

THE PLUG-IN DRUG

Father watches a football game in the den, Mother turns on a drama in the kitchen and the children watch "Gilligan's Island" reruns in their bedroom. What has television done to family life?

by Marie Winn

A quarter of a century after the introduction of television into American society, a period that has seen the medium become so deeply ingrained in American life that in at least one state the television set has attained the rank of a legal necessity, safe from repossession in case of debt along with clothes, cooking utensils, and the like, television viewing has become an inevitable and ordinary part of daily life. In the early years of television a curious myopia afflicted early observers of the effects of television; almost without exception they regarded it as a favorable, beneficial, indeed, wondrous influence upon the family.

"Television is going to be a real asset in every home where there are children," predicts a writer in 1949.

"Television will take over your way of living and change your children's habits, but this change can be a wonderful improvement," claims another commentator.

"No survey's needed, of course, to establish that television has brought the family together in one room," writes *The New York Times* television critic in 1949.

Early articles about television are invariably accompanied by a photograph or illustration showing a family cozily sitting together before the television set, Sis on Mom's lap, Buddy perched on the arm of Dad's chair, Dad with his arm around Mom's shoulder. Who could have guessed that twenty or so years later Mom would be watching a drama in the kitchen, the kids would be looking at cartoons in their room, while Dad would be taking in the ball game in the living room?

Of course television sets were enormously expensive in those early days. The idea that by 1975 more than 60 percent of American families would own two or more sets was preposterous. The splintering of the multiple-set family was something the early writers could not foresee. Nor did anyone imagine the number of hours children would eventually devote to television, the common use of television by parents as a child pacifier, the changes television would effect upon child-rearing methods, the increasing domination of family schedules by children's viewing requirements—in short, the *power* of the new medium to dominate family life.

After the first years, as children's consumption of the new medium increased, together with parental concern about the possible effects of so much television

viewing, a steady refrain helped to soothe and reassure anxious parents. "Television always enters a pattern of influences that already exist: the home, the peer group, the school, the church and culture generally," write the authors of an early and influential study of television's effects on children. In other words, if the child's home life is all right, parents need not worry about the effects of all that television watching.

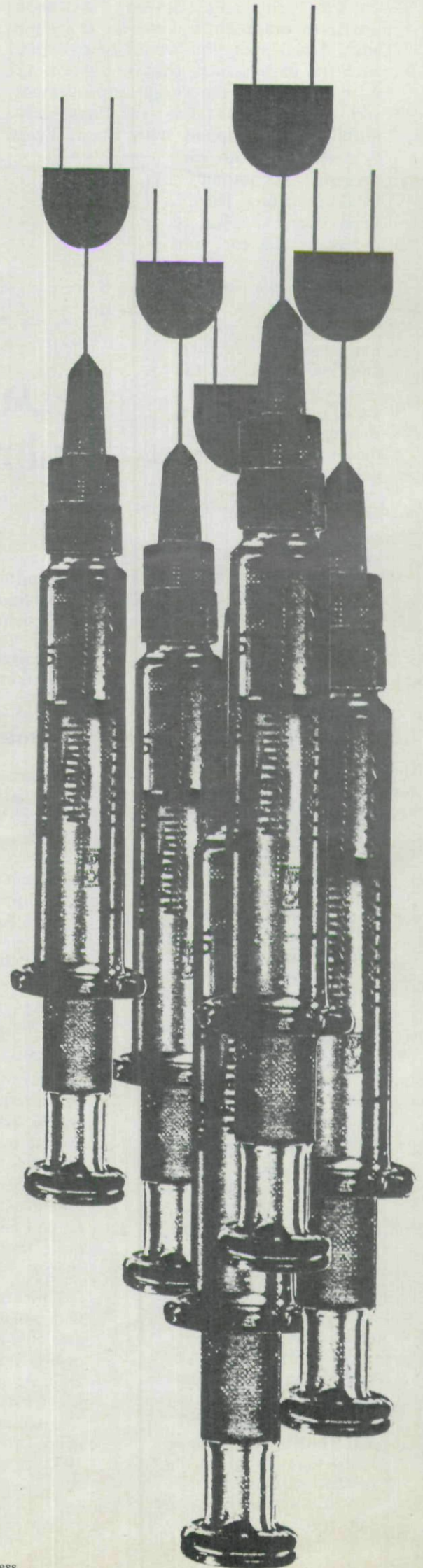
But television does not merely influence the child: it deeply influences that "pattern of influences" that is meant to ameliorate its effects. Home and family life have changed in important ways since the advent of television. The peer group has become television-oriented, and much of the time children spend together is occupied by television viewing. Culture generally has been transformed by television. Therefore it is improper to assign to television the subsidiary role its many apologists (too often members of the television industry) insist it plays. Television is not merely one of a number of important influences upon today's child. Through the changes it has made in family life, television emerges as *the* important influence in children's lives today.

