

FIRST TELEVISION

By John S. Halbert

All day, the excitement had been building. Even dad seemed to have caught the fever. Uncle James's phone call to us that morning had started it all: "Tonight's the night!" he had gushed, "we're gonna have TV! Come on over and we'll all watch this thing together!"

"This thing" was my relative's new television set. At the tender age of seven, neither I, nor had anyone else in our family ever seen an actual television program. At our house, all we had for entertainment, aside from going to the movies, were the big console radio in the living room and the compact, dark blue plastic Crosley radio perched atop the white Frigidaire refrigerator in the kitchen.

Agog with anticipation, we arrived early that evening at my uncle's home next to the city cemetery. We were going to watch television for the first time! Fortified with hot cocoa and buttered gingerbread cookies fresh from Aunt Gertrude's oven, everyone settled onto the sofa and into stuffed chairs to watch the first program. Uncle James bustled in the front door with a wrench in his hand. "Had to adjust the aerial!" he huffed, "the wind keeps blowing it off the station!" I didn't know what he meant, but it sure sounded important.

My uncle flicked off the living room lights and twisted a knob on the front of the set. All of us leaned forward in our seats, and in about a half-minute---lo, and behold, there it was: on the Motorola table TV's twelve-inch screen appeared a flickering black and white picture of a steam train puffing down a railroad track! It was so exciting, we all applauded.

But then the picture dissolved into a squiggly jumble of zig-zagging lines. Uncle James said something I didn't quite catch and bounded out of his chair. Digging around in his tool box, he grabbed a wrench and hustled out the door. In a few moments, there were some rustling noises outside the window. "Tell me when it's okay!" his muffled voice called out, "let me know when the picture is right!"

Dad leaned toward the window and yelled back, "Keep turning it!" After a few seconds, the picture straightened up again. "That's it!" my father shouted through the half-opened window, "hold it right there!" A scraping sound came through the wall.

Uncle James huffed back into the house, and the roomful of spectators once more settled into our stuffed seats. *Now* we would watch some serious television! Aunt Gertrude, smiling, passed out another round of pastries.

Anticipation was running high as all eyes again focused on the marvelous Motorola. On the screen, a sinister-looking outlaw wearing a black hat held a pistol at a frightened-appearing mail clerk inside the train's railway post office. But just as the bad guy, gripping a bulging money bag, jumped off the moving mail car's platform onto a galloping horse, the screen, without warning, again smeared into the aggravating black and white curlicues.

"Plague-take-it!" my uncle spluttered. "That bloomin' aerial is causing all these problems!" He again fumbled for his tools. "Maybe I can tape the wires tighter and make the picture okay."

With his wrench in one hand and a roll of tape in the other, he again went outside. I was curious to see what he was doing, so I followed him out through the squawking screen door around to the side of the house where he was fussing with the antenna. Craning my neck, I

observed that the aerial was supported above the rooftop by a pipe-like mast strapped to the side of the house next to the living room window. A flat wire ran down the pole through the window to the back of the TV set. The wire flapped in the gusty breeze. Uncle James unrolled a length of tape and wrapped the flailing wire to the pole. He then gripped the support in his hands and turned it a little.

From inside, Dad's voice hollered, "that's it---right there!" Uncle James snapped the wrench onto a bolt and tightened it. After a quick inspection of his handiwork, he stepped back into the house, with me trooping along behind him.

Once more, the lights went down and all eyes again fixed on the television set. Although most of us had pretty much forgotten what the movie was all about, interest was still high. We just wanted to see an actual TV program. The station in Birmingham identified itself, then another show came on. Some guy named Milton Berle flashed a toothy grin at us from the twelve-inch screen.

But a second later, the picture again broke-up into the bleary horizontal lines. With a sigh, Aunt Gertrude flipped back on the lights and Uncle James shook his head in exasperation. "I can't understand it," he groaned, "it worked all right this afternoon---"

By now, we had pretty much lost all our enthusiasm for television.

"Music . . . ?" My uncle cast a sideways glance at his big Philco console radio. In a minute, a pleasant orchestra tune came out of the speaker. "I guess I'll just have to stick with radio for a while," Uncle James moaned aloud, "maybe I'm just not ready for TV, yet."