

Television Comes to Grundy County

By Jackie Layne Partin

One evening in the early **1950s**, **John Campbell, Jr.** walked over the railroad tracks in Monteagle to go to the movie at the Eagle Theater which was in Grundy County. As usual, the patrons arrived early for several reasons---to visit friends and family members not often seen, to be first in line for a ticket, to read all the upcoming movie events, in general, "to do what people did in small towns while waiting in line at stores, banks, post offices, depots, bus stops, and theaters, socialize.

John noticed a few people standing in front of the window at the C. J. Cantrell's Furniture Store which was attached to the theater building. Wondering what they found so interesting, he strolled down to the group. There in the window he viewed for the first time a television. Notably, the picture was so grainy or snowy that he could not tell just exactly what was on the screen, but he was excited never-the-less. Like many other families, John's family did not have a television set in their home for many more years.



C. J. Cantrell's Store in Monteagle. His wife Margaret is standing in front of the window that held the tv set that John Campbell saw. It appears at the time this photo was taken that televisions had not yet reached their store.

Carl Wayne Goodman wrote the following: “I grew up in a home without a phone, television or indoor plumbing. We were a family of eight. Dad was a coal miner. We had very little money.

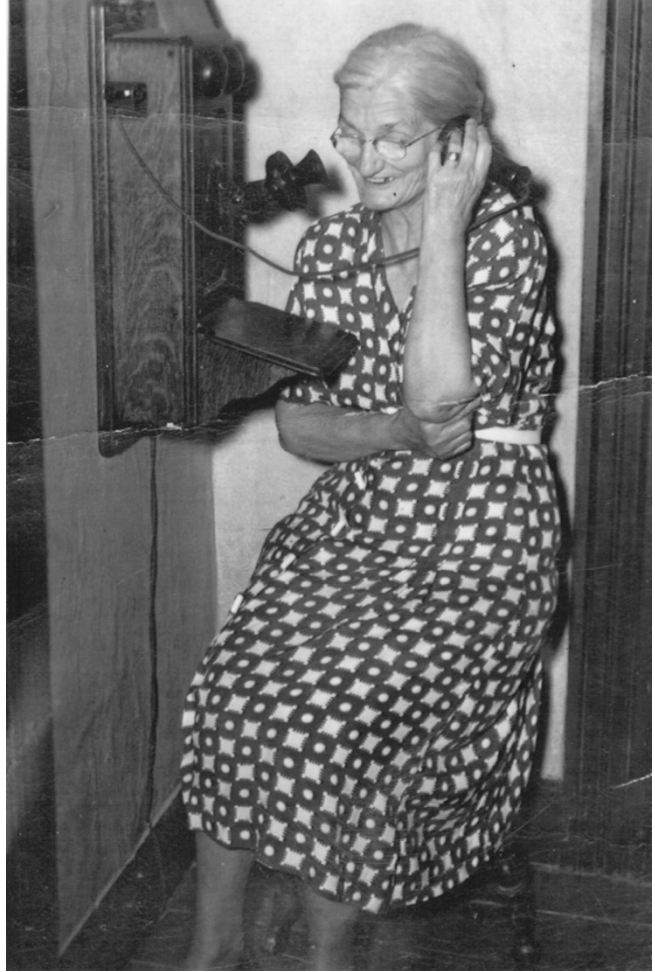
I'm not sure exactly when television came to Tracy City, probably in the early **1950s**. If it had not been for WWII, television would have entered our homes sooner. The technology was well underway by folks at RCA under Richard Sarnoff, but the war effort needed their expertise for things military--like radar and sonar. I watched my first television at my grandmother's. She lived in the big two-story house across the street from Lottie Bell. Her name was Maude Goodman. We called her Momma Goodman. Our Uncle Lude Goodman, who had a CPA business in Chattanooga, took care of things like that for her. She also had an old wall phone. In winter one of us kids, usually me, stayed with her and brought in coal for the two grate fireplaces (the house was always cold). In the morning, we watched the “Today Show” and on Sunday evenings “What's My Line.” But more than tv, my reward were the waffles she made me before school.



