
TELEVISION GROWS UP

Inventing the Commercial

THE IMPERIUM OF MODERN TELEVISION ADVERTISING was born in desperate improvisation

BY HARRY MATTHEI

LT WAS 1945, AND EVERYBODY NEEDED everything. If you knew how to build a car, a house, or a washing machine, you could sell it faster than you could make it. Car dealers, including fine old names that soon would be history—Hudson, Nash, Packard, and Studebaker—all had long waiting lists. Many dealers bluntly quoted not the price of the car but the price of getting on their waiting lists.

In 1945 I had barely heard of either television or the advertising business, and I had no idea what a boom was, even though I was smack in the middle of one. I was thirteen years old, just out of grade school, and my goal was to become an engineer. Instead I spent forty-six years in advertising, mostly as a TV copywriter, later as a writer-producer and agency owner. While it wasn't always fun, it certainly was never dull.

In 1945 on New York's Madison Avenue—Main Street for America's advertising agencies—business had never been better. Freed of wartime paper restrictions, the big general-interest magazines—*Life*, *Look*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and *Collier's*—swelled with advertisements. So did the major women's magazines: *Good Housekeeping*, *McCall's*, and *Ladies' Home Journal*. Fifteen percent of the placement cost of every ad went straight into the advertising agencies' pockets.

Of course, every city of any size in 1945 had at least two newspapers: morning and evening. Big cities had three or four of

each, plus the foreign language press, and every one of them was stuffed with advertising. Americans once again could buy cigarettes, film, shoes, steaks, nylon stockings, tires, and everything else missing from their lives since December 7, 1941.

Into this giddy, superheated economy, commercial television was born. Again.

Television broadcasting had been launched in the United States in 1928 by the General Electric Company, in Schenectady, New York. The station—today's WRGB, Channel 6—had been licensed to broadcast “experimental” television only. Commercials were expressly forbidden.

According to *Advertising Age*, the industry's trade weekly, the first “legal” television commercial was aired on WNBT, the NBC station in New York, on July 1, 1941, during a Dodgers-Phillies game at Brooklyn's Ebbets Field. The camera focused on a Bulova watch with the second hand ticking as the announcer read the correct time. Bulova time checks (“It's three o'clock, Bulova watch time”) were already fixtures in radio advertising; Bulova simply adapted them to TV. For the first time in all of advertising, Bulova was able to combine the stimuli of sight, sound, and motion via television.

Bulova's agency, the Biow Company, billed its client nine dollars: five for airtime and four more for “station charges.” Fifteen percent of this (\$1.35), we can assume, was profit to the Biow Company as

its standard advertising-agency commission. There were then about four thousand TV sets in the New York City area, roughly half of all the sets in the country.

“Illegal” commercials, *Advertising Age* noted, had appeared as early as 1930, when all TV licenses were strictly “experimental”—i.e., noncommercial. On July 1, 1939, General Mills, Procter & Gamble, and Socony Oil (now Mobil), all sponsors of Brooklyn Dodgers' radio coverage, were given free plugs by Red Barber, the Dodgers' announcer, during the first televised major-league baseball game. Red sliced bananas into a bowl of Wheaties, held up a bar of soap, and donned a gas-station attendant's cap. He thereby became the father of the demonstration commercial. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) apparently missed this debut. Earlier violators of the noncommercial rule had drawn fines and threats of license suspension, but Red got off scot-free.

During the war years commercial television went on hold. The government halted the manufacture of new sets and transmission equipment and stopped issuing station licenses. Established stations provided regular programming, but only a handful of people were equipped to watch it.

In October 1945, less than two months after the war ended, commercial television got two major shots in the arm: The FCC lifted the wartime bans on licensing TV stations and making sets, and RCA

demonstrated an improved TV camera that delivered a far crisper, clearer picture. So, after years of sluggish progress, a depression, and a war, television at last was ready to roll.

THE MAJOR ADVERTISING AGENCIES—the “hucksters” that had turned network radio into a money machine—saw the new medium as a natural outgrowth of the older, better-established one. The admen ruled radio as they never could newspapers or magazines, controlling the editorial content. Companies like Procter & Gamble, Ford, and General Foods paid advertising agencies to create and produce—or buy from independent producers—hours of network radio programs every day. The broadcasters functioned only as an electronic pipeline. They generally accepted whatever programming the advertisers chose.

IN 1946 GILLETTE and NBC staged the first TV sports spectacular: the Louis-Conn fight. Louis won. So did Gillette.

Filling the pipe usually began with an independent producer or talent agent proposing a program to an agency. This might be anything from a soap opera to a quiz show. The agency would then sell the idea to one of its clients and negotiate a time slot with a network. The network in turn would offer the show to local affiliate stations, which simply took the network feed via AT&T lines and broadcast it within their areas. The only locally produced radio programming usually was local news, farm and market reports, and fillers for dead times like Sunday mornings, when the audiences were too tiny to attract big advertisers.

