called “re-runs” became popular in the 1960s, and now they are a common feature of cable television. Most programs that aired in the early 1950s were seen only once by a limited audience, but some programs from the 1960s have never been off the air since their original run. Unlike their predecessors, those shows have been seen by multiple generations and therefore have an exponentially larger viewership.

As re-runs and classic shows increasingly populate the cable television landscape, patterns emerge in what types of shows stand the test of time. Since what began as throwaway entertainment has evolved into a permanent fixture, it is more important than ever to understand how and why television trends develop. After all, not every show becomes popular. Out of the hundreds of series developed every year, only a relative handful survive, and even fewer achieve the popularity necessary to achieve “classic” status. For every show that runs for decades in television syndication, dozens languish in archives, long forgotten. Sometimes shows are forgotten because they simply fall through the cracks, a victim of inopportune timing on the part of the people who manage the show’s business interests. In other instances, shows disappear or succeed because of a

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<sup>1</sup> Even when networks began filming television programs in the early 1950s, they would often re-use the tapes from previous shows, effectively erasing their previous work. They would archive a small portion of their shows, only to throw them away periodically to make room for more film. As a result, there are very few surviving copies of the first five years of television programming. *I Love Lucy* was the first show to tape and archive its episodes, making it the first program to reap the financial benefits of syndication.

carefully crafted strategy created by a network. In all cases, television programs reflect current social, economic, and political concerns; they do not exist in a cultural vacuum. Even the most innocuous television trends are motivated by a larger goal on the part of the network.

The motivations driving network-programming strategies have never been as clear as with the rural comedy craze of the 1950s and 1960s. Shows such as *Green Acres*, *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.*, *Petticoat Junction*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, and *The Andy Griffith Show* did not make any revolutionary contributions to the television arts and sciences, and none of them featured any groundbreaking plotlines or themes. Instead, they are examples of mild, generic comedy with a strong southern flavor. Despite the lack of originality, they were some of the most highly rated programs of the 1960s, and they are currently some of the most popular shows on the classic television channels. It is easy to understand why such programs, with their wholesome values and lack of sex and violence, are a good fit for television networks devoted to family-friendly viewing. It is more complicated, however, to understand why such programs became so popular during the tumultuous 1960s.

Eric Barnouw's comprehensive *Tube of Plenty* and Gary Edgerton's *Columbia History of Television* both provide what has become the definitive explanation for why rural comedy became so popular in the 1960s.<sup>2</sup> Barnouw and Edgerton dismiss the rural craze as an attempt by the networks, and CBS in particular, to attract the burgeoning rural and southern audience. There is some truth to that claim. Large cities like New York and Chicago had television access in the late 1940s, but the rural portions of the country still

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<sup>2</sup>*Tube of Plenty* is essentially an abridged and updated version of Barnouw's earlier three part series for Oxford, *The History of Broadcasting in the United States*.

did not have access when, in 1948, the Federal Communication Commission placed a hold on all pending station licenses. After the FCC lifted the ban in 1952, new television stations opened all over the country, including the South and other rural parts of the country. Programs that were popular with what had been a mostly urban audience up to that point suddenly did not perform as well. It was a smart strategy for the networks to appeal to southern and rural viewers by providing them with rural-themed programming.

One flaw in Edgerton and Barnouw's argument, however, is that it discounts the size of the southern television audience. The A.C. Nielsen Company, which has measured television ratings since the 1950s, estimated that in 1966, the height of the rural comedy boom, southerners only owned approximately 14.4 percent of all the nation's televisions, not nearly enough to exert fundamental control over viewing preferences.<sup>3</sup>In the late 1950s, when the seed of rural humor was planted in television, the percentage was much lower. Even accounting for the "Southern Diaspora," the estimated 20 million white and African-American migrants who left the South between 1900 and 1970, there would not be enough southerners to shift them into a position where they could dictate national tastes.<sup>4</sup>A network needed to win 34 percent of the viewership to secure first place in the ratings, and the South could only provide a fraction of that number, even with every set tuned to the same station. Therefore, the South was a niche audience at best and certainly not large enough to commandeer a network's program schedule for nearly a decade.

Another point of confusion in Barnouw and Edgerton's argument is the timing of the rural comedy craze. The FCC lifted its licensing ban in 1952, so it follows that if the

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<sup>3</sup> A.C. Nielsen Company, *Nielsen Television, '66* (Chicago: A.C. Nielsen, 1966), 16.

<sup>4</sup> James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migration of Black and White Southerners Changed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2005), 13.

networks reacted specifically to the influx of southern viewers, it would have reflected in the programming schedule within one or two years. While ABC did attempt to attract rural audiences with a handful of country music programs in the mid-to-late 1950s, CBS monopolized the rural genre by the 1960s. CBS did not air its first rural themed show until 1960, six years after the ban lifted. The record requires further examination to determine why, if the network was responding to the needs of a new audience, it waited six years to do so.

In addition to the necessity for further study into the development of television trends, there is a need to understand why a trend so specifically southern in nature developed in the 1960s. Historians have not devoted much effort to dissecting trends related to southern images in television programming. Some scholarship exists devoted to the representation of southerners and rural people, albeit in a much broader sense. Jack Temple Kirby, Allison Graham, Alan Nadel, and most recently, Karen Cox have all addressed the enduring American fascination with southern stories and images, and how that interest manifests itself in popular culture.

Kirby's *Media-Made Dixie* explored how the media has honed, evolved, and perpetuated southern stereotypes over the course of the twentieth century. As his title suggests, Kirby takes a multi-media approach, assessing how advertisers, filmmakers, and television producers have participated in the manipulation of southern images and examining the cumulative cultural impact of their use. From the books of Erskine Caldwell portraying poor white southerners as pathetic and depraved, to Hollywood's love affair with picturesque antebellum images, to television's reveling in redneck hijinks with *The Dukes of Hazzard*, Kirby demonstrates that while the media has evolved in its

perception of the South, the portrayals remain steeped in stereotypes. Although Kirby's assessments of southern images on television are a valuable part of his analysis, they are also slight compared to his more in-depth explorations of books, film, and advertising. Kirby ultimately provides more instruction on how, rather than why, the media utilizes southern images.

Allison Graham's *Framing the South* provides a more thorough analysis of television's portrayal of the South and contrasts televised images with those found in film. Graham's timeframe aligns perfectly with the period in which rural comedies were most popular, and her research provides insight as to possible connections between the political strife of the period and entertainment preferences. She conceptualizes how these portrayals helped form outsiders' views of the South, addresses what these images might say about how the rest of the country perceived southern people. Graham concludes that the media actively created a black hero/poor white villain dichotomy in movies, news, and television that exonerated southern leadership and placed full blame for southern racism on rednecks. In doing so, the media unintentionally created the idea that only poor southern whites were responsible for southern racial mores while the middle and upper classes were innocent. As southern whites acquiesced to pressure and changed their customs, Graham asserts that depictions of southerners became more forgiving. She cites Tennessee Ernie Ford and Andy Griffith as examples of the change toward friendly southerners in the media.

Although Graham provides an excellent analysis of how southern programming blurred the lines between the realities of southern life and fiction, some of her conclusions require further examination. The southern television characters that she cites

as evidence of the media acknowledging a shift in southern values were on television at the exact time that the civil rights movement and accompanying violence reaches its zenith. They could not have been representative of southern social change because the change had not yet come, so there must be other factors at play. Graham also draws her conclusions solely within the context of southern racial politics and does not examine the broader political implications of the images she analyzes.

Alan Nadel's *Television in Black and White America* branches out from strictly southern images to analyze the breadth of television programming in the 1950s and 1960s. Like Graham, Nadel centers his discussion around America's racial history and its impact on televised images. By not focusing solely on southern-themed shows, he is able to draw conclusions about the role of race in television programming that extend beyond regional borders in a way that Kirby and Graham do not. Nadel finds that television actively served as a purveyor of racial and political attitudes, and he demonstrates how westerns, more than any other genre, convey those stances. He illustrates how 1950s and 1960s television virtually erased people of color from sight, thereby telegraphing to the audience that all of the Cold War era virtues on display were the realm of whites only. The author does an excellent job of demonstrating how television reflected casual racism and Cold War nationalism, but he frames his argument in the context of cultural impact, and does not examine the broader political implications of the shows he analyzes.

One of the newest works on southern media portrayals is Karen Cox' *Dreaming of Dixie*, which provides an analysis of why Americans remain obsessed with southern culture and the role of the media in creating what people think they know about the South. However, Cox frames her analysis primarily around portrayals of antebellum

culture in the South and focuses on the romanticism often connected to that time period. She contends that advertisers and members of the media latched onto the South as a region untouched by modernity and the last outpost of America's pastoral traditions. In making that argument, Cox examines only the period between the end of the Civil War and World War II. As such, her analysis does not explain why the television version of the modern South became so popular in the 1960s. Rural comedies did not tap into nostalgia for either the antebellum or postwar South, and therefore do not fit Cox' model, although her conclusions do partially explain rural comedy as a type of mourning for the loss of rural culture.

In addition to the need to understand the history of southern images in television, it is also important to examine why southerners make such appealing entertainment. Numerous studies explore why certain southern stereotypes endure and why Americans remain simultaneously fascinated with and repulsed by southern culture. These books deal with a number of subcultures that exist within the southern ecosystem, namely rednecks and hillbillies. John Shelton Reed has created an entire career on the dissection of southern culture and the collective American understanding of that culture. In *Southern Folk, Plain and Fancy*, he identified several subgroups of southerners, but that these distinctions are often lost on people outside the South. He also established a possible reason why southern stereotypes endure despite the fact that they increasingly fail to describe the realities of southern life. They persist, according to Reed, because they serve what he calls a "mudsill function" in the culture, meaning that they have the effect of making non-southern people feel better about their own social, economic, and

educational circumstances.<sup>5</sup> Despite Reed's fascinating analyses of southern stereotypes and the effect that they have on southerners and the way that non-southerners perceive them, Reed's is a broad analysis of American culture and its relationship to the South. He acknowledges the usage of southern stereotypes in the media, but he does not address the impact of media portrayals.

Other historians have specifically addressed the media's portrayal of hillbillies and rednecks on television. J. W. Williamson's *Hillbillyland* provides the history of the hillbilly stereotype and the many ways in which that image has evolved in media portrayals. Williamson addresses hillbilly imagery in advertising, radio, movies, and television. Anthony Harkins' *Hillbilly* follows a similar trajectory. His history examines the realities of mountain life and how they are exaggerated for the purposes of entertainment, portrayed alternately as dangerous subversives and nostalgic symbols of old fashioned values. Jim Goad's *The Redneck Manifesto* examines the American fascination with rednecks, taking John Shelton Reed's position that Americans enjoy watching rednecks and poor southerners because it provides them with a sense of elevated social station. He analyzes examples of rednecks in popular culture and explains how they alter real-life perceptions of southerners. As with the other authors who delved into why southern images maintain a hold on the American imagination, Williamson, Harkins, and Goad do not address what it was about hillbillies and other sundry southern types that made them a national phenomenon in the 1960s. They all agree that southern images serve a mudsill function, but they do not examine the import of the fundamentally conservative social values that those images also represent.

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<sup>5</sup> John Shelton Reed, *Southern Folk, Plain and Fancy: Native White Social Types* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 65.

Although all of the above-mentioned historians have examined the American fascination with southern people, rural comedy and its place in the television industry, one aspect of the story remains missing. No one has yet examined the rural craze from a national political standpoint as well as a cultural one. This seems like an obvious oversight since rural comedies became popular at the height of the Cold War, which loomed as an enormous geopolitical threat for half of the twentieth century. In an era of heightened paranoia and fear, it seems unlikely that the television industry could completely divorce political concerns from entertainment. Indeed, even a cursory examination of television in the 1950s and 1960s reveals a heavy Cold War influence, and not only in themes and subject matter. Certain people, themes, and subjects appeared on television before and after the Cold War that were conspicuously absent during this particularly tense time in our history. My contention is that Cold War era political concerns played a stronger role in the development of television programming than others have previously suggested, and that the sudden popularity of southern images resulted in part from the networks' need to display the "correct" political values to the audience for the sake of profit.

The shows of the 1950s are excellent examples of how strongly politics can influence television. When one thinks of 1950s programming, shows like *Leave it to Beaver*, *Father Knows Best*, and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* come to mind. The names of popular characters become synonymous with certain cultural constructs—referring to a couple as “Ozzie and Harriet” alludes to their seemingly ideal parenting style and family situation. Calling a woman a “Donna Reed-type” is to call her a picture perfect mother and wife. Referring to a boy as “Beaver Cleaver” is shorthand for a smart,

wholesome, if slightly rambunctious child. Meanwhile, when one character on the current period drama *Mad Men* referred to a client as Molly Goldberg, the Jewish matriarch of the wildly popular 1950s CBS radio and television sitcom *The Goldbergs*, few viewers even understood the reference and even fewer had ever seen the show itself.<sup>6</sup> It is remarkable that a show that ran longer than *Ozzie and Harriet*, *Leave it to Beaver*, and *Father Knows Best* and equaled them in popularity is now considered an obscurity while the others have achieved lasting fame.

Viewers in the twenty-first century no longer understand a reference to *The Goldbergs* because after a certain point in the 1950s, CBS no longer thought it prudent to have a connection to the show, or any other that prominently featured non-Anglo Saxon whites. The faces on network television's earliest sitcoms were frequently African-Americans or white ethnics, and those sitcoms more often than not took place in an urban setting. The reason programs like *The Goldbergs* and other ethnic-themed comedies did not last while other, more "traditional" programs received lasting acclaim is that they were casualties of the Red Scare. At a time when ethnic minorities were often equated with subversive politics, it was far easier for networks to champion series featuring white actors than to promote shows featuring African-Americans or Jews, no matter how beloved.

The first chapter of this dissertation provides an analysis of how Cold War paranoia and political pressure swiftly and permanently changed the face of American television. In the early 1950s, a combination of highly publicized governmental and civilian concern about the pervasiveness of Communism in the United States led to an

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<sup>6</sup> *Mad Men*, "The Marriage of Figaro," Season 1, Episode 3, originally aired August 7, 2007 on AMC. Directed by Ed Bianchi, written by Matthew Weiner.

overt interest in the political leanings of people in the entertainment industry. In response, the industry instituted a blacklist of people with suspect political connections. Anti-communist groups targeted a disproportionate number of ethnic minorities, mainly Jews and African-Americans. Certain people and ideas could find no quarter in film, radio, or television as network and studio executives attempted to prove their patriotism by excluding any hint of controversy from their productions. Although the blacklist lost its power in the late 1950s and ended by the early 1960s, in that short period the television industry had transformed from being a multicultural bastion of creativity into the model of white, conservative conformity.

Chapter Two addresses how the networks, CBS in particular, coped with the aftermath of the blacklist scandal and the Red Scare. CBS struggled to fill the vacuum left by the blacklisted actors and the now-taboo subject matter. Throughout the 1950s, the network made multiple attempts to create a new craze that would both give it a wholesome image and attract a large number of viewers. Westerns and quiz shows were extremely popular, but also ultimately proved just as controversial as ethnic comedies had been. Westerns drew the ire of critics because of their excessive violence, while the quiz show scandals in the late 1950s exposed widespread cheating and other unsavory business practices on the part of CBS employees. Luckily for CBS, a third option presented itself. Throughout the late 1950s, ABC increasingly produced rural themed shows in an attempt to draw in the growing number of rural and southern viewers. CBS had adopted the trend partially by infusing a number of its westerns with southern characters and storylines, but stopped just short of overtly rural shows.

Chapter Three explains how CBS made the transition from “western” to “southern” programming in the early 1960s. *The Andy Griffith Show* marked CBS’ first foray into overtly rural/southern programming and, like many of the CBS rural comedies, it had a combination of southern and western elements. The show was about a small town sheriff, a common protagonist in western series, but its star was strongly identified with his southern comedy and thick southern accent. The show became an unexpected hit, and the network ultimately created numerous variations on the theme. Throughout the 1960s, the network increasingly moved away from western motifs and more firmly toward southern ones. As viewers increasingly identified CBS with its rural programming strategy, ABC’s commitment to the genre slowly petered out.

The reasons for the popularity of rural comedy are complex, and Chapters Four and Five analyze why those shows achieved stratospheric success for such an extended period of time. In addition to the networks being predisposed to favor rural comedies because they saved money by sharing and repurposing already existing storylines, writers, and sets, viewers connected with the material in unexpected ways. Rural programs were perfect because they were uncontroversial and espoused extremely conservative moral values, particularly in regard to romantic relationships and gender roles. They also provided an old-fashioned, almost vaudevillian style of humor that audiences found inoffensive. They also catered to the niche market of rural and southern viewers, as well as the large southern diaspora. With the southern white man, both ABC and CBS found enormous profits, with CBS in particular gaining a position of influence over the television industry.

Despite CBS initially using rural comedy as a lure to attract southern and rural viewers, programs like *The Andy Griffith Show* and *The Beverly Hillbillies* made a strong showing in the ratings all over the country. The demographic data indicates that income, and not region, was a major predictor of who watched rural comedies. Those in lower income households were more likely to watch than those with higher incomes. Given the doltish behavior and antics often found in rural comedy, one could surmise that lower income viewers were using rural comedies as a mudsill.

Another reason for the popularity of rural comedies is that, by the mid 1960s, they were the last vestiges of overwhelmingly white programming on television. They boasted casts that were, or at least looked and sounded like, Anglo-Saxon Protestants. The South is one of the most ethnically homogenous portions of the country, as white people from that region are overwhelmingly Anglo-Saxon in origin. Their traditions are those of northern Europe and, at a time when other ethnicities were suspect because of their potential political disloyalties, it was important that their behavior not reflect the rituals of a perceived 'other.'

While the networks had almost eliminated people of color from their programming after the Red Scare and the blacklist made non-white ethnicity a cause for suspicion, a few people of color made their way onto primetime shows by the mid-1960s. It quickly became fashionable to include black actors on hit television shows, but rural comedies did not follow suit. The networks remained reluctant to add a significant number of African-American actors to their casts, despite increasing pressure from civil rights groups. For more than a decade, the custom was to attribute the lack of diversity on television to the preferences of southern audiences, but in reality the southern audiences

were not large enough to effectively make or break a television show. The television industry was notoriously racist, and during the 1960s numerous instances of racial violence occurred all over the country, not just in the South. CBS claimed that they kept rural series completely white in order to appease southern viewers, but in reality the network was less diverse than both of its rivals and with white viewers exhibiting exceedingly racist tendencies in the political arena, keeping rural programming white was a prudent business decision. To the network as well as the viewers, rural comedies were meant to serve as a method of getting away from the increasing strife in American society. It would be jarring for white viewers to see black faces mar the lily-white tableau of southern-themed rural comedy.

By the late 1960s, CBS, along with the other two major networks, attempted to move away from its old standards and reinvent itself for the purposes of attracting new viewers, an exercise in futility chronicled in Chapter Six. Throughout the 1960s, research steadily indicated that demographic targeting was a more successful programming strategy than the industry's current standard of pursuing "least objectionable programming." The network started to realize that having a lot of people watch a show did not necessarily translate into major sales for the advertisers. CBS, in particular, discovered that the reason many of its rural comedies were so popular was because they were increasingly favored by small children and the elderly, who were considered the least capable of translating viewership into advertising dollars.

In 1967, the network introduced the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, which was supposed to draw younger, more urban viewers to the network. The Smothers Brothers looked clean cut but had a slightly subversive edge to their comedy, and they soon

became popular with younger viewers as intended. However, as the Brothers gained more confidence, their show quickly became a lightning rod of controversy for the network. In addition to protesting the Vietnam War and cleverly railing against Richard Nixon, the Brothers made a habit of mocking southern people and their values, almost as a stand-in for the Silent Majority. The Brothers eventually caused so much difficulty that the network unceremoniously fired them in the spring of 1969. Faced with the loss of a popular program, the network retreated from its demographic targeting strategy and reverted to what it knew best: rural comedy. Within five weeks, CBS replaced the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* with *Hee Haw*, a new rural-themed comedy and variety show. Although CBS had not aired a new rural-themed comedy show since 1965, in 1969 it debuted three such series, indicating that even as the television industry was moving away from programs that catered to the widest possible audience, CBS was having difficulty letting go of the strategy.

Chapter Seven addresses how CBS finally separated itself from its image as the “Country Broadcast System.” Saddled with three new rural comedy shows in addition to a bevy of rapidly aging rural comedies and outdated variety shows, CBS faced either holding on to its current programming strategies and sliding into obscurity, or making a drastic change in its programming. With the help of a new programming director and president, the network accomplished a turnaround. Both the head of programming and the network president had strong personal feelings against rural comedy, and that distaste helped them to overcome the fear of losing ratings and undertake what became known as the Rural Purge. Between 1970 and 1971, CBS divested itself of every rural comedy and rural-aimed program on its schedule, even though many of them remained in the Nielsen

Top 20. In place of rural comedies, CBS struggled to find programs that would appeal to a young, upwardly mobile, urban demographic. The programs the network chose illustrate that while the network wanted to move away from its connection to rural comedy, it did not necessarily want to lose its rural and southern audience. However, rural comedies had pigeonholed southern characters to the point where it was difficult to portray a southern character on television without referencing common stereotypes. Attempts at southern-themed dramas quickly failed. In the late 1970s, CBS once again attempted a rural comedy series with *The Dukes of Hazzard*, followed by some updated attempts in the late 1980s, but these shows did not amount to a bonafide trend as they did in the 1960s.

By analyzing the rise and fall of the rural comedy, this dissertation will establish the long-term significance of trends in television programming and how they reflect the changing values and cultural mores of the audience. Television is often treated by scholars as a poor relation to the true art of cinema when, in reality, television has a much greater bearing on American lives than movies. Television is with us in our homes at all times and has the ability to hold our attention over years of storytelling, whereas a movie captures our attention for only a couple hours. Now that the average American watches more than seven hours of television a day, it is safe to say that analyzing the programs that people watch might tell us something valuable about the state of our nation. Television programming is not created in a vacuum, but is instead a reflection of our current political and culture mores. In the age of video and digitalization, programming trends like reality television or rural comedy provide a time capsule from which future generation can assess the past.

## Chapter 1. The Communist Broadcast System

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the television networks created as diverse a programming schedule as has ever existed in the industry. CBS, more than any of its competitors, loaded its programming slots with ethnic-themed comedies. One of the most popular, *Amos 'n' Andy*, the story of two African-American southerners who relocated to Chicago, featured an almost entirely black cast. *Bonino* and *Life with Luigi* focused on the experience of the Italian-American family in the big city.<sup>7</sup> *The Goldbergs* was the Jewish counterpart to *Life with Luigi*, although unlike the latter, it focused on an entire family instead of a single man. *Beulah*, a show about an African-American housekeeper, was the first television program with an African-American woman in a leading role, and it found success as well. Each of these programs featured ethnic minorities as the main characters, with white actors present in limited roles. In addition to shows about Italians, Jews, and African-Americans, the networks developed numerous other programs about ethnic minorities that aired with varying degrees of success in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

That television executives chose these programs makes perfect sense given the demographics of early television audiences. All four major networks, ABC, CBS, NBC, and DuMont, had their headquarters in New York City. Though all developed a network of affiliate stations throughout the country, the New York metropolitan area and its

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<sup>7</sup>*Life with Luigi* drew ire from Italian-American groups for its stereotypical depictions of Italians and the fact that the lead character was played by an Irish-American actor, J. Carroll Naish. Despite the grief he received from the Italian-American Anti-Defamation League, Naish was known for playing many nationalities, including Italian, Native American, and Chinese. His January 27, 1973 obituary in *The Washington Post* referred to him as “Hollywood’s one-man U.N.”

surrounding states had the most receivers, potential viewers, and a wider variety of programs.<sup>8</sup> In the fall of 1948, the FCC put a freeze on applications of new affiliate television stations. At the time of the freeze, fourteen states, most of them in the South and the Midwest, had no transmitters at all. Of those fourteen, seven could not even get signals from adjoining states. They had no television access whatsoever.<sup>9</sup> The FCC did not lift the ban until 1952, so people in those regions had no reason to own what, at the time, would have been an extremely costly piece of furniture. In 1950 the median annual household income was approximately \$3,216, and the price of a television set could run anywhere from \$200 to \$500, a prohibitively high sum for many.<sup>10</sup>

Of the one million television sets in use by 1950, most were purchased by people within a 75-mile radius of the New York metropolitan area and a few other major cities like Boston and Los Angeles.<sup>11</sup> Not only did they have access to the most programming options, these cities also had a higher income than their counterparts in other parts of the country as well as smaller families. The typical New York family made \$5,105, nearly 40 percent higher than the national average, while their expenditures were only 20 percent higher.<sup>12</sup> The larger amount of disposable income combined with a smaller than average

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<sup>8</sup> The DuMont Television network existed from 1946 to 1956. It was a major network, but it found difficulty growing in the television market. Unlike the other networks, it did not have a radio division to expand upon. The 1948 FCC freeze on new television affiliate stations also prevented it from expanding. For more information, see David Weinstein, *The Forgotten Network: DuMont and the Birth of American Television* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> J. Fred MacDonald, *One Nation Under Television: The Rise and Decline of Network TV* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1993), 60.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *100 Years of Consumer Spending: Data for the Nation, New York City, and Boston* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1991), 22.

<sup>11</sup> James L. Baughman, "Television Comes to America, 1947-1957," *Illinois History* 46:3 (March 1993), 42.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *100 Years of Consumer Spending*, 23.

family size indicates that New Yorkers could afford televisions more than most Americans.

The networks worked with the audience they were given, which happened to be one of the most culturally and ethnically diverse in the nation. According to the 1950 census, only six states had more than ten percent of their populations comprised of foreign-born residents, with New York having the highest percentage.<sup>13</sup> In addition, New York contained a far higher percentage of persons of non-northern European heritage than almost any other state in the union. The center of the immigrant population in that state was, not surprisingly, New York City. Out of 7.9 million residents, 22.6 percent were foreign born.<sup>14</sup> Considering these demographics, it seems likely that a sizeable percentage of the television viewing population in the late 1940s and early 1950s was either foreign born or a descendent of an immigrant of something other than northern or western European descent. By airing a large variety of ethnic-themed programming, television networks hedged their bets by attempting to satisfy a large range of viewers based on the diverse ethnic makeup of the audience. In its earliest years, advertisers marketed television as a conduit to reality, and the emphasis on ethnic programming demonstrates that television executives tried to project the realities of its current audience.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 89; Census of the Population: 1950, *Volume 2, Part 32* (Washington DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1950), 32-62.

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *100 Years of Consumer Spending*, 22.

<sup>15</sup> Alan Nadel, *Television in Black and White America: Race and National Identity* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 27.

At the same time, programs featuring ethnic minorities created a perfect forum for negotiating tensions caused by the economic and social changes of post-war America.<sup>16</sup> In the midst of the continued Great Migration, increased urbanization, and the ascent of the middle class, each program touched on one or more of these issues and did so in a humorous fashion. *Amos 'n' Andy* dealt with two African-American men and the cab business they started after moving to Chicago from the South as part of the Great Migration. *The Goldbergs*, *I Remember Mama*, and *Life with Luigi* all told the stories of ethnic minorities navigating life in the city. Even *Beulah*, the story of an African-American maid working for a white family in a non-urban setting, reflected the growing presence of African-Americans in northern cities and the ongoing struggle there to negotiate peaceable relations between the races. These programs were ideal for the urban Northeast because many viewers there could identify with navigating urban life and searching for balance among a plethora of ethnic minorities.

Television programmers also had another, more pressing reason for putting ethnic programs on the air: the shows had already proven themselves moneymakers in another medium. Almost all of the ethnic-themed programs on the air in the late 1940s up through 1953 had already established solid records as radio shows. Television programs, like their predecessors on the radio, were sponsored entirely by advertisers, who were merely looking for the most efficient way to get a picture of their product into as many homes as possible. In an era where television was still something of a social experiment, advertisers did not have much interest in throwing money at a new or untried program. They did not even particularly care if the shows they picked became wildly popular, as

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<sup>16</sup> Michelle Hilmes, "Born Yesterday: Television and the Academic Mind," *American Literary History* 6:4 (Winter 1994): 797.

there was not yet a reliable method of measuring the number of viewers for specific shows. Instead, they wanted to back long-standing shows with an already established audience. CBS, in particular, raided its stable of radio programs and those of other networks to ensure it had a strong lineup. In 1948, the network poached Jack Benny, Edgar Bergen, Red Skelton, Burns and Allen, and *Amos 'n' Andy* from various network radio programs for its television division.<sup>17</sup> Although recent studies indicate that this is a good programming strategy, since viewers are consistent in their choices and tend to enjoy the kinds of entertainment that they had enjoyed before, the program coordinators at the networks did not have the benefit of that knowledge.<sup>18</sup> They only wanted shows that guaranteed an instant following on the small screen and therefore would be unlikely to fail. In the case of ethnic sitcoms, the bet paid off. The shows consistently scored high ratings, ensuring a high rate of return for the investors.

High ratings were no match for the burgeoning Red Scare, however. By 1947, America's post-war anti-communist paranoia had increased dramatically. On March 21, 1947, President Harry Truman, under pressure from right-wing opponents who accused him of being soft on communism, signed Executive Order 9835, creating a government loyalty program. Under the program's guidelines, all potential and existing government employees had to agree to a background check that included examination of their past political activities. Those who had suspicious political activities in their past were either

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<sup>17</sup>“CBS in New Bid for Jack Benny Program After NBC Fails to Sign Comedian,” *New York Times* (November 16, 1948), <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=F00E16FD3854177A93C4A8178AD95F4C8485F9>, accessed September 5, 2011; William S. Paley, *As It Happened: A Memoir* (New York: Doubleday, 1979), 208-213.

<sup>18</sup> James Roman, *From Daytime to Primetime: The History of American Television Programs* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2008), 107.

fired or denied employment. Over the course of ten years, the FBI performed cursory checks on more than four million employees and completed 27,000 intensive follow-up investigations on those whose checks turned up something suspicious. Approximately six thousand federal workers ultimately resigned, either in protest or out of fear, and the government fired twelve hundred more.<sup>19</sup>

Truman hoped that the loyalty program would undermine the mission of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), a committee formed in 1938 to investigate people suspected of being disloyal to the U.S. government. Truman considered HUAC dangerous and demagogic, but his loyalty program had the opposite effect of what he intended.<sup>20</sup> The loyalty program led to the creation of the Attorney General's List of Subversive Organizations (AGLOSO), a list of forty-one organizations deemed too radical for a government employee to support. Although the list included some obviously socialist or communist organizations, such as the Communist Party USA, the National Council of US-Soviet Friendship, and the Socialist Workers Party, it also included other seemingly innocuous organizations, such as the Washington Book Shop Association and Shinto Temples.<sup>21</sup> AGLOSO was meant strictly for the use of the State Department, and the list's introductory statement indicated that more often than not, the members of the group were probably loyal citizens who did not realize they were

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<sup>19</sup> Out of all the firings, 91 were because the men in question were believed to be homosexual. At the time, homosexuality was so forbidden that homosexuals were considered a security risk. Many believed that even the most loyal homosexual could have his shameful secret exposed by the communists, and subsequently blackmailed into selling government secrets. For more information on homosexuals and the federal government during the Red Scare, see David Johnson's *The Lavender Scare*.

<sup>20</sup> David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 656.

<sup>21</sup> U.S. National Records and Archives Administration, Office of the Federal Register, "Attorney General's List of Subversive Organizations," *Federal Register* 13 (March 20, 1948), 1473.

involved with a politically suspect organization.<sup>22</sup> In other words, membership in any of the listed groups was merely one piece of evidence, not in itself proof of guilt.

Despite the Attorney General's admonishment that no one should use the list as a method of proving people guilty by association, AGLOSO eventually trickled down into the lower reaches of the government and into the private sector, serving as a template for the period of widespread blacklisting soon to come. The mere existence of the loyalty program and AGLOSO combined with the fact that thousands of people were purged from government service through that program convinced many Americans that communists had indeed infiltrated the country and needed to be stopped.<sup>23</sup>

The following year, HUAC garnered further national recognition after the espionage charges against State Department official Alger Hiss gained traction. The committee wanted to find more cases that would both draw attention to its anti-communist mission and generate positive publicity. Targeting Hollywood seemed the most obvious answer. Communists and people who supported communist causes had supposedly taken over Hollywood, already considered a beacon of liberalism. Beginning in 1947, HUAC held hearings on the extent to which communism pervaded the film industry. Committee Chairman J. Parnell Thomas spoke disparagingly of "writers mocking our political system and picking on rich men and portraying the wealthy and powerful as 'heavies'."<sup>24</sup> Those concerned about communists in show business ascribed

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 1471.

<sup>23</sup> McCullough, *Truman*, 550-552; Robert Justin Goldstein, "Prelude to McCarthyism: The Making of a Blacklist," *Prologue* 38:3 (Fall 2006) <http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2006/fall/agloso.html>, accessed 11 June 2011.

<sup>24</sup> Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 109.

to the “third violin theory,” meaning that even the most anonymous participant in a radio or television broadcast encountered dozens of other actors, producers, directors and production staff. If one of those people was a communist, they could infect anyone involved in the production with the ideological disease. Even an anonymous musician, prop master, or sound technician could have an impact on radio, television, and movie stars, who would in turn spew their communist venom on an unsuspecting public.<sup>25</sup> According to this logic, any person who worked in show business potentially posed a threat to the nation at large. It was not a chance many people wanted to take, and so came a series of actions by both government officials and grassroots movements to prevent the feared communist takeover.

Broadcasters rejected this line of thinking, and at first attempted to combat HUAC’s focus on Hollywood communists, using the airwaves as a platform for protest. Some also joined the Committee for the First Amendment, a group founded in support of those in the entertainment industry accused of communist ties.<sup>26</sup> Despite the best efforts of television and radio broadcasters to stem the tide of anti-communist hysteria, it did no good. HUAC’s fervor for seeking out communists in Hollywood eventually infected the general populace. The level of public concern only rose when a handful of film executives decided to cave in to HUAC’s demands and turn over the names of some of the industry’s most notorious communist writers.<sup>27</sup> HUAC’s investigation of these writers, now known as the Hollywood Ten, generated a huge amount of press. After some

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<sup>25</sup> David Everitt, *A Shadow of Red: Communism and the Blacklist in Radio and Television* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publishing, 2007), 28-29.

<sup>26</sup> “Broadcast Attacks Inquiry,” *New York Times* (3 Nov 1947), 19.

<sup>27</sup> Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, 109.

of the accused writers refused to give the names of their communist friends before the Committee, the issue of communism in the entertainment industry became national news.

HUAC's investigations became even more public when, after testifying before the committee, accused spy Elizabeth Bentley appeared on NBC's *Meet the Press* on September 12, 1948 and repeated an accusation made during her testimony: that William Remington, an employee of the Department of Commerce, was a communist spy. Bentley's accusations set off a chain reaction in which Remington sued NBC for libel and defamation and won a settlement from the network and the show's sponsor, only to have HUAC re-open the case in the spring of 1950. Remington was ultimately tried, convicted of perjury, and jailed. Lawrence Spivak, creator and star of *Meet the Press*, had railed against his lawyers and sponsors for years, claiming that the network and General Foods should have investigated Bentley's claims instead of settling. Remington's conviction provided a very public affirmation that *Meet the Press* had been justified in airing Elizabeth Bentley's accusations because they turned out to be true.<sup>28</sup> The Remington case demonstrated how useful television could be in alerting the American people to the dangers of communist spies, but it also demonstrated how easily communists maneuvered within American institutions. After all, Remington felt so certain he would not get caught that he sued two major corporations for defamation and even procured a settlement from them, even though he knew that no defamation had occurred.

Although television had potential as a spy-catching tool, ordinary citizens now feared that a few sinister types could also use movies and television as weapons of communist indoctrination. In the 1950 Congressional election, Richard Nixon capitalized

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<sup>28</sup> A detailed history of the case can be found in the correspondence between *Meet the Press* creator Lawrence Spivak and his sponsors, lawyers, and insurers. Folder "Remington v. Bentley," Box 174 Lawrence Spivak Papers, Library of Congress Manuscripts Collection.

on the supposed connection between show business and communism when attacking his opponent, former actress Helen Gahagan Douglas. Nixon publicly accused Douglas, a staunchly liberal Democrat who often supported causes such as women's rights and civil liberties, of being "pink right down to her underwear." Although the accusations were false, Nixon won the election handily and Douglas' career never recovered from the smear campaign. It was a dangerous lesson on how much one could benefit by playing to the fears of the far right. It also demonstrated how casually someone could refer to an enemy as a communist and how easily such charges could stick.

A number of grassroots movements developed in the late 1940s and early 1950s intent on informing the American public about the subversive elements in their midst. Chief among them was *Counterattack*, a newsletter started in 1947 by three ex-FBI agents calling themselves American Business Consultants, Incorporated. *Counterattack* was devoted to singling out people in various positions of prominence who had dubious political affiliations. Initially, the members of American Business Consultants did not have any particular concerns about show business, but within a year, *Counterattack* focused almost solely on the entertainment industry.<sup>29</sup> Within months of its first issue, the writers suggested that the networks and sponsors should bar, to the fullest extent permissible by law, all communists from working in television, radio and movies. By 1948, the articles encouraged readers to contact sponsors who had their products associated with programs that employed known communists and voice their disapproval.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Everitt, *A Shadow of Red*, 29.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 48.

The hysteria over communist infiltration of the television industry reached its height on June 22, 1950, with the publication of *Red Channels*. Released just as the United States entered the Korean War, *Red Channels* was a booklet listing all of the people in the entertainment industry suspected of involvement in either communist organizations or groups infiltrated by communists. Published by American Business Consultants, the same group that published *Counterattack*, *Red Channels* listed 151 names and provided exhaustive lists of all the allegedly subversive activities in which each person engaged. The authors of *Red Channels* utilized numerous sources to compile their information and made a point of only using sources that were in the public record. Those sources included newspapers containing HUAC citations, the communist newspaper *The Daily Worker*, and the entertainment industry's own publications. Next to each person's entry was a brief description of his or her role in the entertainment industry, followed by a list of every suspect organization with which the person had ever been involved. The authors stopped just short of openly calling anyone on their list a communist, but in its introduction, Vincent Hartnett, an ex-Naval intelligence officer and a major contributor to the book, clearly implied that all of the people enumerated in the book were in league with the "Red fascists and their sympathizers."<sup>31</sup>

The book claimed that its primary aim was to separate run-of-the-mill liberals from the more sinister communists.<sup>32</sup> However, an examination of the supposedly subversive agencies, organization, and movements listed in the book range from anti-fascist movements dating back to World War II to groups advocating for civil rights or

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<sup>31</sup> American Business Consultants, Inc., *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television* (New York: Counterattack, 1950), 6.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 3-4.

opposing nuclear proliferation. According to the book's introduction, the editors included these groups because they concerned themselves with issues "in which the Party was critically interested."<sup>33</sup> By this logic, any person involved with any organization whose agenda concerned some issue that interested communists had unwittingly made themselves a pawn for the communists, guilelessly spreading their propaganda through the guise of entertainment. During World War II, broadcasters joined numerous political groups as a means of expressing their support for the nation and its allies, and many in Hollywood who did so now risked becoming industry pariahs. The editors of both *Counterattack* and *Red Channels* decided that joining communist fronts was proof of communist sympathies, particularly if the person had joined more than one such organization. At the very least, it made that person incredibly gullible, and therefore susceptible to the propaganda no doubt emanating from the communists who had infiltrated these organizations. Anti-communists considered many liberal causes, such as supporting workers rights or civil rights, as suspect, so they cast an extremely wide net in their quest to find and ostracize the communists in the American broadcasting and entertainment industries.

A heavy undercurrent of racism and anti-Semitism tainted the anti-communist crusades. While *Red Channels* and *Counterattack* targeted the entire spectrum of liberal organizations, black causes were the only ones singled out that specifically benefitted an American minority group. *Red Channels*' introduction even claimed that both the civil rights issue and the "fight against Jimcrow (sic)" interested communists. All of the other supposedly subversive causes were more general, such as opposition to hydrogen bombs

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

or advocacy for peace.<sup>34</sup> The supposedly subversive groups listed in *Red Channels* included the Negro Cultural Committee, United Negro and Allied Veterans of America, the Civil Rights Congress, and the Southern Conference on Human Welfare. Most of these groups also appeared on the Attorney General's List of Subversive Organizations, indicating that both the Attorney General and the FBI, which supplied most of the information for the list, generally considered civil rights groups subversive.<sup>35</sup>

The act of chastising people who belonged to certain civil rights groups had the effect of linking all civil rights groups with communism. Segregationists in positions of authority had already found that anti-communist language was an effective way to oppose racial equality, claiming that communist support of integration and civil rights was proof of its immorality.<sup>36</sup> Representative John Rankin (D-MS) was notorious for equating the cause of racial equality with communism. Arguing against an anti-discrimination bill in the House of Representatives, Rankin claimed that anti-discrimination was part of the Communist Party platform and that the same people who supported it also supported desegregation. In his mind, and that of other segregationists of the time, all civil rights activists were communists. Rankin also claimed that communism was a party of, by, and for racial minorities, citing the origins of Communist Russia as "a racial minority seizing control in Russia and all her satellite countries."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 2-3.

<sup>35</sup> Goldstein, "Prelude to McCarthyism," <http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2006/fall/agloso.html>. According to Goldstein, the Attorney General's office combined the AGLOSO list based on information from the FBI.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 34, 89

<sup>37</sup> U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Rep. John Rankin (D-MS) arguing against the "Celler Amendment," or HR 554, 98<sup>th</sup> Congress, *Congressional Record* (April 23, 1952), 4320.

In a cultural and political climate steeped in paranoia, arguing that people who advocated for civil rights reform had capitulated to communism was an effective strategy. Soon, media outlets that provided a sympathetic portrayal of the civil rights movement received letters accusing them of “racial communism.” One letter in particular even accused NBC’s *Meet the Press* of appearing sympathetic to the civil rights cause for the purposes of getting “negro circulation and Jew advertising.”<sup>38</sup> In the era of the blacklist, anti-communism trumped civil rights, and anyone who continued support for the latter cause was labeled a communist.<sup>39</sup> Both black and white artists were penalized for their participation in civil rights groups, but it was the black faces that disappeared from television in the aftermath of the blacklist period.

The anti-Semitic aspect of the anti-communist movement was also highly visible. That the anti-communists drew that connection is unsurprising, since there is a long tradition of associating Jews with communism.<sup>40</sup> Members of Congress shared this common misconception. Senator Pat McCarran, sponsor of the 1950 Internal Security Act, used the slur ‘kike’ publicly in conversation, and Representative John Rankin, notorious for his racism, was as well known for his rabid anti-Semitism.<sup>41</sup> Rankin often

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<sup>38</sup> Letter from Harold Shea to Meet the Press, February 11, 1950, Folder 9, Box 39, Lawrence Spivak Papers, Library of Congress Manuscripts Collection.

<sup>39</sup> Mary Dudziak, *Cold War, Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 34, 89.

<sup>40</sup> This connection primarily stems from the fact that the author of the Communist Manifesto, Karl Marx, was Jewish, as were a number of the leaders in the early days of Communist Russia, namely Leon Trotsky. Anti-communist ‘white’ Russians spread Judeo-Bolshevik propaganda during the 1917 Russian Civil War, and Adolf Hitler further propagated the stereotype as a tool against both Jews and Russian Communists to serve his purposes in World War II. For more information on the historical connection between Jews and Communism, see Jonathan Frankel. 2004. *Dark Times, Dire Decisions: Jews and Communism* (New York: Oxford University Press).

<sup>41</sup> Everitt, *A Shadow of Red*, 169.

made a game of baiting his Jewish colleagues in the Senate and, more than once, referred to columnist Walter Winchell as a “kike” while debating legislation.<sup>42</sup> Because of the pervasive atmosphere of casual anti-Semitism, the American Jewish League assumed that when HUAC first targeted Hollywood, it was because, at the time, all of the major studio heads were Jewish.<sup>43</sup>

The members of HUAC did nothing to dispel the notion that they explicitly connected Jews with sinister motives. Rankin, in particular, had a reputation for anti-Semitic asides on the House floor and made no secret of his contention that calling a Jew a communist was superfluous. In 1941, he famously argued against the United States entering World War II because “Wall Street and a group of our Jewish brethren” were just trying to “harass” the president and Congress into the war for personal gain. Rankin’s remarks met with applause by his colleagues.<sup>44</sup> When arguing against a bill allowing soldiers to vote, he presented a postcard he had received as evidence of how “New York Communists” were supporting the bill. Although the postcard did not specifically utilize any communistic language, it was signed by a man with a Jewish surname.<sup>45</sup> As a member of HUAC, Rankin made it clear that his problem with Hollywood predicated on

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<sup>42</sup> Walter Goodman, *The Committee: The Extraordinary Career of the House Committee on Un-American Activities* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1964), 173-174. Congress, House of Representatives, 90<sup>th</sup> Congress, *Congressional Record* (February 8, 1944), 1418.

<sup>43</sup> Victor Navasky, *Naming Names* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 109.

<sup>44</sup> Congress, House of Representatives, Rep. John Rankin speaking out against the possibility of the US entering World War II, 87<sup>th</sup> Congress, *Congressional Record* (June 4, 1941), 4726-4727. Rankin’s remarks led Rep. Michael Edelstein (NY) to respond: Hitler started out by speaking about “Jewish brethren.” Edelstein referred to Rankin’s remarks as demagogic and broadly called out the House of Representatives for using Jews as a scapegoat for anything happening that they did not support. Edelstein’s comments, like Rankin’s, were met with applause.

<sup>45</sup> US Congress, House of Representatives, 90<sup>th</sup> Congress, *Congressional Record* (February 7, 1944), 1305.

the Jewish moguls who dominated the entertainment industry. In one hearing on communist infiltration, he commented that the Jews had already been run out of Europe in years gone by, and if they continue to force their communist ways on Americans, “there’s no telling what will happen to them.”<sup>46</sup>

Rankin was merely the most public and vocal of the many Americans who associated Jews with communism. Some anti-communist activists, including the men responsible for *Counterattack*, attempted to disassociate themselves from the anti-Semitic elements often associated with their movement. Despite that effort, ethnic Jews became strongly associated with communism in the mind of both the public and, eventually, the people involved in the entertainment industry. The publication of *Red Channels* only solidified that perception, as at least 48 of the 151 names listed in the booklet, or 32 percent, were ethnically Jewish. That percentage indicates an extreme over-representation in relation to the percentage of Jews in the entire US population in 1950, which was 4.5 million out of 152 million, or just under 3 percent.<sup>47</sup>

Even though the men behind *Counterattack* made a conscious effort to disassociate themselves from the racist elements of the anti-communist cause, they too had ideas of what constituted a true American.<sup>48</sup> They even provided an indicator of what

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<sup>46</sup> US Congress, House of Representatives, 98<sup>th</sup> Congress, *Congressional Record* (April 23, 1952), 4320.

<sup>47</sup> Mandell L. Berman North American Jewish Data Bank (Storrs, CT: University of Connecticut, 2010), <http://www.jewishdatabank.org/AJYB/AJY-1950.pdf>, accessed 20 August 2012.

<sup>48</sup> *Counterattack* only existed because of a \$15,000 loan from Alfred Kohlberg, the Jewish anti-communist textile importer and founding director of the John Birch Society, so resistance to anti-Semitism on the part of American Business Consultants may have been financially motivated. However, while searching for investors, one man told them they could have money as long as their magazine would inform readers that communism was part of a Zionist scheme for world supremacy. The men declined the money, which suggests that they truly did not support the anti-Semitic claims of some of their anti-communist peers.

they thought a real American looked like. In promotional fliers for *Counterattack*, Theodore Kirkpatrick, co-founder of the newsletter and one of the men behind *Red Channels*, billed himself as an “average American.” He went on to list the credentials that proved his membership among those ranks, which included his Scots-Irish heritage, Protestant religious background, and the fact that he was married with two children. Although he did not explicitly mention his race, the picture next to his profile demonstrated his undeniable whiteness.<sup>49</sup> Kirkpatrick’s description of himself, combined with the inclusion of a disproportionate number of ethnic minorities in *Red Channels*, established that certain people and certain causes, such as civil rights, were predisposed to un-American behavior.

Because the same organization published both *Counterattack* and *Red Channels*, the editors and contributors at *Counterattack* used the magazine as a way to fuel interest in the book. The magazine followed up the book’s publication with subsequent stories on actors who continued finding gainful employment in show business despite their suspect political allegiances. The group of artists selected for the follow-up treatment included poet and literary critic Louis Untermeyer, actress Marsha Hunt, and actor Howard Da Silva. In addition to running profiles on actors, *Counterattack* also continued the push for readers to write letters of protest to networks and sponsors.<sup>50</sup>

The case of actress Jean Muir marked the first and most famous indication of *Counterattack*’s influence. In August 1950, only weeks after the publication of *Red Channels*, Theodore Kirkpatrick of American Business Consultants discovered that Muir

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<sup>49</sup> Everitt, *A Shadow of Red*, 18.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

was scheduled on August 27 to appear on the NBC-TV sitcom *The Aldrich Family*, despite her sizeable entry in *Red Channels*. Kirkpatrick used *Counterattack* as a forum from which to urge readers to protest Muir's employment. Within days, the program's sponsor, General Foods, received a number of calls from *Counterattack* readers. Estimates on the exact number of calls vary between 20 and 200. As the calls mounted, both NBC and General Foods panicked. They quickly fired Muir out of concern that the criticism might not subside and her presence on the show might become a problem for viewers.<sup>51</sup>

Jean Muir's firing demonstrated that despite the tenuous ties that many on the list had to actual communist activities, television networks and sponsors took *Red Channels* very seriously. The authors of *Red Channels* publicly threatened to organize a boycott of any advertiser endorsing a program that employed writers, directors, producers and actors suspected of communist sympathies.<sup>52</sup> As leaders in a fledgling industry, none of the television network executives wanted to take the risk of consumers boycotting their programs. *Red Channels* therefore became the template for an industry-wide blacklist. Since 1947, when CBS fired news commentator William Shirer supposedly because of his political beliefs, there had been rumors of an informal political blacklist in Hollywood. In 1949, William Sweets lost his job as a director of two NBC radio shows because of a letter writing campaign branding him a Red sympathizer. The following year, CBS showed reruns of Ed Sullivan's variety show *Toast of the Town* (later *The Ed*

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<sup>51</sup> Jack Gould, 'Aldrich Show Drops Jean Muir; TV Actress Denies Ties,' *New York Times* (29 Aug 1950), 1.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Dixon Dern, Part 2 of 10, Interview by Karen Herman, [emmytvlegends.org](http://emmytvlegends.org), May 7, 2009. [www.emmytvlegends.com/interviews/topics/television-industry](http://www.emmytvlegends.com/interviews/topics/television-industry). Accessed June 24, 2011.

*Sullivan Show*) without a clip of a dance performance by Paul Draper, because of Draper's suspect political affiliations. Sullivan himself even publicly apologized for having allowed Draper to perform on his program at all.<sup>53</sup>

The firing of Jean Muir, however, marked a turning point when the rumor of a blacklist became established fact. Most of the men and women listed in *Red Channels* soon found themselves unemployed. Historians and industry insiders vary widely in their assessment of when the era of blacklisting ended, but for at least a period of a few years, most of the men and women in *Red Channels* were virtually unemployable.<sup>54</sup> Although casting agents always claimed either the blacklist did not exist or that they were unaware of it, people whose names appeared on the list saw an immediate drop-off in the work available to them.

Within months, yet another grassroots anti-communist organization developed that further threatened the radio and television industry. Lawrence A. Johnson owned a chain of four grocery stores in Syracuse, New York. In 1950, the year of *Red Channels*' publication, Johnson's daughter lived at home while her husband fought in the Korean War. She became incensed at the idea that she bought products advertised on shows that employed communists, the same people whom her husband was fighting against in Korea. Johnson saw that he was in a position to do something to ease his daughter's

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<sup>53</sup> Robert Metz, *CBS: Reflections in a Bloodshot Eye* (New York: Signet, 1975), 273.

<sup>54</sup> According to interviews with William Morris secretary Ruth Engelhardt, the blacklist lasted only a couple years, and ended when actor Quentin Reynolds won a libel suit against Hearst columnist Westbrook Pegler in 1954. Director Hal Cooper points to the Army-McCarthy hearings as the turning point. In another interview, producer and director Norman Felton states blacklist lasted until 1963. Felton relates that year, while filming the television series *Dr. Kildare*, an actor thanked Felton for hiring him because he'd been blacklisted and unable to get a job. Likewise, television director Robert Butler recounts a fight with CBS over hiring Howard De Silva, who appeared in *Red Channels*, for a part on a 1963 episode of *The Defenders*. Interviews can be found at [www.emmytvlegends.com/interviews/topics/television-industry](http://www.emmytvlegends.com/interviews/topics/television-industry).

concerns. He founded the Veteran's Action Committee of Syracuse Supermarkets (VAC), an organization of local grocers. The VAC sent circular flyers around to grocery stores asking "How can you help in this matter of keeping Stalin's little creatures from crawling over our supermarket shelves?" Johnson exerted direct pressure on the sponsors by threatening to have his league of grocers display their products in unflattering ways. The displays would draw explicit connections to the fact that the companies allowed the shows they sponsored to employ communists.<sup>55</sup> Because 60 percent of broadcasting revenue stemmed from grocery store sales, networks feared Johnson's influence with the grocery industry and complied readily.<sup>56</sup>

Johnson and the VAC met with initial success when they threatened the Borden Company in response to alleged communists on the ABC show *Treasury Men in Action*. Though completely unsure of how much power Johnson had, Borden did not want to take any chances. One of Borden's vice presidents immediately acquiesced to Johnson's demands and forced the show's producers to fire the offending actors.<sup>57</sup> A few advertisers did hold firm against the demands of Johnson and the VAC. Johnson contacted Samuel Dalsimer of Grey Advertising and threatened him for refusing to reign in the companies he represented. When Johnson ended his rant by reading a list of other agencies that had been blacklisted because of their refusal to cooperate, Dalsimer replied "I would be pleased to be in their company." Likewise, when Johnson wrote to *Life* magazine to complain about a story on Charlie Chaplin, long considered a communist sympathizer,

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<sup>55</sup> Everitt, *A Shadow of Red*, 122-127.

<sup>56</sup> Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, 127-129.

<sup>57</sup> Everitt, *A Shadow of Red*, 127-129.

staff writer Richard L. Williams responded: “Your story moves me deeply but not to sympathy. Your literature is returned herewith.”<sup>58</sup> In response to these slights, Johnson did nothing to follow up on his threats. Despite such instances in which Johnson’s promises proved empty, Dalsimer and Williams remained the exception to the rule in the era of the blacklist. Very few sponsors or advertisers wanted to challenge Johnson to find out whether he actually wielded the power in the grocery industry that he claimed.

Within one year of the release of *Red Channels* and the development of the Veteran’s Action Committee, blacklisting and the anti-communist crusaders permeated the entertainment industry. *Counterattack* expanded its repertoire, calling on its readers to boycott not only advertisers, but also companies that advertised on shows that contained material supporting left-wing political views.<sup>59</sup> Networks and studios also blacklisted actors and other creative personnel if they associated with people who had suspect connections, even if their own politics had not been challenged. Anyone even remotely attached to the political, artistic, or literary avant garde was considered a risk.<sup>60</sup> One director remembered an anonymous caller waking him at two o’clock in the morning to warn him that his wife needed to be mindful of what she said about the blacklist in public.<sup>61</sup> In another case, CBS rejected an eight- year- old girl for a part because of her father’s leftist political connections.<sup>62</sup> Advertiser R.J. Reynolds forced producer Mark

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Dixon Dern, Part 2 of 8, <http://www.emmytvlgeands.org/interviews/topics/television-industry>.

<sup>60</sup> Nadel, *Television in Black and White America*, 36; William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and its Critics* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 99.

<sup>61</sup> Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, 167.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 129-130.

Goodson to fire actor Henry Morgan from his CBS game show *I've Got a Secret* because Morgan was married to a woman with strongly leftist political beliefs. He was fired in spite of the fact that it was an open secret within the industry that he was divorcing the woman in part because of those same beliefs.<sup>63</sup> Kellogg fired Irene Wicker, an actor on the ABC children's television program *The Singing Lady*, because she was rumored to have supported a communist politician. Although Wicker stated that she had never heard of the politician and subsequently demonstrated her innocence, the network still cancelled the show. Despite high ratings, the taint of controversy now haunted the program.<sup>64</sup>

Even people with impeccable political histories felt the fear emanating from the Red Scare in Hollywood. All of the networks feared a popular backlash and adapted to the blacklist to some degree, regardless of any reticence on the part of the management. After all, the networks' value came from the licenses it got from the FCC to establish local television stations, and the FCC could easily take those licenses away if the networks engaged in untoward behavior, such as employing political subversives. No network wanted to risk their company to save a few wayward employees. The actors, writers, and directors accused of engaging in communist activity had to endure a humiliating clearance process in order to get back to work. The process generally involved attending public meetings for anti-communist groups, criticizing other people on the blacklist, and writing letters to network security officials commending them on

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<sup>63</sup> Mark Goodson, "If I Stood Up Earlier..." *New York Times Magazine* (13 Jan 1991), <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/01/13/magazine/if-i-stood-up-earlier.html>, accessed 24 June 2011.

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<sup>64</sup> Jack Gould, "General Foods Seeks Radio Unit To Set Policy on Pro-Red Charges; Sponsor That Dropped Jean Muir From TV Show Calls on Industry to Cooperate in Dealing With Accused Artists," *New York Times* (September 12, 1950), 15.

their fair treatment of supposed communist sympathizers.<sup>65</sup> Even so, this process did not automatically mean the entertainment industry accepted everyone back with open arms.

The networks, fearful of having their own patriotism questioned, instituted methods of rooting out communists in their ranks and preventing those with controversial political leanings from working. CBS publicly announced its intolerance for communists in its ranks and mandated that all prospective employees take an oath of loyalty before they were even hired, a step applauded by *Counterattack* magazine.<sup>66</sup> In 1950, the network went as far as trying to make writing anything “immoral, insulting, or disreputable” an offense worthy of firing, but it ultimately reversed that decision in 1951.<sup>67</sup> The network also hired former FBI agent Alfred Berry to investigate all potential and current employees.<sup>68</sup>

Although the other networks did not go quite that far, they utilized more subtle methods for ferreting out people with suspicious political views. ABC demonstrated its own skittishness by having game show producer Mark Goodson fire *Red Channels* listee Abe Burrows from *The Name's the Same*. Goodson had stood firm on Burrows' presence throughout an extensive letter writing campaign, but caved as soon as Swanson, the show's sponsor, got a call from Lawrence Johnson of the Veteran's Action Committee.<sup>69</sup> By 1953, ABC had also hired Vincent Hartnett, a researcher and contributor to both

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<sup>65</sup> Everitt, *A Shadow of Red*, 106.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Slater, *This is... CBS: A Chronicle of 60 Years*(New York: Prentice Hall, 1988), 137-138; Everitt, *A Shadow of Red*, 77.

<sup>67</sup> “CBS ‘Morals Clause’ Ordered Stricken Out in Contracts with Scripters,” *Variety* 29 August 1951, 26.

<sup>68</sup> Everitt, *A Shadow of Red*, 103.

<sup>69</sup> Goodson, “If I Stood Up Earlier,” <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/01/13/magazine/if-i-stood-up-earlier.html?pagewanted=6&src=pm>, accessed June 24, 2011.

*Counterattack* and *Red Channels*, to compile data on potential subversives within the organization.

NBC also hired Harnett to police its programming. Harnett immediately questioned a number of guest stars appearing on NBC programs, such as Gregory Peck and John Garfield on *The Magnificent Montague* radio show.<sup>70</sup> Harnett also expressed concern that the show continued on the airwaves given that creator Nat Hiken appeared in *Red Channels*. He also questioned the decision to hire Davidson Taylor as a general production executive. Harnett cited Taylor's administration of CBS news and documentaries as proof of his unreliable political stance, claiming that Taylor had allowed those segments of CBS to be "thoroughly colonized by the Party." Taylor had also hired John Henry Faulk, a CBS radio commentator whose connection to communism would become so entrenched that the industry blacklisted him for nearly two decades.<sup>71</sup> Despite bringing on Harnett as an advisor, however, NBC did not strictly adhere to the blacklist. David Everitt credits NBC head David Sarnoff's reputation as a staunchly conservative anti-communist for the network's ability to hire people on the blacklist without experiencing a major backlash.<sup>72</sup>

CBS, on the other hand, could not escape such scrutiny. From 1928, when William Paley and his family bought controlling interest in CBS (then called Columbia Phonograph Broadcasting Company), Paley maintained a high standard for the programming on his network. His commitment to excellence was a hallmark of CBS

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<sup>70</sup> Gregory Peck had signed a letter condemning HUAC's insinuations about Communist infiltration of the film industry. John Garfield had a citation in *Red Channels* and had also refused to name names in his testimony before HUAC.

<sup>71</sup> Everitt, *A Shadow of Red*, 172-175.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

programming for more than six decades, leading some in the industry to refer to CBS as “the Tiffany network.” To maintain the quality he wanted, Paley insisted CBS produce its own shows instead of allowing the sponsors to take control. The network therefore often employed creative personalities who sponsors, concerned only with making their products look good, considered too liberal, controversial or unconventional.

Unfortunately for the network, these were the types of people often targeted by anti-communist crusaders.<sup>73</sup> It did not help that CBS also had a liberal news team led by Edward R. Murrow and a habit of hiring people who, if not communist, at least had a reputation as “comrades of the comrades.” That tendency led FBI director J. Edgar Hoover to remark to CBS head William Paley that CBS stood for the Communist Broadcast System.<sup>74</sup>

In July 1949, *Counterattack* published a scathing piece on the network and from that point on, the network attempted to inoculate itself against further accusations of communist sympathies. CBS attorneys contacted Theodore Kirkpatrick in order to determine how the network could best identify and purge communists from its ranks. The network subscribed to *Counterattack* and presented it to executives as a guide for future hiring practices.<sup>75</sup> Despite CBS’ attempts to clear itself from charges of communist sympathies, *Red Channels* dredged up old concerns. Out of 151 names listed in the book, only 59 performed or worked in television or radio in the two years prior to *Red Channels’* release. Out of the 59, 42 had some association with either CBS-TV or CBS-

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<sup>73</sup> Slater, *This is...CBS*, 135-136.

<sup>74</sup> Everitt, *A Shadow of Red*, 71.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-72.

Radio, whether as a performer, commenter, or guest. While 16 of the 42 who appeared on the network also appeared on another network that same year, 26 performers, writers, directors, and actors worked exclusively with CBS. CBS outstripped all of its competitors in terms of the number of communists or supposed communist sympathizers in its employ, with NBC trailing behind with 29 artists featured and ABC taking last place with only 10. For CBS, these were not encouraging statistics.

