

# THE FORGOTTEN NETWORK

**DUMONT**

AND THE BIRTH OF  
AMERICAN TELEVISION



**DAVID WEINSTEIN**

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David Weinstein



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## About the Author

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On frontispiece: A neon sign atop the DuMont receiver plant in East Paterson, New Jersey. *Source: The Raster*, September 1949, Allen B. Du Mont Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

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## **A Note on Spelling**

Allen B. Du Mont spelled his name “Du Mont.” I have retained this “Du Mont” spelling when referring to Allen Du Mont in this book. Allen Du Mont’s company was generally spelled “DuMont” in the contemporary press, and historians have continued to use the “Du-Mont” spelling for DuMont Laboratories and the DuMont Television Network. I follow this practice, referring to the company and the network as “DuMont.”

## **Preface and Acknowledgments**

*The Forgotten Network* examines television and life in America during the 1940s and 1950s, the years when TV moved from the laboratory to the living room. In 1946, only 8,000 television sets were in use nationally and radio was the favored entertainment medium in the American home. Within ten years, America had become a television nation. By 1956, nearly 35 million families, about 71 percent of all Americans, had purchased television sets. As historian James L. Baughman wrote, "No other household technology, not the telephone or indoor plumbing, had ever spread so rapidly into so many homes."<sup>1</sup> This book tells the story of television's phenomenal growth from the perspective of DuMont Laboratories, one of the pioneering companies in receiver manufacturing and network broadcasting.

Today, the postwar television boom seems all the more remarkable considering the primitive state of TV technology in these years before home theater, high definition television, and digital cable. Viewers watched hour after hour of flickering, fuzzy, black and white images. There were only two or three stations operating in most markets, while the entire country had only four national networks: ABC, CBS, NBC, and DuMont. Despite technological limitations, however, the novelty of the medium and the tremendous assortment of programming offered by early broadcasters induced millions of Americans to purchase television receivers. The four networks, and their partners at local stations, offered something for everybody. Over the course of a typical day, stations

scheduled shows on everything from current affairs to cooking. Crime dramas aired alongside variety shows, wrestling, religious sermons, and programs for children featuring TV cowboys and puppets. Most of this programming was produced live from local or network studios.

Throughout this book, I note the continuing influence and legacy of the early programs that aired on DuMont and other networks. Program genres and production techniques familiar to modern viewers were established through trial and error during television's first decade. In addition, DuMont and the other networks introduced viewers to the sorts of stock characters that continue today: ditzy wives, blustery husbands, ingratiating daytime hosts, tough cops, righteous social and political commentators, and off-the-wall late-night comedians. The people who worked in television during the 1940s and 1950s were skillful in determining the types of programs for which the medium was most suited. It is no wonder that three of the four networks responsible for much of this programming continue to occupy prominent spots on cable converter boxes today. The fourth pioneering network, DuMont, folded in 1955 and is largely forgotten. Yet DuMont was instrumental in bringing television to America and setting the stage for what has followed.

DuMont aired approximately 200 different series, plus numerous news and sports specials, from 1946 to 1955. Rather than attempting to catalog or analyze every DuMont program, I focus on the shows that earned the highest ratings, ran for the longest period of time, attracted the most press coverage, and influenced the scheduling, advertising, and production techniques of other local and network broadcasters. To determine the DuMont programs that were most memorable and significant, I also spoke with people who worked in the television industry during the 1940s and 1950s. DuMont crew members and talent described the thrill of working with Jackie Gleason as he created his best-known characters, including Ralph Kramden of "The Honeymooners." Cameramen and engineers explained how they experimented with camera and lighting techniques to create programs like *The Plainclothes Man*, a gritty detective show that was shot from the first-person perspective of the lead character. Many former DuMont employees were most proud of *Captain Video*, a quirky children's adventure set in outer space. Through my conversations, I learned about



the thrill, and occasional frustration, of working on live productions during the birth of commercial television.