With the coming of television the agencies and their clients assumed that the new medium simply would be radio with pictures, commercials included. The agencies would develop the programs, the TV stations would air them, advertising dollars would pay the bills, and everyone would make money. What could be simpler?

Still, from a 1940s advertising viewpoint, television was a feeble medium. It had neither the scope nor the prestige of the big national magazines. It lacked the

stars of radio—Jack Benny, Fibber McGee, Bob Hope. It was just radio’s baby brother. In 1946 the four radio networks—“webs,” they were called—reached more than 90 percent of the homes in the forty-eight states plus about half the cars. By contrast the only television network linked just three cities: Philadelphia, New York, and Schenectady. Period.



Gillette

The well-groomed Sharpie spent decades asking viewers how they were fixed for Gillette blades.

As Fred Allen, one of radio’s most popular wits—and one of TV’s bitterest critics—put it, “In television, coast-to-coast means from here to Passaic.” He was in Manhattan at the time; Passaic is barely ten miles away on the opposite side of the Hudson River. All through the forties television continued to be a local medium. As with today’s Internet and on-line services, nobody could be sure how fast it would grow, what it could offer, or how advertising agencies could make money from it. In fact, it would be 1948 before a million homes had TV sets and 1951 before coast-to-coast television networks existed. Except for a few major cities, most of the U.S. heartland would have no TV at all until the mid-fifties or later.

George Pryde, a Connecticut advertising man born in Wyoming, remembers his grandparents taking him to visit friends in the little town of Ranchester, a few miles from Sheridan, in 1949. He was ten years old. At one especially nice house, he recalls, “the people seemed pretty well-off. In their living room was a new wooden cabinet like a big radio, with an opaque glass window in the front of it. I asked what it was, because I had no idea. Our

host said, ‘That’s a television set.’ And he seemed really pleased with himself. It didn’t impress me much because I’d never even heard of television, and the screen was blank.” It would be at least five more years before television reached Ranchester, Wyoming.

In the middle of 1946 there were fewer than ten thousand sets in the entire country, half of them still in New York City. This was the age of vacuum tubes and hand-soldered wiring, not printed circuits and transistors, so the sets were not easy to mass-produce. Neither were they cheap. Prices ranged from \$350 to \$2,000, at a time when a typical family could live nicely on \$10,000 a year.

MOST MAJOR ADVERTISING AGENCIES weren’t eager to shift dollars out of high-profit, measurable network radio and mass magazines into this highly questionable and uncharted frontier. So the new medium grew slowly through the forties. Even during the early fifties you’d be more likely to find a TV set in a neighborhood bar than in a living room.

Saloonkeepers loved the tube. A televised baseball game or boxing match would pack in the customers and hold them spellbound for hours. In fact, until the sixties, most men probably saw their first TV program in a bar. For advertisers of cigarettes, beer, cars, and the Gillette Safety Razor Company, this was the medium of their dreams. Their best customers were males over eighteen, and saloons and sports were more purely male territory in the fifties than today.

IN JUNE 1946 GILLETTE AND NBC STAGED the first televised sports spectacular: the Joe Louis-Billy Conn heavyweight championship bout at Yankee Stadium in New York. Louis won. So did Gillette. For the first time the blade maker was able to demonstrate its products to a TV audience estimated at 150,000 fans in New York City, plus bonus viewers in Schenectady and Philadelphia. The next year Gillette joined with Ford to televise the first game of the 1947 World Series. Over the following decades, Gillette’s “Look Sharp, Be Sharp” march music, its jingle, “How’re you fixed for blades? (Do you have plenty?),” and “Sharpie,” its animated parrot, became three of television’s best-known and longest-lived commercial properties.

By the late forties television sets were beginning to appear in more and more

American living rooms. And during commercial television's first postwar decade, no matter what was televised, people watched. Roller derbies. Wrestling. Harness racing. Vaudeville. Amateur shows. The very worst B movies. Like it or not, the new medium seemed to mesmerize people—both sexes and all ages, urban, suburban, and eventually rural. Indeed, viewers couldn't tear themselves away even to eat. Housewives were torn between watching television and cooking dinner. Then along came frozen TV dinners. In many households dinnertime—the nightly ritual with everyone gathered at the table—simply faded away. America preferred to watch TV.

Some advertisers and their agencies dismissed our compulsive viewing habit as little more than a fad. TV equaled free movies. Once the novelty wore off, the whole medium might just dry up and blow away. But more thoughtful and prescient advertising people recognized television as the natural successor to radio. Far more attention-getting and involving and harder-selling, it was radio with teeth.

Radio didn't demand the listener's undivided attention; kids did homework, moms sewed, and dads painted the kitchen to its background babble and steady throb of commercials. Television, by contrast, caught the eye as well as the ear. It seemed to insist, "Look here! Pay attention! Watch this!" Advertisers and their agencies soon realized that TV audiences did pay attention. Products hawked on the tube seemed to sell faster than non-TV brands.

