

Be a ‘Do-Bee’: Take a Magic Mirror Journey Inside *Romper Room*

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I. Introduction*

In the interest of adding to the general awareness and understanding of early educational television for children, this article explores a specific television program from the 1960s, *Romper Room*, chiefly via an interview with one of the show’s local hosts. This host – my mother Joyce Kramer – certainly had a magical job with new educational television, and it made her a celebrity in the town of Ottumwa, Iowa, in that time and for years afterward. I recall strangers calling to her from their passing vehicles if they spied her on a sidewalk, “Hi, Miss Joyce!” Impressive to my young mind as her celebrity was, it was only much later when I considered the impact the show had on young viewers both in our small town and, from other television areas, on the nation, as well as the impact on my mother’s later teaching. At this article’s basic function, eliciting her memories of the show helped to clarify how the show worked and why it was effective. Juxtaposed with her interview remarks are thoughts on the show in comparison with other educational television of the 1960s, the milieu of the times, and the legacy of the *Romper Room* on educational television for children in America.

Romper Room predated that national phenomenon of children’s television programming called *Sesame Street*, which premiered in 1969. Running for an astonishing 46 seasons, *Sesame Street* is now a household name, justly famous for its ground-breaking and innovative combination of education and entertainment with memorable puppets (the famous “muppets”) as well as human characters. The show often added expertly frank discussions of sensitive family and societal matters to its entertaining format. Still, as wonderful as *Sesame Street* was then and now, it owes at least a small debt to shows like *Romper Room*, especially regarding the creation of a world where children at home felt like active participants in the “school” on their television, almost like their older brothers and sisters who went off to their real schools every day. Other television programs currently popular, such as *Daniel Tiger*, *Dora the Explorer*, or *Mickey’s Clubhouse*, all use variations of the basic concept of creating a “school” of sorts for pre-school children. Like *Romper Room*, each of these popular shows first clearly establishes a trusted teacher figure to lead the

episode's quest for knowledge or explanation of a theme or concept. The episodes subsequently work to continually re-establish the leader's competence and friendliness.

Before *Romper Room* and later programs like the ones listed, very little existed insofar as organized and innovative educational outlets for pre-school children ages 2 to 5. This age group was thought to be too young for any schooling whatsoever; therefore, the general concept of pre-kindergarten did not exist. Also, unlike the current public school system in the United States, many kindergarteners went to school only half-days.¹

The country in the 1960s, therefore, was ready for programs like *Romper Room*, and this show's concept and format would prove well-suited to the task of helping to prepare children socially for formal schooling. Most pre-school children have not fully developed the filter between thought and voice, and *Romper Room* helped develop that filter. But not only did the show teach proper social behavior – concepts such as listening, keep one's voice down, maintaining safe behavior in the big world – it also helped popularize the idea that structured play actually can be a form of learning. Rather than anchored to a desk, laboriously copying a lesson while the strict schoolmaster hovered about close by, the thought was, especially for children this young, to use a child's strong inclination to play as a tool for learning. Of course, American education had historically been church-related² and this new idea to use play in a more or less formal classroom ran counter to quiet religious contemplation and worship, as well as the centuries-old thinking that children basically were small adults, able to work in the fields and factories as soon as they were physically able. In the support of play were the educators and educational researchers in post-World War II America who observed and described the value of play in and around formal schools. For example, Schaefer and Kaduson noted that play can be used to “communicate and resolve important emotional issues”³. Viola Spolin, lauded as the pioneer of creative play in traditionally formal settings, wrote, “outside of play, there are few places where children can contribute to the world in which they find themselves”; also, play and games can be “designed not as diversions (emphasis mine) from the curriculum, but rather as supplements, increasing student awareness of problems and ideas fundamental to their intellectual development”.⁴ Another creative play theorist, Nellie McCaslin, was an early describer of the value of creative play in terms of the development of the imagination, independent thinking, and social awareness in children.⁵