Maud (Warren) Goodman aka
“Momma Goodman” with her
husband Edward Goodman.

Maud (Warren) "Momma"

Goodman on her telephone



For some strange reason, our parents enjoyed those awful fake wrestling matches broadcast from Chattanooga on Saturday evenings. We had a standing invitation from a friend, Billie Charles, to watch at her home near E.J. Cunningham's. I wanted to stay home and read or listen to the radio but was not allowed. My Aunt Alma Shook would let me watch detective shows like "77 Sunset Strip" and "Hawaiian Eye." She liked the soap operas.

I have owned one television, a small black and white set that my mother gave me when she won a color set from a local furniture store. I kept it in a closet most of the time and rigged it up on occasion with coat hanger-style rabbit ears when I wanted to watch some event. I gave it away and haven't owned one since."

After Carl Wayne's mention of the early fifties, I started a search for a Grundy County television ad in the local paper. On my search through the *Grundy County Herald*, on **May 29, 1952**, I finally fell upon an ad with the word **television** in it. That ad was placed by W. R. Geary who had numerous business ventures going on in Tracy City. It seemed strange that nothing was said about the item; I was expecting an explosion or

maybe a ticker tape parade. However, less than two weeks later, Mr. Geary introduced the town and thus the county to television with a large ad all about this great wonder.

*"Announcement! WE ARE NOW READY TO SERVE YOUR TELEVISION NEEDS; Complete line of ZENITH 17" or 21" Screen; New 1952 Zenith TV with CUSTOMIZED PERFORMANCE FOR YOUR LOCATION...ON EVERY STATION POSITIVELY...THE PRESCOTT \$339.95...We Install, **We Service**, We Do the Complete Job FROM ANTENNA TO RECEIVER...Get Ready for the conventions, Elections and Fall Football Games...INSTALL T. V. NOW...W. R. Geary & Sons."*

The words, "*We service*," brought the name Kennerly Cunningham to mind. I have been told he was the man in the know when it came to television repair. He had worked on radar equipment while he was in the Army. Stepping into his small shop on Apple Orchard Rd. with one's inoperative television set was like walking into an Emergency Room at a hospital. Kennerly had every piece of equipment needed to repair one's tv set just as an emergency room would have to repair a broken body. If he didn't have it, he would make it. He mostly ordered kits and put them together in his shop according to Kenneth Roberts who worked for Kennerly. Together they made "house calls."

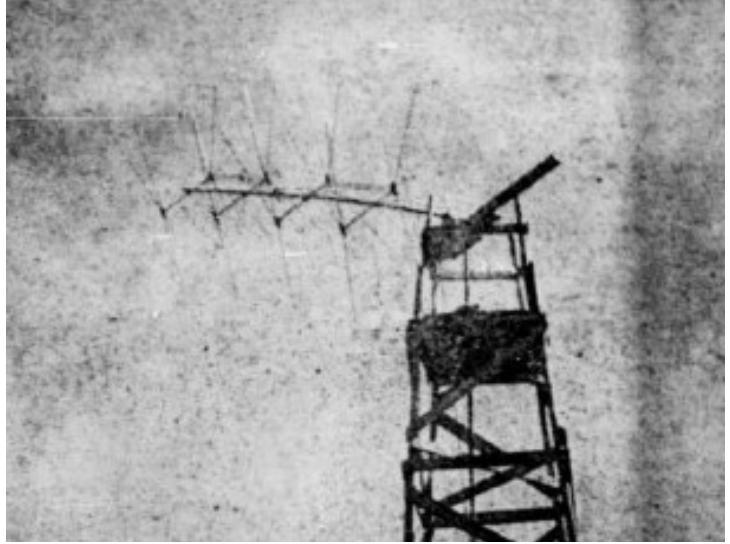
Kennerly and Kenneth often made trips to Palmer at a \$3.00 service charge, but gas was only thirty cents back then.

It was in Kennerly's little shop that my husband Grady Ward Partin saw his first television set. His Uncle Jim Bell had taken him on a show-and-tell trip to see what was happening under that tall tower that rose above the shop. The picture was grainy, to be generous, even with the tall antenna. That seemed to be the foremost need for the skills of Kennerly – "Please make my television picture better," or "I need better reception."