Some of these sales reflected the makeup of the audience. Viewers tended to be more sophisticated and prosperous than average. They all lived in major cities. They were more likely to experiment with new, untried products. What's more—and this is still true—retailers were favorably impressed by the brands advertised on television. With buyers and sellers alike so willing to be wooed, television advertising began flexing its muscles.

LIVE TELEVISION TODAY USUALLY means news, sports, and special events. But from 1945 to 1950 *all* television was "live," including most commercials. There were no other options, except for showing motion pictures or kinescopes—poor-quality films made by shooting specially synchronized movies of television images.

Local sponsors and stations usually couldn't afford film, and videotape wasn't available until 1956. So for a few years ev-

ery night was amateur night. (Daytime TV was almost non-existent until the 1950s.) Live television was a grab bag of minor-league talent mingled with promising unknowns and recycled radio announcers. The latter were there to open and close the programs and deliver commercials in a suitably dignified manner.

Each performance was, for better or worse, unique and then gone. This ephemeral, spontaneous quality made live television both challenging to produce and fun to watch. For viewers it seemed personal, almost participatory. Audience and performers, together, were partners in an intriguing experiment. And neither was sure what would happen next. For those of us who wrote, directed, and produced live television, it's fair to say we made it up as we went along. We really did. Without quite realizing it, we virtually invented an advertising, news, entertainment, and information medium.

ONE OF THE EARLIEST OF TELEVISION'S trailblazers was Sy Frolick. Discharged from the U.S. Coast Guard in 1946 and just married, Frolick set out to become an advertising copywriter. In March 1946 he took a job on trial for thirty days writing radio commercials at the Campbell-Ewald Company, in New York. This later became the Fletcher D. Richards agency, then Richards, Calkins & Holden. Frolick's thirty-day trial lasted nearly twenty years, during which he rose to the head of television production and earned awards for his commercials almost every year. In the sixties he joined the William Esty advertising agency. He retired almost twenty years later.

FROLICK WAS STUNNED.

"Here we were on television, with moving pictures, and we were doing radio commercials!"

"Every Tuesday night," Sy remembers, "my boss, a senior copywriter named Scotty Kosting, would go down to the old John Wanamaker department store on lower Broadway to produce a TV show with live commercials for our client, the U.S. Rubber Company. We got a free half-hour every week from WABD, Channel 13, New York [then, as no longer, a com-

mmercial channel], just to help fill empty airtime. That would be prime time today. In '46 they were giving it away."

The agency had created a science program using *Encyclopedia Britannica* films, called "Serving Through Science," which was U.S. Rubber's corporate slogan. The company's U.S. Royal tires and Keds sneakers were promoted on the show. Sy's boss, Scotty, hated this weekly TV assignment. It wiped out every Tuesday night for him. Like most senior copywriters in 1946, Scotty yearned to write big full-color spreads for *Life*, *Look*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*. That was where the money was.

Frolick was younger and frankly curious about television. So one Tuesday night he asked Scotty if he could tag along to Wanamaker's to see TV in the making. As he recalls it, "The studio was behind Wanamaker's music department, in a tiny area rented by WABD, Alan B. DuMont's flagship station in New York City. When it came time for the commercials, an announcer stepped up to the camera and read a typewritten script."

Frolick was stunned. "Here we were on television, with moving pictures, and we were doing radio commercials!" The copy chief at the agency sensed Sy's interest in TV and assigned him to relieve Scotty of the Tuesday-night follies at Wanamaker's. Three weeks later Scotty quit his job and moved to another agency to work exclusively on print ads. That left Sy Frolick as Mr. Television at the Richards agency: writer, producer, casting, wardrobe, everything. Mr. Television proceeded to teach himself the business.

One day the U.S. Rubber people said, "Be sure to mention that Keds are washable." Immediately Sy thought, "We should *demonstrate* that." So he asked the WABD production crew, "Why don't we get a washing machine in here and show how clean the Keds come out?"

"Aw, come on, Sy," they all moaned. "We don't have any running water."

"Well," said Sy, "there's a men's room down the hall. We can hook up a hose in there and wash the sneakers while the show's going on. Then at the end we'll show them nice and clean." That's what they did. And it worked.

Soon Keds had a Friday-night show for teenagers broadcast live on WNBT, NBC's New York station. The set design was a simple forties soda shop. Frolick named the show "Campus Hoopla," and the following year it was broadcast on the "network" that now linked Schenectady,



Photo by Harry Matthei

The Keds Cheerleaders. Sy Frolick stands third from right; Eva Marie Saint sits front row, third from left.

New York City, Philadelphia, and Washington.