CBS' problems only worsened from there. At the time of *Red Channels'* publication, the network was still reeling from the aftershock of finding out that one of its major radio directors, Betty Todd, was implicated in the case of suspected Soviet agent William Remington. The network fired her after she invoked the Fifth Amendment before HUAC, but the scandal still lingered.<sup>76</sup> Then, Philip Loeb, a star of the CBS hit sitcom *The Goldbergs*, appeared in *Red Channels*. His supposed crimes included signing a petition defending Moscow's purge trials, joining the Council for Pan-American Democracy, and belonging to an organization devoted to ending segregation in baseball.<sup>77</sup> Each of these organizations and causes was defunct, but that was beside the point. Because of the show's popularity and Loeb's steadfast proclamations of innocence, the sponsor initially tried to keep him on the air. After General Foods received four letters protesting his continued employment, however, the company insisted on buying him out

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<sup>76</sup> 'Six Union Org in Making Vs. Discrimination,' *Billboard* (27 May 1950), 8. [http://books.google.com/books?id=RAEEAAAAMB&pg=PA10&lpg=PA10&dq=betty+todd+and+wiliam+remington&source=bl&ots=vS-6-kgCM\\_&sig=TLWcoKF4eYgaSycZJTRlcQvu2BM&hl=en&ei=](http://books.google.com/books?id=RAEEAAAAMB&pg=PA10&lpg=PA10&dq=betty+todd+and+wiliam+remington&source=bl&ots=vS-6-kgCM_&sig=TLWcoKF4eYgaSycZJTRlcQvu2BM&hl=en&ei=) William Remington was an economist employed in various capacities by the federal government in the 1930s and 1940s. He was accused of giving information to the Russians through the spy Elizabeth Bentley. On April 21, 1950, Todd was called before HUAC to testify about her connections to the CPUSA. She refused to answer when asked if Remington had attended a meeting of a Communist cell that took place at her home. CBS promptly fired her based on this action.

<sup>77</sup> American Business Consultants, Inc., *Red Channels*, 100.

of his contract.<sup>78</sup> The company did not explicitly refer to him as a communist, but rather claimed that he was just too ‘controversial.’<sup>79</sup>

Gertrude Berg, the show’s creator and star, at first refused to fire Loeb, vouching for his patriotism and insisting on his value to the program. However, General Foods persisted, and Berg eventually offered Loeb a large payout in an attempt to get him to leave without a fuss. Loeb resisted, but after several months the furor over his alleged political affiliations had not died out. After the program relocated entirely to NBC and continued without him, Loeb finally accepted a payout of \$40,000, a fraction of the amount originally offered. Making the situation worse, actor Lee J. Cobb went before HUAC and named Loeb as the controller of a left-wing caucus, called The Forum, within the Actor’s Equity union. While Cobb claimed “I never knew them to be communists,” the damage was done.<sup>80</sup> Everyone with the misfortune to have their names brought up before HUAC forever carried that stigma. Loeb became virtually unemployable at that point, never again working in television, film, or radio. Loeb’s rejection by the industry combined with family problems was ultimately too much for him; he committed suicide in 1955. Despite his popularity and successful career, few remember his professional accomplishments. Historians only mention his name now in relation to the blacklist.

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<sup>78</sup>*Report on Blacklist: II Radio-Television* (New York: Fund for the Republic, 1956), 35.

<sup>79</sup> “Actor is Dropped from Video Cast,” *The New York Times* (January 8, 1952), 29.

<sup>80</sup> Navasky, *Naming Names*, 270, 281. Navasky points out that so many people named names before HUAC, eventually there was no one new left to name. It became an acceptable practice to name those who had already been named before, under the assumption that those people were already industry pariahs so it would not hurt to name them again. As a result, some people were named dozens of times. Even if they were innocent, the constant repetition of their names further insinuated them with the communists and made some of them unemployable for decades.

CBS spent years attempting to change its image as a haven for communist sympathizers. It remained the only network using a loyalty oath and employing a series of men in its screening department who ensured CBS maintained its reputation as the harshest enforcer of the blacklist among all the networks.<sup>81</sup> CBS subscribed to checking services that specialized in doing research on the political affiliations of actors, writers and directors. If these checking services found anything even remotely suspicious, that person usually could not take the job.<sup>82</sup> The network even insisted on vetting the performers on *Toast of the Town*, Ed Sullivan's weekly variety show. Sullivan frequently had to defend his choice of guests, though he usually got his way because of the program's very high ratings.<sup>83</sup> It did not hurt that Sullivan was a publicly rabid anti-communist who insisted that any supposedly subversive performer who came on his show renounce any suspicious political views and affiliations.<sup>84</sup>

The CBS news team, famous for its liberalism, also toed the company line by agreeing to sign the loyalty oath. It went against their better judgment and initially the news team thought about rebelling in protest. Ironically, it was Edward R. Murrow, who during the late 1930s had vehemently disparaged Europe's appeasement of Adolf Hitler, that encouraged the news team to follow along with the loyalty oath, at least for the time

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<sup>81</sup> Everitt, *A Shadow of Red*, 104.

<sup>82</sup> Navasky, *Naming Names*, 155; "Gertrude Berg, NBC Finalize Deal," *Variety*, 22 Aug 1951, 31. When *Variety* announced that *The Goldbergs* was moving to NBC from CBS, it made no mention of either Philip Loeb or *Red Channels*, despite these being significant reasons for the show's move. This type of omission is indicative of Hollywood's tendency to pretend the blacklist did not exist.

<sup>83</sup> Slater, *This is... CBS*, 137.

<sup>84</sup> Metz, *CBS*, 266.

being.<sup>85</sup> In yet another instance, CBS participated in an international attempt to entice followers of communism to convert their sympathies to democracy. In the summer of 1951, East Berlin hosted an international youth festival, and CBS worked in conjunction with the State Department to install color television receivers in West Berlin as part of a plan to lure children and their families from the Soviet-controlled East to the US/British/French controlled West.<sup>86</sup> CBS' participation in this operation briefly garnered some goodwill in the United States among those who doubted the network's commitment to democratic principles.

Despite all of CBS' attempts to distance itself from accusations of communist sympathies, every so often a scandal erupted that put CBS' commitment to democracy in question. In 1952, Lawrence Johnson and the Veteran Action Committee targeted two programs on CBS, the variety show *Schlitz Playhouse of the Stars* and the drama series *Danger*. Johnson referred to *Playhouse of the Stars* as a "safe haven for communists," while accusing the producers of *Danger* of not only using actors with subversive activities in their past but also hiring, under assumed names, openly communist writers such as Walter Bernstein, Arnold Manoff, and Abraham Polonsky.<sup>87</sup> Johnson protested *Danger's* hiring practices by initiating one of his infamous threats to launch smear campaigns against the sponsor in his grocery stores. The sponsors, Block Drug and American Motors, immediately acquiesced, firing all of the personnel in question. The

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<sup>85</sup> Everitt, *A Shadow of Red*, 77.

<sup>86</sup> George Rosen, "Color TV is Western Democracies' Secret Weapon v. Red Youth Rally," *Variety*, 8 Aug 1951, 1.

<sup>87</sup> Everitt, *A Shadow of Red*, 138-139. In separate interviews for the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, Walter Bernstein and Abraham Polonsky admits that they did work in network television under pen names during the blacklist when possible.

sponsor did not investigate the charges at all. In their opinion, even the presence of charges was a valid cause for dismissal.<sup>88</sup> That same year, CBS news correspondent Winston Burdett admitted to a Senate committee that he had been a Soviet agent during World War II, between 1940 and 1942.<sup>89</sup> CBS had been under scrutiny for too many such episodes already, and neither the network nor its sponsors could afford to keep people around who cast a negative light on the network.

In 1953, CBS launched a new program entitled *You Are There*, a show that dramatized various events in history through the reports of a fictional news team. The network wanted the show because it was an updated and light-hearted version of the highbrow historical programs that Paley loved, but its producers and writers took it in a far more liberal direction and, in CBS' opinion, a more dangerous one. The program hired blacklisted writers working under pseudonyms, and those writers frequently used the show as a platform to air their grievances against Hollywood and the blacklist. *You Are There* often dramatized events involving martyrs and victims of repression, such as the Salem Witch Trial and the stories of Joan of Arc and Socrates.<sup>90</sup> The programs did not have an explicitly liberal subject matter, but the choice in topics did not escape anti-communist activists.

That same year, Edward R. Murrow hosted the program *See It Now*, which featured an exposé on the case of Milo Radulovich. Radulovich was a U.S. Air Force lieutenant discharged because he failed to declare his family's supposedly dubious

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<sup>88</sup> Boddy, *Fifties Television*, 99-100.

<sup>89</sup> "CBS Man Admits He Was a Red Spy," *New York Times*, 30 Jun 1955, 1,8.

<sup>90</sup> Everitt, *A Shadow of Red*, 192.

political affiliation when he enlisted. His father, a Serbian native, continued to receive newspapers from his homeland, one of which was associated with the American Slav Congress, designated by the U.S. government as communist. In addition, he had a sister who supported a number of liberal, though not communist, causes. The Air Force discharged him because of his family's actions, though it had no questions about Radulovich's own loyalty to his government.<sup>91</sup> On October 23, 1953, Murrow methodically presented evidence making the situation seem so ridiculous that an immediate public outcry followed. *See It Now* demonstrated Radulovich's innocence so effectively that the Air Force reinstated him within a month after the program aired.

Murrow also used the show as a platform to do a tribute to General George C. Marshall, at a time when the general was under attack by Red baiting Senator Joseph McCarthy, who called him a tool of the communists.<sup>92</sup> The following year, Murrow devoted an episode of *See It Now* to an expose on Senator McCarthy at a time when very few media personalities were willing to speak out against his demagogic tactics. CBS was so concerned about the potential political fallout that it refused even to pay for the program. In the absence of advertisers, Murrow and his team had to pay for the broadcast out of their own pockets in order to get it on air.<sup>93</sup>

The program initially received broad public support in the form of newspaper editorials, letters and telegrams, but CBS's concerns about negative publicity were soon justified. A mere ten days later, *Counterattack* responded by devoting an entire issue to

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<sup>91</sup> Elie Abel, "Accused Reservist is Ruled Bad Risk," *New York Times* (October 14, 1953), 17.

<sup>92</sup> *See it Now*, "The Case of Milo Radulovich," originally aired 23 October 1953 on CBS.

<sup>93</sup> Slater, *This is... CBS*, 168.

Murrow, condemning his life's work as that of a Red sympathizer.<sup>94</sup> Despite the controversy, Murrow pressed onward, doing an interview with atomic scientist J. Robert Oppenheimer in January 1955, little more than a year after the government stripped him of his security clearance and removed him from the Atomic Energy Commission because of allegations that he was a communist sympathizer. Once again, Murrow and his team had to pay for the broadcast out of pocket because neither the network nor advertisers would touch it.<sup>95</sup> CBS and Murrow both received criticism for putting a so-called 'traitor' on the air, and the program led some to refer to CBS as "the red network."<sup>96</sup> Murrow was, for all intensive purposes, the face of the CBS network and his legendary broadcasts during the London blitz of 1940 had singlehandedly made the network's reputation for strong news reporting. His willingness to use his program to make liberal political statements, however, also made him a liability and made the network a target in the era of the blacklist. By 1956, Murrow found himself with no regular show to call his own after decades with the CBS network.

The network experienced yet another controversy when it came out that Lucille Ball, star of the smash hit sitcom *I Love Lucy*, had registered with the Communist Party in 1936. Though Ball appeared before HUAC and explained that she had joined the party at the behest of her then-ailing grandfather and had never participated in any party politics, the revelations still sparked a firestorm of controversy.<sup>97</sup> Red baiting columnist

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<sup>94</sup> Everitt, *A Shadow of Red*, 200.

<sup>95</sup> Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, 181.

<sup>96</sup> Slater, *This is... CBS*, 177.

<sup>97</sup> Coyne Steven Sanders and Tom Gilbert, *Desilu: The Story of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz* (New York: It Books, 2011), 77.

Westbrook Pegler hounded her, pointing out in his column that she was not to be trusted because she waited for someone to hunt her down and expose her instead of coming forward.<sup>98</sup> Lawrence Johnson led a letter-writing campaign directed at the show's sponsor, Phillip Morris. Ball's husband Desi Arnaz eventually issued a statement at the taping of the first *I Love Lucy* episode of the 1953-1954 season, proclaiming that the only thing red about Lucy was her hair. Despite Ball's very clear and defined relationship to the Communist Party, it was a rare case in which the sponsor, Phillip Morris, stood up to pressure and refused to either fire Ball or cancel her show. *I Love Lucy* continued on the air, without the slightest drop in popularity.<sup>99</sup>

John Henry Faulk was not nearly so lucky as Lucille Ball. Faulk, a radio personality with CBS since 1946, had his own highly rated four-hour morning talk show, *The John Henry Faulk Show*. He had a reputation for liberal political views but maintained his position at CBS for a long time during the blacklist period, even occasionally appearing as a guest star on CBS game shows like *It's News to Me*. In 1956, however, *Counterattack* listed Faulk as a Red sympathizer. Despite the barrage of negative attention CBS endured, the network stood by him and Faulk kept his job for nearly a year and a half after the allegations surfaced. Then, when Faulk brought a defamation lawsuit in 1957 against both Lawrence Johnson and the company that owned *Counterattack*, now called Aware, Inc., CBS fired him. Though the network ostensibly decided to fire him because of his ratings, a CBS producer told Faulk that 'the people

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 83. Pegler was notorious for accusing Hollywood's elite of having communist sympathies. After Pegler attacked Meet the Press creator Lawrence Spivak in one 1953 column, Spivak told a friend "you haven't arrived until you've been Peglarized."

<sup>99</sup> Stefan Kanfer, *Ball of Fire: The Tumultuous Life and Comic Art of Lucille Ball* (New York: Knopf, 2008), 167-174.

upstairs' made the decision. The language implied that CBS executives panicked at the prospect of involvement in a lawsuit against those responsible for instigating the blacklist. It was this timidity and constant fear of being associated with those considered Red sympathizers that made the blacklist possible in the first place. Faulk attempted to find work but found that because of the lawsuit, his name had been thoroughly associated with communism and he could not find a job. Even though he ultimately won his lawsuit against Lawrence Johnson and Aware, Inc., Faulk was unable to find work in the entertainment industry for nearly twenty years.<sup>100</sup>

The cases of Lucille Ball and John Henry Faulk proved that there were limits to how far CBS would go to defend itself against allegations of communist sympathies. If a show was popular enough or the career of one of their franchise stars was on the line, the network did not mind standing up to proponents of the blacklist, even for a former card-carrying member of the Communist Party. A star implying that the network itself was complicit in the blacklist, though, was grounds for abandonment, even if the star had no connection to the Communist Party. CBS' haphazard adherence to its own rules did nothing to clarify where the network stood on either communism or the blacklist. CBS had a reputation for being the most stringent network enforcer of the blacklist and created an entire line-up of programs dedicated to displaying American democracy and patriotism. However, it occasionally ignored the blacklist, putting shows on the air that espoused viewpoints decidedly left of the political center, covertly hired openly communist writers on certain shows, and defended Lucille Ball despite her being a

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<sup>100</sup> Everitt, *A Shadow of Red*, 246-248. Everitt points out that during the trial, CBS sided with Aware, Inc., not Faulk. Even Faulk's former boss, CBS-Radio general manager Carl Ward, took the stand against him despite supporting and defending him against Counterattack's accusations when they first appeared in 1956.

registered member of the Communist Party. CBS sent consistently mixed signals that encouraged anti-communists to continue singling the network out for its transgressions.

By the end of the 1950s, despite the case of John Henry Faulk, the blacklist no longer held its same power. Red-baiting Senator Joseph McCarthy was dead and HUAC had lost most of the authority it wielded a decade before. There are debates about when the blacklist truly ended. Some say it was in 1954, after the Army-McCarthy hearings demonstrated how the fear mongering of the Red Scare destroyed the lives of innocent people. Another industry insider claimed it ended in 1954, but not because of the Army-McCarthy hearings. That year actor Quentin Reynolds won a libel suit against red-baiting newspaper columnist Westbrook Pegler for a column he wrote in 1949 smearing Reynolds.<sup>101</sup> Others say the blacklist ended in 1958 when NBC hired, for *Matinee Theatre*, Jean Muir, who in August 1950 had become the first actress to lose her job because of her listing in Red Channels.<sup>102</sup> Still others claim that the blacklist lasted much longer, until as late as the mid-1960s. Producer and director Norman Felton remembered that while working on *Dr. Kildare* in 1963, an actor came up to him and thanked him for hiring him, saying that this was the first job he had booked since the industry blacklisted him in the early 1950s.<sup>103</sup> Likewise, Robert Butler, when directing an episode of CBS' *The Defenders*, had to fight the network to cast blacklisted actor Howard Da Silva. That episode also aired in 1963, and Da Silva had not had regular work for nearly fifteen

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<sup>101</sup> Interview with Ruth Engelhardt, Part 3 of 8, Interview by Karen Herman (October 9, 2003), <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/topics/television-industry>; "The Press: Reynolds v. Pegler," *Time*, 5 Jul 1954 <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,858511,00.html>, accessed 18 Jan 2011.

<sup>102</sup> Everitt, *A Shadow of Red*, 254.

<sup>103</sup> Interview with Norman Felton, Part 5 of 9, Interview by Lee Goldberg (November 12, 1997), <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/topics/television-industry>, accessed 2 August 2011.

years.<sup>104</sup> Although many of the blacklisted actors, writers, and directors found some type of work by 1963, it is safe to say that it took that long for many of them to find work on a regular basis.

Regardless of when the blacklist ended, its existence left a substantial impact on the television industry and the types of programs broadcast on the networks. The Cold War and the Red Scare pervaded the entertainment industry, and television in particular. By the mid to late 1950s, critics, citizens, and even government officials worried that television, if it sent the wrong message, had the power to destroy the nation.<sup>105</sup> The Democratic National Convention had difficulty even finding an advertising agency to oversee its 1956 presidential campaign. No agency wanted to associate with the DNC in either print or television out of fear that other clients would view a connection to the Democrats as proof that the agency lacked moral resolve on the issue of anti-communism.<sup>106</sup> Even *TV Guide*, ostensibly a schedule of television programming dressed up with a few frivolous articles about television stars, could not escape the Cold War. In 1956, three of the first four issues featured articles on government censorship and the Soviet Union. That a magazine so seemingly trivial as *TV Guide* dealt so heavily with foreign policy concerns and the issue of censorship is an indication of how deeply the Cold War had pervaded the industry.

Every department at every network now had an underlying fear of airing something too controversial or too liberal. In June 1957, CBS aired an interview with

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<sup>104</sup> Interview with Robert Butler, Part 2 of 10, Interview by Stephen J. Abramson (January 14, 2004), <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/topics/television-industry>, accessed 3 August 2011.

<sup>105</sup> Lynn Spigel, "White Flight," in *The Revolution Wasn't Televised*, ed. by Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin (New York: Routledge, 1997), 51.

<sup>106</sup> Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, 210.

Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev with the expectation that President Dwight Eisenhower would do a counterpoint interview in response. When Eisenhower did not do the interview as expected, anti-communists questioned CBS' motives for showing such a one-sided perspective for the benefit of the Soviet Union.<sup>107</sup> It is a testament to the fear of the times that a network became the subject of derision and suspicion for securing an exclusive interview with a prominent and much sought-after world leader.

In this atmosphere, networks stifled creativity and imagination. In 1956, the National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters went as far as to codify the terms under which networks should operate: programming should be inoffensive. "It is seen and heard in every type of home. It is the responsibility of television to bear in mind that its relationship with the viewer is that of guest and host."<sup>108</sup> The networks took that dictate to heart. Even in the early 1960s, when many formerly blacklisted performers and talent once again worked steadily in the industry, programming became increasingly less creative and more formulaic. CBS producer William Froug recalled that after getting a promotion to an executive position, another executive instructed him that his job was "to produce shit."<sup>109</sup> Whereas in the early days of television, comedies like *The Goldbergs* and *Beulah* reflected a more realistic version of the American family and dramas addressed concerns about the human condition, the regime in the post-blacklist era discouraged both. The networks discouraged both originality and any in depth

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<sup>107</sup> "CBS-TV's Khrushchev Coup Snowballs into a Political Hot Potato," *Variety* (12 Jun 1957), 30.

<sup>108</sup> "Television Code of Radio and Television Broadcasters," in *Television's Impact on American Culture*, ed. William Y. Elliott (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1956), 328-329.

<sup>109</sup> Boddy, *Fifties Television*, 238.

examination of real issues.<sup>110</sup> CBS-TV president James Aubrey summarized the trend best when he declared that “content was out.”<sup>111</sup>

The networks still adhered to the old rule that they should not choose programs because they might be popular but choose the ones that would probably not fail. The difference was that before the blacklist, they would have chosen a show that was popular on the radio, even if the program had an ethnic focus. In fact, they might have even preferred the ethnic focus because of its resemblance to the reality of many television viewers. After the Red Scare had drawn so many connections between communism and Judaism, blacks, civil rights, or any foreign culture, networks now had to choose programming that would reflect pure, “real” Americans, meaning the portrayal of native-born whites of northern European descent. Nothing in any program could give off the impression that the show endorsed “otherness.” By broadcasting images of otherness, networks ran the risk of creating innuendo about their political affiliation, and none of the networks wanted to take that chance.<sup>112</sup>

Networks were not the only party feeling skittish about addressing controversial issues. In an article for the fledgling industry journal *Television Quarterly*, advertising executive Robert L. Foreman asserted that advertisers had to meddle in the content of the programs they sponsored to make sure the product they promoted was as wholesome as the product they sold. The network, the director, the writers, and everyone involved in the making of a television program had to keep in mind that the program needed to make the

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<sup>110</sup> Les Brown, *Television: The Business Behind the Box* (New York: Harcourt, 1973), 125-126.

<sup>111</sup> Everitt, *A Shadow of Plenty*, 324.

<sup>112</sup> George Comstock, *Television in America* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1991), p.21.

advertiser look good. As a result, the industry insiders would frequently shy away from covering such emotional and controversial issues as civil rights protests or the story of Emmitt Till, the Chicago teenager who, while visiting his relatives in rural Mississippi, was lynched for allegedly whistling at a white woman. Broadcasting programs on this type of subject matter had the potential to brand the network airing them as crusading liberals. Only a crisis of conscience on the part of some senior executive could get such a program on the air in the post-blacklist era, and even then the program ran the risk of not finding an advertiser. As Foreman put it, “until the American public is adult enough to face facts, no advertiser can afford to underwrite the teaching.”<sup>113</sup>

Instead of confronting the real issues facing the country and its people, as was so common in the television comedies and dramas of the late 1940s and early 1950s, television networks instead looked for inoffensive programming that would appeal to the lowest common denominator. This meant a bevy of westerns, quiz and variety shows, which steered completely clear of topical humor. At the height of McCarthyism, variety shows such as *The Red Skelton Show* and *The Red Buttons Show* were completely devoid of any content that could be construed as political. Their monologues made no mention of current events, politics, or even public figures. The comedy style was completely non-topical and neutral.<sup>114</sup> By the late 1950s, there was no *Red Channels*, *Counterattack* newsletter, or HUAC hearings to keep Hollywood in line. According to Shelley Gordon, a former CBS producer and scriptwriter, “today there’s no censorship to speak of. New

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<sup>113</sup> Robert L. Foreman, “The Dilemma of the TV Advertiser,” *Television Quarterly* 1:1 (February 1962), 44-45.

<sup>114</sup> Folder 1 (The Red Buttons Show), Box 8, Hal Collins Papers, Collection 140, Performing Arts Special Collection, University of California Los Angeles.

writers who are attracted to television generally have nothing to say. The rest of us have forgotten how to say it.”<sup>115</sup> In a very short time, Hollywood writers and producers had learned how to censor themselves; there was little need for an outside agitator to help them.

One of the most obvious byproducts of the blacklist era was the theme of anti-communism that pervaded the airwaves. *Broadcasting* magazine noted that anti-communism was the “hottest new program subject on television,” with networks having amassed more than a hundred programs on the topic ranging from documentaries to sitcoms.<sup>116</sup> The most common iteration of the new trend was the anti-Red docudrama. This staple of mid to late 1950s television specialized in cautionary tales about the dangers that lurked in the minds of seemingly innocent Americans. *I Led Three Lives*, one of the most popular syndicated programs, was based on the life of Herb Philbrick, a man who in the 1940s infiltrated the CPUSA on behalf of the FBI. After Philbrick’s story came out in 1949, he became a celebrity, receiving fan mail and letters of gratitude from all over the country.<sup>117</sup> His story was so popular that it also warranted a radio series and a movie. Another popular program, *The Adventures of Ellery Queen*, utilized Cold War rhetoric for maximum dramatic effect. In one of its earlier episodes, “The Chinese Mummer Mystery,” both the victims and villains are Chinese, while the hero, Ellery

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<sup>115</sup> Boddy, *Fifties Television*, 203.

<sup>116</sup> William Boddy, “Senator Dodd Goes to Hollywood,” in *The Revolution Wasn’t Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 170.

<sup>117</sup> Philbrick’s fanmail can be found under General Correspondence, 1947-1949 in Box 1 of the Herbert Philbrick Papers at the Library of Congress. Interestingly, Philbrick, a beacon for anti-communists, condemned many of the practices of anti-communist movement, particularly loyalty oaths. He claimed that in his time at the FBI, he found that anytime an agency required a loyalty oath, communists would line up to join that organization almost out of spite. Letter from Herbert Philbrick to *I Led 3 Lives* editors, January 15, 1952, Folder 3, Box 17, Herbert Philbrick Papers, Library of Congress Manuscripts Division.

Queen, is the sole white person. The story line involved a Chinese woman having an affair with her arranged husband's nephew in order to win her freedom. The overwhelming theme of the episode is that the ways of the Chinese (who had recently adopted a communist government) were hopelessly outdated and oppressive, while the American tradition of choosing one's own romantic partner was forward thinking and an expression of freedom.<sup>118</sup>

Other than the odd appearance as a wrong-headed foreigner set right by the white hero, actors of non-Anglo Saxon ethnicity almost entirely disappeared from television, although that trend pertained to situation comedies more than to dramas. Minority groups inadvertently played a role in that disappearance. By pointing out the constant reliance on ethnic stereotypes, these groups drew negative attention toward the shows, causing the networks to view those types of show as inherently controversial. *Amos 'n' Andy* was one of the first shows to endure this type of attention. African-American advocacy groups such as the NAACP created a firestorm with its vocal boycotts of the program. However, the NAACP was not alone in its response to stereotypical portrayals of ethnicity. Italian-American groups protested the use of broad ethnic stereotypes in shows like *Life with Luigi*. The protest groups also bristled at the fact that the show's main character, who embodied so many of the stereotypes they hated, was not even played by an Italian-American actor. NBC made one last ditch effort at ethnic humor with its program about an Italian-American family with its 1953 series *Bonino*, but the show never found an audience and only lasted one season.

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<sup>118</sup> Folder "Adventures of Ellery Queen," Box 5, Norman Lessing Papers, Collection 145, Performing Arts Special Collection, University of California, Los Angeles.

By the mid-1950s, television executives and advertising agencies considered ethnic humor of any kind as “deadly.”<sup>119</sup> As the viewing audience rapidly spread to include the South and Midwest, there was less need than ever to cater to an ethnic demographic. It was not just demographics driving that change, however. After all, many of the ethnic shows had achieved nationwide popularity in their previous radio incarnations. The change was more about what the ethnic humor represented. In an age where so many people thought that sending the wrong message had the potential to destroy the country, networks worried about accusations of trying to destroy American values through its promotion of “blue humor.”<sup>120</sup> In response to the controversy, networks relegated white ethnic actors, especially Italian-Americans, to roles as servants and villains.<sup>121</sup> Gone were the programs that displayed a light-hearted touch toward American ethnic groups, such as *The Goldbergs* and *Life with Luigi*. *I Remember Mama* was the only ethnic comedy to last until 1954, but that program was about Norwegians, a decidedly white and therefore uncontroversial nationality.

*Amos ‘n’ Andy* proved the death knell for African-American actors on television because it generated so much controversy. Despite a steady stream of newspaper surveys indicating that many African-Americans enjoyed the show, the NAACP and its

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<sup>119</sup> David Karp, “Who Stole the Melting Pot?,” *Television Quarterly* 7:3 (Summer 1968): 64-65.

<sup>120</sup> Lynn Spigel, “White Flight,” in *The Revolution Wasn’t Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin, p.51. Blue humor is a term used for any humor considered off-color, but in this case pertains specifically to humor about a specific ethnic group or about national inferiority or superiority.

<sup>121</sup> S. Robert Lichter, Linda S. Lichter, and Stanley Rothman, *Prime Time: How Television Portrays American Culture* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1994), 338.

supporters detested its reliance on stereotypes of black men as lazy and shiftless.<sup>122</sup> They believed that these warm, humorous, and generally humanizing portraits of African-Americans in the ghetto further entrenched the ghetto by leading white viewers to believe that not only was this how blacks really lived, but that they were better off where they were. According to the NAACP, the show made the Southside Chicago slums seem charming in its poverty.<sup>123</sup> Despite their loud protests, the organization could never get the black community of one mind in reference to the show. However, NAACP leaders did their best to create as much controversy as possible around the issue and succeeded in getting CBS to pay lip service to their cause. CBS made overtures toward the group about possible changes that might make the show less offensive.

Despite their words, the executives at CBS had no intention of changing the show, no matter how much controversy the NAACP created. The show had consistently high ratings, had received an Emmy nod in 1952, both the network and the show sponsor had invested heavily, and all of the personnel had contracts that could prove difficult to break.<sup>124</sup> Instead, the network made cursory attempts to appease the NAACP, at one point suggesting that the actors appear at the end of each episode out of costume and character to show the audience that they were merely acting. Once *Amos 'n' Andy* had accumulated two seasons worth of shows, CBS cancelled the program in 1953. At that point, CBS sold the show into syndication, where it made the network even more money. After the show

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<sup>122</sup> Letter from Herbert Wright to NAACP Youth Councils, College Chapters, and State Youth Conferences, July 19, 1951, Box 479, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>123</sup> Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, 230.

<sup>124</sup> Melvin Patrick Ely, *The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy: A Social History of an American Phenomenon* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001), 234.

entered syndication, the NAACP could do nothing to stop the show from airing, since doing so would involve individual protests in every city that aired it. Far from washing its hands of the show, the network even toyed with the idea of doing a spin-off series called *The Adventures of the Kingfish*, but ultimately decided to pass on the option.<sup>125</sup>

Instead, CBS used the controversy generated by the NAACP over *Amos 'n' Andy* as an excuse to cancel any shows featuring African-Americans. Although radio had been a safe framework for employing black actors, their involvement in the Red Scare and blacklisting, combined with NAACP agitation and growing African-American consciousness, made all black images controversial, in spite of their actual message. The networks therefore found any excuse to avoid them altogether.<sup>126</sup> When Sammy Davis, Jr. created a pilot in 1954, the networks turned him down despite the fact that he was one of the biggest African-American stars of the time. According to one programming executive, one of the primary reasons was the fact that cast was mostly black.<sup>127</sup> Twelve years passed before any network put another black actor in a leading role.

Even Nat King Cole's musical variety show could not stay on the air in this environment. The network attempted to blame the cancellation of both *The Nat King Cole Show* and *Amos 'n' Andy* on the protests of southern viewers, but the ratings told a different story, since both shows had a following in all sections of the country.<sup>128</sup> In fact,

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 238-239.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, 240.

<sup>127</sup> Fred Silverman, "An Analysis of ABC Television Network Programming from February 1953 to October 1959," Masters Thesis, Ohio State University, 1959, 97.

<sup>128</sup> Nadel, *Television in Black and White America*, 37; Roman, *From Daytime to Primetime*, 63. According to Roman, another factor that led to the cancellation of Cole's program was its placement on the programming schedule, against the extremely popular quiz show *\$64,000 Question*.

*Amos 'n' Andy* was in the Nielsen Top 20 when it lost its network slot in 1953, so CBS cancelled it in spite of its popularity. Despite their apparently universal popularity, the shows just could not keep a national sponsor. Cole was an extremely popular performer and rather affable personality, so the connection of his show with controversy is a testament to the degree of paranoia that existed around black performers in the mid-to-late 1950s. The network even asked that Cole maintain “southern standards” on his program, meaning firing black backup singers and keeping a “respectful relationship” with his white female guests, though his refusing to do so did not apparently affect his ratings.<sup>129</sup> Regardless of the content, any show with a regular black star could not attract regular sponsors due to the controversy they attracted.<sup>130</sup> Cole reportedly remarked, in response to his inability to get a national sponsor, “Madison Avenue is afraid of the dark.” None of the three networks took another risk on a program with an African-American lead until CBS’ *Mission: Impossible* and NBC’s *I Spy* in 1965.

Between 1955 and 1964, approximately 1 in 10 television characters was something other than a white Northern European in appearance, name, and language. When broken down by ethnicity, the numbers are even more stark. One in 50 characters was Hispanic, less than 1 in 100 was Asian, 1 in 200 was African-American, and in a major change from the late 1940s and early 1950s, only 1 in 700 was Jewish.<sup>131</sup> The dearth of Jewish characters where there had once been so many clearly demonstrated that television executives and producers had taken to heart the connection drawn by anti-

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<sup>129</sup> Roman, *From Daytime to Primetime*, 64.

<sup>130</sup> Lichter et al., *Prime Time*, 336-337.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

communists between Jews and communism. The industry was so terrified of courting controversy and re-awakening accusations of Communist sympathies that it no longer cared about representing the true ethnic and racial makeup of its audience.

As a result of Red Scare paranoia and the lingering vestiges of McCarthyism, television in the late 1950s was vastly different from its early 1950s predecessor: lily-white, uncontroversial and untainted by any overt political elements. Many of television's most talented writers, directors, and actors could no longer find work because of the ongoing blacklist, and those who could often had to do so under assumed names. The networks no longer encouraged creativity in developing either storylines or genres, preferring instead to stick to proven formulas that catered to the lowest common denominator for the sake of profits. They remained sensitive to public and political opinion and gravitated toward genres that had in patriotic identifiers what they lacked in creativity or originality. By playing it safe, network executives assumed that they could keep their audiences tuned in and sufficiently entertained while also avoiding the embarrassments and controversies that their creative talent had caused for them in the early 1950s. In short order, however, they would learn that even the most innocuous programs had the potential to create national controversy.

## Chapter 2. Quiz Shows, Horse Operas, and the Confederacy

During the latter half of the 1950s, networks filled the void left by the absence of the ethnic urban comedy with a combination of variety shows, quiz shows, westerns, and mysteries. These genres, quiz shows and westerns in particular, were wholesome, seemingly did not invite controversy, and pulled in massive viewing audiences. Comedy was not a prominent part of the programming line-up during this period, ostensibly because it cost too much to create. With the parameters of what made for acceptable comedic fodder becoming narrower by the day because of fear of blacklisting, there were few comedic actors up to the challenge of making bland, neutral comedy palatable for a large audience. Those who could were in high demand and expensive. Comedies now required big names in order to attract an audience. In addition, comedic scripts were now subject to more exacting standards than other types of programming because of its controversial potential.<sup>132</sup> Considering that comedy had been the foundation of radio programming and the genre also anchored the networks' jump from radio to television, its virtual elimination from the programming lineup represented a major departure. Nevertheless, the networks all prospered in the late 1950s without much comedy, thanks to programming line-ups filled with wholesome and family-friendly television shows of other genres.

At first it seemed as though quiz shows were the ultimate all-American replacement for the urban ethnic comedy. They featured average Americans,

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<sup>132</sup> "Comedy's 'Poor Relation' Status in First-Run Syndication Field," *Variety* (22 Jun 1957), 26.

demonstrating a wide breadth of knowledge on a range of subjects, with the most knowledgeable taking home a cash prize.<sup>133</sup> They provided the suspense and entertainment that the viewing audience craved, while also serving as a subtle weapon in the Cold War by demonstrating how average citizens could use their knowledge to secure wealth and status in a meritocracy. In creating one rags-to-riches story after another, quiz programs provided an entertaining and exciting shortcut to the American dream.

Quiz shows dominated the primetime programming lineups starting in 1955, when Charles Revson, the owner of Revlon Cosmetics, wanted to stimulate the sales of his company's lipstick by featuring commercials on something "more arresting than just any run-of-the-mill show."<sup>134</sup> Independent television producer and packager, Louis Cowan, brought Revson an idea for a re-vamp of a popular radio game show, *The \$64 Question*. For the television version, the producers multiplied the highest prize by a thousand and the program became *The \$64,000 Question*. Revson jumped at the idea, and CBS debuted the show in the summer of 1955. Game shows already existed on network television, but the enormous prize offered on *The \$64,000 Question* raised the stakes and separated the show from its competition. It immediately caught on with viewers, registering an 84.8 percent audience share for its timeslot at the height of its popularity.

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<sup>133</sup> There are indications that the contestants also bought into the idea that their performances were promoting intellectual advancement among viewers. When testifying before a House Subcommittee investigating the quiz show scandals, *Twenty-One* producer Albert Freeman stated that despite the possible financial incentives, what often convinced contestants to cheat was the possibility that they were sending a positive message encouraging people to follow their academic pursuits. *Dotto* producer Edward Jurist justified his actions by saying they were doing a service to the country by entertaining them with bright and amusing people. *Twenty-One* contestant Charles Van Doren said that he was told "by cheating to defeat Herb Stempel, I would be doing a great service to intellectual life, to teachers and education in general, by increasing public respect for the work of the mind through my performances." For more on Van Doren's testimony, see Congress, House, Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, Investigation of Television Quiz Shows, 86<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> session, November 2-6, 1959 (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1960).

<sup>134</sup> Metz, *CBS*, 204.

At one point Las Vegas bookies even took bets on the show's winners.<sup>135</sup> Sensing a potential trend, other networks picked up high-stakes quiz shows for their fall lineups, and CBS hired Louis Cowan, who had originated the idea for *\$64,000 Question*, as its vice-president of creative services in an effort to add more high-stakes quiz shows to its lineup.<sup>136</sup> Quizzes immediately pushed aside more serious programming such as documentaries and news shows. Within two years, quiz shows were five of the top ten programs.

CBS was the network most successful at capitalizing on the trend, which indicated both its thus-far unchallenged ability to spot a trend before the other networks and also its effort to shed its "Red Channel" image and replace it with one associated with innocuous family fun. In 1955, 7 of the top 10 programs in the Nielsen ratings were CBS programs. Two years later, the network's share rose to 8 out of 10. The network's domination of the ratings cemented its status as a leader in capitalizing on viewing trends and capturing advertising revenue. NBC was a distant second in terms of both popularity and profits.<sup>137</sup> For both networks, however, quiz shows proved the key to both their ratings and financial success. At the height of the quiz show craze in 1957, there were twenty-four such programs on the air in primetime alone.

The high-stakes quiz show craze did not last, however. In 1957, allegations erupted around the NBC program *Twenty One* after a contestant claimed he had received the answers from the show's producers, and that those same producers engineered his exit

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 204-205.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>137</sup> Slater, *This is...CBS*, 178-179; Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, 187.

from the show after a prolonged winning streak. Eventually similar accusations surfaced in two other shows, including two CBS programs, *The \$64,000 Question* and *Dotto*. The charges led to a Congressional investigation into television industry practices.

The results of the investigation indicated that the sponsors of quiz programs had intervened with the producers of the shows in an effort to secure high ratings. Although all of the producers who testified claimed to have sought out the brightest contenders using a series of interviews and difficult tests, contestants ultimately were chosen for their ability to draw ratings with their personalities.<sup>138</sup> Those contestants subsequently received the questions and answers ahead of time or were given questions based on the strengths they showed on the initial qualifying exams.<sup>139</sup> The producers also claimed that such fixing practices were common in quiz shows, estimating that between fifty and seventy percent of participants received some sort of help from the production staff. All of them stated that fixing was so ubiquitous that they expected new production assistants from other shows to know about it, and the few who did not quickly lost their jobs. Several producers claimed that they assumed the networks knew about the fixes simply because they were so common, though no one at the networks ever corroborated that testimony.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Testimony of Albert Freeman, October 7, 1959, Folder "Freedman and Enright, 10-7-59," Box 2-Executive Session Transcripts 12/1/58-11/5/59, Interstate Foreign Commerce Committee-Subcommittee on Oversight, RG233 Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, National Archives Legislative Records Division, Washington D.C., 9-13.

<sup>139</sup> Testimony of Edward Jurist, Frances Li, and Patty Duke, October 8 and November 3, 1959, Box 2, Records of the Interstate Foreign Commerce Committee Subcommittee on Oversight, Records of the U.S. House of Representatives.

<sup>140</sup> Testimony of Daniel Enright and Sy Fischer, October 7-8, 1959, Box 2, Records of the Interstate Foreign Commerce Committee Subcommittee on Oversight, U.S. House of Representatives.

Both Congress and the television networks ultimately decided that the scandals stemmed from too much influence by the advertiser on the content of programming, which put pressure on networks to create a product that was helpful for the advertiser.<sup>141</sup> Given this conclusion, the networks ultimately decided they needed to exert more control over program production, and in 1960, Congress amended the 1934 Communications Act, making it illegal to “fix” quiz shows. Nonetheless, the scandals led all three major networks to cancel the bulk of their quiz shows during the 1958-59 season. The controversy produced an overall drop in the ratings for quiz shows, even the ones not facing cheating allegations.

NBC, as the network that broadcast *Twenty One*, received most of the headlines in the quiz show scandal, but CBS once again found itself in an awkward position as well. The network produced two of the three quiz shows that caused the scandal, *Dotto* and *\$64,000 Question*, and had also owned *Twenty One* until 1957. During the congressional investigation following the scandal, the network did not come away looking like a moral stalwart. Sy Fischer, a producer on *Dotto*, testified that, because of pressures to keep from having too many large prizes, the practice of fixing was intrinsic to the genre and that CBS network executives must have known about it.<sup>142</sup> Daniel Enright, a producer on *Twenty One*, claimed that the show had been fixed on CBS before it moved to NBC, although he admitted no firsthand knowledge of fixing.<sup>143</sup> In one of the most sordid events uncovered in the investigation, two employees of *\$64,000 Question* testified to

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<sup>141</sup> Everitt, *A Shadow of Red*, 324.

<sup>142</sup> Testimony of Sy Fischer before the U.S. House Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee Subcommittee on Oversight, October 8, 1959,

<sup>143</sup> Testimony of Daniel Enright before the U.S. House Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee Subcommittee on Oversight, October 7, 1959.

having accepted payments from a gentleman in exchange for allowing him to come on the show as a contestant and say the name of his Pennsylvania department store twice. One man was a show producer and the other was a low-level employee of Cowan and Associates, the production company owned by CBS network president and quiz show impresario Louis Cowan. Although the men were loath to refer to the payments as bribes, the members of the Congressional committee felt differently.<sup>144</sup> All of these separate testimonies culminated in painting a picture of CBS as a network that did not necessarily place a high value on honesty and solid American morality.

In place of the quiz show, the networks stepped up production of the western, a genre of programming that had already proven popular all over the country since 1955. The western had started as a children's trend, with all three networks offering a variety of western-themed children's programming, including shows about Hopalong Cassidy and Annie Oakley and others with names like *Action in the Afternoon*, *Buffalo Bill, Jr.*, and *Range Rider*, most of which were produced by Gene Autry's Flying A Productions. Network executives felt that the genre provided an outlet for a child's sense of adventure while also providing a degree of wholesomeness and morality. There were 19 children's westerns on television prior to 1955.<sup>145</sup>

The prevalence of the western in children's programming combined with the success of ABC's *The Adventures of Davy Crockett*, must have impressed the networks and demonstrated the potential in an adult version.<sup>146</sup> The western offered action,

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<sup>144</sup> Testimony of Elroy Shwartz and Joseph Cates before the U.S. House Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee Subcommittee on Oversight, November 5, 1959.

<sup>145</sup> J. Fred MacDonald, *Who Shot the Sheriff: The Rise and Fall of the Television Western* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 1986), 26, 35-36.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

adventure, and violence, yet generally contained material inoffensive enough to appeal to the lowest common denominator. They also had the added bonus of a uniquely American subject matter that flattered the audience by appealing to the idealism and self-sacrifice of its national past.<sup>147</sup> Westerns had the singular ability to combine that sense of history and national pride with a pervasive law and order theme that appealed to a Cold War sense of justice. Their emphasis on law and order coincided with a sense of rugged individualism and personal morality, and the two somehow did not clash. Henry Kissinger explained it best in an interview with journalist Oriana Fallaci: “Americans like the cowboy who leads the wagon train by riding ahead alone on his horse, the cowboy who rides all alone into the town, the village, with his horse and nothing else. He acts, that’s all, by being in the right place at the right time.”<sup>148</sup> The genre with its cowboys, frontiersmen and law men living by their wits on the fringes of civilization offered up the myth of the American west in the form of fun adventure stories.

By 1959, westerns ruled the airwaves, to the point where ABC executives referred to them as the “bread and butter” of television programming.<sup>149</sup> There were thirty primetime westerns on the three major networks. In August of that year, five of the top ten shows were westerns, and by the end of the year, there were eight westerns in the Nielsen Top 10. They comprised fully one quarter of all evening network programming with thirty on the primetime schedule, not including the countless locally produced westerns shown in syndication all over the country. *TV Guide*, the barometer of all

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<sup>147</sup> Jbid., 111.

<sup>148</sup> Oriana Fallaci, *Interview with History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 41.

<sup>149</sup> Silverman, “An Analysis of ABC Network Programming,” 268.

television trends, carried an article on a ‘horse opera’ at least once a week every week between 1957 and 1960 and featured one on the cover at least once a month during those years. The genre was so popular that even presidential candidate John F. Kennedy capitalized on the trend by calling his new program of domestic and foreign policies “The New Frontier.”<sup>150</sup> Kennedy appointees sometimes even referred to themselves as the “cowboy” ambassadors of the New Frontier, and used cowboy jargon in their speeches.<sup>151</sup> *Billboard* magazine indicated that one network was so confident in the genre that its current motto was “You can be sure if it’s a Western.”<sup>152</sup>

For their part, the networks adored westerns because they worked on so many levels. In addition to the wholesome American aspect of the genre, viewers were attracted to the virulent cowboy ideal. Male viewers identified with and aspired to emulate the rugged, masculine frontiersmen, while women swooned over their good looks and charm. The networks quickly found that the right actor could render a show’s content nearly irrelevant. There were so many westerns on the market that plotlines were far from original and made for rather generic viewing, but people would still tune in to watch a western if the lead actor had star quality. As long as producers could find ruggedly handsome actors who could successfully lend a sense of gravitas to melodramatic plotlines, they could find a way to market that person as the star of their own western.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Nadel, *Television in Black and White America*, 158-159; MacDonald, *Who Shot the Sheriff*, 3.

<sup>151</sup> Newton Minow speech to the National Association of Broadcasters, May 1961, Records of the Federal Communications Commission, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.

<sup>152</sup> *Billboard* (28 October 1957), 2.

<sup>153</sup> “The abc of ABC,” *Forbes* (15 June 1959), 17.

Another major appeal of westerns was that they catered to the ever-growing rural and southern markets. Television was no longer just a luxury for urbanites in major cities and the Northeast. Following the nearly four-year FCC ban on television station licensing that left large portions of the country with little to no access, stations popped up all over the country in the mid 1950s, primarily in the South and Midwest. While only nine percent of the United States population had a television in 1950, at the end of the decade approximately 87 percent of American households had at least one.<sup>154</sup> The number of rural homes owning at least one television set had jumped from around 5 million in the early 1950s to nearly 15 million in the late 1950s.<sup>155</sup>

The huge jump in rural viewers meant that networks had to consider their viewing preferences in a way that would have been unthinkable only a few years before. Rural viewers had tastes that often differed radically from their urban counterparts, and for the first time, those differences affected the ratings. Urban acts such as Milton Berle and Jackie Gleason, so effortlessly popular in the early days of television, did not hold any appeal for rural and southern audiences, and networks found their ratings suddenly suffering as a result. The western became popular because it was the rare genre that both demographics enjoyed.<sup>156</sup> With television viewership now comprised of both urban and rural whites (other races did not yet come into consideration), broadcasters knew the surest route to bigger profits was to cater to the growing sectors of the viewing audience while also pleasing veteran viewers.

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<sup>154</sup> MacDonald, *One Nation Under Television*, 110.

<sup>155</sup> Silverman, "An Analysis of ABC Television Network Programming," 227.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

ABC had the most to gain by trying to break into this market, which partially explains why that network led the western craze in the mid 1950s. While NBC and CBS both had long-running success in the television industry stemming from their willingness to embrace quiz shows and westerns, ABC had a more difficult time establishing itself. The FCC ban on station licensing had severely handicapped the network's growth, as it had far fewer affiliate stations than its competitors did. Besides its five stations in major U.S. cities, ABC only had eight affiliate stations, meaning it was only a skeleton of a network in comparison with NBC and CBS, who shared more than one hundred stations between them. By the time the FCC lifted the ban in 1952, ABC was on the verge of bankruptcy. Only a merger with United Paramount Theatres (UPT) saved the network from fading into obscurity.<sup>157</sup>

After the merger, ABC sought parity with its rivals, but achieving that goal was an uphill battle. Even when the network doubled its profits in 1954, the year after the merger, that profit still amounted to only one third of that made by either NBC or CBS.<sup>158</sup> The other networks had all of the big-name talent and more affiliate stations, causing high-profile projects to shy away from ABC for fear of limiting their exposure on a national level. The network always landed the third place slot in terms of both popularity and advertising rates. ABC consistently made a profit after the merger with UPT, but did not have the resources for hit making that the other networks possessed. Since ratings and ad sales determined the level of salaries and number of available jobs, ABC always had

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<sup>157</sup> Sterling Quinlan, *Inside ABC: American Broadcasting Company's Rise to Power* (New York: Hastings House, 1979), 4, 27.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

the lowest pay and the fewest opportunities, which did nothing to attract the most productive and successful minds in the industry.<sup>159</sup>

ABC's seemingly permanent hold on the third place spot among the networks gave it one advantage: the freedom to experiment. After the 1953 merger, ABC thought that televised football games would be popular. Televising sporting events were popular, inexpensive to produce, and local affiliate stations easily found sponsors for them.<sup>160</sup> After 1953, sporting events comprised more than a third of ABC's airtime.<sup>161</sup> ABC had so much success with its televised sports that it acquired the rights to air National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) football games in 1954. While ABC's sports programming had been popular at the local level, the network found it difficult to find a national sponsor for the NCAA games. ABC ultimately sold advertising space to regional advertisers at a deeply discounted rate, losing nearly two million dollars on the deal.<sup>162</sup> In its quest to distinguish itself in the television market, ABC overestimated the public's appetite for sports.

Undeterred, ABC executives continued to look for ways to distinguish the network from its competition. It was one of the first of the networks to rely heavily on quiz and game shows, and also one of the first to air primetime adult westerns. After the success of the Davy Crockett series on *Disneyland* and the surprising popularity of its star Fess Parker, ABC realized that westerns and adventure series were huge potential moneymakers. Not only did they attract audiences of all ages, they created stars out of

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<sup>159</sup> Comstock, *Television in America*, 22-23.

<sup>160</sup> Silverman, "An Analysis of ABC Network Programming," 47.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>162</sup> *Variety* (1 September 1954), 35.

unknowns, something that the networks had learned did not work for comedies and variety shows.<sup>163</sup> ABC's westerns only confirmed that information. *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp* and *Cheyenne* premiered on ABC in the fall of 1955 to great ratings and started the western craze that continued into the 1960s.<sup>164</sup> ABC added half a dozen new westerns to its lineup over the next couple of years, finally making it competitive with the other networks. Once NBC and CBS started adding westerns to their lineups however, ABC lost its edge.<sup>165</sup>

In an attempt to find the next big trend, ABC reached out to southern and rural viewers. The other networks and the television industry initially balked at ABC's decision and did not follow its lead. That incredulousness now seems shortsighted when considering that by the mid 1950s, all of the networks were already experimenting with the rural genre in the form of shows for children. As the western craze demonstrated, children's shows could often indicate the future of adult programming. CBS purchased the popular 1930s cartoons series *Terrytoons*, which featured a farmer named Al Falfa, in the 1950s for its daytime schedule.<sup>166</sup> After 1953, the hosted children's show became a popular genre. Although most programs featured cowboy or clown themes, other stations experimented with rural themes. Most of the rural children's shows were not in the South, but in the Midwest and the Border states. There was *Hold 'Er Newt* in Chicago, *Friendly*

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<sup>163</sup> Interview with former ABC-TV Vice President of Programming Robert Lewine, quoted in Silverman, "An Analysis of ABC Network Television Programming," 143.

<sup>164</sup> CBS premiered their first hit western, *Gunsmoke*, that same season. The network added the show because it was an adaptation of CBS Chairman William Paley's favorite radio show, not as part of a plan to grab ratings by introducing westerns.

<sup>165</sup> Quinlan, *Inside ABC*, 51.

<sup>166</sup> Hollis, *Ain't That a Knee Slapper*, 65-66.

*Junction* in Columbus, Ohio, *The Hap Richards Show* in Hartford, Connecticut, and dozens of others in Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio, Washington D.C. and Wisconsin.<sup>167</sup>

Given the popularity of the genre in the daytime and children's markets, it seemed a natural step to attempt a rural theme in the primetime sector. All of the networks, however, were still skittish. Faced with a choice of either attempting a new genre that might not work in urban sectors or continuing with the tried-and-true formula of quiz shows and westerns, NBC and CBS opted for the latter.

ABC, on the other hand, was game to experiment. Its first forays into rural programming for primetime were of the musical type. On January 22, 1955, ABC premiered *Ozark Jubilee*, a country and western variety show filmed live in Springfield, Missouri, featuring a rotating cast of country singers. The show was the first in the short history of television to feature country music. It quickly gained a devoted following, appealing to viewers in all parts of the country. Webb Pierce, one of the show's regular performers, marveled that "once upon a time it was almost impossible to sell country music in a place like New York City. Nowadays, television takes us everywhere and country music records sell as well in large cities as anywhere else."<sup>168</sup> The program lasted for six years and went off the air not because of low ratings, but because the government indicted the host, Red Foley, for tax fraud. *Ozark Jubilee* performed so well in the ratings and generated so much advertising revenue that ABC added a similar program to its primetime roster later that same year. *The Pee Wee King Show*, a country music variety show starring comedian Pee Wee King, was a summer program that did not perform well

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 151-153.

<sup>168</sup> "Ozark Jubilee," *TV Guide* (7 Jul 1956), 28.

enough to survive into the fall season. However, ABC felt confident enough in the ratings of both *Ozark Jubilee* and *The Pee Wee King Show* to do yet another country music-based show the following year, *The Grand Ole Opry*. In the tradition of 1950s television programming, the Opry had a long history as an extremely popular radio show before making a transition to primetime television. Despite *Ozark Jubilee*'s popularity, some critics expressed shock that *The Grand Ole Opry* also did well. Critics still held firm to the old belief that no one liked country music except for people in the country.<sup>169</sup> Though the network cancelled *The Grand Ole Opry* after one season, ABC immediately sold it into syndication where the reruns proved popular in rural areas for decades.

ABC had a potential trend in the making. Country music television comprised 15 percent of the network's new programming in 1955, making it ABC's largest new program type.<sup>170</sup> The network, perpetually in the third place slot in the Nielsen rankings, now had one rural-themed program, *Ozark Jubilee*, drawing viewers on a national scale and another, *The Grand Ole Opry*, succeeding in syndication. Yet another, *Talent Varieties*, was doing well as a mid-season replacement on the Tuesday night schedule. The shows were demonstrating solid appeal among "specialized audiences," a popular network euphemism for southern and rural audiences, yet popular enough among the general audience that there were plenty of advertisers willing to buy time on them.<sup>171</sup> They also cost significantly less than other popular ABC shows, with *Ozark Jubilee* costing only eight thousand per episode to *Wyatt Earp*'s twenty-four thousand dollar

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<sup>169</sup>*TV Guide* (4 May 1956), 18.

<sup>170</sup> Interview with ABC-TV Vice President Ted Fetter, quoted in Silverman, "An Analysis of ABC Network Television Programming," 162.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*

price tag.<sup>172</sup> In a bid to continue capitalizing on the trend, ABC looked for other offerings in a similar vein. During the 1956-1957 season, there was talk of creating a rural themed game show which could tap into multiple trends at the same time, satisfying game show fans while also attracting rural viewers. The program ABC had in mind was entitled *Pig in a Poke* and played heavily on the rural theme. In lieu of isolation booths, contestants would answer their questions in corn cribs. Instead of bidding points, they could bid ‘whole hog’ or ‘half hog.’<sup>173</sup> The concept must not have caught on with network executives, however, because the show never made it to air. ABC also considered a pilot called *R.F.D.-U.S.A.*, a half-hour weekly study of rural American communities and their colorful traditions. The network ultimately passed on that show as well.<sup>174</sup>

ABC did not add any country or rural-themed programming to its regular season in 1956, and instead concentrated its country-themed series in the summer lineup. One show, *Country Music Jamboree*, was essentially a version of the already successful *Ozark Jubilee*. Another program, *Cowboy Rodeo*, featured live broadcasts of a rodeo that, while filmed in New Jersey, appealed to viewers who already watched western programming and southern audiences for whom rodeo was a familiar pastime. ABC also featured yet another country music program in its 1957 summer lineup, *Midwestern Hayride*, which featured live country music from Cincinnati, Ohio.<sup>175</sup> None of these shows were filmed in the South, but all were meant to cater to viewers there, as part of ABC’s initiative to use audience analysis to target specific viewing populations.

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<sup>172</sup> Silverman, “An Analysis of ABC Network Television Programming,”171.

<sup>173</sup> *TV Guide* (23 Feb 1957), 5.

<sup>174</sup> Silverman, “An Analysis of ABC Network Television Programming,”193-194.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid*, 219-220.

For the fall of 1957, ABC took its audience's newfound interest in rural programming in a different direction: rural comedy. Rural comedy had a long history in the United States, dating back as far as Poor Richard, the wise fool persona that Benjamin Franklin used in the eponymous almanac from 1733 to 1758. In the twentieth century, however, the genre truly came into its own, spanning genres from print to celluloid. Radio's *Lum and Abner* became immensely popular for its brand of sly, hillbilly humor, while Al Capp's comic strip about hapless hillbillies in fictional Dogpatch, Kentucky, *Li'l Abner*, became a national sensation in 1934. After World War II, rural comedy became a popular genre in movies, with the Ma and Pa Kettle series proving immensely popular with audiences all over the country between 1947 and 1957. Radio and television writers had already used it sparingly, but to great effect. In 1941, Red Skelton made a reputation for himself with his radio show and one of his most popular characters, Clem Kadiddlehopper, was a lazy southern hayseed trying to make it in the big city. When Skelton moved from radio to television in 1951, Clem made the transition as well and remained one of his most popular characters. CBS attempted three times to adapt the popular rural radio sitcom *Lum and Abner*, into a television program, first in a fifteen-minute program and subsequently in the half-hour length. Neither of these attempts resulted in a regularly programmed show, so CBS shelved the project.<sup>176</sup> CBS subsequently created a rural program, *The Egg and I*, for its daytime schedule in 1951, but the network ultimately cancelled that as well, unable to find a long-term sponsor.<sup>177</sup> It

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<sup>176</sup> Hollis, *Ain't That a Knee Slapper*, 143-145.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

appeared as though either the audiences or the sponsors or both still had reservations about committing to a series about rural people.

Despite the networks' inability to create a viable rural themed sitcom, rural characters continued to pop up in primetime, and they proved a popular plot device in all their various iterations. There were hillbillies, who were rural southern mountain dwellers, and there were hicks, who were distinguished by their rural provenance and unsophisticated manner. Hicks are also called rubes or yokels, and did not necessarily have to be southern. However, those who appeared in 1950s comedy generally did feature strong southern accents, and the southern accent is a common device used in film and television to denote a hick character. The rarest southerner in comedy was the redneck, a proud southern blue-collar character that tended toward reactionary and sometimes bigoted behavior. These character types were not mutually exclusive, as it was possible for a hillbilly to be both a hick and a redneck, or for a hick to be neither a hillbilly nor a redneck, but the character types were also not interchangeable.

Despite the differences between hillbilly, hick, and redneck, the networks did not necessarily draw many distinctions among the character types. While some in the audience knew the differences between a hick and a hillbilly, audiences above the Mason-Dixon Line often failed to distinguish between them. As long as characters had a southern accent, most audiences considered them southern, regardless of whether the person was a hillbilly, hick, or redneck.<sup>178</sup> Since the writers, producers, and directors involved in television production were rarely from the South, they also frequently failed

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<sup>178</sup> Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly, A Cultural History of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5; Kirby Moss, *The Color of Class: Poor Whites and the Paradox of Privilege* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 20.

to see the difference. Judging by the ratings that shows using “southern” characters achieved, the viewers either did not see the difference, or enjoyed them so much that they did not care.

In 1954 and 1955, Tennessee Ernie Ford made multiple appearances on *I Love Lucy* as Lucy’s bumpkin cousin from Bent Fork, Tennessee. Ford, who had a lucrative music career and eventually went on to have his own television show, was only supposed to appear in one episode. His character, Cousin Ernie, proved so popular that the show’s producers asked him back for two more episodes. That Ernie Ford came back to the show twice more as a recurring character speaks to his unusual popularity, as *I Love Lucy* typically avoided drawing out guest appearances for more than one episode.<sup>179</sup>

Bob Cummings, a major television star in the 1950s, was among the first to use hillbilly characters, generally defined as rural mountain people from either Appalachia or the Ozarks, on a semi-regular basis.<sup>180</sup> An episode of *My Hero* (Cummings’ first television series) called “Hillbilly” found Cummings’ character getting involved in a hillbilly feud culminating in a shootout.<sup>181</sup> Occasionally writers on *The Bob Cummings Show*, Cummings’ second series, would throw a hillbilly into the mix. The recurring

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<sup>179</sup> Hollis, *Ain’t That a Knee Slapper*, 155-156.

<sup>180</sup>Cummings was a Missouri native who had an interest in flying after his godfather, the manned flight pioneer Orville Wright, taught him to fly when he was still in high school. While still living in Missouri, Cummings would give airplane rides to people for a five-dollar fare, and later he became a flying instructor for the army during World War II.<sup>180</sup> His background seems to have provided the basis for the Grandpa Collins character, and his Missouri upbringing may have provided the impetus for including hillbilly characters on the show, despite the fact that he was not from the Ozarks. Paul Henning, another Missouri native who later became a major producer of 1960s rural comedy, wrote the hillbilly episodes. Henning also wrote hillbilly and rube characters for *The Burns and Allen Show*. Those characters along with Grandpa Collins possibly informed the prototypes for what would become Henning’s most famous project, *The Beverly Hillbillies*.

<sup>181</sup>*My Hero*, “The Hillbilly,” Season 1, Episode 4, originally aired November 29, 1952 on NBC. Directed by Leslie Goodwins, written by Dick Conway and Robert Cummings.

character Grandpa Collins was a mountain man who would fly in and out of California on a World War I era biplane to visit. In addition to the main character, Cummings also played the role of Grandpa. In the episode “Bob Goes Hillbilly,” Cummings primary character also assumed a hick persona.