The tornado of Feb. 13, 1952, wreaked havoc on TV aerials all around Monteagle and Tracy City.

“Here is Kennerly Cunningham’s aerial bent to the winds.”

(Photo courtesy of the *Grundy Co. Herald*)



T. V. BRINGS JOY AND TRAGEDY AT BEERSHEBA was the lead story on **July 24, 1952** in the *Grundy County Herald*. *“Beersheba youth killed was holding ground wire...The first death directly contributed to Television in this county, perhaps the state, occurred at Beersheba Springs last Saturday...when Mr. John Richardson on returning home from work found his small son lying on the ground near their home, electrocuted. His hand was still clutching the ground wire of their television set...Little Fred Wayne Richardson was three and one-half years old.”*

I was born in **1942**; my own introduction to television was probably when I was around ten years of age. My family, like the Goodmans, had very little money. Long before a television was brought into our little house, I have the memory of viewing my first one in the living room of the Wilburn and Josephine Sampley house. Of course, by invitation we four children were allowed by Mama to go across the road and watch “The Big Top,” a circus show (1950-1957), and at least once, my siblings and I viewed “The Howdy Doody Show,” (1947-1960) with the Sampley children. The excitement of this new invention, the wonderments of a real circus, and the curiosity of what we had just participated in kept us talking for days. “Daddy, can we have one of those? Please Daddy, please!” My dad didn’t talk much, but we understood that televisions were rather expensive and out of the financial reach of our household.

Down the street toward town, Monteagle, lived the Jim Short family. Often, I kept their youngest child busy on Sunday afternoons by taking her to the matinee at the Eagle Theater on College Street. Mrs. Irene Short always financed two tickets and enough money for two bags of popcorn and two cokes. When I stepped inside their living room to wait for the child, I was always mesmerized by a large television set, operating without a soul in the room. I didn’t understand. Wasn’t electricity expensive? Wouldn’t it wear the television set completely out of commission? Often, I stood and stared not even aware of what was going on around me – just watching in amazement.

Then one day, it happened, Daddy came home with a television. He set about hooking it up and getting it ready for viewing. But first came the rules; never turn it on without permission; watch it only the limited time allotted by him; do not touch the control buttons, etc. I remember that we asked if "The Big Top" and "Howdy Doody" could be two of our allowed viewings. That was acceptable to him.

That big cumbersome tube never seemed to become that important in the few years before I left home except on Saturday evenings when my mother's folks came from Clouse Hill to watch the very same wrestling that Carl W. Goodman wrote about. That was a big deal for those relatives, but I never fell for all that stuff. If one had taken a poll in those early days of television in Grundy County, I dare say that the number one show would have been "Wrestling!" In the neighborhood of "Buffalo," Tracy City, lived two quite elderly ladies. The community houses were close together, so everyone knew on Saturday afternoons to get ready for wrestling to come on tv at the ladies' home. The yelling, screaming, banging, that came from that house would cause one to think the ladies themselves were wrestling, possibly with their allegiance belonging to different sides of the ring.

For most of my married life with three sons to rear, we did not have television. We lived for six years overseas where there was no television. My husband and I haven't had one in years, but I do have computer access to many shows I missed during those years should I want to share my time with Andy Griffith or Lorne Greene (*Bonanza*).

1952 seemed to be the magical year for Grundy County for those who had money. Jerome "Pete" Bouldin thinks that Kennerly had the first television; then Henry "Stokes" Flury got the second one. Bright Eyes Crisp may have had the third, but those are only Pete's memories. For those who didn't have money, there was always a way to be involved especially if one had a sharing neighbor; scores gathered on lawns to watch the television that had been placed in the open window pointing outwardly. In cold weather, certain rooms were packed to watch sports events, mostly wrestling.

It is now **2019**; seventy plus years have passed since John Campbell, Jr. looked through that window at Cantrell's store and saw his first television. I used to say, one had to search hard sometimes to decide if the cowboy was on or off his horse, but either way, all eyes were fixated on the big tube waiting for all the world to come into Grundy County's homes.