

BY JOHN W. KENNEDY

The vanishing TV family

Once the staple of networks, traditional mom-and-dad shows are almost extinct

Half a century ago on television sets across America, Ward Cleaver arrived home in suit and tie, briefcase in hand, to be greeted by wife June, who wore a pearl necklace and circle skirt dress. Although Ward might have to act as a disciplinarian — in case sons Wally and Theodore (the Beav) had forgotten to do their chores or had lost their allowance — he was portrayed as loving and wise, a worthy recipient of his family's devotion.

The *Leave It to Beaver* street has morphed on network television. It's been rechristened Wisteria Lane. There, housewives are desperate to escape conventions as traditional as the Cleaver family. And husbands and fathers are targets for ridicule.

The upheaval in U.S. society during the past 50 years is nowhere better reflected than by what flickers on our television screens. In the 1950s, wholesome households dominated television. Now, families — if you can find them — are typically dysfunctional at best and conniving at worst.

Just two decades ago, eight of the top 20 rated broadcast network shows had genuine family themes. Now the only family-related series in the Nielsen top 20 are about sex-obsessed middle-aged neighborhood women and a sex-obsessed middle-age man living with his brother and nephew. *Two and a Half Men*, the highest rated situation comedy the past three seasons, and *Desperate Housewives*, the top-ranked scripted series this year, both openly mock the sanctity of marriage.

“What was once the basic grammatical unit of broadcasting — us in our living rooms watching other families in their living rooms — has fallen on hard times,” says Robert J. Thompson, founding director of the Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture at Syracuse University. “We've got to the point where families simply don't exist.”

“Scripted television has given up on the traditional family,” says Stephen Winzenburg,

communications professor at Grand View College in Des Moines, Iowa.

A SLOW DEMISE

The 1950s had a slew of nearly perfect nuclear traditional families, several of which made a successful transition from radio, including *Father Knows Best* and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*.

TV historian Tim Brooks, who retired last year as executive vice president of research for Lifetime Television, says advertisers aim for the coveted women's 18-49 demographic because 55 percent of those who watch television are female. Thus, there always has been a preponderance of sitcoms showing the father as a befuddled, albeit well-meaning, goofball while the mother is intelligent and respected.

Fifty years ago attractive homemaker Donna Stone on *The Donna Reed Show* exhibited more smarts than her physician husband, Alex. The trend holds true today with shows such as *According to*

Jim, which features an overweight beer-drinking contractor husband being outwitted by his wife, Cheryl. The major difference is that dads in the '50s had the respect of the family; today they often are rendered as idiots who have no control over their household. Think Homer Simpson.

“The TV dad today is clueless, a figure that is tolerated rather than loved and respected,” says Melissa Henson, director of communications and public education for the Parents Television Council.

The 1960s had multiple alternative but hardly trendsetting families. Although TV didn't recognize divorce yet, many popular shows featured widowers: *The Andy Griffith Show*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Bonanza*, *The Courtship of Eddie's Father*, *My Three Sons* and *Family Affair*. The notion of a dad trying to raise a child as a single parent seemed novel at the time. The 1960s also had bizarre families in the mode of a witch mother (*Bewitched*), a mother as a reincarnated automobile (*My Mother, The Car*) and creepy families (*The Munsters* and *The Addams Family*).

“Families in the 1960s usually had a working father, a wise mother and two or three kids,” says Brooks, co-author of *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows*,

now in its ninth edition. “Episodes focused on the ordinary problems around the house — like the gas grill not working — not issues like unwanted pregnancy.”

The societal upheaval of the late 1960s resulted in TV questioning family values in the early 1970s. Sitcoms no longer featured families living in the well-manicured suburbs. Reality hit with families that bicker (*All in the Family*), divorce (*One Day at a Time*), have an abortion (*Maude*) and live in poverty (*Good Times*).

