

Let Me Entertain You

Thanks to television, household expenses for entertainment have tripled in the last century. | **By Kenneth Harwood**

Back in 1901 life for the average American was shorter, less comfortable, more confined and more rural than it is today. Television was half a century ahead. An average household's expense for entertainment was about 2% of all the expenses. The same household spent about another 1% for reading.

What changed most was that paid professional entertainers came into small towns and the home with the rise of movies and radio. The average household was spending 5.4% of its total expenses for entertainment in 1934-1936, as the economy began to awaken from the great depression. Reading and education together fell to less than 1% of all household expenses.

Along the way, stage and bandstand gave way to movies and radio, while the nation waxed larger and wealthier. Older media such as books, magazines, and newspapers did quite well, thank you, and newer media grew speedily. Professional entertainers grew in numbers while they grew in wealth, as many were drawn to motion pictures and radio.

Entertainment in 1901

Picture the life of an average person

in the United States in 1901. Life was shorter then, being on average some 50 years, while now it is nearly 78 years. Diet, sanitation, and medicine were less than they are now. Fewer comforts and conveniences graced the house.

Most kitchens were rural, because most people lived on farms or ranches, and in towns of fewer than 2,500 people. Automobiles were scarce and largely unloved, for they spooked horses and cattle. Cooking tended to be done on a wood burning cast iron range or in a fireplace. Water came from a spring, a well, or a cistern and was hand carried to the range. An advanced kitchen might have a hand pump. Drain water might be tossed outside or piped to a septic tank.

Today's refrigerators were not around, for electricity remained to arrive. Kerosene lamps and candles were the main kinds of lights. Broadcasting was years away, so the kitchen had no radio or television. DVD players and MP3 players were not imagined.

The parlor in 1901, if the house was grand enough to have a parlor, might have a hand cranked talking machine with its large horn for amplification and its cylinder recordings. You could buy a Gem brand gramophone from the



Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert in "It Happened One Night"

Sears catalog for \$21.95 plus shipping. A popular cylinder of 1901 was the novelty tune "Who Threw the Overalls in Mrs. Murphy's Chowder?"

The stereopticon viewer in the front room had those printed, slightly curved double-view photographic cards to offer three-dimensional scenes of exotic places such as Egypt and Borneo. Some of the cards were in color, but most were black and white.

The main entertainment was self-entertainment. Sheet music made the printing press the chief mass medium of home entertainment. Many people sang and played musical instruments, including harmonica, guitar, violin and piano. Home recitations, skits and magic helped to pass the winter evenings.

Public entertainment included choral groups and bands in schools and churches. Paid admissions opened the way to everything from traveling theater

on a local stage to circuses when they came to town, and slide shows with travel talks in a nearby Grange hall.

New Media of 1934-1936

World War I and the economic good times following the war helped to build a majority who lived in towns and cities. The census of 1920 showed that rural places and towns of fewer than 2,500 inhabitants for the first time in the history of the U. S. contained less than half of everyone. Cities sprouted movie theaters, followed by radio stations. Small towns grew their own little movie palaces. People in rural households listened at night to radio entertainment and news from distant big cities.

Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert entertained movie audiences of 1934 with *It Happened One Night*. The film was first to win all five Oscar statuettes for picture, director, actor, actress and screenplay.



Minnie Pearl and Rob Brasfield, stars of *Grand Ole Opry* (NBC Radio)

Radio favorites of 1934-1936 included *Lux Radio Theater* (drama), *H. V. Kaltenborn News* (news and comment), *Grand Ole Opry* (country and western music), *The Bing Crosby Show* (popular music), *Little Orphan Annie* (children's serial), *Burns and Allen* (comedy), *Metropolitan Opera* (opera), and *University of Chicago Round Table* (discussion).

Christopher H. Sterling and John Michael Kittross in their *Stay Tuned: A History of American Broadcasting* noted that radio soap opera daytime drama grew quickly, beginning with the success of *Back Stage Wife* in 1935. By 1940 four national networks offered 75 hours a week of these 15 minute programs. *The Guiding Light*, *Lorenzo Jones*, *Our Gal Sunday* and *Road of Life* were among the hits.

