

TV Family

[Transcript]

ELLEN: I remember being in a chair and them asking me a bunch of men in suits, asking me to you know laugh or smile or peak up over the chair. I remember peaking up over the chair and I remember that for some reason I wasn't doing it right. And I remember the feeling of wanting to please those people, and that my mother was there saying, "Ellen, Ellen, come on look over" and I wanted to I just knew that we liked them, and I wanted to do what they said, and I wanted to please them.

LAUREL: I remember a lot of cords, lots of big fat cords all over the place and they would be set up in one area and they just kind of took over.

PJ: He would set up the scene and then let us kind of improvise. But still we were pretty stiff you know, we were, kids from Amarillo Texas, and with camera all over our house.

JANE (SF): Good evening. I'm Jane Wyatt. You probably know me as a television mother. But tonight I join NBC news in taking a look at a real mother, and of the family she raises. Ours is a search into the meaning of family life today. Are we through to Amarillo? Are you there Mrs. Robertson?

PAULINE (SF): Not only am I here, there are about a dozen technicians and maybe half a ton of equipment here with strange men doing mysterious things all over the house. We're beginning to wonder if we're ever going to get back to normal.

JANE (SF): Well I hope this isn't too much of an intrusion, Mrs. Robertson. But we do have a serious purpose. A lot has happened in the world since the last Thanksgiving. U2, Cuba, sit-in strikes, the Congo.

PAULINE (SF): Well, yes, since last Thanksgiving, though, those haven't been our big problems.

JANE (SF): What were your problems, Mrs. Robertson?

ELLEN: From what I understand, NBC was looking for a family to profile, and they sent letters to their NBC affiliates.

PJ (reading): We want your help in finding a family around which to build a one hour program for broadcast at Thanksgiving. The show will be a documentary, photographing actual people in the real circumstances of their immediate life. The family sought should reflect the norm rather than the extraordinary. We've always thought that if they were going to really make it a typical American family, that you wouldn't have chosen one with nine children.

CARRIE: Starting at the top, Kay, Kent, Robyn, PJ, Roy, Laurel, Gini, Ellen, Neil, Carrie.

ELLEN: Everyone always said the Robertsons weren't a family, they were a tribe because there were so many of us. We would spend a week at this church camp and we would all wear the same shirts. Somebody once said, "oh RL"—to my father—"oh RL, that's so cute, is that so you won't lose one?" And he said, "hell no it's so I won't pick up an extra!"

ROBYN: She said, "there's going to be somebody coming here to talk to me about doing a TV show on our family." I said, "what? They want to do this program on us, but I have to think about it. And I have to talk with dad about it." But I remember the final decision was, "well, we've decided to accept this offer." And I said, "why?" And she said, "well, because we feel that it's an adventure, that if we pass it up, we might regret."

JANE (SF): In a day where the world's eyes are on war, space, and machines that make for greater destruction, what value does the family have? In our time it has lost the economic, geographic, and political place it once had in our lives. Does it contribute anything? Does it still have meaning? These are the questions that bring us to *Story of a Family*.

ELLEN: The *Story of a Family* is not a documentary in terms of a real documentary that somebody like *Frontline* would do or somebody like Ken Burns would do. What it is is a new kind of visual reporting, as it says, and it is a product that they were selling to the American people and that Ocean Spray cranberries wanted to be proud of. And we just happened to be the vehicle through which they told their story. And part of it was our story, and part of it was not exactly our story.

CURTIN: After the launch of Sputnik, many journalists were saying, "look, we are not taking seriously enough the possibilities of television. That television can enlighten, can inform, and can motivate the public to take on serious issues."

NARRATOR (CLIP): Because of its being, this boy will grow up acutely aware that there are forces at large alien to his way of life. 12 years old, with a 20-inch screen, and he has seen the face and forces of evil. Communism is a word he is learning to understand.

CURTIN: There was a lot enthusiasm around documentary, beginning right around 1960. Certainly the Cold War was the key issue. But as well, it turned out that there were also people that were saying, "we need to take up the issues that are confronting the American family. If we are going to make America a world leader, then we need strong families."

CURTIN (CONT.): Gitlin came up with a documentary that was kind of an innovative crossover between entertainment and news. He came up with a sponsor that would love to be associated with an American family, and he came up with a format for the documentary that essentially was trying to say that documentary doesn't just have to be what some people used to refer to as "big head documentary." And in certain respects this is an experimental show.