The Quality of Family Life

Television's contribution to family life has been an equivocal one. For while it has, indeed, kept the members of the family from dispersing, it has not served to bring them *together*. By its domination of the time families spend together, it destroys the special quality that distinguishes one family from another, a quality that depends to a great extent on what a family *does*, what special rituals, games, recurrent jokes, familiar songs, and shared activities it accumulates.

"Like the sorcerer of old," writes Urie Bronfenbrenner, "the television set casts its magic spell, freezing speech and action, turning the living into silent statues so long as the enchantment lasts. The primary danger of the television screen lies not so much in the behavior it produces—although there is danger there—as in the behavior it prevents: the talks, the games, the family festivities and arguments through which much of the child's learning takes place and through which his character is formed. Turning on the television set can turn off the process that transforms children into people."

Even when families make efforts to control television, too often its very pres-



ence counterbalances the positive features of family life. A writer and mother of two boys aged 3 and 7 described her family's television schedule in an article in *The New York Times*:

"We were in the midst of a full-scale war. Every day was a new battle and every program was a major skirmish. We agreed it was a bad scene all around and were ready to enter diplomatic negotiations. . . . In principle we have agreed on 2½ hours of TV a day, 'Sesame Street,' 'Electric Company' (with dinner gobbled up in between) and two half-hour shows between 7 and 8:30, which enables the grown-ups to eat in peace and prevents the two boys from destroying one another. Their pre-bedtime choice is dreadful, because as Josh recently admitted, 'There's nothing much on I really like.' So . . . it's 'What's My Line' or 'To Tell the Truth.' . . . Clearly there is a need for first-rate children's shows at this time . . ."

Consider the "family life" described here: Presumably the father comes home from work during the "Sesame Street"- "Electric Company" stint. The children are either watching television, gobbling their dinner, or both. While the parents eat their dinner in peaceful privacy, the children watch another hour of television. Then there is only a half hour left before bedtime, just enough time for baths, getting pajamas on, brushing teeth, and so on. The children's evening is regimented with an almost military precision. They watch their favorite programs, and when there is "nothing much on I really like," they watch whatever else is on—because *watching* is the important thing. Their mother does not see anything amiss with watching programs just for the sake of watching; she only wishes there were some first-rate children's shows on at those times.

Of course, families today still do *special* things together at times: go camping in the summer, go to the zoo on a nice Sunday, take various trips and expeditions. But their *ordinary* daily life together is diminished—that sitting around at the dinner table, that spontaneous taking up of an activity, those little games invented by children on the spur of the moment when there is nothing else to do, the scribbling, the chatting, and even the quarreling, all the things that form the fabric of a family, that define a childhood. Instead, the children have their regular schedule of television programs and bedtime, and the parents have their peaceful dinner together. The author of the article in the *Times* notes that "keeping a family sane means mediating between the needs of both children and adults." But surely the needs of adults are being better met than the needs of the children, who are effectively shunted away and rendered untroublesome, while their parents enjoy a life as undemanding as that of any childless couple. In reality, it is those very demands that young children make upon a family that lead to growth, and it is the way parents

accede to those demands that builds the relationships upon which the future of the family depends. If the family does not accumulate its backlog of shared experiences, shared *everyday* experiences that occur and recur and change and develop, then it is not likely to survive as anything other than a caretaking institution.

What has happened to family rituals, those regular, dependable, recurrent happenings that gave members of a family a feeling of *belonging* to a home rather than living in it merely for the sake of conveni-

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ence, those experiences that act as the adhesive of family unity far more than any material advantages?

