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FORTY YEARS OF

FAMILY LIFE & STRIFE

By any definition, there were no predictions that January 12, 1971 was bound to become a particularly memorable date. The Nixon presidency was still in its pre-Watergate infancy, the conflict in Vietnam lumbered along in America's war-weary consciousness and the post holiday dreariness of winter gripped much of the nation. Yet on this apparently less than promising day, a cultural miracle occurred...

Carroll O'Connor and Jean Stapleton, two well-established character actors but hardly household names, screeched an off-key song called *Those Were the Days*.

Television viewers across the United States sat in their living rooms listening as this sound track played out against aerial film images of New York City and modest homes in the borough of Queens. As the song came to a merciful close, Jean Stapleton, in her role of Edith Bunker, cast a loving look at Carroll O'Connor's self-satisfied and smug character, Archie Bunker. A new age in TV was born.

Up until that moment, situation comedies on American television were characterized by a homogenized blandness that offended no one, addressed nothing and promoted a myth of suburban family life characterized by the unrelenting whiteness engendered by *Leave It To Beaver*, *The Donna Reed Show* and *Father Knows Best*. Against this media backdrop of insipid froth and outright silliness, *All in the Family's* Archie Bunker brought cutting edge political incorrectness to American homes by his casual use of such terms as "fag," "hebe," "dago," and "chink." An equal opportunity misanthrope who spared no one and offended all, Archie's malapropisms took aim at every race, ethnic background, religious affiliation, disability, sexual orientation and political persuasion that did not match his own. With ignorance as an infallible point of reference and prejudice as his guide, Archie presented a less than flattering image of America's lower middle class working man. Many in the entertainment industry (including Carroll O'Connor) were appalled and predicted immediate failure for the program. O'Connor, who was living in Rome at the time he got the call for the show's audition, insisted he would only come to New York if the producer, Norman Lear, offered him a return airline ticket to Italy. *All in the Family*, a guaranteed flop by all rules of conventional wisdom, became the highest rated TV show for five consecutive seasons and aired on network television until April of 1979.

Almost overnight, Bunkerisms such as "meathead, dingbat" and "stifle" entered the mainstream lexicon of American speech. In a case of life becoming art, Rob Reiner, who portrayed Archie's son in law, Mike, earned the less than enviable sobriquet of "Meathead" during a lunch break in the studio. Carroll O'Connor had stopped at a deli and picked up ten subway sandwiches for his co-stars; it soon became apparent that Rob Reiner had eaten four of them. Caught off-guard by his fellow cast member's voracious appetite, O'Connor said, "Four sandwiches at once, this guy's a real meathead." Overhearing the remark, Jean Stapleton told producer Norman Lear, "I think Carroll just came up with the perfect nickname for Rob's character." Today, four decades later and after countless reruns of *All in the Family* on the TV Land cable station, Jean Stapleton's observation still resonates with the voice of prophecy.

Dealing with such provocative topics as abortion, homosexuality, impotence, rape,

religious intolerance, racism and mental impairment, *All in the Family* was considered a lightning rod of controversy by the suits at the television networks. After an initial acceptance at ABC, executives ultimately turned it down. Norman Lear managed to interest CBS in the program because that network wanted to distance itself from its more rural fare, such as *Mayberry RFD*. Nonetheless, CBS honchos, nervous over the public's response to the provocative nature of the Archie Bunker character, insisted on hiring additional telephone operators to handle the flood of calls and complaints they anticipated after the show's first airing. As it turned out, exactly one viewer called to complain about this ground-breaking show that dared to substitute pie-in-the-face realism for the facetious bromides traditionally offered up by the American media machine.

The acting skills of the four-person ensemble cast, Carroll O'Connor, Jean Stapleton, Rob Reiner and Sally Struthers, were indispensable to the show's success, but Carroll O'Connor's flawless portrayal of Archie was the glue that held everything together. O'Connor's Archie Bunker was an ignorant, abrasive and loudmouth bigot, but off camera O'Connor was the diametrical opposite of his bombastic screen character. A devout Roman Catholic from Forest Hills, he grew up in a family that embraced the ethnic and cultural diversity of Queens, New York. In comparing his own background to that of his character he said that Archie's viewpoints and behavior would have labeled him a "low life" among his immediate family members, which included two brothers who were physicians. While double negatives of "you don't know nothin' no how," and speech regionalisms of "little goil" and "youse" flowed like free running "terlet" water from Bunker's mouth, Carroll O'Connor had a Masters degree in Speech and was a college English instructor over the course of his career.

Four decades after the premier of a show that was doomed to fail but went on to win four Emmys for Outstanding Comedy, Archie Bunker and his long-suffering family continues to find a welcoming spot among the nation's television viewers. The living room chairs of Archie and Edith, purchased by the set designer for a few dollars from a Goodwill shop, are now enshrined as cultural icons in the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. Even the United States government acknowledged the impact of the program; in 1998, the Post Office honored the show and its cast by issuing a 33-cent postage stamp. The TV program that was too controversial and inflammatory for an American audience spun off such popular TV fare as *Maude*, *The Jeffersons* and *Archie Bunker's Place*. This type of success against such overwhelming odds proves one thing about the media *wunderkinds* who control the television airwaves of America — "You don't know nothin, you commie, pinko meatheads, youse." ■

AROUND TOWN