

PANORAMA

THE
TELEVISION
MAGAZINE

MAY 1981

\$2.00

**SPECIAL
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Most Powerful
People* — AND HOW
THEY OPERATE



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Finally, She Would Not Be Stifled

How social change helped us realize that Archie's dingbat had all along been a remarkable human being

By JANE O'REILLY

Archie Bunker has just completed his first season without Edith on Archie Bunker's Place. Edith's off-camera death was the subject of this season's first episode; the cause was unspecified. But one thing is certain: Edith did not die a dingbat. In her nine years of service, first with All in the Family, then in occasional appearances on the revamped version, Archie Bunker's Place, she changed; she grew. How have the show—and Archie—fared without her? The show's popularity was not affected by Edith's demise; Archie Bunker's Place is still in the top 20. Archie? Well, Archie is still Archie—a little mellower, a trifle lost, perhaps. He has a housekeeper (ironically, she is black) to put the food on the table and keep the refrigerator stocked with beer. But, without Edith, there is no one to serve as counterpoint to the legions of Liberated Lady Bosses and Working Mothers who now populate TV sitcoms; to act as a reminder that liberation does not come easily and that not all women are liberated. To give the dingbat her due, PANORAMA asked Jane O'Reilly, author of the book The Girl I Left Behind, to reflect on Edith's emancipation.

Ten seasons ago, in January 1971, Edith Bunker first scuttled across our television screens pursued by the bark of her ever-irascible husband Archie. He chose, in that first episode of *All in the Family*, to shout all the phrases that defined his notion of marital conversation: "You're a pip, a real pip." (Nastily.) "Stifle!" (Loudly.) "Case closed." (Firmly.) And, "You silly dingbat." (Constantly.)

Edith, more defensively remote than she would become later, without the

nervous tremor of the head, kept making an effort to produce family peace by suggesting: "I think we should eat." Finally, she unwrapped the anniversary present, ostensibly from Archie, that her daughter Gloria had chosen for her. Delighted, Edith shook out the lace handkerchiefs, held them up, and immediately worried: "How do I look? Some people don't look natural with fancy things."

Dear Edith. She was a living example of the proposition that clothes *can* make, or unmake, the woman. Week after week Jean Stapleton transformed her own handsome face and body into Edith Bunker, a woman whose clothes, from the underwear on out, never fit; whose hair, eyebrows, pocketbook and nervous little gesture of the hand across the mouth proclaimed her of a particular class—struggling. It would have been so much fun to have seen her wrapped up in an enormous mink coat. Instead, she is memorialized by the \$500,000 Edith Bunker Memorial Fund, donated to the National Organization for Women Legal Defense and Education Fund by *All in the Family's* creator, Norman Lear, on behalf of his company, Tandem Productions.

Edith would have liked to see the money go for such a good cause. That's the way she was: never thinking of herself, always looking on the bright side. She would not have expected a mink. In fact, she hardly expected anything. As she once said to Gloria: "I married him for better or worse. I'm just lucky, the worse got a little better."

She chose to hear "dingbat" as a term of endearment. "When we were courting, Archie was too shy to call me sweetheart," she told Gloria, "and so he called me dingbat. And now, no matter how

mad he is, I always hear a little bit of sweetheart whenever he says dingbat." Jean Stapleton once said: "I got my first real clue to Edith from Norman Lear. 'Edith is able not to listen to Archie,' he said. 'She puts her head in the sand, mentally blocking out his worst traits. She's been doing it for years. How else would she survive?' Right away I knew who that woman was."

Though the show was slow to catch on, once it did it seemed that almost anyone with access to print had some kind of opinion on Archie Bunker. His exaggerated bigotry and ignorance provided ample opportunity for comment on the state of our civilization. Everyone, of every possible minority group, even WASPs, found reason to take offense—though they all ended up admitting that the show was brilliantly done.