The search for copies of programs from the 1940s and 1950s represents a great challenge for television historians. DuMont's most popular and influential programs were broadcast live from the network's New York studios. In the days before videotape and reruns none of the television networks preserved their programs. Occasionally, however, broadcasters made kinescopes, which were created by filming television monitors that showed the programs as they aired live. These kinescope films were shipped to affiliated stations across the country that did not broadcast the programs live. While DuMont aired thousands of programs from 1946 to 1955, only about 400 kinescopes have survived. Many of these are available for viewing at the Museum of Television and Radio in New York and Los Angeles, and the UCLA Film and Television Archive in Los Angeles. Some series are better represented in the archives than others. For example, there are only four extant episodes of *The Plainclothes Man*, a weekly police drama that ran for nearly five years, but UCLA holds a near-complete run (74 episodes) of *The Morey Amsterdam Show*, which aired on DuMont for eighteen months. A few additional kinescopes of various programs have made it into the hands of collectors. Through a combination of travel to archives and extensive sleuthing through the world of film and television collectors, I was able to view at least one episode from each of DuMont's most prominent series.<sup>2</sup>

This book would not have been possible without the help of many television industry veterans who shared their memories and their memorabilia. They helped me understand a time, a place, and a company that was long gone by the time I was born. Les Arries Jr., Norman Baer, Ted Bergmann, Edward Bobley, Bishop Edwin Broderick, Judy Crichton, Hal Cooper, Olga Druce, Stan Epstein, Arthur Forrest, Thomas T. Goldsmith, Don Hastings, Dave Hollander, Wes Kenney, Marvin Pakula, Irwin Rostin, Howard Rubin, Don Russell, Mary Kay Stearns, and Chris Witting were unfailingly generous with their time and with precious photographs and scrapbooks documenting their work. Special thanks to Bruce DuMont and Yvonne DuMont Stelle for their insightful stories and observations about Allen B. Du Mont.

In the course of my research, I was fortunate to encounter writers, collectors, and Web masters who shared my interest in DuMont and early television. Clarke Ingram, Charles Grant, Jerry King, and Alan Ruiter offered valuable information about DuMont's personnel, programming, and business operations. Mike Berro, Dave Goldin, Tom Kleinschmidt, Bob Reed, Bruce Simon, and Richard Warner loaned me an assortment of materials, from program guides to audio tapes. I am especially grateful to Rory Coker for tutoring me on the wonders of *Captain Video* and reviewing a draft of the *Captain Video* chapter.

Thomas Doherty served as a constant source of inspiration through his own work and his discussions with me about television history and the publishing business. David Marc shared several fascinating interviews that he conducted with television pioneers as part of an oral history project at the Center for the Study of Popular Television, Syracuse University. Paul Feldman, a basketball buddy who also practices law, gave me lots of helpful advice. James L. Baughman, Virginia Field, Don Godfrey, Jeffrey Miller, and Michael Socolow reviewed this manuscript at various stages of development. I cannot thank them enough.

I remain indebted to many passionate and knowledgeable librarians and archivists. Thanks to John Fleckner, David Haberstick, Rueben Jackson, Kay Peterson, Deborra Richardson, and Wendy Shay at the Archives Center of the Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History in Washington; Tom Connors, Michael Henry, and Chuck Howell at the Library of American Broadcasting, University of Maryland; Jane Klain at the Museum of Television and Radio in New York; Zoe Berman at the UCLA Film and Television Archive. Howard Mandelbaum (Photofest), Muriel Reis (Fox Television), and Thomas Rockwell (Norman Rockwell Family Agency) facilitated the use of several photos and illustrations.

The National Endowment for the Humanities granted two Independent Study, Research, and Development (ISR/D) awards that provided me with time to research and write this manuscript. I have been fortunate to be surrounded by smart and supportive NEH colleagues willing to chat about DuMont and more general issues regarding historical research and writing.

Thanks to Micah Kleit, my editor, for recognizing the potential of a

book on DuMont, trusting me to write the book, and providing constant guidance along the way.