Yet many viewers tuned in for a nostalgic look at the traditional family during the decade. *Happy Days*, *The Waltons* and *Little House on the Prairie* all lasted at least nine years, with *Happy Days* becoming a top-rated show and

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The Waltons finishing one year at number two in the Niensens.

The Waltons had staying power because families enjoyed watching a functioning, close-knit family — one that had grandparents living at home, a sensible mother and father, and seven children who contributed to the well-being of the household. When one family

member suffered physically, emotionally or spiritually, the rest of the family rallied around to get through the trial. Viewers felt sympathy when Olivia contracted tuberculosis, Grandma had a stroke and Grandpa died.

The 1980s brought a host of nighttime soap opera families on high-rated series such as *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *Falcon Crest* and *Knots Landing*. But it also brought contemporary comedies of solid families such as the Seavers in *Growing Pains*, the 1985-92 series that starred Kirk Cameron.

“Clean-cut shows like *Growing Pains*, *Family Ties* and *The Cosby Show* had strong moral messages and cohesive, functional families,” Winzenburg says. “These shows had loving, caring, strong dads

who disciplined their children and served as positive role models.”

The well-adjusted Huxtable family on *The Cosby Show* finished as the most-watched show five years in a row, a feat never beaten. Everybody wants to have a dad like the dads in *Pains*, *Ties* and *Cosby*, characters who had appeal because they worked hard, connected



AP photos

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emotionally with their family and dealt with teenage rebellion without losing their cool.

“TV is largely the way people want the world to be,” Brooks says. “Most Americans want an optimistic role model like *Cosby*. The few people who like to watch pain and misery every night can subscribe to HBO.”

Nevertheless, by the 1990s, families began to lose favor, despite positive portrayals in programs such as *Full House* and *Family Matters*. The '90s ushered in the era of *Roseanne* and *Married ... With Children*, where crude-talking relatives living under the same roof despise each other.

UNRELATED 'FAMILIES'

Thompson, whose books include *Television in the Antenna Age*, says the trend of the workplace family has its origins in military comedies of the 1960s such as *McHale's Navy* and *Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C.* But the breakthrough came in 1970 with *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. Character Mary Richards had various friends at work and at home. Her house didn't have a husband and child (as it did in the 1960s in *The Dick Van Dyke Show*), but it did contain best friend Rhoda and landlord Phyllis. That segued into more acidic workplace cohorts such as *Murphy Brown* and *Cheers*, as well

as young-singles-in-relationships shows such as *Seinfeld* and *Friends*. Ad hoc “families” not linked biologically but rather by institutional workplaces or by friendship continue to rule the day on TV, Thompson says.

Actual families are so rare on the tube now because shows revolve around nonrelated adults, notes Winzenburg, 53. *House*, *CSI* and *Grey's Anatomy* — the highest-rated dramas in 2007-08 — all focus on people working together.

“Scripts now define a family member as anybody that is close to you and that you love,” says Henson, 33. “If you don't look like this, the message is you're abnormal.”

Experts differ as to whether television is merely reflecting changes in society or leading the charge to redefine mores. Thompson is grateful that single-parent and blended families are evident on TV today.

“TV reflects that there are lots of other ways besides a husband, wife and kids to define family now,” says Thompson, 48.

“The portrayal of the American family has changed dramatically over the years, reflecting the real world,” Brooks says. Yet Brooks acknowledges that television is more liberal than culture at large because creators project their values into programs. The routine

acceptance of the homosexual lifestyle on television helped pave the way for more tolerance in society at large.

“Over the long haul, television influences our perceptions of what is acceptable,” Brooks says. “It's a national mirror of how far we can go and can't go.”

After teaching students about television for a quarter century, Winzenburg has a different perspective.

“Young people end up mimicking what they see on TV,” Winzenburg says. He says unrealistic views about working a little and partying a lot — as represented on *Friends* — convinced many young people to move out of their parental homes in search of a new lifestyle.

