

The Honeymooners

Episode for class:

Better Living Through TV (Aired November 12, 1955)

When Jackie Gleason shook the "chef of the future" appliance, a piece of it flew off. This was unexpected during the "LIVE" broadcast of this episode. Gleason's "spearfishing" remark was an ad lib. The part where he runs into the set's kitchen wall and knocks it over was also unplanned with an improvised reaction.

The Honeymooners originally aired from 1955 to 1956. It was created by Jackie Gleason and based on a recurring comedy sketch of the same name that had been part of Gleason's variety show.

Before *The Honeymooners*, Jackie Gleason starred on television as Chester Riley in *The Life Of Riley* from 1949 to 1950.

In July of 1950, Jackie Gleason became the host of *Cavalcade of Stars*, a variety show that aired on the DuMont Television Network. After the first year, he and his writers Harry Crane and Joe Bigelow developed a sketch based upon familiar domestic situations for its material. Along the lines of the popular radio show *The Bickersons*, Gleason wanted a realistic portrayal of life for a poor husband and wife living in Brooklyn. The couple would continually argue but ultimately show their love for each other. After rejecting titles such as "The Beast", "The Lovers" and "The Couple Next Door", Gleason and his staff settled on *The Honeymooners*. Gleason took the role of Ralph Kramden and he chose veteran comedy film actress Pert Kelton for the role of Alice Kramden, Ralph's wife. *The Honeymooners* debuted on October 5, 1951 as a six-minute sketch. Cast member Art Carney made a brief appearance as a police officer who is hit with flour that Ralph throws from the window.

The popularity of the sketches led Gleason to rework *The Honeyymooners* as a filmed half-hour series. It debuted on CBS on October 1, 1955. The final episode of *The Honeyymooners* aired on September 22, 1956. These episodes are now referred to as the "Classic 39 episodes". Over the following years, Gleason revived the characters on his television programs until 1978.

Gleason grew up in apartment 3A at 328 Chauncey Street in Brooklyn, New York. The interior and exterior of the apartment were recreated for *The Honeymooners*.

On January 30, 1954, during an episode of *The Jackie Gleason Show*, Gleason was in a sketch doing parody of a silent film when he slipped on a puddle of water. He wound up with torn ligaments and minor fractures on his right ankle. Gleason continued and finished the sketch while in pain. Beginning the following week, guest hosts filled in for him until his return on March 27, 1954.

Ralph Kramden was played by Jackie Gleason, a bus driver for the fictional Gotham Bus Company based in New York City. However he is never seen driving a bus.

Alice (née Alice Gibson) was Ralph's patient but sharp-tongued wife of 14 years. In the first nine skits from 1951 to January 1952, Alice was played by Pert Kelton. She was followed by Audrey Meadows until 1966, then by Sheila MacRae. In July 1952, CBS president William S. Paley sent Gleason and his cast on a nationwide promotional tour, performing musical numbers and sketches that included *The Honeymooners*. Pert Kelton was married to actor Ralph S. Bell who was blacklisted in the early 1950's. Unfortunately for her, Kelton was blacklisted by association to her husband and replaced on the tour by actress Ginger Jones, who also became blacklisted by CBS. As a result, yet another Alice was needed. Jones's replacement was Audrey Meadows.

Edward Lillywhite/Ethelbert "Ed" Norton was played by Art Carney. By profession, he was a New York City municipal sewer worker who was Ralph's best friend and upstairs neighbor. Ed is the inspiration for Barney Rubble in *The Flintstones*. Ed Norton's character debuted on November 2, 1951.

Thelma "Trixie" Norton was Ed's wife and Alice's best friend. Elaine Stritch was the first and original Trixie Norton in a *Honeymooners* sketch with Gleason, Carney and Pert Kelton on November 2, 1951. This was the only appearance by Elaine Stritch as Trixie. Her character was rewritten and recast by Gleason after that one episode. Joyce Randolph began playing the character as Ed's wholesome housewife. Jane Kean played the role in a series of hour-long *Honeymooners* episodes, in color and with music, on *The Jackie Gleason Show* from 1966 to 1970. Kean played the role for many more years than Joyce Randolph. Trixie is the inspiration for Betty Rubble in *The Flintstones*.

