

THE IDIOT BOX

Grandma Spain lived on a pretty, shady residential street in Monett, three blocks from Broadway. She had a pleasant front porch under a fancy aluminum canopy with upholstered chairs and a glider I loved to rock back and forth on. She kept nice gardens in the front, back and side yards. We all spent a lot of time visiting on that comfortable porch.

Across the street was a house with a considerably more utilitarian appearance. Fastened to its porch was a black and white sign with simple block lettering: SEWING MACHINES. I rarely saw the old man who lived there. One day Grandma offhandedly mentioned he hated television, called it “The Idiot Box.” My young mind reeled in incomprehension. It was something I’ve never forgotten.

Idiot Box?! But television was so WONDERFUL! All my favorite shows, the centerpiece of everyone’s life, but, but...

The old fool was easy to write off, just another bitter, dried up old man. Spiritually bankrupt, no doubt. A mere caricature. Lonely in that house with nothing left but the ghosts of his old trade.

I was a little TV addict. So much so that someone during my adolescence once gave me the nickname “TV Watcher.” I had it bad: turning on TV in the morning in my pajamas, watching the morning test pattern, waiting for the station to begin broadcasting; having TV Guide as the Bible in my life, eagerly anticipating every new season; having favorite shows for each time of day; learning to manipulate the televisions of the time: correcting vertical and horizontal hold, putting up with “snow,” trying the mysterious UHF channel.

Today, in my Slidell apartment I habitually turn on the TV just to have some noise but given the nature of basic cable service

(70 channels and nothing on TV), the numbing repetition of ads and the slow permutations of the depressing “Pageant of Life” in the news, I’m trying to leave the damned thing off more often than not.