Books got a boost from the depression years when leisure was enforced by

unemployment. Circulation from the public library of Muncie, Indiana, rose by 108% from the peak of economic activity in 1929 to the trough of the depression in 1933. Cardholders rose by 17%, some three to five times as quickly as the rise in population. In 1933 an average cardholder withdrew twenty books a year compared to eleven a year in 1929.

In their classic studies of Muncie, Indiana, then a city of some 13,000 people, Robert and Helen Lynd found that the depression years saw declines in direct payment for entertainment and news. Newspaper circulation fell by more than 20% from 1929 to 1933.

The recording industry grew from the introduction of electrical amplification of sound in place of the older mechanical amplification, and from the introduction of plastic discs to replace recorded cylinders. Popular songs performed by professionals and played back from disc tended to have growing audiences in the home, while there were fewer live performances by members of the household who performed the latest hits from sheet music. Cole Porter's "I've Got You under My Skin" was a hit song of 1935.

At the same time, radio continued to be in more and more homes. Electricity was in 96% of Muncie's homes by 1935. For the cost of a radio and the electricity to run it, the whole family could have news and entertainment at most hours of the day and night. The percentage of households in the U. S. having a radio in depression times almost doubled from 34.6% in 1929 to 68.4% in 1935.

Householders in the United States, on average, more than tripled the fraction of total budget for entertainment from 1.6% in 1901 to 5.4% in 1934-36. Consider that 1901 was in economic good times, and



Bing Crosby on radio (top) and on television, celebrating his 50th year in show business.

1934-1936 in economic depression times. During that span of more than 30 years the expense for food went down from 42.5% of the average budget to 33.6%, making way for other kinds of expense to go up, including expense for entertainment.

The declining share of consumer budgets for food reflected greater agricultural productivity from use of improved farm machinery, fertilizers and seeds. Quicker and cheaper distribution by rail and road played their parts in lower cost of food to the consumers, as did the reduced cost of borrowing, and new efficiencies in packaging, storing, and selling food.

The Age of Television

A new vista of the world opened with the rise of television in the years after World War II. By 1972-73 television was the main new medium in households across the United States. One or more television receivers glowed in 96% of homes. Colors splashed across television screens in 53% of homes, and cable television served 10%, while satellite services to the home were in the future, as were video cassette tape recorders in the home.

Movies moved into the living room and the bedroom with television, while radio moved out of the living room to share the bedroom with television. Meanwhile the number of movie screens per theater increased, theater widescreen projection systems added better color and sound, the number of movie theaters decreased, and movie attendance in theaters declined from its peak in 1948.

Lower budgeted movies made for television competed with delayed release to television of the higher budgeted theatrical motion pictures. Some of the Oscars of 1972-1973 for theatrical film

went to *The Sting*, *American Graffiti*, and *Cries and Whispers*.

Total number of radios sold for use in home, automobile, and workplace declined after 1969. Popular radio programs transformed themselves to continue in television, among them the *The Bing Crosby Show*, *The Jack Benny Show*, and *Queen for a Day*. A few, such as *Grand Ole Opry*, continued in the radio version with the added television version. Numbers of radio programs disappeared as audiences turned to television. Broad appeal radio programming changed to specialized program formats such as rock and roll music.

The look of American homes changed from that of 1934-1936. When World War II ended in 1945 many members of the generation who went to war returned to flood into mass-produced suburbs,

have children and settle down to raise the members of the baby-boom generation who are coming to retirement ages now. Some homes were air-conditioned, almost all had hot and cold running water, and most were insulated against heat and cold. Electric refrigerators, washers, dryers, and dishwashers were usual.