To give the commercials more pizzazz, Frolick created the Keds Cheerleaders and wrote them a cheer—possibly the only commercial cheer ever written:

*Keds are keen. Keds are neat.
Keds are best for your family's feet.
Wear'em! Keds! Keds! Keds!*

Then Frolick canvassed model agencies for teens who looked like cheerleader material. He met one pretty blonde girl who had just come to New York to become an actress. He had her in for an audition and instantly hired the young Eva Marie Saint.

Thirty years later Frolick happened to see Eva Marie Saint appearing on the Johnny Carson show. Carson asked her how she got her start in show business. "I was a Keds Cheerleader," she told him.

"Do you remember the cheers?" Johnny asked. According to Frolick, "She not only

remembered the Keds cheer, she remembered every move that went with it. She popped up and did her Keds routine for thirty million Johnny Carson fans and got a huge round of applause."

TELEVISION COMMERCIALS BECAME AN important first step for more than one aspiring talent. They paid better than off-Broadway or summer stock, as much as ten dollars a day in preunion days. They combined the closeup intimacy of the movies with the real-time, real-life spontaneity of the stage. In some ways they were more demanding than either medium.

As always actors had to learn their lines and hit their marks. But they also had to keep one eye peeled for the red light on the cameras—there might be three on the set—that told them which one was live, while staying aware of the countless wires and cables that littered the studio floor, waiting to trip the unwary.

Most important, they had to deliver all their lines "to time." The commercials were almost all exactly sixty seconds long. Not fifty-two. Not sixty-seven. Noncommercial segments were just as rigidly timed. So performers learned to speed up or slow down their speeches. This implacable time discipline was unknown in films and theater. Only radio actors learned to pace themselves so precisely.

A live TV show usually shared its studio with the sets and cast of the sponsor's commercials. During commercial breaks the noncommercial performers were expected to freeze in place and remain absolutely silent for the minute when the commercial players did their turn. This usually took place in a quiet corner of the studio, away from the main action, but even so, an audible background sneeze, squeaky shoes, or a fit of giggles could throw the client into a tantrum. Commercials, lest anyone forget, paid the wages of everyone in the studio.

The pioneer spokesperson Betty Furness expertly demonstrates the many virtues of a Westinghouse.



Westinghouse photo

JULIA MEADE, A YOUNG ACTRESS FRESH from the Yale University Drama School, remembers working in the tiny, cramped Wanamaker's studio that Sy Frolick used, though the two never met. She would later become the spokesperson for Lincoln and Mercury cars on "The Ed Sullivan Show," as well as for the American Gas Association on "Playhouse 90" and for other sponsors on other shows. She began her television career, which spanned more than thirty years, as a model on a local New York show called "Fashion Parade." Recently she recalled, "The lights in that studio were so hot I was always wringing wet within minutes. My makeup was always running off my face. On one occasion I had my hair pinned up with plastic combs. When I finally disentangled them, they'd shriveled into hairy, weird-looking plastic claws. I guess I was lucky I wasn't bald."

TV cameras in the 1940s needed a great deal of light, but TV lighting didn't yet include cool-burning fluorescent tubes, so studio heat was a constant problem. It not only baked the actors but exploded beer bottles, liquefied candles, blistered paint, and made some props too hot to touch, as scorched actors learned firsthand. One producer remembers that his lights once melted the glue bonding the wood veneer to a grand piano. The veneer buckled and peeled off in huge, sticky sheets. The owners of the piano were not amused.

Of course, faster, more sensitive cameras and cooler, brighter lights were on the way, along with more efficient air conditioning. And in 1947 Dr. Frank G. Back in-

vented the revolutionary Zoomar lens. This was the first lens that allowed zooming in for a close-up and zooming out for a long shot without moving the camera or losing the focus. Cameramen and directors wondered how they had ever lived without it. A frenzy of in-and-out zoom shots followed until Dr. Back's Zoomar became just another lens in the cameraman's bag.

DURING THE FALL OF 1948 MILTON Berle burst into television with the "Texaco Star Theater." By November he had achieved a record rating, reaching nearly 90 percent of all the TV homes in the country. That same autumn "The Ed Sullivan Show" made its debut, sponsored by Ford's Lincoln-Mercury Division.

George Burns and Gracie Allen, sponsored by B. F. Goodrich, abandoned radio in 1948 to be among these first stars of the new medium. By this time, *Advertising Age* reported, more than a hundred new TV licenses had been issued by the FCC, and at least as many more were being processed. Nearly a thousand advertisers bought television time in 1948, five times as many as the year before. For the men who ran the major advertising agencies—there were no women—it was time to take television seriously.

In 1950, coming through the back door as a messenger, I joined the biggest, most buttoned-up agency of all, the J. Walter Thompson Company. WASP-ish, decorous, Ivy League (Yale)-oriented, Thompson had been founded in 1864. At J. Walter Thomp-

son a key to the executive washroom carried almost as much cachet then as a personal limousine would today.