Mealtime rituals, going-to-bed rituals, illness rituals, holiday rituals, how many of these have survived the inroads of the television set?

A young woman who grew up near Chicago reminisces about her childhood and gives an idea of the effects of television upon family rituals:

"As a child I had millions of relatives around—my parents both came from relatively large families. My father had nine brothers and sisters. And so every holiday there was this great swoop-down of aunts, uncles, and millions of cousins. I just remember how wonderful it used to be. These thousands of cousins would come and everyone would play and ultimately, after dinner, all the women would be in the front of the house, drinking coffee and talking, all the men would be in the back of the house, drinking and smoking, and all the kids would be all over the place, playing hide and seek. Christmas time was particularly nice because everyone always brought all their toys and games. Our house had a couple of rooms with go-through closets, so there were always kids running in a great circle route. I remember it was just wonderful.

"And then all of a sudden one year I remember becoming suddenly aware of how different everything had become. The kids were no longer playing Monopoly or Clue or the other games we used to play together. It was because we had a television set which had been turned on for a football game. All of that socializing that had gone on previously had ended. Now everyone was sitting in front of the television set, on a holiday, at a family party! I remember being stunned by how awful that was. Somehow the television had become more attractive."

It is not only the activities that a family might engage in together that are diminished by the powerful presence of television in the home. The relationships of the family members to each other are also affected, in both obvious and subtle ways.

The hours that the young child spends in a one-way relationship with television people, an involvement that allows for no communication or interaction, surely affect his relationships with real-life people.

Studies show the importance of eye-to-eye contact, for instance, in real-life relationships, and indicate that the nature of a person's eye-contact patterns, whether he looks another squarely in the eye or looks to the side or shifts his gaze from side to side, may play a significant role in his success or failure in human relationships. But no eye contact is possible in the child-television relationship, although in certain children's programs people purport to speak directly to the child and the camera fosters this illusion by focusing directly upon the person being filmed. (Mr. Rogers is an example, telling the child "I like you, you're special," etc.). How might such a distortion of real-life relationships affect a child's development of trust, of openness, of an ability to relate well to other *real* people?

Bruno Bettelheim writes: "Children who have been taught, or conditioned, to listen passively most of the day to the warm verbal communications coming from the TV screen, to the deep emotional appeal of the so-called TV personality, are often unable to respond to real persons because they arouse so much less feeling than the skilled actor. Worse, they lose the ability to learn from reality because life experiences are much more complicated than the ones they see on the screen . . ."

But more obviously damaging to family relationships is the elimination of opportunities to talk, and perhaps more important, to argue, to air grievances, between parents and children and brothers and sisters. Families frequently use television to avoid confronting their problems, problems that will not go away if they are ignored but will only fester and become less easily resolvable as time goes on.

A mother reports: "I find myself, with three children, wanting to turn on the TV set when they're fighting. I really have to struggle not to do it because I feel that's telling them this is the solution to the quarrel—but it's so tempting that I often do it."

The decreased opportunities for simple conversation between parents and children in the television-centered home may help explain an observation made by an emergency room nurse at a Boston hospital. She reports that parents just seem to sit there these days when they come in with a sick or seriously injured child, although talking to the child would distract and comfort him. "They don't seem to know *how* to talk to their own children at any length," the nurse observes. Similarly, a television critic writes in *The New York Times*: "I had just a day ago taken my son to the emergency ward of a hospital for stitches above his left eye, and the occasion seemed no more real to me than Maalot or 54th Street, south-central Los Angeles. There was distance and numb-

Continued on page 90

Chief of Naval Operations. Bud Zumwalt was definitely not out of the mold that stamped out everyday admirals. He was a swashbuckling colorful small ship sailor with a golden tongue. He had a knack with young people. Bud felt he could set those dissidents aright if he could just talk to them directly. He built lines of communications between himself and the sailors on the ships. He frequently ignored the chain of command. He forced scores of admirals into retirement. He abolished lots of Navy customs which he scorned. Some said Bud Zumwalt's techniques undermined shipboard discipline and encouraged dissent; others felt he had checkmated the dissenters.