Most "isms"—racism, anti-Semitism—were, in 1971, finally considered bad social behavior (which is why it was possible to joke about them). But sexism was hardly ever recognized, even in its most flagrant form: Archie Bunker. John Leonard, writing superb TV criticism for the old *Life* magazine, was the rare critic who found the show insulting to women. Everyone else attacked Archie as a bigot, and then joined him in ridiculing Edith as a . . . dingbat. Being bigoted against your wife was apparently OK.

It seems remarkable now, in 1981, that a man's treating his wife as though she were his property should have gone so unremarked. But it was, in fact, that situation that caused Edith Bunker's nervous little gestures, that gave her the confusing sensation of feeling she didn't belong—no matter how hard she tried. She was intellectually and emotionally bewildered by her life. And so, in 1971,



were a lot of other American women. We are still pretty bewildered, but at least now we have a better understanding of the problem. Ten years ago, Congress was still debating the wisdom of the Equal Rights Amendment before passing it out to the country for ratification. The Supreme Court had not yet declared the choice of abortion a woman's constitutional right. Dr. Spock had not yet discovered sexism in his own books. The New Jersey Little League teams were still closed to girls. Women were still routinely denied credit. In 1971, a feminist was still an anomaly. American women were busy apologizing for working, even as we streamed into the labor force and were grateful for the chance to take home about 40 percent less pay for the same work as men. We thought our situation was our own fault, and so did Edith.

She began her TV life as a direct descendant of Lucy—the dingbat's dingbat, a female cultural norm hard to believe today. But Edith changed, and we changed. Still, like most women today, she didn't change completely. The last time we saw Edith, in the final episode of last season's show, renamed *Archie Bunker's Place* when "the family" dispersed, she nearly killed herself cooking enough cabbage for Archie's bar to feed Queens. "Why didn't you tell me you was sick?" shouted Archie. "I didn't want to sperl your party," she said. And then Archie finally admitted: "If the whole damn world was to go to the dogs, as long as I had you by my side everything would be just OK. . . . I ain't nothin' without you." The last image we have of Edith Bunker, person in her own right, is of her leaning over, saying tenderly to Archie. "You're a pip, a real pip."

Poor Archie. He was right. He isn't complete without Edith, even though niece Stephanie (Danielle Brisebois), in her role of too-wise child (as opposed to Edith's role of too-childish woman), gives him a chance to be both worrier and worried-over. He is nicer now, which says something interesting and sad about how much men and women give up of themselves in traditional roles. His partner Murray seems too soft. He makes us realize how tough Edith was.

Edith's was a long, slow transformation. She was always honest, guileless and stubborn, and she usually won Archie over by the end of the show. But the end came after a half hour of such jokes

as: "Shut up and get me a beer!" and "Edith, if I didn't interrupt youse, you wouldn't know youse was finished." Such was the brilliance of the series that Carroll O'Connor and Jean Stapleton could turn those lines into jokes, and even Gloria's outraged objections—"Do you have to talk to Ma like that?"—seemed only cues to yet more outrageous jokes.

One night in 1973, Edith was shown planning a surprise anniversary trip to Atlantic City for a second honeymoon. She wanted to make reservations on the phone without Archie overhearing. He was furious, and stomped around the house shouting: "This is MY house, MY living room, MY telephone. You are MY wife." It was a minor moment, a small

To Archie's surprise, Edith had a full-scale tantrum, shouting, "It turns out all I did for 30 years was worth nothing!"

tantrum within the larger one provoked by his having to give up a basketball game. The only slightly poignant moment of the show came at the end, when Archie responded with affection and even excitement to the sight of Edith in her new nightgown.

Poignancy, an effect that slips somewhere between sentimentality and truth, crept in more certainly as the show went on, as Edith changed. In 1973 it had been mildly amusing, if irritating, to see Edith merely included as part of her husband's household inventory. By 1978, it was, somehow, deeply moving and enlightening to hear Edith list, for the benefit of a banker, her own possessions: her clothes, the dishes her mother gave her when she was married, the pots and pans she had gotten as presents from Archie, and the Water Pik Gloria gave her.