Supported, therefore, by such growing scholarly theory, the playful learning approach was the “go-to” choice of television shows in the 1960s such as *Romper Room*, *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*, and *Captain Kangaroo*, also

because, at least in part, television was overwhelmingly thought to be a medium of entertainment. Playful learning proved to be a wise approach, for using a young child's inclination to play instead of fighting it or treating it as a discipline problem, was another reason for the success of *Romper Room* and its legacy TV programming. The success of such early educational television in turn propelled classroom teachers to see the potential for fun in education – that the two did not have to be mutually exclusive – and the development of that potential has instigated greater and happier participation from school children in their school day ever since. This should be remembered in light of the more recent trend in public elementary schools to introduce complex concepts earlier and earlier in the learning process. My evidence here is anecdotal and only from qualitative observation, but it seems modern kindergarteners are expected to learn to read and to perform math problems that may have been, only a few years earlier, the domain of second grade students. In older students one sees the same trend evidenced with the notion of “early college” high schools popping up all over the country. The debatably positive results of the “earlier is better” notion include at least one casualty: children's playtime. Children in the early grade levels, now expected to work at school “business” (constant test-taking, note-taking, etc.) without recess or toys in the classroom, exhibit signs of stress with behavioral and physical problems (including obesity), all because many of our esteemed educators and administrators fail to give credence to the value of play in the learning development of a child. This is an area in need of further research beyond my limited evidence, and, to be fair, school administrators are typically under some kind of extreme pressure themselves such as the demand for high scores on state-mandated exams, but the cost to valuable play time is still worth pondering. *Romper Room*, however, always understood the value of play even as fairly mature concepts, such as empathy and the importance of rules, were introduced and discussed on the show.

In this understanding, *Romper Room* was only one of the pioneers, as the 30 year run of *Captain Kangaroo*, for example, also featured a friendly host, playful characters and a wide variety of situations that used drama and creative play in its scripts. Characters such as “Mr. Green Jeans,” “Bunny Rabbit,” “Dancing Bear” and “Mr. Moose,” (I recall an episode where Mr. Moose announced he was running for president of the United States as a way to teach a concepts about the political processes of the country) accentuated the appeal of the grandfatherly Bob Keeshan and the stories he would tell to illustrate a theme or teach a concept. *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* began in 1963 (its animated spin-off, debuting in 2012, is called *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood*). Not only did *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood* benefit from the teacher/host idea, it specialized in

the colorful characters doing the right thing, a concept that owed a debt to *Romper Room*'s "Doo Bee." Characters such as "Lady Aberlin" organizing the neighbors to volunteer to serve others, or "Beaver O'Day" helping with neighborhood improvement projects are specific examples of Doo Bee legacies. *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood* is also famous for its host Fred Rogers style of directly and honestly discussing concepts with the television viewer, which always reminded me of how Miss Joyce on *Romper Room* would directly address her "students" at home.

The use of play as part of *Romper Room* and these similar shows with teacher/hosts actually hearkened back to the original approach of kindergarten in 19th century America. Unlike modern kindergarten as the earliest level of child's schooling, complete with homework and tests, kindergarten as originally established by Friedrich Froebel, Margarethe Meyer Schurz and others in the mid-1850's was "based on the child's developmental needs rather than on society's expectations for what it wanted children to know".⁵ It seems common sense that most children younger than age five may not be ready for complex arithmetic or diagramming sentences, but they are ready to learn about how to – through play – enjoy learning, and also how to behave in a classroom and how to appreciate their teachers. All of these elements are not only crucial for later school success, they all are elements, to stress the point, for which *Romper Room*'s teaching methods were particularly well-suited.

Additionally, *Romper Room* and shows like it helped paved the way for later theories regarding school policies, procedures and discipline practices. For example, William Glasser, in his book *Choice Theory*, writes, "Discipline programs, even those that are kindly coercive, do not work on rebellious students who do not have school and school work as a part of their quality worlds". By "quality world" Glasser referred to how a person's reality is shaped by "specific pictures that portray, more than anything else we know, the best ways to satisfy our basic needs." ⁶ According to Glasser, these basic needs are survival, belonging, power, freedom and fun. *Romper Room* helped youngsters find the path to school success by supplying four out of Glasser's five ("survival" was probably not on the minds of the four-year-olds on the show). Children on the show belonged to the show's world by being the most important part of it. They were given the power to create within the framework of the show; nonetheless, they were free to participate as they wanted. And, in my recollection as well as others, the show, mostly through its use of play as a teaching tool, certainly was fun.