One thing was fact: Bud Zumwalt and John Warner collided head-on with John, taking the side of the Navy's traditional establishment. If John Warner was a politician who thought like an admiral (and made a liberty like a sailor), Bud Zumwalt was an admiral who thought like a politician. Both were keen students of the international scene and of military strategy.

To the outside world they stood their ground together with a shrinking Navy and a tottering President in the White House. Most of the press, many of the nation's young people and several in Congress were arrayed against them. Somehow these two protagonists held the Navy together during one of America's darkest hours. In their spare time they tinkered with ideas of how to get each other fired—at least so we are told.

The Yom Kippur War came in the fall of '73. The Soviets came within a hair of entering the fray. So badly had America's governmental fabric been damaged that many in the press and Congress tossed aside reports of Soviet mobilization as White House trickery. Although outnumbered ship for ship in the Mediterranean and essentially unsupported by other forces, John Warner's and Bud Zumwalt's Navy performed admirably. The crisis passed.

Two years later helicopters from the very support ships which the dissidents tried so hard to immobilize evacuated the remaining Americans from Saigon and Phnom Penh while planes from American aircraft carriers held Hanoi's forces at bay. It wasn't as hard as Dunkirk, but it wasn't easy. America was lucky to get the rest of her men back.

The Navy which John Warner and Bud Zumwalt worked so hard to preserve had come through admirably and safeguarded America's interest on the other side of the oceans as our Navy is meant to do. By the time of the Saigon evacuation both Warner and Zumwalt had slipped from the scene. Neither received any praise or fame. Probably neither expected any. They had done their duty and stood their watch. They left the Navy on its way back up. Destiny was once more to bring these two colorful protagonists and polished poli-

ticians together again.

John Warner went from one thankless job to another. As the nation prepared for its 200th birthday President Ford tapped him to prepare for and direct the Bicentennial celebration at the national level. Thwarted by a cynical press and greedy small businessmen hawking questionable wares, John managed to put together a national celebration worthy of the American people. We had a birthday which the whole nation enjoyed. Typical of John Warner, it was quiet, it struck the right note—in this case, a time of healing and contemplation. At the conclusion of 1976 John Warner finished his work and turned his attention toward Elizabeth Taylor. It was

tional scene, and his part-time home in Washington, D.C. Despite his long-time Virginia ties, they say he is not Virginian enough.

Late last summer, John's most worthy opponent withdrew from the Virginia political scene. Elmo Zumwalt, having retired from the Navy, had set up shop in Virginia. He ran as a Democrat against Republican Senator Harry Byrd in the 1976 elections. Byrd was a "shoo-in," but Zumwalt turned in a creditable performance. He had the strong backing of presidential candidate Carter. It was widely assumed that Republican Warner would meet Democrat Zumwalt in the '78 campaign for Scott's seat. Suddenly, in August, Zumwalt withdrew from political life, pulled

the men I've really liked really didn't like women." Well, John Warner really does like women, and he really does like Liz. And if it is not likely that either will be a watch fob for the other, neither would want it that way. We wish them well; they're the salt of the earth and, for now, the spice of Virginia. ☞

