

THE FIRST TELEVISION

by

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Across Hillside Avenue from our home in Englewood lived the Saliba family. The Salibas were richly endowed with mechanical genius, a judgment that has yet to be made of the Parlin family. Since the Salibas were always tinkering and soldering and experimenting, it occasioned little surprise when their house sprouted what looked like an elaborate wire clothesline on the roof.

One Sunday afternoon Joe Saliba invited me in and led me to where the Saliba family was gathered in the living room which was darkened by drawn drapes, with only a flickering, impure light. Was I to witness an exotic religious rite? Was something clandestine and nefarious going on here? I was apprehensive. But, a ten year old boy is brave enough to attempt to disguise his fear and sophisticated enough to want to appear blasé. In the vernacular of 1970, I would "play it cool." I sank into the chair to which the Salibas directed me.

The flickering, unholy light was coming from a glass window about seven inches across and five inches high in a mahogany cabinet about the size of two coffins, one atop the other. In this window miniature men on white horses were chasing more miniature men on black horses to a background of frenetic music.

A more worldly young man than I could readily have identified those scenes as a Western even if he could not have identified the mechanical contraption. Some profligate youths of my acquaintance spent every Saturday afternoon in the movie theater mechanically chewing ju-ju-bees and Mason's Black Crows without taking their eyes from the screen where such scenes were commonplace. But in our household Saturday movies were in the same taboo category with Cokes and other teeth-rotting, soul-destroying demons of debauchery. Nothing in my experience had prepared me for what I was seeing at the Salibas.

My mind raced to interpret the situation. "The Salibas have prepared an elaborate hoax to make me look foolish," was my final conclusion. I would have to be terribly blasé to retain my integrity.

Hours passed and my calm exterior never once betrayed the inner humiliation that I could not fathom the Salibas trick. The room's darkness was my ally, plus the fact that all of the Salibas, including the parents, were so intent in staring at the hoax that nobody seemed to notice me. At last the men on horses seemed to resolve all their troubles, the music became triumphantly ecstatic, then stopped. A loud hum and rectangular designs appeared in the window. The Salibas stood up; the lights were turned on. I hurriedly left.

How could you say "thank you" when you felt that your presence had served some joke at your expense?