PJ: When we cleaned out my mother's house, I was lucky to find this file of all the Christmas letters that she had written. This was from December 9, 1960.

(reading) Dear People: the first big snow of the season today has put me in the mood for writing our Christmas letter to all you out of town people whom we don't see often. The TV show on November 14 of course was the big event for us for 1960. On September 19, just 17 days after we had met him on his first visit to Amarillo to see us, Joe Krumgold the NBC director/writer/producer called us from New York to tell us that he had selected the Robertsons for the hour long TV special. He arrived that night and the rest of the crew began falling into Amarillo very shortly and our life lost all semblance of order for the month the crew was here. Thirteen assorted men employed by NBC plus five local newsmen and photographers have been in and out of our house—mostly in—for the past month. Every morning at precisely 8:45, somebody would look out the front door and sigh, "here comes the network." From five cars and a large film truck arriving from a downtown motel would pour the assorted men, making a B-line for the restaurant-size coffee urn on our kitchen table. Swooping up the youngest girls in good morning greetings, giving the glad hand to the older members of the family, and caring on babbling conversations with the baby in his high chair. And another hectic day at 124 Wayside Drive was beginning. Although the usual quitting time was 5:30, some work days lasted until bed time... One, until after midnight! Working without much of a script we were all family and crew at the mercy of the director's whims. As to what happened day by day, just as sure as I would give five girls shampoos and hair rollings at 9:30 PM to prepare for some shoots Joe had discussed that night, he would breeze in the next morning, ready to shoot me instead, straggly locks and all.

JANE (SF): Now in August 1940, Mrs. Robertson, you were about Kay Linda's age?

PAULINE (SF): Yes, I was, that's right.

JANE (SF): Here is your diary of that year. Do you mind if I read it?

PAULINE (SF): No, if you'd like to, please go ahead.

ELLEN: You know we fill in narrative watching it as adults, and when Jane Wyatt says, "can I read your diary?" We're like, "no, hell no, you can't read my diary!" You know, because, really? "Can I read your diary?" No, you really can't.

PJ: We never met Jane Wyatt. It was obvious that that was all done in New York and totally separate.

ROBYN: What they did when they were filming her is they would say, ok, now we want you to look like this. Now we want you to go...

JANE (SF): The next decision is about marriage for me. RL, who has said all year that he'd wait till I graduated from college until he pressed the question, has changed his strategy. Now that I won't be continuing my education.

ELLEN: I have no doubt that my mom probably had a diary because she writes down everything. I think those were Joseph Krumgold's words, hearing my mother's stories. I imagine him sitting at our kitchen table, writing as fast he could you know, back in early September 1960, as my mother told him stories.

JANE (SF) (reading): Of course, he's almost 24, but here I am, only 18, with all my fancy ambitions still unfulfilled. When I'm with RL, though, my plans seem so trivial compared with this overwhelming love for him. But then again, I could always stay my job this year and then go back to college to keep on working my way through. Or, I could marry RL and live happily ever after. I wish I could make up my mind.

RL (SF): Her mind got made up as I remember in a 1940 black Chevrolet. I had a pretty impressive automobile by the time Pauline and I became serious.

ELLEN: Oh, "her mind was made up in the 57 Chevy" or whatever, I don't know what it was. Every time I hear that I go, "oh, oh!" You know, I mean I'm 50 years old and I have a hard time with that, I think, "don't say that, dad!"

SPIGEL: The set up is about trying to create this sense of informal, interpersonal communication, in this case between Jane Wyatt and the family, right. And yet it seems so strange and artificial, to us, now. She's very aware of all this technology around her, and I mean having a television then period was a new thing, so imagine being filmed on TV in your house.

LAUREL: I think she was trying to come across as the demure housewife that you know runs around in her little belted house dress and her high heels. But that wasn't my mom.

SPIGEL: You had this kind of ideal sitcom mother who was so poised in her sort of satin cocktail dress interviewing this mother who was almost trying to kind of look that poised, but looked much more frozen and unnatural. So it was this really interesting kind of performance of being a woman in both of their cases.