By 1957, ABC took another step toward reaching its rural and southern viewers and attempted a half-hour rural-themed sitcom. Over the years, this burgeoning genre took on many forms and producers tinkered with which components made the show specifically rural. Some of them had rural characters in urban settings, while others featured urban characters in rural settings, or rural characters in rural settings. ABC created the prototype in *The Real McCoys*. In 1957, the network, in an effort to increase profits and ratings, implemented a counter-programming strategy for the first time in its history. ABC determined which viewers the other networks wanted to get with their shows, and then filled its schedules with programs that would attract other elements of the viewing audience while also pulling viewers away from the competition.<sup>182</sup>

The network’s demographic analysts had found that there was a dearth of programs suitable for young families to watch together, a strange phenomenon considering how many such families existed at the height of the baby boom.<sup>183</sup> ABC researchers realized that not only were young families with children grossly under-served as a viewing audience, they were also a huge attraction for advertisers, who considered them prime consumers. The network wanted their viewership so much that executives

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<sup>182</sup> Silverman, “An Analysis of ABC Network Television Programming,” 230.

<sup>183</sup> Quinlan, *Inside ABC*, 69.

referred to them as the “get-age” group.<sup>184</sup> ABC decided that a combination of westerns and comedies was the best way to attract the “get-age” viewers.<sup>185</sup> A family-friendly rural comedy was particularly advantageous because it not only catered to the family viewership, but also the southern and rural audience. The result was *The Real McCoys*, a show about a man and his grandchildren travelling from West Virginia to California to start a new life farming a parcel of land left to them by a deceased relative. Irving and Norman Pincus, the show’s creators, had pitched the show to all three networks and been rejected by NBC and CBS, despite ABC’s unexpected success with rural material. The Pincus brothers finally found a home for their show on ABC, still the smallest and least popular network.<sup>186</sup>

Given the cast, production team, and crew of *The Real McCoys*, the show seemed destined for success. The list of people involved with the show reads like a Who’s Who in American television. Danny Thomas’ production company produced the show. Thomas was a major star in 1957 and already had his own popular sitcom on CBS, *Make Room for Daddy*. Having his name attached to the project gave it an air of legitimacy. The Pincus brothers also managed to secure veteran actor and three-time Oscar winner Walter Brennan to play the lead character, Amos McCoy. Crewmembers were experienced but had not yet reached their professional prime. Several went on to become major players in later rural series. Everett Greenbaum, who became one of the main writers for *The Andy Griffith Show*, also wrote some of the early episodes. Sheldon

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<sup>184</sup> Silverman, “An Analysis of ABC Network Television Programming,” 234.

<sup>185</sup> Interview with President of ABC-TV President Leonard Goldenson, found in Silverman, “An Analysis of ABC Network Television Programming,” 226.

<sup>186</sup> Hollis, *Ain’t That a Knee Slapper*, 172-173; Harkins, *Hillbilly*, 180-181.

Leonard, just beginning to make a name for himself in the industry when he directed the first episodes of *The Real McCoys*, later produced *The Andy Griffith Show* and *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.*<sup>187</sup> Paul Henning, who wrote some of the first episodes of *The Real McCoys*, would later go on to create *The Beverly Hillbillies* and other rural comedies.

*The Real McCoys* quickly caught on and gave ABC its third rural-themed hit. The network was in the process of re-vamping its Thursday night lineup to appeal specifically to young families, and the network took a risk by placing the untried sitcom in the middle of the evening schedule.<sup>188</sup> Having found instant success, *The Real McCoys* anchored the Thursday night line-up from 1957 to 1962 and was in the Nielsen Top 10 the entirety of its run on the network. It was the eighth most popular show in its first year, and by 1960, it moved up to fifth place. Ratings and demographics became much more sophisticated in the late 1950s, so now ABC could determine who watched the show and where.<sup>189</sup> The show was popular all over the country, finding strong markets not only in southern cities like Atlanta and Baltimore, but also in Seattle, Cleveland, and Boston. In fact, Seattle and Cleveland both had a larger audience share than the southern cities.<sup>190</sup>

The show had multiple levels of appeal. It was partially a western, centered on a family giving up the comfort and familiarity of home to seek their fortune in the west. On

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<sup>187</sup>*The Real McCoys* Episodes 1-6, Box 539, Collection 81, Television Scripts Collection, University of California, Los Angeles, Performing Arts Special Collections.

<sup>188</sup> Silverman, "An Analysis of ABC Network Television Programming," 234.

<sup>189</sup> Boddy, *Fifties Television*, 205-206. The American Research Bureau (known as ARB or Arbitron) and the Nielsen Company both did ratings research. In the late 1950s, ARB was the more respected of the two.

<sup>190</sup> ARB Syndication Chart, *Variety* (31 Aug 1960), 29. An audience "share" denotes the percentage of a viewing audience watching a particular program. For example, in *The Real McCoys*' time slot, Cleveland had a 41 share, meaning that 41 percent of Cleveland televisions turned on at that time were tuned in to ABC.

the other, it was the prototype for a rural comedy, defined for the purposes of this study, as any humorous program specifically targeted toward a rural and southern audience. *The Real McCoys* possessed all of the hallmarks that would define such shows in the years to come, including the unusual family structure, romantically unattached male character, strong southern aspect present a combination of setting and characters, comedic emphasis on southern characters, and strong emphasis on middle class values.<sup>191</sup> The presence of a sustained southern theme was paramount. All rural comedies feature southern characters and/or a southern setting, with *The Real McCoys* featuring the former. Though the characters were not always explicitly based in the South, they usually featured southern accents. The titular McCoys were a family of West Virginians, and many elements of their mannerisms and speech clearly imply a rural, southern background. Their West Virginian Appalachian roots combined with the rural and southern signifiers specifically identified them as both rubes and hillbillies.

The pilot script's explicit instructions about how the audience should first meet the family indicate the degree to which producers and writers wanted the family's hillbilly background to be apparent. The opening sequence featured the family piled into a twenty-five year old vehicle, singing "mountain songs" and driving down a busy California highway going thirty miles per hour, far slower than the cars around them. In the first comedic set piece, a highway patrol man pulls the family over in order to return an item that fell off their car: an old tire heavily patched with duct tape. Luke, the eldest

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<sup>191</sup> Social historian Peter N. Stearns once posited that the middle class is defined not by its income level, job prestige, or degree of consumption, but by the values it holds in common. James Heald best defined the middle class values of the era in his mid 1960s article on the subject. In Heald's estimation, middle class values include civic responsibility, understanding the importance of family and marital fidelity, honesty, education as a means of economic and social advancement, manners, self-reliance, and thrift. James E. Heald, "In Defense of Middle Class Values," *Phi Beta Kappan* 46:2 (October 1964), 81-83.

grandson, quickly identified it as one of their “good spares.”<sup>192</sup> Everything about the scene, from the McCoys’ shabby farm clothes to the songs they sang to their outmoded vehicle and slow pace on the highway, indicated that the family did not fit in with an urban environment. The sight gag effectively conveyed the McCoys’ rural otherness. The director of *The Beverly Hillbillies* must have thought so as well. When the show debuted five years later, the director used a virtual replica of that opening sequence in the second episode, as the Clampetts enter Beverly Hills for the first time.

The most obvious indication of the McCoys’ inherent southern identification was, of course, their southern accents. In the opening episodes, the entire family shared the same thick accent. In the pilot, “Californy Here We Come,” the writers played on the issue of the accents in a set piece involving the McCoy family and their farm’s Mexican foreman, Pepino. After Pepino introduced himself in heavily accented English, both Grandpa and Luke seemed confused about what he is saying and conferred over it in their own heavily accented English. Luke posited that Pepino sounds like a Russian (pronounced “Roo-shun” in his hillbilly accent) before ultimately deciding “that there’s English. He’s done somethin’ to it, but English is what it was.”<sup>193</sup> It was a set piece helpful in introducing all of the characters while at the same time establishing the culture shock that the McCoys felt in being transplanted to a place where people spoke a different language, both literally and figuratively. The sequence also highlighted the family’s complete lack of awareness that their own accents were a potential source of humor for those around them.

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<sup>192</sup>*The Real McCoys*, Episodes 1-6, Box 539, Collection 81, Television Scripts Collection, University of California, Los Angeles, Performing Arts Special Collection.

<sup>193</sup>*The Real McCoys*, Episode no. 1, originally aired October 3, 1957 by ABC. Directed by Sheldon Leonard, written by Bill Manhoff and Irving Pincus.

As the season progressed, the characters' accents changed as their roles developed. Amos McCoy, the grandfather, started the series with the weakest accent, but soon had the strongest accent in the family. He was also the family member most tied to the family's old culture and traditions. The age of each family member correlated directly to the strength of each person's accent and feelings of connectedness to the southern home they left behind. The older grandson, Luke, and his wife were in their twenties, still occasionally mention twinges of homesickness on the show, and spoke with medium-heavy accents, while the younger children had almost no accent and seem the most committed to creating a new life for themselves in California. However, all of the McCoy's had some degree of southern accent and Amos McCoy's over-the-top twang and colloquial expressions became one of the show's hallmarks. Not coincidentally, he was also the funniest character on the show, with his lines getting more laughs than his costars. In their previous appearances on television shows, hillbillies had been the comic relief, and *The Real McCoys* only continued the trend. It became a hallmark of rural comedies for the funniest characters to have the strongest southern accents.

ABC's trend toward rural programming was at its most pronounced in 1957, as the network became increasingly concerned with appealing to "specialized" audiences, as executives often referred to southern viewers. In addition to *The Real McCoys*, the network had established a Saturday night lineup geared mainly toward southern and rural viewers, with *Country Music Jubilee* and *The Lawrence Welk Show* forming the nucleus of the schedule.<sup>194</sup> In 1958, the network aired *George Hamilton IV*, which featured live

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<sup>194</sup> Interview with Jules Barnathian, in Silverman, "An Analysis of ABC Network Television Programming," 263. According to Silverman, Barnathian and others at ABC geared *The Lawrence Welk Show* specifically toward southern and rural audiences, as a counterpart to urban comics like Milton Berle and Jackie Gleason.

country music from Washington D.C. and starred the eponymous country star and Roy Clark, the future co-host of *Hee Haw*. The show failed after a few weeks but ABC persisted in tinkering with rural concepts, hoping to expand on the popularity of *The Real McCoys*.

For the 1959-1960 season, the network introduced *Bourbon Street Beat*, a detective show set in New Orleans. ABC conceived the show as a virtual replica of its popular detective series *77 Sunset Strip*, but changed the locale in order to give it some local color and make it more appealing to southerners. Hoping to improve its Monday night schedule, it placed *Bourbon Street Beat* in the 8:30 position, expecting it to anchor the evening's lineup.<sup>195</sup> The show did not perform as well as expected and only lasted one year. That same year, the network introduced *Hobby Lobby*, later renamed *The Charley Weaver Show*. The show was based on an elderly rural character that actor Cliff Arquette originated on *The Tonight Show*. *Hobby Lobby's* premise involved Arquette hosting in character as Charley Weaver, and introducing a variety of celebrity guests who came on the show to talk about their hobbies. The show contained some surprising and entertaining moments, such as Zsa Zsa Gabor demonstrating her fencing skills, but *Hobby Lobby/The Charley Weaver Show* lasted only one season.

The success of *The Real McCoys* in the fall of 1957 and ABC's subsequent efforts to provide dedicated programming for its rural and southern audiences demonstrated the network was attempting to create a specialization in earnest. CBS and NBC could no longer deny the obvious appeal that rural-themed shows held with the current viewing audience. CBS immediately added their own rural shows to the schedule in an attempt to

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<sup>195</sup> Silverman, "An Analysis of ABC Network Television Programming," 328.

usurp ABC's newfound success with the genre. Instead of committing to a rural comedy or game show however, CBS attempted to inject a southern flavor into other already successful genres.

In April 1957, before *The Real McCoys* ever aired, CBS picked up a syndicated morning variety show called *Country Style*, hosted by Jimmy Dean. The network gave the program a more innocuous name, *The Morning Show*, and put it in the 7am slot, replacing another, similar show hosted by Will Rogers, Jr. A politician, businessperson, and sometime political commentator, Rogers was the type of host that the network traditionally relied on for talk shows. Rogers had something of a folksy demeanor and audiences associated him with westerns, but Dean was a country music singer who wore cowboy garb and spoke with a distinctive Texas twang. Dean represented both the West and the South, and his hiring demonstrated CBS' new commitment to cater to the ever-growing rural and southern audiences. For the morning show format, the network eschewed the humorous hillbilly character type popular with sitcom guest spots in favor of Dean, who represented a more generic rural southern type. The switch was successful, prompting one CBS spokesman to marvel: "For five years we've been trying to top [the competition]. We tried everything: news, weather, Jack Paar, Will Rogers. Who'd have thought we'd finally bring down Dave (Garroway) with country music?"<sup>196</sup> While Nielsen ratings showed that Dave Garroway's *Today* on NBC still cornered the market when the two shows competed, they also indicated that Dean had a strong following in the western markets where his show did not compete with Garroway's. A following in western markets defied the still-common belief that a country star could only appeal to

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<sup>196</sup> "Happy as a Clam" *TV Guide* (7 September 1957), 17-18. Dave Garroway was the original host of NBC's *Today*, from 1952 to 1961.

southerners and people in rural areas.<sup>197</sup> The program performed so well in the timeslot that CBS gave Dean his own afternoon show the following year.

The most common method that CBS used to attract rural audiences was via the tried-and-true western. While ABC led the push for more overtly rural-themed programming in the mid-1950s, CBS was on top of the western trend, with six of its programs in the Nielsen Top 10, most of them westerns.<sup>198</sup> At CBS, the president of the television division, Louis Cowan, briefly panicked in the fall of 1959 upon realizing that more than one third of his network's lineup consisted of westerns and similar adventure stories, accepting that state of affairs only when he discovered that NBC and ABC had even more homogenous offerings. Americans were obsessed with all things western, prompting one scriptwriter to quip: "why do so many people spend so much time staring at the wrong end of a horse?"<sup>199</sup> Whatever the reason, in the late 1950s, the trend showed no signs of abating. For CBS, the best way to attract the new audience was to add southern and rural elements to a genre that the network had already mastered.

In the fall of 1957, CBS debuted its first southern-themed western. Audience research determined that westerns were generally the only genre popular among both rural and urban audiences, and the networks wanted to capitalize on that.<sup>200</sup> By infusing an already popular genre with overtly southern elements, producers believed they could attract fans from all segments of the population. *The Gray Ghost*, which premiered in

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<sup>197</sup> "Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Slater, *This is... CBS*, 187-188.

<sup>199</sup> James Baughman, *Television's Guardians: The FCC and the Politics of Programming, 1958-1967* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1985), 25,27.

<sup>200</sup> Silverman, "An Analysis of ABC Network Television Programming," 227.

October 1957, was a fictionalized account of the exploits of the Confederate Major John Singleton Mosby. The producers of *The Gray Ghost* thought that the audience would enjoy entertainment with a historical background, and they were concerned enough about historical accuracy that they employed Virgil Carrington Jones, a Mosby expert, as a historical consultant.<sup>201</sup> However, CBS did not air the show in order to teach history lessons. Rather, the network meant to provide a hero to whom southerners could relate, but dashing enough that any viewer might enjoy watching his exploits. CBS initially passed on the show out of fear of “starting the Civil War all over again,” but once again, a rural program thwarted expectations. Far from being popular only in the South, the show found fans all over the country, even in major northern cities like Boston and Seattle.<sup>202</sup> When Tod Andrews, who played the lead character, made a tour of the country in his costume in the spring of 1958, he confirmed, “They all greeted me as if I were Robert E. Lee incarnated.”<sup>203</sup>

Given the popularity of *The Gray Ghost* on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line, the combination of southern with western seemed a winning one. Themes common in westerns aligned with those common to programming aimed at Southern and rural audiences, drawing overt connections between the two seemed natural. According to Karen Cox, the West and the South both represented uniquely American frontiers, evocative of the pre-industrial era and vaguely exotic.<sup>204</sup> That exoticism imbued both

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<sup>201</sup> “Why No ‘Gray Ghost’,” *Newsweek* (4 Aug 1958), 65.

<sup>202</sup> “This Rebel’s From New York,” *TV Guide* (30 Aug 1958), 28.

<sup>203</sup> “Why No ‘Gray Ghost’,” *Newsweek* (4 Aug 1958), 65.

<sup>204</sup> Karen Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South was Created in American Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 83.

regions with an air of mystery and excitement, and the thought that anything could happen. The southern “Lost Cause” tradition intrinsically connects to the mythology of the old west; both demonstrate a durable connection to the concepts of insurrection and freedom.<sup>205</sup> Both frequently feature characters that have lost their sense of control and, as a result, seek mastery over their lives and circumstances. With western characters, the need is to tame the wilds of one’s environment, while southern themed fare often addressed the need to overcome the destruction and defeat that followed the Civil War. Because of this perceived loss of control, alienation is also a prevalent theme.<sup>206</sup> Western and southern characters alike found themselves both figuratively and literally cut off from the rest of the country. The theme of alienation and independence resonated with residents in those regions because it represented their own history. Meanwhile, viewers in other parts of the country could enjoy the shows for the action-packed adventure stories.

Although southern westerns often addressed that theme of separation, shows like *The Gray Ghost* also attempted to bridge the gap between southerners and the rest of the country. Top western shows repeatedly redeemed southerners by putting them in service of the West and the common good, be it on a wagon train, cattle drive, or pioneer settlement. Southerners became heroes in the service of western values, which stood in for American values, and even serve as mediators between the North and South.<sup>207</sup> John Singleton Mosby never lost a battle or a fight of any kind in all thirty-nine episodes of the show, and that outcome made sense given that he was the show’s main character and

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<sup>205</sup> Allison Graham, *Framing the South: Hollywood, Television and Race During the Civil Rights Struggle* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 133.

<sup>206</sup> John Evans, “Modern Man and the Cowboy,” *Television Quarterly* 1:2 (May 1962): 39-40.

<sup>207</sup> Nadel, *Television in Black and White America*, 126.

protagonist. However, his valor and bravado never came at the expense of the Union soldiers. Instead of portraying Mosby's adversaries as incapable or inept, the program showed the Yankees as courageous fighters as well.<sup>208</sup> A viewer could find a hero to worship on that show, regardless of what side they rooted for.

The show's even-handed portrayal helped make it popular all over the country. From its inception, CBS had run *The Gray Ghost* in first-run syndication and almost 85 percent of the syndicates renewed the show for its second season.<sup>209</sup> Had it not been for the court decision ordering the integration of Little Rock public schools in the fall of 1958, the show might have continued indefinitely. However, the power and reach of television now meant that resistance to desegregation, once only a regional concern, became a national and even international news story. In light of the burgeoning civil rights movement, northern syndicates and sponsors felt that having a show about the Civil War with a southern protagonist actively fighting for the Confederacy was unnecessarily provocative. Although an overwhelming percentage of syndicates wanted to keep the show and many affiliates had no difficulty keeping its sponsors, the producers thought it best to stop production indefinitely.<sup>210</sup> Sure enough, the integration of Little Rock's Central High School became a national news story only a few weeks later, proving the producers correct in their assessment. CBS made one more brief foray into

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<sup>208</sup> "Why No 'Gray Ghost'," *Newsweek* (4 Aug 1958), 65.

<sup>209</sup> According to The Museum of Broadcast Communications, syndication is the practice of selling rights to the presentation of television programs, especially to more than one customer such as a television station, a cable channel, or a programming service. Syndication is the source of the "reruns" often seen on network television, and of much material seen on cable networks. In regular syndication, the program is a second run or a series, or a "re-run," but series are broadcast in first-run syndication have never been seen before. For more information, see <http://www.museum.tv/eotvsection.php?entrycode=syndication>, accessed 13 August 2011.

<sup>210</sup> "This Rebel's From New York," *TV Guide* (30 Aug 1958), 30; "Why No 'Gray Ghost'," *Newsweek* (4 Aug 1958), 65.

the “southern” western with *Yancy Derringer* in 1959. That show, featuring a former Confederate soldier serving as a federal agent in the aftermath of the Civil War, only lasted one year, and CBS did not attempt to replace it with a similar show.

The controversy around *The Gray Ghost* convinced the networks that having a Confederate adventure hero might have been a bridge too far in trying to lure southern viewers. Rather than shying away from the “southern” western altogether, however, ABC used that information to its advantage. The network fiddled with the formula and discovered that some Confederate affiliation was not problematic when it introduced *Bronco* in the fall of 1958. *Bronco*, like *The Gray Ghost*, featured a southern hero and storylines based loosely on real historical events. The main difference was in the show’s timeframe. While *The Gray Ghost* was about John Mosby’s exploits during his years in the Confederate army, *Bronco* was set in the years following the Civil War. The titular character, Bronco Lane, was a former Confederate soldier who, after coming home to Texas after the war and finding his home confiscated, set out to explore the west as an undercover federal officer. Unlike the Mosby character, Lane had the advantage of having his Confederate affiliation in his past. Viewers all over the country could cheer his exploits and good deeds without having mixed feelings about where his loyalties lay.

*Bronco*, like *The Gray Ghost*, also portrayed soldiers on both sides of the Civil War as brave and heroic, all the while never mentioning why they fought the war in the first place. One episode about Jesse James and the Younger Gang even indicates that Cole Younger received a pardon because, after getting caught and given a chance to escape, he did not take it. The show leads the viewer to believe that both Bronco and his boss, another former Confederate officer, respected Younger’s decision not to escape

because it demonstrated that he still maintained a sense of personal honor representative of his southern roots and Confederate ties.<sup>211</sup>

*Bronco's* premise proved a more palatable and more lasting formula than the one used for *The Gray Ghost*. The show ran until 1962 and earned high enough ratings that ABC duplicated the formula almost exactly with *The Rebel* in the fall of 1959. Like *Bronco*, *The Rebel* featured a former Confederate soldier as its hero. The primary difference between the two was that the newer show had more of a law and order premise than its predecessor did. The main character, Johnny Yuma, roamed the west after the Civil War helping settlers protect themselves and their homesteads against various villains. Although *The Rebel* did not remain on the air as long as *Bronco*, it still lasted several seasons.

ABC's strategy of combining the universally popular western genre with themes that were supposedly sympathetic to southerners worked perfectly. As long as the heroes did not have a current allegiance to the Confederacy, it did not matter if they had fought for it. If anything, these programs went a long way toward proving that southerners were just as much a part of the American myth as anyone else. In CBS' *The Rebel*, the lead character Johnny Yuma wore a combination of clothing that indicated his mixed allegiances. On the one hand, he wore the cap and pants from his old Confederate uniform, signifying his southern past and his attachment to that time of his life. On the other hand, he also wore a fringed leather tunic, signifying his current place in the west. Wearing those items together indicated that, at least in Yuma's mind, that the South and

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<sup>211</sup>*Bronco*, "Shadow of Jesse James," Season 2, Episode 9, originally aired January 12, 1960 on CBS. Directed by Leslie Goodwins, written by Gerald Drayson Adams.

the West were compatible. In keeping with Yuma's persona, the odd choice of clothing also distinguished him as being outside of the mainstream.

Other westerns with a southern flavor found a number of ways to infuse southern values into the west, thereby binding the two regions together. When *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color* added Texas John Slaughter as a recurring character on the series in 1958, Disney himself introduced the show with a proclamation that the Texas Rangers were essential to settling the West. By equating the Texas Rangers with the West, Disney equated Texas, a former Confederate state, with the west, and therefore Texas with America. It did not matter that Texas John Slaughter had fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War; he became the heir to Davy Crockett, fighting tyranny in service of American freedom and expansion. Likewise, the title character on ABC's *Cheyenne* also participated in the Civil War as an Indian scout. However, *Cheyenne* never specifies the side for which he fought. All that matters is that he was fighting for the West. It no longer mattered whether he was on the side of North or South, only that he was fighting for an American cause.<sup>212</sup>

At the same time southern-tinged westerns spent a large amount of time proving the American bonafides of their southern heroes, they provided a sense of catharsis for southerners. Some of the programs portrayed the South as having been unfairly punished after the Civil War and featured episodes in which the southern characters forgave northern characters for all of the occupation troops and carpetbaggers that ravaged their land and people nearly a century before. On NBC's *Wagon Train*, in the premiere episode "The Willie Moran Story," the Willie Moran character is a former Union soldier. As a

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<sup>212</sup> Nadel, *Television in Black and White America*, 92, 130.

result, he finds it difficult to connect romantically with a Confederate widow whom he meets on the wagon train, as her family objects to the relationship. The widow and her family consent to the relationship only after Moran successfully fights off would-be robbers attacking the wagon train. The scene plays out almost as though Moran needed to atone for his sin of belonging to the Union army before the Confederate widow could “forgive” him.<sup>213</sup>

A number of the southern-themed westerns also featured episodes in which northerners were at the mercy of southerners, even in situations that have historically demonstrated otherwise. In one episode of *The Rebel*, Johnny Yuma had a flashback in which he was in the attic of the Appomattox Courthouse on the day of Robert E. Lee’s surrender to Ulysses S. Grant. He was there in order to assassinate Grant, but experienced a change of heart after witnessing Grant’s humanity toward Lee and his soldiers. The tale was meant as a testament to how northerners are just as kind and empathetic as southerners, but it also put the victorious Grant, slayer of the South, in a position where he was at the mercy of a random southern soldier who outsmarted him into a compromising position.<sup>214</sup>

Likewise, in episodes of *Yancy Derringer*, also a CBS show, the inept northern occupiers in New Orleans after the Civil War often found themselves needing southern help. In one episode, a group of men came to town claiming they were supposed to relieve the current occupying administration, when in fact they were part of a

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<sup>213</sup>*Wagon Train*, “The Willie Moran Story,” Season 1, Episode 1, originally aired September 18, 1957 on CBS. Directed by Herschel Daugherty, written by William Fay and William R. Cox.

<sup>214</sup>*The Rebel*, “Johnny Yuma at Appomattox,” Season 2, Episode 1, originally aired September 18, 1960 on CBS. Directed by Bernard Kowalski, written by Nick Adams and Andrew Fenady.

complicated counterfeit money scheme meant to destroy the economy. In another episode, raiders were able to seize an overland shipment containing the U.S. Army payroll.<sup>215</sup> In yet another episode, Derringer intervened in order to save a northern firing squad from executing an innocent man.<sup>216</sup> The episodes clearly differentiated between the bad northerners and the good, and some episodes featured a southern villain, yet the kindly northern administrators consistently found themselves in situations that demonstrate their incompetence. Only a southern man, Yancy Derringer, seemed able to rescue these men from their ineptitude.

Although non-southerners may have taken issue with some of the portrayals on the southern-themed westerns, one element of the programs certain to gain universal approval was their abounding whiteness. In the nineteenth century, as many as 25 percent of cowboys were African-American, Hispanic, or Native American, primetime westerns in the late 1950s displayed little ethnic diversity. Ironically, producers probably thought that adding people of other races to these programs would undermine their authenticity, since the myth of the west has always excluded people of color. This practice dates back as far as the 1870s and 1880s, essentially as long as the western myth has existed.<sup>217</sup> The whitening of the western myth progressed still further after the advent of film and television. The desire for escapism and entertainment combined with historical amnesia and a repressive white supremacist pedagogy merged to produce a constant series of

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<sup>215</sup>Yancy Derringer, "Ticket to Natchez," Season 1, Episode 3, originally aired October 23, 1958 on CBS. Directed by Richard Sale, written by Herman Hoffmann and Mary Loos.

<sup>216</sup>Yancy Derringer, "Memo to a Firing Squad," Season 1, Episode 9, originally aired December 4, 1958 on CBS. Directed by William Claxton, written by Mary Loos and Richard Sale.

<sup>217</sup> Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African-Americans in the American West, 1528-1990* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 162.

identifications of America as white.<sup>218</sup> In an age where Arkansas governor and publicly outspoken segregationist Orvil Faubus was one of the ten most admired men in the country, the unrelenting whiteness of the television western was not only expected, but also welcome.<sup>219</sup> Out of the dozens of western series that emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s, only two featured heroes of non-Caucasian descent. *The Cisco Kid* featured a Hispanic protagonist and *Law of the Plainsman* featured an Apache, albeit a heavily assimilated version possessing a Harvard law degree.

On the rare occasions that black characters did appear on primetime westerns, they were not necessarily positive portrayals. Sammy Davis, Jr., one of the few actors of color to work regularly on stage and screen, often played the parts in guest roles. His characters were often studies in the propagation of crude stereotypes about African-American men. On an episode of CBS' *Zane Grey Theatre*, Davis starred as a member of a company of Buffalo Soldiers, which were African-American units in the Union Army following the Civil War. In this episode, the company is charged with a vital task, something above and beyond the menial labor normally expected of them. The company ultimately botched the job. The scene seems to be a cautionary tale about the bad things that can happen when you give African-Americans more responsibility than they can handle.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> Henry Giroux, "Memory and Pedagogy in the Wonderful World of Disney: Beyond the Politics of Innocence," in Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells, eds., *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film Gender and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p.45,47.

<sup>219</sup> Laurie O'Neill, *Little Rock: The Desegregation of CentralHigh* (Brookfield, CT: Millbrook, 1994), 55.

<sup>220</sup> Nadel, *Television in Black and White America*, 153.

In an episode of *Frontier Circus*, workers caught a black character, again played by Davis, attempting to steal from the circus and offered him a job. The character, Cato, eventually revealed that he joined the circus only because he is looking for a former Union soldier and needed transportation to get there. Cato hoped to kill the soldier in retribution for his part in both burning down the plantation where he lived as slave and killing his former master.<sup>221</sup> This particular portrayal relied on old stereotypes of black men as violent thieves, while also trotting out the tired trope of the kind master and loyal slave who was happy in bondage, a story that was probably well-received by Lost Cause enthusiasts. Davis' subsequent turn on *The Rifleman* as a gun hero who turns out to be a pathological liar is no more positive in its portrayal of African-Americans.

In the age of desegregation, the television western with its overwhelming whiteness and cautionary tales about African-Americans, was a visually segregated genre. Adding a southern presence was a reassurance, not a hindrance. Far from the rabidly racist southerners aggressively taunting black protesters on the evening news, the southern-themed western showed southern men with a strong sense of right and wrong and old –fashioned values. They were men who defended the West, and therefore defended America. That most of them were former Confederate soldiers and some might have once owned slaves in a previous life did not figure into any of the shows' contexts.

Despite the sometimes racially charged and regionally biased themes that “southern” westerns featured, a number of westerns that included southern elements did attract viewers and led to high advertising sales and high ratings in the late 1950s. The adaptation, however, was ultimately not enough to save the western from its eventual

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<sup>221</sup>*Frontier Circus*, “Coals of Fire,” Season 1, Episode 11, originally aired January 4, 1962. Directed by William Witney, written by Shimon Wincelberg.

fate. By the late 1950s, the decision to emphasize the western was beginning to backfire, although not nearly to the extent it had with the quiz show phenomenon. In the late 1950s, Congress and the nation's parents grew concerned about the level of violence that appeared in America's living rooms each night. As early as 1952, the House Subcommittee on the Federal Communications Commission investigated violence in television programs, and within two years, the Senate Judiciary Committee formed a subcommittee to investigate the links between television violence and juvenile delinquency. The subcommittee held several rounds of hearings over the course of seven years, the last of which occurred in 1961. In the age before family friendly "primetime television," the hours between 7 and 10 when networks are now required to adhere to family-friendly programming standards, concerns developed that children had too much access to violent programs that potentially contributed to juvenile delinquency. Although the network generally programmed the early evening hours with children's shows, the sub-committee found that many children watched beyond those hours. The sub-committee monitored 42 hours of television between the hours of seven and ten and found that out of 168 hours, 39 hours were devoted to violent themes, or one quarter of the time. Studies done in seven cities produced the same results.<sup>222</sup> Another report stated that violent programming was not only increasing in quantity, but also in degree and

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<sup>222</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, Report to the Judiciary by the Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency (January 16, 1956), 15-17.

intensity.<sup>223</sup> One producer and writer lamented that “we shudder when our kids see them and we continue to write them just the same.”<sup>224</sup>

There was a patriotic concern at play. Congress thought that America’s television programs were a window through which the rest of the world could view American life. They feared that the image America projected in its television programming did not reflect positively on the country. After all, the crime rates as projected by network television were exponentially higher than in real life. The rate of serious crime on television was 50 percent higher than the national average, and the rate of violent crime was 90 percent higher.<sup>225</sup> Congressional representatives believed that when the people of other nations watched American shows, all they would see is a country of violence and crime, certainly not the image it needed to project in the midst of an ongoing battle with the Soviet Union for world domination. They felt that television, if used properly, had potential as a form of propaganda. One researcher claimed that television “may well determine whether Russian or English is the main language of the future.”<sup>226</sup> With so much at stake, both government regulatory agencies and the entertainment industry needed to rethink the amount of violence on television.

Some critics of television violence believed that westerns should be exempt from scrutiny because of their uniquely American themes and patriotism. The sub-committee, however, did not differentiate between those and other equally violent genres. Their

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<sup>223</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Judiciary Subcommittee of Juvenile Delinquency, *Effects on Young People of Violence and Crime as Portrayed on Television- 1<sup>st</sup> revised draft*, (Washington DC: Congressional Printing Office, 1963), 2.

<sup>224</sup> Boddy, *Fifties Television*, 203.

<sup>225</sup> Lichter et al., *Prime Time*, 278

<sup>226</sup> Romney Wheeler, “Television in a Divided World,” *Television Quarterly* 1:2 (May 1962); 49.

decision was borne out when researchers who testified indicated a number of westerns in their analyses of violent programming, and found the violence in westerns was no less detrimental than that in a typical crime show.<sup>227</sup> In fact, one researcher concluded that kids were more likely to mimic violence they saw on westerns because they perceived the characters as heroes who only use violence for good reasons. The shows essentially acted as a primer to teach children that sometimes violence is an acceptable solution.<sup>228</sup>

The western, despite its patriotic underpinnings and fetishizing of the frontier, was a logical lightning rod for the television violence debate, and it attracted attacks from both the government and civilians. Many westerns advertised firearms in their titles, such as *Have Gun, Will Travel*, *Gunsmoke*, and *The Rifleman*. Others, such as *Gunslinger*, *The Restless Gun*, and *Shotgun Slade*, not only had titles that included firearms, but also demonstrated the use of weapons in the opening credits. Even the westerns that did not directly advertise violence in either name or in the opening credits were teeming with brutality. Typical depictions included shootings, stabbings and brutal beatings. The portrayal of some degree of savagery was inevitable when portraying societies solely consisting of adult men untamed by civilization and living on the verge of anarchy, where prudence meant carrying a gun at all times.<sup>229</sup> However, justifying the ubiquitous presence of violence in westerns did not mollify those concerned about television brutality.

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<sup>227</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Judiciary Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, Report from the Subcommittee to the Judiciary Committee (January 16, 1956), 29-30.

<sup>228</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Judiciary Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, Hearings (April 6-7, 1955), 19-20.

<sup>229</sup> MacDonald, *Who Shot the Sheriff*, 72-73.

CBS, which produced the lion's share of the most popular westerns, found itself in a position where it had to defend itself against attacks by both Congress and civilian moralists, but all the networks took their share of blame. Parents and child development specialists brought the issue to NBC so frequently that the network finally created a set of guidelines for how much violence could appear in its western programming.<sup>230</sup> Regardless of attempts by the networks to appease critics, between 1958 and 1960, they all came under increasing attacks from journalists, parents, and intellectuals who all openly lamented the current state of programming standards. Continuing investigations by the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency established that even though the networks blamed writers and producers for excessively violent content, the networks were in a position to control content and frequently exercised that power. Subpoenaed network records indicated that the networks had allowed ratings to dictate all programming decisions, and that executives, sponsors, and producers had displayed a complete lack of responsibility toward young viewers in their dealings.<sup>231</sup>

The networks, despite the constant scrutiny of their programming choices, continued to maximize the profit potential that westerns offered. By 1959, the writing was on the wall. Even without the public concerns over excessive television violence, the western genre was near the end of its life cycle. Executives saw that even though westerns remained very popular, the market was saturated and had been for some time. Viewers would soon lose interest and look for something new.<sup>232</sup> The pressure from

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<sup>230</sup> Stockton Helffrich, *Variety* (10 September 1958), 38.

<sup>231</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, Interim Report to Judiciary from the Subcommittee-1963 (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963), 3.

<sup>232</sup> Silverman, "An Analysis of ABC Network Television Programming," 400.

Congress concerning television violence merely pushed the issue. The networks needed to find the next big thing.

Finding material that suited Cold War era white middle class values was not difficult, but it also severely limited the options. Hard-hitting news shows and topical dramas got low ratings and tended to represent liberal viewpoints. Networks increasingly avoided those programs, as they dredged up memories of the early 1950s Red Scare that most people wanted to forget by the end of the decade. Quiz shows were easy, mindless fun but the scandals of the late 1950s put an end to the craze. Family comedies like *Leave it to Beaver* and *Make Room for Daddy* did well, and by 1959, networks pushed for more sitcoms in a similar vein. After all, such programs struck just the right chord by being both humorous and observant of the appropriate social values. In practice, however, accomplishing the mass production of family-based comedy was a difficult task. Featuring too many perfect, white, nuclear families living in non-descript post-war suburbs would be too monotonous, but adding any discernible ethnic background was inviting unnecessary controversy. For the 1960-1961 season, the new president of CBS-TV, James Aubrey, decided to try a family sitcom with what appeared to be the only acceptable 'ethnic' twist: the southern kind.

## Chapter 3. The Country Broadcast System

The 1960s saw a surge in the popularity of southern and rural comedy. Although ABC started the trend with *The Real McCoys* in 1957, and westerns from all networks incorporated southern elements into their characters and plotlines, CBS successfully brought the genre into its own in the early 1960s. Under the direction of network president James T. Aubrey, a transplant from ABC who had launched *The Real McCoys* before moving to CBS, the network took a genre that supposedly appealed only to southern and rural audiences and made it appealing to a larger viewing audience. With every successful rural comedy, producers relied less on the western elements so prominent in the earlier series and allowed the southern elements of the genre to stand on their own. Rural comedy evolved and thrived in spite of attempts by then-FCC Chairman Newton Minnow to improve upon the “vast television wasteland.”<sup>233</sup> CBS not only took the lead in creating pure rural comedy, it also perfected the art of marketing such series. The network capitalized on the success of its first two rural comedies, *The Andy Griffith Show* and *The Beverly Hillbillies*, by turning each of the programs into brands and using them as spring boards for creating multiple new series. By 1965, CBS was the undisputed master of rural comedy and not coincidentally, at the height of its power over the other two major networks.

*The Andy Griffith Show* represented CBS’ first successful attempt at a rural comedy. The show, which premiered in the fall of 1960, debuted at an interesting time in

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<sup>233</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Judiciary Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, Newton Minnow Address to the 39<sup>th</sup> National Association of Broadcasters, May 19, 1961, Box 339, Records of the U.S. Senate, National Archives, Washington D.C.

CBS' history. The quiz show craze came to an abrupt halt by 1959 and westerns, while still popular, did not have the same intense following they had commanded in the late 1950s. News shows and documentaries did not achieve competitive ratings against lighter fare, such as second-run movies and variety shows. CBS attempted all of these genres and found success with many of them, but also received negative attention from them in the form of concerns over quiz show manipulation, television violence, and political propaganda, respectively. The network needed to find a type of show that provided pure escapism; that neither cast dispersions upon the network's patriotism nor subject it to scandal, yet still appealed to large numbers of people.

James Aubrey was a man who seemed to understand these concepts implicitly. As the programming chief at ABC from December 1956 to the spring of 1958, Aubrey spearheaded the network's foray into rural and southern-tinged programming during that period. Nicknamed "The Smiling Cobra" for his cutthroat and sometimes painfully straightforward business style, Aubrey was also unabashedly ambitious. Raised in a suburb of Chicago and the son of an advertising executive, he went to college, served in the military during World War II, and started his career as a salesman for CBS' Los Angeles station, KNX, in 1948. From there he experienced a meteoric rise through the ranks, jumping from sales manager to general manager of several stations before becoming the head of West Coast programming for CBS in 1956.<sup>234</sup>

He abruptly transferred to ABC the same year because of the opportunity for further advancement. While there, he demonstrated nothing but disdain for the

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<sup>234</sup> David Gunzerath, "James T. Aubrey," *Encyclopedia of Television* (Chicago: Museum of Broadcast Communications, 2011), <http://www.museum.tv/eotvsection.php?entrycode=aubreyjames>, accessed 13 August 2011.

perennially third-place network and made no secret of the fact that he wanted to leverage his job at ABC to get a promotion at CBS.<sup>235</sup> Whatever his ambitions or behavior while at ABC, the network flourished during his brief tenure there. Under his supervision, ABC found success with its rural and southern-themed programming choices. He left after constant clashes with his staff and ABC president Oliver Treyz, and went back to CBS, taking a series of jobs and wielding increasing responsibility between 1958 and 1959.<sup>236</sup> In December 1959, after a series of Congressional hearings and public campaigns against television violence in addition to the quiz show scandals, CBS fired the president of its television division, Louis Cowan, and replaced him with James Aubrey. CBS' board of directors hoped that by hiring Aubrey and manipulating his ability to appeal to mass audiences, the network could finally escape a decade of negative press.<sup>237</sup>

They also hoped that Aubrey could improve the network's viewership and raise its profits on a grand scale. By 1960, the television viewing in the average American household was up to five hours a day, and executives at CBS realized that in order to maintain the lion's share of the viewership, they needed to appeal to more audiences.<sup>238</sup> CBS chairman William S. Paley had always run the network with an elitist's sense of programming, but in the era of James Aubrey, news programs and highbrow dramas no longer held as much cache.<sup>239</sup> The viewership for these kinds of shows had dropped off steadily in the 1950s in favor of sitcoms, quiz shows and westerns, and Aubrey wanted to

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<sup>235</sup> Quinlan, *Inside ABC*, 70.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 70-71.

<sup>237</sup> Paley, *As It Happened*, 267.

<sup>238</sup> Marc and Thompson, *Television in the Antenna Age*, 78-81.

<sup>239</sup> Slater, *This is...CBS*, 195.

capitalize on those trends. Throughout the 1950s, CBS had increasingly added popular genres to its programming schedule of high prestige news and drama projects, but Aubrey wanted to take that strategy even further.

Aubrey adhered to the concept of least objectionable programming, meaning that out of the offerings on all three networks, the goal was to be the least offensive, and therefore the most watchable. This was a programming strategy based on lack of disagreeable material rather than actual attraction. Aubrey had little interest in maintaining CBS' legacy of quality programming, and he did not care about preserving any sort of television traditions from the "good old days."<sup>240</sup> He also demonstrated little concern about the quality of product that the audience received. He was famously quoted as saying dismissively, "the American public is something I fly over."<sup>241</sup> Given his lack of commitment to quality and content it is no surprise that his motto during his nearly six-year run at CBS was "broads, bosoms, and fun."<sup>242</sup> He adhered to that motto despite constant criticism that his programming strategy systematically betrayed the levels of quality set by his predecessors.<sup>243</sup>

Aubrey did not concern himself with any standards of excellence. His only goals were to attract the largest number of viewers possible and to get CBS' advertising revenues as high as possible. Aubrey's commitment to profits over quality was so whole-

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<sup>240</sup> Baughman, *Television's Guardians*, 32.

<sup>241</sup> Lance Morrow, "Goodbye to "Our Mary," *Time* (14 March 1977) <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,947266,00.html>, accessed 20 July 2011.

<sup>242</sup> Almost every source associates this mantra with Aubrey. Files subpoenaed by the Dodd Committee also demonstrate that CBS executives used the phrase frequently as a way of indicating Aubrey's wishes. U.S. Congress, Senate, Judiciary Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, Senator Thomas Dodd's Report to the Subcommittee-1964, Folder CBS Correspondence 1964, Bo 236, Records of the United States Senate, National Archives, Washington D.C.

<sup>243</sup> Baughman, *Television's Guardians*, 33.

hearted that at one point the FCC questioned whether CBS was meeting its responsibilities to the public.<sup>244</sup> At the same time though, Aubrey's arrival at CBS signaled something of a paradigm shift at the network. From its inception until 1959, CBS had prided itself on its reputation as a highbrow network providing high quality material, even as its schedule reflected a steady decrease in quality as the years passed. Aubrey's ascent to the head of the CBS-TV hierarchy represented a final break with that old mentality, a break that started with the blacklisting of some of the medium's most talented writers, producers, and actors. The network no longer pretended that quality was an issue; the only important thing in the age of Aubrey was the bottom line. The more easily a star, storyline, or set could be recycled, the more valuable they were to the network. Aubrey would do anything necessary to fulfill his promise of raising the network's revenues and cutting its costs. Aubrey's secondary concern was reflecting societal mores and giving the viewers what they wanted. In the late 1950s, at the height of the Cold War and the civil rights movement, viewers' predilections indicated they wanted something safe, predictable and reassuring. They wanted something that fit into "the conventional morality of the middle class."<sup>245</sup>

Andy Griffith and his broad brand of bucolic humor seemed like an ideal fit with CBS' new concept of ideal entertainment. When Griffith recorded the comedy monologue album "What it Was, Was Football" in 1953, he seemed the last person likely to become a successful television star. In the early 1950s, the typical male television stars were on police dramas like *Dragnet* and *I Led 3 Lives*, and therefore had a decidedly

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<sup>244</sup> Metz, *CBS*, 220.

<sup>245</sup> Larry Gross, "The 'Real' World of Television," *Today's Education* 63 (Jan-Feb 1974), 86.

world-weary attitude and urban aesthetic. Andy Griffith could not have been further from that standard. Raised in Mount Airy, North Carolina, and educated at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Griffith taught high school English in a small town in his home state. On the weekends, he and his wife performed music and comedy shows just for fun.<sup>246</sup>

He developed a reputation for comedic monologues in which he used a rube persona to relate everything from football games to the works of Shakespeare. One of his most popular bits was a take on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* "that was in love of one another, and everything woulda been alright for 'em but their daddies didn't get along." He reinterpreted the balcony scene as "Juliet standing on her front stoop" when Romeo jumps out of the bushes and starts "climbing the old pea vine up to her window." After explaining that Romeo immediately asked Juliet to marry him, Griffith helpfully explains that the proposal demonstrated that Romeo "wasn't up there for no light courting, he wanted to get on with it." Griffith finished with the moral of the story: "if you got a boy that courts a girl that you don't like, or the other way around, if you don't want the expense of a double funeral on you, the best thing for you to do is to let them have a cheap wedding."<sup>247</sup> Griffith's act was not exactly a new one, as everyone from Mark Twain to minstrels had transformed Shakespearian tragedy into parody simply by

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<sup>246</sup> Interview with Andy Griffith, Part 1 of 5, Interview by Michael Rosen, May 5, 1998 (Los Angeles, CA: Archive of American Television, 1998), <http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/andy-griffith#>, accessed 22 August 2012.

<sup>247</sup> Andy Griffith, "Romeo and Juliet," *Wit and Wisdom of Andy Griffith* (London: EMI Music Special Markets, 1997).

modifying the language and delivery, but it seemed fresh to his audiences.<sup>248</sup> The Romeo and Juliet bit was one of Griffith's most popular creations, and was the only part of his original act that eventually made it onto *The Andy Griffith Show*.

As demonstrated by his comedic take on Romeo and Juliet, Griffith's act contained an element of mockery toward his southern roots, and he sometimes used stereotypes about his home for a laugh. Another typical joke went as follows: "We're really doin' good back home in North Carolina. Nearly all of our 'lected officials can read an' write now."<sup>249</sup> Griffith did not rely on mocking jokes, but he did use them occasionally and to great effect. Growing up in Mount Airy, he had been a religiously devout townie who never played sports or achieved popularity among his more rural classmates, but co-opting the personality of the affable if somewhat naive country bumpkin brought him acceptance from his audiences.<sup>250</sup> He ultimately played various versions of that character for much of his life.

An agent named Richard Linke saw one of his shows in which he performed both the Shakespeare bits and the "What it Was, Was Football," monologue, in which he humorously "recounts" an experience attending a football game and describes the event even though he had no idea what is going on around him. Linke convinced Griffith to make a novelty record based on the monologue, which played on regional radio and by 1954, achieved national popularity. Griffith went on to star as Private Will Stockdale in the teleplay *No Time for Sargeants* on the *US Steel Hour* in March 1955. He reprised the

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<sup>248</sup> For more information on how humorists have historically subverted Shakespeare and other great works, see the first chapter in Lawrence Levine's *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*.

<sup>249</sup> Hollis, *Ain't That a Knee Slapper*, 161.

<sup>250</sup> Interview with Andy Griffith, Part 1 of 5.

role later that same year when it became a Broadway play and starred in the feature-length film version released in 1958. He performed a number of other roles on Broadway and delivered a tour-de-force performance as Lonesome Rhodes in the 1957 Elia Kazan movie *A Face in the Crowd*.

In each of these performances, Griffith played some version of the hick character he had honed in his original stand-up comedy monologues. In his multiple reprisals of the Will Stockdale role, Griffith was a sweet, naïve hick, while his role in *A Face in the Crowd* was more sinister. As Lonesome Rhodes, Griffith played a Deep South musician with a penchant for trouble who stumbles into an opportunity as a radio announcer and, buoyed by unexpected popularity, eventually creates a dangerously demagogic public persona. Will Stockdale played the harmless side of the southern stereotype, while Lonesome Rhodes exposed the seedy underbelly of the hick stereotype.<sup>251</sup> Griffith's career choices all solidified his public image as a southern yokel. This was an intentional choice, meant to solidify his presence in the entertainment industry.<sup>252</sup>

Griffith's commitment to his public persona ultimately made his career. In 1959, television producer Sheldon Leonard became interested in working with him after Griffith's string of movies, Broadway hits, and television appearances indicated that he could play a naïve southern country boy better than anyone else in show business. Leonard knew immediately that he wanted to make a show about the rural South starring Griffith, as it provided the perfect compliment to Griffith's already established southern

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<sup>251</sup> Williamson, *Hillbillyland*, 57.

<sup>252</sup> "Cornball with a Steel Trap Mind," *TV Guide* (28 January 1961), 17-18.

yokel persona.<sup>253</sup> Leonard was a native New Yorker who had no personal experience with the rural South. However, he had directed six episodes of the hit ABC program *The Real McCoys* so he at least had some experience with the rural comedy genre. When the two met in 1959 to discuss the possibility of a show, Griffith did not initially like the idea. Leonard was taken aback, as he had taken Griffith's stage persona at face value and expected him to jump at the chance for fame. Instead, the men engaged in a series of meetings in which Griffith was, by turns, cheerfully inquisitive with an exaggerated drawl or stony and silent while Leonard did all the talking.<sup>254</sup> Griffith ultimately agreed to do a show because he liked Sheldon Leonard, and from there, the show began to take form.<sup>255</sup> In the process, Griffith also worked out an excellent deal for himself, acquiring fifty percent ownership of the program.

The show's premise came together in the spring of 1960. Andy Griffith would play a version of the southern bumpkin he had already made so popular in *No Time for Sargeants*. Instead of a soldier, his character would be a small town cop and justice of the peace named Andy Taylor. The show thereby bridged a gap between western and southern, just as other westerns had done in previous years. The only difference was that with *The Andy Griffith Show*, the ratio changed. Whereas previously the formula was to make westerns with southern elements, *The Andy Griffith Show* would be a southern show with echoes of western influence. Andy Taylor was a small town cop who stood for law and order and would occasionally tangle with criminal elements, but even these

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<sup>253</sup> Interview with Sheldon Leonard, Clip 2, Interview by San Denoff, 11 July 1996, Archive of American Television, <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/shows/andy-griffith-show-the> . accessed 11 July 2011.

<sup>254</sup> "Cornball with a Steel Trap Mind," *TV Guide* (28 January 1961), 18.

<sup>255</sup> Interview with Andy Griffith, Part 3 of 5.

storylines had comedic or light-hearted overtones. Although Taylor's duties as an officer of the law often drove the action of some episodes, the real focus of the show was his relationships with family and friends.

Like the main characters in most westerns, Andy was an unmarried widower. Although single status in a western contributed to the main character's mythology and often symbolized a burden that the hero bore to signify that he was alone against the world, adhering to personal code of justice sometimes at odds with his surroundings, the effect was different for Andy Taylor. While Andy did not have a wife, he did have a small son and an elderly aunt living in his home. Far from being detached from his family the way that western heroes often were, Andy was solicitous of his family's feelings and proved a veritable font of parental wisdom and restraint. He actively participated in his family life in a way almost never seen in westerns.

The southern emphasis of the show became apparent in its "backdoor pilot," a crossover episode of *The Danny Thomas Show* that aired on February 16, 1960.<sup>256</sup> Veteran comedy writer and frequent *Danny Thomas Show* contributor Arthur Stander wrote the episode, entitled "Danny Meets Andy Griffith." It featured all the elements of the soon-to-be *Andy Griffith Show* (with the exception of Deputy Barney Fife, who was added later) within the context of *The Danny Thomas Show*. In the episode, Andy arrests Thomas' character for running a stop sign as he travelled through Mayberry with his family.

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<sup>256</sup> A backdoor pilot introduces new characters and settings on an existing show specifically for supplying proof of concept, or proof that the proposed idea has enough power to carry a whole show. Producers introduce a new show idea within another already popular show for two reasons. It is way to freshen an old program without necessarily disrupting its continuity and it is cheaper than producing a stand-alone pilot episode for the proposed new show. If the backdoor pilot is unpopular, the show producers know not to pursue the concept, because if viewers do not like an idea when presented in the context of a beloved show, they will most likely not watch the concept presented as an independent entity.

At the time of the pilot, the Andy Taylor character was a version of the hick stage character that Griffith had perfected over the previous decade. He stood in stark contrast to the taciturn television sheriffs of the day with his sunny, almost child-like, demeanor and personality. He used an incredibly exaggerated southern accent and peppered his speech with colloquialisms straight out of Li'l Abner's Dogpatch. In the opening scene, when he gives Thomas' character a traffic ticket, he just smiles and drawls clever quips in the face of Thomas calling him "Clem" (possibly a reference to Red Skelton's famous rural character Clem Kadiddlehopper) and "hayseed." In a later scene, he sits at his desk at the courthouse, whittling away at a wooden squirrel while Danny Thomas' character stands in the background in a jail cell. He puts down the whittling knife just long enough to convince a local businessperson involved in unscrupulous business practices to do right by his customers or face a steep fine.<sup>257</sup> The entire confrontation between Thomas' character and Taylor highlighted the cultural differences between two- the rural versus the urban, and the northerner versus the southerner. Whatever else *The Andy Griffith Show* had to offer, its backdoor pilot demonstrated that although the two shows shared a similar sense of morality, in many ways it would be the antithesis of *The Danny Thomas Show*, and that much of the difference would stem from the rural setting.

Since Sheldon Leonard produced Thomas' show and was set to produce Griffith's show, the crossover seemed like a perfect fit. In this way, CBS could market the Griffith show as a spin-off of Thomas' show, which had been on the air since 1953 and had a strong and devoted viewership. In the 1959-1960 season, when the Griffith episode aired, *The Danny Thomas Show* was fourth overall in the Nielsen rankings, and producers

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<sup>257</sup>*The Danny Thomas Show*, Season 7, Episode 20, originally aired 15 February 1960 on CBS. Directed by Sheldon Leonard, written by Arthur Stander.

hoped that connecting the two shows would create a built-in following for Griffith in the fall. General Foods, which sponsored Thomas' show, immediately liked the concept and signed on as a sponsor for the upcoming *Andy Griffith Show*, prompting CBS to pick up the show immediately for the fall season.<sup>258</sup>

The network put the show in a place of honor, Monday nights at 9:30. Monday night was a prime spot because it was the second biggest television viewing night of the week, right behind Sunday.<sup>259</sup> The timeslot was not early enough to capture a children's audience, but it was still a sign of the high hopes that CBS had for the show. The show received an average promotion, although one tactic stood out from the rest. On Monday, September 26, just one week before the show premiered, Andy Griffith introduced the first of the Kennedy-Nixon presidential debates. The debates taped in a CBS studio in Chicago and CBS aired the show, so the network used that opportunity to highlight the star of one of its new series. As if to emphasize the rural ideal his show would soon embody, Griffith gave the introduction with a heavy drawl and a stalk of wheat perched between his lips.<sup>260</sup>

*The Andy Griffith Show* first aired on October 3, 1960. The show took place in a non-descript southern town called Mayberry, and initially the town was not affiliated with any state. With the exception of Andy's heavy southern accent, there was nothing to indicate that the show was set in North Carolina, or even the South. The first hint that the show took place in North Carolina occurred in the third episode, with a reference to

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<sup>258</sup> Richard Kelly, *The Andy Griffith Show* (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, 1981).

<sup>259</sup> Brown, *Television*, 117.

<sup>260</sup> Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 53.

Winston-Salem. Later, Andy Griffith and Sheldon Leonard would disagree about whether Mayberry was based on Griffith's hometown of Mt. Airy, North Carolina. Griffith claims that Leonard came up with the entire concept for the show, including its location, and that initially the town was not even supposed to be in North Carolina.<sup>261</sup> Leonard says that the setting was always loosely based on Mt. Airy, and the geographical clues given out over the course of the show's eight-year run indicate as much. Ron Howard has also said that Griffith himself used to claim that Mayberry was the town he had grown up in.<sup>262</sup>

Leonard was the show's executive producer, however, which in the world of television meant he was the primary auteur of the show and its vision. Whatever the provenance of Mayberry, Leonard had final say in the town's creation and its representation.

Although Griffith and Leonard disagreed on Mayberry's provenance, they did agree on what the fictional hamlet represented. According to Griffith, "so much of Mayberry is like it used to be. We drive modern cars, dress modern, and stories take place in the present but there are overtones of a past era. It's this sense of nostalgia that we create."<sup>263</sup> When reminiscing about the show, Ron Howard, who played Andy's young son Opie, said it was a show never meant to be modern, that it was nostalgic even when it was new.<sup>264</sup> Richard Crenna, star of *The Real McCoys* and an occasional director

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<sup>261</sup> Interview with Andy Griffith, Clip 1, Interview by Matt Rosen, Archive of American Television, 5 May 1998, <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/shows/andy-griffith-show-the>, accessed 11 July 2011.

<sup>262</sup> Interview with Ron Howard, Clip 6, Interview by Gary Rutkowski, Archive of American Television, 18 October 2006, <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/shows/andy-griffith-show-the>, accessed 21 July 2011.

<sup>263</sup> "The Show that Has H.A.Q.," *TV Guide* (11 May 1963), 25.

<sup>264</sup> Interview with Ron Howard, Clip 6, Archive of American Television, <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/shows/andy-griffith-show-the>, accessed 21 July 2011.

on *The Andy Griffith Show*, referred to the show as “homey,” while Elinor Donahue, who played Ellie Walker in the show’s first season, called the humor “timeless.”<sup>265</sup>

One element of the program that gave it an old-fashioned feel was its unusual family structure. Andy Taylor was the loving and patient widower father, Aunt Bee was the loving grandmotherly figure, and Opie, the sweet obedient son. The Taylor’s family dynamic was similar to that of *The Real McCoys* in that the main character was widowed and the lived with members of his multi-generational extended family. This non-traditional family, along with strong southern identification, would soon become a defining feature of the 1960s rural comedy. In no other sitcom genre does one see a complete lack of traditional nuclear families, meaning a mother, father, and children. The lack of a traditional nuclear family in these and all subsequent CBS sitcoms set them apart from other family sitcoms of the same time period. While having multi-generational families in one home was common before World War II, by the 1960s the proliferation of new, cheap housing had made such living situations a rarity. In an age when quality housing was inexpensive and the nuclear family structure became the norm, the multi-generational family also signaled poverty, even if that was not technically the case. Having all of the main characters in southern-based rural comedies follow that pattern while having all other families follow another is one way to establish them as old-fashioned and behind the times.

Many of the episodes of *The Andy Griffith Show* mined the unusual family dynamic for both laughs and morals. In the show’s first episode, “The New

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<sup>265</sup> Interview of Elinor Donahue, interview by Jennifer Howard, 25 April 2006; and Interview with Richard Crenna, interview by Henry Colman, 3 April 2002, <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/shows/andy-griffith-show-the>, accessed 21 July 2011.

Housekeeper,” the Taylors’ old housekeeper quits her job to get married and Andy’s aunt comes to take her place. Opie reacts poorly to the change and behaves rudely to Aunt Bee. Andy then chided Opie for his behavior and explained that if he gave her a chance, Opie would be as close to Aunt Bee as he was with the old housekeeper. The boy follows his father’s advice and ultimately accepts Aunt Bee’s new role in the family.<sup>266</sup> In one of the most popular episodes, “The Pickle Story,” Aunt Bee makes pickles that everyone despises. In order to avoid hurting Aunt Bee’s feelings by telling her they dislike her “kerosene cucumbers,” Andy and Opie go to comically desperate lengths to avoid eating them while appearing to enjoy them.<sup>267</sup> These episodes, along with many others, stressed going to great lengths to avoid hurting people’s feelings, especially those of family members. Aunt Bee was often the person whose feelings were in danger of being hurt, while Andy and Opie were typically the ones in a position to spare them.

In addition to unusual family structure, the show drew much of its humor and morality from Barney Fife, a last-minute addition to the cast and arguably its most valuable member. Barney was the deputy to Andy Taylor’s sheriff, and though overzealous in discharging his duties, he was also a loyal friend and citizen. He always tried a little too hard to overcome his own inadequacies, and Andy was always there to make Barney feel better after he inevitably embarrassed himself in an effort to make himself seem smarter, stronger, or more authoritative. The dynamics of the friendship were demonstrated in “The Clubmen,” in which Barney unknowingly makes a fool of

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<sup>266</sup> *The Andy Griffith Show*, “The New Housekeeper,” Season 1, Episode 1, originally aired October 3, 1960 on CBS. Directed by Sheldon Leonard, written by Jack Elinson and Charles Stewart.

<sup>267</sup> *The Andy Griffith Show*, “The Pickle Story,” Season 2, Episode 11, originally aired 18 December 1961 on CBS. Directed by Bob Sweeney, written by Harvey Bullock.

himself while trying to impress the members of a club he desperately wants to join. The members of the Esquire club were elites in the state capital of Raleigh, and Barney's nervous attempts to demonstrate his worldliness only emphasized his lack thereof. Club members were impressed by Andy and ask him to join, but they snub Barney. In an effort to spare Barney's feelings, Andy tells his friend that it was the other way around. Andy's actions allowed Barney the luxury of being indignant on his friend's behalf, which leads him to refuse his "membership."<sup>268</sup> Barney's foibles served as an excellent forum for Andy's demonstrations of kindness and wisdom, but the show offered many such opportunities. Taylor, as sheriff, friend, and family member, could modify even the most unruly behavior with common sense and a heart-to-heart talk. These relationships gave the show a sense of universality; the world of Mayberry was an ideal hometown with which large swaths of the country apparently identified. It was the perfect, old-fashioned, all-American show.

*The Andy Griffith Show* had good ratings from its first airing, indicating that people all over the country enjoyed the program. While CBS and the show's producers obviously enjoyed its popularity, *The Andy Griffith Show* clearly appealed to one particular group above all others: southerners. Some critics saw the show as a critique on urbanism but its primary goal was to reach rural audiences, southern ones in particular. To the extent that CBS was specifically targeting rural and southern audiences, the network succeeded. The show had nearly three times the number of viewers in Metro D counties, defined by the A.C. Nielsen Company as any county with less than 35 thousand residents, as it did in the Metro A counties, which are the 25 largest in the United States.