Friends and family patiently allowed me to ramble about DuMont and early television for nearly four years. Chief listeners were Jonathan Markovitz, Diane Friendak, and Greg Wahl, who had the good sense to tempt me away from DuMont when I needed a vacation, a hockey game, or a beer. Jonathan and Greg also read drafts of this manuscript.

As children of the 1940s and 1950s, my parents, Judy and Steve Weinstein, shared their thoughts and memories and offered gentle encouragement.

Most of all, I thank Rachel Weinstein, my partner in this book and in life.



Allen B. Du Mont examines a cathode-ray tube.

*Source:* Allen B. Du Mont Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

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## **My Father Was an Engineer**

For a generation of Americans, the name “DuMont” stood for innovation, entertainment, and an exciting new medium called television. After World War II, when television took a rapid hold of the country, many people first watched TV on DuMont brand sets, the best receivers that money could buy. While it made its mark as a manufacturer, DuMont Laboratories was most familiar to Americans as the parent company of the DuMont Television Network. In 1946, DuMont used its New York and Washington, D.C., stations as the foundation for one of America’s first television networks. The DuMont network eventually reached from coast to coast. Jackie Gleason got his big break on DuMont, where he and his writers created “The Honeymooners.” Other DuMont stars like Bishop Fulton Sheen and Morey Amsterdam, along with fictional characters like detective Rocky King and the children’s space hero Captain Video, helped Americans make sense of the postwar world and shaped the television programming that followed.

By the middle of 1955, DuMont Laboratories was in shambles and the network ceased operations. Allen DuMont was forced to relinquish control over the company that he founded in 1931. No other company challenged the three-network oligopoly of NBC, CBS, and ABC until 1985, when Rupert Murdoch purchased six stations as the foundation for his new Fox Television Network. The DuMont

story concerns money, power, politics, business, and the birth of commercial television in America. It shows how three large radio networks took control of television broadcasting from 1946 to 1955. Like pioneering entrepreneurs in other industries, from automobiles to computer software, Du Mont and his company were swamped by bigger, tougher competitors. But CBS, NBC, and ABC were not the only parties responsible for the DuMont network's extinction. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC), Paramount Pictures, DuMont's executives, and Allen Du Mont himself all played important roles in the network's many successes and its ultimate demise.

Like much on early television, DuMont programs displayed a charming and somewhat innocent faith in the power of television to enhance the lives of viewers and to help bring about a safer and happier world. This optimistic view of television was most clearly articulated by Allen Du Mont, the head of the company and one of the people most responsible for the postwar introduction of television. The key to understanding how the DuMont network operated, including its successes and failures, begins with the man on top of the DuMont Laboratories television empire. Trained as an engineer, Allen Du Mont had a gift for working with electronics, starting with his first jobs as a production manager at Westinghouse and then at the De Forest Radio Company during the 1920s. Facing unemployment in 1931, Allen Du Mont started DuMont Laboratories with \$1,000. He operated out of the basement of his Upper Montclair, New Jersey, home. Initially, DuMont developed cathode-ray tubes used to display electronic images in instruments. In 1937, the company bought a new factory and moved into television. DuMont's tubes, which could display a TV picture without quickly burning out, made commercial television possible. Historian Les Brown explained that "Du Mont transformed the cathode-ray tube from a fragile, short-lived device to a reliable piece of equipment around which practical TV receivers could be built."<sup>1</sup> In 1938, DuMont began to license its picture tubes to other manufacturers and added a line of receivers to its electronic instruments, establishing itself as one of the country's first manufacturers of TV sets. During World War II, DuMont also built an experimental station in New York which served as the DuMont network's flagship when commercial television was introduced to the country after the war.