The Kramdens and Nortons lived in an apartment house at 328 Chauncey Street in Brooklyn, New York City. Jackie Gleason's actual birthplace was located at 364 Chauncey Street. Most of *The Honeymooners* episodes takes place in Ralph and Alice Kramden's small, two-room apartment. Other settings used in the show included the Gotham Bus Company depot, the Raccoon Lodge, a neighborhood pool parlor, a park bench where Ralph and Ed occasionally meet for lunch and on occasion the Nortons' apartment which noticeably better-furnished than the Kramdens'.

In 1955, many television shows including *The Jackie Gleason Show* were performed live and recorded using kinescope technology, which was recorded directly onto 35mm film. For *The Honeymooners*, Gleason utilized the Electronicam TV film system, developed by DuMont in the early 1950s, which allowed for a live performance to be directly captured on film. As a result of the superior picture and sound

quality afforded by the system, episodes of *The Honeymooners* were more suitable for rebroadcast than most other live shows of that era.

All 39 episodes of *The Honeymooners* were filmed at the DuMont Television Network's Adelphi Theatre at 152 West 54th Street in Manhattan before an audience of 1,000. Episodes were never fully rehearsed because Gleason felt that rehearsals would rob the show of its spontaneity. As a result, mistakes often were made, with lines recited incorrectly or altogether forgotten. To compensate, the cast developed visual cues for each other.

On September 29, 1956, one week after *The Honeymooners* ended as a weekly 30-minute series, *The Jackie Gleason Show* returned. *The Honeymooners* returned as part of that variety show. Eight episodes were produced as original full hour *Honeymooners* musicals with music and lyrics by Lyn Duddy and Jerry Bresler.

In January 1966, Audrey Meadows returned on Gleason's *American Scene Magazine* variety series as Alice for *The Honeymooners: The Adoption*, which was a reenactment of a 1955 sketch of the same name. In 1966, when *The Jackie Gleason Show* relocated to Miami Beach, Florida, *The Honeymooners* sketches returned, in color for the first time, featuring Sheila MacRae and Jane Kean in the roles of Alice and Trixie. Audrey Meadows and Joyce Randolph declined to relocate to Miami. Gleason was adamant that the Ed Norton role should never be played by anyone other than Art Carney. One notable 1967 segment featured the return of Pert Kelton as Alice's mother. This was one of her last performances before her death in 1968.

On October 11, 1973, Jackie Gleason, Art Carney, Sheila MacRae and Jane Kean reunited for a *Honeymooners* sketch titled "Women's Lib" as part of a Jackie Gleason special on CBS. Four final one-hour specials aired on ABC from 1976 to 1978, with Audrey Meadows returning as Alice and Jane Kean as Trixie.

Art Carney won five Emmy Awards for his portrayal of Ed Norton. Two of them for the original *Jackie Gleason Show*, one for *The Honeyymooners* and two for the final version of *The Jackie Gleason Show*. He was nominated for another two in 1957 and 1966, but lost. Jackie Gleason and Audrey Meadows both were nominated in 1956 for their work on *The Honeymooners*. Gleason was nominated for Best Actor In A Continuing Performance, but lost to Phil Silvers. Audrey Meadows was nominated for Best Actress-Supporting Role, but lost to Nanette Fabray. Meadows was also nominated for Emmys for her portrayal of Alice Kramden in 1954 and 1957.

In 1960, Hanna-Barbera produced the animated sitcom *The Flintstones* on ABC. Critics and viewers noted the close resemblance of the show's premise and characters to those of *The Honeymooners*. William Hanna and Joseph Barbera both stated that *The Honeymooners* was among their inspirations for *The Flintstones*. Jackie Gleason later said that he considered suing but decided that becoming known as "the guy who yanked Fred Flintstone off the air" was not worth the negative publicity. *The Honeymooners* had been compared in its day to the similar comedy series *The Bickersons* as well as to the work of Laurel and Hardy. *The Flintstones* series and its spinoffs changed over the years and deviated from the similarities to *The Honeymooners*.

In 1999, TV Land came up with the idea of developing and erecting statues of some of its fictional TV characters as a way to publicize the network and its shows. The statue for Ralph Kramden became the first of these projects to be located in New York City at the busiest bus terminal in the world, the Port Authority Bus Terminal in mid-town Manhattan. The dedication took place in August of 2000.

The statue reads:

Jackie Gleason as Ralph Kramden

Bus Driver – Raccoon Lodge Treasurer – Dreamer

Presented by the People of TV Land”

REFERENCES

Internet Movie Data Base

Wikipedia

Radio Spirits website - Ralph Bell / Pert Kelton Blacklist