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<sup>268</sup> *The Andy Griffith Show*, "The Clubmen," Season 2, Episode 10, originally aired 11 December 1961 on CBS. Directed by Bob Sweeney, written by Fred Fox and Irving Elinson.

Even so, the show still had an average 2.7 million viewers in the major cities, an average of 108,000 in each city.<sup>269</sup>

Although Mayberry's North Carolina location does not become apparent until several episodes into the series, it is clear from the first episode that part of the show's humor derives from its southern-ness. Andy Taylor's line delivery is one of the most humorous aspects of the first few episodes. Smiling an overly broad, toothy grin, Andy drawled out his sage wisdom, peppered with colloquialisms. He was not supposed to be a foolish character, but his accent, pronunciations, and vocabulary suggested a southern rube, albeit one with some common sense. The characterization fits in with Griffith's stage persona up to that point, as each of the characters he had played spoke with an exaggerated accent and used distinctively southern lingo.

Tellingly, Andy Griffith toned down his southern accent in later episodes as it became increasingly apparent that his character would be the straight man to Don Knotts' nervous, twitchy Barney Fife. He still had a noticeable drawl, but it mellowed to the point where it accentuated his line delivery, but was not the source of humor in and of itself. Once Andy was no longer the funny one, he no longer needed the thick southern accent, suggesting that the accent was an integral part of the show's humor in its initial conception. While Andy toned his accent down, Barney Fife's accent stayed the same. Knotts' delivery, blustery and officious, highlighted his southern twang, and complimented his hammy facial expressions and spastic movements. In an interview for the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, Don Knotts confirmed that Andy Griffith had purposely played up his southern accent before the producers decided to make him

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<sup>269</sup> American Research Bureau, US Television Audience- January 1964 (Los Angeles, CA: ARB, 1964), 18.

the straight man. In the same interview, Knotts also admitted that he had exaggerated his own accent for the role of Barney Fife, building on the remnants of a southern cadence left over from his childhood in West Virginia.<sup>270</sup>

By using southern accents as a source of humor, the cast members of *The Andy Griffith Show* were not necessarily mocking southerners. Although the show featured several humorous hillbilly-type characters, there is no evidence that any of the actors intended their accents as a form of mockery, a turn of events that would have seemed strange considering many of the primary cast members were from southern or border states. The audience also did not seem to view the actors' over-the-top accents as derisive. One reviewer even claimed that Andy Griffith's "cracker twang" and mugging were assets to the show.<sup>271</sup> Griffith, as part owner of the show, often took it upon himself to make sure that all the little details of the show were as true to life in the rural South as possible. He also insisted that the show not make fun of its characters, and that the humor derive from the characters' behavior. Griffith did not want the show to mock southerners, just to draw from the humor inherent in small town life.<sup>272</sup>

There were several characters on the show, however, who portrayal seemingly contradicts Griffith's stated mission to avoid mocking southern people. The Darlings and Ernest T. Bass were minor hillbilly characters on the program, each appearing no more than eight times throughout the show's run, but their appearances mark some of the series' most popular episodes. The musical Darling family was composed of the father,

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<sup>270</sup> Interview with Don Knotts, Part 3 of 7, Interview by Gary Rutkowski, 22 July 1999, <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/shows/andy-griffith-show-the>, accessed 23 July 2011.

<sup>271</sup> TV Review, *Variety* (3 October 1962), 46.

<sup>272</sup> Don Rodney Vaughn, "Why *The Andy Griffith Show* is Important to Popular Culture Studies," *Journal of Popular Culture* 38:2 (2004), 400.

Briscoe, his friendly daughter Charlene, and his quartet of slack-jawed, mute, musically prodigious sons. One of their running jokes was that the boys never spoke, yet Briscoe always yelled at them for talking too much. The Darlings came down from their Western Carolinian mountain hovel six times in order to stir up trouble in Mayberry and, occasionally, to play music on Andy Taylor's front porch. They usually were driven by some misguided errand to marry off one of their number, first attempting to marry Briscoe to Aunt Bee, then Charlene to Andy. Once Charlene finally found a mate and had a baby girl, then the Darlings came to Mayberry in an effort to secure her engagement to ten-year-old Opie Taylor.

The episodes featuring the Darling family were a study in the stereotypical portrayal of southern mountain people. The Darlings were kind, generous, and displayed immense musical talent as a jug band, but they were also shiftless, deceptive, disruptive, poor, and uneducated. The daughter, Charlene, was always neat and prettily dressed, but her father and brothers wore dirty, ill-fitting overalls and hats. At least one of the brothers displayed an uncomprehending, slack-jawed expression at all times. As followed the pattern with rural sitcoms, they were designed as comic relief and therefore had the thickest accents and were most prone to silly phrases and customs. The accent rhetorically tied the Darlings to the South while also establishing them as outsiders, even in a rural, southern town like Mayberry. Like many television hillbillies in the 1950s and 1960s, they had an overinflated sense of their own grandeur, as demonstrated in the episode "Briscoe Declares for Aunt Bee." In the episode, Briscoe attempted to woo Aunt Bee by showing her his property, which turns out to be a tiny, dirty, mountain shack. Although Aunt Bee displayed thinly concealed horror in response to her shoddy

surroundings, Briscoe was clearly proud of his property, indicating a lack of awareness as to his socioeconomic station. She finally convinced him to stop his attentions by attempting to clean the house and improve his bad manners.<sup>273</sup>

The Ernest T. Bass character displayed some of the same traits as the Darlings, with some accompanying tics that made him special. Like the Darlings, Bass was a poor, uneducated, mountain man. The show attested to his lack of education in the episode “The Education of Ernest T. Bass,” when Ernest enrolls in Opie Taylor’s fifth grade class in the hopes of expanding his limited knowledge. His intended goal was to impress a woman with all of the information he picked up from the class.<sup>274</sup> The implication is that Ernest’s general knowledge was at a fourth or fifth grade level and that any woman impressed by what he learned in a fifth grade classroom was not bound to know much more than that.

In addition to Ernest’s lack of education, he also displayed the signs of impoverished filth and mental instability common to southern and hillbilly television characters. He was always unshaven, wore the same undershirt, dirty jeans, and vest in each of his appearances, and, in term of his personality, alternated between slack-jawed and crazed. He often spoke in rhyme, greeting bewildered townspeople with a hearty “howdy do to you and you. It’s me, it’s me, it’s Ernest T!” He was best known in Mayberry as a nuisance because of his penchant for throwing rocks through windows, thus perpetuating the stereotype of the hillbilly as violent and anarchic. His role on the

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<sup>273</sup> *The Andy Griffith Show*, “Briscoe Declares for Aunt Bee,” originally aired October 28, 1962 on CBS. Directed by Earl Bellamy, written by Everett Greenbaum and Jim Fritzell.

<sup>274</sup> *The Andy Griffith Show*, “The Education of Ernest T. Bass,” originally aired October 12, 1964 on CBS. Directed by Alan Rafkin, written by Everett Greenbaum and Jim Fritzell.

show was as comedic relief, and like the Darlings, that meant that his southern accent was heavier than that of other characters.

Although the Darling family and Ernest T. Bass cast some doubt on whether *The Andy Griffith Show* provided a fully positive portrayal of southern people, the writers of those characters may have unwittingly served a positive function on behalf of southerners. By associating humor with a southern accent, the show may have helped neutralize the southern image for the American public. The show aired only months after the Greensboro civil rights sit-ins at the Woolworth's lunch counter and was on the air during the civil rights movement. The constant attention given to the movement meant that Americans got a strong dose of the redneck southern sheriff on a regular basis. In some cases, television news or reporters from magazines would purposefully publish inflammatory photos and stories about desegregation in the hopes of agitating the local resistance they hoped to find. In one case, *Life* magazine did a feature on a peacefully integrated school in Hoxie, Arkansas, including a picture of two African-American girls with their arms around a much smaller white girl. The picture incited massive resistance by a group of segregationist locals who called for the school board's resignation. Of course, *Life* magazine was there to capture the fallout.<sup>275</sup> Between the conflict incited by the press and the problems created independently by white ne'er-do-wells, the American public got its fair share of the seedy, racist South in its daily television diet.

Although the producers of *The Andy Griffith Show* probably did not intend for the program to act as a neutralizing agent against the barrage of negative images of the South, research into the psychology of television tells us this is probably what happened.

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<sup>275</sup> Graham, *Framing the South*, 6-9.

As FCC Commissioner Nicholas Johnson stated in 1967, “all television is educational television. It may not teach the truth. It may produce more mental illness than health. But it teaches. Endlessly.”<sup>276</sup> According to Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin, the concept of entertainment is merely a cultural construct because it assumes that viewers do not absorb what they see on television as information simply because it is not presented as objective fact.<sup>277</sup> Viewers ostensibly are cognizant that they are watching fictional programming designed for entertainment, they still absorb what they see. They are particularly likely to absorb the information if it is either confirmation of the known or something that the viewer knows little about. Viewers are even more likely to absorb information if the message is met with a reward, such as applause or laughter.<sup>278</sup> Watching a program like *The Andy Griffith Show* created an inherent conflict for viewers in which they were forced to reconcile contradictory images. For southern viewers, the show offered vindication against the sinister image of the South frequently seen in the news, while viewers outside the South were left to grapple with whether the real South was affable and silly, or scary and racist. Although rural comedies did not wholly neutralize feelings toward the South in the 1960s, they did at least create enough of a contrast to mitigate the negativity in the news.

There is no indication that Andy Griffith or his manager, Richard Linke, had any grand plans for using the show as a whitewash for the South, but Linke certainly tried to push his client toward material that was as uncontroversial and apolitical as possible. His

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<sup>276</sup> Nicholas Johnson, “*How to Talk Back to Your Television Set* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), 102.

<sup>277</sup> Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin, *The Revolution Wasn't Televised*, 11-12.

<sup>278</sup> Comstock, 71, 93-95.

motto, and one that Griffith seemed to take to heart, was “right down the middle for the masses.”<sup>279</sup> Linke’s, and by extension Griffith’s, policy seemed appropriate for the era. Griffith’s character was refreshing for a number of reasons. In an age where the sinister southern lawman was almost a cliché, Sheriff Andy Taylor struck an entirely different pose. He was a pacifist police officer, non-violent and solving his town’s problems with common sense instead of weapons and vile words. That pacifism separated him not only from the reality of the southern redneck sheriff, but also from many of the western lawmen on television. He represented a break from the violence that had plagued and ultimately contributed to the diminishment of the television western. One reviewer called it a “durable and consistently entertaining family which conveys a nice balance of humor and seriousness to make it a fast and right half hour.”<sup>280</sup> The American public obviously agreed with the reviewer, as the show quickly climbed into the Nielsen Top 10 and remained there for the next eight years.

Unfortunately for CBS, it took a couple years for the network to replicate the success of *The Andy Griffith Show*. The delay did not stem from lack of interest. Instead, television networks and producers felt pressure from the government to avoid making more fun, lightweight programs in favor of more educational fare. When John F. Kennedy took office as President in January 1961, he appointed Newton Minnow, a former law partner of perennial Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson, as the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Minnow had no experience in the area of broadcasting, and according to Chicago broadcaster Sterling

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<sup>279</sup> Robert Warren Lewis, “The Wonderous Andy Griffith TV Machine,” *TV Guide* (13 July 1968), 18.

<sup>280</sup> TV Review, *Variety* (3 October 1962), 46.

Quinlan, “What Minnow saw when he came to Washington literally gave him heartburn.” The FCC had long been under a cloud of scandal, constantly barraged by accusations of influence peddling, bribe-taking, and rampant alcoholism among its employees.<sup>281</sup> With all the enthusiasm and activist spirit of a clueless newcomer, Minnow vowed to clean up the FCC and the entire world of television broadcasting.

Within months of taking office, Minnow launched a series of public tirades blaming the networks, writers, and producers for the poor state of American television. He criticized the change from documentaries and anthology dramas to formulaic sitcoms (like *The Andy Griffith Show* and *The Real McCoys*) and game shows. At a meeting of the National Association of Broadcasters on May 9, 1961, Minnow gave a now-infamous speech in which he thoroughly lambasted the entire television industry, saying that he was “not convinced that the people’s taste is as low as you assume.” After pointing out that 59 out of 73 total primetime hours were devoted to mindless entertainment, he famously referred to television as a “vast wasteland, offensive yet boring.” In an appeal to Cold War paranoia over American supremacy, he addressed the role of television in selling American values to the rest of the world. “What,” he wondered, “will the Latin American or African child learn of America from our great communications industry?” Minnow concluded his remarks with a threat to revoke licenses of affiliate stations if networks did not cooperate with his demands to provide more educational and information programming.<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> MacDonald, *One Nation Under Television*, 157.

<sup>282</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Judiciary Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, Newton Minow Address to the 39<sup>th</sup> National Association of Broadcasters, May 19, 1961, Box 339, Records of the U.S. Senate, National Archives, Washington D.C.

Minow's speech was like a bomb going off in the entertainment industry, sparking a huge debate. ABC, which had recently instituted some new public service programming, was the most outwardly accepting of Minow's challenge, although even ABC executives were quick to point out that change could not occur overnight.<sup>283</sup> CBS did not make any immediate rebuttal, but its position soon became clear. When Newton Minow appeared on the program *Washington Conversation* shortly after giving his speech, only 75 out of 200 CBS affiliates carried the show, despite Minow being a controversial figure at the time and therefore a potential source of high ratings.<sup>284</sup> At least one network executive anonymously commented that "it makes me shudder to hear Mr. Minow list the programs he likes or dislikes. When the government starts with that kind of subjective argument, we are getting into dangerous area."<sup>285</sup>

CBS company president Frank Stanton made his own feelings on the subject clear in a series of speeches over the next few months. In an address before the Broadcast Advertising Club of Chicago, he claimed that a "free society can't determine if one kind of program deserves more freedom than others or have the government decide which need more strictures." He insinuated that the nation was in danger of having something taken away that makes us special in the world, which would ultimately weaken us in the Cold War. He underscored his point by alluding to Europeans losing those same

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<sup>283</sup> ABC-Paramount Says Better Programming Can't Come Overnight," *Wall Street Journal*, May 17, 1961.

<sup>284</sup> Jim Frankel, "Minow Not Big Enough a Fish to Swim in Channel 8 Here," Unnamed Cleveland, OH newspaper from May 1961, found in Duplicate Editorials Folder in "Records Relating to Public Attitudes Toward Chairman Minow's Comments Concerning TV Programming," Records of the Federal Communications Commission, National Archives, College Park, MD.

<sup>285</sup> Frederick Roevekamp, "FCC Chief's Indictment Challenges TV Industry," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 12, 1961.

freedoms under the fascists during World War II.<sup>286</sup> Months later, he took a different approach, defending the current status of television by claiming that the large selection of low brow entertainment brings in the money that pays for the less popular educational shows. He pointed out that all the networks continued to broadcast such programming despite its lackluster advertising sales, indicating that the executives still clearly saw the educational benefit of television. If television was nothing but educational, however, Stanton argued that people would just stop watching.<sup>287</sup> Although it was not as pointed a critique as his earlier speeches, it was still a clear indication that CBS liked its lineup just as it was.

Meanwhile, the American public appeared galvanized by Minow's speech. Newspaper editorials praised his courage in taking on the entertainment industry, and Minow received letters from all over the country in support of his mission. Mayors, parents and even teenagers wrote to thank him and sent him accounts of terrible things they had seen on television and news clippings about unscrupulous advertisers preying on young viewers.<sup>288</sup> Within a week, he received more than 1500 letters of support, and only 11 opposing his crusade.<sup>289</sup> The mail became so voluminous that Minow staffers developed a checklist for quantifying the contents of all the letters.

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<sup>286</sup> Frank Stanton, Speech to Broadcast Advertising Club of Chicago, May 24, 1961, CBS Network- General Folder, Box 236, Records of the U.S. Senate, National Archives, Washington D.C.

<sup>287</sup> Frank Stanton, Benjamin Franklin Lecture at University of Pennsylvania, December 7, 1961, CBS Network General Folder, Box 236, Senate Records.

<sup>288</sup> Letters can be found in "Records Relating to Public Attitudes Toward Chairman Minow's Comments Concerning TV Programming," in the FCC Records in College Park, MD.

<sup>289</sup> Lawrence Laurent, "Minow Knows What Viewers Want," *Washington Post*, May 17, 1961.

Fearful that public fervor would compel Minnow to make good on his threats, the networks attempted to comply with his standards, despite the fact that the previous two seasons had been a time of immense prosperity for all three networks. They added informational childrens' shows, complex dramas, and fictional medical series to their programming schedules. At first, Minnow's plan seemed to work, and the 1961 Dodd Committee hearings on television violence helped his cause. The hearings represented the third and final inquiry into television violence since 1957, and findings indicated that there were connections between juvenile delinquency and the amount of brutality demonstrated on popular programs. Minnow's prods combined with the powerful evidence provided to the Dodd Committee indicated that quick change was necessary, and the networks complied.

By the fall of 1961, there was a marked drop in violence on television. The networks cancelled the action and adventure shows that seemed a natural backdrop for violence and replaced them with sitcoms. Action shows soon found themselves struggling to keep affiliates and sponsors.<sup>290</sup> According to one network executive, "we're being closely watched in Washington and we're starting right now to clean house."<sup>291</sup> The number of action and adventure shows, including westerns, plummeted from forty percent of the programming schedule in 1960 to twenty percent in 1962, and the number kept dropping from there.<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> William Boddy, "Senator Dodd Goes to Hollywood: Investigating Video Violence," *The Revolution Wasn't Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin (New York: Routledge, 1997),

<sup>291</sup> *Variety*, (14 June 1961), 25.

<sup>292</sup> Boddy, "Senator Dodd Goes to Hollywood," 176.

Despite Frank Stanton's outspoken distaste for Minnow's agenda, CBS led the other networks in attempting to overhaul its schedule. Doing so was an excellent way for the network, and by extension its employees, to demonstrate patriotism and willingness to adhere to government dictates. Despite the fact that the mandated changes to the programming schedule had the potential to threaten CBS' domination of the ratings, the network rarely missed an opportunity to further distance itself from the "red channel" image that defined it in the early 1950s. CBS Chairman Frank Stanton even did a public about-face and claimed to support Minnow's mission, giving speeches that affirmed the need for more educational programming. He spoke about the need to introduce more educational programming in the spirit of free competition and, in another statement mirroring Minnow's own Cold Warrior sentiments, thought the networks needed to pay more attention to their programming, as "what entertains us at home may embarrass us abroad."<sup>293</sup> Stanton's sudden concern with the foreign reception of his network's programming seems odd in light of the fact that foreign television revenues were on the rise and by 1960, had never been higher.<sup>294</sup>

Regardless of Stanton's motives, the network did not follow up on the success of *The Andy Griffith Show* by producing other rural comedies. Instead, CBS went back to its roots by airing new prestigious drama series based on topical events, such as *Route 66* and *The Defenders*.<sup>295</sup> Their efforts to clean up their primetime offerings were rewarded

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<sup>293</sup> Frank Stanton, Speech at the 9<sup>th</sup> Conference on CBS Affiliates, May 9, 1963, CBS Correspondence Folder, Box 36, Senate Records; Boddy, "Senator Dodd Goes to Hollywood," 169.

<sup>294</sup> Boddy, *Fifties Television*, 226.

<sup>295</sup> Congressional subpoenas of network documents demonstrate that even when CBS was attempting to clean up its act, the influence of James Aubrey still made itself felt. Initial testing for *Route 66* found that advertisers and audience members alike found the show too tawdry for television, calling it "gruesome," "brutal," and "revolting."

with praise from the Dodd Committee, which claimed that CBS was the only network to make a noticeable attempt to improve the quality of its programs. The network even received a commendation from the National Audience Board, an anti-violence watchdog group.<sup>296</sup> The press initially supported the networks' attempts at reform, pointing out that television earnings had jumped from \$9.9 million in 1952 to \$95.2 million in 1960. It seemed obvious that the industry could devote some time to public service instead of giving all of the time to "schlock."<sup>297</sup>

The experiment with improving the quality of network television proved short-lived. By 1962, Minnow felt a huge backlash against his policies from the industry and entertainment reporters. The networks found that using quality as a component of programming was a detriment to both their ratings and their revenue stream. The highbrow fare that Minnow asked for suffered from both low ratings and, subsequently, a lack of sponsors. Programmers realized that educational programming, even in small increments, had the potential to negatively affect the other programs scheduled around them, and even destroy the ratings for the entire evening.<sup>298</sup> Network executives resented Minnow for putting them in that position when he had nothing to lose from the experiment.<sup>299</sup> Reporters at *The Wall Street Journal* and *US News and World Report* debated the implications of Minnow's policies and implied that the FCC chairman was

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<sup>296</sup> Press Release from the National Audience Board, August 17, 1964.

<sup>297</sup> "The Confrontation," *Time* (2 February 1962), 54.

<sup>298</sup> Silverman, "An Analysis of ABC Network Television Programming," 401.

<sup>299</sup> David Marc and Robert Thompson, *Television in the Antenna Age: A Concise History* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 1987), 82-83.

behaving as a censor.<sup>300</sup> *The Chicago Tribune* dubbed Minnow “the cultural Khrushchev,” while *Time* magazine lamented that people could no longer rely on television as a tool of relaxation.<sup>301</sup> The tension reached the point when even if Minnow praised a show, the networks reacted defensively and saw it as coercion.<sup>302</sup>

By the beginning of the 1962 season, the networks no longer took seriously Minnow’s entreaties for more thoughtful television, and Minnow himself eventually gave up in frustration. Although he still detested the banality of network television, he ultimately had little power to wield, having made so many enemies in the entertainment industry. He was also unable to obtain Congressional support for a sweeping reform of the television industry. Having little room to maneuver, he held on to his position at the FCC until 1963, and after he left, most of the programs that he had fought for disappeared from the airwaves by the end of the year.

By 1962, hoping to make up some of the revenue lost from the highbrow programming that Minnow demanded, CBS finally decided to continue its quest to corner the rural market and follow up the success of *The Andy Griffith Show*. That same year, a veteran television writer and a producer got together in the wake of the Dodd Committee hearings on television and violence, and the two parties decided that the audience was ripe for some old-fashioned fun.<sup>303</sup> The combination of the show that resulted and CBS was a winning one. *The Beverly Hillbillies* became arguably the most popular television

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<sup>300</sup> Baughman, *Television’s Guardians*, 79.

<sup>301</sup> “Figs for Newton,” *Time* (15 June 1962), 57.

<sup>302</sup> Frederick Roevekamp, “FCC Chief’s Indictment Challenges TV Industry,” *Christian Science Monitor*, May 12, 1961.

<sup>303</sup> Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly*, 189.

program of all time. Its appearance in the fall of 1962 was a factor in the demise of Newton Minnow's FCC career and crusade to improve the quality of network television. The show was such an astounding success and so completely opposite of the type of show that Minnow promoted, that its introduction signaled to producers that they could once again make programs the public wanted.

Paul Henning, a veteran comedy writer and producer, created and wrote *The Beverly Hillbillies*. Paul Henning grew up in Independence, Missouri, best known as the birthplace of President Harry Truman, and his nostalgia for his rural roots informed his writing throughout his career. Henning got his start in the entertainment industry in 1937 by writing for *Fibber McGee and Molly*, a decidedly non-rural radio show. Nevertheless, he eventually came to specialize in writing hillbillies and rural characters for *The Burns and Allen Show*, *The Bob Cummings Show* and *The Real McCoys*.<sup>304</sup>

When given the opportunity to create his own series in 1962, Henning looked once again to his roots in rural Missouri. The story varies as to how Henning came up with the show. One version has Henning getting the idea to write about isolated rural southerners and their relationship to the outside world from an article about a town in the Ozarks. Henning was supposedly intrigued that the mountaineers tried to stop a road from being built because they did not want outsiders coming in.<sup>305</sup> Henning himself recalled decades later that he came up with the idea for *The Beverly Hillbillies* by taking a road trip to tour Civil War battle sites. Henning found himself daydreaming about Civil War

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<sup>304</sup> Paul Cullum, "Henning, Paul," *Encyclopedia of Television* (Chicago: Museum of Broadcast Communications, 2011), <http://www.museum.tv/eotvsection.php?entrycode=henningpaul>, accessed 31 July 2011; Marc and Thompson, *Prime Time, Prime Movers*, 31.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

soldiers, wondering how they would have gotten along in the modern age, riding in cars and interacting with modern technology. He decided that his new sitcom should explore the theme of displacement, and he knew immediately that the main characters were southern (Henning considered himself a southerner and considered Missouri a southern state) and that they would migrate to a major city. This scenario permitted Henning to expand upon one of his favorite writing themes, the dynamic between “rubies” and “city slickers.”<sup>306</sup> Although he initially thought they should move to New York, he ultimately chose Beverly Hills for the convenience of show production in California.<sup>307</sup>

Henning’s desire to combine the Missouri mountain characters he loved with a fish-out-of-water story evolved into a concept in which a man who accidentally struck oil on his land in the Missouri Ozarks and subsequently sells his land to an oil company for a small fortune.<sup>308</sup> Henning based the characters, called the Clampetts, on people whom he had met as a child while attending an extremely isolated summer camp in the Ozarks.<sup>309</sup> Henning knew he wanted the Clampetts to be out of touch with modern life and very rustic, but also did not want to exploit them or make them grotesque in the tradition of the southern gothic authors such as William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell. He saw mountaineers not as a backward people living in the past, but also as a stalwart opposition

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<sup>306</sup> Marc and Thompson, *Prime Time, Prime Movers*, 32-33.

<sup>307</sup> Paul Henning, Interview Clip 1, Interview by Bob Claster, Archive of American Television (3 September 1997), <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/shows/beverly-hillbillies-the>, accessed 31 July 2011.

<sup>308</sup> There is some contention as to whether Missouri constitutes a southern locale. The US Census Bureau classifies Missouri as a Midwestern state, and according to Gallup polls and the National Opinion Research Center, the American public does not include it in the South either. However, many Missourians owned slaves in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, fought for the South in the Civil War and even today some Missourians have a southern accent and identify as southern, so it is sometimes categorized as a southern state. For more information on the issue of what constitutes a Southern state, see John Shelton Reed’s *The Enduring South*.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*

to the dominant culture's idea of progress.<sup>310</sup> By juxtaposing an independent mountain family used to living off the land with the lavish consumerism of suburban Beverly Hills, Henning was able to set off the excesses of post-war America to full affect.

Indeed, the Clampetts were often baffled by technology that their neighbors and friends took for granted, such as electric ovens and swimming pools, or "cement ponds," to use their language. Their experience had not equipped them to comprehend a world in which people dig holes in their yards and line them with cement for the sole purpose of having a clean, private place to swim. The very act of asking the purpose of certain innovations had the effect of rendering their value questionable and making them seem silly and ostentatious. Their subsequent rejection and re-purposing of the state of the art resources available to them also called into question the value of consumerism and materialism. After all, if they could not only survive, but thrive, in an environment that placed a high value on materialism without becoming enslaved by wholesale consumerism themselves, the notions of progress and freedom are called into question. What purpose did a cement pond serve except to further enslave a person to the cycle of endless consumerism; to drain one's bank account as a means of proclaiming one's wealth to the neighbors? At least in the Clampetts' backyard, the cement pond was used for practical purposes, such as washing and providing a habitat for the family's many animals.

The Clampetts not only defied the economic and cultural expectations of their new home, but also the familial ones. Jed Clampett moved to California hoping his newfound wealth would help him build a lifestyle conducive to transforming his sweet

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<sup>310</sup> Harkins, *Hillbilly*, 188.

but tomboyish daughter, Elly May, into a refined woman. He also hoped to secure both an education and a profession for his awkward nephew, Jethro. He also brings along his elderly mother-in-law, Daisy Moses, known to all as “Granny,” to act as a cook, housekeeper, and mother figure. The Clampett family was unusual compared to the other denizens of Beverly Hills, who mostly lived as part of more “traditional” nuclear families consisting of parents and children. The family’s non-traditional structure, combined with its members’ mountain customs and lack of interest in modern innovation, served to set it apart both culturally and visually from the other families around it.

The show’s familial structure, though strange in the Beverly Hills setting, was similar to those in other rural comedies of the time, thus further establishing a pattern for future rural comedies. *The Beverly Hillbillies’* widower and a multi-generation family echoed the familial situations on *The Real McCoys* and *The Andy Griffith Show*. In each case, there was also a female figure to fill the role of mother, usually an elderly relative, but her role was generally limited to homemaking and general care giving. Often the widowed father participated in intensive parenting for the children, particularly on *The Andy Griffith Show* and *The Beverly Hillbillies*. The active father subverted the heteronormative gender roles ascribed to men during the 1960s, when women were still expected to do the lion’s share of hands-on parenting while the man’s role was primarily that of financial provider.<sup>311</sup> The juxtaposition was interesting because, in many ways, the men of rural comedy displayed signs of traditional masculinity that lined up with the expectations of the 1950s and 1960s. Their widowed status implied present, if dormant, heterosexuality. They worked blue collar jobs that involved using their hands, were

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<sup>311</sup> Aaron LaDuke, *Living Through the Sexual Revolution* (New York: Thompson Gale, 2006), 12-13.

handy at odd jobs, and exerted themselves as the heads of household. Thus, the men of rural comedy generally did not appear emasculated by their unusually intensive parenting responsibilities.

The comparison is particularly strong between *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *The Real McCoys*, both specifically about southern mountain people. The two shows also converged in their use of overt hillbilly imagery familiar from hillbilly movies of the 1940s, as seen in their shabby and simple clothing, rundown living conditions, and extremely old and rickety vehicles. The use of heavy accents and hillbilly humor on both *The Real McCoys* and *The Beverly Hillbillies* also fit in with the networks' previous use of hillbilly comedy on other programs like *The Bob Cummings Show*. *The Beverly Hillbillies* was striking because Henning used concepts already pioneered on other shows, yet his program did not seem recycled. That the show seemed like something out of the ordinary is a testament to Henning's ability to create something fresh out of ideas that had already proven popular.

The show's family dynamics were not the only thing it had in common with other programs of its kind. *The Beverly Hillbillies* was the last rural comedy in which producers consciously blended together elements of the western and southern. The show in many ways mirrored *The Real McCoys* more than its immediate predecessor, *The Andy Griffith Show*. Although the Clampetts were newly minted millionaires and the McCoys were poor farmers, both families had essentially the same goal. They both left behind a southern mountain home in order to pursue a new life in the West. The Clampetts dressed like hillbillies, wearing shabby and ill-fitting clothing with floppy brimmed hats, but the

songs they sang were more in the tradition of cowboy songs than mountain music.<sup>312</sup> Even making Jed Clampett a widower was a connection to the west. Almost none of the old western heroes of film, radio and television had been married, in an effort to make their outsized manliness seem unfettered by a woman. Making the main hero a widow had been a popular plot device to get around having to create a family life for the character.<sup>313</sup> Whether intentional or not, Jed Clampett's widowhood recalled the western, although Jed did have a family.

Even casting Buddy Ebsen as Jed Clampett signified a connection between the western and the southern. Ebsen had made a long career as a character actor, playing every role from the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz* (before an allergy to the paint of his costume forced him to cede the role to Jack Haley) to Holly Golightly's husband Doc in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. By the late 1950s and early 1960s though, he had played a series of rugged types in a series of westerns and action shows. Ebsen was an actor on the verge of being typecast for westerns when Henning cast him as Jed Clampett. Bringing in a well-known western actor playing a southerner once again connected the two regions.<sup>314</sup> It is possible that producers still felt that in order to sell a rural comedy, there needed to be a western element to make it more palatable. Whereas before *The Beverly Hillbillies*, all rural comedies had contained some western element, those produced after 1962 no longer included any western themes or elements, making *The Beverly Hillbillies* the clear line of demarcation. The show found so much success that producers must have realized

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<sup>312</sup> Harkins, *Hillbilly*, 88.

<sup>313</sup> MacDonald, *Who Shot the Sheriff*, 75.

<sup>314</sup> Fritz Goodwin, "Right at Home with the Clampetts," *TV Guide* (10 October 1962), 16.

rural comedy could stand on its own without the inclusion of elements from other successful genres.

*The Beverly Hillbillies* turned out to be one of the most successful television sitcoms of all time, but CBS had no way of gauging its potential success ahead of time. Even after creating a string of rural-themed shows dating back to the late 1950s that performed extremely well in primetime, CBS obviously still had doubts about the genre. In the fall of 1962, the network scheduled *The Beverly Hillbillies* on Wednesday nights at nine, pitting it against NBC's highly rated *Perry Como Show*. Time slots opposite established and popular shows were referred to in the industry as "kamikaze slots."<sup>315</sup> That CBS placed *The Beverly Hillbillies* there indicates that network executives initially thought of the show almost as cannon fodder. They hoped it would succeed just as *The Andy Griffith Show* had done, but it lacked the star power of that show and the hillbilly motif was more aggressively southern than *The Andy Griffith Show*. Although the network was reasonably sure the concept would attract a southern and rural audience, it did not know how non-rural audiences would react and certainly did not consider it a sure thing. By scheduling it opposite the Como show, CBS would at least have an excuse if it failed. The network did nothing out of the ordinary to promote the new show, indicating that CBS did not try very hard to lure viewers away from the competition with the new offering. Filmways Productions, on the other hand, took the show's launch very seriously. As the production company behind *The Beverly Hillbillies*, Filmways had a lot riding on the show's success and launched a huge marketing campaign to make sure it

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<sup>315</sup> David Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny: The Uncensored Story of The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* (New York: Touchstone, 2009), 82.

succeeded. The company launched an elite promotional campaign in eighty-five key cities in the weeks before the show aired.<sup>316</sup>

Whether the Filmways promotional blitz had an extraordinary effect or the viewers were just curious, *The Beverly Hillbillies* premiered on September 26, 1962, and became an immediate and unexpected success. Not only did the show match the success of its competitor, *The Perry Como Show*, it defeated it by an overwhelming margin. *The Beverly Hillbillies* cornered the market for the timeslot with 33.7 million viewers in comparison with Como's 14.1 million.<sup>317</sup> Within weeks, the show reached the Nielsen Top Ten and stayed there for most of the 1960s. Although the ratings were consistently high in rural and southern locales, *The Beverly Hillbillies* also reached Top 5 status in urban markets on a regular basis by the end of its first year. The show consistently had the most even distribution of viewers of all the rural programs that CBS produced in the 1960s. On a given week it pulled in approximately 22 million viewers, with two-thirds of those being in counties with more than 35,000 people.<sup>318</sup> These numbers indicate that viewers in small towns and cities were driving the show's popularity, not rural viewers. Michael Dann, head of programming for CBS at the time, did not exaggerate when he pronounced the show "the biggest hit in the history of broadcasting."<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> Harkins, *Hillbilly*, 189; Interview with Paul Henning, Part 6, Interview by Bob Claster, Archive of American Television, 3 September 1997, <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/shows/beverly-hillbillies-the>, accessed 2 August 2011.

<sup>317</sup> "The Corn is Green," *Newsweek* (3 December 1962), 70.

<sup>318</sup> American Research Bureau, *US Television Audience- January 1964* (Los Angeles: ARB, 1964), 33.

<sup>319</sup> Donna McCrohan, *Prime Time, Our Time: America's Life and Times Through the Prism of Television* (New York: Prima Lifestyles, 1987), 127.

In contrast to the public's warm reception of the show, the critical reception for the newest rural comedy was almost universally negative. The same magazines that lamented Newton Minnow's insistence on more highbrow shows just a year before decried the depths to which television had sunk. *The Saturday Evening Post* wrote that *The Beverly Hillbillies* was dedicated to the proposition that "Minnow's wasteland was really a cornfield," while *Variety's* reviewer called it painful to sit through and claimed that "even hillbillies should take umbrage."<sup>320</sup> *TV Guide* reviewer Gilbert Seldes lamented that the "whole notion on which *The Beverly Hillbillies* is founded is an encouragement to ignorance."<sup>321</sup> According to Ron Howard, even Andy Griffith took a mild jab at the show. He would say that *The Andy Griffith Show* was not a farce, not a Li'l Abner and not *The Beverly Hillbillies*, and that he wanted people to laugh with the characters on his show not at them.<sup>322</sup> If Howard's recollection is accurate, then Griffith's words imply that he felt *The Beverly Hillbillies* encouraged the audience to laugh at their characters, and that Griffith held his own show to a higher standard. In a 1992 interview with entertainment columnist Bob Thomas, Buddy Ebsen recalled that *The Beverly Hillbillies* received only one good review, from *The Saturday Review*. Ebsen had obviously taken much solace in the review, as he then proceeded to recite it to Thomas by heart.<sup>323</sup>

At the time though, the show seemed to draw power from the press' criticism. In one interview, producer Paul Henning pointed out that "even those who insist they

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<sup>320</sup> Harkins, *Hillbilly*, 190.

<sup>321</sup> Gilbert Seldes, "Review- The Beverly Hillbillies," *TV Guide* (15 December 1962), 4.

<sup>322</sup> Interview with Ron Howard, Clip 6, American Archive of Television, [www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/shows/andy-griffith-show-the](http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/shows/andy-griffith-show-the), accessed 02 April 2011.

<sup>323</sup> Bob Thomas column, 24 August 1992, Folder 19 "Buddy Ebsen," Box 10, Bob Thomas Papers, Collection 299, Performing Arts Special Collection, University of California, Los Angeles.

wouldn't be caught dead tuning into the corn-fed humor of *The Beverly Hillbillies* will spend an hour at a cocktail party offering glib sociological explanations for the show's appeal."<sup>324</sup> Its popularity became a story in and of itself. One account incredulously reported that major Hollywood players such as the "pronouncedly un-rural singer" Frank Sinatra and Tony Randall enjoyed the show, as though one had to live in the country in order to appreciate the show's humor.<sup>325</sup> Another article, in reference to CBS adapting *The Beverly Hillbillies* for broadcast overseas, playfully wondered how the delicate Japanese language would accommodate phrases such as "possum innards."<sup>326</sup> Yet another pointed out that the program was so low-brow that friends of the show's director Richard Woolf, a former Broadway director, had never even heard of the show when asked to comment on Woolf's new job. Based on the appalled responses of those who did know about Woolf's work on the show, the writer left the impression that either Woolf's friends on Broadway were feigning ignorance about *The Beverly Hillbillies* for fear of being associated with something so low-brow or that the program was so far beneath them that they had never even heard of it.<sup>327</sup>

The wave of critical backlash against *The Beverly Hillbillies* did nothing to impede its success. Whether viewers tuned in because they enjoyed the wholesome, sympathetic characters and vaudeville-style comedy or because they wanted to laugh at the spectacle, they did so in droves. The program earned a 50 percent share of the viewership in its timeslot, meaning that of all the televisions turned on between nine and

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<sup>324</sup> Marian Dern, "Viewers Like 'Em, and That's That," *TV Guide* (14 March 1964), 11.

<sup>325</sup> "The Show That Has H.A.Q.," *TV Guide* (11 May 1963), 22-23.

<sup>326</sup> "The Corn is Green," *Newsweek* (3 December 1962), 70.

<sup>327</sup> "The Beverly... What?," *TV Guide* (18 January 1964), 12-13.

nine-thirty on Wednesday nights, 50 percent were tuned to CBS.<sup>328</sup> The share was remarkable, even for the 1960s, and would be virtually unheard of today. The most popular episodes reached even larger audiences. *The Beverly Hillbillies*' share also demonstrates that the show's popularity was in no way limited to rural areas and the South. Those regions simply did not have large enough populations to comprise such an enormous share of the viewing audience. Even taking into account the southern diaspora, southern migrants did not exist in enough numbers to drive viewership in such an extreme way. With that sort of success, CBS executives could no longer deny that rural comedy had a legitimate place in primetime television. Though critically lambasted, *The Beverly Hillbillies* was overwhelmingly popular with the viewers. As the show's director Richard Woolf said, "in Shakespeare's day, high comedy was distinguished from low only by who laughed. But only the pit could get the show removed from the stage."<sup>329</sup> Indeed, the "pit" had declared that rural comedy was on television to stay.

The continued success of *The Andy Griffith Show*, then in its third year, the newfound success of *The Beverly Hillbillies*, and the ongoing success of the original rural comedy *The Real McCoys*, proved that CBS had a bona fide trend on its hands.<sup>330</sup> In 1963, after *The Beverly Hillbillies*' first season on air, CBS earned \$555 million out of a total \$1.8 billion made in the television industry. CBS also pulled in 39 percent of all network business, compared with NBC's 35 percent and ABC's 26 percent. *Forbes* magazine called CBS the "money tree of Madison Avenue."<sup>331</sup> Rural programming

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<sup>328</sup> Hollis, *Ain't That a Knee Slapper*, 183.

<sup>329</sup> "The Beverly...What?," *TV Guide* (18 Jan 1964), 12-13.

<sup>330</sup> CBS bought *The Real McCoys* from ABC for its final year on the air, 1962-1963.

<sup>331</sup> J. Fred MacDonald, *One Nation Under Television*, 149.

played a large part in the network's success, and therefore came to play a large role in CBS' programming strategy for the next decade. Michael Dann, head of programming for CBS from 1963 to 1970, oversaw the launch of numerous rural themed shows, particularly sitcoms, during his tenure. Dann was universally known as lacking tact, class, culture and intellectual depth. He was not a strategist nor did he have any theories about television programming. His "strategy" was simply to provide what the people desired.<sup>332</sup> Given Dann's simplistic view of his job, his consistent choice of rural comedies indicates the popularity of the genre at the time.

CBS was not the only network to capitalize on the exploding rural trend. ABC, which had originated southern and rural programming back in the 1950s, sold *The Real McCoys* to CBS in 1962 but came back strong the following year with a number of rural shows. ABC did not offer any rural comedies; CBS already had three on the air and seemed to have a lock on that particular genre, but the network did offer variety. Jimmy Dean, who hosted a series of rural-style morning and children's shows in the late 1950s on CBS, got his own primetime variety series on ABC in 1963. ABC aimed *The Jimmy Dean Show* directly at southern and rural audiences. The network even insisted on him having a hound dog sidekick, in the form of a puppet named Rowlf.<sup>333</sup> Although there were shows that employed puppets and ventriloquist dummies, there were no other shows

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<sup>332</sup> Brown, *Television*, 70-71.

<sup>333</sup> John Aylesworth, *The Corn was Green: The Inside Story of Hee Haw* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 12-13. The then-obscure puppeteer Jim Henson voiced and operated Rowlf the puppet dog sidekick. Rolf went on to become part of Henson's famous puppet repertoire The Muppets. Aylesworth claims that during the entire run of *The Jimmy Dean Show*, Henson was never introduced to Dean, and that Dean would carry on conversations with the puppet, even off-air. Part of Henson's job description was to sit in Dean's office behind a chair and talk to Dean through Rowlf. Aylesworth seems convinced that Dean actually thought Rowlf was a talking dog.

that used a puppet as a sidekick to a variety show host in primetime. The show appealed to its intended audience as well as small children, probably because of Rowlf and the occasional appearances of cartoons like Fred Flintstone, from the popular series *The Flintstones*. In a profile of Dean, one writer even went as far as to say the program was for rural viewers only. She could not fathom that the show held any appeal for an urban viewer, despite Dean's varied line-up of popular musicians, hipster comedians, and opera singers.<sup>334</sup> Nevertheless, the program developed enough national appeal to remain on the air four seasons, until 1966.

*Hootenanny*, a musical variety show featuring pop-tinged folk music acts was probably the most popular of ABC's programs aimed at rural audiences. The show featured artists such as Johnny Cash, The Carter Family and Judy Collins, and seemed like a sure-fire hit. It appealed to college students and was even taped on college campuses, but featured musicians who had national recognition and relatively wholesome appeal. A number of the performers, like Flatt and Scruggs, Eddy Arnold, and The Carter Family, had southern backgrounds and first established a following by touring the South. The music appealed to both rural and urban viewers, young and old. One reviewer excitedly claimed that *Hootenanny* was stimulating a new brand of folk that appealed to mass audiences, instead of just the young. When it aired in the spring of 1963, it immediately became ABC's second most popular show, attracting an average of eleven million viewers per week.<sup>335</sup>

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<sup>334</sup> Aylesworth, *The Corn was Green*, 11-12; Edith Efron, "A Drawl, a Packet of Country Songs, a Pair of Boots, and a Grin," *TV Guide* (4 January 1964), 16.

<sup>335</sup> Mike Gross, "Folk Music's Tin Pan Alley," *Variety* (3 July 1963), 1.

Far from being wholesome, all-American family fun, however, the show unexpectedly attracted controversy early in its run. In March 1963, the same month the show premiered, *Variety* broke a story that *Hootenanny* would continue adhering to the now thirteen-year-old Red Scare era blacklist. ABC refused to allow folk singer Pete Seeger, blacklisted because of his membership in the Young Communist League in the 1930s and subsequent membership with the Communist Party in the early 1940s, or his group The Weavers to appear on the show.<sup>336</sup> In response to ABC's refusal to break the blacklist, Bob Dylan, The Kingston Trio, and Joan Baez refused to come on the show.<sup>337</sup> ABC finally asked Seeger to appear on the program, but only on the condition that he sign an affidavit explicitly stating his past and current affiliations with either the Communist Party or Communist front organizations. Seeger thought the deal sounded suspiciously like signing a loyalty oath and refused. Seeger's manager leaked the story to the press, and the whole situation convinced even more singers to avoid appearing on *Hootenanny*.<sup>338</sup> The controversy over Pete Seeger did not seem to bother the show's viewers; they were obviously not concerned about Pete Seeger's free speech crusade. The show continued achieving excellent ratings, and ABC renewed it for a second and then a third season. The network eventually cancelled *Hootenanny* because of the so-called "British invasion" of 1964 and a subsequent lull in interest in folk music among younger viewers.

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<sup>336</sup>"Talent Boycott Threatened in Ban of Seeger, Weavers on 'Hootenanny,'" *Variety* (20 March 1963).

<sup>337</sup>"Six More Folkniks Nix 'Hootenanny,'" *Variety* (27 March 1963).

<sup>338</sup> Seeger Bars Oath for TV 'Hootenanny,'" *The New York Times* (6 September 1963), 59.

ABC found middling success with its rural-themed shows and even dealt with minor scandal as a result of that programming decision, but CBS still dominated the genre. By the end of the 1962-1963 season, the network had eight out of the top ten shows. Of those eight, *The Beverly Hillbillies* ranked first and *The Andy Griffith Show* ranked sixth. CBS Chairman William Paley happily defended rural comedies to critics by calling it slapstick humor. Some CBS stockholders adored the profits that rural humor created, but others lamented the network losing its pristine image for the sake of profit.<sup>339</sup> CBS network president James Aubrey felt some pressure to continue straddling the line between the network's "Tiffany" image and the rural comedies that made so much money, but it was evident to most of the country that the shift had already occurred.<sup>340</sup> Even with only three rural shows on its primetime schedule, critics already referred to it as "the hillbilly network" and facetiously claimed that CBS stood for the "Country Broadcasting System."<sup>341</sup>

Despite concerns by some at CBS that the network's image was leaning too much toward corn and too far away from class, James Aubrey nonetheless ordered Paul Henning to create another rural series for the fall of 1963 to capitalize on the popularity of *The Beverly Hillbillies* and compensate for the loss of *The Real McCoys*. Henning once again drew upon Missouri for inspiration, using his wife's memories of a small hotel in her hometown and her memory of being told to avoid talking to travelling

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<sup>339</sup> James Roman, *From Daytime to Primetime*, 109; MacDonald, *One Nation Under Television*, 152.

<sup>340</sup> Mark Alvey, "'Too Many Kids and Old Ladies': Quality Demographics and 1960s US Television," *Screen* 45:1(Spring 2004): 53.

<sup>341</sup> Hollis, *Ain't That a Knee Slapper*, 191; Robert Slater, *This is... CBS*, 200.

salesmen.<sup>342</sup> The series that resulted from that concept, *Petticoat Junction*, was the second in what would ultimately become a trilogy of Paul Henning-created rural comedy series. The show was about the widowed mother of three girls who ran a small hotel, the Shady Rest Hotel, next to a railroad spur in rural Missouri. The hotel was always on the verge of closure because the vice-president of the railroad kept threatening to close off the unprofitable spur. Like Henning's previous rural offering, the show once again centered upon a conflict between simple, but morally upright country folk and the corrupt, modern world.<sup>343</sup>

Again in keeping with the traditional CBS rural comedy premise, the Bradley family was not a traditional one. Kate Bradley ran her home and business as a single mother to three teenaged daughters. Kate bore the distinction of being the only mother out of all the female main characters in 1960s CBS rural sitcoms. All of the other women were elderly, teenaged, single, or too busy raising other people's children to have time for more. Her uncle, Joe Carson, lived with the family and helped Kate run the business. That Kate Bradley was a business woman made her unusual for any female sitcom character in the 1960s, let alone a rural one, but she was portrayed as managing her business and family affairs with wit and aplomb.

In a twist, the show was set in the same fictional universe as *The Beverly Hillbillies*, Henning's other rural comedy. The fictional town where the show took place, Hooterville, was supposedly close in proximity to the Ozarks homestead that the

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<sup>342</sup> Interview with Paul Henning, Part 6 of 8, Interview by Bob Claster, Archive of American Television (3 September 1997), <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/paul-henning>, accessed 5 August 2011.

<sup>343</sup> Marc and Thompson, *Prime Time, Prime Movers*, 34.

Clampetts left behind when they moved to Beverly Hills. A primary difference between the two was characters in *Petticoat Junction* were more garden-variety rubes than hillbillies, closely resembling *The Andy Griffith Show* with its emphasis on the humor found in small town life. One example is the Bradley girls' names, Billie Jo, Bobby Jo, and Betty Jo. The names are a parody of stereotypical southern naming patterns, with each girl called by both her first and middle name.<sup>344</sup> That all three girls have the same middle name is an extra comic touch, one also found in *The Real McCoys*. In the latter program, both of Grandpa McCoy's male grandchildren were named Luke because, as explained by big Luke in the first episode, the parents were so excited at the birth of the younger boy, they forgot about him.<sup>345</sup> In the case of the Bradley girls, the naming seems to have been purposeful, and possibly in honor of the girls' great uncle Joe, but the names still specifically conjure the rural South, creating a sense of place that grounded the show's comedy.

Another example of the show's rural-based humor was in the pilot episode, "Spur Line to Shady Rest," when the locals explain to a visiting executive from the train company that the train stopped because it was dropping off the Bradley women to do their shopping, and would wait until they had loaded their groceries before resuming its journey. The encounter prompted the executive to wonder aloud whether the conductor

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<sup>344</sup> The tradition of utilizing two names originates with the southern tendency to rely heavily on family names. A first-born son is traditionally named after the father's father, the first girl after the mother's mother, the second son after the mother's father, and so forth. Since the children are named after people who are likely alive and share the same last name, it is necessary to differentiate by utilizing the middle name. For more on the origins of southern naming patterns, see *Albion's Seed* by David Hackett Fischer.

<sup>345</sup> *The Real McCoys*, Season 1, Episode 1, originally aired October 3, 1957 on ABC. Directed by Sheldon Leonard, written by Bill Manhoff and Irving Pincus

was running a train or a taxi.<sup>346</sup> It was part of Hooterville's charm that it had a train so rarely used by outsiders that citizens used it to run errands and the train conductor accommodate their needs to the exclusion of any actual paying customers.

The Bradley women of Hooterville were the "valley billies" to the Clampetts' "hillbillies."<sup>347</sup> Having the two shows exist on the same fictional plane made it possible for them to overlap, with the stars of each show appearing in guest spots on the other, adding to the realism of Henning's fictional universe. Because the two shows utilized the same writers, producers, and plot lines, it also saved on production costs, which in turn meant even more profit for the already-flush CBS. Having the connection to television's top series also helped *Petticoat Junction* gain an immediate following. Both of Henning's shows placed in the Nielsen Top 4 in the 1963-64 season.

Critics were just as kind to *Petticoat Junction* as they were to *The Beverly Hillbillies*. One reviewer, hinting that the show was merely a device to create yet another hillbilly spin-off show, lamented "where it will end we don't know; all we can hope is that it will." In evaluating the show, the same writer smugly assessed that "the kindest thing you can say about it is that you haven't seen it."<sup>348</sup> One writer, analyzing the success of both CBS' rural strategy and Henning's creation of a two-show television universe, pictured Henning sitting at his typewriter all day long, turning out "shock after shock of plastic corn."<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> *Petticoat Junction*, Episode no. 1, first broadcast 24 September 1963 by CBS. Directed by Richard Whorf, written by Paul Henning.

<sup>347</sup> "The Quick and the Dead," *Time* (8 November 1963), 68.

<sup>348</sup> Cleveland Amory, "Review: Petticoat Junction," *TV Guide* (28 March 1964), 11.

<sup>349</sup> "The Quick and the Dead," *Time*, 68.

By this time, CBS was impervious to the criticism its lineup of rural comedies received. In 1964, CBS led its competitors by a wide margin both in ratings and in profits. That year the network commanded fifty thousand dollars per commercial minute, compared with forty-five thousand at ABC and forty-one thousand at NBC.<sup>350</sup> Because of the historically high revenues, James Aubrey fulfilled the promise he had made to CBS when he took the reins as network president in December 1959; he had nearly doubled the network's profits from 25 million a year in 1959 to 49 million by 1964.<sup>351</sup> Confident in Aubrey's abilities, CBS founder and Chairman William Paley gave the network president essentially absolute control over the television side of the company, something he had never before done in the network's nearly twenty-year history.<sup>352</sup>

With the network under Aubrey's control for all intensive purposes, CBS ignored the negative press and continued to churn out more rural comedies, once again drawing upon previously existing concepts and characters. For the 1964 season, the network created a spin-off of *The Andy Griffith Show* using one of its recent break-out characters, Gomer Pyle. Gomer, a simple-minded but good-hearted auto mechanic and gas station attendant played by Jim Nabors, initially appeared on the show in 1962 in what was supposed to be a one-time guest spot. Instead, he quickly became one of the series' most beloved characters and ultimately appeared on twenty-three episodes. With his barely intelligible hick accent and his catchphrase, "sha-zayum!," Gomer quickly became the

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<sup>350</sup> MacDonald, *One Nation Under Television*, 152.

<sup>351</sup> Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, 346; David Gunzerath, "James T. Aubrey," *Encyclopedia of TV* (Chicago: Museum of Broadcasting Communications, 2011), <http://www.museum.tv/eotvsection.php?entrycode=aubreyjames>, accessed 13 August 2011.

<sup>352</sup> Interview with Michael Dann, Chapter 4, Interview by Don West, *Archive of American Television* (Hollywood, CA: Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, 26 October 1998), <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/michael-dann>, accessed 13 August 2011.

focal point of many episodes in seasons three and four. Andy Griffith, who had discovered Nabors himself in a California nightclub in 1962, wanted his protégé to have his own series, while producer Aaron Ruben was keen to recycle the idea of placing characters with simple country values in opposition to the cold outside world. Having simple-minded, soft-spoken Gomer join the U.S. Marines seemed like the perfect juxtaposition.<sup>353</sup>

The pilot of *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.* premiered just as its predecessor had done; as a backdoor pilot on its parent series. In *The Andy Griffith Show's* season four finale, entitled "Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.," Gomer enlisted in the Marines, and Sheriff Andy Taylor drove him to the base and ultimately prevents the sergeant in charge from throwing Gomer out of the service. In a classic fish out of water story very similar to the one in *The Beverly Hillbillies*, Gomer's unassuming friendliness and thick country twang are at odds with the no-nonsense bustle of the military base and the barking orders of his drill sergeant, Carter. At every turn, Gomer seemed beyond comprehending his circumstances or understanding his place in the Marine machinery. One *Time* magazine writer said of Gomer, "he wears a gee-whiz expression, spouts homilies out of a lopsided mouth, and lopes around uncertainly like a plowboy stepping through a field of cow dung. He is a walking disaster area."<sup>354</sup>

The show set itself apart from other rural comedies by not taking place in a town but on an army base. Gomer Pyle bore a second distinction by being the only rural

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<sup>353</sup> Interview with Aaron Ruben, Part 5 of 10, Interview by Morrie Gelman, *Archive of American Television* (25 February 1999), <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/shows/gomer-pyle-usmc>, accessed 05 August 2011.

<sup>354</sup> "Success is a Warm Puppy," *Time* (November 10, 1967), <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,837550-1,00.html>, accessed December 10, 2012.

comedy star to have no family. The show primarily revolved around Pyle and Carter, and the comedy resulted not only from Gomer's simplistic worldview, but also from the marked contrast in men's drastically different portrayals of masculinity. While Sargeant Carter was barrel-chested, deep-voiced, gruff, and appeared to fulfill all of the masculine qualities associated with the Marines, Gomer was effeminate. There were rumors that Jim Nabors was a homosexual, due to his lack of public romantic attachments, and it seemed possible that, by the standards of the day, Gomer might be gay as well.<sup>355</sup> Gomer never had a girlfriend or wife on *The Andy Griffith Show* and although he had a love interest on *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.*, beginning in the third season, the relationship was chaste, even by the standards of 1960s situation comedy.

In one episode, Gomer even encourages the woman, Lou Ann Poovie, to return to her hometown and marry her old boyfriend. The episode's title, "The Better Man," could even be an oblique reference to Gomer's lack of masculinity compared to the two other men in the episode, Lou Ann's father and her other suitor, Monroe. Both men owned their own businesses, belonged to a country club, drank hard liquor, played football, and exhibit an air of back-slapping camaraderie. In contrast, Gomer drank nothing stronger than root beer, made fabric flowers as a present for Lou Ann, expressed no interest in sports, and took cooking classes. Lou Ann's father mocked Gomer's hobbies, insinuating that he was not manly enough for his daughter. He also expresses a desire to return to his job at the gas station when he returns to Mayberry after his time in the service. Lou Ann's father sees his lack of ambition as a masculine failing. Not coincidentally, Lou Ann's father and Monroe conspicuously lacked southern accents, despite hailing from North

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<sup>355</sup> Rumors of Nabors' sexuality persist to this day. A 2005 *St. Petersburg Times* article identified him as gay, and Nabors did not contest the story, leading some to believe that Nabors now lives as an out gay man.

Carolina, the same state as Gomer. Gomer's strong accent served to underscore his lack of ambition, his poor roots, and lack of education, each stereotypes commonly associated with rural southerners. When Lou Ann's father conspires to push Lou Ann toward Monroe, Gomer easily, if reluctantly, concedes to his rival.<sup>356</sup> Although Lou Ann ultimately elects to stay with Gomer, the two characters never got married or even engaged. Lou Ann appeared in 15 out of 150 episodes and appears ninth in cast billings, so she was merely a peripheral character to Gomer's story.

In an era when homosexuals were not accepted in society, let alone in the Marines, the most historically macho of the five military branches, seeing Gomer talk back to his sergeant with his high-pitched voice and slight lisp seemed almost subversive. However, Gomer's commitment to his military service and his ability to remain in the elite Marine Corps attested to his patriotism and citizenship, despite his constant bumbling and inability to rise about the rank of private. Whatever his perceived lack of traditionally masculine traits, his commitment to a somewhat steady girlfriend provided a visual indicator of his heterosexuality. At the very least, the presence of a girlfriend, when combined with his service to his country, indicated that he was committed to the living life on the straight and narrow and not necessarily giving into any homosexual inclinations he might have, thereby making him strong-willed.<sup>357</sup>

James Aubrey, after seeing the backdoor pilot, initially did not want to put the show on the air and changed his mind only after General Foods demanded ad time for the

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<sup>356</sup> *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.*, "The Better Man," Season 4, Episode 10, originally aired November 10, 1967 Directed by Coby Ruskin, written by John Barbour and Gordon Mitchell.

<sup>357</sup> According to David K. Johnson's *The Lavender Scare*, the typical view of homosexuality in the 1950s and 1960s was that it was not a trait native to a person from birth, but a universal urge to which any person could succumb at any time. Those who had homosexual urges and did not successfully control them were therefore weak, and those who fought them were strong-willed.

show the next season. Having nailed down a powerful and prominent sponsor, Aubrey promptly acquiesced and added the show to the fall schedule.<sup>358</sup> Though General Foods was excited at the prospect of yet another CBS rural comedy and *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.* was an instant hit with audiences, ranking third in the Nielsen ratings for the season, criticism of the genre reached its height. When describing the new fall television shows, one reviewer pointed out that CBS “as usual, will be the main programmer of harmless, usually unfunny, often pointless placebos,” and mentioned *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.* as specific examples.<sup>359</sup> One critic chastised CBS for “its contrived plots, mindless dialogue, and a forthright lack of imagination.”<sup>360</sup> Yet another referred to the “cool, mechanical touch” of CBS’ newest rural offerings and even suggested that with *Gomer Pyle*, the network’s “proven laboratory skills with test tube situation comedies failed.”<sup>361</sup>

The words used in these reviews indicate that the rural comedy had ceased being a novelty genre and had become just another fad to be mercilessly bilked by the networks, and CBS in particular. The reference to the shows as “placebos” indicates a certain frustration that existed among members of the television audience. Shows like *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.* may have elicited some laughs, but they certainly did not address real world issues. After all, the latter depicted *Gomer Pyle* as a Marine at the height of the Vietnam War, yet the show never references the war once in

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<sup>358</sup> Interview with Lee Rich, Part 1 of 7, Interview by Jeffrey Glaser, Archive of American Television (12 April 1999), <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/lee-rich>, accessed 5 August 2011.

<sup>359</sup> “How the Fall Season Shapes Up,” *Newsweek* (3 August 1964), 68.

<sup>360</sup> “Many Unhappy Returns,” *Newsweek* (12 October 1964), 74.

<sup>361</sup> “Television: Second Week Premieres,” *Time* (2 October, 1964).

its entire run. The shows really were placebos; they briefly comforted viewers but offered no lasting solace or insight into the world. At a time when the United States confronted one civil rights crisis after another, faced escalated involvement in Vietnam, and a burgeoning student movement created a divide between generations, people needed to laugh. The networks, perhaps sensing that need, scheduled a plethora of situation comedies of all kinds. The problem with rural comedies as critics saw it, however, was that the network used them cynically. CBS traded on the audience's increasing need for comfort by churning out multiple versions of the same program and masquerading it as wholesome Americana, every version becoming a more obvious money grab than the one before it.

Near the end of the 1964-1965 season, CBS experienced a major change that affected its programming choices from that point on. After taking over the network from William Paley in 1964, James Aubrey's behavior became so increasingly erratic and reckless that the people who worked under him were concerned about his actions negatively affecting the network.<sup>362</sup> Despite the success of *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.* in the fall of 1964, the rest of CBS' lineup was slow to catch on. Suddenly CBS' seemingly insurmountable lead over the competition was in jeopardy. Though his head of programming referred to Aubrey as "certifiable," CBS executives put up with his erratic behavior because of his hit-making reputation.<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> Interview with Michael Dann, Chapter 4, Interview by Don West, *Archive of American Television* (Hollywood, CA: Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, 26 October 1998), <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/michael-dann>, accessed 13 August 2011.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid.