Media amenities in 1972-1973 tended to include color television, transistor pocket radios, transistor automobile radios, and 8-track audio tapes. Transistor radios replaced the tube radios of 1934-1936, and vacuum tubes for old radios became hard to find. Some automobile radios also played 8-track tapes. Oldest media mainly were in the forms of books, magazines, and newspapers. Stereopticons might be found in antiques shops, along with wind-up turntable gramophones and vacuum tube radios.

Daily newspapers were shifting from evening editions to morning as the effects of automobile, radio, and television cumulated. Main news stories on average were longer and carried more detail than the versions on radio or television.

Emmys of 1972-1973 for outstanding new series went to *America* on NBC, *The Julie Andrews Hour* on ABC, *Kung Fu* on ABC, *M*A*S*H* on CBS, *Maude* on CBS



Jack Benny (left) with Isaac Stern



(l. to r.) Gary Burghoff, Alan Alda, Loretta Swit on *M*A*S*H*

and *The Waltons* on CBS. News and documentary awards included, among others, those to Walter Cronkite, Dan Rather, Daniel Schorr, Roger Mudd, and Eric Severeid, all of whom worked for CBS.

Half-hour drama filled half of all tallied quarter hours on commercial television networks in the U. S. in 1973. Daytime television offered an average of 340 hours of programs each week, of which 148 hours, or somewhat fewer than half, were daytime drama. Network television news was about 10% of all network programming, as it was almost a decade earlier in 1964.

Grammys of 1973 went to Roberta Flack for “Killing Me Softly with His Song,” to Stevie Wonder for “You Are the Sunshine of My Life” and to Carly Simon for “You’re So Vain,” among others.

Consumer outlays for entertainment in the U. S. came to 8.6% as residents bought color television receivers to replace aging black and white ones. Expenses for reading and education amounted to 1.6% of outlays from an average household.

The World-Wide Web Rises

Skipping along another 30 years to 2002-2003 brings us to the rise of the

World Wide Web and the Internet. The long 40-year Cold War was gone. The War on Terror arrived in 2001, coinciding with an economic downturn as the balloon of investment in information technology deflated.

The American home was bigger and more richly equipped than ever. Baby boomers who were in their peak earning years built McMansions, while average

houses continued to have larger footprints, as they did in much of the 20th century. The Bureau of the Census reported that the number of square feet in the average house in 2003 was 2,434, compared to 1,660 in 1973, making a gain of 47% in 30 years.

McMansions tended to fill their building lots, be larger than some nearby houses and shelter fewer people than they might. Would-be Mediterranean looks also could be French, Tudor or a mix. They had large entry halls, bedroom suites, open family kitchens and little-used dining rooms and living rooms. Media theaters were in many of them, offering digital screens, custom audio systems, lighting controls, custom seats and other equipment, including the complete refreshment bar. Screens and other communication devices were linked by high speed fiber optic connections throughout the house. Average houses had some of these features and smaller scale.

Sound, motion pictures, radio and television often moved into a room of their own as the 21st century began, leaving their places of 1972-1973 in the living room, if not the bedrooms and kitchen of 2003. With them went computers, digital

recording and digital storage.

Mobility was a principle of new media as wireless telephones added television, camera and other features. Personal headphone tape and disc players of 1979-1997 began to make way by 2003 for iPod recorders and MP3 players featuring compact digital storage of sound and pictures. The World Wide Web delivered recordings to computers and mobile phones while it streamed live television.

The Web and the Internet changed news media by offering news with advertising to computers in 55% of homes in 2003, plus instant deliveries to public libraries, schools, and businesses. Weblogs or blogs offered news, opinion, and discussion. Classified advertising tended to migrate to the Web from newspapers. Advertising funded free daily and weekly newspapers appearing mostly in tabloid form in many metropolitan areas of the United States.

Television in 2003 included deliveries to 98% of households from broadcasting stations, 68% of households from cable systems and perhaps 20% of households from satellites in space. Terrestrial broadcast television offered general programming in main, while most cable television services specialized. Cable networks included several for news, while others specialized in comedy, drama, children's programs, home shopping, religion, and more. *Arrested Development* (Fox) and *The Sopranos* (HBO) won outstanding numbers of Emmys for programs in 2003-2004. Reality programs of broadcast television attracted large audiences as networks sought to limit expenditures.