CURTIN: In the minds of many television viewers, Jane Wyatt is part of one of the perfect families of the 1950s. The costar of *Father Knows Best*, a series that modeled in many ways a kind of aspirational mode of suburban living. *Father Knows Best* was not a ha ha comedy. It was a comedy about the challenges of raising children, the challenges of maintaining family unity. The problem when the daughter decides that maybe she'd like to become an engineer, as opposed to growing up and being a homemaker.

JANE (FKB): Betty, I think if you try this dress on.

BETTY (FKB): Mother, didn't you hear what I said? I'm going to be an engineer.

JANE (FKB): Yes, I heard you.

BETTY (FKB): But you don't believe me?

JANE (FKB): Well, certainly not. You're joking.

BETTY (FKB): Oh, am I? Well do you know what I'm going to do all next week during spring vacation? I'm going to work with a county surveying crew!

FATHER (FKB): Surveying crew?

JANE (FKB): Surveying crew?

CURTIN: They were domestic comedies, and in that sense, when we think about shows like *Father Knows Best* and *Donna Reed*, and *My Three Sons* and programs like that, we think about families very much like this family.

ROBYN: If you think about a *Father Knows Best* platform for the family, then I can only imagine that Joseph Krungold, the writer of this documentary, and the people that he worked with, were probably thinking the idea was to show a family, but to delve more deeply into or as deeply as you possibly could and get by with it.

ELLEN: The picture that they were trying to paint of a story of a family was what I think we wanted to be as Americans. We wanted to hang on to this kind of family that probably never was but that we always thought should be. The kind of family that we wanted to hold up to the world as Americans. And so they tried to paint us into that perfect picture when indeed you know it's not like that. And no one's like that.

CURTIN: They were choosing certain, what they saw as emblematic of an American family at that time, but obviously what's elided, what's left out of the frame speaks volumes also to what American families were at that time and what people thought of the family itself. So we not only should ask the questions about "why this family?" but "why not all the other families?" And obviously the most important thing with any documentary is not simply to ask what's in the frame, but what's out of the frame. And so what's out of the frame are a lot of other families.

PJ: One of my friends said she thought she was going to be this huge movie star. Well, she ended up being the one who had to go through the wind and pretend that she was my mom in a dust storm.

PAULINE (SF): It came at us like a great big mountain. My older sister who was fourteen, and I, twelve. And when we saw the storm, we didn't know what was coming. We could hardly get home the two miles or so we had to go.

PJ: So they got one of Robyn's friends and one of my friends who would have been the age of my mother and her sister at the time. Went out to the airport, got a big Braniff airplane. They took the airplane out on the field so that there were weeds and everything that the girls were running through. And they had the girls with their scarves on, and the airplane was sitting there, in the field, still but with its engines going, and the propellers going. And

so the propellers were creating this huge wind and they were throwing up the dirt, and so it created that dust storm. And here are these poor girls, in their scarves, running through that, and they could barely get through it because the wind was so strong from that airplane. And the dirt was stinging their legs, and it was so real. And so my friend said, yeah, that was my movie star appearance.

CURTIN: What's happening is documentary is trying to come to primetime and look like primetime but it's also trying to become more mobile, and to take us to places we haven't been before. And to go into an everyday home, um, with the kind of equipment that they needed to be able to shoot this, was to basically invade the home, take it over, and essentially occupy every nook and cranny with recording equipment and lighting equipment.

LAUREL (reading): There were ten huge lights on tripods blocking the closet and cabinet doors. Clip lights on the valances and book cases, cameras replacing furniture which was relegated to the yard or carport, cables curling one upon the other around the house, upstairs and down, like spaghetti, and a backyard playhouse full of boxes containing unexposed film and other mysterious paraphernalia. This is my major memory of that is just all the technology. All of the big cameras, the big things, all of the lights, all that.

CURTIN: It's very crisp images, very high resolution, those were production values that were Hollywood production values, and they were trying to emulate those values because they saw that the show was going to be up against other shows that were going to look like that. So if you look at the way it was shot, you notice that a lot of, a lot of sequences are something like I would say show and tell. The daughter shows up in front of the laundry room, and then opens the door to show the laundry room. At that moment when you're watching that, you're saying to yourself this is very staged. Right? It's almost mechanical.

PJ (SF): Now Laurel, what note is this?

LAUREL (SF): E.