Plug-In Drug

continued from page 41

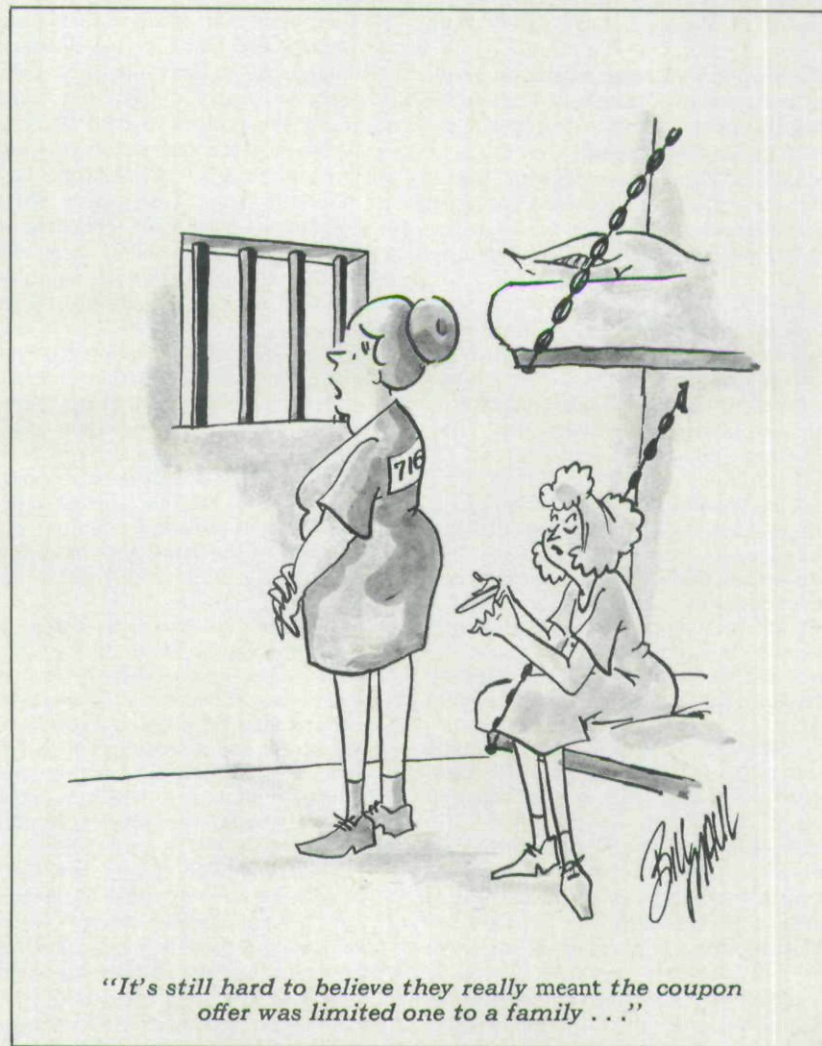
ness and an inability to turn off the total institution. I didn't behave at all; I just watched. . . ."

A number of research studies substantiate the assumption that television interferes with family activities and the formation of family relationships. One survey shows that 78 percent of the respondents indicated no conversation taking place during viewing except at specified times such as commercials. The study notes: "The television atmosphere in most households is one of quiet absorption on the part of family members who are present. The nature of the family social life during a program could be described as 'parallel' rather than interactive, and the set does seem to dominate family life when it is on." Thirty-six percent of the respondents in another study indicated that television viewing was the only family activity participated in during the week.

In its effect on family relationships, in its facilitation of parental withdrawal from an active role in the socialization of their children, and in its replacement of family rituals and special events, television has played an important role in the disintegration of the American family. But of course it has not been the only contributing factor, perhaps not even the most important one. The steadily rising divorce rate, the increase in the number of working mothers, the decline of the extended family, the breakdown of neighborhoods and communities, the growing isolation of the nuclear family—all have seriously affected the family.

But while the roots of alienation go deep into the fabric of American social history, television's presence in the home fertilizes them, encourages their wild and unchecked growth. Perhaps it is true that America's commitment to the television experience masks a spiritual vacuum, an empty and barren way of life, a desert of materialism. But it is television's dominant role in the family that anesthetizes the family into accepting its unhappy state and prevents it from struggling to better its condition, to improve its relationships, and to regain some of the richness it once possessed.

And so the American family muddles on, dimly aware that something is amiss but distracted from an understanding of its plight by an endless stream of television images. As family ties grow weaker and vaguer,



time once more to take a wife. On a high hill in Virginia, as they hugged in a rainstorm, Liz had said yes.

Elizabeth Taylor had made quite a find. For all his experience John Warner is a young man barely turned 50. He is now a seasoned politician, well versed in national defense and international affairs. He is ambitious and ready for greater responsibility.

John Warner has not announced that he is a candidate for any office, but it is well known that the seat of Virginia's Senator Scott will be up for grabs next year. John Warner is likely to be the Republican candidate.

Some old hands in Virginia resent John Warner's considerable experience on the national and interna-

up stakes and left Virginia to take a position in private industry. Friends said Bud Zumwalt had tested political waters and found them not to his liking.