Four films of 2003 were among the top 100 all time domestic box office favorites when ticket prices were adjusted for inflation. They were *Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*, *Finding Nemo*, *Pirates*

of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl, and *The Matrix Reloaded*. Home videos, most of them on digital video disc, yielded greater return to motion picture studios than domestic box office ticket sales.

Top-selling console-video games in the U. S. during 2003 were *Madden NFL 2004*, *Pokemon Ruby*, *Pokemon Sapphire*, *Need for Speed: Underground*, and *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker*. Retail sales of console games were estimated to be about equal to domestic sales of movie tickets.

Sales via the Web in 2003 were about 24 % of all retail sales value of books, 19% of retail sales value of event tickets, 16% of retail sales value of videos, and 12% of retail sales value of music.

Average households in the U. S. in 2002-2003 spent 5.4% of their outlays for entertainment, and less than 1% for reading. Remarkably little variation appeared in the share of household spending for entertainment and reading in 18 years from 1985 to 2003, as shown in the *Statistical Abstract of the United States 2006*. Percentages ranged between 5.3% and 5.8% for almost a generation. Meanwhile the average share of expense for food declined from 19.3 % in 1972-1973 to 13.1% in 2002-2003.

Michael L. Dolfman and Dennis M. McSweeney reported in May, 2006, results of their study for the U. S. Bureau of the Census on 100 years of consumer spending. They found that, "In many ways, the only thread of commonality between U. S. households in 1901 and 2002-2003 is their geographic location." They might have added that the center of U. S. population continued to move west and south, as it had since the first U. S. census in 1790.

The Century and Beyond

Looking back through a century of consumer spending for entertainment, we could see the change from much self-entertainment in the parlor of 1901 to much professional entertainment in the digitally equipped media room of 2002-2003. The home itself on average was larger and better equipped. Occupants of the house were fewer and lived longer.

Older media made way for newer ones by adapting to the changed circumstances as they continued to attract audiences. Entertainment outside the home became a wonderland of special effects and illusions, including those of the theme park, the Las Vegas showroom, and other venues, while traditional theatrical presentations found better sound, lighting, temperature control and more.

Television rose to prominence in the years after World War II, attracting, replacing, and adding to many offerings of radio. News-seeking habits changed. The World Wide Web, the Internet, and other digital media of 2002-2003 transformed entertainment and news in the home. Household spending for entertainment reflected the changes as it settled down to a long plateau from a peak in 1972-1973.

Signals changed from analog to digital. Computers and telecommunication made possible streaming video through the World Wide Web. Mobile wireless telephones could and did receive and send television images and sounds as the 21st century began.

Few of these developments were foreseen in any but shadowy form as 1901 dawned. The word "television" itself

came into the American lexicon in 1907. Looking back to 1901 suggests that like our predecessors we have little ability to foresee entertainment and television in the country's average home of 2103.

Certainty about 2103 perhaps is greatest in foreseeing that entertainment through storytelling about human comedy and tragedy, with music and without, will be at the forefront, just as storytelling has been before and after the heyday of Greek theater nearly 2500 years ago. Likely we shall continue the division of storytelling into fact and fiction, yearning to take our news as fact more than fiction.

The story of media since the coming of the printed book to the West more than 500 years ago seems to suggest continuing places for television and newer media in the world of 2103. As more media arrive each one seems to adapt to changing circumstances. Less certain might be the added capabilities of television equipment in 2103, although we are able to see easier and nearly universal presence of television where and when we wish.

When all is said and done, expenditures for entertainment ranged between 5% and 6% of all household expenses in the United States in the economically depressed years of 1934-36 and in the 18 years ending with 2003. Otherwise the average ranged from 1.6% in 1901 to 8.6% a little more than 30 years ago. Hence the share of entertainment expenses in the average American household in 2002-2003 was more than three times larger than it was in the simpler days of 1901.

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