PJ: He would say, uh, "okay, PJ. I know that, let's, you're going to be teaching Laurel piano lessons, just like you do." And so we would do it, right? And then Laurel would play a wrong note, because she was only a little kid and so Joe would say, "well, so, what would you say to Laurel?" I would say, "well, Laurel why did you play it that way?" Or, "Laurel that was wrong!" And Laurel would go, "yeah I know." And then Joe would say, "PJ what would you say?" And I'd go, well, I would say, "so why did you play it that way?" In that accent.

PJ (SF): Yes, why didn't you play it that way?

LAUREL (SF): I don't know.

PJ (SF): Well, play it again.

CURTIN: They were literally besieged by equipment. Their domestic space was upended, so until you could downsize the scale of the recording equipment and make the documentarist less conspicuous and more a part of the household flow, it was very hard to get that kind of quality of everyday life.

PJ: I did teach Laurel piano, I'm sure I did. I don't remember it, but this is how you do when you don't have a lot of money and you have a lot of kids in your family. One kid learns something like piano, and takes the lessons, and then you know you teach it to all the others.

ROBYN: Every night PJ and I fed the kids, the babies. We had two of them in high chairs full time. Didn't matter which two they were, just ... And then bathe them, changed their diapers, put their pajamas on, rocked them to sleep, read them stories, and it was more of an assembly line type thing. And I did that from the time I was 5, 6. That was the year when I announced I'm finished being nice. I'm finished being good. I'm finished changing diapers, I'm finished feeding all these kids.

PAULINE (SF): All of our children have been slow walkers, but Robyn was the next one after Kent, and when at 18 months she wouldn't strike out and walk on her own, we were a little apprehensive. But RL solved that problem.

ROBYN (SF): Well, that was a little too far back for me to remember.

RL (SF): Robyn I remember that very distinctly. Uncle Charles and I would take a string such as this, we would stretch it real tight. And long as you had your hands on it, walking up and down, well you had a very secure feeling to walk.

ROBYN (SF): You mean like this?

RL (SF): Yes, just like that.

ROBYN: I remember thinking, "A) why are they having me do this? On national TV? How embarrassing." And then secondly I thought, "they want me to stand there and hold this string while my father holds the other end and now I'm supposed to listen to him tell me this like I've never heard it before?"

RL (SF): You would walk along the string, holding it, and pretty soon we would drop it lower and lower. You would still hold it real tight, but you could walk. So finally I just finally rolled it up and just handed it to you, and as long as you had it in your hand, well you could walk fine.

ROBYN : Joseph Krungold stopped the camera and he said, now what I want you to say is, my, I must have been a curious child, and so I thought, "what the hell does that mean? Curious?" I'd never heard that word used in that context. I mean that's not a Texas term, you know?

ROBYN (SF): I must have been a curious child.

ROBYN: It's all I could do not to roll my eyes and just throw the string up into the air.

RL (SF): From then on, we didn't have to worry about Robyn's athletic abilities. She is a good swimmer, horseback rider, and ball player. And to climax it all this fall, she ran for cheerleader against 22 other girls, which is a great honor here in Amarillo for any girl.

ROBYN (SF): OK Rangers, we're gonna do klip-klap. Now come on, let's hear it!

CHEERLEADERS (SF): Clip-clap, clip-clap, clip-clap, yell. Who you gonna yell for, Rangers! Rangers!

ROBYN: I was 13 years old, in the eighth grade, extremely awkward, extremely... I was just barely out of childhood and there I was in a formal cheerleading outfit and trying to learn those yells, and trying to learn how to jump up and down without falling over, you know? [Beat] I looked at Joe Krungold and Bill Lynch and they were crying and I thought, "what, is it that bad?" And when it was over they were still crying and they came up and they said, "we've never seen anything like this." They said, "this is what somebody needs to do a documentary on is this group..." they didn't use the word hysteria, but it was something they had never been around. For people to be able to get people to really you know go, and yell out of their minds.

PJ: They were characters and we all really loved them. We just welcomed these people into our home as if they were family, you know long lost cousins or whatever even though they were Yankees and we had barely ever seen a Yankee in our life.

ELLEN: I look back and I think, phew, what an impossible task those guys had. It wasn't as if you could take a little camera, and some lights, and a tripod and and go out, you know, and shoot.