Once that reputation started to slip, there was no reason to keep him around. Adding to the trouble was the fact that Aubrey's underhanded tactics as president of the network were becoming a matter of public record. The Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency had subpoenaed and analyzed production files for CBS shows in the early 1960s and discovered that even while the network was attempting to clean up its image, Aubrey was deliberately sabotaging that effort. In particular, the sub-committee focused on the records of one show, *Route 66*, a show about two men traveling across the country that had ostensibly been one of the thoughtful dramas introduced by CBS during the era of Newton Minow. The record clearly indicated a campaign of threats and intimidation by Aubrey and his lackeys against the producers of *Route 66*. Although its ratings were high, Aubrey felt the show was not good enough because it did not contain enough sex and forced the show to change its format in order to accommodate more sexual activity.<sup>364</sup> Aubrey's underlings would preview episodes and give pointers, encouraging "sex and action."<sup>365</sup> In one instance, an executive applauded an episode featuring a "more than generous share of bosom, amply displayed to a point where program practices was screaming in anguish."<sup>366</sup> The bosom in question belonged to a Lolita-type who was playing the victim of an attempted rape. When the producers of *Route 66* refused to disregard Aubrey's repeated and emphatic suggestions, he made thinly veiled threats of cancellation.<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>364</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Judiciary Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, Statement by Senator Thomas Dodd to the Subcommittee (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1964).

<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid.

<sup>367</sup> Letter from James Aubrey to John Mitchell at Screen Gems, April 4, 1961. CBS Correspondence Folder, Box 236, U.S. Senate Records.

The subpoenaed records revealed that *Route 66* was just the most egregious example of Aubrey deliberately going against CBS' attempts to clean up its image. CBS corporation president Frank Stanton was forced to testify in front of the committee on how he could reconcile his public commitment to higher standards for programming with his network president's stated desire to create programs that shocked the censors.

<sup>368</sup>Aubrey had now put the network in a position where its highest officers faced a public reckoning for his actions.

In addition to Aubrey's leadership style causing problems for the network with the government, CBS executives became suspicious in the fall of 1964 after Aubrey allowed his friend Keefe Brasselle to produce three shows for the network, even though the first one had performed poorly. Since it was rare for even a successful producer to get more than one show per season, it was unheard of for an unsuccessful one to get three. Brasselle's shows all tanked, leaving holes in CBS' primetime lineup and creating a slump in CBS ratings. For the first time, CBS' once invincible hold on the title of television's top network was now in jeopardy. Around the same time, William Paley discovered that Aubrey was living in an apartment owned by Filmways Productions, the production company that made *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Petticoat Junction*, and *Mr. Ed*, all CBS shows.<sup>369</sup> As it became apparent that Aubrey accepted cash and gifts in exchange for favoring certain television producers, William Paley and CBS corporate president

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<sup>368</sup> U.S. Congress. Senate. Judiciary Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, Testimony of CBS, Inc. President Frank Stanton (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1964).

<sup>369</sup> Metz, *CBS*, 236-237.

Frank Stanton unceremoniously fired him in February 1965.<sup>370</sup> It was the end of a very profitable, if profligate, era at CBS.

As Aubrey's successor, Paley and Stanton chose John A. "Jack" Schneider, the head of the network's New York station who had no programming experience. In what was either an effort to assuage the increasing critical backlash or an attempt by Schneider to differentiate himself from Aubrey while still capitalizing on a trend to make profits, CBS' next rural comedy took a new direction. Paul Henning created the third and final installment of his so-called "rural trilogy" for the 1965 season. The new show, *Green Acres*, was a departure from the previous two. Although it was set in Hooterville just like *Petticoat Junction*, and the characters on the two shows interacted, *Green Acres* was not a rural comedy in the traditional sense. Instead of a rural family moving to a big city, like the Clampetts, or a rural family in its original setting, like the Bradleys of *Petticoat Junction*, *Green Acres* was the story of an urban married couple, Oliver and Lisa Douglas, relocating to the country in the quest for a simpler life. The idiosyncrasies of life in the country proceed to drive the husband crazy. Oliver moves to the country with high-minded visions of life as a Jeffersonian-style gentleman farmer and instead finds swindlers, lazy farmers, and neighbors raising a pig as their son. His wife Lisa, on the other hand, initially reluctant to leave city life behind, adjusts with ease.<sup>371</sup> *Green Acres* was the only show in Henning's trilogy, and the only rural comedy of any provenance, that features top-billed characters who are neither native-born rural nor Southern.

Part of the change came from the fact that CBS consciously tried to separate *Green Acres* from its rural comedy predecessors. Paul Henning even took out

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<sup>371</sup> Marc and Thompson, *Prime Time, Prime Movers*, 35.

advertisements in Hollywood trade papers correcting the ‘misconception’ that *Green Acres* was part of a trilogy with *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Petticoat Junction*, even though all of the shows had Hooterville in common.<sup>372</sup> Separating the new show from its predecessors helped distinguish it and make it appear new and different. In many ways, *Green Acres*’ depiction of rural life was not much different from other series’ interpretations. The show featured a stable of loveable and hilarious dolts with thick southern accents to act as catalysts for Oliver Douglas’ frustration with his new life. Like *Petticoat Junction*, it was often just a humorous take on small town living. There were, however, small touches that separated it from its predecessors. The shows had a strong element of surrealism, such as the Douglas’s chickens laying square eggs, that separated it from the rural comedy pack. Life was just a little more whimsical in the *Green Acres* version of Hooterville than it was in the *Petticoat Junction* version.

Unlike the first two Paul Henning productions, Henning himself did not actually write *Green Acres*. For that project, Henning enlisted the help of one of his most promising writers, Jay Sommers, who until then was a staff writer for *Petticoat Junction*. In looking for source material, Sommers went back to a series he had written for radio fifteen years prior, called *Granby’s Green Acres*. The radio show only had thirteen episodes recorded before going off the air, but the basic storyline was already in place.<sup>373</sup>

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<sup>372</sup> Hollis, *Ain’t That a Knee Slapper*, 191. In later interviews, Henning acknowledges that the three shows were, in fact, a trilogy.

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*, 140-141, 189.

Sommers adapted the show for television and Henning designed the program so that *Green Acres* could use the same sets as *Petticoat Junction*.<sup>374</sup>

*Green Acres* premiered in the fall of 1965 and like all of its rural predecessors, found a measure of success. The show did well because it fit into multiple molds. Its Hooterville setting and connections to both *Petticoat Junction* and *The Beverly Hillbillies* firmly rooted it as a rural comedy. The show also had elements of the ridiculous, such as the neighbors raising a pig as a human child. Storylines about Arnold the pig were among the silliest and found him doing everything from writing a book to visiting Washington on a scholarship. These surrealist details combined with the show's gimmicky premise helped *Green Acres* distinguish itself by straddling the line between rural comedy and the newest trend in 1960s television, the "idiot sitcom." Idiot sitcoms relied heavily on gimmick-driven comedy at the expense of character development, resulting in characters that function almost at a cartoon level, and restricted plot development to farce.<sup>375</sup> Other shows often grouped into the genre with *Green Acres* include *My Favorite Martian*, *The Addams Family*, *The Munsters*, and *Gilligan's Island*, which were just starting to emerge as a trend in the mid 1960s.<sup>376</sup>

The combination of rural and silly comedy should have been a shoe-in as a ratings hit, given the popularity of the two genres, but *Green Acres* did not even break into the Nielsen Top 10 in its first season, though it did place eleventh. While eleventh place

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<sup>374</sup> Interview with Paul Henning, Part 7 of 8, Interview by Bob Claster, Archive of American Television (3 September 1997), [www.emmytvlegends.com/interviews/shows/green-acres](http://www.emmytvlegends.com/interviews/shows/green-acres), accessed 7 August 2011.

<sup>375</sup> David Marc, *Demographic Vistas: Television in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 56.

<sup>376</sup> Joyce Millman, "Stupid is as Stupid Does," *Salon* (21 October 1996), <http://www.salon.com/weekly/tv961021.html>, accessed 15 August 2011.

indicates a level of success most shows would love to replicate, it was the first of the rural sitcoms to achieve that dubious distinction. In its six years on the air, the show never placed higher than sixth overall, and did not even make the Top 30 in its last two seasons. *Green Acres*' middling success signaled the end of new rural sitcoms on CBS; the network did not produce another one for another four years.

Despite ceasing production of rural sitcoms, the network still utilized its now-signature character, the hillbilly, on its other shows. Rural comedy had become so pervasive by the 1960s that practically every major sitcom featured a hillbilly or some type of rural character.<sup>377</sup> They showed up on *The Jack Benny Show* in 1964 and *The Munsters* in 1965. Lucille Ball even brought back Tennessee Ernie Ford, an old favorite guest star from her original sitcom *I Love Lucy*, for a spot on her new program, *The Lucy Show*. Ford played a country singer who, after making it big as a country singer, proceeded to carry his new fortune around with him in a cardboard box.

Other networks also capitalized on the continuing rural craze by adding hillbilly guest spots to their popular shows. They showed up on everything from children's cartoon *The Flintstones* on ABC in 1964 to the teen sitcom *The Monkees* in 1967 to the "idiot sitcom" *I Dream of Jeannie* in 1968. NBC and ABC also attempted half-hour rural comedies but found nowhere near the success that CBS had with the genre. In 1964, the same year that CBS rolled out *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.*, ABC attempted to re-make *No Time For Sargeants* into a sitcom format. Although Andy Griffith became a household name playing the lead role in the story as adapted for teleplay, theater, and film, the sitcom version lasted only one season. CBS dominated the ratings throughout the 1960s

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<sup>377</sup> Hollis, *Ain't That a Knee Slapper*, 193-196.

and did so mainly on the strength of the rural comedies in its lineup. The best the other networks could hope for was to make a few attempts to capitalize on CBS' signature genre and perhaps place second in both ratings and profits.

James Aubrey's departure from the network and *Green Acres*' less-than-blockbuster reception signaled the beginning of a shift in CBS' programming policies, but through the late 1960s, rural comedy remained the network's bread and butter. Though CBS did not put any other rural comedies on the air after *Green Acres*, neither did they remove any. In 1968, every single rural comedy that James Aubrey had green-lighted since 1959 was still running on CBS' primetime airwaves, and most were still Nielsen Top 10 shows. While CBS may have appropriated ABC's rural genre for itself in an effort to appeal to rural and southern audience, rural shows sustained a level of popularity that suggested a much larger following. Something about these shows struck a nerve in the rest of the country.

## Chapter 4. The Anesthetic and Mudsill Effects of Rural Comedy

In the 1960s, CBS ran a series of rural sitcoms that proved extremely popular with television viewers and earned massive advertising dollars for the network. Other networks dabbled with the rural formula but CBS, under the direction of television network president James T. Aubrey, manipulated the concept so successfully that it became the network's signature. In less than one decade, CBS went from being the "Communist Broadcast System" to the "Country Broadcasting System." While network executives created rural comedies specifically for rural and southern audiences, some of them, such as *The Beverly Hillbillies*, became national sensations. The themes and characters obviously struck a chord with American audiences that the networks and show producers did not anticipate. Because rural programming clearly resonated with many diverse segments of the population, it is worth examining what made the shows so popular.

For southerners, the appeal was obvious. CBS had created rural comedies specifically to connect a southern audience, with southern settings, characters, and accents with which they were familiar. The characters were not negations of southern and rural stereotypes, but they were far more nuanced than previous characterizations like Li'l Abner.<sup>378</sup> Although the fictional people who populated rural sitcoms lacked

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<sup>378</sup> Li'l Abner is one of the first nationally known comic southern characters. The character started in a comic strip written in 1934 by Al Capp, and eventually made its way into comic books, radio shows, and multiple movies. Written by a northeasterner approximating his version of southern life, speech, and customs, Li'l Abner was a stereotypical hillbilly surrounded by other hillbillies who were equally lazy and shiftless. For more information of the profound impact Li'l Abner had on the national perception of southerners, see M. Thomas Inge's "Li'l Abner, Snuffy, Pogo, and Friends: The South in the American Comic Strip," *Southern Quarterly* 48:2 (2011): 6-74.

education, most compensated with a strong moral compass and healthy dose of common sense. They were also cheerful and wholesome people. Even the hillbilly stereotypes received a dose of levity in *The Beverly Hillbillies*. The writers and producers of that show redefined the stereotype by combining in Jed Clampett a comical hillbilly and a noble mountaineer. Clampett was always grabbing for a jar of corn liquor in a way that recalled hillbilly stereotypes, but the character also displayed a quiet thoughtfulness and dignity that gave him another dimension. The Clampetts were silly and the show took care to highlight their hillbilly otherness, but they were also loving, funny, and essentially harmless. Characters like Jed served as a type of self-affirmation for the hillbilly, hick and southerner. They were sympathetic portrayals that acknowledged minor flaws but ultimately flattered.

The complimentary aspects of rural comedy extended beyond characterization and into the setting. All of the shows took place in a contemporary world, yet remained magically free of the social strife that plagued the country in the 1960s. *The Andy Griffith Show*, *Green Acres*, and *Petticoat Junction*, set in rural North Carolina and Missouri, never showed a hint of the racial tension and strife that plagued the rural South in the 1960s and remained untouched by riots and civil rights demonstrations. None of the shows featured characters of color in any meaningful way, so writers easily sidestepped what had become the South's defining social issue. While taking away from the illusion that the programs took place in a contemporary timeframe, the omission of race only had the effect of improving the appearance of white southerners. Thanks to news reports about their treatment of their black neighbors, white southerners seemed like wretched racists in the eyes of many Americans. By omitting all non-white faces, the producers

removed what appeared to be the only obstacle preventing white southerners from achieving their destiny as the naïve but loveable counterparts to the more worldly and sophisticated regions of the country. For southerners, the characters on rural sitcoms reflected a much more pleasant image than the national news. Having the nation believe they were sweet but naïve was preferable to appearing racist and cruel. Regardless of how people outside of the South felt, white southerners could look at the images of themselves as portrayed in rural comedy and believe that they, too, were good, salt-of-the-earth people.

Rural shows, comedies in particular, had an anesthetizing quality that on some level appealed specifically to southerners. A common theme on all rural comedies was alienation and a sense of not belonging in the world, a feeling that aligns with C. Vann Woodward's take on the southern psyche. Woodward once claimed that southerners possessed an insecurity and paranoia that was unique to the United States, a sort of siege mentality.<sup>379</sup> Sociologist John Shelton Reed agreed with Woodward's assessment, claiming that southerners have retained just enough of the paranoia inherited from the Civil War that they remain suspicious of outsiders while simultaneously retreating inward toward community, church, and family.<sup>380</sup> The imagery put forth by the national media in the 1950s and 1960s seemed to support Woodward's and Reed's assessments. Many white southerners felt that under the guise of racial integration, interlopers were invading

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<sup>379</sup> C. Vann Woodward, "The Irony of Southern History," *Journal of Southern History* 19 (1953), 13.

<sup>380</sup> John Shelton Reed, *The Enduring South: Subcultural Persistence in Mass Society* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 89.

their territory and destroying their way of life.<sup>381</sup> Having television shows illustrate their fears must have been both affirming and comforting. By having their viewpoint broadcast on national television, southerners could believe that their feelings of being invaded were not unfounded, that it was a common feeling among all Americans.

The shows that took place in rural settings, including *Petticoat Junction* and *The Andy Griffith Show*, generally portrayed sources of trouble as coming from the outside, not from within. The entire premise of *Petticoat Junction* centered on the possibility that C & FW Railroad, the company that owned the rail line running through town, was always threatening to shut the spur down. Before the C&FW Railroad discovered the long-forgotten spur, the people of Hooterville lived happy and insular lives, using the train, affectionately dubbed the Hooterville Cannonball, as a local trolley. The company functioned in the role of outsider, and its constant threats to shut down the rail line put the entire town's livelihood in jeopardy.

While the conflict between the railroad and the people of Hooterville was played as a source of humor, it was nonetheless also a source of stress and paranoia. In one early episode, one of the Bradley girls remarks that her mother stayed up all night pacing the floor trying to figure out how to prevent a visiting no-nonsense railroad employee from going back to headquarters and issuing an unfavorable report about the Hooterville spur.<sup>382</sup> That late-night pacing session culminated in an episode's worth of hilarious

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<sup>381</sup> A favorite scapegoat of the southern segregationist was the "outside agitator," people from outside of the South who pushed integration for the express purpose of causing trouble. The Southern Manifesto, a 1956 statement of defiance against the Brown v. Board decision, is the most famous document alluding to these agitators. It was signed by 99 southern congressmen, including delegates from every southern state and the entire delegations from Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, and Mississippi, indicating the popularity and universality of the sentiment.

<sup>382</sup> *Petticoat Junction*, "Quick, Hide the Railroad," Season 1, Episode 2, originally aired October 1, 1963 on CBS. Directed by David Alexander, written by Paul Henning.

hijinks, but a very real undercurrent of desperation prompting the whole series of events. The Bradleys' apprehension over the loss of the railroad speaks to both the rural fear of being forced into irrelevance as well as the perils of becoming reliant on technology. Just as the railroad company had forgotten about the Hooterville spur, the townspeople had, in turn, forgotten that the train belonged to someone else. Having become reliant on the railroad and its customers, the people of Hooterville panic at the thought of their livelihoods disappearing along with the train, and therefore resent the outsiders who own it and want to take it away from them.

The characters on *The Andy Griffith Show* faced similar paranoia when confronted with outsiders. In one episode "Quiet Sam," a newcomer to the town did not speak to anyone, leading the townspeople to gossip about him. Upon hearing about the newcomer and his strange behavior, Deputy Barney Fife assumes that he must be doing something illegal.<sup>383</sup> In another episode, a man visited Mayberry and seemingly knew all of the people in town, but they did not know him. His over-familiarity made the townspeople suspicious and so they called for the sheriff to arrest him. The accusers never clarify for what crime they want the man arrested.<sup>384</sup> While in each case the accusers were ultimately humbled for jumping to conclusions, the characters' townspeople always defaulted to suspicion when facing strangers, thereby normalizing that behavior. Since characters modeled suspicion as an expected response to outsiders, southerners could

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<sup>383</sup> *The Andy Griffith Show*, "Quiet Sam," Season 1, Episode 29, originally aired May 1, 1961 on CBS. Directed by Bob Sweeney, written by James Fritzell and Everett Greenbaum.

<sup>384</sup> *The Andy Griffith Show*, "Stranger in Town," Season 1, Episode 12, originally aired December 26, 1960 on CBS. Directed by Don Weis, written by Arthur Stander.

imagine that their own paranoia about invaders destroying their way of life was defensible, if not always justified.

Indeed, the moral of many rural comedy plotlines indicated that suspicion toward outsiders was justified. *The Andy Griffith Show* frequently portrayed outsiders visiting Mayberry under various guises so that they could somehow swindle the townspeople. In “Crime-Free Mayberry,” two criminals posed as FBI agents who held a ceremony to celebrate Andy’s and Barney’s achievements in law enforcement. The two men, flattered by the gesture, warmed quickly to the visitors, not realizing that the ceremony was an elaborate ruse to keep them occupied while the criminals robbed the local bank.<sup>385</sup> “Crime-Free Mayberry” represented a situation in which Andy and Barney were nearly made foolish in front of their friends and family because of their naïve willingness to trust out-of-towners.

Rural comedy’s clear southern influence and in-group mentality made it a natural fit for southern and rural viewers, but their attraction for the rest of the country is more complicated. What is clear is that the programs found an audience outside of their intended southern and rural markets, and that they could not have achieved the ratings that they did without substantial viewership in other regions of the country. According to the A.C. Nielsen Company, the southeastern portion of the country, what we typically think of as the southern states, made up only 14.2 percent of the total national market. While Nielsen estimates indicated that there were more than 2.5 million televisions on in the South at any given time during the evening, or approximately one-third of total sets in the region, they also consistently demonstrate that southerners watched fewer hours of

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<sup>385</sup> *The Andy Griffith Show*, “Crime-Free Mayberry,” Season 2, Episode 7, originally aired November 20, 1961 on CBS. Directed by Bob Sweeney, written by Paul Henning.

television than almost any other part of the country.<sup>386</sup> The South's 7.6 million sets are a mere fraction of the estimated twenty-eight and thirty-three million total sets on between the hours of eight and ten.<sup>387</sup> Therefore, the South was only partially responsible for the consistently high ratings that rural comedies achieved during the 1960s.

One of the most consistently stated reasons that viewers and critics provided to explain the popularity of rural comedy outside of the South was its nostalgic tone. The rural comedies of the 1960s were all contemporary, yet they each had the feel of a throwback. The shows radiated a sense of so-called "old fashioned values" that became less common in television as the 1960s progressed. In rural comedies, the community was as important as family, the man always supported the family, and there was always a woman to care for hearth and home. The sexual double entendre, a device that became increasingly popular in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was notably absent, thus adding to the general wholesome atmosphere of rural comedies. These attributes were common in the 1950s but became rarer in the 1960s as the "idiot" sitcoms became more popular and more networks attempted to modernize their message. By the early 1970s, the values rural comedies expressed were positively archaic.

*The Andy Griffith Show* is the best example of rural comedy at its nostalgic, traditional best. The show portrayed small town life draped in nostalgia, the "town of yesteryear."<sup>388</sup> In a way, the program represented CBS' primetime challenge to its own

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<sup>386</sup> A.C. Nielsen Company, *Nielsen Television '66* (Chicago, IL: A.C. Nielsen Company, 1966), 8,16; A.C. Nielsen Company, *Nielsen Television '69* (Chicago, IL: A.C. Nielsen Co., 1969), 10.

<sup>387</sup> A.C. Nielsen Company, *Nielsen Television '66*, 15-16.

<sup>388</sup> Interview with Don Knotts, Part 4 of 7, Interview by Gary Rutkowski, *Archive of American Television* (22 July 1999), <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/don-knotts>, accessed 21 October 2011.

news reporting. The show premiered the same year as the Greensboro, North Carolina sit-ins at Woolworths, and aired at the height of the civil rights movement. The racist pronouncements of southern white governors, sheriffs and other government officials became a hallmark of evening newscasts. Yet, *The Andy Griffith Show* offered the antithesis of violent white supremacy and hatred. The show was set firmly in the 1960s, with constant references to current movies, political events, and magazines. In the Season 4 episode “Up in Barney’s Room,” Barney mentions a Gregory Peck movie, as well as his stack of magazines dating back to 1959.<sup>389</sup> There were references to current events, such as in the episode “Quiet Sam,” when a reference to Sam growing marijuana stemmed from the headlines over actor Robert Mitchum’s recent pot arrest.<sup>390</sup> Even the Cold War earned a place in Mayberry. In the show’s eighth and final season, Barney hosted a Cold War summit in the Taylor living room and Aunt Bee single-handedly saved the world from nuclear holocaust by serving a mouth-watering dinner to her US and Soviet diplomatic visitors.<sup>391</sup> The show marked a rare acknowledgement of a current political issue, even though its tone was decidedly light-hearted. Despite all the contemporary references, no one ever mentioned any element of the social unrest that defined the 1960s.

*The Andy Griffith Show* was clearly nostalgic in tone, despite the constant references to the present and the attention to detail that gave the appearance of realism.

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<sup>389</sup> *The Andy Griffith Show*, “Up in Barney’s Room,” Season 4, Episode 10, originally aired December 2, 1963 on CBS. Directed by Jeffrey Hayden, written by James Fritzell and Everett Greenbaum.

<sup>390</sup> Neal Brower, *Mayberry 101: Behind the Scenes of a TV Classic* (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair Publishing, 1998), 6.

<sup>391</sup> *The Andy Griffith Show*, “Barney Hosts a Summit Meeting,” Season 8, Episode 21, originally aired January 29, 1968 on CBS. Directed by Lee Phillips, written by Aaron Ruben.

Griffith himself even acknowledged that the show more closely resembled the South of the 1930s than of the 1960s.<sup>392</sup> For southern viewers, the show offered an idyllic view of their lives and presented small town southern life as one of morals and strong relationships with family and community. There was no violence on the show, a function of having a pacifist sheriff as the main character, and barely a hint of sexuality.

Indeed, one of the most important aspects of rural comedy that exuded a sense of nostalgia was the use of hetero-normative gender roles and chaste sexuality. Although rural comedies were notable for their lack of so-called traditional families, their modeling of gender roles was exceedingly old-fashioned, particularly as the shows aged. The traditional gender roles seemed increasingly dated as more and more television shows in the late 1960s and early 1970s offered characters who subverted the gender paradigm of the 1950s and 1960s with a variety of sexually liberated women, single career mothers, and hints of homosexuality. It was thought at the time that strong sexual relationships between men and women were essential to preserving the American family and, by extension, the moral health of the country.<sup>393</sup> The almost complete absence of sexuality in rural comedy seemed like a holdover from an earlier era when such issues were not deemed as important.

*The Andy Griffith Show* had a knack for successfully mining the conservative sexuality of its main characters for a laugh without being too risqué or mocking the characters. Andy was a widower and Barney was a bachelor, but even though both men were single and never appeared lacking for female companionship, the program never

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<sup>392</sup> “The Show that Has H.A.Q.,” *TV Guide* (11 May 1963), 25.

<sup>393</sup> Carolyn Lewis, *Prescription for Heterosexuality: Sexual Citizenship in the Cold War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 14-15.

showed anything more risqué than a chaste kiss. A couple of recurring characters known as the “Fun Girls” provided a hint of a more racy lifestyle, but their presence on the show was played for laughs. The “Fun Girls,” so called by Barney’s erstwhile girlfriend Thelma Lou, were named Skippy and Daphne. They hailed from the neighboring “big city” of Mt. Pilot. The girls wore slightly more revealing clothing than the women that Andy and Barney usually dated, and wore heavily teased hair and gaudy jewelry. They smacked their gum, and used slang. In one episode, they were even arrested, albeit for complications stemming from a parking ticket. They were the kind of girls who went out on the town with men they just met, whose names they did not even know. The implication was that the “Fun Girls” were sexually promiscuous.

While Barney was in theory quite eager to date them, in reality their promiscuity and big city ways frightened him. When the audience first met Skippy and Daphne, they suggested to Andy and Barney that they would like to go dancing. Barney responded by suggesting they go to Daphne’s house and watch a movie on television. The girls were clearly non-plussed at Barney’s lackluster suggestion, sarcastically calling him “the last of the big time spenders.” The evening ended with one of Daphne’s former paramours starting a fight with Andy and Barney, and Barney cowering in a restaurant booth.<sup>394</sup> The exchange indicated the degree of difference between Barney’s quiet rural life and the Fun Girls’ own tendency toward a flashy night life (and love life). Barney and Andy met up with the Fun Girls three times over the course of the series, and each time Barney ended the show reunited with the reliable, undemanding, and comparatively chaste Thelma Lou. The “Fun Girls” episodes served as a cautionary tale, demonstrating that despite the

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<sup>394</sup> *The Andy Griffith Show*, “Barney Mends a Broken Heart,” Season 3, Episode 6, originally aired November 5, 1962 on CBS. Directed by Bob Sweeney, written by Aaron Ruben.

temptations of the modern promiscuous woman, there was something safe and appealing about an old-fashioned girl who knew how to stay in on Friday night.<sup>395</sup>

*Petticoat Junction* was another prime exemplar of the nostalgic trend in rural comedic gender modeling. Although the Bradley family was non-traditional in makeup, as was typical of rural comedy, traditional gender roles were in play here in a way that they were not in the other programs. Her business, however, conveniently required her to mostly cook and clean for a living. Kate's uncle was responsible for making repairs and doing other "manly" jobs around the house. He was also responsible for financial decisions, although the show makes much of Kate's manipulation of her uncle to get her own way on major decisions. Since the business revolved around enticing customers from the Shady Rest railroad spur, nearly every episode featured Kate cooking some sumptuous meal in the hopes of attracting customers.

Kate's conservative portrayal of gender extends to her romantic life, or lack thereof. She was a widow and it seemed that this fact disqualified her from further romantic entanglement, if her utter lack of interest in men was any indication. The show sometimes alluded to the many boyfriends Kate had in her past, and this combined with her marriage provided indicators of her heterosexuality. In spite of Kate being a fit, trim, attractive, sought after, middle-aged woman, the show treated her almost like an elderly dowager. She never had any real opportunities for a romantic relationship, despite the fact that several male characters on the show expressed interest in her. Often, her reason for not exploring a relationship was fear that her uncle Joe would feel threatened by a

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<sup>395</sup> In the 1950s and 1960s, it was thought that a woman who exuded too much sexual energy or exerted control over a couple's sexuality was a turn-off for a man, because the man needed to control the sexual relationship. For more on this issue, see Carolyn Lewis' *Prescription for Heterosexuality: Sexual Citizenship in the Cold War Era*.

younger man taking over his duties at the hotel. With the exception of her children, most of her interactions on the show were with men, but she often treated them like children as well. She was not obviously grieving for her deceased husband, but it also appeared as though she had put notions of a romantic life behind her when he passed away.

The show addresses the socially problematic nature of Kate's single status in the episode "Kate and the Manpower Problem," in which Kate's friend, aided by the Bradley sisters, attempts to find her a new husband. The episode ends not with Kate finding love, but once again comforting her uncle Joe, who was convinced his niece was trying to replace him. Kate remained single until 1968, when she disappeared from the show after Bea Benedaret, the actress who played her, passed away. Her lack of love life provided a series of humorous storylines, and she seemed content to remain single, and having Kate involved in a relationship might have changed the nature of the program. Still, her unwillingness to move beyond widowhood conveniently allowed the show to continue on as a wholesome family comedy and not one that explored the nature of love in middle age. Although shows like *Maude* would popularize such themes in the 1970s, it still seemed untoward in the 1960s.

The strong sense of old-fashioned values found in rural comedies was not limited to the representation of gender roles or in how the characters conducted their romantic lives. The wholesome nature of Hooterville and Mayberry often rubbed off on their wayward visitors as well. Whether it was a harried businessman learning to slow down and enjoy the simple life in "Man in a Hurry" or an ex-con returning to Mayberry to thank Sheriff Andy Taylor for arresting him and ultimately helping him turn his life around in "High Noon in Mayberry," people seemed to be prone to epiphanies when they

came to town.<sup>396</sup> It seemed as though the people in Mayberry existed for the sole purpose of helping other people find their moral compass. Likewise, one of the running gags from Petticoat Junction was the railroad company that owned the Hooterville Cannonball could not manage to shut the rail line down because all of the company employees sent to accomplish the task were so utterly charmed by Kate Bradley and her army of beautiful, young, daughters. The wholesome and jovial atmosphere that Kate and her family provided at the Shady Rest Hotel reminded city visitors of the advantages of rural life.

Old-fashioned family values were also an important aspect of the Mayberry aesthetic. In addition to his commitments to the community, Andy Taylor's life revolved around his his son and his Aunt Bea, who served as the family housekeeper and a stand-in mother for Opie. Andy's parenting of Opie was often tinged with humor, but also heartwarming. One acknowledged fan favorite, "Opie the Birdman," was an excellent testament to the emotional pull of the show and the important role that family played in it. In that episode, Opie accidentally killed a bird with his slingshot, leaving a nest of baby birds without their mother. A distraught Opie eventually confesses to his father what he did. After explaining to his son the gravity of his actions, Andy "punished" Opie by making him take care of the baby birds until they are old enough to leave the nest. The end of the episode showed Opie releasing the birds out of his window, having successfully nurtured them to adulthood and learned some important lessons about responsibility.<sup>397</sup>

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<sup>396</sup> *The Andy Griffith Show*, "Man in a Hurry" and "High Noon in Mayberry," Season 3, Episodes 16 and 17, originally aired January 14 and 21, 1963 on CBS. Both episodes directed by Bob Sweeney and written by Everett Greenbaum and James Fritzell

<sup>397</sup> *The Andy Griffith Show*, "Opie the Birdman," Season 4, Episode 1, originally aired September 30, 1963 on CBS. Directed by Richard Crenna, written by Harvey Bullock.

Andy's handling of the situation was a model of temperate parenting, conveying disappointment without being too harsh and displaying compassion for Opie without underplaying the consequences of his behavior. Most other episodes did not have the same dramatic tone as "Opie the Birdman," and therefore did not highlight Andy's parenting to the same degree, but they still indicated a strong bond between father and son. Don Knotts acknowledged that one primary reason for the show's popularity was the "good feeling" it gave people to watch Andy Taylor's relationship with his young son.<sup>398</sup> As long as parents like Andy Taylor existed, there was at least an inkling of hope that American values were not changing as quickly as some feared. The values that he embodied had been common in 1950s sitcoms like *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best*, but were increasingly rare in the age of the idiot sitcom.

Although the values set forth by rural comedy resonated, the most obvious reason that people liked them was that they were funny. *The Beverly Hillbillies*, like *The Andy Griffith Show* and *Petticoat Junction*, portrayed a family with a strong work ethic and even strong set of values, but its biggest draw was its humor. While humor in *The Andy Griffith Show* was derived from everyday life on Main Street, U.S.A., *The Beverly Hillbillies'* humor was like a slapstick alternate reality. In a conversation with actor Carl Reiner transcribed for *Television Quarterly*, producer Sheldon Leonard claimed that the tense social climate of the 1960s automatically pointed comedy in the direction of broad concepts far removed from reality.<sup>399</sup> For his part, Reiner likened watching *The Beverly Hillbillies* to the enjoyment of watching children play; it was entertaining because they

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<sup>398</sup> Interview with Don Knotts, Part 4 of 7.

<sup>399</sup> "Dialogue: Sheldon Leonard and Carl Reiner," *Television Quarterly* 2:3 (Fall 1963):7.

did silly things.<sup>400</sup> Indeed, shows like *The Beverly Hillbillies* offered up silly antics and feisty hillbillies without any violence or ugliness to temper them. As the show's director, Richard Whorf, stated: "You know that no one will be killed. No one will have a brain tumor."<sup>401</sup>

As evidenced by the plethora of rural comedies and idiot sitcoms that abounded in the 1960s, audiences gravitated toward shows with an absolute minimum of angst and rewarded those that followed that formula. Any program with the temerity to address social issues did not last very long. Shows like *Petticoat Junction* attracted record-breaking numbers of viewers while another show in the same timeslot, a political satire program called *That Was the Week That Was*, lasted only one season. Rural sitcoms seemed uniquely qualified to satisfy the audience's appetite for the safe and mundane. The fact that shows like *The Beverly Hillbillies* recycled stereotypes, jokes, and plotlines only made them more valuable to the audience, since research at the time showed that viewers preferred familiar television formats, characters, and plotlines because they provide a sense of continuity and reassurance. They used the television as a recreational relaxation device, which required it to offer a degree of comfort and familiarity.<sup>402</sup> While a small group of viewers wanted their television programs to challenge them, the networks realized that most people wanted something easily recognizable, something that they did not have to think about. Using familiar southern stereotypes, while not necessarily flattering to southerners, provided a sense of tradition because television was

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<sup>400</sup> "Dialogue: Sheldon Leonard and Carl Reiner," 11.

<sup>401</sup> Slater, *This is... CBS*, 198.

<sup>402</sup> Joseph M. Ripley, "Television and Recreational Patterns." *Television Quarterly* 2:2 (Spring 1963): 34.

simply using the same characterizations created previously in movies and radio. The ideas were the same; only the format had changed.

Rural programs, even the ones set outside of the South, also provided a sense of reassurance by keeping their characters inured to the day-to-day problems facing the nation. *The Beverly Hillbillies*, for example, took place in California, yet featured hillbilly charm and feistiness without the inconvenience of student protests or anti-war demonstrations. *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.* took place at Marine bases in North Carolina and California, and aired during the Vietnam War as a contemporary program, yet no one on the show ever went to war, much less endured injury or died while fighting. Likewise, a character on *Petticoat Junction*, Herby, got drafted into the army in the first season, but is conveniently discharged immediately for minor medical problems.<sup>403</sup> In an episode of *Green Acres*, Arnold, the Ziffels' coddled pig, also got drafted. The entire episode revolves around Oliver Douglas' attempts to explain to the draft board that Arnold is not, in fact, a human being.<sup>404</sup> Having beloved characters experience the draft without having to actually face the consequences of that action allowed the show to acknowledge a war without having to exact an emotional toll on either the people of Hooterville or the audience members who emotionally invested in them. Whether by minimizing the role of war or removing it from the equation altogether, rural comedies kept reality at bay and therefore acted as an anesthetic for a nation in the throes of major cultural and political conflict.

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<sup>403</sup> *Petticoat Junction*, "Herby Gets Drafted," Season 1, Episode 15, originally aired December 31, 1963 on CBS. Directed by Jean Yarbrough, written by John Elliott. This episode aired while the U.S. was in the process of increasing its advisory role in Vietnam, but before American troops were engaged in the ground war.

<sup>404</sup> *Green Acres*, "I Didn't Raise My Pig To Be a Soldier," Season 2, Episode 3, originally aired September 28, 1966. Directed by Richard Bare, written by Jay Sommers.

CBS' programming decisions suggest that the network relied on that anesthetizing quality for purposes other than just entertainment. In 1966, Senator J. William Fulbright, as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, began what would become a five-year series of investigations into the feasibility of U.S. strategy in Vietnam. Televised in full, NBC and ABC carried coverage of the first six-day investigative session. CBS, however, opted not to carry any coverage of the hearings, instead choosing to counterprogram the first installment of live coverage with an episode of *The Lucy Show*. The network counterprogrammed the subsequent installments with *Andy Griffith Show* reruns. When asked about the decision, executives at CBS claimed they had decided not to run footage of the so-called Fulbright hearings because the information would "obfuscate and confuse the issue."<sup>405</sup>

Indeed, American involvement in Vietnam was escalating but the nation generally supported a heightened US presence in Southeast Asia. Senator Fulbright, despite having sponsored and then voted for the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, emerged as one of the war's earliest critics. In the minds of CBS executives, it was more beneficial for their audience to re-watch shows they had already seen than to get a glimpse of their elected leaders at work debating the wisdom of certain US foreign policies. The reticence to air anything that would directly challenge the nation's current position on Vietnam, even a Congressional hearing, aligned with the network's more than decade-long policy of erring on the side of conservatism. Given its previous brushes with accusations of being a safe haven for communists in the entertainment industry, it seemed unlikely that CBS would risk earning a liberal reputation again by airing hearings that questioned the war.

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<sup>405</sup> James Reston, "Say it Ain't So, Fred," *New York Times* (February 18, 1966), 32; Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 80.

The network's decision not to air the Fulbright hearings was so obviously politically manipulative that Fred Friendly, the head of the CBS News department, quit in disgust over the policy.<sup>406</sup> The most unfortunate aspect of Friendly's departure from the network is that it was in vain. There was little to no response from the viewing public over CBS' foray into political counter-programming, which indicated a passive approval of the network's policy.

In addition to the nostalgic properties and escapism afforded by rural comedies, the programs invited elitism that may have held some sway for non-southern and rural viewers. Rural comedy denizens made loveable protagonists, but as much as people rooted for the hillbillies in *The Real McCoys* or the earnest rubes of *Mayberry* or the Clampetts in *Beverly Hills*, no one emulated them or their situation.<sup>407</sup> Although many people watched the show, critics and critical viewers all agreed that "the pone is the lowest form of humor." There is certainly no arguing that the characters of rural comedy were striving to achieve intellectual excellence. While a common theme in rural shows was that the country boy outsmarts the city slicker, thereby giving the characters an opportunity to demonstrate a variety of admirable personal traits, every single program featured multiple characters who also lacked not only formal education, but common sense.

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<sup>406</sup> Jack Gould, "Friendly Quits CBS News Post in Dispute Over Vietnam Hearing," *The New York Times* (16 February 1966), 1.

<sup>407</sup> Jim Goad, *The Redneck Manifesto: How Hillbillies, Hicks, and White Trash Became America's Scapegoats* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 94.

As a rule, one could “calibrate how much of a bungler a character is by the strength of his southern accent.”<sup>408</sup> As discussed in Chapter Three, *The Real McCoys*’ Grandpa and *The Andy Griffith Show*’s Darling family have significance as comedic characters utilizing heavy southern accents, but these are the rule, not the exception. In all rural comedies, the person with the thickest southern accent was always some combination of funny, bumbling, foolish, and uneducated. In *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.*, Gomer himself took on the role, having previously played the role of the town simpleton on *The Andy Griffith Show*. Gomer’s accent was so heavy as to be nearly intelligible at times, and it made him stand out as a rube among his fellow recruits on their California training base. Likewise, all of the Clampetts in *The Beverly Hillbillies* had accents of equal weight, as they were all supposed to be comedic characters. Their friends and neighbors all played a collective straight man to the Clampetts, who always provided the punch lines embellished with a thick layer of Ozark twang. Even in *Green Acres*, arguably the least southern of all the rural comedies, featured Eb, the Douglas’ handy man. Eb, played by Mississippian Tom Lester, was one of the most frequently used comic actors on the show, appearing only twenty episodes less than stars Eva Gabor and Eddie Albert. Eb was unusual in Hooterville in that he possessed a southern accent, but it was not unusual that his accent was used to enhance his comedic talents.

Given the value placed on southern accents in rural comedy, it is not surprising that articles discussing the lack of quality in rural comedy inevitably referred to the fact that the characters were unsophisticated and above all, southern. Writers often highlighted the southern tone of the shows by using phoneticized spelling in their articles

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<sup>408</sup> Roy Blount, Jr., *Two Dollar Dogs*, 4-5. According to Blount, writers and producers only use southern types if they want the setting to be explicitly southern.

to manufacture the cadence of a southern accent. For example, in *Time*'s review of *The Beverly Hillbillies*, the critic refers to Jethro Clampett as “ a li'l weak-minded” while also congratulating the show for killing its main competitor, *The Perry Como Show*, “daid.”<sup>409</sup> The use of phoneticized language implicitly connected the hillbilly subject matter of the article to an explicitly southern accent, and therefore to the south as a region.

Characters without accents did exist in the world of rural comedy, but these were usually the “straight men,” the people who set up the jokes so that the guy with the southern accent could deliver the punch line. Sargeant Carter played the non-accented straight man for Gomer Pyle, the Douglasses for Eb on *Green Acres*, and the whole of Beverly Hills served that function for the whole Clampett clan. To some extent, Andy Taylor's mildly accented sheriff served the straight man role to Barney's bumbling rube character as well as the Darlings and Ernest T. Bass on *The Andy Griffith Show*. Consistently using neutrally accented characters as straight men created a natural association between a southern accent and a joke's punch line.

The creation of southern-infused rural comedies and their casts of loveable hick and hillbilly misfits coincided with the increased media attention on the plight of the southern poor. Indeed, southern rural comedy was a way of giving attention to a group of people without actually having to address the issues that made the group a concern in the first place. The issue of southern poverty had been in the media spotlight intermittently since the 1930s, when federal studies branded the South as the nation's top economic problem area.<sup>410</sup> Stories about the attempt to eradicate hookworm in the South fascinated

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<sup>409</sup> “On the Cob,” *Time* (30 November 1962), 76.

<sup>410</sup> Jack Temple Kirby, *Media-Made Dixie: The South in the American Imagination* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 55.

those outside of the South and led to heavy funding for the cause, but they also fed a taste for more “southern gothic” style stories that reinforced stereotypes of southerners as backward and diseased.<sup>411</sup> Meanwhile, books such as Erskine Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road* and the photographs in Margaret Bourke-White’s photo compilation *Have You Seen Their Faces* were meant to evoke pity and sympathy for the impoverished South. In the case of Bourke-White’s photographs, she would actively choose the poorest and dirtiest subjects she could find and then pose them in order to make them seem even poorer. Despite Bourke-White’s manipulation of her subjects and settings, and the fact that the South had made great strides in terms of the education and health of its people over the intervening decades, her photographs came to represent the truth of southern life for the rest of the country, even decades later.<sup>412</sup>

During that same time period, southerners, often referred to as “Okies” or “hillbillies,” were streaming out to other parts of the country in search of jobs. Wherever they went, natives applied hillbilly stereotypes to them, and the southern migrants experienced both social and economic discrimination because of their native region. White natives of the various cities found that migrants were a major cause of urban deterioration, with their grating accents, their loud hillbilly music and their tendency to gather outside their homes in order to drink and work on cars. Due to the negative associations that preceded them, southern migrants were frequently pushed to the boundaries of civilized society. Some cities relegated southern migrants to segregated

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<sup>411</sup> Matt Wray, *Not Quite White*, 107-109.

<sup>412</sup> Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 186.

portions of public buildings and often only allowed to live on the outskirts of their various communities.<sup>413</sup> They were also banned from certain jobs, called a variety of ethnic slurs, and sometimes not served in restaurants.<sup>414</sup>

Poor white southern migrants were an uncomfortable phenomenon for middle class whites, many of whom mistakenly believed that only minorities could be impoverished.<sup>415</sup> In his study of the paradox of class privilege among poor whites, Kirby Moss found that even poor whites tended to distance themselves from their poverty because the media had so totally associated being poor with being black or Hispanic, even though white people comprised 68% of all poor people. Regardless of how dire their circumstances, they always believe that minorities are worse off than they were. They chose to disbelieve what experience told them in favor of believing the consistently reinforced media image.<sup>416</sup>

While the poor whites used the media as reinforcement as a way to deny their class status, middle class whites also viewed poverty through the same media generated, racially based, paradigm. In their view, if all poor people were minorities, then impoverished whites were race traitors who had failed to utilize the advantages automatically afforded them as white people. In some ways, this created a sense that poor whites were even lower in social caste than poor minorities, because the minorities could not help being poor, but the white poor could. Because so many of the poor whites migrating to the larger cities were southern, the association between poverty and southern

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<sup>413</sup> Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 323-325.

<sup>414</sup> Harkins, *Hillbilly*, 175.

<sup>415</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>416</sup> Kirby Moss, *The Color of Class: Poor Whites and the Paradox of Privilege*, 35.

whites became a strong one. When Moss did his study, many participants attempted to help him by telling him to look for certain symbols of poverty. Most common among them was the southern accent.<sup>417</sup>

As more rural, white, southerners moved to other parts of the country, media portrayals of that group reflected an increasing wariness. Hillbilly films and stereotypical television depictions became more and more common, particularly after World War II as southerners resettled in search of opportunities. The public perception of southern rural and mountain people was that they were an unwanted population virtually incapable of cultural assimilation. One 1951 survey at Wayne State University had students identify groups that they considered undesirable in their city. The university was located in Detroit, Michigan, a popular destination for southern migrants in the post-World War II era. Twenty-one percent of respondents believed that hillbillies and poor southern whites were the most detrimental populations, second only to gangsters and ahead of African-Americans and drifters. A 1957 Gallup poll also found that northerners generally had a more negative opinion of southerners than vice versa.<sup>418</sup> Meanwhile, articles in national newspapers catalogued a litany of complaints against southern migrants, including their supposed tendency toward vicious behavior, their slovenliness, and their neglectful habits. In Chicago, a Midwestern city also popular among southern migrants, one major paper compared them to a plague of locusts.<sup>419</sup>

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<sup>417</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>418</sup> AIPO 582, 1957, quoted in John Shelton Reed, *The Enduring South*, 21.

<sup>419</sup> Harkins, *Hillbilly*, 176-177.

ABC's *The Real McCoys* was the first high-profile attempt by the networks to address the white southern migration and portray it in a humorous light.<sup>420</sup> The McCoys, leaving their West Virginia home for California in the hopes of starting a new life running a farm, were humorous and positive representations of the southern migrants streaming west during the Great Depression and after World War II. Unlike many media depictions that portrayed southern migrants as dirty and lazy, the McCoys were a different breed.

This is not to say that the show sidestepped all of the prevailing stereotypes about mountain dwelling southerners. The family patriarch, Grandpa Amos McCoy, was portrayed as stubborn and illiterate, a detail telegraphed by the fact that in certain episodes characters mention that family members write his letters for him.<sup>421</sup> Another episode featured Grandpa declaring that his granddaughter, Hassie, was too old to be in school and needed to think about getting married. Although Hassie's age is not explicitly given, the actress who played her was fourteen at time. Grandpa's reasoning is that his wife was married by Hassie's age.<sup>422</sup> His estimation combined with his illiteracy demonstrates his low opinion of formal education as well as his extremely old-fashioned views on the appropriate age of marriage. It was considered a unique Southern custom for girls to marry so young, making Grandpa's views a strong regional identifier.<sup>423</sup>

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<sup>420</sup> *Amos 'n' Andy* was the first show to address the Great Migration, but that show dealt exclusively with black migrants.

<sup>421</sup> Undated script from Fall 1962, Folder 1, Box 22, Collection 80, Charles Isaacs Papers, UCLA PASC.

<sup>422</sup> *The Real McCoys*, "Grampa Learns About Teenagers," Season 2, Episode 2, originally aired October 9, 1958 on ABC. Directed by Hy Averback, written by Jack Elinson and Charles Stewart.

<sup>423</sup> The case of Jerry Lee Lewis is testament to how the rest of the country viewed the southern custom of marrying minors. Mere months before "Grampa Learns About Teenagers" aired, reporters

In another episode, “A Skeleton in the Closet,” the writers also indulged in another classic rural comedy trope; the hillbilly with illusions of grandeur. In the episode, Uncle Rightly McCoy visits from West Virginia just as Luke’s girlfriend brings her wealthy northern aunt over to the farm for a visit. Righty is tacky, loud, obnoxious, and convinced that he and his family are upper class. As he lustily bites off a hangnail from his finger, he tells the aunt that he does not want his nephew dating anyone beneath him and that she and her niece have to prove they are good enough to be associated with the McCoy’s. Both the McCoy’s and their visitors are embarrassed by Rightly’s behavior. Rightly’s unearned confidence in his social position is played in an over-the-top fashion and punctuated by the laugh track.<sup>424</sup> The episode featuring Uncle Rightly exemplified the type of mockery in which the show’s writers occasionally engaged. Far from upholding prevailing stereotypes about southern migrants, however, the McCoy’s were a tightly knit multi-generational family with a strong work ethic and a positive attitude in the face of hardship. They engaged in laughable antics that belied their Appalachian background but in contrast to portrayals of real southern migrants, were neither menacing nor a detriment to their community.

Likewise, *The Beverly Hillbillies* represented a different class of southern migrant. The Clampetts came to Beverly Hills as a wealthy family, but their behavior, speech, and cultural traditions were still deeply rooted in their Ozarks upbringing. The

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discovered that the Louisianan singer, 22, was married to his 13 year- old cousin. Lewis, who was on tour at the time, faced an immediate backlash, causing him to cancel the rest of his appearances. After that, he virtually disappeared from the music industry at the height of his fame, indicating that people no longer wanted to work with him because of his unorthodox marriage.

<sup>424</sup> “A Skeleton in the Closet,” Folder 6/22/62, Box 22, Collection 80, Charles Isaacs Papers, UCLA PASC. Rightly McCoy may have been a prototype for another rural comedy hillbilly, Briscoe Darling, who was featured on *The Andy Griffith Show*. The two men share personality characteristics, mannerisms, and the same lack of understanding about their own place in the social caste.

Clampetts' arrival in their posh Beverly Hills neighborhood was not received as well as when the more middle class McCoy's moved to their farm. The Clampetts were kind and demonstrated an earnest desire for self-improvement, but through their behavior still indicated the type of "cultural pollution" so reviled by middle class Americans in the 1960s. Indeed, one recurrent plot device on the show was their neighbors' attempts to get them to leave. The Clampetts constantly inflicted their backwoods customs and values on their befuddled neighbors. Granny was notorious for forcing her home remedies, which usually involved some stomach-turning combination of animal parts, on unsuspecting neighbors.<sup>425</sup> She was also the family member most likely to engage in activities that would prove detrimental to the entire neighborhood, leaving her neighbors in constant fear of property devaluation. In one instance, she started to till up the front yard of the family's mansion in order to plant a garden. While Granny never gave a thought to how her actions affected others, her neighbors were horrified and made every effort to stop her.<sup>426</sup> Granny was not the only family member whose devotion to the customs of their past life infringed on their neighbor's sense of propriety. The whole family indulged in well-meaning but misguided gestures like leaving piles of live crawfish on their doorsteps as a present.<sup>427</sup> Given the vast divide between the Clampetts' own behavioral expectations and those of their neighbors, it was not difficult to see why these southern imports might be difficult to take.

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<sup>425</sup> *The Beverly Hillbillies*, "Jed Gets the Misery," Season 2, Episode 1, originally aired September 25, 1963. Directed by Richard Whorf, written by Paul Henning.

<sup>426</sup> *The Beverly Hillbillies*, "Granny's Garden," Season 2, Episode 3, originally aired October 9, 1963. Directed by Richard Whorf, written by Paul Henning.

<sup>427</sup> *The Beverly Hillbillies*, "The Great Crawdad Hunt," Season 2, Episode 28, originally aired April 15, 1964. Directed by Richard Whorf, written by Paul Henning.

The issue of southern migrants and the southern poverty problem continued to make national headlines throughout the 1960s, just as rural comedy exploded in the national consciousness. In the 1960 presidential election, John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey both campaigned in the West Virginia Democratic primary with a degree of political pity so intense that it created national concern for the “social problems” in Appalachia. Having read *The Other America*, Michael Harrington’s groundbreaking 1962 book on the tens of millions of impoverished Americans and the particular struggles of poor white Appalachians, Kennedy went on to create a presidential commission for the purpose of alleviating the region’s poverty. When Lyndon Johnson took over the presidency in 1963, he also targeted Appalachia and the poor rural south.<sup>428</sup> In his “War on Poverty,” Johnson and his team frequently drew upon images of poor white Appalachians to mask the fact that most of the benefits in his anti-poverty plan were for urban non-whites.<sup>429</sup>

Meanwhile, news programs occasionally featured exposés on the living conditions of poor southern whites, particularly those in the Ozarks and Appalachia. CBS News aired a 1962 documentary entitled “Christmas in Appalachia,” and in 1964 Lyndon Johnson made a trip to Kentucky in order to promote the Appalachian Regional Renewal Act as part of his War on Poverty. The media followed him there and plastered images of the visit all over the country, replete with a host of impoverished mountain dwellers.<sup>430</sup> The migration of southerners to the north and west combined with the images of the rural

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<sup>428</sup> Williamson, *Hillbillyland*, 251.

<sup>429</sup> Harkins, *Hillbilly*, 8.

<sup>430</sup> *Ibid*, 185-186.

poor in the isolated southern mountain ranges created an image of southern people as impoverished, uneducated, and desperate. When taken in collusion with media portrayals of the white reaction to civil rights protests and racial integration, the South appeared to be the seedy underbelly of the United States, where people were both poor and mean-spirited.

While segregationist rednecks were a dangerous threat to social order and stability, and the rural mountain people in Appalachia appeared filthy and pathetic, hicks and hillbillies on television were harmless and relatively supportive of the societal status quo outside of the South. Although they existed in a world uninhabited by people of color, they did not outwardly support racism, segregation, or any other type of discrimination. Since rednecks, hicks, and hillbillies were all of the same collection of southern misfits, the funny, harmless hicks and hillbillies had a neutralizing effect. The pervasive message of rural comedies was that the people in them were kind but so silly it was often impossible to take them seriously. Since these characters are all identifiably southern by their accents, their portrayal on rural comedies had the potential to create widespread assumptions about the behavior and intelligence of southern people as a group. If a viewer who knew nothing about southern people other than what he saw on rural comedies and the news, he might assume that southern white people were generally nice and sometimes funny but often not very smart.

Sociologist John Shelton Reed wrote that the yeoman character type seen so frequently in rural comedy was established in the nineteenth century to serve a “mudsill” function in the antebellum era. The mudsill function is defined as using the quirks and customs of a lower social class as fodder for higher classes as a means to make them feel

more secure in their own socioeconomic status. The southern mudsill was revived in the twentieth century as a result of a combination of southerners appearing in the media as a result of migration and the civil rights movement. In the nineteenth century, northerners and middle class southerners used hick stereotypes as a way to elevate themselves at the expense of the poor southerner. The ignorance and naïveté displayed by the characters allowed the viewers, listeners, or readers to think more highly of their own wit and intelligence.<sup>431</sup> The mudsill effect becomes even more powerful because the characters in rural comedies are rarely in positions of authority. Instead of being lawyers, doctors, professors, or any type of educated professional, the characters were strictly blue collar. *The Andy Griffith Show* featured cops, mechanics, farmers, and small business owners, while *The Real McCoys* featured farmers. *The Beverly Hillbillies*, before striking it rich, were subsistence farmers and hunters. Gomer Pyle was mechanic before becoming a soldier, and the characters in *Green Acres* were mostly farmers, with the exception of the would-be yeoman Oliver Douglas.

When considering that television viewing in the 1950s and 1960s was highest among working class, uneducated whites, the necessity for having programs that served the mudsill function becomes apparent.<sup>432</sup> Since many viewers were of a lower socioeconomic class, they may have been more likely to appreciate any program that pointed out to them a sector of society that contained people held in lower esteem than themselves. The characters had the same types of jobs as the viewers, so the primary thing that separated them was region. The hick, the redneck, and the hillbilly all served as

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<sup>431</sup> Reed, *Southern Folk, Plain and Fancy*, 65.

<sup>432</sup> Comtock, *Television in America*, 30-31.

signifiers of region and class, and indicated that southern and rural areas were on the outskirts of American civility, intelligence, and taste. In using this so-called mudsill, the media had the power to make the lower and lower-middle classes feel more comfortable with their own location and status. Viewers found security in knowing there were people beneath them socially, culturally, and economically.

There is very little surviving socioeconomic data relating to television viewership from prior to the late 1960s, but the information that exists bears out the theory that rural comedy's most ardent viewers were people of lower and middle class socioeconomic status. A 1961 American Research Bureau (ARB) analysis of which programs were popular among people of varying incomes divided viewers into those whose families made more than 7,000 dollars per year, and those who made less. The results demonstrated that 73 percent of viewers of *The Andy Griffith Show*, one of only two rural comedies on television at the time, came from the latter group.<sup>433</sup> In comparison, shows like *All-Star Golf* had only 58 percent of its viewers in the lower income bracket, while soap operas averaged 86 percent of their viewers in the lower bracket.<sup>434</sup>

To put that income number into perspective, census reports from 1961 indicate that the average income for a family headed by a person with a high school education was 6,300 dollars.<sup>435</sup> Approximately 37 percent, or just over one-third of American families made more than 7,000 dollars a year, meaning that ARB's determined cut-off point

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<sup>433</sup> American Research Bureau, *U.S. Television Audience-March 1961* (Los Angeles: ARB, 1961), 13.

<sup>434</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>435</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports-Consumer Income, Series P60, Number 39* (Washington D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1963), 1.  
<http://www2.census.gov/prod2/popscan/p60-039.pdf>, accessed August 23, 2012.

separated the wealthy and upper-middle classes from the lower and middle class.<sup>436</sup> The Census Bureau estimated that 81 percent of those in the higher income bracket were there because they had attended at least one year of college, meaning that the ARB's cut-off income was also an indicator of the viewer's education.<sup>437</sup> If people who made more than 7,000 dollars and attended college comprised only 27 percent of *The Andy Griffith Show's* viewership, they were watching in disproportionately small numbers based on their percentage of the total viewing audience.

Although ARB's numbers indicate that rural comedies were not as big of a draw for the moneyed and the educated, the shows served the mudsill function even for those who did not watch. Television was not a popular pastime among the wealthier and more educated classes in the 1960s. For them, shows like *The Beverly Hillbillies* served primarily as fodder for condescending cocktail chatter; proof positive of television's lack of redeeming value. Entertainment critics were no better. They also used rural comedies as examples of declining American standards. Lee Remick summed up the trend best when she wrote dismissively in a 1962 article for *American Weekly*: "I find it most depressing that 54 million people look at that show every week."<sup>438</sup>

The assumptions that viewers made manifested themselves in how the media discussed rural comedy. Critics treated rural comedy as a pestilence to tolerated at best. In 1963, upon receiving a Distinguished Service Award from the National Association of

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<sup>436</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>437</sup> Ibid., 4. It is possible that some of the households with higher incomes derive their extra money from a working spouse. The Census Bureau's data, however, indicates that male earners accumulated 91% of the total earnings, and that women of lower economic status were far more likely than their wealthy counterparts to take a full-time job, meaning that most of the \$7k+ households in question had a single earner.

<sup>438</sup> McCrohan, *Prime Time, Our Time*, 127.

Broadcasters, Bob Hope gave a speech in which he made jokes about the role of the rural comedy in the contemporary scope of television. Referencing FCC Chairman Newton Minnow's recent crusade to rescue television from a fate as a "vast wasteland," Hope claimed that such machinations led to a consumer backlash manifesting itself as rural comedy. He referred to shows like *The Beverly Hillbillies* as the "outhouse on the vast wasteland."<sup>439</sup>

*TV Guide*, at the time the primary purveyor of trends in television content and the only media-related periodical consumed by the masses, was among the leaders in this trend. While other national magazines such as *Life*, *Time*, or *Newsweek* gave short shrift to rural comedy or, in the case of *The New Yorker*, ignored it altogether, rarely a week passed in the 1960s without *TV Guide* doing some feature connected to rural comedy. Their articles were rarely laudatory. For example, the February 3, 1962 issue featured an article that advertised a tutorial on "hillbilly-ese." The piece, titled "TV Jibe: The Real McCoys," was ostensibly about the television show but the article made no reference to either the show, its characters, or the actors that played them. More than likely, *TV Guide* used the piece as filler to pad out the magazine on what might have been a slow news week in the entertainment industry. The piece used the mention of a rural-themed program as an excuse to mock southern and rural accents. The piece appeared as follows: a series of words, each followed by an example of how to use it in a sentence. A portion of the list appeared as follows:

"woosht"- She woosht and woosht but her woosh never come true.

"mere"- He seen himself in the mere.

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<sup>439</sup> Muriel Davidson, "Fame Arrived in a Gray Wig, Glasses, and Army Boots," *TV Guide* (September 1963), 4-7.

“crine”- She’s crine her heart out for that boy.<sup>440</sup>

The phonetic spelling of the words as supposedly pronounced by a character on *The Real McCoys*, paired with the grammatically incorrect sentences and supposedly rural syntax, indicated an air of superiority on the part of the author. The statements provided were not uttered by the characters on the show, but were clearly written as jokes for the purpose of entertaining readers. The grammatical errors were the most egregious offense, as they combine what would have been a play on southern accents with an implied lack of education on how to put a sentence together correctly in the English language. The reader, upon perusing the list, would have gotten a chuckle not because it was reminiscent of how the characters on *The Real McCoys* or other rural shows spoke, but because of implied southern ignorance.

The following year, *TV Guide* capitalized on the success of *The Beverly Hillbillies* by featuring a review of the show by an actual hillbilly from the Ozarks. A reporter found Junior Cobb of Three Brothers, Arkansas to participate in the stunt. The results were not particularly flattering to Cobb. Ostensibly, Cobb was supposed to review the show, but most of the piece focused on his life. The author points out that Cobb, described as “trim-bodied hillbilly” had never seen *The Beverly Hillbillies* before, as he did not own a television and the nearest one was four miles away. He mentions that Cobb and his wife made less than one hundred dollars a month and that their income came almost entirely from whittling figurines for tourists. Despite having nothing to do with *The Beverly Hillbillies*, Cobb’s wife also features prominently in the article, probably because she was sixteen years old and was “fresh from the eighth grade” when they married two years

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<sup>440</sup> “TV Jibe: The Real McCoys.” *TV Guide* (February 3, 1962), 11.

before.<sup>441</sup> As for the review segment of the piece, it comprised only two sentences. Cobb's assessment of *The Beverly Hillbillies* was essentially that it was funny. The ostensible purpose of the piece, to get a hillbilly to review a show about hillbillies, did not produce the expected result, but it did give the magazine an excuse to provide the particulars of the man's decidedly unconventional life. His bride had been seven years younger than the national average, his income was less than 20 percent of the national average, and he did not own a television, unlike approximately 97 percent of Americans at the time.<sup>442</sup> The purpose of the article seemed to be demonstrating how anathema an actual hillbilly's lifestyle was compared to the average American.

