

Let There Be Madison Ave.

THE pioneer's path in TV programming for commemorative events of industrial significance lies open still for some enterprising American business giant. The most recent attempt to enter was made by a group of electric light and power companies on the seventy-fifth anniversary of Thomas A. Edison's invention of the practical incandescent lamp. This group preempted all the national networks for two hours on that occasion, and presented a show called "Light's Diamond Jubilee" to celebrate the date. Here was a fresh opportunity for a leading business institution to succeed where the Ford Fiftieth Anniversary show (last season) failed—namely, in the special department, over and above entertainment, of some reasonably creative and significant commentary on American life and times related to the institution's origin and evolution.

The jubilee program addressed itself rather directly to this objective, far more so than did the Ford show; yet regrettably, in this reviewer's opinion, it achieved considerably less by its frontal attack than its predecessor accomplished by indirection. If American industry's capacity in this sector of anniversary broadcasting is to be judged solely by these two big-timers thus far introduced in evidence, this conclusion suggests itself: the companies are either derelict in a province where their power and influence on the national scene should confer upon them certain clear responsibilities; or else they are, out of timidity or ignorance, hewing slavishly to pharisaical rules and rituals.

Where the Ford Company last year turned to Madison Avenue and Broadway for creative leadership, the light industry this year elected to go west to Hollywood and David O. Selznick, the motion-picture producer, whose white clapboard colonial studio sign has graced the opening footage of many an Americana film, most notably, "Gone With the Wind." True, Mr. Selznick, in this, his TV debut, turned first and foremost to the creatively eclectic Ben Hecht, who, apparently, did the chief writing. He, in turn, leaned upon three literary talents, John Steinbeck, Irwin Shaw, and Max Shulman.

Hollywood has done excellent fiction stories with a documentary flavor. Walt Disney's nature documentaries are vivid and effective. But here was Hollywood without a story-line, in a

social-documentary area, with its customary compulsion to "entertain." From his special competence, Mr. Selznick carried over a most welcome speed and precision in cutting which gave the two hours an undeniable pace. For his narrator he chose screen-star Joseph Cotten, whose highly individual, electric style never fails to generate overtones of excitement and implication no matter what he reads. But beyond these two sharp plus signs the result was inevitably a two-hour mulligatawny of self-styled "dramatics, whimsicalities, oratorical flights, etc," without the integrating tension of a single, dominant idea. The effect was a slow roller-coaster of tedium, relieved by a mild chuckle, one good laugh, and a moment of fair sentiment. The rest was pious, patriotic, chauvinistic superficiality, without the agreeable spice of conventional Hollywood activism, naturalism, and Vista-vision.

The program began, West-Coast fashion, with interminable credits down to the last hairdresser; then it got down to business. Business No. 1 was Scripture: this was a show about light; naturally, it had to begin with Genesis 1:3 ("And God said, Let there be light: and there was light"). This perfunctory acknowledgment out of the way, the program announced its main drive—namely, a salute to the American individual. Although it was never so verbalized, the goal seemed to be a sort of compendium of the seven ages of American man. Tom Sawyer, shrewd little promoter, spoke for boyhood in the whitewash-the-fence scene from an old film. Robert Benchley (via an always funny short-subject on the "Care and Handling of Infants") seemed to be the spokesman for the Dr. Spock legions.

Eddie Fisher sang sweetly of Sigma Chi at a college prom, and that took care of the age devoted to the great ideas. For young manhood there was an Air Force cadet who bet ten dollars he could strike up a conversation with a svelte blonde in a midget sportscar, who had a little son whose daddy was a flyer who had been killed and the widow kissed the cadet in full view of his three pals so he could win his bet and then she drove away in her midget sportscar, leaving young America solemn in the presence of beautiful, tragic womanhood. Young marriage was there, of course, in its most important aspect—sex. David Niven, a first-rate actor (who should about

now begin to protest against always being cast as a sophisticated wolf), explained patiently to his fretful wife, Lauren Bacall, how he could be faithful and still admire the girls.

