

## Television Reception in the 1950s: A Coming of Age

by Ronald R. Thomas  
6415 Chastain Dr. NE  
Atlanta, GA 30342

---

**T**elevision reception came of age in the 1950s. It was a time when prosperity had returned to America, and many people could afford to purchase a black and white television receiver. However, television reception in the 1950s was an expensive, and at times a challenging, experience.

By the early 1950s, the great depression of the 1930s was just a bad memory. The economic stimulus of World War II had put significant disposable income in the hands of many families--even those of the blue-collar workers in factories and steel mills. At last, things were starting to look good again.

Amplitude Modulated (AM) radio was still an important entertainment medium. AM radio reception was easily accessible to anyone. Most homes had a vacuum tube AM radio, and network programs like *Amos and Andy* were at the top of everyone's listening list.

Television receivers began to appear in homes in the late 1940s. By the early 1950s, people were beginning to take a real interest in this new medium. Suddenly, everyone wanted to watch, and those who didn't own a television receiver would try and visit a friend or relative who had one. The outdoor receiving antennas that sprouted on many homes were status symbols--proclaiming TV ownership to the neighborhood.



A family gathers around the living room TV set in the late 1940s or early 1950s.  
RCA Photo.



A newly-installed TV antenna soon become a neighborhood status symbol.

## Reception

But receiving a television signal was very different than receiving an AM radio signal. Television signals are very wide in order to contain audio, video, and synchronization information. Those signals are transmitted on a line of sight basis at frequencies (VHF and UHF) that might be hundreds of times higher than those used for AM radio.

A television receiver has to display the video signal on a picture tube, which requires complex synchronizing circuitry. Also, a television receiver requires much higher voltages than an AM radio receiver, and those voltages present a significant danger to repair personnel.

In the 1950s, a black and white television receiver might have had several dozen vacuum tubes and cost approximately \$300. That was a lot of money at a time when an AM table radio cost only \$20. Also, the 1950s television receiver was physically large and complex. In fact, it was probably the most complex device ever to be introduced into an American household. Today, it is difficult to

appreciate that fact.

The television receiver required a more sophisticated antenna system than a radio receiver. Those who lived close to television transmitters could get by with a simple "rabbit ears" on top of the TV cabinet. But in the 1950s most people were not that lucky and required an outdoor antenna.

Typically, an outdoor receiving antenna was mounted on a mast on the roof of a house. When more height was required, a short tower might be added. In rural or "fringe" areas, it was not unheard of for a tall tower to be erected next to the house. When television signals from multiple directions had to be received, an antenna rotor was also installed. Such an elaborate antenna system sometimes resembled a radar antenna on a navy ship.

In the 1950s, the installed cost of a sophisticated antenna system might equal the cost of the receiver itself. However, people were willing to accept that reality. Discussing all of that effort and expense brings up the question of what were people watching on their television receivers in the 1950s. The answer is anything and everything!

## Programs

Many of the programs from the 1950s have become classics. After-school programs like "The Howdy Doody Show" were popular with younger viewers. "American Bandstand" was a hit with teenagers. In the evening there were family programs that included "I Love Lucy," "The Jackie Gleason Show," "Your Hit Parade," and many others.

Those programs all had rather basic background sets and were presented live, since videotape systems were still in the future. Nevertheless, they required studios with lighting and camera systems. Network programs needed facilities to relay programs to local television stations around the U.S. Those stations had transmitters to send out the programs to the local viewers. All of that equipment was expensive and a challenge to operate and maintain.

Advertisers liked television, because people did seem willing to sit and watch almost anything, including commercials. Therefore, advertising time could command high prices. That was fortunate because the television stations and the networks had large operating expenses.

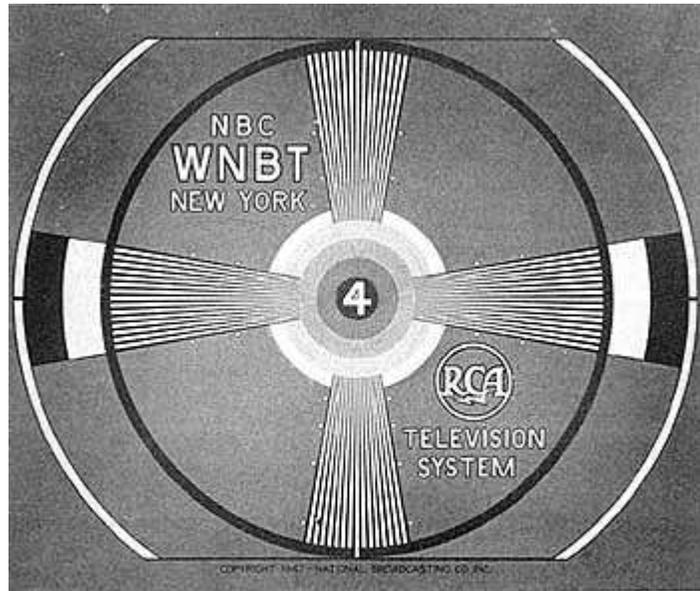
Viewers enjoyed watching television to the point that a failure of a receiver created a household crisis. Unfortunately, repair was another expensive part of television viewing.

## Repair

Repair problems were often due to the failure of one or more vacuum tubes. A television repairman would be called, and he would arrive with a tube tester and/or a kit of commonly used tubes that could be substituted for suspected defective ones.

A repair call every few months to replace a burned out vacuum tube was a common occurrence. Those repair calls added significantly to the cost of television viewing. People soon realized that if they could find and replace a burned out vacuum tube, they could save the cost of a repair call.

In response to that need, self-service tube testers became available at businesses like drug stores. Individuals who used self-service tube testers were left to their own resources in determining which tubes to remove for testing. Sometimes they simply took them all in a paper bag, which sometimes resulted in accidental breakage and more expense.



During the early days of television, a test pattern was seen on the screen more often than programming.



Early TV dramas were filmed live using very basic sets.

The failure of a component other than a vacuum tube usually meant a visit from a technician and removal of the set to the repair shop. It was a sad event to watch a television receiver leave the house and difficult to wait patiently for days or weeks for its return.

### **Color Television**

In the middle and late 1950s, color television receivers were becoming available. However, they were more complicated and expensive than black and white sets. In addition there was only limited color

programming. Most people were content to stay with their black and white receivers.

Even into the 1960s, television viewers were reluctant to switch to color. Most had made a significant investment in a black and white receiver, and they were hesitant to make a new investment in color. Also, they understood the potentially higher repair costs associated with a color television receiver.

Eventually, people did begin to switch to color, particularly when their black and white receivers could no longer be economically repaired. By the late 1960s, color television finally took hold and became the dominant medium.

Today, television reception is simply taken for granted. The excitement and expense of television reception in the 1950s has long been forgotten. However, in many ways it really was a glorious era in television viewing history.

*Note: All photos from Understanding Television by O.E. Dunlap, Jr, Greenberg:Publisher, 1948*