There has been only one thing making a splash in Virginia political waters this year, and that's Liz. If anyone has the right to claim Bud Zumwalt's political scalp, she does. She continues to do her thing with enthusiasm, energy and sultry charm. Liz has only one speed and that's full ahead.

We can't predict whether these two tempests can make their marriage last. On the subject of her five previous husbands, Liz has commented that "one doesn't always fry the fish one wants to fry. Some of

as children's lives become more separate from their parents', as parents' educational role in their children's lives is taken over by television and schools, family life becomes increasingly more unsatisfying for both parents and children. All that seems to be left is Love, an abstraction that family members *know* is necessary but find great difficulty giving each other because the traditional opportunities for expressing love within the family have been reduced or destroyed.

As for love of children, this love is increasingly expressed through supplying material comforts, amusements and educational opportunities. Parents show their love for their children by sending them to good schools and camps, by providing them with good food and good doctors, by buying them toys, books, games and a television set of their very own. Parents will even go further and express their love by attending PTA meetings to improve their children's schools, or by joining groups that are acting to improve their children's schools, or by joining groups that are acting to improve the quality of their children's television programs.

But this is love at a remove, and is rarely understood by children. The more direct forms of parental love require time and patience, steady, dependable, ungrudgingly given time actually spent *with* a child, reading to him, comforting him, playing, joking and working with him. But even if a parent were eager and willing to demonstrate that sort of direct love to his children today, the opportunities are diminished. What with school and Little League and piano lessons and, of course, the inevitable television programs, a day seems to offer just enough time for a good-night kiss.

Evolution of A Problem

Helen S., a part-time musician and mother, began using television as a handy child sedative while she prepared dinner. She describes the evolution of a serious television problem:

"There was a time when Kitty and John were both little, about two and three, when they watched nothing but 'Mr. Rogers.' Our whole dinner schedule was geared to that program, and

I'd have dinner ready for them exactly at five-thirty when 'Rogers' was over. That was a nice useful time to have them salted away watching TV. I was the one who turned on the set at that time, and I didn't turn it on any other time. But that program

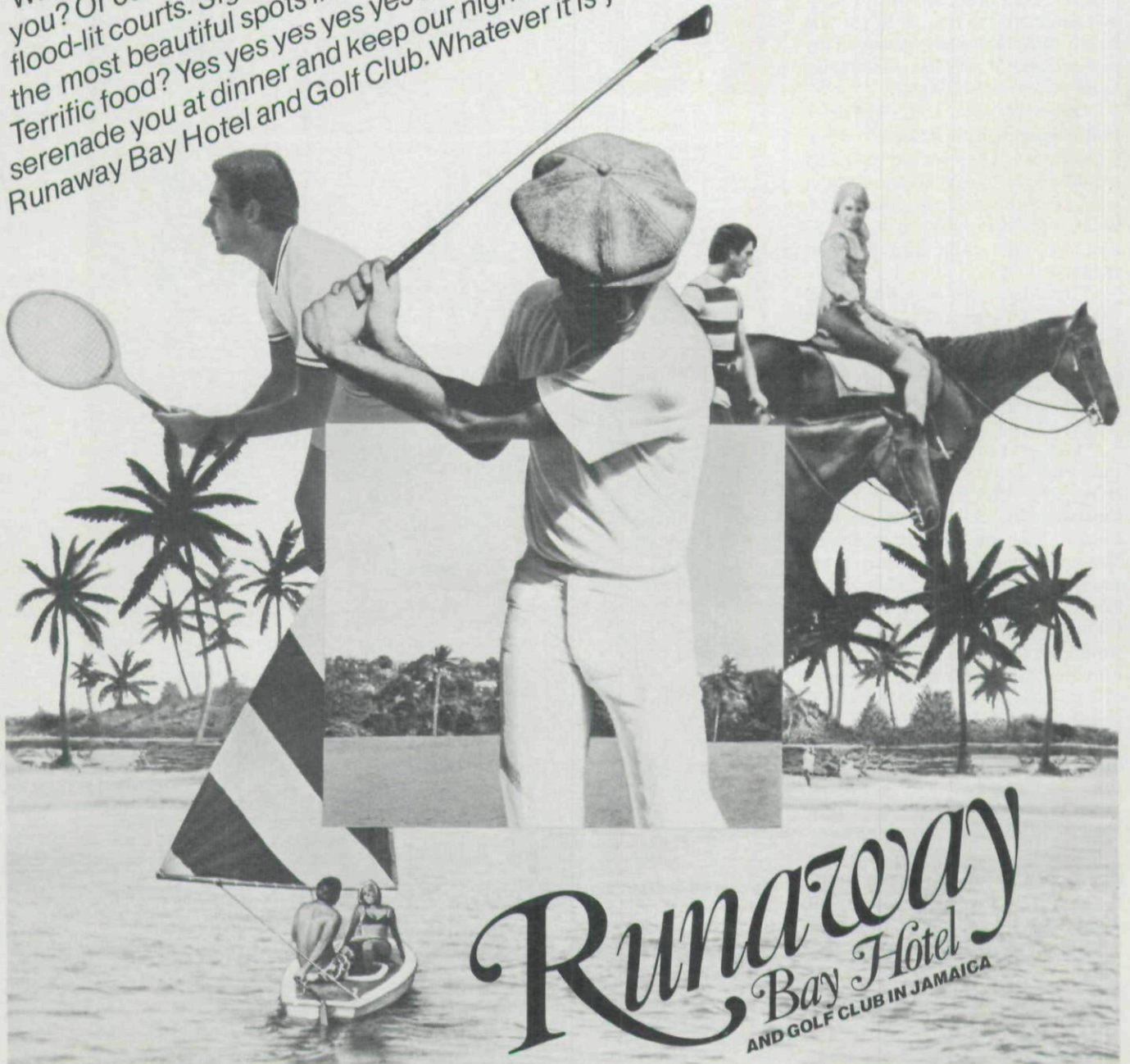
was very convenient for us all.