Back in 1971, that scene would not have had any point. Too few people would have expected Edith to have anything of her own, or would have realized how odd it was that she had so little. By 1978, we, and she, had changed enough

to know that her tiny list was tragic. I remember crying as I laughed during that show, watching Edith go to the bank for a loan so that she could buy Archie a new television set. The man behind the desk assures her of the bank's warm feelings for women: "One of our chief tellers is a woman, and she makes the best damn coffee in town." He beams. Edith beams. She explains she has five accounts in his bank, with a total of \$78 in three savings accounts. The banker frowns and asks what she owns. It is, obviously, not enough to secure a loan. He says it is too bad she doesn't work full time. She says she does—at home.

He: "I mean *real* work."

Edith: "But I shop, and cook, and clean. Have you ever tried it?"

He: "That's just housework."

Edith: "What's wrong with housework. Ain't that important?"

Insulted, Edith closes her accounts. And then, carefully, she asks Archie to lend her the money.

Archie: "A man can trust his wife up to 25 dollars. Then he needs to know what's goin' on."

Edith: "Do you think the work I do is worth one dollar a week? The cooking, the cleaning, the washing and shopping?"

Archie: "About."

Edith: "After 30 years, I figure you owe me 1560 dollars."

Archie: "I've gotta pay you for doing the work God gave you to do?"

Edith: "I guess you do."

Archie: "That's communist talk."

And to Archie's and the watching world's surprise, Edith then had a full-scale tantrum, jumping up and down and shouting, "It turns out all I did for 30 years was worth nothing!" Hearing it put that way, Archie was finally persuaded to pay her \$260 a year. The beatific expression on Edith Bunker's poor, underpaid face as she planned the presents she would buy with HER money spoke for all the housewives of the '70s who began to see that their "unpaid household contributions" should count for something.

There was another segment, in 1975, that I think should be run continuously above the Bunker living-room chairs in the Smithsonian Institution, where they sit on display, symbols of the series'—and TV's—tremendous influence. The segment was, in its way, a perfect delineation of the decade's changing domestic attitudes. Archie



No matter how mad Archie got, Edith always heard a little bit of sweetheart whenever he said dingbat.

comes home to an empty house. He looks in the refrigerator. "No beer." (Slam.) "Fifteen minutes after 6 and she ain't home." He sits down in his chair, disgusted. Edith, moving at a racing scuttle, comes through the door, darts across the living room with a grocery cart, and has two TV dinners in the oven before she sees Archie.

She has been volunteering at a home for the aged, and Archie doesn't like it. "Your job is me," he says. Edith argues that her work gives her a sense of purpose, makes her feel useful. "Wait a minute," says Archie. "Being married to Archie Bunker is wasting your life?" After much complaining about the uselessness of volunteer work ("If it was worth something you would get something"), and invoking the way it used to be ("She is supposed to enjoy *here, this house and me*"), Archie orders Edith not

to go back.

Edith: "I ain't taking no orders. I can be a Sunshine Lady if I want to. And I want to." And she leaves! And SLAMS THE DOOR!

Today's schoolchildren should watch that scene, while their parents explain that once upon a time, only six years ago, there were many men in America who sincerely believed that being married to them was enough to fill up a woman's whole life (and some of those men were corporate lawyers and doctors and gamblers and burglars and professors; it wasn't a blue-collar idea alone). I hope they cheer when Edith slams that door, and realize they are watching a woman who has figured out what is wrong with her situation and is doing something about it.

Norman Lear said recently: "Like a lot of women, Edith's growth was directly a

result of the women's movement. In her case subliminally, because she didn't read much and her husband couldn't help her. But from television, from mingling with people in the supermarket, everywhere she went, she had to—by osmosis almost—become a part of the women's movement."

It is true that Edith would never have slammed that door without the women's movement. But I don't think she, herself, changed. I think the actors changed, and the scriptwriters, and the directors. I think the network, and the audience and the critics changed, until finally they saw her as Edith Bunker, Person instead of Edith Bunker, Dingbat. But she was what she had always been: guileless, honest, stubborn, loving, compassionate, hopeful, generous. The change was, finally, that her value was recognized.

Edith Bunker. Everywoman. R.I.P. ■