

Shirley Jones Never Wavered in Her Absoluteness That Television Show 'Partridge Family' Would

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dren, was well on his way to having a million pubescent girls fighting over his gallbladder.

Since adults rarely chew bubble gum, it might be easy to dismiss "Partridge Family" (ABC, Friday) as another in the series of children's hours from "Davy Crockett" to "The Monkees" that have their hot season in the sun and then melt, leaving something of a chocolate mess behind.

A NEILSON Audience Composition survey did indeed call "Partridge Family" the highest rated TV program among children 6 to 11. But the NAC breakdown also showed that, although 38 per cent of "Partridge Family" viewers were children, 28 per cent were women over the age of 19 and 19 per cent were grown men.

"Partridge Family" started as "Family Business" in the typewriter of Bernie Slade in August, 1969. Slade, who had already created "The Flying Nun," "Love on a Rooftop," and "Mr. Deeds Goes to Town," had a contract with Screen Gems, Columbia's TV subsidiary, to create three pilots a year.

To get his new show on the air, he would have to create something different enough to be interesting, familiar enough to sell to a network. Remembering "The Sound of Music," he decided "to try a combination that hadn't been tried before on television, a show that had a straight story line but also had music."

"The Monkees" may not have been in the back of Slade's mind as he sat down at his typewriter but, at one time or another, it was in the back of the minds of most people connected with "Partridge Family"—both as a goal and a warning.

THE EMPHASIS on teen-age music had made a success of "The Monkees." But the success had come apart in Screen Gems' hands long before it should have. According to Ed Justin, head of merchandising for 16 years at Screen Gems, that was partly due to the rapidly enlarged egos of the four performers.

"The mistake we made on 'The Monkees,'" says Justin, "is that we didn't poison the four actors the first week." As soon as he read the pilot script of "Partridge Family," Justin knew that the show would be highly merchandisable. "I've been at this so long I can smell it."

The day the script was out of Slade's typewriter, it was sent to Shirley Jones. "I thought it had the best chance of success of any pilot script I'd ever read," says Shirley. "For a situation comedy, it was written honestly; and the Partridges weren't a fairy-tale, candy-box family." She was never to waver in her absolute certainty that the show would be a success—even when everyone else connected with it was sure it would be a failure.

Claver—a sensible, intelligent man with a teen-age daughter of his own—now had to find five children. There would be a male teenager to attract teenage girls to the show, a female teenager, and three more-or-less-little children. Although the Partridge children were supposed to sing or play musical instruments, Claver did not look for children with musical talent.

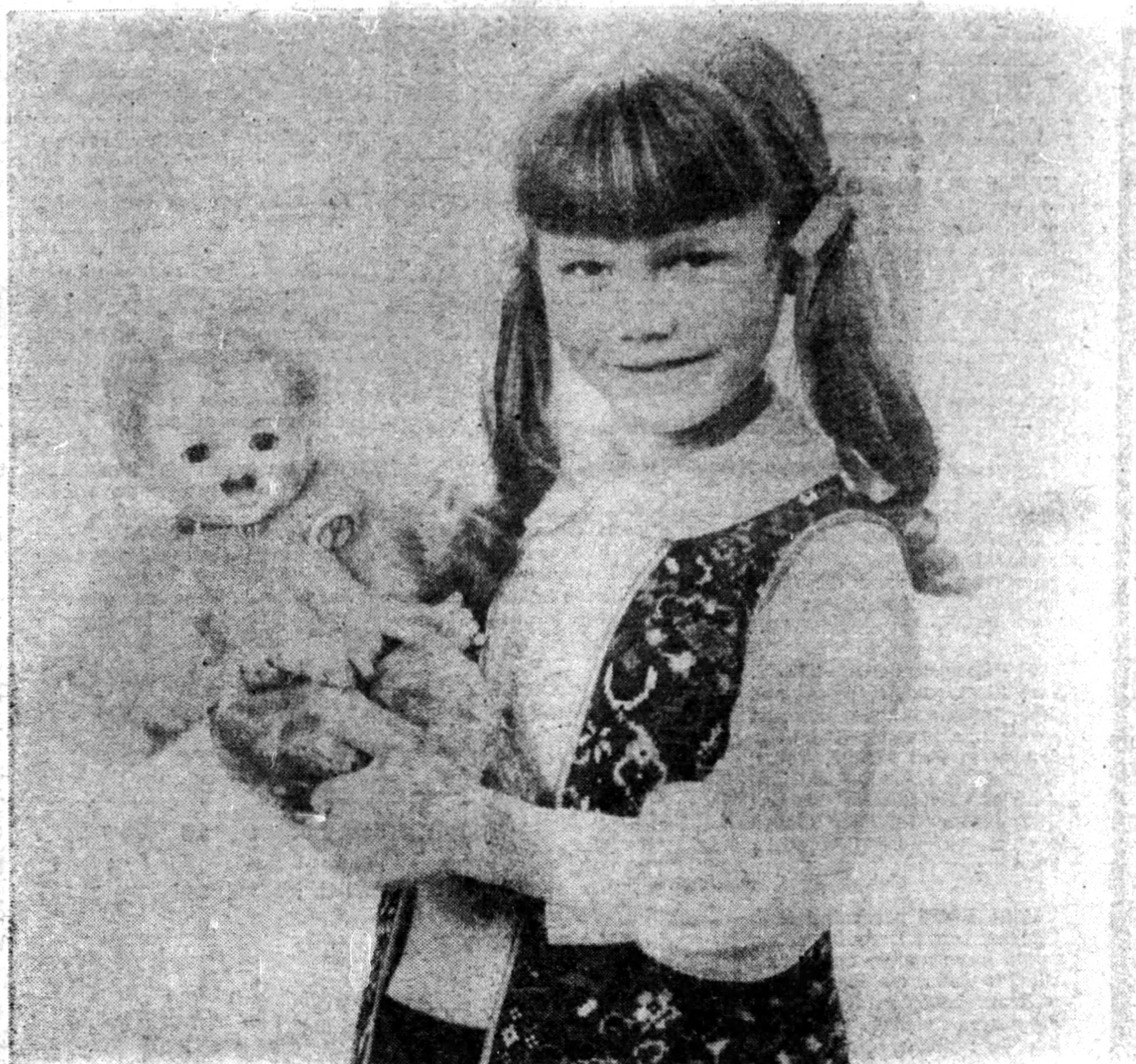
"IF WE WERE TO HAVE looked for five kids who could act and sing, we'd have been looking for five years." As it was, Claver interviewed 850 children before deciding to test 10—two for each role. They were tested and chosen "in relationship to each other—for the chemistry."