DuMont's slogan, "First With the Finest," referred mostly to the company's receivers, which had a reputation as "the Cadillac" of television sets, but DuMont also manufactured high-quality equipment, such as cameras and transmitters, used by television stations.<sup>2</sup> By 1950, DuMont Laboratories had annual sales of \$76 million (approximately \$580 million in 2003 dollars).<sup>3</sup> Allen Du Mont became a folk hero, widely praised for his accomplishments as an inventor and manufacturer of high-quality television equipment. He was also a prototype of the successful American entrepreneur, demonstrating, in the words of *New Yorker* writer Robert Rice, "perseverance, equanimity, intelligence, physical energy, loyalty to associates, devotion to his family, and the strength of mind to be able to refrain from taking more than one cocktail at lunch."<sup>4</sup> Du Mont was a favored speaker at luncheons for professional associations and businessmen. As an executive, he also won awards from a variety of outfits, including *Forbes* (Outstanding Business Leader, 1951) and the American Schools and Colleges Association (Horatio Alger Award, 1949). Du Mont's alma mater, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, awarded him an honorary Doctor of Engineering degree in 1944. Throughout the 1940s and early 1950s, magazine articles widely credited Du Mont as a technology guru who also understood the business of TV.

Despite his prominence, Allen Du Mont was not a gregarious or magnetic leader. A typical magazine portrait cautioned that "if one expects to meet the dominant, loud tycoon type, he will be disappointed, for Du Mont is mild, retiring, friendly." The *Popular Boating* profile also noted that Du Mont was not physically imposing. The "short, stocky man" walked with a noticeable limp, left by a childhood polio attack.<sup>5</sup> Even when he started to make money from DuMont Laboratories, Allen Du Mont was not flashy. As the *New Yorker* observed in 1951, "Extreme conservatism governs almost everything he does. He has owned automobiles [from] the same manufacturer (Chrysler) for twenty-five years and has seldom driven any one of them more than fifty miles an hour . . . For the last couple of years, his wife has been urging him to redecorate his office, which contains the same furniture that he has used for years."<sup>6</sup> According to Du Mont's daughter, Yvonne DuMont Stelle, her father did not entertain people from work or bring company business to the family's northern New Jersey home at the end of the day.<sup>7</sup> He also did



not frequently venture into Manhattan to see a Broadway show, a nightclub act, or a live television production, even though Du Mont would have received royal treatment as the head of the network and a minor celebrity in his own right. According to his close friend, Thomas T. Goldsmith, Du Mont enjoyed the local theater around Montclair, New Jersey, but his physical disability sometimes made it difficult for him to travel into the city.<sup>8</sup> Instead, Du Mont spent many evening and weekend hours in the electronic research laboratory located a few hundred yards from his home.<sup>9</sup>

Other than television, Allen Du Mont's passion was boating, something he did alone or with a select group of friends and relatives. Du Mont's boat, the *Hurricane III*, afforded him an opportunity to practice engineering and navigation on the seas. He excelled in "predicted log races," in which boaters calculated the exact time at which they would pass predetermined marks in a course which might run from 35 to 150 miles. The races required participants to consider a number of variables, including the current, tide, and winds. One boating magazine noted that "Du Mont does not win often but he is remarkably consistent and seldom, if ever, has a bad race." As a measure of Du Mont's dedication to boating, he won the American Power Boat Association's national championship for accumulating the most points in races in three consecutive years: 1953, 1954, and 1955.<sup>10</sup> Around the time of the World Series, Du Mont would take his annual cruise from Long Island to Florida, frequently accompanied by Goldsmith, DuMont's longtime head of research. Even on vacation, the two scientists indulged in their shared passion for television during these journeys. Du Mont had a TV on board which he would use to watch the ball games while Goldsmith steered the ship. "We learned a lot about television broadcasting there because we would get signals from distant stations, and we'd survey the performance of television from Maine clear down to the tip of Florida," Goldsmith said.<sup>11</sup> Boating provided a welcome element of risk and excitement in Allen Du Mont's otherwise conservative life outside the office. As Du Mont told Edward R. Murrow in a 1955 interview on *Person to Person* (CBS), "I find that when you get out in the ocean, the problems level off. In other words, any problems that you have in you business, when you're out in the ocean, wondering if you're going to get back or not, why, they don't seem so important."<sup>12</sup>