*TV Guide* occasionally mocked rural comedies and the region they represented, but they were by no means alone in their ridicule. Occasionally, the magazine could even find actors on rural comedies who were equally disdainful. Elizabeth MacRae, who played Lou Ann Poovie on *Gomer Pyle USMC*, gave an interview in which she expounded on how her southern upbringing informed the way she played her character. Saying that she "escaped" from her upbringing in North Carolina, MacRae asserted that everything southern women did was about sex, a "pathetic self-deception- the southern girl is so sure she understands men. The sad part is, she understands only a certain kind of man with a fat ego, the kind who can't exist without continual flattery." MacRae claimed that southern women have to pretend their whole lives that they are wide-eyed and

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<sup>441</sup> Don Richardson, Sr., "Junior Cobb of 3 Brothers, Ark. Judges The Beverly Hillbillies," *TV Guide* (July 6, 1963), 9.

<sup>442</sup> For a breakdown of the age of first marriage for men and women in 1963, see <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/tabMS-2.pdf>, accessed December 18, 2012. Statistics on television ownership and income have been provided in chapters 1 and 2.

innocent, a mindset she called “sad and limiting.”<sup>443</sup> Even though MacRae was speaking only about her own experiences through the lens of nostalgia, she attributed her own perceptions to all southern women, leaving the reader imagining all southern women as pathetic, child-like creatures right out of a Tennessee Williams play.

Critics were not the only ones who tended to highlight the southern features of rural comedy. Writers on the shows themselves often enhanced the mudsill effect by using a variety of methods in order to inject humor into their series, some of which also played on southern characteristics. Accents and speech were the most common devices. If a scene became too serious, the script would typically include some type of joke to break up the tension. In the case of rural comedy, the joke typically revolved around an accent or some southern colloquialism. For example, in “Stranger in Town,” an episode of *The Andy Griffith Show*, Andy comes under pressure from the people of Mayberry to arrest a man who is going around claiming that he knows people who do not know him. Andy, reluctant to arrest a man who had not committed any crime, protested that arresting the man would be like “pickin’ a peach that ain’t fuzzed up good yet.”<sup>444</sup> The addition of a laugh track accentuated the line’s humor, highlighting the contrast between the heated situation and Andy’s light-hearted and colloquial response to it. In another episode, “The Runaway Kid,” Andy and Opie engaged in a serious conversation about the importance of keeping promises. When Opie pointed out that Andy’s advice was contradictory, Andy conceded that he had “gotten his britches caught on his own pitchfork.”<sup>445</sup> The line

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<sup>443</sup> “Gomer’s Learning About Women From Her,” *TV Guide* (March 9, 1968), 20.

<sup>444</sup> *The Andy Griffith Show*, “A Stranger in Town,” Season 1, Episode 12, originally aired December 26, 1960 by CBS. Directed by Don Weis, written by Arthur Stander.

<sup>445</sup> *The Andy Griffith Show*, “Runaway Kid,” Season 1, Episode 5, originally aired November 7, 1960. Directed by Don Weis, written by Arthur Stander.

represented yet another instance of the writers using colloquial phrasing as a way to lighten the serious mood in a scene.

In addition to using accents and colloquialisms as a counterpoint to serious scenes, writers often misused or mispronounced words for comedic effect. On *The Andy Griffith Show*, writers often reserved this device for Gomer Pyle or, more often, Barney Fife. Barney was a character seemingly full of unearned confidence who always struggled to demonstrate his talent and intellect. His misuse of the English language often served as proof that he lacked the very qualities he wanted to demonstrate.

In the case of *The Beverly Hillbillies*, the characters misused or did not understand relatively common terms due to their simplistic grasp of the language. For example, in an episode in which the Clampetts were sued for damages supposedly inflicted in a car accident, the judge takes Jed Clampett aside and over the course of their conversation, refers to him as the defendant. Jed has to ask the judge to define the word before he can continue the conversation. He subsequently expresses confusion over the language in the court summons he received and does not understand its implications. It is not until the episode is nearly over that the Clampetts even understand that they are on trial.<sup>446</sup> Such incidents demonstrate the Clampetts' near-complete ignorance of the world around them. Jed's ignorance of basic legal terms and his lack of recognition as to his own status in the courtroom either indicates that he and his family come from a place so remote that they, nor anyone they know, have knowledge of how the American justice system works., or that they are simply too stupid to understand it.

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<sup>446</sup> *The Beverly Hillbillies*, "The Clampetts in Court," Season 1, Episode 32, originally aired May 1, 1963. Directed by Richard Whorf, written by Paul Henning.

Another tactic was to place the rural comedy characters into situations in which they played or were perceived against type. This was a common approach in comedy used previously on many other types of shows. What is telling about the way it was used in rural comedy, however, is the situations that the characters were placed in for comedic value. *The Andy Griffith Show* was notorious for using Barney's social striving as a source of laughter. The plot device allowed Barney to try on numerous personas in his quest to become someone bigger and better than he actually was. In one episode, Barney, along with a number of other Mayberry townspeople, invested in a record company. The decision turns out to have been a smart one, and Barney became cocky about his entrepreneurial prowess. The episode's epilogue showed Barney kicking back in his chair at the office, impatiently puffing a cigar as he scans *The Wall Street Journal*.

The scene was played for a laugh, and implied that Barney was behaving like someone he was not; that Barney was not the type to sit around puffing on cigars and fret over the business section. Instead, Barney was a small-town sheriff's deputy who got lucky and was consequently trying on a new persona. The implication is that it is silly for small town people to attempt such affectations, as it goes against who they really are. Southern people do not read *The Wall Street Journal*, at least not in the rural comedies of the 1960s. In fact, the only character in a rural comedy with the potential to do so was Oliver Douglas of *Green Acres*, an urban transplant. Even then, the townspeople would have excused the habit as part of the man's eccentricity.

The entire premise of *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.* was based on playing a character against type. The idea of sweet, naïve, gaffe-prone Gomer from Mayberry as a member of the notoriously disciplined Marine Corps opened up a world of humorous possibilities.

Even as the concept was introduced, in the fourth season finale of *The Andy Griffith Show* when Gomer abruptly marches into the Mayberry courthouse and sings the first verse of the Marines' Hymn, complete with drawled lyrics and exaggerated marching, it was clear Gomer had made an odd choice. His child-like exuberance and naiveté were at odds with the rigidity of a Marine, so seeing him attempt to behave as one was discombobulating.<sup>447</sup> The rest of the series hinged upon Gomer trying, and rarely being able, to live up to Marine standards.

Gomer's superiors constantly excused errors and incompetency that would have been inexcusable in a real Marine. In one episode, Gomer, tasked with picking up a box of cigars for a superior, ends up taking a detour to the airport and somehow ends up on a flight to Rome. Instead of his superiors charging him with disobeying an order or court-martialing him for going AWOL, Gomer manages to evade punishment by bringing back a box of cigars superior to the ones he was sent to procure. Gomer's actions, even though they were wildly irresponsible, were perceived as him going beyond the call of duty to make his superior happy.<sup>448</sup> Although such hijinks were humorous and clearly the audience enjoyed them enough to propel the show into the Top 10, they also made it readily apparent that Gomer had no business being in the Marines. That Gomer was the only character with a southern accent, a pronounced drawl so exaggerated as to be hardly understood, tacitly implied that the southern boy was uniquely unequipped to do his job.

Television writers and producers used southern colloquialisms, purposely misused English, and liberally indulged in southern stereotypes for humorous purposes, and to that

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<sup>447</sup> *The Andy Griffith Show*, "Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.," Season 4, Episode 32, originally aired May 18, 1964 on CBS. Directed and written by Aaron Ruben.

<sup>448</sup> *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.*, "The Jet Set," Season 1, Episode 27, originally aired March 26, 1965 on CBS. Directed by Alan Rafkin, written by Ben Joelson and Art Baer.

end they were successful. Southerners either did not mind or did not notice the negative side of how rural comedy portrayed them because the shows were funnier and generally more positive than treatment they received from other media outlets, namely the news organizations. There were enough people outside of the South who enjoyed the humor in shows like *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *The Andy Griffith Show* enough to keep them in the Top 10 programs for the entirety of their run. While the timeless humor displayed in rural comedy had an anesthetizing effect on an audience in the midst of a decade of profound upheaval, those same programs were able to achieve that effect through the use of demeaning stereotypes that diminished the characters to the point that their audiences could easily look down upon them. By extension, the audience could also look down on what, and who, those shows represented.

## Chapter 5. Rural Comedy and the South as a Scapegoat for Racism

The previous chapter addressed the varying appeal that rural comedies held for American audiences in the 1960s. For southerners, shows like *The Real McCoys* and *The Beverly Hillbillies* provided a positive portrayal of southern people in contrast to the near-constant images of southern violence shown on the news. For the rest of the country, rural comedies had an anesthetic effect that was based partly on their ability to invoke nostalgia as well as their ability to conveniently ignore or gloss over troubling aspects of the present. Slightly more troubling was that part of the allure for non-southerners lay in the shows' willingness to portray characters in such a way that left viewers feeling more secure in their own intellectual and socioeconomic status. A final, more abstract, aspect of rural comedies that made them appealing to viewers deserves some examination. While the studios argued that the racial homogeneity on rural programs was a result of southern preferences, a closer examination of the record indicates that the preferences were more likely a symptom of the systematic racism that still pervaded the entertainment industry, to say nothing of the desires of white viewers nationwide.

Every rural sitcom in the 1960s not only had a core cast of white characters, but they also lacked diversity even in supporting and non-speaking roles. At the beginning of the rural trend in the early 1960s, this arrangement was not unusual. By the mid-1960s, however, the NAACP and other African-American interest groups had agitated enough that most networks made at least superficial changes in their racial policies. In the early 1960s, the networks eased into re-integrating the airwaves by hiring a token black

reporter for their news divisions.<sup>449</sup> There was an unspoken rule that there could only be one black reporter or anchor per station. Veteran reporter Ed Bradley recalled that when he worked for WCBS in New York in the late 1960s, the station hired a second African-American. The decision was controversial enough that that station manager felt obliged to call Bradley into his office to assure him that he was not getting fired- the station had decided to break protocol and hire a second black man.<sup>450</sup> The Bradley incident demonstrates the degree to which racial tokenism pervaded the television industry in the early 1960s, when a company could not hire a second black employee without causing a minor scandal.

By 1965, each network had at least one show with an African-American main character and a few strategically placed minorities in their other shows. In contrast, rural comedy was far less diverse, and there are indications that the producers preferred it that way. Even when given the opportunity to add diversity to their formula, producers resisted. In 1968, when Andy Griffith was leaving his show and the producers of *The Andy Griffith Show* were looking to create a new spinoff, the original idea was to have an Italian family move to Mayberry and have the new show evolve around them. It was a fish out of water story similar to *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Green Acres*, but with the added bonus of familiar characters from *The Andy Griffith Show*.<sup>451</sup> Goober Pyle, Aunt Bee, and Howard Sprague would be series regulars, and Andy Griffith would occasionally guest star. Producers ultimately decided not to pursue the Italian family

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<sup>449</sup> “CBS Follows ABC Lead in Quest for Negro Newsmen,” *Variety* (September 5, 1962), 20.

<sup>450</sup> Interview with Ed Bradley, Part 2 of 8, Interview by Don Carleton, 12 May 2000 (Los Angeles, CA: Academy of Television Arts and Sciences), <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/ed-bradley>, accessed 3 November 2011.

<sup>451</sup> Richard Warren Lewis, “The Wheels Keep Turning,” *TV Guide* (July 20, 1968), 28.

concept, and instead made *Mayberry R.F.D.* about a white widower and his son, thus replicating the familiar, and racial, formula of *The Andy Griffith Show*. Although the producers may have chosen that scenario because it had worked in the past, it also ensured that Mayberry would remain populated entirely by Anglo-Saxons.<sup>452</sup>

Rural comedy's lack of diversity may have been a secret to what some considered their inexplicable popularity in the rest of the country. Television networks had consciously stayed away from minority actors since the Red Scare of the early 1950s.<sup>453</sup> Many of the steadily-employed African American actors in the entertainment industry had gotten caught up in the Red Channels debacle and been blacklisted for their involvement in civil rights organizations, which at the time were considered communist front groups. Television shows avoided casting African-American actors after the Red Scare for fear that viewers would continue to associate them with un-American causes. That was the networks' excuse, at least.

In reality, the lack of racial diversity on television was a reflection of the racism that most white Americans felt toward people of color in the mid-twentieth century. In earlier decades, that racial prejudice was voiced openly in popular culture. James T. Farrell's Studs Lonigan trilogy, released between 1932 and 1934, reflected class differences in Chicago, then a mecca for southern workers. Farrell's books, which were subsequently adapted as a 1960 movie and a 1979 NBC mini-series, ruminated on the flight of Irish-Americans from their old neighborhoods in an effort to escape the influx of

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<sup>452</sup> Until the mid twentieth century, Italian-Americans were not considered white and eugenicists often classed them differently from whites due to their darker skin. It was not until World War II that Italian-Americans were commonly classed as whites. For more information on the fluidity of whiteness in the twentieth century, see Matthew Frye Jacobsen's *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*.

<sup>453</sup> Silverman, "An Analysis of ABC Network Television Programming," 97.

African-Americans. According to Farrell, the ethnic whites of the region detested the new intruders, whom they considered little better than animals. Though Farrell's protagonist was attempting to escape that kind of small mindedness, the attitudes of his family and friends were a fairly accurate reflection of white working class anxiety over racial mixing.

Programs such as *Amos 'n' Andy*, also set in Chicago, attracted people who shared similar concerns. The show, both in its radio and television formats, attracted white viewers who had negative views toward African-Americans. Although a large number of African-Americans had physically left the South by the 1950s, whites could watch *Amos 'n' Andy* and dream of a world where blacks remained in the South mentally, still subservient and inferior to whites.<sup>454</sup> Given this mindset, it is unsurprising that *Amos 'n' Andy* maintained a large audience both inside of the South and out.

Non-southern liberals felt the South was practically a foreign country, while moderates and conservatives thought that it was slightly distinctive but essentially in line with the social mores of the rest of the country. Radical African-Americans, however, felt that whites outside of the South had no reason to feel morally superior to their southern counterparts, given that de facto segregation and discrimination existed everywhere in the country. Revolutionary black leader Malcolm X best summed up the feelings of frustrated African-American activists everywhere when he stated that "Mississippi is anywhere south of the Canadian border."<sup>455</sup> Not only did most northerners accept southern racial attitudes, but they also supported them. Studies of regional stereotypes

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<sup>454</sup> Ely, *The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy*, 135.

<sup>455</sup> Steven Lawson, *Running from Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in America since 1941* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 172.

done as late as the late 1950s by the United States Information Agency (USIA) indicated that even when people outside of the south held unfavorable attitudes toward southerners, those feelings only weakly correlated with their feelings on southern racism. Of the participants who had unfavorable feelings toward the south, thirty-nine percent of them supported segregation. Of those who felt favorably toward the south, forty-six percent supported segregation.<sup>456</sup> The findings suggested that while some northerners may have felt superior toward southerners, those feelings were rarely the result of southern racism.

Racism was a major concern for American politicians in the 1960s, and the government spent much time and effort trying to convince the rest of the world that the United States was making great strides toward eradicating discriminatory attitudes. The USIA, essentially a propagandistic organization, existed to improve the nation's image around the world and, because so many of the world's leaders were not white, addressing the race issue was paramount in establishing relationships. The USIA strived to portray racism as a strictly southern problem, and a forgivable one at that. The agency pointed to the region's long history with slavery, and white southerners' difficulties with overcoming the past. The agency even sent African-American members of the U.S. House of Representatives to foreign countries in order to combat negative propaganda about the state of American race relations, although those same representatives frequently met with resentment from their own peers in Congress.<sup>457</sup>

There were, however, many indicators that the USIA's claims were hollow. Throughout the late 1950s, public opinion of segregationist southern politicians remained positive. In the early 1960s, Louisiana politician and staunch segregationist Leander

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<sup>456</sup> Reed, *The Enduring South*, 22-23.

<sup>457</sup> Borstelman, *Cold War and the Color Line*, 96.

Perez became a figure of national repute. His fame, which stemmed solely from his staunch resistance to desegregation and the civil rights movement, earned him a front-page story in the *New York Times* and a portrait session with famed artist Richard Avedon. When CBS aired a documentary about Perez and his resistance to racial integration, the network received mail from all over the country supporting him.<sup>458</sup> Shortly thereafter, Alabama governor George Wallace made a shockingly strong showing nationwide in the 1964 presidential primaries. Despite Wallace's well-publicized attempt to prevent the desegregation of the University of Alabama by physically blocking African-American students from entering their classrooms, his supporters included many who were not from the south.<sup>459</sup> George Wallace continued to perform solidly on the national political stage throughout the 1960s. Even Barry Goldwater, a conservative politician from Arizona who had little personal experience with the modern civil rights movement, appealed to latent American racism by suggesting that perhaps African-American activists were asking for too much, too soon.<sup>460</sup> Goldwater's stance on civil rights represented a major change of heart, as he had advocated for the desegregation of the Arizona National Guard nearly two decades prior.<sup>461</sup>

American racism was so pervasive that it even managed to cause international incidents, many involving prominent members of the United Nations. In September 1960, both Nikita Khrushchev and Fidel Castro were in New York attending a meeting of the U.N. When Castro left his hotel in a posh part of the city and moved to another one in

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<sup>458</sup> Garry Boulard, *The Big Lie- Hale Boggs, Lucille May Grace, and Leander Perez in 1951* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing, 2001), 208.

<sup>459</sup> Borstelmann, *Cold War and the Color Line*, 206-207.

<sup>460</sup> Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 242.

<sup>461</sup> Hedley Donovan, "The Difficulty of Being Fair to Goldwater," *Life* (18 September 1964), 94.

historically black Harlem, Khrushchev arranged to meet with him there. The press had a field day, with television cameras capturing the leaders of two of America's biggest rivals, laughing on the street surrounded by black Americans. The image was a jarring contrast to the abounding whiteness of American television and the fact that affairs attended by American presidents tended to be racially homogenous. Indeed, both Khrushchev and Castro used the footage in their own countries as evidence of their willingness to socialize with African-Americans when supposedly democratically minded white Americans would not.<sup>462</sup> On August 30, 1964, a group of New Yorkers assaulted Youssef Gueye, the first secretary of the Permanent Mission of Mauritania for the United Nations, while he walked near his home. The attack on Gueye was just one of many well-publicized instances of racial discrimination and assault that non-white U.N. delegates experienced between New York and Washington D.C.<sup>463</sup> These assaults clearly demonstrated that, despite claims by the USIA, racial violence and discrimination was hardly a distinctively southern trait.

Following the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, worldwide concern about American racism dropped off drastically. The world took the law as a sign that the United States was serious about its stated commitment to civil rights, but the relief over the Civil Rights Act masked continued racial violence plaguing the nation.<sup>464</sup> When race riots broke out in major cities in the late 1960s, white Americans became even more intolerant of the civil rights movement. They thought that with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the

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<sup>462</sup> Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, 258.

<sup>463</sup> Dudziak, *Cold War, Civil Rights*, 229.

<sup>464</sup> *Ibid*, 235.

Voting Rights Act of 1965, the civil rights movement had achieved major victories and that racial problems had reached an end. When riots broke out, whites did not associate them with issues like systemic poverty and discrimination, but with crime. Northern racism reared its head and white citizens stormed the ghettos of Detroit, Baltimore, and Los Angeles proclaiming white supremacy.<sup>465</sup> Meanwhile, public opinion polls found that even as southern whites were beginning to loosen their attitudes toward racial segregation by the late 1960s, northern whites experienced a hardening in their own opinions about race, bringing the two regions into close alignment.<sup>466</sup> Richard Nixon used those attitudes to his advantage in the 1968 presidential election, preying on the covert racism in the north as well as the more overt southern version.<sup>467</sup> Even the FBI, the nation's highest enforcer of law and order, detested the civil rights movement and saw racial violence as proof of the innate subversive nature of the African-American.<sup>468</sup>

Racism was clearly a pervasive trait that permeated every level of American society and government, so it comes as no surprise that the television industry mirrored that mindset in its own practices. Because of the controversy created by the Red Scare and subsequent blacklist, minorities and African-Americans in particular had disappeared from television screens by the mid-1950s. The stigma against hiring African-Americans, far from just affecting those with jobs in front of the camera, carried into all aspects of the entertainment industry. African-Americans were virtually banned from all industry trade unions and comprised less than half of one percent of all unionized Hollywood

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<sup>465</sup> Borstelmann, *Cold War and the Color Line*, 207.

<sup>466</sup> Reed, *The Enduring South*, 3.

<sup>467</sup> Dudziak, *Cold War, Civil Rights*, 248.

<sup>468</sup> Borstelmann, *Cold War and the Color Line*, 208.

workers as late as 1964.<sup>469</sup> The few African-Americans allowed to join a union were often turned away from union jobs sometimes for openly racist reasons. One experienced stage manager, James Wall, applied for a job at CBS in the 1950s and was told that, despite his vast and coveted experience working on both Broadway and television productions, the studio did not “think it’s time to put a Negro in that position.” CBS would not hire a black stage manager for several more years, and Wall himself did not get the job he wanted at CBS for more than a decade.<sup>470</sup>

Even the entertainment industry unions that did admit African-American workers were averse to allowing more than one or two men of different races to join their ranks. When the sole black member of the camera operators union pressed his leaders about allowing more African-American workers in, he was told “you’re our guy and that’s enough.” Black union members felt that they were allowed into their respective unions to prove a point, and that they were welcomed as long as they did not stir trouble or try to recruit any other members of their race. Their union membership certainly did not prevent African-American television crew members from the occasional aggressive displays they were subjected to on set from white cast and crew.<sup>471</sup>

Like the entertainment industry unions, television networks also had unspoken rules about race that applied to their hiring process. CBS, again, was among the worst

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<sup>469</sup> Richard Gehmen, “Black and White TV: Opportunities-Limited,” *TV Guide* (27 June 1964), 18.

<sup>470</sup> Interview with James Wall, Part 5 of 9, Interview by Michael Rosen on 21 October 1999 (Los Angeles: Academy of Television Arts and Sciences), <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/james-wall>, accessed 26 October 2011.

<sup>471</sup> Interview with Joseph Wilcots, Part 2 of 4, Interview by Gary Rutkowski, 5 December 2007 (Los Angeles: Academy of Television Arts and Sciences), <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/joseph-m-wilcots>, accessed 26 October 2011.

offenders. According to one woman at the network's personnel office, African-Americans were eligible for all jobs at the network, except for receptionist positions or any job that required face-to-face contact with a client. CBS referred to this practice as "diplomatic hiring."<sup>472</sup> Mirroring the reasoning for maintaining racial homogeneity in front of the camera, the network ostensibly practiced diplomatic hiring in their offices for the benefit of its southern advertisers.

Given the locations of the major advertisers, however, adhering to southern racial mores should not have been a vital concern. Although a few major advertisers, such as R.J. Reynolds and the other tobacco companies, were headquartered in the South, the vast majority of television's biggest advertisers, such as Kraft, Palmolive, and Alcoa, were mostly headquartered in New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and New Jersey. Although the networks may have used diplomatic hiring in the interest of keeping the few lucrative southern advertisers it had, the relationship between network and advertiser was not one-way. Advertisers also had much to gain from maintaining good relationships with the networks. If the networks had decided to hire African-American personnel and the majority of advertisers did not object to the practice, southern advertisers would have to go along or risk the loss of what was becoming their most effective advertising tool. It is therefore possible that the use of diplomatic hiring, despite the lack of advertisers and clients in regions typically considered hotbeds of racism, indicates that the networks may have used the racial mores of a small percentage of clients as an excuse to utilize racist business practices.

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<sup>472</sup> Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, 207.

The lack of racial diversity in jobs that were out of the view of clients supports the theory that networks were blaming “southern standards” for their own racism. One exposé of racism in the television industry found that there were only a few black executives working in television in the early 1960s. Even those few, who were grateful for their opportunities, were making half the salary of men who had been in the industry for far shorter periods of time.<sup>473</sup> The expose demonstrated that while some opportunities existed for African-Americans in the entertainment industry, they were extremely limited and the equality of opportunity was lacking.

Although the networks blamed their racial policies on southern advertisers, the northern advertisers, which were far more prevalent, were no more diverse than their southern counterparts. According to one executive in the advertising industry, most people in advertising personally held liberal racial views but had to behave conservatively because of their clients. Unwillingness to project the morals of the clients could lead to firing, so fear drove the advertisers’ behavior. Despite the declarations of personal racial liberalism from advertising executives, however, the problem was not limited to allowing African-Americans in front of the camera. The agencies themselves maintained very racist hiring practices well into the 1960s. In 1963, the top ten advertising agencies in New York City employed only eleven African-Americans out of a total of 23,600 employees.<sup>474</sup> Whether these few were employed in a menial capacity or in some position of authority is unclear. Four years of aggressive campaigning by the National Urban League for further hires in the advertising industry led to only a single

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<sup>473</sup> Richard Gehman, “Black and White Television,” *TV Guide* (20 June 1964), 21.

<sup>474</sup> “Urban League Hits New York Agencies on Racial Discrimination in Employment,” *Advertising Age* (22 April 1963), 96.

additional hire.<sup>475</sup> In one particularly embarrassing episode, employees at Young and Rubicam dropped water balloons on black protesters decrying the agency's discriminatory hiring practices. The incident was incendiary enough to warrant an article in the *New York Times*, shedding a national light on the advertising industry's abysmal record with discrimination.<sup>476</sup> As late as 1968, one industry insider lamented that compared with similar industries like banking or insurance, "our record is not even average. We are bringing up the rear."<sup>477</sup>

The racist worldview held by the advertising agencies seeped into their handling of television advertisements. While advertisers in the late 1950s and early 1960s were becoming increasingly aware of African-American buying power, they were loathe to capitalize on that information for fear of the impact it would have on white viewers. Sammy Davis, Jr. elaborated further: "sponsors are afraid of what the public reaction would be. They're afraid nobody will buy their stuff if a Negro's selling it."<sup>478</sup> It was not just a matter of using black actors to sell products; it was also an issue of advertising products on shows that catered to non-white viewers. It was a lesson that advertisers learned the hard way. When ABC and NBC both aired documentaries about the civil rights movement in the early 1960s, they found advertisers unwilling to pay the normal primetime rates and ultimately sold the time at a steeply discounted rate.<sup>479</sup> Subsequent

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<sup>475</sup> Ibid.

<sup>476</sup> John Kifner, "Poverty Pickets Get Paper Bag Dousing on Madison Avenue," *New York Times* (May 28, 1966), 1.

<sup>477</sup> Philip H. Dougherty, "Negroes' Job Lag in Ad World Hit," *Advertising Age*, Jan. 22, 1968.

<sup>478</sup> Richard Gehmen, "Black and White TV: Opportunities- Limited," *TV Guide*, 16.

<sup>479</sup> Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, 327.

programming dedicated to the civil rights movement was relegated to Sunday morning talk shows, long considered the television “ghetto,” and even then, all of the advertisements shown during those programs featured white actors.<sup>480</sup> Some local affiliates refused to air any programs on racial issues, citing concerns about boycotts and other demonstrations, despite there being no record of a successful boycott against a business that supported fair racial policies.<sup>481</sup> Though African-Americans comprised more than ten percent of the population, coverage of issues that pertained to them as a group was virtually nonexistent. Whether television executives felt personal prejudices or not, they provided programming based on what they perceived to be the needs of both advertisers and the majority of viewers. They made it clear through ratings and advertising dollars that what they needed did not include people of color.<sup>482</sup>

Advertisers did not want their product associated with African-Americans and the civil rights movement, no matter how much they may have supported the cause personally. When sports became a viable programming option in the 1960s, advertising executives pushed for time on sports programs that catered to whites, such as golf. Advertisers were convinced that even though golf appealed to a relatively small segment of the population, the people who enjoyed the sport were the “right” people, meaning white and upwardly mobile. In response to clamoring advertising agencies, networks over-programmed golf tournaments. Meanwhile, advertisers eschewed sponsoring sports programs that typically drew non-white audiences, such as basketball. The networks

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<sup>480</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>481</sup> Joseph L. Brechner, “Broadcasting and Racial Issues,” *Television Quarterly* 5:2 (Spring 1966): 8-9.

<sup>482</sup> Ibid, 7.

responded by avoiding basketball programming whenever possible, even though it was much more popular in the ratings.<sup>483</sup> In the minds of the both advertisers and the networks, African-Americans were the wrong kind of viewer, and their business was not considered important enough to risk losing white viewers.

For the most part, the FCC and the Nielsen rating company did not take issue with the television industry's racist practices and supported them in some cases. In the south, African-American programming was not even accepted for local affiliate stations, resulting in a purely white television experience. The FCC took the region's racial mores for granted and as a result did not do anything to assist African-American television producers who wanted their shows on air. In 1964, Reverend Everett C. Parker of Jackson, Mississippi took action by tape-recording the content on his city's two television stations, and then asked the FCC not to renew the station licenses based on the recorded content. Parker pointed out that although African-Americans comprised forty-five percent of the city's viewership, they were virtually ignored by the local television stations. Parker demonstrated that the stations also ignored or eliminated news about the civil rights movement and ongoing desegregation efforts, indicating that citizens both white and black received a distorted picture of vital issues. Because such large segments of the population were ignored and important national news stories were intentionally overlooked, Parker made a case that the stations were not fulfilling their responsibility to serve the public interest.<sup>484</sup> Reverend Parker's actions created a public stir about the dearth of black programming on television, causing the FCC to finally acknowledge the

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<sup>483</sup> Brown, *Television*, 64.

<sup>484</sup> Robert B. Horwitz, "Broadcast Reform Revisited: Reverend Everett C. Parker and the "Standing" Case (Office of Communication of the United Church of Christ v. Federal Communications Commission)," *The Communication Review* 2:3 (1997), 5.

problem. Even after being confronted with the pervasive racism in the southern local television affiliate, the FCC still declined to hold hearings on the matter and renewed the licenses of the offending stations. Reverend Parker subsequently resorted to filing a lawsuit in order to reverse the trend of white-only programming.<sup>485</sup>

Parker's struggle is indicative of American views on racially homogenous television. While individually confessing personal racial liberalism, in official groupings those same individuals reject the possibility of change. Officials at the FCC, upon becoming aware that black Mississippians craved programming that reflected or at least acknowledged their existence, had the authority to investigate Parker's charges, hold hearings, and potentially revoke the offending stations' licenses. Instead, the agency did nothing to rectify the inequities clearly laid out before them. Though a federal body supposedly above the political fray, the commission sided with existing racist policies instead of using the issue as a stepping stone toward more equality in television programming. Judging from their actions, officials at the FCC did not feel any moral compunction to use their positions to promote social change. It was far easier to maintain the racist status quo.

For its part, the Nielsen ratings company also took American racism for granted and catered to the entertainment industry's acceptance of those racial mores. Its pattern of racism extended to its business practices throughout the nation, not just in the south. The company, which accrued its statistics by placing viewing diaries in twenty-two hundred homes, did not solicit or accept research from African-American homes. The company prided itself on the diversity of the homes it used to gather information, but their concept

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<sup>485</sup> Ibid, 8.

of diversity included income, education, and region.<sup>486</sup> Racial diversity was not a priority. The lack of Nielsen ratings for black families meant that both their viewing choices and subsequent post-viewing participation in advertisement-led consumerism were virtually unquantifiable. Because statistics on black viewership and consumerism did not exist, black preferences never figured into any discussion of demographics, programming, or selective advertising. The lack of Nielsen Company statistics for African-American viewers not only meant a dearth of national programming for people of color, it also meant that the few African-American shows on local affiliate stations had a difficult time remaining on air. Because the programs catered to black audiences, and there were virtually no Nielsen diaries in black homes, black programs were consistently low-rated regardless of how many people tuned in.<sup>487</sup>

With the entertainment industry and all of its offshoots so mired in racism, it is not surprising that programming itself mirrored those social standards. By 1963, however, networks began including African-Americans as extras in crowd scenes and occasionally included peripheral black characters in their programs. The same year, CBS debuted *East Side, West Side*, a drama series set in an inner city ghetto. The show, about social workers doing community outreach, starred George C. Scott as a social worker and Cicely Tyson as his boss. In addition to having a regular black female character, the show occasionally featured other black characters that were usually sympathetic. The show touched upon a number of controversial issues, and therefore had difficulty in finding sponsors, but its biggest problem was that the network president hated it. James Aubrey

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<sup>486</sup> Brown, *Television*, 34.

<sup>487</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

was uncomfortable with the show because of its setting. He regularly fought with the show's producer, David Susskind, and told him to "get that fucking show out of the ghetto" because "I'm sick of it, the public's sick of it, and it doesn't work. They've got just as big social problems on Park Avenue and that's where I want the show to be." Despite the fact that the show enjoyed a 33 share in its timeslot, a reasonable showing, Aubrey cancelled the show when Susskind refused to bow to his wishes.<sup>488</sup> It was a clear case of a show being canceled, not because it was too controversial, but because it was too black.

By 1965, the networks were making further attempts at diversifying their programs. NBC cast Bill Cosby in a starring role opposite Robert Culp on the adventure series *I Spy*, breaking a more than decade-long streak in which no African-Americans received lead roles on television. Though some southern affiliate stations refused to air the program, *I Spy* became so popular by its second season that most stations acquiesced in the face of potential advertising dollars.<sup>489</sup> *Mission: Impossible* premiered the following year and used a version of the *I Spy* casting formula by placing one African-American in a predominantly white cast. *Mission: Impossible*, like its predecessor, had strong enough ratings to force southern censors to lift restrictions on the program.

Despite the success of *I Spy* and *Mission: Impossible*, as well as the fact that African-Americans made up a sizeable portion of the viewing audience, people of color on network television remained a rarity. Executives often spoke of their efforts at

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<sup>488</sup> Metz, *CBS*, 228.

<sup>489</sup> Interview with Robert Culp, Part 5 of 6, Interview by Stephen J. Abramson, 6 November 2007 (Los Angeles, CA: Academy of Television Arts and Sciences), <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/robert-culp>, accessed 31 October 2011.

diversification, which directly contradicted statistics from the NAACP stating that there were no people of color in any high-level administrative or executive position at any network.<sup>490</sup> Some executives even denied that prejudice existed in the entertainment industry or that African-Americans ever experienced feelings of victimization due to discriminatory behavior. Others acknowledged that black actors were historically excluded from performing “in certain areas,” but then swore they had never seen segregation or discrimination in the business.<sup>491</sup>

In reality, network executives in the 1960s probably did worry about diversity, but in practice that meant varying the nationality of the white characters, not adding people of color to the mix. In one expose of racism in the television industry, several black actors spoke of parts written specifically for them, later re-cast with white actors. Others recalled directors explicitly saying they would consider black actors in the future for “strictly Negro parts,” such as slaves, porters, and other menial workers.<sup>492</sup> In another article about industry racism, a writer recounted an instance in which one top network executive specified that “no Chinese or Negroes” were used on his series.<sup>493</sup> When networks did hire people of color, they met with some pushback. When actress Ena Hartman made a guest appearance on the western *Bonanza*, the sponsor, General Motors threatened to pull its advertisements. Their excuse was that they sold cars in the South,

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<sup>490</sup> Gehmen, “Black and White Television,” *TV Guide*, 19.

<sup>491</sup> *Ibid*, 17-18.

<sup>492</sup> Gehmen, “Black and White TV: Opportunities Limited,” *TV Guide*, 18.

<sup>493</sup> Murray Schumach, “Like a Horse with Five Jockeys,” *TV Guide* (3 March 1962), 10.

but the company did not see a drop in its southern sales as a result of the episode in question.<sup>494</sup>

On the few shows that had black characters, their acting abilities were rarely put to the test. Nichelle Nichols, who played Uhura on the original 1960s *Star Trek* series, was one of the first women of color to play a role on television beyond that of a servant. She later recalled her resentment at the lack of character development and having to say the same throwaway lines week after week. She nearly quit in frustration, but ultimately realized that her presence on television, regardless of how small, was still a major advancement for the African-American community.<sup>495</sup> Nichols recalled in an interview for the PBS series *Pioneers of Television* that Martin Luther King, Jr. himself personally urged her to continue in the role.<sup>496</sup>

Even in instances like Nichols', when audiences accepted her presence on *Star Trek*, there were still exacting specifications when it came to what those characters could do. *Amos 'n' Andy* still had a nation-wide following in syndication in the 1960s, despite constant opposition to the program from black advocacy groups. The program specialized in the highly stereotyped portrayals of African-Americans that most Americans were comfortable with and used to seeing. Despite the show's decidedly old-fashioned take on the African-American community, Freeman Gosden, who had played Amos on the radio version of the show, expressed bafflement at the opposition. He thought that because the

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<sup>494</sup> Gehmen, "Black and White Television," *TV Guide*, 21; Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, 326-237.

<sup>495</sup> Interview with Dorothy Fontana, Part 3 of 7, Interview by Karen Herman, 29 December 2003 (Los Angeles, CA: Academy of Television Arts and Sciences), <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/dorothy-fontana>, accessed 2 November 2011.

<sup>496</sup> Mike Trinklein, Episode "Pioneers of Science Fiction" aired 18 January 2011. Directed by Steven Boettcher. Nichols went on to break other barriers when she shared television's first interracial kiss with William Shatner on the 22 November 1968 *Star Trek* episode "Plato's Stepchildren."

characters did not drink, gamble or allude to certain racial stereotypes such as the supposed African-American affinity for watermelon, that black activists had no reason for complaint.<sup>497</sup> Gosden shared his attitude of dismay with many in the audience. When *Amos 'n' Andy* was cancelled in 1966 because of increased pressure from NAACP and other advocacy groups, entertainment columnist Bob Thomas reported a huge public backlash all over the country.<sup>498</sup> When calls to revive the show met with vitriol from civil rights groups, one Chicago producer behind the reported remake lambasted the show's detractors for trying to "expunge folklore" and compared the uproar to the Nazis burning books in Germany.<sup>499</sup> The American people may have complained about an African-American woman on a western, but they were completely comfortable with the stereotypical portrayals offered on *Amos 'n' Andy*, which kept black people within the context that white viewers were most comfortable with, the ghetto. As long as black people remained in the ghetto, white Americans did not have to consider them in the context of their own world.

Even as it blazed the trail of supposed racial equality, *I Spy* had to follow the unspoken rules of racial interaction on television. Though Robert Culp later claimed that NBC was thrilled as the prospect of being the first adventure show with an African-American lead, the show's composer Earle Hagen remembered tension behind the scenes as Culp and producer Sheldon Leonard advocated for Bill Cosby's inclusion in the

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<sup>497</sup> June 14, 1961 column, Folder 9, Box 1, Bob Thomas Papers, Collection 299 Performing Arts Special Collection, University of California, Los Angeles.

<sup>498</sup> October 22, 1965 column, Bob Thomas Papers.

<sup>499</sup> *Time* (5 June 1964), 37.

show.<sup>500</sup> According to Hagen, the network worried that the premise of the show, two spies travelling the world, would mean that the two characters would have to share living space. NBC felt that showing interracial living spaces would be too much for some viewers.<sup>501</sup>

Once the show was on the air, writers and producers still had to contend with content problems. In terms of the show's action, the two actors received equal screen time and Cosby's character, Alexander Scott, was portrayed as the brains of the operation. In terms of personal relationships, however, Robert Culp's character, Kelly Robinson, got all the action. He moved from one woman to the next, while Scott always remained serious and focused on the job at hand. Scott never had romantic scenes and in contrast to his partner, rarely came into direct physical contact with women, especially white ones. In one first season episode "No Returns on Drugged Merchandise," the original ending had Cosby's character shooting a Russian villain in order to save his partner. NBC forced the writers to change the ending because they did not want to portray an African-American man killing a white man, despite the man being a Russian.<sup>502</sup> In the minds of NBC executives, it was clearly better to allow the communists to win than to violate the unspoken social code. It was a rare case of racism triumphing over Cold War-era nationalism.

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<sup>500</sup> Interview with Robert Culp; Interview with Earle Hagen, Part 7 of 10, Interview by Jon Burlingame, 17 November 1997 (Los Angeles: Academy of Television Arts and Sciences), <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/earle-hagen>, accessed 31 October 2011.

<sup>501</sup> Interview with Earle Hagen, Part 7 of 10.

<sup>502</sup> Interview with Garry Marshall, Part 3 of 6, Interview by Karen Herman, 28 August 2000 (Los Angeles: Academy of Television Arts and Sciences), <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/garry-marshall>, accessed 31 October 2011. Marshall wrote the episode under examination.

The unspoken rules were even more strict when involving interactions with white and black performers of different sexes. When black actress Leslie Uggams appeared on *Sing Along with Mitch*, host Mitch Miller recalled that NBC had no problem with her, but viewers kept them to a very strict level of interaction. When Miller casually put his arm around Uggams during one episode, letters of protest poured in. Each letter said essentially the same thing: “It’s such a good show, why do you have to ruin it by touching that black girl?”<sup>503</sup> Producer Henry Colman confirmed the strict terms of interaction, recalling one instance in which a CBS drama depicted a white man dancing with an African-American nurse. The scene caused so much furor that the network cut it. The cutting caused a scandal so large that the *New York Times* reported on it and called Colman asking for comments. Colman confirmed that although there were no written rules specifying proper interracial conduct, certain things were just not done.<sup>504</sup> In yet another instance, *Petula*, a run-of-the-mill musical variety special on NBC starring Petula Clark, veered into controversial territory after Clark touched and held Harry Belafonte’s arm during the taping of one of their duets. The show’s sponsor, Chrysler, tried to force Clark and Belafonte to perform another take without the touching, concerned that Clark’s familiarity with Belafonte would alienate viewers. Clark held firm, insisting that NBC either air the duet in its current iteration or scrap the entire special. Given the time and

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<sup>503</sup> Interview with Mitch Miller, Part 4 of 5, Interview by Karen Herman, 24 July 2004 (Los Angeles, CA: Academy of Television Arts and Sciences), <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/mitch-miller>, accessed 2 November 2011.

<sup>504</sup> Interview with Henry Colman, Part 5 of 7, Interview by Karen Herman, 16 March 2001 (Los Angeles, CA: Academy of Television Arts and Sciences), <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/henry-colman>, accessed 2 November 2011.

money invested in the endeavor, both Chrysler and NBC reluctantly put the controversial duet on the air.<sup>505</sup>

Of all the networks, CBS had the worst reputation for racism, a far cry from its early reputation as one of the most ethnically diverse networks. Even when CBS joined the other networks by adding a recurring black character to *Hogan's Heroes*, the character, Sergeant James "Kinch" Kinchloe, was only the sixth lead, meaning there were five cast members who rated a higher status than him in terms of billing, screen time, and recognition. Kinchloe did not even rate enough attention to appear in the show's publicity photographs. As late as 1969, when CBS aired the special "A Day in the Life of the United States," a reporter covering a story from an African-American neighborhood in Chicago referred to his location as a "nigger bar." The reporter himself was an African-American. Even in this rare instance of CBS televising a story about African-Americans, the story was negative. The story, about the black community's reaction to the moon landing, portrayed all of the citizens as indifferent; more concerned about drinking alcohol than feeling the sense of communal pride apparent in all of the white communities that the show featured.<sup>506</sup>

CBS for its part was not overly concerned with its recent track record of subtly racist programming and hiring policies. When a *TV Guide* reporter confronted Michael Dann, the network's head of programming, about the absence of African-Americans on CBS programs, Dann responded defensively, claiming that viewers who complained about the lack of racial diversity on his shows were asking him to be dishonest and to, for

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<sup>505</sup> Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny*, 180.

<sup>506</sup> Lynn Spigel, "White Flight," *The Revolution Wasn't Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin (New York: Routledge, 1997), 65-66.

diversity's sake, depict African-Americans in places they would not normally be. According to Dann, there were no African-Americans in New York City's 21 Club, and there were not any lounging around the swimming pools of Beverly Hills, and to claim there were for the sake of portraying a wider variety of races on television was to undermine a program's realism.<sup>507</sup>

In light of the fact that none of CBS' myriad rural and southern comedies reflected the racial reality of the South, Dann's explanation was paradoxical. Dann framed his argument in terms of the racial makeup of shows set outside of the South, but in the late 1960s, CBS was indisputably the king of the rural comedy, and that genre and its southern connections were closely associated with the network. If anything, southern locales would have provided an obvious opportunity to introduce African-American characters into a program. While African-Americans comprised approximately ten percent of the population of the United States, in the southern states their percentage of the population ranged between twenty and forty percent.

Despite the fact that one would have had a far higher chance of seeing an African-American in the South than any other part of their country, CBS' rural comedies remained completely white. There were no recurring African-American characters on any of the rural comedies, and there were rarely faces of color even among the extras. Each show maintained its lack of diversity for the remainder of its run, even the ones that aired into the early 1970s. One famous exception was the use of New York Giants football star Rockne Tarkington as Opie's football coach on *The Andy Griffith Show*. Tarkington's character, Flip Conroy, helps Opie overcome his fear of being bullied by his football

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<sup>507</sup> Martin Maloney, "Black is the Color of Our New TV," *TV Guide* (16 November 1968), 8.

teammates for taking piano lessons.<sup>508</sup> His character is a likeable and sympathetic figure in the episode, demonstrating to Opie that one could enjoy athletics while still enjoying more artistic pursuits, but his appearance on the program was an anomaly. The episode marked the third use of an African-American actor on the show and the only such instance involving a speaking part. The other two were background extras.

At the beginning of the rural comedy craze in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the lack of African-American faces seemed normal. However, as more producers incorporated black actors into their shows, the rural comedy's avoidance of the issue became more conspicuous. According to producer Aaron Ruben, who worked on both *The Andy Griffith Show* and *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.* in addition to numerous specials featuring the lead actors of those two shows, the choice not to use black actors became a conscious one. Ruben stated that Andy Griffith had no issue with the use of black actors on his show, but the producers frowned upon the idea. The logic was that television, and rural comedies in particular, were supposed to evoke a nostalgic and even utopian quality. They were supposed to represent a better version of reality; a Never-Never-Land. Just as the Vietnam War was not mentioned on *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.* because it destroyed the fantasy, Ruben felt that having black actors on his programs would jolt the viewers out their reverie. To Ruben and other producers, the presence of African-Americans, no matter how inauspicious, represented trouble. The American people equated black people with societal problems. By keeping the shows completely white,

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<sup>508</sup>*The Andy Griffith Show*, "Opie's Piano Lesson," Season 7, Episode 26. Originally aired 13 March 1967 on CBS. Directed by Lee Phillips, written by Leo Townsend and Pauline Townsend.

Ruben says the shows stayed “safe, nice, no riots, no problems.”<sup>509</sup> It was a viewpoint clearly shared by his fellow producers, as all of the other CBS rural comedies remained as white as Ruben’s throughout the 1960s.

Ruben made these claims late in life, but he made no excuses for them and acknowledged that were he making the same shows today, he would make different decisions. His excuse was that the shows were produced before the civil rights movement.<sup>510</sup> The civil rights movement, however, was well under way by the time *The Andy Griffith Show* aired in 1960, and was at its height during the rural comedy craze. Agitation from African-American interest groups during the civil rights movement played a significant role in convincing the other networks to include black actors on their shows, which aired during the same time frame as the rural comedies in question. Ruben’s reasoning also does not explain why the rural comedies continued to make racist casting decisions long after the civil rights movement had passed. With the exception of the *The Real McCoys* and *The Andy Griffith Show*, every CBS rural comedy remained on the air into the 1970s. Even *The Andy Griffith Show* still existed in a different iteration, *Mayberry R.F.D.* Not one of six CBS rural comedies on the air as of 1970 had a single African-American character, recurring or otherwise.

Actors and producers often point to the South as the reason why their shows neglected to add African-American actors to their cast. When asked about troubles faced by the *I Spy* production team in the mid 1960s, Robert Culp pointed to angry letters from

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<sup>509</sup> Aaron Ruben, Part 5 of 10, Interview by Morrie Gelman, 25 February 1999 (Los Angeles, CA: Academy of Television Arts and Sciences), <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/aaron-ruben>, accessed 7 November 2011.

<sup>510</sup> Ibid.

southern viewers, and the fact that some southern stations initially refused to play the show.<sup>511</sup> Mitch Miller claimed he received similar letters from the South in response to his interaction with Leslie Uggams on *Sing Along with Mitch*.<sup>512</sup> Recalling instances of southern anger against the use of black actors on television served as an all-purpose excuse for not casting them. No one could refute that the South contained many virulently racist white television viewers who chafed at the idea of watching black actors interacting with whites. It was better to keep things safely white than risk offending those viewers.

Hollywood, however, had long realized that capturing the southern market was not crucial to success in either film or television. The movie industry had kowtowed to southern preferences in its early decades, believing that because thirty percent of movie theaters were in the south, that southerners would make or break a movie. That myth was busted in 1949, with the release of *Intruder in the Dust*. The film, based on a book by William Faulkner, was about a black farmer wrongfully accused of killing a white man who is ultimately exonerated thanks to the help of an elderly white woman and two white teenage boys. The subject matter would normally have made it off limits for film, but Faulkner won a Nobel Prize for literature that same year and his work was becoming very popular nationally. *Intruder in the Dust* went on to have a very successful run in the box office, spanning well into 1950 despite the refusal of some southern theaters to show the

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<sup>511</sup> Interview with Robert Culp, Part 7 of 10.  
<http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/earle-hagen>, accessed 31 October 2011.

<sup>512</sup> Interview with Mitch Miller, Part 4 of 5.  
<http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/mitch-miller>, accessed 2 November 2011.

movie.<sup>513</sup> From that point on, Hollywood became increasingly less concerned with the preferences of southern audiences, preferring instead to grab major profits from movies that portrayed the violence and gritty intensity of southern race relations.

Television producers took heed of that lesson in the early days of the medium and eagerly put African-Americans on their shows, but they quickly reverted back to the safety of all-white casts following the Red Scare and its subsequent blacklist. Reverting to all-white casting seemed practical for not only avoiding connections to actors with possibly radical political backgrounds, but it assured the southern viewers who were just coming into the market that television was a safe pastime for them to indulge in. By the 1960s, however, the controversial ties to civil rights groups that had gotten so many African-American actors blacklisted were no longer considered proof of communist sympathies. The networks caved to the intense pressure brought by black advocacy groups, and they found that most white audiences would tolerate black characters, even slightly aggressive ones like *I Spy*'s Alexander Scott. Yet the networks still supposedly cowered at the thought of offending racist white southerners with images of black characters.

With the creation of the rural comedy, network television producers found a way to skirt the issue. The programs were calculated to appeal to a southern audience, with their hick themes allowing race to be subordinated while also allowing the region's quirkiness and warmth to shine through. Shows like *The Andy Griffith Show* and *Petticoat Junction* were not about the complexities and struggles of small-town southern life, but the joys of that world. Racial strife had no place in such an environment. While

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<sup>513</sup> Kirby, *Media-Made Dixie*, 99.

the shows pulled in the rural and southern audiences with its highly idealized version of their world, Americans in other parts of the country were potentially drawn by not only the shows' nostalgia for the "good ol' days," but also by the show's almost stubborn commitment to maintaining an entirely white cast. They did not have to worry about any "special" episodes that would address real world issues, or risk seeing an African-American causing trouble or interacting with a white person in any controversial manner. Yet when questioned about the whiteness of rural comedy, the blame easily shifted to southern racism.

Recent studies show that there may have been an instinctual element to whites and their seeming preference for these shows in the 1960s. One researcher from Indiana University ran a study in which he showed groups of white students a movie synopsis along with a mock poster and got them to gauge how likely they were to see the movie. The synopsis remained the same for each group but the movie poster was changed subtly so that while the composition of the photograph stayed the same, the race of the cast varied. Some participants saw a poster with an all-white cast, some saw a poster with a mixed-race cast, and others saw an all-black cast. The results indicated that the whiter the cast, the more likely the students would see the movie.<sup>514</sup>

While the study is about white preferences in movies, its general conclusions apply to television, and indicate that white audiences subconsciously prefer visual entertainment that contains predominantly white actors. The networks' programming choices in the 1960s indicate awareness that their audiences had similar inclinations to the test groups in the study. In utilizing rural comedy, the networks, and CBS in

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<sup>514</sup> Andrew Weaver, "The Role of Actors' Race in White Audiences' Selective Exposure to Movies," *Journal of Communication* 61: 2 (April 2011), 369-385.

particular, found a genre that not only had the effect of subverting race in favor of emphasizing the hilarity and quirkiness of rural life, making them appealing to southerners, but also one in which racial homogeneity was intrinsic to maintaining the genre's safe and nostalgic tone. Viewers could watch the shows safe in the knowledge that they would be racially homogenous. If the NAACP or any other African-American interest group complained about the programs' glaring whiteness, viewers and the network could easily point toward southern racial conventions as the reason, not their own prejudices. However, by claiming to bow to southern racial standards and maintaining all-white casts long past the point when it was expected, the networks were tacitly giving those cultural values their seal of approval.

## Chapter 6. Smothers Brothers, Quality Demographics, and the Rural Safety Net

In the mid-to-late 1960s, CBS' five remaining half-hour rural comedies continued to have reasonably high ratings. Whether because the programs served as a mudsill to make viewers feel better about themselves, as a slice of Americana triggering nostalgia for simpler times and stronger morals, or as safe place where white viewers could guarantee a world populated solely by white characters, people continued to watch the shows in the face of ever-strengthening social unrest. The programs rarely gave any hint of the troubled world in which the viewers lived. Despite the escalation of the Vietnam War, anti-war protests, the burgeoning women's movement, and the radicalization of the civil rights movement that marked the late 1960s, rural comedy continued to flourish as an oasis of calm. Never before had there been such disconnect between real life and the world of television.

By the end of the decade, however, a change occurred in how the networks perceived shows like *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Green Acres*, and *Petticoat Junction*. The networks began realizing the strategic importance of analyzing the demographic composition of its audience. Since the beginning of television in the 1940s, the networks had, to a certain extent, understood the importance of demographics, but held firmly to the notion that it was more important to get a large number of viewers than to target any specific audience. NBC, in particular, had been analyzing demographic data since 1953. By the late 1960s, the network was convinced that changing strategies from least objectionable programming to targeted programming was the wave of the future.<sup>515</sup>

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<sup>515</sup> Alvey, "Too Many Kids and Old Ladies," *Screen*, 45.

As early as 1963, NBC, bolstered by its research on demographics, publicly ridiculed CBS' reliance on rural comedy. While CBS gloated that its rural comedies were top-rated and commanded viewers all over the country, NBC, the perennial runner up in the ratings, claimed that the CBS lead was misleading. In NBC's estimation, CBS' rural comedies were only popular in upper income households because children were controlling the dial. NBC's assertions had the backing of research from the A.C. Nielsen Company. In the company's analysis of audience composition, no program genre available during primetime hours attracted more children and teenagers than situation comedy. Children between the ages of two and eleven comprised an average of twenty-six percent of the sitcom audience, and teens twelve to seventeen comprised eleven percent. Conversely, the Nielsen demographic data showed that adult men and women were far less likely to watch a situation comedy. They averaged sixty-three percent of the sitcom audience, which might seem like a high number except that in the dramatic category, adults comprised as much as eighty-five percent of the audience. In the later primetime hours, the ones with the smallest number of young viewers, sitcom viewership was at its lowest, indicating that many younger adults were only watching sitcoms in earlier hours because they were monitoring their children's viewing. The numbers clearly demonstrated that the sitcom was, by far, one of the least popular genres among adults.<sup>516</sup> Nielsen's statistics indicated that although CBS produced high numbers with its primetime rural sitcoms, the viewers were not necessarily in a position to translate their viewing into sales for advertisers.

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<sup>516</sup> A.C. Nielsen Co., *Nielsen Television '66* (Chicago, IL: A.C. Nielsen Company), 13.

NBC executives claimed that the ratings for its dramatic shows were more reliable because even though the audience was smaller, the mature content would guarantee that adults comprised the majority of the viewership. More important, the network felt that smart writing and socially relevant subject matter would attract an audience comprised of upper middle class professionals who had the money to buy the items that they saw advertised in the commercials. NBC particularly wanted to attract the wealthier demographic, who watched television less than the average viewer and was generally more discerning, but had more disposable income to spend on the products advertised.<sup>517</sup> The wealthiest viewers were also nearly twice as likely to have a second television set than the middle or lower classes, so there was the potential for NBC to get the parents' attention with a highbrow drama while the kids watched their programming in another room.<sup>518</sup> NBC felt they could afford to lose those less valuable viewers in an effort to win over the household breadwinners. NBC initially overestimated the value of its strategy, however; the network cancelled many of the quality shows in question in their first seasons because of low ratings.<sup>519</sup>

The constant fear of low ratings and series cancellations made networks and advertisers slow to accept the importance of targeted demographics. As late as the 1966-1967 season, if an advertiser had to choose between buying time on a highly rated lowbrow comedy like *The Beverly Hillbillies* or on a quality drama that rated last in its

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<sup>517</sup> A.C. Nielsen Company, *Nielsen Television '66*, 9. According to the Nielsen Company, the wealthiest viewers watched 40.44 hours of television per week in contrast to middle class viewers, who watched twelve percent more, or 45.27 hours. However, primetime viewing comprised sixty-one percent of total viewing for wealthy viewers; four percent higher than middle class viewers.

<sup>518</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>519</sup> Alvey, "Too Many Kids and Old Ladies," 47-48.

time slot but had an audience full of upper middle class consumers, the advertiser usually went with the former. Despite NBC's gloating over its cutting-edge, demographic-aimed programming and quality audiences, its programming executives remained somewhat attached to the old "lowest common denominator" system. When one of its spaghetti westerns beat a highbrow program on another network, NBC executives still crowed over its success despite the show's lowly pedigree. Years later, after demographic targeting became a standard in the television industry, NBC was still not above snapping up its rival's leftovers after CBS dropped older but highly rated shows in favor of more risqué fare.<sup>520</sup>

Although NBC's smug attitude over the quality audience of its poorly rated dramas thinly masked the network's insecurity about its chronic second place in the ratings, their argument for paying attention to who was watching, rather than just how many, had real substance. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, CBS maintained a stranglehold on television ratings, always beating its competition by a healthy margin. The network had based that claim to supremacy on the data compiled by ratings companies Nielsen and Trendex. Nielsen was a random selection of viewers from all over the country and therefore an indicator of a show's overall success, and Trendex measured viewership exclusively in urban areas. Although all of the networks used these ratings as a barometer of success, the systems had limitations as an indicator of successful programming. Nine of the ten cities measured by Trendex were on the East Coast; Chicago was the only exception. The service did not measure any cities west of the

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<sup>520</sup> NBC picked up *The Red Skelton Show*, one of the oldest and most outdated programs on television, after CBS cancelled it in 1970. NBC then cancelled the show after two seasons. Alvey, "Too Many Kids and Old Ladies," 52.

Mississippi River. As for the Nielsen ratings, the diary system it used necessarily excluded the illiterate, and the company made no secret of the fact that its statistics severely under-represented African-Americans.<sup>521</sup> Although these two systems measured viewership in different ways, they still provided a flawed picture of how Americans spent their television viewing time.

During the 1960s, networks became increasingly aware of how skewed the ratings systems were, and they took measures to correct their programming strategies accordingly. One strategy employed by the networks was to re-evaluate the merits of so-called “quality programming,” or shows with strong character development and complex story lines that dealt with contemporary sociopolitical issues in a thoughtful manner. Rather than distracting the viewer from the real world, quality programming sought to engage the viewer in current events and controversies. Networks had supposedly abandoned quality programming in the 1950s, making it a casualty of the Red Scare and the blacklisting of some of the entertainment industry’s most prolific and socially concerned writers. For more than a decade, the networks had long avoided complex and socially relevant programming because it had a tendency to attract controversy and complaints from viewers looking for mindless entertainment. Although these programs, which dealt with issues such as poverty, the impact of war, and racism, did not appeal to a broad segment of the population, they did appeal to the young and affluent viewers sought by advertisers. As the rating systems changed in the 1960s to more clearly

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<sup>521</sup> Les Brown, *Television*, 60.

quantify who was watching what shows, heads of programming for the networks saw it as the beginning of a new era: that of the selective viewer.<sup>522</sup>

For NBC, relevance meant the introduction of more African-American characters and shows. Such programs held some appeal for well-heeled, urban viewers who did not feel threatened by a racially mixed cast of characters, and had the added advantage of supplicating civil rights protesters. In addition to the successful action/adventure series *I Spy*, the network added *Julia* to its lineup in 1968. Starring Diann Carroll as the titular character, *Julia* was the first television program to have an African-American female star since *Beulah*, which went off the air in 1953. It was also the first program to feature a black woman in a non-stereotypical role. Creator Hal Kanter created the show specifically in response to concerns raised at a meeting with Roy Wilkins of the NAACP. Wilkins explained to him just how under-represented African-Americans were on television, inspiring Kantor to create a show that not only made use of the available pool of untapped talent but also appealed to a previously ignored viewing audience.<sup>523</sup> *Julia* was about a nurse and widowed mother who lost her husband in the Vietnam War. Far from the comedic and subservient roles often inhabited by black actors in the 1950s, the role of Julia was a serious and thoughtful one. Julia represented a major step forward in terms of NBC's willingness to portray non-white culture on television.

At the same time, Flip Wilson made a splash as a recurring guest on *Rowan and Martin's Laugh In*, an ultra-modern variety show that featured the cast delivering a series

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<sup>522</sup> "Programming: At the Halfway Mark," *Time* (12 January 1968), 52.