From the beginning, Shirley Jones was aware that her stepson was being considered. The only person at Screen Gems who knew of their relationship was casting director Rene Valente. She withheld that information until Cassidy became a finalist.

Success in television comes from small accidents. Lucky as producer Claver was with David Cassidy's ambience and singing ability, he was equally lucky with 11-year-old Danny Bonaduce's ability to make anything he says sound funny.

A random sampling of children in West Los Angeles shows that almost all children under the age of 12—male and female—turn on "Partridge Family" not for David Cassidy but for Danny Bonaduce. In fact, for young children, David Cassidy runs a poor third to Shirley Jones.

THE PILOT was finished in December 1969. ABC policy then demanded that it pass an audience research test. The pilot was "a smashing success," and the network decided to go ahead. But when, a few months later, the first six shows were shown to a similar audience, the results were not exactly smash-



Tracy Partridge (Suzanne Crough) holds newest member of family, Patti Partridge.

ing. "In fact, they hated it," says Claver. The network was gloomy. Claver was gloomy. "How could they like the pilot and hate the other six shows?"

Claver soon had reason to be even gloomier. ABC had decided to put "Partridge Family" opposite Andy Griffith's new show.

What ingredient or combination caused "Partridge Family" to rise like a helium balloon above its competitors while so many seemingly similar television show huddle forlornly in the Neilson doldrums?

"A lot of kids would like to be in that family. It seems like fun. I'd like to be in that family if I were a kid," says Claver.

"It's the emphasis on teen-age music," says Ed Justin.

"You can't just say the music is responsible," says David Cassidy. "It's the chemistry between the actors. The show's positive. We're not trying to bring anyone down."

"Let's face it," says one of Cassidy's agent-managers. "David Cassidy is the 'Partridge Family' phenomenon."

CASSIDY IS A FRAIL, courteous, 21-year-old boy with hair the color of bronze. It is Tuesday, Aug. 10, Cassidy's first day back at work since his operation. His gallbladder was removed at 12:30 p.m. Tuesday, July 12. By dinnertime his fans were hiding in the diet elevator of Mt. Sinai hospital, perhaps in hope "of seeing me with the intravenous still in my arms."

During his two-week stay in the hospital, he received 5,000 get-well cards and several hundred presents, including a large number of candles, incense, love beads and "more stuffed partridges than I ever knew existed."

Of his own success, Cassidy—who opens doors for

ladies, seems spotlessly wholesome—muses, "Who can say why one person is singled out? Maybe because of the way I talk or look. Possibly because I'm uncomplicated, clean. There's no threat involved."

THERE IS STILL the question of how much of "Partridge Family's" success is due to David Cassidy and how much of David Cassidy is due to the show's success.

"It's Shirley Jones who makes it all happen," says writer Bernie Slade. "Kids loved 'The Monkees' but their parents hated it and the result was no more Monkees. Shirley is our adult point of view, a parent figure who appeals to adults for her beauty and her warmth and her brains."

For the first time in a career that started as an apple-cheeked Rogers and Hammerstein heroine ("Oklahoma," "Carousel") and included an Academy Award as a prostitute ("Elmer Gantry"), Shirley Jones is notorious.

"I get more fan mail in the teen magazines than any other adult has ever gotten."

From the beginning Shirley Jones has felt the success of the show depended on "the honesty of the characters and the rapport we have as a family."

On the big, cool stage at the Columbia Ranch in the San Fernando Valley, the rapport is apparent. Because it is David Cassidy's first week back at work, the burden of the script centers on "the little ones."

In the hierarchy of the show, "the little ones" are Danny, Chris (played this year by 10-year-old Mark Forster) and Tracy (eight-year-old Suzanne Crough). The big ones are Keith (David Cassidy) and Laurie (Susan Dey). For script purposes, 21-year-old Cassidy and 18-year-old Dey will "stay in high school forever, like Little Orphan Annie."

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