Between 1946 and 1956, according to *Advertising Age's* estimates, Thompson's billings grew from \$78 million to \$220 million, and they topped \$300 million before 1960. Most of this growth was based on the television boom. With few exceptions Thompson's major competitors grew as fast or faster.

IN 1959, IN DAYTON, OHIO, I nearly electrocuted a lady named Betty Rogge while she was doing a live Frigidaire demo.

JWT, as it was called, was the very model of a modern advertising firm. At its New York headquarters in the Graybar Building, an appendage of Grand Central Terminal, waves of secretaries arrived each morning in their ladylike hats, fresh white gloves, and stockings in both winter and un-air-conditioned summer. JWT men were uniformly tailored by Brooks Brothers, J. Press, Chipp, or at the very least Rogers Peet.

Thompson's tall, patrician president, Stanley Resor, set the tone at the agency from 1917, when he bought it, well into the fifties. With his striking, icy-eyed wife,



Kraft Foods photo

There was tension before any live demo started; this one is on "The Kraft Television Theater."

Helen—a gifted copywriter—Resor devoted his life to making the business responsible, professional, and dignified. In the early 1940s the legend goes, one of Resor's vice presidents set out to win the Camel cigarette account for JWT. It looked like a sure thing. All the agency had to do to close the deal was submit some speculative advertising. Camel was the biggest cigarette in the business—the best seller and biggest spender. Most agencies would have killed for the account. Stanley Resor felt otherwise.

JWT policy forbade doing speculative work for any prospect. The vice president, Bill Esty, urged Resor to make an exception for Camel. Resor haughtily refused, and Esty departed JWT in what *Fortune* magazine later described as a “shower of sparks.” He opened the William Esty Company a block away. Overnight the William Esty Company was a major agency. Esty launched R. J. Reynolds's Winston and Salem brands in the mid-fifties, and both became gold mines for his agency.

Resor pioneered consumer research with the JWT Consumer Panel, a national list of householders recruited to keep diaries of their everyday purchases. They regularly mailed the diaries to JWT, New York, in exchange for modest rewards, such as coupons for products the agency handled. If a new soap, toothpaste, or food product ignited the sales charts, the JWT Consumer Panel would sound the alarm, so when television arrived, Thompson was quick to sense its selling power. JWT urged its clients to take the lead in sponsoring quality TV programs the agency would create, just as it had for radio.

In 1947 Thompson launched “The Kraft Television Theater,” bringing original live drama and star talent to television for the first time. Schlitz beer, Armstrong floors, Philco appliances, Goodyear, and others all launched television theaters of their own. But “Kraft Theater” was the opening curtain. It survived for more than twenty years.

“KRAFT THEATER” ALSO TOOK RED BARBER's naive demo commercials to new heights for Kraft foods. During intermissions Ed Herlihy, the voice of Kraft for the next forty years, described the action as viewers saw Miracle Whip, Velveeta, and Cheez Whiz transformed live into an endless menu of culinary delights.

What viewers did not see were the harried “home economists”—they're called “food stylists” today—who heated and stirred, sliced and poured, just out of camera range. Endless rehearsals, truckloads of food, and real human tears went into these live how-to commercials. If the cheese sauce spilled or the lady poked her finger through an egg, well, that was live television. No matter how many rehearsals, nobody's perfect. But JWT became masters of the demo for Kraft, Scott Paper, Lever Brothers, and a long list of others.

The most ingenious demos were usually those promoting consumer goods in highly competitive product categories. This was where a demonstrable difference—even a tiny one—could make a product soar off the sales graph. Only television could turn tiny differences into compelling theater, sixty seconds at a time.

Classic early demos included the egg test (1956), in which a Band-Aid plastic strip with “Super Stick” clung fast to an egg even in boiling water; the Remington shaver peach test of 1954 (“shaves close enough to shave a peach”); the Timex watch torture tests, with John Cameron Swayze (“Timex takes a licking and keeps on ticking”), from 1948 to 1968; RCA's “Impac Case,” a plastic portable radio that survived a drop from a twelve-foot ladder (1954); and of course Betty Furness's Westinghouse appliance demos, each of which proved “You can be *sure*... if it's Westinghouse” (1949–1960).

Betty Furness was the undisputed queen of the live demo, first gaining national attention during the 1952 and 1956 Republican and Democratic conventions. Day and night, product after product, in the heat of high summer, Betty coolly sold appliances as nobody has before or since. But one of the most perversely memorable Westinghouse demos—for which Betty has been incorrectly credited—was handled by a bright, unflappable young actress named June Graham.