“Television is a tremendously influential medium,” Henson says. “It tells the story to the viewer that this is the norm in America today.”

With the demise last year of *7th Heaven*, the last bastion of old-fashioned family values vanished. Thompson found *7th Heaven* to be the most realistic portrayal of a contemporary family ever.

“The series showed a family that loved each other while dealing with issues like drugs and sexuality in a sincere and earnest way,” Thompson says.

Ironically, about the only place where the nuclear family still is featured on network TV is in raunchy animated send-ups such as *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*.

With increasing competition from cable, broadcast networks keep pushing the envelope. In June, CBS debuted its heavily publicized *Swingtown*, a series advocating spouse swapping as normal. It likely will have a short history. *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice*, a 1973 sitcom about open marriage, lasted six weeks. *Coupling*, a show about six singles who talk about nothing but sex, got the ax after four episodes in 2003.

“Producers think it's a great concept — then the ratings come in,” Brooks says. “Such shows go down the tube because they are out of touch with what mainstream America wants to see.”

WHAT'S NEXT?

Thompson doesn't see family shows making a comeback on network television because executives are obsessed with finding hits among the under-35 demographic. He notes audiences have splintered into multiple channels for children, teens and women, and doesn't believe broadcast TV executives will ever green light a program such as *The Cosby Show* again.

“TV programming centered around the hijinks of a nuclear family doesn't work within the business model of the fragmented, multi-channel universe,” Thompson says. “If you're looking for a healthy family raising kids under the same roof, it's really hard to find.”

Henson, noting that *7th Heaven* served as WB's most popular program for a decade, says the traditional family is a huge underserved audience.

“Hollywood is more interested in telling stories they want to tell rather than what viewers want to see,” Henson says. “As long as they find advertisers, they will be able to push their own agenda.”

Many viewers have forsaken network television. Before the inroads of cable, *The Cosby Show* typically drew one out of every three TV watchers. Now the highest-rated sitcom, *Two and a Half Men*, snags only one in 10 in the viewing audience.

Brooks notes that around 60 percent of the audience today watches shows on cable rather than broadcast networks. He notes that Disney (*Cory in the House*), Nickelodeon (*Drake & Josh*) and ABC Family (*Lincoln Heights*) feature series with nuclear families.

“All have popular shows that reassure kids that it's not abnormal to have a reasonably well-adjusted mom and dad,” Brooks says.

A HarrisInteractive poll released in May shows that traditional moms of long ago are revered. June Cleaver finished as the favorite TV mom, followed by Claire Huxtable, Carol Brady, Marion Cunningham, Donna Stone and Harriet Nelson. All those characters have been off

the air for more than 15 years.

“There is a strong desire among a substantial part of the population for social structures rooted in more traditional family values,” Brooks says.

Brooks is interested to see whether a spate of television shows will incorporate gay marriage into scripts. In May, *Brothers & Sisters* had primetime's first “gay commitment” ceremony of the character Kevin, but Brooks doesn't foresee programs promoting same-sex lifestyles as an ongoing theme.

He notes the sitcom *Ellen* enjoyed good ratings until title character Ellen DeGeneres announced her real-life lesbianism. Viewers deserted when episodes focused on *Ellen* being gay.

“Acceptance is one thing, but making a crusade out of an issue is something else,” Brooks says. “We won't see shows that explicitly dismiss core values that Americans treasure.”

Nevertheless, such values aren't too visible on the small screen.

“We no longer have strong family roles on television that people can imitate,” Winzenburg says. “That should be a real concern to society.”

Winzenburg says if another *Cosby*-like show shot to the top of the ratings it would generate multiple copycats.

In the meantime, however, those looking for a good quality TV series might be wise to buy a DVD set from yesteryear. **tpe**

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For more on how the TV family has disintegrated, check out John Kennedy's blog, *Midlife Musings*, at jkennedy.agblogger.org.

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