CURTIN: When we see dad in the grocery store, the shots of dad in the grocery store, there's only so much mobility. This is not the kind of cinema verite quality that we would later see associated with the work of people like Robert Drew who would start to experiment with 16 mm cameras, with synchronized sound recording that could be carried on a tape recorder pack, that could be held on the shoulder and off the hip, where you could actually follow characters around. [Beat] So it was both a challenge as far as changing our sense of what should be on TV and what can be on TV as far as content, but also a challenge as far as coming up with the kind of infrastructure that would make that possible.

SPIGEL: In order to create any kind of narrative interest, there has to be some kind of dramatic conflict or crisis. So you know, in a sense it's a function of trying to represent the family itself that you're gonna have to have some sort of you know, something going on, some trouble in that text.

ROBYN: You've got to have some sort of plotline to keep people's attention. You've got to have some sort of conflict and rising action. And so I would imagine that he sat with her and said, "so tell me some of the more difficult things that have happened in your family." And from her point of view, she's not going to say some of things that she doesn't want aired on national TV.

JANE (SF): Was Kay Linda's career as a cheerleader any part of her problem, the problem that you mentioned?

PAULINE (SF): I guess indirectly, just as it indicates how well she got along in high school, socially. During those years we had a good many boys coming to our door.

KAY LINDA (SF): I had a reputation for never going steady in high school. It was something we agreed on, my parents and I. So there must have been about 70 or 80 boys that I dated during those four years.

ELLEN: My sister Kay was a drama major at TCU at the time and so they flew her back and she had so much fun you know being the actress. Well they had to get some boys fast, and my sister was already at college, and so they called the high school and got some younger boys that were a year or two younger than my sister and she was just incensed that they had gotten all the nerds. And she would say, "Oh yeah, sure, like I would go out with him! Oh my gosh, they sent him?"

PAULINE (SF): I don't think a pair of teenagers can see each other day after day and night after night without, well the simplest biological reaction beginning to work itself out.

RL (SF): It was the night of Kay Linda's graduation from Tascosa High School. Pauline and I were sitting in the balcony. She asked me would I go down and get a picture of Kay Linda in the graduation line. As I got down there, a group of her girlfriends were standing around her. I slid in to see what was the matter, and there it was on her finger, an engagement ring.

KAY LINDA (SF): When I came in that morning, mother had been waiting up all night, just as I expected. One thing I hadn't expected though was the quietness. [Beat] There was no panic and no hysteria.

LAUREL: Kay later said, "that's not at all the way it was! My mom was like, losing it. There was anything but quiet." So that's not actually how that went down, but that's how they— either my mother or Joe Krungold wanted to present it that way.

PAULINE (SF): I don't think that the answer to teenage romance is to subsidize marriages. And I didn't want our last toy our oldest daughter to be matrimony.

KAY LINDA (SF): I guess my feeling that morning after mother got through talking to me was mostly that of resentment, rebellion, and frustration.

ROBYN: Kay got up in front of the camera, and she was an RTF major at TCU, and my father stood up at that table right in the middle of the filming, and he said, “Kay Linda, stop that! Stop talking like that, these people are filming and it’s costing them money! Now talk right!” He thought she was really putting on.

RL (SF): I don’t like to leave the store on Saturday afternoon, even for Pauline to have a baby. But this time I got home. I told the boy that he needed to head a cosmetic firm or a hair dressing company if he were to supply Kay Linda’s needs. We also told them that they would not get any financial help from this family if they got married, and I think that thought stuck with them that afternoon.

PAULINE (SF): Well, anyway, the ring went back that afternoon, and we were over one of our biggest hurdles of the year, at least for the time being.

ROBYN: It was maybe a big deal for 24 hours or 48 hours or something, but we had a whole lot of things, things that apparently my mother wouldn’t have wanted on TV. The normal everyday things that people have to go through, when you’ve got a family. Like, where are we going to get the money? My father coming home tired from work. My father having to work 7 days a week. My brothers having problems at school and...those were big dramatic things. My mother not having enough money to pay the bills. My father and my mother arguing about those things. See these are the real things. They’re not critical and crucial, but they’re important, and that’s the texture that wasn’t there. But who wants to show that kind of stuff on national TV?