June was demonstrating an “easy open” Westinghouse “frost-free” refrigerator, the door of which stubbornly refused to yield. She pressed, tapped, and then thumped the “easy open” button. But no luck. So, barely missing a beat, she shifted emphasis to the “frost-free” feature as the camera moved in close on her face, squeezing the fridge out of the picture while someone in the studio crew overcame the traitorous easy-open mechanism. As the camera moved back out again, it revealed a smiling June Graham beside the now open door. Millions

who saw the spot never forgot it, and it was reported in newspapers nationwide.

In 1959, in Dayton, Ohio, I nearly electrocuted a lady named Betty Rogge while she was doing a live demo with a Frigidaire electric range. Frigidaire was a client of Dancer-Fitzgerald-Sample, Inc., and I, in my mid-twenties, was the creative director of the DFS Dayton office. When Frigidaire asked me to produce four live commercials at WLW-D, Dayton, on election night, I was delighted. This would be my first solo production. I had written dozens of TV commercials, but in this case I was required to write, direct, and produce the commercials entirely on my own. I never imagined I might threaten somebody's life in the process.

Frigidaire had a new campaign created at DFS, New York: "You'll feel like a queen with Frigidaire." I was told to find a "queen" in Dayton and have her deliver the commercials while balancing a brass coronet on her head. No easy job for live television.

ENDLESS REHEARSALS, truckloads of food, and real human tears went into these live how-to commercials.

I booked Betty Rogge, a talented local spokesperson, as our queen and had her rehearse with the crown until she could do cartwheels while wearing it. On election night Betty donned her crown and clipped the microphone to her bra beneath her soft, high-necked dress. She was ready: regal, cool, and lovely. When I cued her, she stepped up to the range, draped her hand on it, and delivered her lines flawlessly. But as soon as she heard, "Cut," Betty screamed, "Help! I can't move!" The microphone had somehow short-circuited to her skin when she touched the range. She could not let go. Some quick-witted person disconnected the microphone wire and possibly saved Betty's life.

Until the networks, under agency pressure, began selling thirty-second commercials in 1971, advertisers had sixty seconds to make their demos work. To minimize risk, most demos were filmed or taped. Today's commercials are almost all thirty seconds long. Result: More commercials but fewer demos. Reason: Performing a credible demonstration in thirty seconds is not easy at all.

IN 1949 THE RULES OF TV BEGAN TO change when Sylvester ("Pat") Weaver left the highly respected Young & Rubicam agency to join NBC-TV as its president. Weaver believed that the networks, not the advertisers, should decide what shows to air and at what times to air them. When he took the job with NBC, he made it clear that he would devote himself to programming, not just to selling minutes of commercial time. This was heresy.

Since the days of radio's "A&P Gypsies," "The Ford Sunday Evening Hour," and "The Voice of Firestone," advertisers had owned not only their shows but their time slots too. Pat Weaver rewrote the book. First he launched his "Magazine Concept": Advertisers could participate in shows that NBC would produce just as advertisers participated in magazines. But NBC would own and control the programs' content. A tectonic power shift was at hand.

If Weaver succeeded, NBC would earn a profit from producing shows as well as from the commercials that ran within them. Also, by selling one-minute participations, NBC could bring network TV within the reach of smaller advertisers, companies that couldn't afford to sponsor entire programs on their own.

CBS had taken this tack in radio in 1948 and succeeded, gambling on launching a number of untried shows on its own, unsponsored. Within a year advertisers were lining up to buy participations in them. Two of the shows—"Our Miss Brooks," with Eve Arden, and "My Favorite Husband," with Lucille Ball—became TV hits as well, the latter as "I Love Lucy," which is still running. In 1950 Weaver launched "Today," with Dave Garroway, and "The Home Show," with Arlene Francis. In 1954 he added "The Tonight Show," with Steve Allen. All three were hits with viewers and advertisers. Forty-three years later "Today" and "The Tonight Show" still run.

The shows ran in "fringe" time—early morning, midday, and late night—time that network advertisers normally shunned. But all three offered participations rather than full sponsorships, so an advertiser could buy commercials a minute at a time. NBC also offered "Today"/"Home"/"Tonight" combination buys, giving smaller advertisers a way to pitch their goods to three different audiences at a relatively low cost. Weaver's new concept turned a healthy profit. So he next planted his flag in prime time, 8:00 to 11:00 P.M. NBC launched "Your Show of Shows," starring Sid Cae-

sar and Imogene Coca, on Saturday nights, again selling only participations. And again with success.

Across town at CBS, its president, Frank Stanton, was happy to align his network with Weaver's in the spot-not-sponsorship shift. Stanton had seen it work for CBS radio. So NBC and CBS, independently but in parallel, edged the agencies out of programming. In exchange the networks assumed the risk for buying and creating new shows and for paying for those that flopped.

THE AGENCIES RESISTED SURRENDERING control over programming—and the profits that went with it—but they soon saw the benefits in picking and choosing their spot participations. This gave them new flexibility in how and where to spend their clients' money, and it excused them from facing irate clients when an expensive agency-created show turned out to be a turkey. A few advertisers continued to sponsor shows of their own, regardless of rising costs and network pressure. "Hallmark Hall of Fame" is still a valiant hold-out after nearly fifty years, but as a special event, not a weekly regular.