"Then there was a time when they watched 'Sesame Street' and 'Mr. Rogers.' That didn't seem too much television to me. But pretty soon a time came when 'Mr. Rogers' became too tame for John. When he

was four he discovered 'Batman.' So now there was 'Sesame Street' and 'Batman.' And sometimes 'Underdog,' which both of them like a lot. And then they developed a great fondness for 'The Flintstones.' I don't know where they got interest-

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ed in all those other programs, maybe from baby-sitters, who always let them watch TV.

"Now I began to feel a bit uneasy about television. You see, I had been in such complete control at first. But then, slowly, all these other programs infiltrated, and they seemed to want to watch so many things! So I decided to limit the time they spent watching instead of worrying too much about what programs they watched, since they seemed to like some programs so much.

"But what began to bother me was that John often refused to go out and ride his bike in the afternoon because he preferred to stay at home and watch TV. Well, I fought that tooth and nail! I'd explode and have a tantrum and say, 'We're not going to watch any television if it has that sort of a hold on you!' I'd make a scene about it and declare that we were going to have some new rules about television! But those never lasted very long. Also, I talked to the school psychologist about the television problem and she told me not to worry, that if John wanted to watch two or three hours of television, it was probably the best thing for him to do. Well, that went against all my instincts, but it was the easiest thing to do, to just let him watch.

"When they were six and seven they discovered the Saturday morning cartoons. They adored them and would watch them all morning. I can't deny that this was great for us, because we'd be able to lie in bed nice and late while they watched their programs.

"Then last year they discovered 'Jeannie.' [Groan]. The combined message of 'Jeannie' and 'The Flintstones' is so sexist that it makes me furious. But the school psychologist assured me that TV is just TV and that kids know it isn't real.

"Last year our pattern was a terrible one. 'Jeannie' was on from five-thirty to six-thirty, but our dinner-time was six o' clock. I'd tell the kids that if they insisted on watching 'Jeannie,' they'd have to turn it off when dinner was ready. They'd say, 'Yeah, sure, we'll turn it off.' Then I'd come and warn them that dinner would be ready in five minutes. Then I'd come in and tell them to turn it off at the next commercial. Of course, they didn't turn it off. I'd always have to come in and turn it off and they'd be very angry about this. They'd say, 'I hate you,' and come into dinner shoving and kicking each other, angry and pouty.

"They'd stay grumpy for the whole meal. It was the worst time of the day, really! And this went on all year. Every once in a while I'd get fed up and make threats like 'We won't watch TV anymore if this is what happens when you watch!' I don't think I ever made good on those fancy threats."