Educational theory well prior to Glasser seems to support what *Romper Room* was about from its inception. For example, the idea of self-actualization as

the highest stage in human growth, as attributed to Abraham Maslow,⁷ was reflected by *Romper Room*'s emphasis on children's achieving knowledge within social mores. This skill would enable him/her to "get along" in the big world outside the home and more easily self-actualize.

The idea of first developing children for school before they actually begin school (an idea enjoying a current revival that is in direct response to placing rigorous scholastic burdens on very young children) is most clearly supported by the notion that young children are best educated at home. "We know from decades of research that children learn best through their everyday experiences with the people they know, trust and love, not in structured environments where they are pressured to perform".⁸ *Romper Room* clearly sought to project such an aura of a trusted place. It was a homey experience for the pre-kindergarten child even though it was through the still-glamorous television medium. And a comfortable home, especially in the mid-1960s in America, depended upon the warm, wise, and welcoming mother. This is a role that hosts like Miss Joyce filled and that made *Romper Room* so memorable for many.

It is important to additionally note that collected evidence would strongly suggest that viewers of pre-Kindergarten educational programming were better prepared than their non-viewing or low-viewing peers for Kindergarten, and adapted well to school in general.

A Brief History of *Romper Room*

Romper Room existed, via its local affiliates, from 1953 to 1994. The show was the brainchild of Bert and Nancy Cluster of Cluster Television in Baltimore, Maryland. Nancy became the first teacher on the show, and she was instrumental in the training of other *Romper Room* hosts, which numbered in the dozens during the peak years of the show in the mid to late 1960s and early 1970s.

Brick-and-mortar preschools were rare in the 1950s and 1960s when television was new, but, with the reasons as stated previously, the exciting idea of bringing a preparatory show for children into people's homes caught on quickly. The idea was met with such positivity that the Clusters took the idea to other surrounding area TV stations and eventually began the training program for hosts or hostesses (the *Romper Room* teachers were always female). Of course, another reason for the show's success was financial – the show was a free-for-the-public alternative to pre-school. As my mother noted, in many states at the time, public Kindergartens weren't funded by taxes.⁹ For example, Missouri didn't get public Kindergartens until the 1990s. Another reason for the show's success was that it was relatively easy to duplicate. Every teacher, representing whatever

viewing area, was given the same script each week (*Romper Room* was unique in that it was franchised rather than syndicated. This meant local TV stations could use their own hosts in lieu of national hosts, which is how Miss Joyce came to be hired at KTVO and why she did not have to relocate to Baltimore).

A given TV station from the different regions would obtain sponsors and the teacher in the area would teach that small segment of preschoolers. People who are old enough to remember *Romper Room* always reminisce about the specific teacher, like Miss Joyce, who instructed them or their children on the regional TV programming. Most did not realize that “their” *Romper Room* teacher only served a relatively small viewing area.

Monday February 28, 1966

Morning

6:30 (8) **SUNRISE SEMESTER**—Education
Age of Rubens: “The Roman Revival.” Dr. Jane Costello is the lecturer.

7:00 (2) **SUNRISE SEMESTER**—Education
Classical Myths: “Athens.” Dr. Philip Mayerson of NYU is the lecturer.

(5) **OPEN CIRCUIT**—Education
(6) (7) (13) (21) **TODAY**
[COLOR] Scheduled guests include actress Lee Remick; puppeteer Burr Tillstrom, with Fran Allison and the Kuklapolitans; and Eugene Lyons, who discusses his biography “David Saroff.” Also: a Washington interview. Hugh Downs, Frank Blair. (Two hours)

Local programs at 7:25 and 8:25 A.M.

(8) **PASTOR’S STUDY**—Religion

7:05 (8) **NEWS**—Mike Wallace

7:30 (2) (3) **NEWS**—Mike Wallace

(3) **MORNING REPORT**—Hal Oyster

(5) **TOPPER**—Comedy
“Topper’s Rejuvenation.” Topper attempts to recapture his youth. Lee G. Carroll, Anne Jeffreys, Robert Sterling.