<sup>523</sup> Interview with Hal Kanter, Part 4 of 6, Interview by Sam Denoff (Los Angeles, CA: Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, 1997), [www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/Hal-Kanter](http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/Hal-Kanter), accessed 17 January 2012.

of pithy one-liners interspersed with skits and musical performances. Wilson appeared eleven times on the series between 1968 and 1970 and was so popular that NBC gave him his own show in 1970. NBC's push to have more African-American performers yielded positive results in the ratings and some goodwill from the black community, and the other networks noticed. By 1968, a rumor circulated that CBS, in an effort to join the racial diversity trend, wanted to buy out Bill Cosby's contract with NBC and develop a show with him.<sup>524</sup>

The rumor about CBS buying out Billy Cosby's contract from NBC proved to be just that, as CBS adopted its own way of adjusting to the new emphasis on quality, well-heeled viewers over mere quantity. In a desperate attempt to reach out to young urban viewers and destroy the hold that NBC's *Bonanza* had over its Sunday night timeslot, CBS developed *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* as a mid-season replacement. At the time, Tom and Dick Smothers were a burgeoning comedic musical act making guest appearances on network variety shows while also touring the country in an effort to build their fan base. The Brothers had already helmed one show on CBS, the short-lived 1965-1966 sitcom *The Smothers Brothers Show*, and were eager for another opportunity. At the time, the brothers seemed like an ideal fit for CBS and its goals. Tom and Dick were white, clean-cut, and handsome young men who always wore their hair short and dressed neatly, yet were not afraid of using double entendres and making other risqué jokes in their performances. They were mild enough to appeal to the rural and older audiences, but also young and perceptive enough to pull in the 16 to 24 year olds who had generally turned away from television altogether. Nielsen research between 1965 and 1968

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<sup>524</sup> "Programming: Black on the Channels," *Time* (24 May 1968), 74.

consistently demonstrated that the older teenagers were a particularly difficult group to attract, comprising an average of eleven percent of the total audience.<sup>525</sup> Data indicated that they were even less likely to watch a variety program, since teenagers on average made up seven percent of that audience.<sup>526</sup> For the network, the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* not only provided a chance to attract a new market, the show also signaled the possibility of reacquainting a new generation with the variety show concept. CBS considered them a bridge for the generation gap between baby boomers and their parents, leading critics to refer to the Smothers brothers as “hippies with haircuts.”<sup>527</sup>

*The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* represented a departure in the way that CBS utilized young people in its programming lineup. Up until 1967, CBS had used young characters in an attempt to attract viewers, but never in a way that reflected the life of the modern young person. The network instead used them within the context of rural comedies and westerns. These genres provided very limited and generic ways to use youthful characters, rendering them essentially wasted. For example, *Petticoat Junction* featured three teenaged girls, the Bradley sisters, but the show portrayed them only within the context of an idyllic small town life. The girls appeared to have interests and life goals more closely resembling those of teenagers in decades past. For example, in the season one episode “The Ringer,” part of the plot revolves around the youngest daughter, Betty Jo, entering a horseshoe tournament.<sup>528</sup> In another episode, each of the girls falls in

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<sup>525</sup> A.C. Nielsen Co., *Nielsen Television '68* (Chicago, IL: A.C. Nielsen Co.), 12.

<sup>526</sup> A.C. Nielsen Co., *Nielsen Television '66*, 13.

<sup>527</sup> Anika Bodroghkozy, “The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour and the Youth Rebellion,” *The Revolution Wasn't Televised*, 202-203.

<sup>528</sup> *Petticoat Junction*, “The Ringer,” Season 1, Episode 7, originally aired 5 November 1963 on CBS. Directed by David Alexander, written by Paul Henning and Richard Baer.

love with a pilot whose plane has crashed in Hooterville, and each believes the pilot will propose to her.<sup>529</sup> Yet another episode features Betty Jo fretting that she will never find a husband because she does not know how to cook.<sup>530</sup> The situations the Bradley girls found themselves in rarely resembled anything that resonated with the 16 to 24 year olds of the mid-to-late 1960s. The experiences of the young characters on *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *The Andy Griffith Show* were no more applicable to teenagers in the late 1960s than those of the Bradley sisters. The lack of relevant teenage characters on television helps explain the dearth of young viewers during that era.

In its effort to reclaim those disinterested young viewers, CBS wanted the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* to take the youth concept only slightly further than other shows. The network wanted a youthful version of the perennially popular variety show. The show would charm the elderly with standard musical numbers and guest appearances by beloved stars while appealing to young audiences with the Smothers Brothers' mildly cheeky comedy. The desire to appear relevant and attractive to young audiences was only on the surface, however. CBS objected to the Smothers Brothers using slang and having guest stars who appealed primarily to young viewers.<sup>531</sup> The network also objected to most of the rock and folk musical acts popular with its desired demographic, instead preferring Broadway numbers or Americana.<sup>532</sup> CBS executives

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<sup>529</sup> *Petticoat Junction*, "He Loves Us, He Loves Us Not," Season 4, Episode 4, originally aired 4 October 1966 on CBS. Directed by Charles Barton, written by Paul Henning and Al Schwarz.

<sup>530</sup> *Petticoat Junction*, "It's Hard Being a Mother," Season 5, Episode 2, originally aired September 16, 1967 on CBS. Directed by Ralph Levy, written by Paul Henning and Charles Stewart.

<sup>531</sup> Metz, *CBS*, 296.

<sup>532</sup> Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny*, 98.

worried that viewers would associate the show with youth, or worse, rebellion. The last thing that CBS wanted was to seem openly sympathetic to the youth-led protest movements so prevalent in the late 1960s. According to CBS executive Perry Lafferty, “We weren’t looking for shows that rocked the boat. The boat was already being rocked. We were trying to quiet them down.”<sup>533</sup>

CBS placed the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* on Sunday nights opposite the NBC ratings behemoth *Bonanza*, one of the few westerns from the 1950s still thriving more than a decade later. That CBS chose the *Comedy Hour* for that particular time slot is an indication of its ambivalence about committing to targeted programming. Had CBS actually wanted the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* to succeed, programming would have placed it in a timeslot with far weaker competition, not put it up against the number one show on television. In fact, *Bonanza* had been the top show for the previous four years, and no show that went up against it ever survived in that timeslot. CBS had tried numerous other shows before, and the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* was a last-ditch effort. In an act of desperation, the network counterprogrammed a ratings behemoth with a show aimed toward people who normally did not watch television at all: older teenagers and young adults in cities. It was an extremely risky strategy, and CBS executives did not have high expectations. If the *Comedy Hour* failed, the network had the cache that came with trying something new while also having the show’s failure as an excuse to further delay a switch to targeted programming.

*The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* debuted on February 5, 1967, with Tom and Dick looking harmless and clean cut in blazers and ties. The guests were *Gomer Pyle*,

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<sup>533</sup> Ibid., 59.

*U.S.M.C.* star Jim Nabors and actress Jill St. John, best known for playing a “Bond girl” in the film *Diamonds are Forever*. The show featured inoffensive musical numbers and comedy skits that gave no indication of appealing to the young audiences CBS sought to attract. However, the ratings soon demonstrated that although the show was not as youthful as initially marketed, it still appealed to plenty of people. The first Nielsen ratings for the show, published a couple weeks after the show first aired, indicated that the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* was a bona fide hit. The show not only held its own with its NBC rival *Bonanza*, but it out-performed its rival. The *Comedy Hour* successfully knocked *Bonanza* from first to sixth place in the Nielsen ratings

Bolstered by the success of their show, the Smothers Brothers injected subsequent episodes with slightly more subversive material, including an occasional drug joke and blanket statements about the state of American politics. For example, in the fourth episode, Tom explained to Dick that he could tell how much power a person had based on how many articles of clothing they were wearing. Tom went on to say that the people who had the least power were the “less-ons.” When Dick asked who had the most power, Tom deadpanned, “the more-ons.”<sup>534</sup> CBS gave the Smothers Brothers complete creative control over their show, and while the network did not love the show’s venturing into political territory, they accepted it for the sake of big ratings.

Over the course of its first season, *Comedy Hour* only continued to grow in popularity, placing sixteenth overall in the yearly Nielsen ratings. The Smothers Brothers’ increasing penchant for political satire was a welcome change from CBS’ constant parade of rural comedies, as evidenced by the show’s strong showing in the

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<sup>534</sup> *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, Season 1, Episode 4, originally aired 26 February 1967 on CBS. Written by Steve Martin, Rob Reiner, et al.

ratings. According to George Carlin, a popular comedian who frequently performed his standup comedy routines on the network variety shows, the American people were ready to talk about serious issues, whether seriously or humorously. According to Carlin, the people of the 1960s watched a lot of television and had a stronger awareness of the world around them than their predecessors had. That same awareness gave the audience a sophistication that made satire a potential outlet for societal frustration.<sup>535</sup> Another contemporary comedian, Dan Rowan of NBC's *Rowan and Martin's Laugh In*, agreed with Carlin's assessment. Rowan contended that audiences perceived disconnection between the troubled world around them and life as it appeared on most television programs.<sup>536</sup> For many viewers, the constant parade of variety shows and rural comedies had never been less relevant. Both Carlin and Rowan believed that television networks did not give American audiences enough credit, because viewers were smarter and more prepared to tackle real issues than ever before. For Carlin and Rowan, the popularity of shows like *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* was proof of that sentiment. Since NBC had a similar show in Rowan's own *Laugh In*, CBS could also take comfort in the knowledge that other networks were also willing to turn away from old programming strategies in an effort to connect with new viewers.

CBS executives may have agreed with Carlin's and Rowan's sentiments because the network briefly acquiesced to the Smothers Brothers' edgier comedy. Not only was the show a breakout hit among young viewers, but Tom and Dick also had contract stipulations giving them complete creative control over the show's content. Network

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<sup>535</sup> George Carlin, "Made For Each Other: Television and Satire," *Television Quarterly* 8:1 (Winter 1969): 24-26.

<sup>536</sup> Dan Rowan, "What Revolution in Comedy?" *Television Quarterly* 8:1 (Winter 1969): 22.

censors frequently sparred with Tom Smothers, who wanted to take the show in a more political direction. They removed most references to drugs and politics, to a point where Tom and the other writers would include fake slang in the scripts just to frustrate the censors. The writing team also got into the habit of writing multiple controversial skits, one slightly edgy skit, and the other much more contentious. The censors usually removed the sketch that most flagrantly violated their standards, thus making the other one seem mild in comparison. The censors would then allow that sketch, the one the writers had wanted all along, to stay in the show.

Over the course of its first two seasons, *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* became progressively more political. CBS, for its part, attempted to neutralize *Comedy Hour* through a combination of censorship and controlling the guests on the show. While Tom and Dick Smothers wanted cutting-edge rock musicians and comedians who would appeal solely to younger audiences, the network tempered that impulse. CBS might have been using the show to pay lip service to the concept of quality demographics, but it still understood the importance of appealing to conservative, rural audiences. In addition to bringing on a parade of aging Hollywood legends such as George Burns and Bette Davis, the network attempted to stock the *Comedy Hour* guest list with stars from its rural comedies. In addition to Jim Nabors, who starred on the show's first episode, Eddie Albert and Eva Gabor, the stars of *Green Acres*, were also frequent guests. Guests associated with the clean, safe, fun of rural comedies acted as a conservative anecdote to the anti-establishment messages that the *Comedy Hour* espoused. Although CBS designed the show to appeal to young audiences, the network seemed to be betting against its own concept by forcing the Smothers brothers to have guests that were better

suiting to one of the more old-fashioned variety shows. Even while using the *Comedy Hour* to gain quality demographics, CBS was still stuck in the quantitative mentality. CBS executives feared losing the allegiance of the southern and rural viewers who so strongly supported its other programs despite the knowledge that these were no longer the people their advertisers hoped to attract.

CBS' attempts to neutralize the increasingly radical nature of the *Comedy Hour* were not very effective. By the end of the second season, the Smothers became almost contemptuous of the southern and rural audiences that CBS so desperately hoped to keep. Although by 1968 the rest of the country was starting to experience racially driven violence, such behavior was still primarily associated with the South. As the region with the most visible racial hatred, the South bore the brunt of the Smothers Brothers' political frustrations. Tom and Dick conceded to having rural comedy stars as guests, but their appearances became rarer. After having country singer Glen Campbell on the show in January 1968, they hired him to host their summer replacement, *The Summer Brothers Smothers Show*. However, there were elements of mockery and condescension in their interactions with Campbell that hinted at their disdain for rural audiences, and southerners in particular. The singer had come from a very small town in Arkansas, and although he had become a well-respected session musician in Los Angeles who had recorded with major acts like The Beach Boys, he still spoke with a thick southern accent and maintained a very conservative and traditional social outlook. He also displayed stilted mannerisms and nervousness in his early appearances, a function of his complete lack of experience performing onscreen.

Tom and Dick Smothers quickly used Campbell's country charm for comedic effect. In one of Campbell's first appearances on the show, he performed the ballad "Once in a Lifetime." The performance began as a standard variety show production number. Halfway through the song, a herd of pigs burst onto the stage, quickly enveloping Campbell and his back-up dancers.<sup>537</sup> Although the Smothers Brothers often found ways to interject comedic bits into the musical performances on the show, livestock did not typically play a role in the hijinks. Given Campbell's rural upbringing and the focus that the media often put on that background, the pigs appeared as a way of ribbing Campbell about his southern roots. Other instances over the course of the show's run indicate that the pig prank during Campbell's musical performance was not an isolated incident of regional ribbing. On stage, the brothers sometimes treated Campbell as an object of ridicule, patting his head like a school boy and making jokes about his thick southern accent.

Whatever CBS may have thought about the Smothers Brothers and their treatment of Glen Campbell, they liked the earnest country singer and the audience reaction to him. Given the *Comedy Hour* propensity for courting controversy, the network was eager to capitalize on any goodwill the show created. Campbell had a strong showing as the host of the *Summer Brothers Smothers Show*, and audiences connected with his unassuming manner and morals as well as his musical talent. Campbell's persona lined up naturally with the rural brand of entertainment for which CBS was known. Despite the ribbing from Tom and Dick, the network rewarded Campbell with his own show beginning in January 1969. *The Glen Campbell Good Time Hour* was a variety show, but that was the

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<sup>537</sup> *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, Season 2, Episode 19, originally aired 28 January 1968 on CBS. Written by Steve Martin, Ted Bergman, et al.

only feature it had in common with its forbearer, *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*. The show featured Campbell as host, and although it heavily favored country music, it featured performers and entertainers from many genres. Campbell's show was as conventional as they came, never attracting any of the controversy that the *Comedy Hour* seemed to openly court. There were promising cross-promotional possibilities stemming from Campbell's connection to the show. Campbell, a conservative and naïve-seeming country singer, got some countercultural cache by virtue of his association with the more hip Smothers Brothers, while the *Comedy Hour* earned some goodwill from the public for being the show that gave the wholesome singer his big break into show business.

Any goodwill the Smothers Brothers earned from their championing of Glen Campbell was short-lived. During the third season, the relationship between CBS and the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* took an ominous turn. The show lost two of its original producers, Saul Ilson and Ernest Chambers. Both Ilson and Chambers were career producers who acted as a buffer between the network censors and young, hotheaded Tom Smothers. With them gone, no one remained to temper Tom's impulse to force the network into more controversial territory with his show. The writers for season three also brought a volatile element to the show's production. Many of the writers had been on the show for at least part of the previous two seasons, and they were disillusioned and angered by CBS' constant censoring of their work.<sup>538</sup> The lack of levelheaded producers combined with a team of angry writers produced a situation ripe for controversy.

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<sup>538</sup> Interview with Tom and Dick Smothers, Part 5 of 6, Interview by Karen Herman, October 14, 2000 (Beverly Hills, CA: Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, 2000), <http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/shows/smothers-brothers-comedy-hour-the#>, accessed September 13, 2012.

The network's pressure on Tom Smothers to tone down the political content of his show only pushed him to act out further. One of the ways that he rebelled was by having a large number of black performers on the show and consistently airing sketches that satirized American race relations.<sup>539</sup> The inclusion of black actors not only demonstrated Smothers' own racial liberalism, it offered the opportunity to perform some thought-provoking racial satire. On the first episode of the third season, black performers formed a sizeable contingent on the *Comedy Hour* stage, and the writers did not shy away from utilizing those performers to offend southern viewers. Although the episode did not allude specifically to southern or even rural people, it was obvious the Brothers were trying to offend some viewers. The episode, with guest stars Harry Belafonte, "Mama Cass" Elliot, and football star Roosevelt Grier, featured a skit that skewered the so-called "conventional" television that Americans seemed to prefer, while also providing some tongue-in-cheek confrontation of societal, racial, and sexual mores. The skit, called "Ponderanza," would normally have raised the hackles of CBS censors. The Ponderanza sketch, however, was another example of *Comedy Hour* writers getting one controversial sketch on the air by drawing the censors' attention to another, more aggressively contentious bit. In the original script, Harry Belafonte was supposed to sing "Don't Stop the Carnival," ostensibly a song about Mardi Gras; however, the singer added a final stanza to the song, one that included lyrics saying that America was no longer free. As Belafonte sang the final verse, which included the words, "Let it be known, freedom's gone and the country's not our own," he and the Smothers Brothers wanted to play a slide show of photographs depicting the police violence at the Democratic National

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<sup>539</sup> Ibid, Part 4 of 6.

Convention in Chicago the previous week.<sup>540</sup> Eighty-eight percent of American homes had tuned into coverage of the DNC meeting, and so the violent brawl that took place there was well known to viewers and still fresh in their minds.<sup>541</sup> When the censors saw what the brothers were planning, however, they were not interested in giving viewers a refresher on the previous week's disturbing events. Instead, the network refused to air Belafonte's performance, replacing that segment with a five-minute long campaign advertisement for Richard Nixon.<sup>542</sup> The uproar over the Belafonte performance freed the cast to do the "Ponderanza" sketch with little interference from the network.

"Ponderanza" was a parody of *Bonanza*, but the skit also served as a conduit for the Smothers Brothers to address the problems they had with the network over censorship and ratings. In the skit, Pat Paulsen was "Pa Cartwrong," the patriarch of the family. Cass Elliot played his son "Hass," and Harry Belafonte played another son, "Little Jerk." The names were a play on the *Bonanza* characters Pa Cartwright, Hoss, and Little Joe. The story was that a pair of outlaw brothers had taken the local "Nielsen family" hostage, and the Cartwrongs wanted them back. Ultimately, the outlaw brothers, played by Tom and Dick Smothers, appeared at the Cartwrong ranch and lambasted the family for their hypocrisy. The brothers told the Cartwrongs they had no right to question their morals. They pointed out that the Cartwrong family, which consisted of three grown men living together indefinitely with no female presence to speak of, was not exactly mirroring

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<sup>540</sup> "Script for September 29, 1968," Box 20, Collection 36, Smothers Brothers Television Scripts and Production Material, UCLA Performing Arts Special Collections.

<sup>541</sup> A.C. Nielsen Company, *Nielsen Television '69*, 2.

<sup>542</sup> Interview with Tom Smothers and Dick Smothers, Part 5 of 6, Interview by Karen Herman, 14 October 2000 (Los Angeles: Academy of Television Arts and Sciences), <http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/tom-smothers-and-dick-smothers>, access 8 January 2012; Bianculli, xii.

perfect American family values. The outlaws insinuated that not only were the Cartwongs not representative of an all-American family, but that some might construe their lifestyle as homosexual. At the end of the sketch, Pa Cartwong admits that the family does need a female influence around the house, and concedes that Ma Cartwong has been there all along, locked in the hall closet. Little Jerk promptly broke down the door, and out came football star Roosevelt Grier dressed in female drag. Prompted by the outlaw brothers, Ma Cartwong kisses her “sons,” Harry Belafonte and Cass Elliot. In the span of a few seconds, Americans saw a cross-dressing black man “coming out of the closet” to kiss a man, and then that same black man kissing a white woman. The scene was tailor-made to offend the show’s more conservative viewers, and particularly southern ones for whom interracial intimacy was difficult to stomach. Tom Smothers got the final line, with his outlaw exclaiming: “now we’ll never get the Nielsens back!”<sup>543</sup> While the sketch was partially meant to be a joke alluding to all of the controversy surrounding the show, it was also a line in the sand; the Brothers’ way of saying that they knew their material was innovative and controversial, they knew they were offending certain viewers, and they really did not care. As Tom Smothers put it, “we’re not talking to those people, we’re talking to the people who understand.”<sup>544</sup>

That CBS allowed the Ponderanza sketch while refusing to air Harry Belafonte’s performance of “Don’t Stop the Carnival” also indicates some of the network’s priorities. The “Ponderanza” sketch had the potential to cause a public uproar, but it also had the advantage of being funny. There was much to giggle about in the sketch, even if some

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<sup>543</sup> *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, Season 3, Episode 1, originally aired 9 September 1968 on CBS. Written by Steve Martin, Allan Blye, et al.

<sup>544</sup> Interview with Tom and Dick Smothers, Part 5 of 6.

people took exception to Roosevelt Grier kissing Cass Eliot at the end of the scene. The show's target audience would knowingly enjoy the satire while CBS' most loyal viewers in the South and rural areas could enjoy the spectacle of famous guest stars dressed in comic drag. The Harry Belafonte performance, on the other hand, did not offer any comic relief to ease tension for the viewers. The piece, with its accompanying slideshow, was a straightforward critique of the brutality exhibited by police toward non-violent protesters at the Democratic National Convention, and the subsequent lack of consequences for those who brutalized. That Belafonte was a black man only heightened the impact of the song and the accompanying images. It was like a slap in the face to rural and southern America to see, in the midst of comedic skits and jokes, this sudden representation of black agitation and liberal politics thrust into their living rooms. For CBS, it was better for the Smothers Brothers to take a mild but humorous swipe at its most loyal audience, rural areas and the South, with the "Ponderanza" sketch, than to completely alienate them with the disturbing images from the Democratic National Convention combined with a sanctimonious song from a black, liberal, agitator.

After the "Ponderanza" sketch, *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* frequently veered into difficult political territory. The writers touched on all of the hot-button issues of the day, including religion, race, and the Vietnam War. Nearly every week, there was a battle between the Smothers Brothers and CBS censors. On the October 27, 1968 show, a Second City comedian named David Steinberg performed a sermonette on the show. Steinberg was a former student of religion who had a firm grasp of his subject matter, which in this case was a humorous discussion of Moses and the burning bush. For viewers in the Bible Belt, however, Steinberg's sermonette was inappropriate and

tasteless. The segment generated more viewer complaints than any other skit during the show's previous two years on air.<sup>545</sup> The backlash did not surprise Tom Smothers and his team of writers. Having nearly two years of experience with the censors by this point, they knew what topics would cause an uproar, but by the fall of 1968, the writers at *Comedy Hour* ceased caring about what would upset southern and rural Americans.

Instead, the show and its writers almost seemed to take pride in their ability to create controversy. That fall, as the country anticipated the upcoming presidential election, *Comedy Hour* remained true to form by providing reams of commentary on the race. Naturally, the final show aired before the election was packed with political humor and satire. The writers did not just take on the political candidates, but also the issues that faced them. In true *Comedy Hour* fashion, the results were incendiary. On the November 3, 1968 show, series regular Pat Paulsen continued one of his running gags, a faux campaign for the presidency. Giving a final "campaign" speech before the following Tuesday's election, Paulsen used the time to address each of his fellow candidates individually. When he got to George Wallace, former governor of Alabama and famously staunch segregationist, Paulsen wise cracked: "I commend you for your efforts at promoting racial unity. Never before has any one man done so much to unite the American . . . Negro."<sup>546</sup> The writers did not exactly design the speech to win over any alienated rural and southern viewers. The speech implied that the needlessly oppressive tactics of Wallace and his ilk were responsible for the increasing radicalization of black civil rights protesters. By attacking Wallace, a southern candidate, Paulsen indirectly

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<sup>545</sup> Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny*, 230-231.

<sup>546</sup> "November 3, 1968 script," Box 20, Collection 36, Smothers Brothers Television Scripts and Production Material, UCLA Performing Arts Special Collection.

attacked many white southerners and their behavior by implying that they were reaping what they sowed.

Paulsen's admonishment of Wallace was not supposed to be the only mocking reference to the South in that evening's show. The original script called for Tom to make a joke in which he takes credit for teaching Campbell how to "talk good." The final version of the script did not include the joke, as the censors requested its removal.<sup>547</sup> It is difficult to say why the censors went after that particular joke, which did not violate any obvious decency standards. One possibility is that Campbell had a show on CBS, and the network did not want one of its own stars mocked by a show on the same network, or that Campbell himself was no longer willing to have his southern heritage mocked now that he was successful in his own right. Another possibility is that CBS executives were uncomfortable with the degree of mockery that the Smothers Brothers lavished on southern and rural audiences, and the degree to which the show was hemorrhaging viewers in that demographic. Faced with two jokes about southerners in one show, the network chose the joke that directly attacked an individual public figure on his controversial views, rather than the joke that needlessly mocked the speech patterns of the entire South.

Despite CBS' consistent attempts to reign in the *Comedy Hour's* increasingly edgy political satire, viewers complained constantly. The concerns ranged from the brothers' treatment of race to their constant voicing of their liberal political views. Racists were some of the Smothers Brothers' most dedicated critics, and they wrote in from all over the country. In contrast to the Smothers' Brothers belief that their biggest detractors were southern, some of the most vitriolic letters came not from northerners.

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<sup>547</sup> Ibid.

One angry viewer from Hackensack, New Jersey wrote: “I hope you get the nigger shit kicked out of you.” Another writer from Canton, Ohio vented: “I for one am fed up with looking at niggers, nigger-lovers, and long-haired fruits on your and every other show on television.”<sup>548</sup> When the CBS news program *60 Minutes* did a segment on *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* on December 8, 1968, they began by reading a further sampling of the hate mail that the show received. Some critics lamented that the seemingly clean-cut Smothers Brothers had joined the “lower element who have dirty long hair beards and low morals.” Others requested that CBS take the show off the air before it did any more damage with “their kind of talk.”<sup>549</sup> Such letters belied the notion that only southern and rural viewers that did not care for the Smothers Brothers’ envelope-pushing brand of integrated entertainment.

Indeed, by 1968, the Smothers’ could not even guarantee the loyalty of their studio crew in California, the supposed bastion of liberalism. They often had to worry about crew members harassing some of the show’s more counter-culturally inclined guests, particularly the long-haired men, and making snide, patriotic comments and retorts in response to any comments in the show about racism or the Vietnam War.<sup>550</sup> At one point Tom Smothers even got into a wrestling match with a disgruntled crew member who disagreed with him about something on the show.<sup>551</sup>

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<sup>548</sup> Metz, *CBS*, 299.

<sup>549</sup> Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny*, 243.

<sup>550</sup> William Kloman, “The Transmogrification of the Smothers Brothers,” *Esquire* (October 1969), 149.

<sup>551</sup> Interview with Tom and Dick Smothers, Part 3 of 5.

The outpouring of animosity toward the *Comedy Hour* from viewers and the show's own crew demonstrated that CBS' plan for a show that straddled the divide between young and old, rural and city, had failed miserably. While the viewership of the show among young viewers remained high, most other demographics stopped watching and criticized the network for allowing a bunch of smut-talking, countercultural, race-mixing, liberal muckrakers on their airwaves. The network occasionally forcing the Smothers' to have a guest from a rural comedy was not enough to make up for the politics that now defined the *Comedy Hour*.

By 1969, the confrontation between CBS and the *Comedy Hour* came to a head. A number of issues caused the problem to escalate past the point of peaceful resolution. For one, the Smothers Brothers became frequently and openly disdainful of newly elected President Richard Nixon. The Brothers had been less than respectful toward his predecessor, at one point in the second season fighting to have controversial folk singer Pete Seeger perform an anti-war protest song critical of President Johnson. The network initially cut Seeger's performance, but the Smothers Brothers persisted and Seeger eventually performed the song on the program, with no interference or grumbling from the Johnson administration. Lyndon Johnson took their jabs in stride, at one point even congratulating them on their willingness to push the envelope and say things that others were afraid to say. Among other things, Johnson conceded, it was "part of the price of leadership of this great and free nation to be the target of clever satirists."<sup>552</sup> Richard Nixon did not see the *Comedy Hour* in the same way. He made it clear from the beginning of his term that he wanted to exert tighter control over the media, which he

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<sup>552</sup> Tom Smothers read portions of Johnson's letter, dated 9 November 1968, on the final episode of the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, which originally aired 20 April 1969.

considered his enemy. Nixon's plan included silencing those who openly dissented against his policies.

After February 1969, Nixon targeted the Smothers Brothers specifically. One of the skits on the February 16 show, "A Fable for Our Time," was a political satire based on the fable "The Sword and the Stone." Townspeople gathered to watch man after man attempt to pull a sword from a stone, with the intention of making the successful contender their leader. After the last man, "Sir Richard of Nixon," tries and fails to pull out the sword, the townspeople give up and proclaim him their leader. They lift him upon their shoulders, proclaiming, "Rejoice! Rejoice! There is no other choice! For now he's the best we can find!"<sup>553</sup> The implication was the American people elected Richard Nixon not because they truly believed he could fix the problems facing the country, but because he was a lucky man in the right place at the right time and the least offensive out of many terrible options. Coming less than one month after his inauguration, the skit was hardly a vote of confidence. To people in the South, who supported Nixon, such skits were off-putting and further reason not to watch the show, but to Nixon they were unacceptable for television. After that, Nixon targeted the *Comedy Hour* specifically in his effort to free the airwaves of political dissent. The brothers, to this day, believe their names were on what became an early version of Nixon's "enemies list," and they claim that Nixon exerted direct pressure on their superiors to eliminate the *Comedy Hour* as a political threat.<sup>554</sup>

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<sup>553</sup> *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, Season 3, Episode, originally aired 16 February 1969 on CBS. Written by Steve Martin, Allan Blye, et al.

<sup>554</sup> Interview with Tom and Dick Smothers, Part 4 of 6, [www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/tom-smothers-and-dick-smothers](http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/tom-smothers-and-dick-smothers), accessed 10 January 2012.

CBS had been willing to tolerate some subversive comedy from the Smothers Brothers while their ratings were high, but their numbers started to slip dramatically. The *Comedy Hour* ranked sixteenth in 1967, but it dropped to twenty-seventh place by 1969. CBS vice-president of programming Fred Silverman, apparently forgetting the numerous angry letters from northern viewers, claimed “the Smothers Brothers were antithetical to our Southern affiliates. They were like Martians.”<sup>555</sup> Indeed, the *Comedy Hour*, in addition to its anti-Nixon skits, continued to air sketches that skewered southern social and racial mores, much to the consternation of the CBS network. In the February 16, 1969 episode, the show opener featured Tom as a southern preacher presiding over the wedding of a white woman and an African-American man. After the couple exchanges vows, Tom reached out his hand and instead of asking for the wedding rings, he says “the rope, please.” Coming in the wake of escalating race riots in American cities and the *Loving v. Virginia* court decision that made state laws against interracial marriage illegal, a southern lynching joke made many people uncomfortable, especially in the South. No one felt the discomfort more than CBS. In the February 21, 1969 edition of the *Los Angeles Free Press*, entertainment columnist Harlan Edison remarked on the trend: “Sure, in the Thirty Cities Ratings, the Smothers clan does well, but in the outlying regions, where most of the soap-suds are bought, they die. And the network notices, make no mistake.”<sup>556</sup> Indeed, the Nielsen demographic data from the 1968 sweeps season demonstrates that while the *Comedy Hour* was the tenth most popular show among all

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<sup>555</sup> Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny*, 305.

<sup>556</sup> Harlan Edison, *Los Angeles Free Press*, 21 February, 1969.

men, it did not even crack the top fifteen among women and the general audience.<sup>557</sup> CBS programming executives may have been ready to pull some of their focus away from southern and rural audiences, but they were hardly ready to dismiss them.

The Smothers Brothers also found that some of the places where they typically found support no longer welcomed their antics. *TV Guide* had been a supporter of the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* since its inception, and, right up until the February 16 show, it published editorials lauding the show's courageous stance. However, the magazine quickly reversed positions after it became clear that the show planned to make Nixon a constant target and became a champion for those who felt that the Smothers Brothers acted in poor taste by mocking the President. Incidentally, at the time, *TV Guide* publisher Walter Annenburg sought an appointment as U.S. Ambassador to Great Britain, an honor that Richard Nixon alone could bestow.<sup>558</sup> Whatever Annenburg's personal feelings on the subject, he was not about to thwart his own political ambitions in the interest of saving the jobs of two comedians who were rapidly losing public support. His magazine quickly adopted a conservative viewpoint, withdrawing support from the *Comedy Hour* and instead started printing editorials calling for CBS to take the show off the air.

CBS also became less supportive of the Smothers' antics. Network chairman William Paley, like Walter Annenburg, wanted the appointment as Ambassador to Great Britain. Because of his political aspirations, Paley did not feel particularly warmly toward the brothers and their political grandstanding. Around the same time, as if to solidify his

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<sup>557</sup> A.C. Nielsen Company, *Nielsen Television '69* (Chicago, IL: A.C. Nielsen Company), 18.

<sup>558</sup> Interview with Tom and Dick Smothers, Part 4 of 6; Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny*, 272. Annenburg ultimately got the desired appointment to the Court of St. James.

new commitment to the Nixon administration, Paley appointed long-time CBS executive Robert Wood as the new network president. Wood had very little patience for the antics of television performers. He was also a staunch conservative who had passionately editorialized against Berkeley Free Speech protests and other instances of student unrest on the news while managing a CBS station in California.<sup>559</sup> By this point Tom Smothers was regularly communicating with highly placed executives in the network trying to find allies. In the spring of 1969, CBS, Inc. President Frank Stanton seemingly defended the Smothers in a speech he gave before the National Association of Broadcasters that lambasted proposals to create a review board to pre-screen all television shows for decency. According to Stanton, a central arbiter of television taste was “harmful, indeed dangerous.” Tom Smothers took Stanton’s speech as a sign that CBS had re-considered its position on the *Comedy Hour* and politics on primetime television.<sup>560</sup>

Smothers could not have been more wrong. If anything, CBS executives were growing tired of the constant flow of angry mail and incessant censorship battles over the *Comedy Hour* and with the added pressure from the Nixon administration, their jobs became even more difficult. Now in addition to monitoring for anti-war or pro-civil rights stances, CBS censors and executives looked for any even remotely political messages. CBS explicitly told the *Comedy Hour* not to create material that would “interfere with national policy” and claimed they would censor anything that did.<sup>561</sup>

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<sup>559</sup> Kloman, “The Transmogrification of the Smothers Brothers,” 153; Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny*, 69.

<sup>560</sup> Bianculli, *Dangerously Funny*, 296-297.

<sup>561</sup> Interview with Tom and Dick Smothers, Part 5 of 6, [www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/tom-smothers-and-dick-smothers](http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/tom-smothers-and-dick-smothers), accessed 11 January 2012.

What they meant by interfering with national policy remains unclear. After all, the Smothers Brothers had somehow touched on nearly every social and political issue facing the United States in the 1960s, from drug use to counterculture to racism. For the entire third season up to February 1969, the anti-war message of the show had been prominent. Skits frequently featured peace signs and in one of the last episodes filmed before the Nixon crackdown, a skit skewered the concept of God being on any one side in a war. The sketch showed a series of famous generals marching into war, all claiming God supported their cause. Eventually, they all convened in the same place, at which point a civilian asked which side God supports. All of the generals said “yes” simultaneously. The sketch ended with lightning striking a rock, emblazoning it with the commandment “thou shalt not kill.”<sup>562</sup> What is clear is that beginning in March 1969, CBS refused to allow any remotely political statement on the *Comedy Hour* for what turned out to be the very limited remainder of its run. In a skit that featured soldiers in a foxhole, the original script called for the sound of gunfire in the background. CBS vetoed the sound of guns, believing that it was too evocative of the Vietnam War, and when the skit finally aired, crickets chirped in the background instead.<sup>563</sup> When Joan Baez appeared on the show, she prefaced the song “Green Green Grass of Home” with a dedication to her husband, explaining that he was getting ready to serve jail time for avoiding the draft. CBS removed Baez’s explanation for her husband’s impending incarceration from the final broadcast. On air, Baez’s introduction was edited so that she only said “It’s kind of a gift

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<sup>562</sup> *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, Season 3, Episode 21, originally aired 2 March 1969 on CBS. Written by Steve Martin, Allan Blye, et al.

<sup>563</sup> “November 3, 1968 script,” Box 20, Collection 36, Smothers Brothers Television Scripts and Production Material, UCLA Performing Arts Special Collection, University of California, Los Angeles.

for David, because he's going to be going to prison," before abruptly beginning to play the song. Viewers were left to discern for themselves what nefarious thing Baez's husband had done to earn his prison sentence.<sup>564</sup> In one of the final battles the Smothers Brothers had with the network, the *Comedy Hour* writers wanted to display on the show an anti-war Mothers' Day card made by a mothers' group in Los Angeles. In a move harkening back to the Red Scare of the early 1950s, the censors said that the show could not use the card because HUAC had not yet vetted the group that made it, and so the group in question could be subversive.<sup>565</sup> By the late 1960s, the House Committee on Un-American Activities was long past its prime and had little to no influence over the entertainment industry. Even the blacklist spawned by HUAC no longer existed. That CBS used HUAC as an excuse to pull an anti-war Mothers' Day card, particularly after previously allowing formerly blacklisted performers to come on the show, indicated that they would find any reason to limit the *Comedy Hour's* expression of political sympathies, no matter how benign.

The final nail in the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* coffin was the show slated to air on April 13, 1969. Against direct orders from CBS and a virtual mandate from viewers, the Smothers' had David Steinberg perform another of his controversial sermonettes, this time on the biblical story of Jonah. CBS responded by unceremoniously yanking the entire episode from the schedule. The following week, there was a misunderstanding. Under a mandate from the network, *Comedy Hour* had to make show installments available for affiliates to preview a week before airtime. Although both Tom

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<sup>564</sup> *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, Season 3, Episode 22, originally aired 9 March 1969 on CBS. Written by Steve Martin, Allen Blye, et al.,

<sup>565</sup> Metz, *CBS*, 299.

and Dick insisted that they had the next week's tape available on time, the network conveniently misplaced the tape and blamed the Smothers brothers for the mistake.<sup>566</sup>

After the David Steinberg sermonette in the April 13 episode, the network was looking for an excuse to get rid of the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* once and for all even though the show had just been picked up for the following season. The mishap with the Smothers' tape was just the excuse that the network needed. CBS-TV President Robert Wood unceremoniously fired both Tom and Dick Smothers on April 3, 1969, citing breach of contract.<sup>567</sup> Critics were almost unanimous in their furor over the firing, with the only exception being Walter Annenberg's *TV Guide*, which continued its transformation as the new voice of the Nixon administration and middle America. It ran a full-page editorial accusing the Smothers Brothers of "pseudo-intellectualism," a term for liberalism that George Wallace, the 1968 presidential candidate whose votes were concentrated in the South, had popularized during his campaign.<sup>568</sup> The brothers, bolstered by critical support, went on to sue CBS for violating their contract, but the court battle was not settled until 1973. The Smothers Brothers eventually got back on the air, but by then, their time had passed. CBS cancelled the show due to low ratings and the brothers faded into obscurity, emerging occasionally over the years to do one-off variety specials.

The Smothers Brothers drifting from the spotlight was exactly the reaction that CBS hoped for, and the network's subsequent programming decisions also point to that

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<sup>566</sup> Interview with Tom and Dick Smothers, Part 5 of 6, [www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/tom-smothers-and-dick-smothers](http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/tom-smothers-and-dick-smothers), accessed 11 January 2012.

<sup>567</sup> Since the stipulation about handing the tape in early was not part of the Smothers' contract, Tom and Dick Smothers sued CBS. The case was settled in favor of the brothers in 1973.

<sup>568</sup> Kloman, "The Transmogrification of the Smothers Brothers," 160.

conclusion. The *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* experiment had succeeded in its original goal; to bring in younger, more urban viewers. It also, however, had the effect of alienating CBS' core audience in southern and rural areas. The network immediately sought to remedy that mistake. Although they were already in the process of catering their programming toward more desirable demographics, in 1969 CBS still relied heavily on southern and rural audiences, and wanted to please them. Executives also realized that NBC's *Laugh-In*, which was very similar to *Comedy Hour*, still attracted legions of young fans without any of the controversy that accompanied *Comedy Hour*. CBS executives hoped to strike a balance between attracting young viewers with a *Laugh-In*-type show while also catering to their rural fan-base. In the summer of 1969, CBS thought they had found just such a show: *Hee Haw*.

The creators of *Hee Haw*, John Aylesworth and Frank Peppiatt, initially envisioned it as a "country *Laugh-In*," but far less topical.<sup>569</sup> The show, filmed in Nashville and using largely unknown talent, was inexpensive to produce and serviceable enough as a summer replacement. With rural comedy still doing well in the Nielsen ratings, CBS knew that *Hee Haw* would attract enough viewers to at least make a respectable showing in the Sunday night timeslot previously held by the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*. The show's creators, having had no prior experience with rural comedy except on ABC's *The Jimmy Dean Show* in the early 1960s, quickly assembled a team of comedians, musicians, and crew in Nashville, Tennessee. There was only a ten-week stretch between the Smothers Brothers' firing on April 4, 1969, and the premiere of

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<sup>569</sup> Interview with Bernie Brillstein, Part 4 of 8, Interview by Dan Pasternack (Los Angeles, CA: Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, 2001), [www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/Bernie-Brillstein](http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/Bernie-Brillstein), accessed 13 January 2012.

*Hee Haw* on June 15, so there was no time to aim for excellence. The crew quickly shot enough material for thirteen episodes, which featured musical performances and a quick-cut joke segment that mirrored the one on *Laugh-In*. For *Hee Haw*, the joke segment took place in a specially constructed cornfield. Comedians, musicians and guest stars would stand hidden in the cornfield, popping up when it was their turn to tell a joke. Host Roy Clark, a musician who up until that point had made his living playing hillbillies in guest parts on other shows, recalled that the show was just a collection of the “worst jokes you ever heard.” Though Clark was still at the beginning of his career and needed every job he could get, his agent was still ambivalent about the gig. Clark recalls the man conceding “it’s not gonna hurt your career too much. It won’t do too much damage.”<sup>570</sup> Clark’s experience indicates exactly how little esteem the program had among entertainment industry insiders. Even the agent of a struggling, no-name actor who could only book hillbilly guest spots on other shows felt his client was probably too good for *Hee Haw*.

For the most part, the show had numerous critics and no one, least of all CBS, thought *Hee Haw* would amount to much. The locals in Nashville hated it because they were trying to get away from the hick image and thought it was a mockery of their music and lifestyle.<sup>571</sup> The cast and crew of ABC’s *The Johnny Cash Show*, which also filmed in Nashville at the Ryman Auditorium, made disparaging remarks about the show on the rare occasions when their personnel came into contact with the *Hee Haw* crew. Not only

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<sup>570</sup> Interview with Roy Clark, Part 3 of 6, Interview by Karen Herman (Los Angeles, CA: Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, 2005), [www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/roy-clark](http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/roy-clark), accessed 13 January 2012.

<sup>571</sup> Interview with Sam Lovullo, Part 4 of 10, Interview by Stephen J. Abramson (Los Angeles, CA: Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, 2005), [www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/sam-lovullo](http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/sam-lovullo), accessed 13 January 2012.

did *The Johnny Cash Show* get the rare privilege of filming in the Ryman, famous for being the home of the Grand Ole Opry, but Cash's star power meant that the show was a hotly anticipated part of the fall 1969 programming schedule. *Hee Haw* had neither that level of star power or audience anticipation. Cash was still riding a wave of national popularity after the crossover success of his prison albums, *Live from Folsom Prison* and *Live from San Quentin*. He was no longer just a country star but an outlaw, someone that younger viewers could relate to while also appealing to older viewers with his show's solid-gold lineup of country legends. Cash's versatility translated to a diverse guest list that included Pete Seeger, George Jones, and Bob Dylan. The anticipation and star power that Johnny Cash mustered translated to a much larger production budget. In comparison, *Hee Haw*, with its no-name stars, small budget, hurried production, and corn pone humor, came off looking like a country cousin to *The Johnny Cash Show*. While *Hee Haw* was occasionally able to secure some big-name stars, such as when Loretta Lynn and Charley Pride guest-starred on the first episode, the show could not compete with Johnny Cash's own personal fame and the production values that fame commanded.

Given the amount of money and star power that Johnny Cash wielded, most industry insiders assumed his show would perform better than *Hee Haw*. Expectations were high when *The Johnny Cash Show* debuted on June 17, 1969, but the initial ratings did not look promising. In the late 1960s, accurate national ratings took a couple of weeks to compile, and networks tended to look at large cities as barometers of national opinion. More often than not, testing in large cities did not provide an accurate reading of what the rest of the country watched, and *The Johnny Cash Show* was no different. The network saw the first week's ratings for New York City alone, where the program commanded a

measly twelve share, or twelve percent of the total viewing audience in its timeslot. The national results that came back weeks later told a different story. *The Johnny Cash Show* not only had higher ratings than previously indicated by the New York showing, it had also dominated its timeslot with a thirty-three share. Of all thirty major cities polled, New York had actually polled the lowest.<sup>572</sup> The numbers for *The Johnny Cash Show* indicated that despite media experts' cries for so-called "quality" programming that addressed "real" issues, many Americans still preferred a rural or southern tinge to their entertainment, whether it was relevant to real life or not.

The ratings for *The Johnny Cash Show* were dismissed as fluke and attributed to Cash's fame instead of a genuine desire on the part of the audience to listen to country music and hear Cash and his pals relate old tales from their shared past. *Hee Haw*, certainly, was never in the same category or of the same caliber as *The Johnny Cash Show*. When it premiered on June fifteenth, critics universally lambasted the new program. Everything about it, from the braying cartoon donkey in the opening credits, to the cornfield full of actors wearing bib overalls and gingham shouting out corny one-liners, to the barely literate Junior Samples' stunted reading of his cue cards, invited ridicule. *TV Guide*, which only weeks before had applauded CBS for removing the "un-American" Smothers Brothers from the airwaves, now mocked its replacement, which could not have been more American in scope.<sup>573</sup> *TV Guide's* implacable reviewer aside, no critics thought that *Hee Haw* had any merits worth considering. The *TV Guide* critic referred to the show as an "outhouse *Laugh-In*," while the *Houston Chronicle's* reviewer,

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<sup>572</sup> Les Brown, *Television*, 45.

<sup>573</sup> Interview with Tom and Dick Smothers, Clip 6, [www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/tom-smothers-and-dick-smothers](http://www.emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/tom-smothers-and-dick-smothers), accessed 14 January 2012.

Ann Hodges, called it “the worst show I’ve ever seen.” *The Toronto Star* took the insult a step further by claiming that “anyone who would watch *Hee Haw* did not deserve to own a television.”<sup>574</sup>

Given the show’s near-universal condemnation at the hands of critics, everyone was shocked when *Hee Haw*’s numbers came back astronomically high. The show had completely dominated its timeslot with a forty-one share, an unusually strong performance even by the standards of the time.<sup>575</sup> Even CBS, which had made a nearly decade-long reputation for rural comedy, was shocked at the show’s popularity. The strong performance of both *The Johnny Cash Show* and *Hee Haw* in the summer of 1969 indicated that American audiences were not only still willing to watch programming featuring southerners and southern characters, but they also enjoyed it. For the rest of the summer, the two shows enjoyed high ratings, proving that their opening night audiences were not just a fluke. *Hee Haw* ended the year ranked sixteenth in the Nielsen ratings.

That the contentious, young Smothers Brothers got edged out of their top 20 show, only to be replaced by a show about singing and joking hillbillies in a cornfield says much about the American television viewer and his/her state of mind in the late 1960s. The success of the *Johnny Cash Show* speaks to the growing popularity of country music in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and while *Hee Haw*’s popularity may have been partially due to its emphasis on music, its allure was more complicated. Like *The Beverly Hillbillies* before it, *Hee Haw* served as a mudsill for some viewers: something to laugh

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<sup>574</sup> Aylesworth, *The Corn was Green*, 63.

<sup>575</sup> Interview with Bernie Brillstein, Part 4 of 8, Interview by Dan Pasternack (Los Angeles, CA: Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, 14 November 2001), <http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/shows/hee-haw>, accessed 3 March 2012.

at and mock while secure in the knowledge of one's own superior place on the social hierarchy. However, viewers who saw the show as a gimmick or source of mockery must have lost interest rather quickly as the novelty wore thin. What remained then, were people who not only enjoyed the country music but also appreciated the ridiculous, carefree humor that the show offered. In the tradition of rural comedy, it was not socially relevant, it did not address the pressing social issues of the day, and it was not topical- no one would be offended by the show, perhaps with the exception of educated southerners taking umbrage with the stereotypes it promoted. The humor was so dated as to be almost vaudevillian, and had a timeless, silly quality to it. Those qualities made it excellent viewing for the entire family, but it definitely appealed to certain demographics more than others, namely the rural and southern audience. *Hee Haw's* creators conceived the show as a country version of *Laugh-In*, yet it had none of the youthful cache or relevance of that program, nor did it attract the same audience. Young people just did not watch *Hee Haw*, so the show did not live up to one of its original purposes. Yet enough people watched that CBS could not ignore it.

CBS executives were mortified by the success of *Hee Haw*, which they had accepted only as an emergency stopgap replacement for the Smothers Brothers. Although its primetime schedule was littered with successful rural comedies and rural-based variety shows like the *Glen Campbell Good Time Hour* and the recently premiered *Jim Nabors Hour*, CBS never dreamed that *Hee Haw* would become popular with a widespread audience. Having the show on the primetime roster did nothing to staunch naysayers who claimed that CBS had relinquished its "Tiffany" reputation for the sake of catering to the lowest common denominator. Regardless, *Hee Haw* performed so well that the network

felt compelled to include it as a full-time replacement for its timeslot in the 1969-1970 season. As CBS scrambled the show back into production for the fall season, network president Robert Wood lamented “you can’t kill that show with a stick!”<sup>576</sup>

As the 1969-1970 television season came to a close, CBS was farther from its goal of catering to quality demographics than ever. Despite several years of contemplating change and making a handful of attempts at relevant programming, the network was living up to its reputation as the “Country Broadcast System” more than ever before. The other networks still dabbled in rural-themed programming, such as ABC’s *The Johnny Cash Show*, but even in that case, Cash’s crossover success made the show more mainstream than what CBS offered. CBS, meanwhile, devoted more than five hours of its most valuable time to the genre. Its lineup boasted four half-hour rural comedies and three rural-themed variety shows; the most it had ever featured. With the exception of *Mayberry RFD*, a spin-off of *The Andy Griffith Show*, all of the half-hour comedies had been on the air for five years or more. Three of the four half-hour programs were spin-offs, plain attempts to capitalize on previous successes. Two of the three variety shows, *The Glen Campbell Good-Time Hour* and *Hee Haw*, existed due to the cultural and political fall-out associated with *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*. CBS, after using the Smothers Brothers to bring youth and relevance to its lineup, panicked when the brothers succeeded a little too well and instinctively doubled down on its old strategy: rural programming. In an effort to build the beginnings of a more relevant primetime schedule, CBS ultimately lost its one cutting-edge program and gained two more safe and conventional rural shows instead.

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<sup>576</sup> Aylesworth, *The Corn was Green*, 95-96.

By 1970, CBS was steadily losing ground in the ratings as a result of its refusal to branch away from rural-themed shows, and its hold on first place, which had seemed iron-clad for nearly two decades, was suddenly tenuous. In the early days of the rural comedy craze, CBS led its competitors in ratings and profits by double-digit percentages. By 1970, the network remained in first place, but only by the narrowest of margins. NBC, the early pioneer of catering to quality demographics over viewer quantity, fully committed to the strategy and found increasing success with urban-themed programs and shows featuring black performers. Slowly but surely, through the late 1960s and early 1970s, NBC came to the verge of edging out CBS in the ratings. While in the early 1960s, CBS routinely had seven or eight shows in the top ten, by 1969, CBS had only five in the top ten, and NBC had four.<sup>577</sup>

Advertisers noticed the change. As late as 1967, advertisers were reluctant to adopt the quality demographic strategy when choosing what shows to sponsor, but over the next few years they saw the financial benefits of such a plan. Previously, advertisers would never have deliberately sponsored a third-place show, but Nielsen demographics analysis helped to change that standard. Their analysis showed that television was failing to attract the audiences most sought by advertisers. Evidence demonstrated that the incidence of television viewing dropped as the educational and income level of a household rose. College-educated viewers watched an average of 8.19 hours of primetime television per week, more than three hours less than those with an eighth grade education.<sup>578</sup> Research on viewer income showed a similar trend. Those viewers who

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<sup>577</sup> A.C. Nielsen Company, *Nielsen Television '69* (Chicago, IL: A.C. Nielsen Co.), 18.

<sup>578</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

made more than fifteen thousand dollars a year watched far less television (19.40 hours per week) than those who made less than five thousand a year (28.44 hours per week), a disparity of more than thirty-two percent.<sup>579</sup> Additionally, the Nielsen Company began publishing demographics information that specifically contained the viewing preferences of the 18-34 age demographic, something absent from analyses from the early 1960s.

Those numbers, like the statistics for viewer income and education, also demonstrated that the networks had major blind spots toward its most upwardly mobile viewers. The average viewer watched 23.11 hours of television per week, but the 18-34 demographic watched only 20.20 hours per week, or thirteen percent less.<sup>580</sup> Conversely, the most frequent viewers were people over the age of sixty-five (31.55 hours per week), people who made less than five thousand dollars a year (28.44 hours per week), and people with less than an eighth grade education (26.23 hours per week), groups with the least amount of disposable income. Advertisers, upon seeing these numbers, could no longer justify spending as much money sponsoring shows that clearly did not appeal to the more upwardly mobile demographics. By 1970, they happily sponsored critical favorites with small but loyal audiences of moneyed urban professionals.<sup>581</sup>

CBS desperately needed to adopt a version of the NBC strategy in order to maintain its dominance, but in a throwback to the early days of the Red Scare, the network remained so fearful that it was willing to stick with a losing programming strategy in order to avoid attracting controversy. Southern people, locations, and themes

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<sup>579</sup> Ibid.

<sup>580</sup> A.C. Nielsen Co., *Nielsen Television '69*, 14.

<sup>581</sup> Mark Alvey, "Too Many Kids and Old Ladies," 52.

remained popular, but suddenly they were no longer a guarantee of spectacular ratings success. They could not depend on the South to save the shows' status in the ratings, as that region comprised only 14.4% of the total viewership and had consistently had some of the lowest rates of primetime viewing in the country.<sup>582</sup> In the face of these statistics, rural comedies no longer drew the most desirable advertisers. Most of the CBS affiliates were located in smaller markets and its loss of ratings dominance in the late 1960s, combined with its refusal to modernize its schedule, meant that it was getting increasingly difficult to add new and profitable affiliates in cities.<sup>583</sup> Continuing on its current path, CBS would stagnate while its competitors flourish. Chairman William Paley, CBS President Frank Stanton, and network President Robert Wood all agreed that in order to preserve the network's status as the number one network, something needed to change. In 1970, they found the man who had the solution.

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<sup>582</sup> A.C. Nielsen Company, *Nielsen Television '66*, 8,16; *Nielsen Television '69*, 10.

<sup>583</sup> Steven Alan Carr, "On the Edge of Tastelessness: CBS, the Smothers Brothers, and the Struggle for Control," *Cinema Journal* 31:4 (Summer 1992): 7.

## Chapter 7. The Rural Massacre and the Demise of Rural Comedy

In 1970, CBS was in a state of flux. The network, mired down with a slew of aging rural comedies and steadily losing ratings ground to its competitors, had difficulty making a transition toward more modern programming. Its most high profile attempt at more relevant programming, *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, created so much controversy that the network jettisoned the show in favor of yet another rural-themed comedy. CBS' stable of rural comedies remained popular, but by the 1970s, the genre no longer guaranteed success. Programs like *Mayberry RFD* and *Hee Haw* still drew some of the biggest audiences, but they did not even make the Top 20 among more affluent and educated viewers or viewers in the largest metropolitan areas.<sup>584</sup> Since advertisers started to seek out programs that attracted a smaller number of more affluent, urban viewers, CBS needed to change its programming strategy quickly or risk sliding into irrelevance and possible financial difficulty.

That same year, CBS hired Fred Silverman as the head of programming. Silverman was known in the entertainment industry as a phenom who parlayed a master's thesis containing an intricate analysis of ABC's 1950s programming schedule into a television career in the early 1960s. Silverman worked at a local station in Chicago before becoming the director of daytime programming at CBS in 1963. After successfully re-vamping the daytime schedule and earning major profits for the network, CBS, in the spring of 1970, promoted Silverman to vice-president of network programming. He

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<sup>584</sup> A.C. Nielsen Company, *Nielsen Television '71* (Chicago, IL: A.C. Nielsen Company, 1971), 18.

replaced Michael Dann, who had held the position since 1963. Dann had presided over one of the most lucrative periods in CBS history, which happened to coincide with the reign of rural comedy. Although Dann was not known for his sophistication, he was adept at the strategy of least objectionable programming. That strategy led him to program a steady stream of rural comedies throughout the 1960s, a decision that made the network a lot of money but also contributed to the extreme loss of prestige and affluent viewers that the network now sought to attract. CBS promoted Fred Silverman because the network finally realized that in order to remain competitive in the marketplace, it needed people who could develop a long-term strategy to revolutionize its programming to stay relevant, not people like Dann who could only think in terms of short-term ratings.

When Silverman took the job, he had definite ideas about the direction CBS programming should take. He was a strong advocate of strategic scheduling to target demographics and realized that CBS' demography was making it the network for the rural and aged, two demographics most advertisers no longer cared about due to their lack of consumer power. One of Silverman's goals was to gear more of the network's shows toward the newly coveted 18 to 34 age group, a shift that demonstrates the newfound purchasing power of the now- adult baby boomers.<sup>585</sup> Doing so would firmly move the network away from the lowest common denominator strategy and would give CBS a stronger chance of reaching an audience likely to buy advertisers' products.<sup>586</sup> Silverman, who at 32 was sixteen years younger than his predecessor, was in a unique

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<sup>585</sup> In the Nielsen Company's statistics for 1967 and prior, there is only information on the viewing habits of children, teens and adults. In the 1969 ratings information, they included statistics specifically for the 18 to 34 age demographic.

<sup>586</sup> Slater, *This is...CBS*, 253-254.

position to understand what baby boomers wanted to watch because he was close to their age. He knew that one of the keys to revolutionizing the CBS programming lineup was eliminating rural comedy.

Network founder and chairman William Paley was reluctant to implement Silverman's plan, since rural comedies still made money. Silverman and the network president, Robert Wood, outnumbered Paley, however. Since taking over control of the network in 1969, Wood had continually expressed disdain for the rural reputation the network seemed intent on maintaining. He was disgusted by the success of *Hee Haw* and the continued revenue stream stemming from CBS' stable of rural comedies. Shows like *Red Skelton* and *The Beverly Hillbillies* had long past their prime but remained in good standing because their ratings were still high enough to bring in decent advertising revenue. For two seasons, Wood had proposed "de-ruralizing" the CBS schedule and divesting of aging variety shows as part of the network's rejuvenation.<sup>587</sup> In an effort to jump-start the adjustment, he famously told Paley, "a parade will be coming down the street and you may watch it from your rocking chair and it will go by you. Or you might get up from that chair and get into the parade so that when it goes by your house, you will be leading it, not watching it."<sup>588</sup> In Wood, Silverman had a strong ally in the push for programs that were both socially relevant and appealing to advertisers.

Shortly after Silverman's promotion, there were a series of changes that signaled the beginning of the end for rural comedy. At the end of the 1969-1970 season, CBS had six programs in the Top 21. While four of those programs (*Mayberry RFD*, *The Beverly*

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<sup>587</sup> Mark Alvey, "Too Many Kids and Old Ladies," 40-41.

<sup>588</sup> Slater, *This is...CBS*, 254.

*Hillbillies*, *The Glen Campbell Good-Time Hour*, and *Hee Haw*) were part of the fading rural trend, the others, *Gunsmoke* and *The Red Skelton Hour*, were both even more outdated. Both shows debuted in the mid-1950s, and represented genres that felt increasingly old-fashioned in the early 1970s.<sup>589</sup> Indeed, CBS had not debuted a new western in nearly a decade due to parental and congressional concerns about violence. The network continued to cling to the variety format and tried to find ways to reinvent it, but by the 1970s, most variety shows were on the way out because they were unpopular with the targeted demographic. All six CBS shows in the Top 21 represented an era that was quickly fading into television history.

Fred Silverman, who finished graduate school in 1960 and became a part of the entertainment industry the following year, when the blacklist was nearly at an end, was part of a new generation of television executives. His cohort had partially grown up with television and understood that controversy was not inherently indicative of subversive politics. While in the 1950s and even into the late 1960s, content that challenged the status quo indicated subversion (as evidenced by the Smothers Brothers saga), the 1970s saw a major turn around in the outlook of the average US viewer. While the nation still faced a stagnating economy still reeling from the effects of the Vietnam War, the war had already reached its peak by 1969. The civil rights movement was on the wane, and the number of race-related riots dropped. At the time, it seemed as though the US was finally in a period of recovery after the repeated traumas of the 1960s.

Despite having survived the turmoil of the previous decade, Americans did not escape the 1960s unscathed. They had gotten used to a high level of drama in the

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<sup>589</sup> While the programs were still attracting a large number of viewers, Nielsen data indicates that the average audience age skewed older and more rural.

nation's political and cultural life, and that exposure had the potential to change viewing preferences. In 1968 alone, six major news events received extensive coverage on network television: President Johnson's State of the Union, the funerals of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, the Democratic and Republican National Conventions, and the presidential election in November. Nielsen research indicates that, far from being disinterested, the overwhelming majority of Americans found these events engaging enough to watch them on television, as opposed to watching some other program or simply turning the television off. President Johnson's State of the Union address reached fifty-eight percent of homes, and coverage for some of the events reached as many as ninety-two percent of homes.<sup>590</sup> Heightened levels of viewership for coverage of major national news events indicated that viewers were interested and engaged in all of the dramatic changes taking place in the country, and not necessarily trying to hide from them.

All of that exposure to groundbreaking national and world events potentially left the American public more jaded than before and changed its viewing preferences. For an audience used to seeing images of war, riots, and protest on their televisions for much of the 1960s, shows like *Petticoat Junction* no longer satisfied the needs of many viewers. Those kinds of shows now appealed mostly to an aging audience that skewed older all the time, the people probably most appalled by war protesters and riots, who needed a dose of nostalgic, all-white, escapism. The younger generation, which had distinguished itself by supporting protests and riots, at least on a superficial level, now wanted to watch something more relevant. The networks had to pay attention to the "younger generation,"

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<sup>590</sup> A.C. Nielsen Company, *Nielsen Television '69*, 2.

also known as the Baby Boomers, because their numbers and purchasing power were on the verge of eclipsing their parents, especially now as they entered the work force in droves. Now that the country had entered a period of relative peace and affluence, and younger viewers expressed interest in more socially relevant programming, the network felt secure in exploring more controversial fare. The success of shows like *Laugh-In* and *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* had demonstrated the potential of including a dose of subversion in entertainment, and the networks realized that they would not necessarily be condemned as communists for delving into controversial political and cultural issues.

It was in this mindset that Fred Silverman, with the assistance of Robert Wood and the acquiescence of William Paley, initiated what is known in the entertainment industry as the “rural purge.”<sup>591</sup> In the spring of 1970, Bob Wood suggested a trial period for Fred Silverman’s new programming strategy. The network would remove three proven but aging favorites from the primetime lineup: *Petticoat Junction*, *The Red Skelton Show*, and another show starring a holdover from the early days of television, *The Jackie Gleason Show*. In their places, the network would put new topical shows designed to attract younger, urban viewers. Most of the remaining rural comedies were then exiled to Tuesday night, then one of the weakest nights on the primetime schedule. As Silverman put it, Tuesday night became the “receptacle for the crap we hadn’t cancelled yet.”<sup>592</sup> Changing timeslots was often a death sentence for television shows, so the combination of that plus a bad timeslot meant that the shows would experience a

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<sup>591</sup> In interviews, network executives and actors from the time period all use the term “rural purge” when discussing the cancellation of rural comedies in 1970-1971. It is unknown who coined the term.

