

No peace of mind permitted on the premises...

THE NEWS from Mr. Nielsen is grim. According to his calculations, "The Partridge Family" rates number 68 out of 71 network series programs surveyed this year, with a 10.6 per cent share of the audience. Last January "The Partridge Family" had a 20.3 per cent share of the audience, which would have put it up among the Top Twenty. Clearly, a situation comedy that can't outdraw "NBC Reports" is in sick shape, and I am saddened.

It used to be that on Friday nights at our house we would gather around a burning vat of grease to fry some innocent chicken and watch "The Brady Bunch" and "The Partridge Family" on ABC. This seemed a very American activity—one family quietly getting fat while watching two other families in frantic motion. Although neither program was God's gift to the hearty guffaw, both provoked giggles; engagingly, they propped each other up; deftly, they dealt with recognizable problems of growing up middle-class in this country. The wholesomeness was kept on a short leash, and there were enough children of all ages trooping across the screen to give everybody in our house at least one person with whom to identify.

Alas, the energy crisis now causes us to conserve electricity by baking instead of frying our chicken, when we can afford chicken. And "The Partridge Family" is no longer on Friday nights. It is on Saturday nights, which accounts for why it lost half of its audience, because it is

now competing with "All in the Family." I imagine that some ABC vice president in charge of annoying me pulled the Friday-Saturday switch in hopes that the teeny-bopper passion for David Cassidy, who plays Keith Partridge in the show, would gnaw away at Archie Bunker's popularity. As usual, this kind of creative counter-programming has ended in disaster, and the culpable vice president should be sentenced to 40 years of Orange Bowl half-times.

There are a number of negative things to say about "The Partridge Family," if you want to jump up and down on a cripple. Shirley Jones is another one of those indomitable widows in which television specializes because its writers usually can't cope with an adult sexual relationship. David Cassidy lapses too often into a callowness and vapidly unbecoming even to a rock star. The little kids that they keep adding to the cast are sweet enough to double the demand for dentists in a single year. And the music is more rocking-chair than rock, as though Lester Lanin had had an electronic-guitar transplant.

HOWEVER, I am grateful to "The Partridge Family" for rescuing Shirley Jones from old Pat Boone movies; she has an affecting presence; she embodies common sense. I like Danny, who is in the continuing American tradition of Tom Sawyer, Dennis the Menace and Abbie Hoffman. Each episode has a not entirely sappy moral that very much resembles what we grope for in our negotiations with our own children. You know—homiletic little essays on what constitutes decent behavior, middle-class values and so on. Hav-



The "Partridge Family" cast: Victims of creative counter-programming?

ing finally achieved the middle-class myself, I admit being susceptible to such values. I will not, of course, impugn the authenticity of counter-cultural alternatives or any other alternatives to them. Let those who want experience to be an adding machine with a total-bar keep on punching up their ecstasies and dreads, and let those who presume a libidinal ferocity to be their birthright prowl the streets of the mind like werewolves. My hopes for my children are more modest; I approve of "Sesame Street."

It seems to me a shame that a harmless, humorous, helpful, once-popular program should be victimized by the Russian roulette of time-slot changes. In fact, I'm beginning to suspect that guilt-ridden,

middle-class network vice presidents have it in for any program so stuffy as to be content with trying to make the middle-class feel a little better about itself. People in the suburbs are not supposed to be capable of peace of mind; theirs must be an anguished flight forever. Truth is extreme situations. One by one, gentle programs are perceived to be gigantic hypocrisies unless they are tucked safely away in Depression-time Appalachia or Disneyfield to suffocate all qualms. The qualm, like the homily, is a middle-class habit. It helps define scruples. How naive. CBS is contemplating one new weekly series based on the exploits of Evel Knievel and another weekly series based on "Planet of the Apes." Now *that's* relevance. □