(8) **NEWS, WEATHER**—Dick Eaton

7:35 (8) **BREAKFAST CLUB**—Bill Riley

7:55 (2) **TALES OF THE RIVERBANK**

(3) **NEWS, WEATHER**

8:00 (2) (2) **CAPT. KANGAROO**—Children
Mr. Green Jeans invents a machine that makes paper toys. (60 min.)

(5) **SUPERMARKET SWEEP**—Game

8:15 (8) (3) **CAPT. KANGAROO**—Children
Mr. Green Jeans invents a machine that makes paper toys. (45 min.)

8:30 (5) [COLOR] **JACK LA LANNE**

(8) **SENATOR DOUGLAS REPORTS**

8:45 (3) **SOCIAL SECURITY IN ACTION**

8:55 (11) **CLASSROOM**—Education

9:00 (2) **MODERN WOMAN**—Jan Voss
Scheduled guest is Mrs. Delbert Hayford of Dubuque. (Live)

(2) (7) **CLASSROOM**—Education

(3) **LOVE LUCY**—Comedy
Ricky doesn’t want Lucy around when his band auditions for a TV show. Lucy: Lu-

A Real TV on  KTVO 3 KENTUCKY OREGON



Romper Room with Miss Joyce

...It's Educational ... It's Fun
Weekdays 10:30 to 11:00 A.M.

A-22 TV GUIDE

The Cluster family also sold their special line of toys associated with the show, mostly the famous jack-in-the-box that provided theme music to open the show and the Do Bee/Don’t Bee, previously mentioned and subsequently explained. Marketing like this was yet another aspect of the show that was ahead of its time and would be copied by marketing executives for TV shows and movies ever since, even to the detriment of the story in some cases.

The Format of *Romper Room*

According to Miss Joyce, “The script was easy for me to learn, and remember I had four children at home so I had had a lot of practice saying prayers, reading stories and playing games.”¹⁰

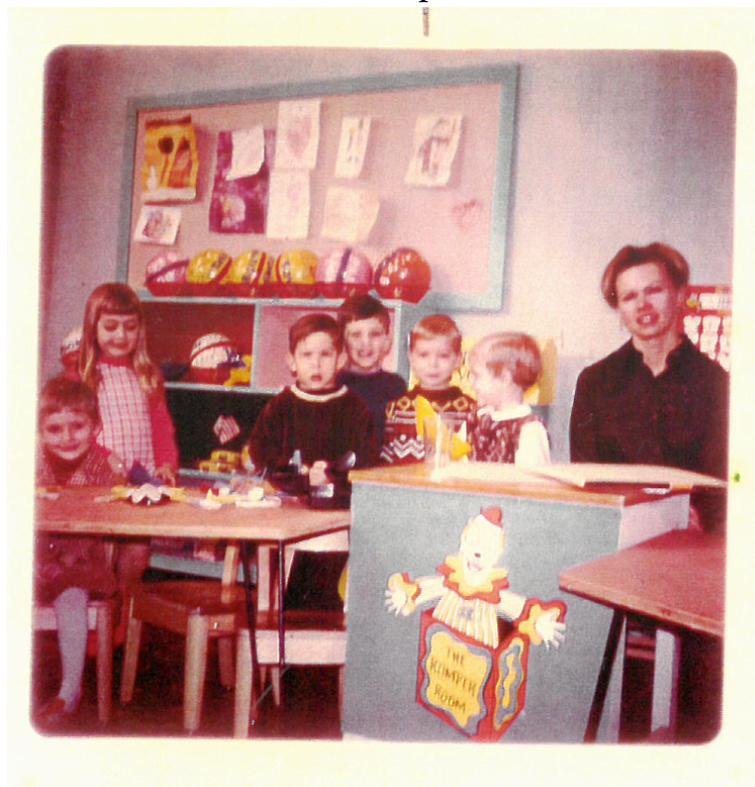
While parents and family of the children on the show watched from behind a glass wall at the studio, the program would open with a greeting from the host, both to her TV class and to the “class” at home, then all would recite the Pledge of Allegiance together. After a commercial break, the second phase featured the main learning activity. Miss Joyce would direct the children to go to the learning tables, and she would position herself on a “teacher chair” between the two tables that each seated three children. With her easel and a pointer, Miss Joyce would begin the learning activity.