<sup>592</sup> Interview with Fred Silverman, Part 4 of 13.

precipitous drop in ratings, therefore warranting their cancellation.<sup>593</sup> The theory was that CBS would experience a momentary drop in ratings, but the lull would allow the network room to begin changing its focus while still having the comfort zone provided by the remaining rural comedies.<sup>594</sup>

In place of the old shows, CBS tried out a combination of topical dramas and cheeky adult comedies, many of which included minority characters and socially relevant themes. The show that the network pinned many of its hopes on was *Mary Tyler Moore*, which could not have been more different from its predecessors. The program, starring the eponymous actress, was about a single, educated woman, Mary Richards, navigating her way in the urban workplace. She was not an impressionable young girl, but a reasonably experienced woman of thirty. Although the show touched upon Mary's dating life, the goal of the show was not to find her a husband. She even alluded to the fact that she used birth control. She was not just a secretary, but an associate producer at a television station with real authority. Mary Richards was a far cry from the gentle and domesticated women who populated rural comedies, and for that matter, the role that Moore herself had inhabited only four years before as a housewife on *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. A decade before, Mary Richards might have been condemned as a radical character because of her then-unconventional lifestyle. In the more jaded culture of the 1970s, however, she seemed sensible and even wholesome.

*Mary Tyler Moore* fared the best out all the new shows in the slightly revamped CBS lineup. In its first season it won numerous awards, including four Emmys for Best Supporting Actor and Actress, Best Writing and Best Directing. Moore also won an

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<sup>593</sup> Ibid.

<sup>594</sup> Brown, *Television*, 57-58.

acting award at the Golden Globes. Critics also loved some of CBS' other new gritty dramas, which included *O'Hara*, *United States Treasury* and *Storefront Lawyers*, about a young lawyer who quits his cushy corporate job to open a non-profit venture that provided legal services to the underprivileged. Critical appreciation, however, did not translate into ratings. CBS ended up cancelling *Storefront Lawyers*, *O'Hara*, *United States Treasury*, and most of the other shows in its revamped primetime lineup for the 1970-1971 season. *Mary Tyler Moore* was one of the few holdovers. Despite not even cracking the Top 20 programs, or even the top programs for wealthy and educated households, the show did have one important attribute. It was the thirteenth highest rated show in what the Nielsen Company referred to as the Metro "A" counties, defined as all of the counties belonging to the twenty-five largest metropolitan areas.<sup>595</sup> The show was reaching its intended urban audience.

CBS executives like Fred Silverman were loathe to admit why *Mary Tyler Moore* was so much more successful than its counterparts. In an attempt to ease its most loyal viewers into its new strategy, the network had placed *Mary Tyler Moore* between *Hee Haw* and *The Beverly Hillbillies*. The lead-in program, *Hee Haw*, was solidly ranked in the Top 20 shows, providing *Mary Tyler Moore* a huge lead-in audience. While that audience dropped off substantially enough that *Mary Tyler Moore* could not compete with *Hee Haw's* ratings, the new show still kept enough of its lead-in audience to develop staying power where the other new shows failed. For CBS, rural comedies were the proverbial sugar that made the medicine go down.

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<sup>595</sup> A.C. Nielsen Company, *Nielsen Television '71*, 18.

The relative failure of CBS' tentative push toward relevant programming meant that the remaining rural shows, which included *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Mayberry RFD*, seemed safe for the time being. In an interview with entertainment columnist Bob Thomas, Buddy Ebsen, who played Jed Clampett on *The Beverly Hillbillies*, confidently claimed that he felt his show had a strong enough demographic showing to avoid cancellation.<sup>596</sup> Ebsen clearly ignored the fact that *Petticoat Junction*, also one of the Henning rural trilogy series, had been cancelled the year before despite the same relatively high ratings. In Ebsen's defense, however, it seemed that by all appearances, CBS' attempt at relevancy and capturing a more youthful market had failed.

Ebsen, and others like him who believed that CBS would now have to resume its old reliance on rural comedy, underestimated the degree to which CBS network president Bob Wood and vice president of programming Fred Silverman detested what remained of the network's rural comedies. When *Hee Haw* creator and writer John Aylesworth met with Silverman and Wood in March 1971 to discuss the show's prospects, Aylesworth recalled that the men seemed almost annoyed at his show's continued success. In a bid to make Americans tired of rural comedy, Silverman had put *Hee Haw* amongst two other rural comedies on the same night, but ratings did not drop accordingly. At the time of Aylesworth's meeting with Silverman and Wood, *Hee Haw* was going strong in ninth place.

The vehemence with which both Silverman and Wood hated rural comedies speaks to a hatred of rural comedy that goes far beyond scheduling preferences. Decades after Silverman left CBS to pursue jobs at rival networks, his distaste for rural

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<sup>596</sup> Bob Thomas column from 7 July 1970, Folder 19 "Buddy Ebsen," Box 10, Collection 299, Bob Thomas Papers, UCLA PASC.

programming remained palpable. Asked in one interview about his role in the rural purge, Silverman sneered when talking about shows like *The Beverly Hillbillies*, and was dismissive of the genre and its contributions to CBS' commercial success.<sup>597</sup> In his eyes, rural comedies were a waste of airtime and appealed to people whose opinions and tastes did not matter anyway. Such lasting animosity attests to personal feelings about rural programming that extend beyond a business decision. After all, rural comedies were no more than a temporary and minor inconvenience to CBS executives. Programs like *Hee Haw*, while not in line with CBS executives' plans to make the primetime lineup more sophisticated, still attracted enough viewers to force advertisers to take notice, regardless of quality of viewership. The network was not losing money on any of its remaining rural comedies, so they were not exactly dead weight on the schedule.

Instead, the top brass at CBS seemed to hate rural programs because they disliked the people to whom the shows appealed. That top executives like Silverman routinely referred to the rural comedies on his own network as "shit-kicking" was a testament to the degree of condescension and resentment that they felt toward the programs. Although most of the shows on CBS were of dubious social relevance, Silverman did not say that all such shows were of the "shit-kicking" variety, and more than one person recalls Silverman utilizing that terminology specifically in relation to rural comedy. While the term has multiple meanings, some of which have positive connotations, shit-kicking is often used as a derogatory term for a rural, working class person, meant to denote that they are working on the farm all day and therefore have shoes caked in manure.<sup>598</sup>

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<sup>597</sup> Interview with Fred Silverman, Part 4 of 13.

<sup>598</sup> Definition found in *Oxford English Dictionary*.

Silverman's long-standing hatred of rural comedy places his usage of the phrase in the negative context.

How Silverman developed such strong emotions toward rural comedies may have been a function of his career. When writing his masters thesis in 1959, he saw that ABC utilized rural comedy specifically as a way to reach out to rural people and families. As the years went on, he may have fixated more on the rural attraction and the new evidence that indicated adults often only watched rural comedies because that is what their children preferred. In Silverman's thesis, his tone did not reflect any distaste for rural comedy, suggesting that his feelings about the genre may have developed over the course of his career in the 1960s.

Silverman's career up to the point of his promotion to vice president of programming in 1970 occurred during a decade of broad rural comedies that while popular with the masses, did nothing to endear themselves to people who considered themselves of a more refined class. Featuring people with country accents saying and doing ridiculous things, rural comedies like *Gomer Pyle* and *Hee Haw* only reinforced previously existing stereotypes about what southern and rural people were like. The media and television critics, in discussing rural comedy, parroted and mimicked those same behaviors in their stories, thus solidifying the caricatures. The actors on the programs went to great lengths to publicly identify with their onscreen characters, thus making the caricatures seem even more realistic. Meanwhile, shows like the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* had skewered southern and rural social mores and mocked their racial intolerance. This multi-pronged media spotlight on southern-themed shows, people, and customs may have created some temporary publicity for the rural comedy genre, but

it also created an image of the South so monolithic that it became difficult to see southern and rural people as anything but childish, uneducated, out of touch, racists.

For executives looking to return some sophistication back into the former “Tiffany” network, it was a source of irritation that this group of undesirables, to whom they could not relate, was also their most loyal audience. Silverman had grown up in New York City and spent his entire life in major metropolitan areas, having no extended contact with southern people or rural life. Bob Wood had grown up in Boise, Idaho, but immediately left home after high school to attend college in Los Angeles, never to return.<sup>599</sup> Although Wood’s upbringing in Idaho might have allowed him some identification with his network’s core audience, his life choices indicate that he clearly had no desire to continue that affiliation. In fact, being a Midwestern boy in image-conscious Los Angeles may have exacerbated Wood’s desire to eliminate those parts of himself that connected him to his hometown. Silverman and Wood had nothing in common with the southern and rural audience, and had no desire to if the media portrayal of the South was any indication.

With that contempt in mind, in the spring of 1971, CBS executives decided to commit fully to their new demographics-based strategy and risk a temporary drop in ratings in service of that goal. Despite the relative failure of their first season of socially relevant programming, the network cancelled all remaining rural comedy shows and programs meant to appeal to rural and southern audiences. Between 1970 and 1971, the network cancelled a total of thirteen programs. Pat Buttram, who played Mr. Haney on

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<sup>599</sup> James A. Brown, “Robert Wood,” *Encyclopedia of Television* (Chicago: Museum of Broadcast Communications), <http://www.museum.tv/eotvsection.php?entrycode=woodrobert>, accessed August 13, 2012.

*Green Acres*, claimed that CBS had cancelled “every show with a tree in it.”<sup>600</sup> The only rural-themed program that remained on the primetime schedule was the *Glen Campbell Good Time Hour*, a program apparently deemed sophisticated enough to stay, despite its country music star host and the fact that it was among the lowest rated of all the rural-themed shows on the schedule in the spring of 1971. Indeed, almost all of the cancelled programs rated higher than Glen Campbell, but at this juncture, ratings did not matter so much as who was watching. While *Hee Haw* went on to a successful multi-decade run in syndication, ABC and NBC chose not to pick up any of CBS’ discarded rural shows. After a decade, the rural trend was officially over.

Not only did Silverman and Wood cancel almost all of the old rural comedies, they then embarked on a campaign to distance the network from its old image as the “Country Broadcasting System.” The network cancelled a development deal with Andy Griffith. Since leaving *The Andy Griffith Show* in 1968, Griffith had worked to distance himself from his rural comedy roots, but he was still too closely associated with the genre. His latest show for CBS, *Headmaster*, about an administrator at an elite California private school, aired in the fall of 1970 and had lasted only thirteen episodes. In the spring of 1971, the network had replaced it with *The New Andy Griffith Show*, a program that strongly echoed the “old” original. Although the new show was set in a small town as opposed to a sleepy hamlet, both shows took place in North Carolina and had a decidedly southern tinge. Even when Griffith returned to his more rural-oriented roots, the reception was tepid, and that program was also cancelled after thirteen episodes. Research on the viewership for both *Headmaster* and *The New Andy Griffith Show*

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<sup>600</sup> Harkins, *Hillbilly*, 203.

indicated that anything Griffith created for the network in the future would mainly attract fans of his old show, many of whom were rural and rapidly aging, so CBS had to cut Griffith loose.

Silverman and Wood took further public steps to disassociate themselves from CBS' rural comedy reputation. At a meeting of the National Association of Broadcasters in 1971, Fred Silverman gave a speech in which he declared that the networks had a responsibility not to air "mindless rural pap" like *Hee Haw*.<sup>601</sup> Sheldon Leonard, who had produced several of the old rural comedies including *The Andy Griffith Show* and *Gomer Pyle, USMC*, recalled Silverman adamantly and vocally resisting the idea of having any more "shit-kicking" shows on the network.<sup>602</sup>

Instead, the network looked to the future, building on the small but auspicious start created by *Mary Tyler Moore*. Two programs in particular spoke volumes about CBS' intentions and also about its continued relationship with its faithful southern and rural audiences: *All in the Family* and *The Waltons*. Although the shows represent Fred Silverman's insistence on separating CBS from its association with rural comedy, they paradoxically demonstrate the adoption of traditionally "southern" traits as national ones. The two programs successfully meld what were previously viewed as southern and rural experiences into the national narrative in a way that the rural comedies of the 1960s had not. More importantly, they were able to accomplish the feat while also burnishing CBS' reputation as a purveyor of prestige programming capable of attracting sophisticated audiences.

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<sup>601</sup> Aylesworth, *The Corn was Green*, 111.

<sup>602</sup> Interview with Sheldon Leonard, Part 4 of 5.

*All in the Family* aired first and received a major portion of the network's press during the 1971 season. The program first aired in January 1971 as a mid-season replacement and initially suffered from low ratings and some negative reviews. The show, a spinoff of a British series, was about a bigoted older man and his wife, living in an increasingly diverse neighborhood with their daughter and her liberal husband. The original program featured frank and often bigoted talk on the issues of racism and white supremacy. It had possibilities as a tentative first step toward examining racism and bigotry in the wake of the civil rights movement.

When initially developed, CBS was still hesitant about putting a program so cutting edge in its lineup, so some changes were made for the American series. Though geared toward young adults and fully within the urban aesthetic that CBS desired, the program also featured formulaic plotlines, easy to like characters, and little in the way of complexity. With the exception of the subject matter, it was no different than any other sitcom on television. The suggestion of newness, however, gave the show enough edge to remain attractive to the target audience.<sup>603</sup>

CBS placed the show on Saturday nights at 9:30, on the same night as *Mary Tyler Moore*. Silverman's long term plan was to devote Saturday nights to quality comedies. At first, it did not seem to work. *All in the Family* initially attracted underwhelming audiences. Critics, however, loved the show and debated it endlessly in the press, and soon the audience grew via word of mouth. By the end of the 1970-1971 season, the show was on its way to becoming a hit. It was partially the success of *All in the Family*, combined with that of *Mary Tyler Moore*, that gave CBS the courage to finally commit to its targeted demographic programming strategy. For the fall of 1971, CBS wanted *All in*

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<sup>603</sup> Brown, *Television*, 135.

*the Family* to become its new set piece. *All in the Family* took the first primetime spot on Saturday nights, with *Mary Tyler Moore* at nine-thirty. The lineup was a hit, and *All in the Family* quickly went on to become the top show on television for the next five seasons. In New York, the show typically boasted an eighty share for the timeslot, and in Los Angeles, a sixty-eight share. With such high numbers in the coveted “Metro A” counties, which contained 41 percent of the total televisions in the United States despite comprising only the 25 largest cities, the networks hardly cared whether the people in the smaller cities and more rural areas liked the show.<sup>604</sup> Both of the new flagship shows went on to receive numerous awards and accolades for their cutting-edge humor. By 1971, CBS had begun to shed its old cornpone image in favor of a return to the worldly and sophisticated network it had once prided itself on being. Just as in the late 1940s and early 1950s, it catered to the big cities, and that decision started to pay off.

In some ways, however, *All in the Family* was not as cutting edge as CBS pretended. CBS claimed that the show indulged in familiar stereotypes in order to cast a spotlight on prejudices and make them a source of laughter, but the show contained some elements that gave critics pause. Some critics were concerned that the show actually promoted the behaviors that it supposedly condemned. The ambiguity started from the pilot episode. Between 1968 and 1970, the networks passed around the rights to the show, with ABC initially shooting one pilot and CBS shooting the final two. In the first CBS pilot originally shown to critics, the show, like its British predecessor, focused primarily on generational issues between the Bunkers and their daughter and son-in-law. The set piece of the original pilot was a scene in which the Bunkers, returning home early

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<sup>604</sup> A.C. Nielsen Company, *Nielsen Television '72* (Chicago: A.C. Nielsen, 1972), 16.

from church, discover their daughter and her husband having sex. Some critics were dismayed to find that in the pilot that ultimately aired, CBS had cut that scene entirely and replaced it with more scenes of Archie hurling racial slurs and insults at his Polish son-in-law. *New York Times* writer Fred Ferretti found the change jarring and felt that CBS abused the show's cutting edge potential in hopes of getting more viewers through the use of shocking language.<sup>605</sup> Indeed, Archie Bunker simultaneously horrified and fascinated viewers with his wide and varied vocabulary of racial and ethnic slurs. The term "nigger" was off-limits, but words like "spook," "burr-head," and "coon" were acceptable. The show's use of such language on a regular basis led some to believe that the show propagated more stereotypes than it destroyed. Bigots all over the country could look to Archie Bunker as their voice of reason, something that CBS may have secretly counted upon.

The show's first season in 1971 did poorly in the ratings, but all of the controversy generated by critics created buzz. By the end of the spring, the controversy around *All in the Family* started to translate to increased viewers, to the point where CBS agreed to renew the show. During the 1971-1972 season, the first after the rural purge, the show's popularity exploded. The program's viewership averaged sixty percent all over the country, and upwards of seventy percent in urban areas. Many critics loved the show, and felt that most people who watched it were getting the point that Archie was a jerk for being a racist. One critic even hailed the show as a return to television's roots in ethnic comedy.<sup>606</sup>

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<sup>605</sup> Fred Ferretti, "Are Racism and Bigotry Funny?" *New York Times* (12 January 1971), 70.

<sup>606</sup> Arnold Hano, "Can Archie Bunker Give Bigotry a Bad Name?" *New York Times Magazine* (12 March 1972), 32.

There were many critics, however, who thought that the show did not make that point strongly enough. Benjamin Epstein, the national director of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai Brith, expressed concern that a "very funny program makes light of vicious ethnic slurs and makes the bigot tolerable." Laura Hobson, the author of the book *Gentleman's Agreement*, believed that CBS purposely held back Archie's bigotry just enough for him to be a redeemable character. To her, making a bigoted character into a loveable protagonist sent an unclear message, one easily cleared up by a willingness to display his prejudices to their full extent.<sup>607</sup> *Life* magazine's television reviewer took issue with CBS' assertion that exposing bigotry robbed the words of their power to shock and/or destroy. The reviewer felt that was an excuse, countering that creating an approximation of bigotry gave bigots a voice, and a prominent one at that.<sup>608</sup> Professing that watching the show was as pleasurable as fixing a septic tank, he called *All in the Family* a wretched program about the friendly neighborhood bigot and his hatred for "spooks, spics, wops, and fags." He called CBS on their "double-edged lie," saying that the network was selling us Archie as a bigoted buffoon worthy of our contempt, yet he was also charming, forgivable, and ultimately incapable of hurting the people he dislikes.<sup>609</sup> In the minds of these reviewers, CBS in its attempt to create a thought-provoking show about bigotry, had actually created an advertisement for the bigot.

*The Saturday Review* did multiple stories on *All in the Family* in its first couple of seasons, both of which were equally critical of the show's premise. Robert Lewis Shayon,

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<sup>607</sup> Ibid.

<sup>608</sup> John Leonard, "Bigotry as a Dirty Joke," *Life* (19 March 1971), 10.

<sup>609</sup> Ibid.

the author of both articles, claimed that CBS' declaration of its honorable intentions for the show rang hollow. He pointed out that in order for the show to work, Archie had to remain blind to his own prejudice, in spite of the mounting evidence that demonstrates his wrongheadedness. His lack of insight rendered him not very useful in the cause of remedying prejudice. In fact, Shayon suggested Archie Bunker's brand of loveable prejudice was more dangerous than the extremist version, because he was free to verbalize a stream of unchecked hostilities without any repercussions.<sup>610</sup> Worse, in Shayon's view, was the fact that CBS knew that *All in the Family* was offensive and did nothing but encourage that viewpoint. CBS' awareness of the show's potential for backlash was apparent when it hired a bank of extra phone operators for the night of the show's debut in order to intercept the expected influx of outrage.

The response that CBS received in the form of phone calls, letters, and news editorials was indicative of the conflicting message that the show presented. The network received an overwhelmingly favorable response, with approximately seventy-five percent of responders providing positive feedback. The other twenty-five percent came from two opposing camps. New Yorkers, specifically, seemed to take umbrage with the show, which they thought was racist.<sup>611</sup> Most of the unfavorable commentary, however, came from hard-core bigots who resented that the show made Archie's bigotry seem foolish and thought the show was part of some insidious communist plot.<sup>612</sup> These two camps of negative response, despite their divergent opinions on the show's themes, indicate

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<sup>610</sup> Robert Lewis Shayon, "Love That Hate," *Saturday Review* (27 March 1971), 20.

<sup>611</sup> Hano, "Can Archie Bunker Give Bigotry a Bad Name," 32.

<sup>612</sup> Shayon, "Love That Hate," 20.

something about the viewers whose perceptions fell somewhere in between. What is clear is that everyone perceived Archie Bunker as racist. Some felt the show should have punished him more harshly for it, while others felt he deserved no punishment at all. In the middle there were many Americans who on some level identified with Archie and related to his prejudices, but also understood that those feelings were now considered inappropriate. Those viewers secretly rooted for Archie as the show's protagonist but also understood when circumstances contrived to make his prejudice look ridiculous.

In theory, these were the people that the show's creator, Norman Lear, hoped to reach. Lear claimed that he modeled the character of Archie Bunker after his own father, and frequently stated in interviews that Americans had the same prejudices as Archie. He told the *New York Times Magazine* that he wanted to prove that "bigotry exists in good people."<sup>613</sup> It was interesting that he chose to make his point using a New Yorker rather than a southerner, with whom Archie's prejudices were more typically associated. Lear's choice indicated an awareness of the universality of American prejudice that had not previously existed on television.

Lear's choice of traits for Archie Bunker served a number of other, possibly unintended, purposes. One possibility is that by using an aging, working class man from an unfashionable borough of New York, Lear was giving his more sophisticated audiences permission to look down on Archie for his prejudices. If the show had been about a young Manhattanite who expressed similar sentiments, it would have taken on a much more uncomfortable tone. Using an older man in the role allowed the show's

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<sup>613</sup> Hano, "Can Archie Bunker Give Bigotry a Bad Name," 124.

targeted younger audience to overlook their own lingering biases in favor of decrying Archie's as a passé relic of the old guard.

In a similar fashion, the use of an older, northern man as the show's source of negativity and bigotry may also have made it more comfortable to watch for the increasing number of young, southern urbanites. Having just experienced decades of civil rights struggles, the South was still making peace with its violent history of racism. Having Archie Bunker be an older man represented the now-outdated views of a previous generation for southerners as well as the rest of the country. Young urban southerners in growing cities like Atlanta could look at him and for the first time, feel a sense of superiority in their own growing racial enlightenment. In a way, Lear was replacing the old southern mudsill with a new version based on age and socioeconomic status.

Another possibility is that CBS wanted the show to reflect the network's new commitment to providing programming that appealed to a more "urban" aesthetic. The views of the show's protagonist lined up clearly with the hard-line racism long associated with the South, but the network executives made it clear on many occasions that they were not interested in that backdrop. Besides, given the South's contentious and violent racial history, a comedy about an aging, racist Alabamian would have yielded more wincing than laughter. Such a character could very well have a back story that included lynching, membership in the Ku Klux Klan, and other unsavory instances of violent racism. Archie was a racist, but he was a northern racist and therefore, in the eyes of the rest of the country, inherently innocuous. However harmless his bigotry, it was also an authentic trait. Lear also felt strongly that Archie's prejudices were not out of character for his time, place, and station in life, and claimed that any guy in Queens would express

the same sentiments as Archie Bunker about African-Americans, Jews, and hippies, just not within a twenty-three minute time period.<sup>614</sup>

That Lear utilized an aging Queens resident instead of a southerner to make his point on bigotry also indicates a sea change in the American public's understanding of bigotry. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the South had made huge strides toward accepting at least a modicum of racial integration and was beginning to more closely resemble the rest of the country both culturally and economically. Between 1940 and 1960, southerners had accomplished a major migration from rural areas to the cities, for a combination of reasons ranging from desperation stemming from the lack of jobs during the Great Depression to the overuse of farm land and sinking crop prices.

The outbreak of World War II led to an increase in military sector jobs, increasing the number of southern migrants coming to cities in search of factory work. The military expanded their training bases in the South and built new ones in the region because of the large amounts of available land. As a result, there was an enormous infusion of cash and middle class jobs into the region. As people flocked toward the military jobs, housing shortages emerged, spurring a rash of new construction. The combination of people, money, jobs, and construction turned once rural areas into bustling centers of commerce. One of the most prominent examples was northern Virginia, which was mostly farmland at the outbreak of World War II, when the Department of Defense purchased 280 acres in Arlington in order to build its headquarters there.<sup>615</sup> The building of the Pentagon coupled with the building and expansion of multiple military bases in the area led to a population

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<sup>614</sup> "Family Fun," *Newsweek* (15 March 1971), 68.

<sup>615</sup> Alfred Goldberg, *The Pentagon: The First Fifty Years* (Department of Defense: Government Printing Office, 1992), 34.

boom. Between 1940 and 1950, the three counties in proximity to the Pentagon; Arlington, Fairfax, and Falls Church, grew by more than 137 percent.<sup>616</sup> They were hardly the only southern towns to experience such record growth. Of the 32 fastest growing counties in the country following World War II, 20 were in the South.<sup>617</sup>

By 1960, the combination of migration and development of southern urban areas meant that more southerners lived in cities than in rural areas.<sup>618</sup> The middle class was stronger, and more than half of the southern work force held white collar jobs, a quarter of which were managerial and professional.<sup>619</sup> In the second half of the twentieth century, the South, and North Carolina in particular, also established itself as a banking center. Politically, southerners demonstrated a newfound appreciation for moderate and articulate politicians who publicly supported nationally held ideals about equality and racial cooperation. Such preferences were a far cry from the populist demagogues so popular in earlier decades.<sup>620</sup> The South was headed toward middle class respectability, and further away from the caricatures portrayed in the rural comedies in the 1960s.

Meanwhile, the rest of the country seemed to regress in terms of social and cultural values. While the 1950s and 1960s featured a constant barrage of media images of the bigoted white south defending segregation, by the 1970s, such images were more likely to come from the North than the South. As the last vestiges of the civil rights

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<sup>616</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1950 Census, Volume 2, Part 1 (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1950), 23.

<sup>617</sup> Ibid.

<sup>618</sup> Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, xiv-xv.

<sup>619</sup> Numan Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980: A History of the South* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 262-263; John Shelton Reed, *Southern Folk, Plain and Fancy*, 64.

<sup>620</sup> Bartley, *The New South*, 400.

movement arrived above the Mason-Dixon Line in the form of school busing and integration of neighborhoods, citizens responded negatively. Race riots abounded in northern cities like Boston as African-Americans attempted to buy homes in all-white neighborhoods and gain access to formerly all-white schools. Southern politicians openly complained that northerners were just as committed to segregation as southerners had been, only to have northern politicians retort that their form of segregation was different from the “moral degradation” of the southern system. Senator Abraham Ribicoff deplored the monumental hypocrisy of the situation, claiming that “as long as the North hides in lily white suburbs and as long as they say this is a southern problem, we’re not going to attack the basic problem.”<sup>621</sup>

Senator Ribicoff’s concerns about northern racial hypocrisy is telling in light of the story trajectory of *All in the Family* and the network’s lack of response to criticism. Having achieved massive ratings success with Archie Bunker’s seemingly loveable bigotry, the network did nothing to discourage producers from frequently portraying Archie’s bigotry while also making him a sympathetic character. That characterization brought protests from some very loud critics. Robert Shayon’s theory was that CBS had no incentive to change *All in the Family* because it was the top show on television for most of the 1970s. If Archie Bunker ever became aware of his distorted worldview, the show’s premise would be undermined. To change the formula might be more instructive to the viewer and might help that viewer examine his or her own prejudices, but it would also destroy the show’s success.<sup>622</sup> Nobody wanted to see a reformed, racially liberal

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<sup>621</sup> Ibid., 418.

<sup>622</sup> Robert Lewis Shayon, “Archie’s Other Side,” *Saturday Review* (8 January 1972), 8.

Archie Bunker. Ratings were ultimately far more important to CBS than the mass enlightenment of the audience.

*All in the Family's* success had some critics concerned, particularly as the show went on without any noticeable change in Archie Bunker's worldview. Critics who had raved over the show's cutting edge humor in the first season grew weary of it after a couple of years. CBS and the show's cast all saw the show as some great lamentation on the preposterous nature of American bigotry, but when Archie's bigoted worldview never changed despite his constantly being made to look foolish, such claims rang hollow after a couple of years. Instead, the possibility crept into the minds of some critics that the show provided the so-called Silent Majority with someone to root for, and the show's formula would never persuade them to do otherwise.

Other aspects of the *All in the Family* lend credence to the possibility that it was a show for conservative bigots masquerading as a satire. One was the fact that its portrayals of African-Americans were often stereotypical almost to the point of being offensive. A major plotline in the show centered around the fact that a black family had moved into the Bunkers' previously all-white neighborhood in Astoria, Queens. George and Louise Jefferson, played by Sherman Helmsley and Isabel Sanford, provided the perfect foils for Archie. Louise was a smarter and more worldly version of Edith, while George was the black version of Archie. George, a successful business man, was as full of confidence in his superiority as Archie, and just as racist. It was their son Lionel, however, who created problems for the show's producers. Lionel's role was to verbally spar with Archie, and

the producers found it difficult to stage those arguments in a way that would not “upset” the audience.<sup>623</sup>

According to Mike Evans, the actor who played Lionel, one of the solutions was to have him occasionally affect what he referred to as a “Steppinfetchit manner.”<sup>624</sup> Evans was referencing the black comedic actor Stepin Fetchit, who rose to fame playing numerous versions of his signature character “the laziest man in the world.” Fetchit often embodied racial stereotypes in his roles, particularly laziness and a perpetual willingness to shuck and jive for the benefit of white people. Evans said that he did not mind behaving in such a manner if the scene called for it, but he recalled that there were times when the script required him to do so for no apparent reason, and that he had complained.<sup>625</sup> The fact that the writers defaulted to racial stereotypes in their writing of Lionel’s character, and the fact that such treatment went uncommented upon by the show’s producers and directors until Evans complained, indicate a disconnect between the show’s and the network’s insistence on its commitment to demonstrating the ridiculous nature of bigotry. Evans’ testimony demonstrates that while the show’s production team may have been interested in making bigotry seem unreasonable, they were only interested in the white perspective. Actually changing the portrayal of the young African-American man in order to alter how white viewers perceived such characters was only a peripheral concern.

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<sup>623</sup> Interview with John Rich, Part 10 of 14, Interview by Henry Colman (Los Angeles, CA: Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, 1999), accessed 18 May 2012. <http://emmytvlegends.org/interviews/people/john-rich>

<sup>624</sup> Hano, “Can Archie Bunker Give Bigotry a Bad Name,” 125.

<sup>625</sup> Ibid.

According to director John Rich, the Lionel character was the most problematic, even before Mike Evans expressed concerns about his portrayal. Rich asserted that his part was one of the most difficult to cast, for reasons that once again indicate that the show was not as progressive as it liked to appear. Producer Norman Lear initially chose actor Cleavon Little for the part, but Rich believed that Little was wrong for the part. Rich felt that Little possessed a “threatening aspect” that viewers would find off-putting, and that the production needed someone who would not be “offensive.” Producers ultimately cast Mike Evans, a young college student with no acting experience, in the role because “it wouldn’t upset you” when he argued with Archie.<sup>626</sup> Rich’s insistence on the non-threatening appearance of the Lionel character goes hand-in-hand with the writers’ tendency to render that character as a black stereotype. *All in the Family*’s production team wanted the show to be forward thinking in terms of its racial politics, and wanted it to make people uncomfortable, but the limit was set at allowing a “threatening” black man to argue with the show’s bigoted protagonist.

The episode “Lionel’s Engagement” provides another example of how the show’s desire to push the envelope had limits in practice. This 1974 episode featured Lionel bringing home his new fiancée, Jenny, to meet his family. The Jeffersons throw a party in honor of the couple, and all goes well until Jenny’s parents arrive. The event takes a turn for the tense when the Jeffersons discover that Jenny’s father is white, and that Jenny is of mixed race. The audience is caught off-guard by this revelation, because the girl is rather dark-skinned. Had the father never appeared on-screen, neither the audience nor the characters would have ever guessed she did not have two black parents. Her dark coloring made it possible to keep her “secret” safe until the end of the episode, thus

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<sup>626</sup> Interview with John Rich, Part 10 of 14.

allowing for maximum dramatic and comedic payoff, but it also prevented the producers from having to romantically pair Lionel with a lighter-skinned girl. Throughout the episode, Lionel and Jenny are affectionately touching and kissing each other, and if Jenny had a lighter skin tone, such sustained physical romantic contact would not have been considered acceptable. The show featured a mixed-race couple in the form of Jenny's black mother and white father, but they were only onscreen for a couple of minutes, were not affectionate with each other, and they barely touched each other.<sup>627</sup> Although the show was meant to demonstrate the remaining social stigma attached to mixed-race relationships, in practice, the show shied away from depicting that type of relationship.

Such limitations would once have been blamed on the preferences of southern viewers, but CBS could no longer fall back on that excuse, because southern and rural areas were not the targeted audience. The network created *All in the Family* specifically for the top thirty metropolitan areas, almost all of which were north of the Mason-Dixon Line. Dictating that a non-threatening black actor had to behave as a stereotype of his race in the face of vehement bigotry or that Lionel's supposedly mixed-race love interest had to be black attests to the fact that even the educated and sophisticated northern audience that CBS aimed for had limits to their open-mindedness. They only felt comfortable judging Archie's behavior if his black counterpart conformed to stereotypes, or at least, this is what the network believed.

In contrast to the show's treatment of bigotry, the actors and producers had more exacting ideas when it came to the show's treatment of religion. In one infamous incident, the show, was taping a Christmas episode in front of a live studio audience. In

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<sup>627</sup> *All in the Family*, "Lionel's Engagement," Season 4, Episode 20, originally aired February 9, 1974. Directed by John Rich, written by Norman Lear and Michael Ross.

the episode, the Bunkers received a Christmas card from a used car salesman. Edith remarked in passing that she remembered his card from last year- the Christ child driving a blue convertible. At that point in the taping, Carroll O'Connor objected to the joke. O'Connor, himself a Catholic, thought the studio audience would find it offensive. At that point, the producers put the issue to a vote among the studio audience members. Although there was intense discussion, the studio audience ultimately decided in favor of leaving the joke in. In spite of the audience giving its blessing to the joke, the final show aired with the Three Wise Men taking the place of the Christ child behind the wheel of the card's blue convertible.<sup>628</sup>

The Christmas card joke was only a minor part of that particular episode of *All in the Family*, and not vital to the plot, yet Carroll O'Connor felt it was controversial enough to warrant discussion and the network ultimately felt uncomfortable enough with the flippant reference to remove it. The controversy over a seemingly innocuous joke indicates that despite the show's avowed commitment to testing the limits of social mores, there were limits. While the producers, actors and the network felt comfortable with Archie Bunker's profusely racist language and unabashed bigotry, they were not so willing to accommodate flippancy toward Christianity. These two concerns, the portrayal of bigotry and flippancy toward religion, are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they are both indicators of the network's priorities. When it came to primetime programming, CBS was cognizant of the fact that while Americans were willing to model and make a joke out of racism and bigotry as a major theme, they might not prove so open-minded about even the most inconsequential flippant religious references in the same context. While some of the urban, educated, audience might have appreciated Edith's joke about

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<sup>628</sup> Hano, "Can Archie Bunker Give Bigotry a Bad Name," 126.

the baby Jesus driving a convertible, on this particular subject, the network felt it was too much of a risk. Considering that CBS had endured months of protest concerning the show's portrayal of a sympathetic racist and simply ignored it, their concern about the reaction to the Jesus joke seems hypocritical.

Despite the seeming incongruities between *All in the Family's* stated purpose and its content, its popularity spoke to its ability to reach the viewing public. People enjoyed the show and viewed it as smart, cutting-edge comedy, while at the same time indulging in the show's abrasive bigotry. While *All in the Family* claimed some of the highest ratings in the post-rural purge era, CBS created yet another paradoxical hit around the same time: *The Waltons*. Like *All in the Family*, *The Waltons* served as a prestige program for CBS. Both programs attracted broad audiences, and both programs also created a sense of universality for experiences and ideas previously associated solely with southerners. Although in the case of *All in the Family*, the effect was to establish a sense that bigotry was a national problem instead of a southern one, *The Waltons* infused a story of rural life with a sense of commonality that transcended regional borders. Far from the rural comedies of the 1960s, which emphasized the outrageous and defiant aspect of southerners in relation to people of other regions, *The Waltons* came across more as Americans who just happened to be southerners.

*The Waltons* sprang from a television movie broadcast on December 19, 1971 entitled *The Homecoming: A Christmas Story*. The movie was about the Waltons, a poor, Depression-era family living in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. The script, written by Earl Hamner, was based on his childhood experiences growing up poor in a large household consisting of his grandparents, parents, and six brothers and sisters. The movie

received excellent reviews and ratings, prompting CBS to create a series based on the movie, which began airing in the fall of 1972.

In light of the fact that CBS was actively trying to get away from its reputation as a purveyor of southern comedy, a show about a Depression-era southern mountain family seemed an odd choice. Local affiliates certainly did not immediately take to the idea; they initially balked at *The Waltons*.<sup>629</sup> While on its face the show appealed primarily to southern and rural audiences, CBS found that it had universal appeal, attracting the well-to-do as well as well as urban viewers in addition to children, the elderly, and the rural. It was as though the network had taken all of the sweet and nostalgic elements from 1960s rural comedies while removing the hillbilly humor and slapstick comedy, leaving behind a core of wholesome southern authenticity and morality. Southerners and rural people could identify with the show's portrayal of rural life while urban people could view the show through the lens of idealized nostalgia for simpler times. Older members of the audience saw it as some version of their youth, and children could relate to the family-friendly storylines, a function of the fact that children comprised the majority of the show's characters.

The show's overwhelming appeal was apparent in the ratings. Amidst a growing sea of socially relevant comedies and dramas like *Maude* and *M.A.S.H.*, *The Waltons* not only survived, but thrived. CBS placed the show on Thursday nights opposite *The Flip Wilson Show*, then the most popular show on television. By the end of the year, *The Waltons* had surpassed *Flip Wilson* in popularity. By 1973, an average of 30.4 percent of American households watched the show every week, making it the second most popular

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<sup>629</sup> Interview with Fred Silverman, Part 5 of 13.

show in the country. Although the show initially started out more popular among children than adults, within two years, it was in the Top Five for every demographic. The only other show to accomplish that feat in the early 1970s was *All in the Family*.<sup>630</sup>

At first glance, *All in the Family* and *The Waltons* have nothing in common. The programs catered to completely different audiences, dealt with two completely different types of families, and addressed dissimilar themes. They did not even take place during the same time period or in the same part of the country. However, both shows are instructive on CBS and its use of southern and rural themed programming in the 1960s. They also demonstrate how programming can be a reflection of the nation's changing relationship to the South and the assumptions often associated with that area of the country. For CBS, *The Waltons*, like *All in the Family* and *Mary Tyler Moore*, was a repudiation of the network's reputation as the Country Broadcast System.<sup>631</sup> The show was a way to demonstrate that it could create wholesome programming that appealed to people on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line without relying on the broad, silly comedies that characterized their primetime lineup in the 1960s. *The Waltons* demonstrated the positive characteristics of the South; the strong family ties, common sense, and old fashioned morality, without relying on old stereotypes.

The network shared that goal with the show's creator, Earl Hamner. Hamner was intent on dispelling the stereotypes created by the barrage of 1960s rural comedies. In the preface to the original script for *The Homecoming*, Hamner fleshed out the background of

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<sup>630</sup> A.C. Nielsen Company, *Nielsen Television '74* (Chicago, IL: A.C. Nielsen Company, 1974), 18.

<sup>631</sup> In a way, *The Waltons* was also a repudiation of the 1950s blacklist. Will Geer, who played Grandpa Zeb Walton, was blacklisted from 1951 to 1962 because of his long-standing association with political radicals. He had been the lover of a prominent communist in the 1930s and frequently agitated for communist causes during the same period. That the network that once blacklisted him for his supposed moral and political intransigence subsequently hired him to play the mischievous but morally upstanding Zeb Walton on a southern-based rural show was the height of irony.

the characters in the story, who were based on his own family. He wrote that actors, directors and writers rarely actually knew any mountain people, and therefore had a tendency to portray them as either “Beverly Hillbilly types” or as comic strip characters. He specified that his characters should never be played for laughs or cuteness. Instead, Hamner explained how, far from being clueless bumpkins, people like the Waltons were actually the prime examples of American strength and resiliency. He pointed out that while the Waltons would have an innocence born of their isolation from the larger world, they were also the descendents of pioneers, who survived difficult living conditions through sheer force of will.<sup>632</sup> The Waltons were the mountain version of a cowboy; quintessentially American characters, cut off from the rest of the world, often misunderstood by outsiders, and living by an inner code that did not necessarily match that of the modern world.

Hamner also sought to dispel some of the stereotypes long associated with southern mountain people because of comedic television characters. He specified that the Waltons, while poor, were not lazy and did not live in squalor. Their clothing was shabby and cheap, but not torn or tattered, in stark contrast to other overtly southern characters on previous CBS shows such as *The Real McCoys* and *The Beverly Hillbillies* and even *The Andy Griffith Show*. Their home was modest but not run down, and the father fixed broken items around the house to keep it in good repair. The mother was not fashionable but also neither dowdy nor depressing.<sup>633</sup> Unlike other characters of similar backgrounds portrayed on *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *The Real McCoys*, none of the

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<sup>632</sup> “The Homecoming,” Folder: The Waltons, Box 480, Television Scripts Collection, Collection 81, Performing Arts Special Collection, UCLA.

<sup>633</sup> “The Homecoming,” Folder: The Waltons, Box 480, Television Scripts Collection, Collection 81, Performing Arts Special Collection, UCLA.

Waltons were illiterate, and none of them spoke with comically strong southern accents. They valued education, and one of the primary story lines was the oldest son's quest to be the first one in his family to get a college education. None of the characters came across as ignorant. Essentially, they reversed every stereotype indicating that southerners and rural denizens were a degraded class of people and instead portrayed them as normal, middle-class people struggling with everyday issues.

In many ways, *The Waltons* were carrying on a lot of traditions found in rural comedy, but they were doing so in an unorthodox way. Like the old rural comedies, *The Waltons* portrayed southerners as kind, fun-loving people who were eager to help their neighbors and their community. Most episodes featured the family extending its own meager resources to help out neighbors who had even less. In the earlier seasons, the family was constantly taking in stray animals and people who had nowhere to go. In the final seasons, as World War II affected Waltons' Mountain, the family often found itself involved in helping the war effort. Each of the Walton boys enlisted in the military, and one of the girls married a man who was killed in Pearl Harbor. Meanwhile, the mother worked at the VA Hospital. Such selflessness was an integral part of the series and it mirrored the values found in 1960s rural comedy.

One major aspect of *The Waltons* that separated it from its rural comedy ancestors was its treatment of race. Unlike the 1960s rural comedies, which dealt with race by excluding it from discussion altogether and unlike *All in the Family*, which examined race as a source of direct confrontation and alienation, *The Waltons* addressed race and ethnicity in a forthright but non-confrontational manner. In one episode, John Boy and the rest of the Walton family helped out a family of recent Jewish émigrés who fled Nazi

Germany and subsequently feared anti-Semitic persecution in their new town. When the family's fear leads them to cancel their son's bar mitzvah, the Waltons ultimately offer to let the family hold the ceremony at their home as a gesture of neighborly goodwill.<sup>634</sup> In yet another episode, the Waltons assist a family of gypsies who become targets of discrimination and harassment by some of the locals. Although some of their neighbors call for the gypsies' arrest after they are caught breaking into an empty house to seek shelter from a storm, the Waltons try to help the family fix their wagon and nurse their sick baby back to help.<sup>635</sup> Such acts of humanity and kindness are features of nearly every episode of the series.

*The Waltons*, unlike other programs, did not just extend its open-minded treatment of race and ethnicity to white minorities. They were also one of the first series to feature African-Americans, not just as part of a teachable moment, but as regular characters that were part of the Waltons' Mountain community. While *The Andy Griffith Show* only featured one speaking role by an African-American in its eight-year run, and none of the rural comedies featured any black actors, *The Waltons* seamlessly incorporated black characters into the family's circle of friends on a semi-regular basis. They did so in the same way they integrated other characters; someone needed help, and the Waltons did what they could to provide assistance.

In the case of Verdie Grant, an African-American widow, John Boy Walton befriended her because he was teaching her how to read. Verdie was initially reluctant to

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<sup>634</sup> *The Waltons*, "The Ceremony," Season 1, Episode 9, originally aired November 9, 1972 on CBS. Directed by Vincent Sherman, written by Earl Hamner, Jr. and Nigel McKeand.

<sup>635</sup> *The Waltons*, "The Gypsies," Season 1, Episode 19, originally aired February 1, 1973 on CBS. Directed by Harry Harris, written by Earl Hamner, Jr. and Paul Savage.

allow John Boy into her life because of previous bad experiences with white people. However, Verdie eventually becomes a close friend of the Walton family and she appeared in seventeen episodes, along with various members of her own family.<sup>636</sup> Through Verdie's back story, the show acknowledged the racial tensions of the time and region, but also established through the Waltons' relationship with her that interracial connections were possible. After Verdie's initial appearance, which addressed her experience as a victim of racism and served as a moral lesson for John Boy, she was integrated into the show and no longer used as a cautionary tale. She moved past the stage of being a one-dimensional character used to teach naïve white people the dangers of southern blackness. Instead, the viewer met members of her family, saw her get married, and even learned about her family's history. She was not treated as the comic relief as George Jefferson was on *All in the Family*, nor was she a source of aggression; she was just an ordinary person. To be black and ordinary on television in the early 1970s was no small feat; one had to either be funny and angry like George Jefferson, be able to sing and dance like Flip Wilson, or be mysterious and cool like Bill Cosby on *I Spy*. Verdie Grant transcended those limits and in doing so, underscored her and the Waltons' common humanity in a way that other rural shows had not been willing to attempt.

Stripped of all the personality tics and eccentricities typically associated with southern characters, and imbued with a sense of humanity that allowed them to deal realistically with real life issues like racism, the Waltons came across as a typical American family in the midst of hard times. Although the characters spoke with southern accents and were explicit about their location in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia,

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<sup>636</sup> *The Waltons*, "The Scholar," Season 1, Episode 21, originally aired 22 February 1973. Directed by Lee Phillips, written by Earl Hamner, Jr.

viewers did not necessarily associate *The Waltons* with the South. The lack of regional association was in sharp contrast to the strong identification that viewers made between shows like *The Beverly Hillbillies* and the South. The irony is that while *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Green Acres* took place in Missouri, a border state that is only sporadically associated with the South, they are more associated with the region than *The Waltons*, which takes place in a state considered southern by every metric. In fact, as the show gained popularity, its southern locale became less and less important. With each season, the actors' accents became less and less distinguishable until finally, they disappeared altogether. Eventually, the Walton family became a stand-in for struggling middle class families everywhere as opposed to being uniquely representative of specific region.

*The Waltons*, along with *All in the Family*, remained popular for the duration of the 1970s. With the success of these shows came a complete re-vamping of the CBS primetime schedule that focused increasingly on hot-button political and cultural issues. Although both *The Waltons* and *All in the Family* had some philosophical ties to the rural craze of the 1960s, CBS programming continuously moved further away from that connection. *All in the Family* spun off two series, *The Jeffersons* and *Maude*, but neither addressed issues even remotely concerning southerners or their portrayal. CBS attempted a couple of vaguely southern and rural themed dramas in the early 1970s, but the network cancelled the shows quickly in the face of low ratings. By the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, there were no portrayals of southerners, rural people, or any way of life traditionally associated with southerners on primetime television.

None of the networks seriously revisited the idea of a southern or rural themed show during the 1970s. With the advent of quality demographics and the new push to

attract young, affluent, urban audiences with socially relevant programming, network executives had no desire to revisit the quaint rural comedies so beloved a decade prior. With the exception of *The Waltons*, CBS' rural purge was total. The network no longer needed those safe programs when it could get away with more risqué material. As the South assimilated more and more with the rest of the country, both politically and culturally, there was no longer a need to cater to southerners as a specialty audience. The older and rural audiences so loyal to CBS programming in the 1960s were no longer a vital demographic and no longer comprised a large enough audience to even guarantee good ratings. For anyone who still wanted to watch shows like *The Andy Griffith Show* or *Green Acres*, they were available as reruns in syndication on local stations. The rural themed programming so dominant in primetime in the 1960s was no relegated to afternoon and weekend timeslots.

The problem was that the rural comedies of the 1960s painted the genre of rural-themed programming into a corner. The shows were meant to be a wholesome, non-controversial, mindless distraction, and they succeeded a little too well. By the end of the 1960s, the media had created a dichotomy of southern-ness indicating that southerners were all either violent racists or naïve yokels. While the news had demonstrated the former in its coverage of the civil rights movement, the characters on rural comedies had collectively created an image of the South as wholesome but mindless, and the thicker the southern accent, the dumber the character. The southern accent was irrevocably associated with comedy and violence, and if a program did not demonstrate one or the other, there was no place for it on television. The comedy option had played out, and it would have been difficult to create a dramatic show set in the South in which southern

people played the villain week after week. That left only the option of a dramatic show in which southerners were the protagonists and, as CBS found out in the early 1970s, audiences were happy with *The Waltons* and did not seem interested in pursuing that genre further. Therefore, southerners and rural people left out of primetime almost entirely for the duration of the 1970s.

## Conclusion

Nearly a decade after CBS first aired *The Waltons*, the network revisited the rural-themed concept in 1979. Its choice of program, *The Dukes of Hazzard*, indicated that the network, despite having twenty years of experience with the rural comedy genre and no longer being encumbered by a Red Scare-induced imperative to play it safe, had still not figured out how to create a more nuanced and modern comedic portrait of southerners on television. The show, set in the fictional Hazzard County, Georgia, was rife with southern stereotypes. The protagonists were the titular Dukes, Bo and Luke, unreconstructed good ol' boys and reformed moonshiners who now spent their days foiling the schemes of the corrupt county commissioner, Boss Jefferson Davis Hogg. While the Duke boys received little assistance in their exploits from the inept sheriff, who was also Boss Hogg's cousin, their Uncle Jesse and Cousin Daisy were frequent collaborators.<sup>637</sup> Daisy's primary role on the show was as the sexy, tomboyish, girl-next-door in tight cut-off shorts, a costume choice that became a cultural phenomenon to the point where such shorts are now referred to as "Daisy Dukes." In case the references to Jefferson Davis, moonshine, and girls in cutoff shorts were not enough to place the show in the South, the Dukes' car, a bright orange Dodge Charger painted with a Confederate flag, nicknamed The General Lee, and boasting a horn that blared the opening bars of "Dixie" cleared up any confusion.

Following in the long tradition of CBS rural comedies, *The Dukes of Hazzard* was generally panned by critics but popular enough to stay on the air for six seasons. It was

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<sup>637</sup>In a nod to the original rural comedies, Uncle Jesse was played by Denver Pyle, a who played Briscoe Darling on *The Andy Griffith Show*.

among the top ten shows for its first three seasons. The show was a one-off for the network, picked up and produced only because it was based on a popular movie, *Moonrunners*, and also reminiscent of another popular film, *Smokey and the Bandit*. The show was the only one of its kind on television at that point in time, despite efforts by CBS to create a spin-off. A short-lived 1980 detective show based on the Deputy Sheriff of Hazzard County, entitled *Enos*, lasted only 18 episodes, and a cartoon, *The Dukes*, aired in 1983 and lasted less than one year. CBS did not attempt any further spin-offs, as the public had demonstrated a low tolerance for the denizens of Hazzard County and after 1983, the ratings for the original show dropped dramatically.

*The Dukes of Hazzard* was simultaneously reminiscent of the late 1950s pro-southern westerns like *The Gray Ghost*, as well as the rural comedies of the 1960s, while also being uniquely representative of the post-civil rights era. The one-dimensional characters, silly plotlines, and heavy reliance on southern stereotypes did nothing to promote southerners as anything other than Confederacy-obsessed, uneducated hicks. Despite the liberal use of Confederate imagery and silly dialogue, the unreconstructed Duke brothers were undoubtedly a force for justice in Hazzard County, even though they had past dalliances with the wrong side of the law. In theory, the Dukes' good-heartedness and dedication to their hometown creates a dichotomy wherein southerners can be heroic while also revering parts of the southern past generally considered unsavory by the general population. It is this same dichotomy that makes the *Dukes of Hazzard* an aberration of the post-civil rights era. After painful and protracted attempts to desegregate the housing and schools in northern cities in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it seemed that the South no longer had a monopoly on bigotry. The popularity of *All in*

*the Family* confirmed that Americans were becoming more aware of their own prejudices and beginning to take a more forgiving attitude toward bigotry in others. Only under such conditions could a show whose heroes drive a car emblazoned with the Confederate flag not only survive but also thrive.

Despite the popularity of *The Dukes of Hazzard*, it did not inspire imitators during its six years on the air. Neither ABC nor NBC seemed willing to re-visit the rural comedy genre, and CBS' feeble attempts to create spinoffs for the show did not inspire confidence. CBS, however, remained undeterred. During the 1980s, the network changed its approach to rural programming, creating several crime procedurals based in the South, including *Matlock* and *In the Heat of the Night*. Both programs featured actors from previously beloved CBS rural series (Andy Griffith and Carroll O'Connor of *All in the Family*, respectively).

The network also expanded its repertoire of southern shows to include some unorthodox combinations, such as *Designing Women*, about a group of female interior designers in Atlanta. A few years later the network added *Evening Shade*, a comedy about life in small-town Arkansas. The show featured a fictionalized version of the titular town, located in the northeastern quadrant of the state. Its title sequence was shot in Hot Springs, in the Ozarks just south of where the town lies. In contrast to previous shows about people from or in the Ozarks, *Evening Shade* offered a much different version of southern life. There were eccentric characters, a staple of any comedic show, but there were no fantastical elements to the program that lowered the show to the level of fantasy or children's entertainment. Unlike *Green Acres*, there were no eccentric neighbors pretending that their pig was a child. Unlike *The Beverly Hillbillies*, the people of

Evening Shade had modern conveniences and did not need to be told how to operate indoor plumbing. Unlike *Petticoat Junction*, the townspeople did not skinny dip in the town water tower. Shows like *Designing Women* and *Evening Shade* addressed the realities of modern life in the South without relying on old-fashioned and well-worn stereotypes.

Linda Bloodworth-Thomason, who created both *Designing Women* and *Evening Shade*, saw herself as the heir to the rural comedies of the 1960s. Bloodworth-Thomason, born in Missouri, was among the first generation of television producers who came of age watching television. Like her fellow Missourian, rural comedy legend Paul Henning, Bloodworth-Thomason considered herself a southerner and wanted to continue the legacy of southern comedy on television. Unlike Henning and his cohort, however, she actively worked against using genre stereotypes about the South and southern people in her work.<sup>638</sup> The result was a series of contemporary comedies that showed southerners in the late twentieth century facing the same trials and tribulations as people living in the rest of the country. Each of the new southern programs found a large and enthusiastic audience and remained on the air for at least four seasons.

Although audiences embraced the new television version of the South, there was still a place in their hearts for the old version. The rural comedies of the 1960s found a new life in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the rise of cable television. The Turner Broadcasting System (TBS) became known for its constant reruns of *The Andy Griffith Show* and *Nick at Nite*, a subsidiary of the children's station Nickelodeon, developed a reputation as a reliable source for old favorites such as *Green Acres* and *Gomer Pyle*.

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<sup>638</sup> Marc and Thompson, *Prime Time, Prime Movers*, 109.

New generations of Americans now had access to a large variety of old-fashioned rural comedies.

To the new generation of viewers, rural comedies were no longer infused with the expectations of Cold War patriotism and network concerns about demographic appeal. The rural comedies of the 1960s may have been created to appeal to southern viewers, but to those watching the programs one or two generations later, the shows were more representative of nostalgia than anything else. People often watch programs like *The Andy Griffith Show* and *The Beverly Hillbillies* because they represent an idealized version of a bygone era that was far less perfect in reality than in retrospect. All rural comedies have in common a strong sense of family values, morality, and community that resonate regardless of the time period. Although the accents present in rural comedies still identify them as southern, the social customs, economy, and culture of the South have melded with the rest of the country to the point where even rural southerners can now recognize the shows as nostalgic in tone. Over the course of researching this project, whenever I explained my topic, people of all different backgrounds confided that rural comedies reminded them of their childhoods. Fifty years out, rural comedies have moved beyond being representations of regional otherness and have become firmly entrenched as a mainstay of American popular culture.

One of the primary reasons for the unexpected endurance of rural comedy is its focus on wholesome values and the importance of family. They are among a set of increasingly rare television programs that families can watch together without having to worry about aggressively sexual or violent content. Even the adult themes on the show are addressed in casual and humorous way so as to keep the interest of younger viewers.

The lack of sex and violence combined with wholesome themes leaves some modern viewers with the impression that rural comedies are representative of all programs from the 1950s and 1960s.

While rural comedies perform a timeless service by providing a source of comfortable communal viewing, the viewpoint that such programs were representative of their time period is misleading. Sex and violence were as prevalent on television in the 1950s and 1960s as they are now, and rural comedies were an anecdote to that trend. CBS purposely fostered a strong sense of morality in its programming during the 1960s as an attempt to burnish its own image as a network committed to American values. After a decade of scandals that included the network employees prominently featured on anti-communist blacklists and Congressional subpoenas, CBS wanted shows that were inoffensive and non-controversial.

Given the image that CBS wanted to present, many of their shows were inherently conservative. The themes of each show heavily centered on the affirmation of strong morals and family values. The deliberate lack of controversy also eliminated civil rights, reproductive concerns, gender relations or any other divisive issue as possible topics for examination. Ellie May Clampett would never have an abortion, nor would Opie Taylor ever defy the expectations of his community by dating a girl of another race. In order to prevent those topics from coming up, the shows were almost universally white, modeled traditional gender roles with a working father and a homemaker wife, and children were often featured. In the shows that featured teenagers, their burgeoning sexuality was buried under layers of naiveté and a firm grounding in the puritanical morals of the 1950s. *Green Acres* and *Gomer Pyle* were the only rural comedies to not feature children

or teenagers, and the latter had the distinction of being the only rural comedy about a single man. In the case of Gomer Pyle, however, he was fulfilling another conservative patriotic ideal, seemingly forgoing the luxury of a wife and children to serve his country by enlisting in the Marines during wartime.

The enduring cultural connection between rural comedies and conservative values is best illustrated by the split reactions to the recent death of Andy Griffith. Griffith, as the star of perhaps the best loved rural comedy, received an outpouring of affection from all over the world following his passing in July 2011. However, there were some who did not greet his death with sadness. Vicious statements, some labeling him a traitor and a communist, marred online tributes to Griffith.<sup>639</sup> Others likened him to a pimp, a traitor, and a whore.<sup>640</sup> Griffith's offense was that he publicly supported Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign and subsequently supported the passage of the Affordable Care Act in 2010. He made a pair of video advertisements in support of these causes, one of which was directed by Griffith's old costar, Ron Howard, and featured the two of them in character as Andy and Opie Taylor. Both videos subsequently went viral and sparked much debate about the role of actors in politics. In the eyes of some, Griffith's support of a liberal Democratic politician and a liberal political cause were enough to negate the balance of his fifty-year career.<sup>641</sup>

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<sup>639</sup> Charles Davenport, Jr., "Guarino, Andy Griffith, and the News & Record," *Greensboro Guardian* (July 24, 2012), <http://greensboroguardian.com/2012/07/24/guarino-andy-griffith-and-the-news-record/>, accessed 11 August 2012.

<sup>640</sup> Debbie Schlusel, "Remember Andy Griffith For His Good Acting, Not For His Role as Obamacare Pimp," [www.debbieschlusel.com](http://www.debbieschlusel.com), July 3, 2012; Jonathan Seidl, "Andy Griffith Dies at 86," *The Blaze* (July 3, 2012), <http://greensboroguardian.com/2012/07/24/guarino-andy-griffith-and-the-news-record/>, accessed August 11, 2012.

<sup>641</sup> Davenport, "Guarino, Andy Griffith, and the News & Record."

Although sorrowful reactions to his death far outweighed the cruel ones, and negative sentiments represented a small portion of the overall conservative response to Griffith's death, they were limited to conservative commenters and websites. Such comments are a testament to the profound betrayal some conservatives felt upon learning about Griffith's political views and his referencing *The Andy Griffith Show* to support that stance. Griffith's open affiliation with liberal causes made them re-think their love of the show, and created questions in their minds as to what values the program supported, a mindset that echoes the sociopolitical paranoia of the early 1950s. If Andy Griffith the actor was a Democratic liberal, then it followed that his show might have advocated for a similar mindset; one that conservatives consider antithetical to their own. Some commenters claimed that in retrospect, they never really trusted Griffith in spite of the seemingly wholesome values he espoused, while others claimed to have revisited the show and discovered liberal bias where they had not seen one before.<sup>642</sup> Some commenters even claimed that after hearing of Griffith's support of Barack Obama, they simply stopped watching the show, despite being lifelong fans.<sup>643</sup> The loss of these few rabidly right-wing viewers notwithstanding, rerun marathons of *The Andy Griffith Show* following Griffith's death were popular, giving fans a chance to reminisce about a man who became a cultural touchstone. No doubt many of these were conservatives who, despite disagreeing with Griffith's personal politics, still found value in his program.

Regardless of whether viewers explicitly draw connections between rural comedy and conservative values, the shows still enjoy worldwide popularity despite not having

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<sup>642</sup> Scott Johnson, "A Phase in the Crowd," *Powerline Blog* (July 5, 2012), <http://www.powerlineblog.com/archives/2012/07/a-phase-in-the-crowd.php>, accessed August 11, 2012.

<sup>643</sup> Tim Brown, "The Days of Andy Griffith Are Long Gone," *Freedom Outpost* (July 3, 2012), <http://freedomoutpost.com/2012/07/the-days-of-andy-griffith-are-long-gone/>, accessed August 11, 2012.

aired new episodes in more than forty years. It is ironic that the same programs once universally lambasted by critics as drivel now live on cable television as examples of quality television. The journey of rural comedy from a cynical Cold War- era effort to rehabilitate a network image to nostalgia-inducing mainstay of basic cable is instructive in the larger importance of television. The medium is often dismissed as having lesser value than the art forms of film and literature, but its impact on our lives is just as enduring. Thanks to modern technology, it is now just as easy to access an old television show as it is to procure an old film or book. Like all art forms, television programming changes its message depending on who is watching and when. Audiences today perceive things from rural comedy that are the polar opposite of what critics perceived half a century ago. In retrospect, what seemed to contemporary critics like a silly waste of time now seems like an oasis of calm and normalcy in the midst of a fraught and rapidly changing culture. The study of the arc of rural comedy indicates that what appears on our television screens on any given night is not just a thoughtless blur of words and people, but a time capsule that will speak to future generations about our politics, our culture, and our national psyche.

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### **Television Programs**

All in the Family

Bronco

Glen Campbell Good-Time Hour

Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.

Green Acres

Hee Haw

Hootenanny

Mayberry R.F.D.

My Hero

Ozark Jubilee

Petticoat Junction

Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour

The Andy Griffith Show

The Beverly Hillbillies

The Bob Cummings Show

The Danny Thomas Show  
The Jim Nabors Hour  
The Johnny Cash Show  
The Real McCoys  
The Rebel  
The Red Skelton Hour  
The Waltons  
Wagon Train  
Yancy Derringer

## Vita

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