At this point in the narrative the mother stopped and said to the interviewer in a changed voice, "This is really a terrible saga, isn't it?"

Scott

continued from page 43

Scott, who also saw the approaching school, called out to me to try and obtain a picture of them, just as I was snatching up my reflex camera for that purpose. The whales dived under the ice, so, hastily estimating where they would be likely to rise again, I ran to the spot—adjusting the camera as I did so. I had got to within six feet of the edge of the ice—which was about a yard thick—when to my consternation it suddenly heaved up under my feet and split into fragments around me; whilst the eight whales, lined up side by side and almost touching each other, burst up from under the ice and blew off steam.

"The head of one was within two yards of me. I saw its nostrils open,

and at such close quarters the release of its pent-up breath was like a blast from an air compressor. The noise of the eight simultaneous blows sounded terrific, and I was enveloped in the warm vapor of the nearest 'spout,' which had a strong fishy smell. Fortunately the shock sent me backwards, instead of precipitating me into the sea, or my Antarctic experiences would have ended somewhat prematurely.

"As the whales rose from under the ice, there was a loud 'booming sound'—to use the expression of Captain Scott, who was a witness of the incident—as they struck the ice with their backs. Immediately they had cleared it, with a rapid movement of their flukes (huge tail fins) they made a tremendous commotion, setting the floe on which I was now isolated rocking so furiously that it was all I could do to keep from falling into the water. Then

they turned about with the deliberate intention of attacking me. The ship was within 60 yards, and I heard wild shouts of 'Look out!' 'Run!' 'Jump, man, jump!' 'Run, quick!' But I could not run; it was all I could do to keep my feet as I leapt from piece to piece of the rocking ice, with the whales a few yards behind me, snorting and blowing among the ice blocks. I wondered whether I should be able to reach safety before the whales reached me; and I recollect distinctly thinking, if they did get me, how very unpleasant the first bite would feel, but that it would not matter much about the second.

"The broken floes had already started to drift away with the current, and as I reached the last fragment I saw that I could not jump to the firm ice, for the lead was too wide. The whales behind me were making a horrible noise amongst the broken ice, and I stood for a moment hesitating what to do. More frantic shouts of 'Jump, man, jump!' reached me from my friends. Just then, by great good luck, the floe on which I stood turned slightly in the current and lessened the distance. I was able to leap across—not, however, a moment too soon. As I reached security and looked back, a huge black and tawny head was pushed out of the water at the spot, and rested on the ice, looking round with its little pig-like eyes to see what had become of me. The brute opened his jaws wide, and I saw the terrible teeth which I had so narrowly escaped.

"I wasted no time in sprinting the 60 or 70 yards to my sledge, by which Captain Scott was standing. I shall never forget his expression as I reached it in safety. During the next year I saw that same look on his face several times, when someone was in danger. It showed how deeply he felt the responsibility for life, which he thought rested so largely on himself. He was deathly pale as he said to me: 'My God! that was about the nearest squeak I ever saw!'"

Scott, who had witnessed the whole incident, described it in his journal. He ended his account with these words: "One after the other their huge hideous heads shot vertically into the air through the cracks that they had made. As they reared them to a height of 6 or 8 feet it was possible to see their tawny head markings, their small glistening eyes and their terrible array of teeth—by far the largest and most terrifying in the world."

Preparations for life ashore took less than two weeks and once the stores had been landed and the hut erected, Scott's next preoccupation was to lay a large depot to the south in preparation for the Pole journey the following summer. He had hoped to deposit one ton of provisions and equipment on the 80-degree parallel of latitude, but owing to bad weather and the tender condition of the ponies, the party only reached latitude 79 degrees 29 minutes south. On the way back, Scott learned that



Rand McNally

Where Do You Think You Are?

East or West, North or South, each of the distinctive areas above appears on the road map of a single state. In terms of routes, state parks, mountains and memorials, there is, as the saying goes, "no place like it." Can you identify the states? If you or a friend find the game too easy (but you won't) add the requirement that you place the area north, south, east, west, or central in the designated state.

(Answers on Page 108)

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