Horatio Alger in the Sticks

Or, how I rose from tractor driver to TV director in just seven panic-stricken months

By Gary W. Jones

When I was 16, my family becameneighbors with a television station. This

event was a bit miraculous, since our"neighborhood" was the wooded hills

near the town of Jonesboro, Ark. Iimmediately turned in my ax and en-

tered the glorious, show-biz world ofa S20-per-week photography assistant.

nes rise and fall quicklyin the television industry, but nowherewith more frequency and unexpected-ness than in small-market TV stations.

This explains why I found myselt pro-moted to Channel 8's chief photogra-

pher with my television career only fourdays old.equally instantaneous panic‚Äîan un-derstandable reaction, considering thefact that I had no idea what I wasdoing. Characteristic of my flair forfumbling ineptitude was my habit otstreaking out to photograph an assign-ment, only to meet with darkroom dis-to terms with all the mysterious chemi-cals that confronted me daily amid (heinky environs of our broom-closet-turned-darkroom.

Although my trial-and-error methodof processing meant that I wastedmuch timeremixing, pouring, crankingand rinsing, my photo fiascoes weremostembarrassing when 1 had to skulkback to the client and ask to reshootthe pictures. "You here again, kid?"became a painfully familiar refrain.

If I had not been a much betterphotographer than I was a laboratorytechnician, I would have been backbaling hay in short order. Luckily, however, I had a knack for compositionand telling a story pictorially, so Ibegan trying my hand at studio camerawork. Since I had no worry aboutprocessing, electronic photography andstudio production seemed a more exciting‚Äîand safer‚Äîarea in which to

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Despite Channel 8's popularity with

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electric milking machines were plugged in along the line.

Because of the station's strugglesto survive economically, we rarely pro-

duced a program‚Äîregardless of length or complexity‚Äîwith more technical per-

sonnel on duty than two cameramen, an engineer and one hapless soul whofunctioned as director/switcher/audio man/projectionist/telephone operator.

A television control room‚Äîwith its monitors, meters, communications cir-

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the operation is fully staffed. But Channel 8's two-man control room not only

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Needless to say, Channel 8's programming continuously teetered on theverge of complete chaos. And whenit tottered too far, disaster might ensuein the form of a rollicking series ofaudio/visual goofs or in an extendedtelecast of the director's favorite stationidentification or "technical difficulty"

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During moments of directorial catastrophe I had a bad habit of gettingmy cameras (all two of them) confused.I would yell for Camera One to get ashot but would push the button forCamera Two instead. I soon learnedthat this recurrent camera miscommand of "Ready One, Take Two . . ."was certain to treat viewers to un-

scheduled glimpses of elbows, earlobes, and fuzzily kinetic camera work.

The various station managers whotook the helm at Channel 8 were always encouraging directors and engineers alike to exercise their imagination and ingenuity. This is a positive way of saying that there were neverany production budgets and seldomany equipment working properly. Forexample, the Channel 8 concept ofset designing was to figure out todayhow to rearrange the same backgroundflats, curtains and set pieces we hadused yesterday and the day before. Oneparticularly unkempt plastic pottedplant‚Äîaffectionately dubbed "Matilda"was shown so many times on dif- ‚Äî>

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very had near the studio and transmit-

ter Our intrepid engineering department

solved the proo'em oy fastening a home

TV antenna to Ihe top ot a Vulk-.war^r.

bus. driving ihe vehicle far out into Ihe

woods, and running a cable back to our

control room This Rube Goldberg ar

rangement rmghi have worked il it had

not rained in Jonesboro New Year's

Day and if a passing hunicr had noi

gotten his car stuck in the mud Close

to Our bus The ignition noise Irom the

ception And thousands ol Channel 0

viewers cursed and fumed until our two

trusty cameramen sloshed through Ihe

woods lo help push out the floundering

automobile

Once while I was directing a live

wrestling show, the combatants decided

to continue some real, unscripled vio-

lence in my conlrol room ] Quickly or-

dered lights and cameras to be turned

in my direction and ducked tor safely

under the switching console just as the

hero administered the coup de grSce

with a borrowed chan Nothing helped

our wrestling ratings more than honest

bloodshed

But studios and control rooms were

SIMAREST. IT CAN HELP MEAN THE

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SINUS SUFFERING AND

FEELING BETTER AGAIN.

Sinarest was made specifically for people who get sinus headaches

and congestion.

It was created by a research scientist who's suffered from sinus

headaches nearly all his life. So he made it strong to be effective.

And in less than a year it's become a leading brand.

The basic idea behind Sinarest is to help relieve your headache pain

fast. And to go to work on your swollen sinus cavities.

To do this he used a pain reliever that's i

easy on your stomach, a decongestant that |

helps drain your sinus cavities and an

antihistamine.

He even added a mild energizer to help

keep you from getting drowsy.

Sinarest for sinus headache pain and

the congestion that causes it.

It can help mean the difference between

suffering and feeling better again.

film production market in Northeast |

Arkansas. I was forced to employ an

"auteur." or do-it-all. method of news-

film production. After shooting the film

story (usually a beauty pageant or a

cheerleading clinic). I rushed back to

the studio and developed the film in

a hand-cranked processor. I then dried

the wet. dripping mess by stringing the I

film from lights in the studio. While j

the film dried, I wrote the accompany-

ing news copy and prepared to direct |

the evening's first newscast. TV sta-

tions just do not put together news

programs that way any more.

My memories of this type of rustic

television are a mixture of chagrin,

smiles and tremendous pride. During |

my four-year apprenticeship in Arkan-

sas television. I became an authority |

on Wallace Beery movies. Roller Der-

by, Veg-a-MatiCS. Highway Patrol re-

runs, and chinchilla-ranch promotions.

Much more important. I discovered that

television in even its most backward,

goshawfu! state exerts a powerful com-

munications force

The TV studio back in Jonesboro is

Still out in the woods, but civilization I

has begun to encroach in the form of |

paved roads and real-estate subdivi

sions. Channel 8 is now a prosperous,

progressive ABC-affiliate station which |

no longer has that quaint, anachro

tic charm. And I suppose beginners

there are no longer allowed all the

mistakes I once made.

Today‚Äîalmost eight years after foul-

ing up my first batch ol slides for |

Channel 8‚Äî1 am still in the "glorious,

show-biz world of television." But

although my position as a film/video-

tape producer for WFAA Productions I

in Dallas affords me the opportunity t"

use millions of dollars' worth of the I

latest equipment, to travel throughout |

the world and to work alongside some

ot the top professionals in the industry.

I sometimes miss the simple satisfac-

tions and insanities of my first job back

in Jonesboro.