What this change meant for the viewer was that original quality drama and experimental or exploratory television, such as "Omnibus" and "See It Now," disappeared to make room for mass entertainment—Westerns, cop shows, sitcoms, and games. These were hardly all bad, but excellence became rare, greatness even rarer.

Most major agencies and their clients had exited show business entirely by the sixties. Instead they focused their creative energies on building more distinctive commercials. By then the agencies were scattering one-minute spots here, there, and yonder, so it became more important than ever that these messages be noticed and remembered, no matter where viewers might find them. This dictated filmed, not live, commercials. Some advertisers, especially of autos and cigarettes, had been able to afford filmed commercials even during television's barroom epoch in the forties. And when color TV arrived in 1953, they were among the first to switch over to it, swallowing production costs that grew by a third or more.

Chevrolet and Ford filmed their gleaming new beauties swooping about the landscape from coast to coast. The Utah salt flats, surf-washed beaches, and the Pacific Coast Highway came to symbolize emancipated driving, TV-style. Chrysler—pre-

Iacocca—used much the same imagery but usually with lower budgets and less pance. And Volkswagen led the way for imports in the early sixties with its memorable commercials from the new agency on the block, Doyle Dane Bernbach.

Such early VW Beetle commercials as “How does the man who drives the snowplow get to the snowplow?” set a new standard for auto advertising. And Doyle Dane Bernbach—non-WASP, informal, and brilliantly creative—began its meteoric ascent.

CIGARETTE MAKERS—ALWAYS LAVISH spenders until banned from the air in 1971—tended toward lighthearted image advertising, most of it on film when film cost too much for most advertisers. Among the first cigarette commercials were square-dancing cigarettes (Lucky Strike, 1948), dancing packs with women inside (Old Gold, 1950), and an animated penguin (Kool, 1954).

As the filter-versus-regular cigarette war sputtered through the fifties, Viceroy thundered about its “filter traps,” Parliament introduced its recessed filter, Kent created the Micronite filter (made of asbestos), and Marlboro offered the slinky, seductive Julie London crooning, “You get a lot to like with a Marlboro—filter...flavor...flip-top box.” The Marlboro cowboy and Marlboro Country, created by Chicago’s Leo Burnett agency, came later, around 1959. Perhaps the most successful cigarette advertising campaign in history, it still runs worldwide.

Very late in the TV cigarette era, around 1968, when Salem advertising was my responsibility at the William Esty Company, we launched “You can take Salem out of the country *but*... you can’t take the country out of Salem.” It was a relatively expensive campaign to film, using city and country locations from coast to coast.

One of my commercials called for a white gazebo with a Dixieland band and singers set among flowering trees. A search for just the right location turned up a slightly run-down gazebo in a grove of apple trees at a convent in New York’s Hudson River valley. The setting was ideal, and in exchange for a substantial contribution, the mother superior agreed to allow the use of the property for the filming. The gazebo was given a fresh coat of white paint with accents of gold and Salem green, and buses and vans were poised to

whisk cast and crew there just as soon as the apple trees reached full flower.

Then the night before the big day, a lashing rainstorm moved in and stripped the apple trees of their blossoms. But the location still looked fresh and springlike, and that was Salem’s trademark. As I drove to the convent, dawn broke sunny and warm.

At six that morning a van filled with thousands of plastic apple blossoms rolled up to the convent, and by eight-thirty the trees were beautifully abloom with polyethylene flowers. The mother superior—a tiny sixtyish lady with a saintly smile—watched as a swarm of workers redecorated her denuded apple trees. Then she turned to the film’s director, the late Peter Miranda, and said, “Oh, my! I thought only God could make a tree.” Miranda—one of the quickest wits in a witty business—clasped his hands, smiled, and replied, “Sister, this is what God would do—if he had our budget.”

AS THE LIVE TELEVISION ERA WOUND down—as Pat Weaver launched his magazine concept and as coast-to-coast networks were born, thanks to the laying of coaxial cable in 1951—Rosser Reeves emerged as the creative maestro of the Ted Bates Agency. For the next twenty years Reeves was Madison Avenue’s leading advocate of “hard sell” advertising.

In his 1961 book, *Reality in Advertising*, he claimed that his commercials for Anacin pain reliever had tripled annual sales in less than two years. Trumpeting “Fast... FAST... FAST RELIEF” from “tension headache” and replete with lightning bolts and sledgehammers, Anacin’s one-minute spots were generally despised by viewers and derided by competitors. But Reeves and Anacin seemed to prove that people needn’t like a commercial to be influenced by it. They needed only to understand the message, find its promise appealing, and be willing to believe it. “Fast relief” is, after all, what a painkiller is supposed to deliver. Anacin made “tension headache” its own private ailment, and the spots ran everywhere, ad nauseam.

