



Courtesy photo
There was a time when seven out of every 10 TV households tuned in to watch *I Love Lucy*.

'I Love Lucy' still funny at 50

By Doug Nye

The (Columbia, S.C.) State

In 1951, America needed a good laugh.

Its soldiers were away fighting in some distant place called Korea. Communism was spreading its tentacles across Europe. The fear of a Soviet atomic attack on U.S. soil was very real. And kids spent their summers worried about catching the crippling infantile paralysis, aka polio.

They were frightening times.

Fifty years ago Monday on Oct. 15, 1951, that much-needed laugh came when *I Love Lucy* premiered on the CBS television network. The

show centered on a wacky redhead housewife named Lucy Ricardo, enthusiastically portrayed by Lucille Ball.

I Love Lucy was an immediate hit, soaring to No. 3 in the ratings during its first season and moving to No. 1 the next season, where it stayed

throughout most of its network run.

Lucy and her bandleader husband Ricky Ricardo (played by Ball's real-life husband, Desi Arnaz) and their best friends Fred and Ethel Mertz (William Frawley and Vivian Vance) became American icons before anyone really knew what the word meant.

Every Monday night at 9 for six years, families gathered around their black-and-white TV sets to enjoy the antics of the Ricardos and the Mertzes. At the show's zenith, seven out of every 10 TV households were watching *I Love Lucy*.

When Lucy gave birth to little Ricky on the Jan. 19, 1953, show, it was a national event which made the front page of many daily newspapers.

A half-century later, after generations have grown up watching *I Love Lucy* re-runs, some things haven't changed.

**I LOVE LUCY
MARATHON**
Monday, 10 p.m.- 2 a.m.,
Tuesday-Friday, 9 p.m.-2 a.m.
(CDT), TVLand

America is still in need of a few good laughs. Monday at 9 p.m. ET, TVLand will celebrate the show's golden anniversary by telecasting the first episode of *I Love Lucy* exactly as it aired 50 years ago to the hour. It serves to launch a week-long prime-time Lucy marathon.

Bob Schiller, who served as one of the writers on the series, says it's no secret why *I Love Lucy* has endured over five decades.

"It's good clean humor with lovable characters and outlandishly funny situations," Schiller said during a recent telephone conversation. "It was a family show that everybody could watch and laugh at."

Schiller admits, however, that the thought of *I Love Lucy* being around 50 years later never entered his head.

"We didn't know anything about reruns or long-time syndication," Schiller said. "It was unheard of then."

Please see Lucy

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Lucy: Her show became a lucrative blueprint

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Practically everything on television was done live in the early 1950s. Lucy and Desi, the driving forces behind the show, decided to film each episode in front of a live audience using three cameras. CBS was lukewarm about the plan, but reluctantly agreed.

Several years later, the value of shooting film was demonstrated when *I Love Lucy* became the first lucrative rerun property. It served as the blueprint for the hundreds of sitcoms and dramatic shows that followed.

Schiller said he doesn't get any residuals from all those years of reruns.

"We got paid for four runs of each

episode," Schiller said. "It seemed like a good deal. Who could have dreamed of what would eventually happen?"

He said, though, he wouldn't trade anything for his experiences of working on the series.

"Lucy and Desi were both great to work with," Schiller said. "Lucy would try anything we writers came up with. Some stars wouldn't do that, but Lucy was always willing. If it was funny, she wanted to do it. She was fearless."

When *I Love Lucy* ended its network run with the 1956-57 season, the show was still ranked No.1. Lucy and Desi had done 180 half-hour episodes and were ready to try a different format. During the next three years they pro-

duced 13 *I Love Lucy* one-hour episodes under the banner *The Lucille Ball-Desi Arnaz Show*.

"We had fun with those," Schiller said. "Each one had a guest or guests stars and it gave us some opportunities to come with some new situations."

Asked if he thought there were any current sitcoms that might have the same impact of *I Love Lucy* 50 years from now, Schiller said he doubted it.

"I just don't care for much of the stuff that's on now," Schiller said. "The last one I really watched regularly was *Seinfeld* because of the writing and it was funny. I'm not sure, though, that it will be as popular 50 years from now."