

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF TELEVISION. EXCERPT FROM EMMY TV LEGENDS

A quick primer on the highlights of American TV history, and the legends who shaped it.

### Birth Of Television To The Dawn Of Networks (1800s-1939)

*"I thought they were pulling my leg when they said that one of these days, pictures are going to be flying through the air - you'll be able to see radio."*

[HAL KANTER](#), Comedy Writer

Television was never one person's vision -- as early as the 1820s, the idea began to germinate. Certainly by 1880, when a speculative article appeared in The Scientific American magazine, the concept of a working television system began to spread on an international scale.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, there were a few American laboratories leading the way: Bell, RCA, and GE. It wasn't until 1927, when 21-year-old [Philo Farnsworth](#), beat everyone to the punch by producing the first electronic television picture. This historic breakthrough catapulted him into a decades-long patent battle against major corporations, including RCA and CBS. The battle took its toll on everyone and RCA's David Sarnoff brilliantly marketed this invention to the public and became known as the father of television -- while Philo Farnsworth died in relative obscurity.

[Experimental broadcast television](#) began in the early 1930s, transmitting fuzzy images of wrestling, music and dance to a handful of screen. It wasn't until the 1939 World's Fair in New York, where RCA unveiled their new NBC TV studios in Rockefeller Plaza, that network television was introduced. A few months later, William Paley's CBS began broadcasting from its new TV studios in Grand Central Station.

Now that television worked, how could these networks profit on their investment? Who would create the programming that would sell their TV sets? How would they dominate this new commercial medium, without destroying their hugely profitable radio divisions?

### Ready! Sets! Go! (1940s)

*"We had a rating of 80, a share of 83.9. Of course I used to say there were only 83 sets, but there weren't."*

[MILTON BERLE](#), host *Texaco Star Theatre*

Four months after NBC station W2XBS began regular programming in 1939, Red Barber announced the first televised major league baseball game between the Cincinnati Reds and the Brooklyn Dodgers. Even though television was still considered a fad, throughout the 1940s, the deep-pocketed television divisions of NBC and CBS -- and soon ABC -- cashed in on the tastes of the American public. Networks expanded their reach as key cities built broadcast facilities.

Television showed signs of becoming a commercial success, at least until the US entered [World War II](#). The war interrupted its growth significantly, as personnel shortages forced stations to shut down. Only the DuMont network remained on the air.

It wasn't until 1947 that television's growth truly exploded. Some of the biggest shows premiered including: [The Ed Sullivan Show](#), *Candid Camera*, [Howdy Doody](#), *Philco Playhouse*, and [Kukla, Fran & Ollie](#). *Meet the Press* began broadcasting out of the nation's capitol to become the longest-running news program ever.

Perhaps the brightest star of the era was [Milton Berle](#), "America's favorite uncle." Berle brought his vaudeville sensibilities to NBC's *Texaco Star Theatre* and made it an unprecedented success. City water levels dropped during commercials, stores closed early. Television set sales skyrocketed.

## CAMS

### Markwalter

As networks raced to provide content for the popular new medium, many radio stars and shows attempted to make the transition to television -- Burns and Allen, The Jack Benny Program, The Shadow, Fred Allen, and Fibber McGee and Molly.

#### Television News Finds Its Way (1950s)

*"None of us had any ax to grind, none of us had any political ambitions. Our only real purpose in life, and in work, was to tell people what we knew to be true."*

DAVID BRINKLEY, News anchor

In 1949, a young girl named Kathy Fiscus fell into a Los Angeles-area well. Television provided continuous local coverage for over 27 hours. The unfolding tragedy proved that live television news coverage could not only inform, but also unite a community.

At the dawn of the 1950s, with over seven million TV sets in circulation, the need to broadcast fresh news images was magnified. The networks had initially offered short newscasts peppered with filmed newsreel footage – but that didn't last long. Those who had built their careers in radio news ultimately provided television network news expansion. CBS News in particular established a protocol for television reporting - airing stories about topical, political and worldwide events that impacted its viewers. Plus, each night, viewers could see the newsmen they had trusted for years.

One of the biggest national concerns of the decade, along with the [Korean War](#), involved [The Cold War](#) and the national fear of communist infiltration. Senator Joseph McCarthy used his "Red scare" tactics to ferret out communism on every level. The networks were not immune to scrutiny – in fact, to keep in good graces with sponsors, they often enforced blacklists within their ranks.

On a Sunday night in 1954, Murrow and his associates put their careers on the line to take on Senator McCarthy. The See It Now broadcast turned the tables on the Senator and acted as a political mallet. The indecency of McCarthy was further exposed when ABC and DuMont aired gavel-to-gavel coverage of the Army-McCarthy hearings in 1955.

There was another bright spot in the development of network news programs. In 1951, NBC programming head Pat Weaver conceived Today as a news and entertainment wake-up show called Rise and Shine. It worked for the ratings. But the events that loomed on the horizon in the 1950s made the show into one of the most important news programs ever produced by that network.

