

Leading Tribune's first-run for the money

The scene is a crowded New York department store in 1948. A young theater arts graduate is attracted to a crowd surrounding a large wooden box containing a glowing glass tube. He approaches, his over-six-foot height commanding an unobstructed view of the miniature figures flickering on the screen. The aspiring producer-director, recently discharged from the Navy, at first thinks he's witnessing a sonar demonstration. "What's that?" he asks. "Television," is the reply. As he watches, the young man decides that the box with the crackling audio and soft blue glow is merely the latest technical enhancement of a 2,500-year-old art form. "Why, that's theater!" he exclaims.

Thirty-six years later, Sheldon Cooper is still in the business of entertaining, as president of Tribune Entertainment Co.—the young man with aspirations to produce and direct for the stage having been wooed away from the footlights by the flickering lights of the new medium. In his 34 years with the broadcasting interests of the Chicago-based Tribune Co., Cooper has produced and directed a score of television shows, syndicating many of them nationally, in addition to serving a tour of duty as vice president and general manager of WGN-TV Chicago.

Now, as head of Tribune's reorganized production and syndication arm, Cooper is one of a small band of programmers concentrating their efforts on first-run series and specials. Under Cooper's two-year stewardship, Tribune has embarked on a number of projects, all of them first-run. The list includes *At The Movies*, the former PBS show featuring movie critics Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert; *A Married Man*, a four-hour miniseries, and *Nadia*, a two-hour movie scheduled for this summer. Now comes *Dempsey & Makepeace*, a 10-hour detective series, co-produced with London Weekend Television, which Tribune will distribute domestically.

"It's time to make premiere, first-run hours and half-hours," Cooper proclaims with the slightly worn patience of a preacher who feels his message too frequently falls on deaf ears, "because we're reaching the economic turning point." Cooper says that "stations are concerned as to where in the future those 150 episodes of shows like *The Dick Van Dyke Show* are going to come from... Network shows barely last a couple of seasons any more."

Except for one year as an NBC page, Cooper has dedicated his career to the growth of independent television, and all of it in positions of increasing responsibility at Tribune. In an industry where station hopping is endemic, Cooper's rise may be unusual only in the sense that it was accomplished without a seasonal shedding of employers.

Cooper majored in drama at Indiana University and after graduation headed for New



Sheldon Cooper—president Tribune Entertainment Co., b. Feb. 15, 1926, South Bend, Ind., Officer's school in sonar, U.S. Navy, 1944-46, BA in drama, Indiana University, 1948; NBC page, 1949; joined WGN Television, Chicago, 1950, various positions in production, including floor manager, director and producer, 1950-61; manager of productions, 1961, executive producer, 1962; assistant program manager, 1964; manager of program department, 1965; vice president for program development, WGN Continental Productions Co., 1966, vice president, WGN Continental Broadcasting, 1967; station manager, WGN-TV, 1974; vice president and general manager, WGN-TV, 1975; present position since June, 1982; m. Mary Hayward, 1961, children, Charles, 20, and Cheryl, 16.

York. He quickly found that "you could get involved with little theatrical groups, but you had to have a daytime job to live." After the department store television demonstration, Cooper discovered something called the Television Workshop of New York—"an empty room with a couple of chairs and a blackboard"—that gave preliminary lessons in television production. After finishing the course, he got a job as a page at NBC.

Cooper might have stayed with NBC, "but I got mononucleosis, couldn't take care of myself, and had to go home." NBC's loss would be Tribune's gain.

After recovering, Cooper got a job at Tribune's WGN-TV. During the 1950's, he held a variety of positions in the production department, including floor manager, director and producer. In 1961, he was named manager of production and a year later, executive producer for the station.

Although WGN-TV was at one time associated with the DuMont Network, the station has always had a tradition of producing much of its own programming, especially in the early days. Cooper helped direct a number of shows, including "the granddaddy of all courtroom drama shows," *They Stand Accused*. In the 1960's, he produced the shows and specials that Tribune began selling to other stations—*The Big Bands*. An

Evening With... All Time Hits. Barn Dance and Great Music from Chicago.

After consecutive stints as assistant program manager and manager of the programming department at WGN-TV, Cooper was appointed vice president for program development at WGN Continental Productions, the predecessor of the Tribune Entertainment Co., in 1966. It was from that position, a year later, that Cooper was named vice president and manager of programming at WGN-TV, which eventually led to the general manager's position in 1975.

An unusual route, Cooper admits today, since the general manager's job usually went to someone on the sales side. But it was not unusual at Tribune, he says, where programming, more than anything else, has been the measure of the executive.

Not content to sit in Chicago juggling the programming schedule, Cooper remained first and foremost a programmer, and he became active in industry activities. He was chairman of the Association of Independent Television Stations in 1980 and 1981, and served on the board of NATPE International. He is generally regarded as the founder of Operation Prime Time, the network of independent and affiliated stations that periodically interrupt their normal prime time schedule to broadcast original, first-run, made-for-television movies. Cooper said the idea came to him when he added up the cost of buying an off-network hit series or movie in New York, Los Angeles or Chicago, and decided it was about equal to producing an original half-hour of programming. "So why not go a little further" and develop a feature length movie? "Then there was a plane ride with Al Masini," president of TeleRep, on a return trip from an INTV conference. At that INTV, Cooper explains, Masini had "made a speech saying that the sales side of independent stations was doing a better job getting its share of billings than the programming side was doing getting its share of ratings." Cooper laid his plan before Masini that the "costs were within reason" to produce premiere first-run programming. As an incentive for carrying the programming, stations would not be asked to invest, but instead would be charged a straight license fee. "The damn thing worked," Cooper says, "and got those independents ratings they never had before."

Although the general manager's chair at a leading independent television station might seem a plum to many tenure-minded broadcasters, when Tribune decided to rearm its production division for a major thrust in first-run programming, Cooper jumped at the chance to head that effort. In 1982, he was named president of Tribune Entertainment Co.

Cooper has come full circle: he is now back at distributing television programs and conceiving and putting shows together—just like in the days before managing WGN-TV. The perfect role, he will tell you, for the once stage-bound dramatist who became a "reformed producer"