I Know…I was There

TV Gave Us a New Kind of Neighborhood

The ’50s were a wondrous time if you enjoyed family comedies on TV, many having made the jump from radio.

Neighbors can be a blessing or a curse…and sometimes both. But they are part of life unless you choose to be a hermit.

Yet, even though they might live so nearby, there usually isn’t much we know about their real lives.

But when television arrived, we could be intimately involved with all sorts of families…rich ones, poor ones, city families, country families, families with or without kids…just a whole bunch of people we never would have met in the normal run of things. Just pick your channel and you instantly acquired interesting new neighbors.

“Lucy, I’m Home!”

Remember the Ricardos? Ricky was a Cuban bandleader. Wife Lucy was an unpredictable but well-meaning screwball. Fortunately, their landlords, the Mertzes, were there to offer support, sympathy and common sense. Lucky us—we got to laugh our way through the misadventures of our new neighbors for a half hour every week.

A vastly different sort of family was adapted from the hit play Life with Father. The TV show, also called Life with Father, featured Clarence Day, the father who foolishly believed he ruled the roost. Wife Vinnie and their four boys coped with his foibles while pretending that, yes, he new best. Yup, just like life in my own family.

Another popular comedy in those early days was The Goldbergs.

Few of us in Middle America had ever lived in the Bronx or been close friends with a Jewish family, so the show was not only amusing but culturally broadening as well. The Bronx merged with the cornfields.

We had been neighbors with the Aldrich family going back to when they dwelled in radioland. Then they packed up and moved to TV-land in 1949. Hey. Welcome back! Every show opened with the familiar summoning of the son: “Hen-ry…Henry Aldrich!”

Some years later, the Cleaver family came into the neighborhood. The show was Leave It to Beaver and it had a long run, thanks to great scripts and a fine cast. Beaver’s entertaining misadventures turned him into a bit of a folk hero, especially with kids.

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A few you’ll likely remember were Blondie, The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show and Fibber McGee and Molly. One you may not recall was Heaven for Betsy, notable mostly because it starred a very young Jack Lemmon.

I did have a bone to pick with one staple of sitcoms, though. Dads were mostly portrayed as hopelessly clueless while their wives were wise and very, very domestic. One rare exception was Gracie Allen.

George Burns once explained that even going back to their vaudeville days, Gracie was portrayed as decidedly goofy…but

never stupid.

“I gave her all the punch lines,” Burns recalled. “Thanks to her, I didn’t have to spend the rest of my life playing cheap strip joints. She was the star.”

Then came The Beverly Hillbillies. The story was about some country folks who struck it rich and audaciously moved into snooty Beverly Hills. The critics hated the show, but we viewers turned it into an overnight hit.

And why not? How could you resist watching some hicks outsmart crafty and sophisticated city slickers? And for Buddy Ebsen, a former song-and-dance man in the movies and on Broadway, it opened up a whole new career as a TV star.

It Worked Great on TV

My Three Sons had a secret formula for success, revealed only years later. Scriptwriters were told that the widowed father, played by Fred MacMurray, must never say “no” to his sons. Instead, he was to sit down and quietly talk things over, eventually reaching the right decision. What a novel idea!

And what a contrast to the Bunker family in All in the Family, whose members communicated with each other mostly by shouting. Archie was breathtakingly bigoted, while his live-in daughter and son-in-law were dedicated liberals. Wife and mother Edith dithered in total confusion amid all the uproar.

A totally different family lived in Western range country. Who could

have predicted that a show about a father and three sons living on a ranch could draw a loyal crowd?

But it did, and the Cartwrights moved right into our hearts in Bonanza.

When the show ended, Michael Landon barely missed a beat, moving from the Ponderosa to Little House on the Prairie. That's quite a feat for a lad raised in New Jersey, just across the river from Philadelphia.

By now, you're probably wondering why I haven't mentioned four or five of your favorite family sitcoms. Truth to tell, there were too many to cover in this space. The eternal puzzlement is why some were hits and others flopped.

But if any of us had the answer to that, we'd be rich enough to pack up and move next door to the Clampetts in Beverly Hills.

Instead, I'll continue enjoying my weekly visits with my tele-neighbors. They've been great friends over the years. And unlike real life, I can pick and choose the best of the bunch.

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—Clancy Strock, Contributing Editor