As the decade closed, the television industry was hit again with [the quiz show scandals](#). The \$64,000 Question, made its debut in 1955 and within a month had turned television on its ear. The opportunity to see everyday people win enormous cash prizes pushed that show past I Love Lucy and Ed Sullivan to become number one in the ratings. Other quiz and game shows followed the craze. It wasn't until Charles Van Doren won \$129,000 on Twenty-One, defeating [Herbert Stempel](#), that the machinations behind quiz shows were exposed. Van Doren was disgraced when it was revealed that he and other contestants were given answers in advance. The scandals caused viewers to question television practices, and it prompted the networks to take responsibility, and ultimately control, of their programming.

Instances like the Blacklist and the quiz show scandals placed the television news divisions in awkward positions – they had the delicate task of exposing their own networks' dirty laundry. It was through the integrity of the broadcasters that television news survived virtually unscathed and was seen as a trusted, objective source.

#### Storytellers to a Nation (1950s Entertainment)

*"There was gold dust in the air."*

TAD MOSEL, Live Drama Writer

Now that television had proved itself, the linking of both coasts by coaxial cable in 1951 meant that the same programs could be seen simultaneously nationwide. The new challenge was to feed a program-hungry nation. Television devoured more material than radio and motion pictures had ever done, and it was up to writers, performers, producers and directors to keep the ideas coming.

## CAMS

### Markwalter

LIVE DRAMA: First as children of the Depression, then as war heroes, they followed their dreams via the GI Bill to attend the colleges of their choice. As students of theatre, they were in the right place at the right time when television was in its infancy. Live drama showrunners like Fred Coe, Worthington Minor and Martin Manulis. Writers like Paddy Chayefsky, Rod Serling, Tad Mosel, Horton Foote, JP Miller and Reginald Rose. Directors like John Frankenheimer, Delbert Mann and Arthur Penn. Actors like Rod Steiger, Paul Newman, Kim Hunter, E.G. Marshall, Jack Lemmon, Angela Lansbury, and James Dean.

We will highlight the live television anthologies and explore the reasons why their era earned the moniker "The Golden Age of Television." It will explore the challenges of presenting a live production using the emerging technology of television, and explore the influence of business interests on the creative process.

Some of the live drama programs of the era include:

[Kraft Television Theatre](#)

[Matinee Theatre](#)

[Philco, Goodyear Playhouse](#)

[Playhouse 90](#)

[Robert Montgomery Presents](#)

[Studio One](#)

[U.S. Steel Hour](#)

COMEDY: Individuals from vastly different backgrounds, family trades, cultural heritages and varying interests came together and figured out how to make television work. They were curious, talented, brilliant, and determined to do something...really funny.

As the decade took hold, the vaudevillian antics of the 1940s television gave way to more sophisticated sketch and variety comedy, and ultimately, sitcoms. NBC's Your Show of Shows starring [Sid Caesar](#) and Imogene Coca, was a prime example of the new variety trend. Plus, due to coaxial cable, unknown comedians from local stations showcased themselves to larger audiences. Philadelphia's favorite comedian Ernie Kovacs' zany mischief, as well as Chicago-based shows including Stud's Place and Garroway at Large found new audiences.

As film studios relaxed their restrictions on their stars appearing on television, production moved west. With the premiere of CBS' I Love Lucy and the subsequent rise of Desilu, situation comedies came to the forefront. In fact, on January 19, 1953, history was made as over 44 million Lucy fans tuned in to watch Little Ricky's birth.

Some of the programs of the era include:

[All Star Revue](#)

[Burns and Allen](#)

[Caesar's Hour](#)

[Colgate Comedy Hour](#)

[Father Knows Best](#)

[Gunsmoke](#)

[The Honeymooners](#)

[I Love Lucy](#)

[The Jack Benny Program](#)

[Leave it to Beaver](#)

[Make Room for Daddy](#)

[The Milton Berle Show](#)

[Mr. Peepers](#)

[Your Show of Shows](#)

FILMED DRAMA: Filmed shows began to replace live programming starting in the mid-1950s. The use of filmed drama increased the scope of expression of television, including many popular police, courtroom, hospital and mystery series. Suddenly the camera could change point of view or leave the studio, close-ups could be shot separately, and new

## CAMS

### Markwalter

stories could be told with budget as the only restraint. It also made syndication a viable option for independent producers, including the "father of syndication," Fred Ziv.

Early on, Hollywood motion picture studios usually refused to enter television. The tables turned when ABC's Leonard Goldenson invested \$500,000 into the completion of Walt Disney's cash-strapped Disneyland, in exchange for Disney programming for ABC. In 1954, ABC premiered [Davy Crockett](#), which became a goldmine and proved that television and studio collaborations could work.

In daytime programming, although advertising was gaining momentum, writer Irna Phillips had to personally fund her Guiding Light pilot, because Procter & Gamble claimed that soap operas would never work on TV. They came aboard soon after. Guiding Light recently celebrated its 65th anniversary.

On the darker side, television entertainment divisions did not escape the "Red Scare" and McCarthyism. Government regulators forced CBS to institute a loyalty oath that it required all employees to sign. The [Blacklist](#) permeated all aspects of the industry, and many lives and careers were ruined by it.