ELLEN: I empathize with them. I see what an impossible task they were given. But then at the same time I think, “oh man, tell the story, see the story.” And you know when you’re in that big of a hurry and you’re on that big of a deadline it is easy to say, you know, “OK, we’re gonna focus on the story of this teenager, and getting engaged too early, and now it’s all swell because she went off to college and now she’s engaged almost or dating this really nice guy that goes to the Naval Academy, what a swell American.” You know, and so you get why they chose the easy road.

ROBYN: I had a friend whose sister—same age—got pregnant, but I didn’t find out about that for three years later. Why? Because they sent her away to Oklahoma to live while she was pregnant, and to have that baby, and the baby disappeared. My sister to my knowledge did not get pregnant. But had she gotten pregnant that would not have been a part of that show. At all. You just didn’t air that kind of dirty laundry.

ELLEN: The real story of the Robertson family is not my sister and her boyfriend, that’s just nuts. That was nothing. The real story of the Robertson family is that you have this woman who grew up during the Dust Bowl and the Depression and lost her mother.

JANE (SF): We have your recollections, Mrs. Robertson, of those times, here in your diary. Do you mind if I read it?

PAULINE (SF): No, I, I don’t mind.

JANE (SF): Well, this is dated, May 30, 1935. (Reading) Well, tonight was graduation night from grade school and I'll be entering 8th grade in junior high next fall. This last year's been hard in many ways. Not in the school work; I made straight A's most of the year. But being without Mama has made it hard.

PJ: My mom was very reluctant to talk about her mother and what happened to her mother during the depression. In fact, my mother would have never said my mother had a nervous breakdown.

JANE (SF) (reading): She's been gone since last September, and you sure need a mother in the seventh grade. About the only thing that would make it any easier to be without a mother would be money. But ever since daddy lost his business in 1929 or 1930 or whenever it was, it seems that we haven't had any money. I hate the depression.

ELLEN: They didn't know what to do with somebody with a nervous breakdown, so they sent her to jail. She went to jail for a nervous breakdown. And then they sent her to the state hospital where they did electric shock treatments and ruined her brain, and so my mother had no mother. And then my father's father died of the flu pandemic of 1918, so when he was one year old, my father was one. So these two people got together who hadn't ever had anything, and especially not a mother or father, and had broken families at a time when broken families were not the norm and what they valued was family.

GINI (SF): This is the boy's room, and Roy sleeps in here and as soon as Neil gets old enough, he'll sleep here too. My oldest brother Kent, of course, he doesn't stay up here. His room is downstairs on account of his wheelchair.

PAULINE (SF): Our boy Kent has been an invalid for a long time now.

CARRIE: My oldest brother had cerebral palsy, and they said he was going to live only to be about twelve. And that we should institutionalize him because he would be a burden on my mom and dad. And they, you know, considered all the options and ended up raising him at home.

JANE (SF): Well we haven't met Kent. Where is he?

PAULINE (SF): He isn't here. He's in his crib back in his room.

PJ: All they showed was his wheelchair. And I don't know whose decision that was, when actually Kent was a big part of our lives, you know?

ELLEN: They made him like Boo Radley, and just every time I see it, I go, "ugh!" He wasn't Boo Radley. He was my brother.

DOCTOR (SF): I'm Dr. George Waddill of Amarillo. The hopeless quality of Kent's condition soon became apparent.

ELLEN: When the doctor said, “you need to send him to an institution,” well my mother’s mother had gone to the institution. They weren’t about to do that.

PAULINE (SF): We’ve had Kent a lot longer than we expected. They told us that he might live just 11 or 12 years. We don’t know how much longer he’ll be with us, but we do feel that he’s had a good life, as far as he can understand what a life is. Comfortable and secure.

PJ: Kent was not one who could ever interact with us. But he was our brother and we learned how to take care of him and I think we learned unconditional love. He was real valuable in our family. But that didn’t come through. That didn’t come through that he was actually in our midst all the time.

ELLEN: We took care of my brother in our home until he was 37 years old and died in my mom’s arms. While I think Krumboltz was a great storyteller—I know he was a great storyteller—he understood that that was an important part of the story, but he could really in that hour never get there. You know so he let her talk about losing her mother, and my grandmother talked about losing her husband and moving to run the boarding house with her two sons. But the why and the how hard that was, and showing my brother Kent, because he was, you know, he was twisted like somebody with cerebral palsy is, that’s too hard. That’s not a thanksgiving story.