Toward the end of the program there was alleged American autumn, with Helen Hayes and Thomas Mitchell, making a brief, abortive effort to travel and see the world, but ending up on the good, old American hearth, disillusioned, with a windfall earmarked for a houseful of new electric products. And lastly, there was old age, Walter Brennan, on film, in the Steinbeck story of the wagon-train leader who kept reliving the past to the irritation of his son-in-law and the joy of his grandchild. Of the seven keystones this alone had some fitness—for it spoke touchingly of the real frontiers, old and new, those of the mind and the spirit.

AMONG these main stitches, there was plenty of gadgetry, world of tomorrow prophecy, a touch of traditional history, President Eisenhower on zealously guarding our foundation of faith, the White House windows lighting up as a soprano and a chorus sang "Bless This House," and as we came in on creation, so went we out—even the nebulae in the night sky lit up for the industry—a staggering suggestion. Light there is, and ample. in the history of American light and power, light and shade in the trough and the crest of its advance. No deeper than mom's apple pie, however, was the commemorative bite of this "salute." Not a meaningful mention was made of or tribute paid to the thousands of men and women who helped build this business and are today working for this vast, industrial empire. How big a public-relations opportunity can you miss!

Admittedly, these one-time anniversary shows present sharp challenges to production teams that ride, like TV jockeys, astride prodigious investments in time and talent. Sad, indeed, if all their enterprise is to be limited, as in the Ford show, to superb popular entertainment. Sadder yet, however, if in their alleged effort to do some useful "reflecting" on venerable industrial birthdays they produce merely the windier variety of Fourth of July oratory. And how perversely odd a commentary that the most-remembered moment of "Light's Diamond Jubilee"—a spectacular celebration of scientific achievement—should be comedian George Gobel's hilarious, impious, average-man's monologue ribbing the electronic lightning-speed calculator. This satirical laughter echoes—but where is the memory of authentic inspiration—the real story of light's seventy-fifth year?

—ROBERT LEWIS SHAYON.

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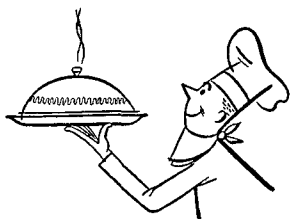
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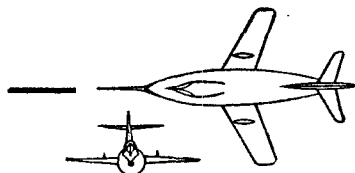
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A New Venture Over the Cold Spot

COPENHAGEN (By Cable).
"MUSH!" The legendary cry of the arctic trailblazers sounded across the Northern skies last week as Scandinavian Airlines sent the first two commercial flights in history across the polar route between America and Europe.

While one plane sped over the Northern path from Europe to America, four husky Pratt and Whitney engines pulled forty passengers—press, politicians, and Walter Pidgeon—from California in the land of the sun to Copenhagen in the land of the smörgasbord in less than a day. It was only a half-century ago that dogsledgers were pioneering the trail I followed last week as we sailed over the ice cap in a DC-6B at 300 MPH, three miles high in the sky.

On Sunday afternoon I sat by the pool of the Los Angeles Ambassador Hotel and watched the mermaids in the seventy-six-degree November sun. A day later I stood before the bronze statue of the Little Mermaid at Copenhagen harbor. We came in three easy stages—about six hours from Los Angeles to Winnipeg, then eight hours from Winnipeg to the U.S. Air Force base at Bluie West 8, Greenland,

and another eight hours into Copenhagen.

Aside from the adventure of flying the polar route, Westerners traveling to Europe will save five hours' time, \$18, and 535 miles of travel. New DC-7Cs coming in 1956 will provide one-stop service California to Copenhagen in nineteen hours. Today's Arctic explorers can skim above the ice in a fully reclining dormette or sleep in a private berth. —HORACE SUTTON.

★ ★ ★

THIS polar flight between Copenhagen and California culminates four centuries of man's efforts to push aside the Arctic ice floes and find a shorter trade route from one side of the world to the other. As far back as 1587 an Englishman named John Davis got as far as West Greenland. He was followed by Dutchmen, Scandinavians, Italians, by an American named Captain Hall who found "Thank God Harbor," and finally by Peary, who made it to the North Pole in 1906.

Attempts to conquer the northern ice-packs by air date back to 1709, when a Brazilian monk named Gusmao tried to interest King John V of Portugal in Arctic exploration by kite.