Rosser Reeves, Southern-born, was a shrewd thinker and marketer and an unabashed salesman. He was indifferent to style, taste, and artistry in advertising. He cared only about clarity, persuasion, and uniqueness. These he refined and distilled into his personal advertising formula—the “Unique Selling Proposition,” or U.S.P.—

which he considered a virtual reinvention of salesmanship.

The U.S.P. meant describing a product and its benefits so that consumers would feel they had never heard of such a thing before and had to have it, yet no competitor could duplicate it without appearing to be a craven imitator. Once this was accomplished, the advertiser had only to keep hammering away at the same message as often and loudly as possible. On television, of course.

By scattering his spots far and wide, with little regard for what programs they were in, Reeves spent his clients’ money efficiently, and he never (well, almost never) changed the commercials, which also saved a few dollars. He insisted, correctly, that even a weak commercial, run again and again, will outperform individually stronger commercials that keep changing.

Under Reeves’s guidance the Ted Bates Agency launched TV campaigns for Colgate toothpaste (“Cleans your breath while it cleans your teeth”), M&M’s candy (“Melts in your mouth, not in your hand”), Wonder bread (“Builds strong bodies 12 ways”), and a flock of others. In 1952 Reeves wrote, produced, and directed the first TV spots ever used in a presidential election. They were titled “The Man From Abilene.” He gave Dwight Eisenhower very few lines to speak on camera, relying on Ike’s folksy image rather than his painfully self-conscious acting. By election day “The Man From Abilene” was almost as omnipresent on the tube as Ivory soap or Listerine. Some people were shocked to see Eisenhower peddled like toothpaste, but Adlai Stevenson became the last presidential candidate not to use television.

ROSSER REEVES’S POLAR OPPOSITE WAS probably Leo Burnett, of Chicago’s Leo Burnett agency. Burnett made commercials that were distinctive and direct but also fun to watch. His agency probably created more animated commercial characters than anyone else in the business: the Jolly Green Giant, Tony the Tiger, the Keebler Elves, Charlie the Tuna, and dozens of others. Many are still performing.

Animated characters make superb salespeople. They never grow old. They never get in trouble with the law or spouses not their own. And they can do anything people can do and more—like baking cookies in hollow trees.

Among television’s very first animated characters were the pixies created in 1948

The once-ubiquitous Ajax pixies. Don't mourn them; they may very well be back.



Colgate Palmolive

by the Sherman & Marquette agency for Colgate's Ajax cleanser. Its singing commercial made Ajax—the first scouring powder to contain detergent—the number one brand. Its ditty was unforgettable:

*Try Ajax (Bum Bum),
the foaming cleanser,
(Ba, Ba, Ba, Ba, Ba, Bum, Bum),
Floats the dirt...
right down the drain!
(Ba, Ba, Ba, Ba, Ba, Ba, Bum!)*

The pixies were *too* unforgettable, it turned out. When Procter & Gamble's Comet cleanser with chlorine bleach arrived some years later, nobody seemed able to write a television spot for Ajax that could effectively introduce new Ajax with bleach. According to Colgate's consumer-recall tests, housewives remembered nothing about Ajax except (Bum, Bum) *pixies!* It wasn't until around 1960s when I wrote a "slice of life" commercial using Bess

Myerson—a former Miss America and a popular game-show panelist—that the pixies disappeared. But don't be shocked if they reappear one day. It wouldn't be the first time an old commercial idea was resurrected. Speedy Alka-Seltzer came back from the dead after twenty years to replace some very clever Alka-Seltzer advertising: the famous "Bellies" commercial and "some spicy meatball," both award winners. Trade gossip says Speedy simply sold more Alka-Seltzer.

In 1954, television became the dominant medium for national advertising. At the same time, network radio imploded as the major stars and their audiences abandoned it in favor of TV. Even general magazines grew thinner and thinner as advertisers moved their dollars to television scatter plans, shot-gunning one-minute spots throughout prime time.

By the early sixties the ad-lib, ad hoc quality of live television had almost totally disappeared. Fewer live shows and live

commercials went on the air. Live hosts—Arthur Godfrey, Garry Moore, Dave Garroway, and Jack Paar—cut their involvement with advertising to live lead-ins to filmed spots: "Here's good news from the folks who make Glass Wax!" or "Don't go 'way, we'll be back in one minute..."

Television had matured, become formalized. Shows, time slots, commercials, and even personalities acquired ratings. Each measurement was crucial. The financial stakes had become so enormous that live television was nearly dead. It simply didn't fit the formula.

To paraphrase Winston Churchill, this was not the end or even the beginning of the end. But it was certainly the end of the beginning.

Harry Matthei retired from advertising in 1996 and became a freelance writer. He died in February of 1997