ELLEN: When I watch the show, I think OK. Real life of that show is that we did go to church every time the dang doors opened.

PJ: We were at church two or three times a week, so that’s something that was not made up.

LAUREL: I had to memorize some prayer, and I think I was real intimidated about that.

LAUREL (SF): Dear God, we thank thee for this day that we have had. We thank thee for our home and our family. We thank thee for our church and our school. Bless those who we love.

ROBYN: If they’d really wanted to put the truth in there, what really happens on Sunday is that we all get up and we go to church and we’re late. We’re late. And here goes my mother going down the aisle with all of her kids and they reserved that front aisle for us. I hated that. Because we were late, and we had so many kids. So then, here’s the part that is not in the film, that wouldn’t be. When we went home, yes, we all helped cook lunch. So usually I was sitting there peeling potatoes or making salad or something like that. My mother who’s over there cooking is saying, “so, what did John Doe your Sunday school teacher say today?” Well, he said, “blah blah blah blah blah.” “Oh! How could he teach you children something like that? You know not to take the Bible literally!” And so she would completely undo—I mean she wanted to know every syllable that he had said, and she would just unroll it all the way to the very last thing. And I always thought, “why did I even go? because now I don’t believe anything he said.” So then she would listen to this kid, “what did your Sunday school teacher say?” “Oh! D-d-d-d-d-doop!” Scratch that. And it’s good, because it was a crock you know what they were teaching us.

LAUREL: That's one thing that I think is really different about that documentary—my mom. Because she was a very educated, outspoken, activist person. And here she is being this, casting her eyes down and being real “well...” you know.

ROBYN: I grew up in a matriarchy. My father was a very strong man and he was very good natured and hard working and fun and adventuresome and an outdoorsman and he had his own full character. But my mother pretty well ruled the show.

ELLEN: My mother was in charge. In charge of the family. And so you know we matched to her drum.

ROBYN: I think there were a lot of parents who thought my mother was very eccentric. As I look back on it, people didn't relate to things that she was doing like having all those kids. And now being on TV. What is she doing, you know? And they were pretty critical back then, very critical. If you stepped outside of the mold in any way, it wasn't good.

ELLEN: People in Amarillo used to say to me, “well, your mother is awfully headstrong.” They would say that. “Headstrong.” They always used that. Because what they meant was, you know what they meant, they just didn't want to say that word. The big B word, you know? And mother would say, “now then there's a time to get along, but then there's gonna be a time when you just need to be a bitch. And you need to remember that.”

ROBYN: When the program started airing, the telephone started ringing and it was just everybody in Amarillo started calling us and we were trying to watch the thing. My mother would go we can't talk now and she would just hang it up, because you can't click that thing off, you know. It was the old fashioned telephone. We can't talk now. We can't talk now. We can't talk now. And she did that for about the first 30 minutes of the show.

PJ: Oh, from Jane Wyatt. (Reading) Thanks so much for your nice telegram. Unfortunately I was shooting until midnight and couldn't see the show, but everyone has told me that it was an absorbing hour of TV and that the Robertsons were all absolutely great. Hope to see the film next week, love and thanks and congratulations, Jane Wyatt.

GINI: I don't even remember watching it on TV. I don't remember anybody in my school being impressed or saying, “oh my gosh I saw you on TV!” There was nothing...my life was not changed by that.

LAUREL: People in Amarillo for about 10 or 15 years afterwards would go, “oh, so you were the ones who did that!” because they had heard of that. But after that, no, nobody remembers that.

ELLEN: You know, there were stories of legend in our family, like people would just write us the year after and say, The Robertsons, Amarillo, TX with no address, and it would magically appear in our mailbox because the mailman knew who they were talking about.

LAUREL (reading): From every part of the country, people, perhaps as many as 100 of them strangers, have written to say that the program had real meaning for them. I trust NBC has sufficient request for future showings of your story to permit a rerun prior to each Thanksgiving day in the future, somewhat like Dickens the Christmas Carol is shown at each Christmas season. Feeling like kinfolks now, we must keep in touch and find out such things as how Kay Linda's romance with the midshipman turns out, for instance.

LAUREL: This woman was so evidently genuine in her interest that I wrote her the good news that we expect to have a really glorious July in 1961 with a brand new Robertson.

PJ (reading): So we think the whole effort was worthwhile and it was a great experience for these Robertsons. As evidence of his personal charm and real goodness, I submit the fact that we all still love Joe Krungold in spite of everything. In fact this article is just a love story, um...this always makes me cry, I don't know why. Um... In fact this article is just a love story about a bunch of Yankees who erased the Mason-Dixon line as far as we're concerned... By coming down to Texas and moving deep into our hearts, all the while we were ridiculing one another's accents.

PJ: And that's the whole truth, we still miss every one of them and look forward eagerly to their letters and telephone calls. I think that this documentary and this whole episode of being recognized for maybe the work that mom and dad, and the love that they had put into this whole project of raising these children, I think she was validated by that. That's what I think. And I think that that paragraph maybe kind of brings that home.

JANE (SF): I want to thank you, Mrs. Robertson, for allowing us to come and visit you.

PAULINE (SF): Well I hope you've enjoyed it.

JANE (SF): I know we've enjoyed it. But you remember that wasn't the only purpose of our visit. We came on a search to find the meaning of the family and what value it has for all of us in this moment of our history.

PAULINE (SF): Well have you found it, the answer you were looking for?

JANE (SF): I think we have.

GINI: I think I'm a lot more obviously nostalgic than anybody. I think the fact that I was here when we sold 124... This is the clock that was you know, in the dining room forever above the dining room table. This is the chair that was in my dad's grocery store. He had a little desk in the back of his store, his meat market. And I have to say, I don't think I ever saw him sit in this chair. And then, this table is...I won't be able to say this...this table is the table that...this is the table that we had all of our big meals, and I just think it looks so small right here, but I have all the leaves that go in it. I would love sometime to have you know put all the leaves in and spread it out and have everybody here, I'm really happy to have this table here. But it still looks so small to me.

ELLEN: Come on Rangers! Let's do clip-clap!

TERRI: Clip-clap! It's clip-clap!

GINI: That was on the stage.

ELLEN: Yeah. We still had pep rallies there when I was there.

CARRIE: We didn't.

GINI: We did. Not always, but once in a while.

ELLEN: And we still did this cheer.

PJ: This letter on NBC stationary, National Broadcasting Company Incorporated stationary, is from Bill Lynch, he was one of our favorites of the crew. He wrote this letter to my mom, November 15, 1960 and I believe that must have been the day after the documentary aired. (Reading) Dear Pauline, have just finished chatting on the phone, and as always I'm kicking myself for leaving so many things unsaid. It's difficult to describe in words but the experience of meeting you and the family has had more of an effect on me than I'd really care to admit. About the show itself, it's history now and we could second guess from now till forever about the ways it could have been improved. Be certain of one thing though, and that is that if it missed the mark, it didn't miss from lack of effort. *Son of a Story of a Family* will be better, I promise! [laughs]

GINI: She wasn't overprotective—

ELLEN: Shh! Here it is!

[They watch while Kay Linda says her famous line about resentment, rebellion, and frustration, and laugh.]

CURTIN: I would say that it is significant, and probably in large part because it shows both the challenges of doing observational cinema, and it also shows the kind of response that people had to being placed within an observational context. And it's also a fascinating document because of what it tells us about what was acceptable to put on television as a representation of an American family.

CARRIE: Mom, you haven't watched that in a long time, have you?

GINI: It hasn't changed, has it? It's still the same.

PAULINE: It's still the same.

ELLEN (to Pauline): You think it's kind of corny?

ELLEN (from interview): You know, I look back at the crew again and I understand that they had this quick turnaround. They had to shoot this in a month, they had to edit in maybe two weeks, and I see what an impossible task they were given. You know, and so you get why they chose the easy road, when in fact the really important story and I think the story that would have been, that would have lasted through time, would have been this more complicated story. Of how families can stick together, maybe, even during difficult times. And even though life's not perfect, life's never perfect. It's never going to be perfect, and that's exactly when you need family, and that should have been the story that they told. That was the story of the Robertsons.

ROBYN: We didn't associate ourselves as being movie stars or TV stars or anything. It was more of a very finite experience. TV was more you know it was a vehicle, and we happened to have a little bleep on it. It was very finite. Um...the only threat that I only got from that was from brother-in-laws who would say, "we're going to do a sequel on y'all, and you know tell the way it really is now!" And we were all going, "oh gosh."

[END]