The main learning activity could and did vary. Typically, the host would pose a question, such as “What is hibernation?” and she would point out pictures of sleeping bears snug in warm caves while connecting children to the concept by asking secondary questions like, “When you are sleepy, what do you do?” Thus, the children and the host would discuss the meaning of the sentence and the pictures. Miss Joyce notes that she tried to make sure to call on each student, and this was relatively easy as there were only 6 children in the studio class. After the second commercial break, the “game” of the show was featured, such as “Ring Around the Rosey,” but invariably a clear extension of the main lesson. So, with the hibernation lesson example, the game might be “Don’t Wake the Giant” or something similar. Snack time immediately followed, featuring milk or fruit juice (in the case of KTVO, contractually supplied by their main sponsor Wapello Dairy), with a prayer offered before eating. The *Romper Room* prayer – a standard in many American homes then – went “God is great, God is good. Let us thank Him for our food. Amen.” The third and final commercial break was positioned then, and, following that, the last segment of the show when Miss Joyce brought out and used the hand-held “Magic Mirror.” This element of the show was so memorable to the public that it deserves a closer description. At the end of each broadcast, Miss Joyce would look through her “Magic Mirror” – actually, an open frame of a hand mirror, decorated with glitter that sparkled under the television studio lighting. Most shows also choose to enhance the mirror with a special effect of some kind, perhaps an ever-changing swirl of colors, like a kaleidoscope emanating from the center of the mirror. Miss Joyce would recite, “Romper, stomper, bomper, boo. Tell me, tell me, tell me, do. Magic Mirror, tell me today, did all my friends have fun at play?” As kids at home held their collective breaths, hoping to be “seen,” she would then name all the children she spied out there in the home audience, such as, “I see Kathleen and

Penny; oh, there's Jimmy. I see Tommy, and Bobby, too..." Incidentally, she always, without fail, saw little Brian, Johnny, Annie, Billy and Marky – the names of my siblings and me.

When questioned in the interview about whom she would "see" on the show, Miss Joyce explained that for this Magic Mirror time, parents in the community were encouraged to mail in their children's names.¹¹ A weekly list was compiled from which Miss Joyce would read when she looked through the mirror. Even years later, people from the community would vividly recall being seen by Miss Joyce, a testament to a child's powers of imagination and belief. Children's television programming thereafter would make use of this technique, for example, Mr. Rogers asking the children at home for an answer, or Dora the Explorer asking a question and "waiting" for the kids at home to reply, or Mickey asking the children watching *Mickey's Clubhouse* if they could spy a certain clue or hidden figure on the screen.

The number of children on the show was six, ages 4-6, and these groups of six were changed every two weeks. According to Miss Joyce, the cast selection worked as follows: parents of the children wrote a request for their child to be on the show. Then, she said, "I would answer the letters, schedule a meeting, meet with the child and parent and then, if all went well (and it invariably did), select the child for a certain two-weeks to be on Romper Room."¹²



Casting, then, was part of the job of the *Romper Room* host, and the two-week-and-recast system fair but problematic. As Miss Joyce commented, “The new selection of the children in the cast every two weeks was one of the few drawbacks – it really affected the teaching element. You never really got to know the children. I can't tell you how many parents have said "My child was on your show," but any specific recollection of the child for me was a blur. When I moved on to normal kindergarten teaching when the show went off the air, I was gratified to have the time to get to know and remember the children in my year-long class. It's part of the proof that the ‘Romper Room School’ was the vehicle to actually try to teach a home audience. My students were the viewing audience at home and the six children on the set were more like props!”

The most fun part (however educational and carefully scripted) of the show occurred during that middle segment, began when Miss Joyce would engage the kids in the games, exercises, and songs, sometimes featuring recurring characters. For example, an oversized bumblebee would make an appearance (in pictures I have from KTVO of the show, this character was presented as both a puppet and a large cutout on the teaching easel)



This was the famous "Do Bee," smiling and happy to be knowledgeable about correct behavior. The "Don't Bee" also made an appearance; he of course sported a perpetual frown and did the opposite of whatever the Do Bee did. If, for example, the Do Bee would say "Thank you" when given something; the Don't Bee would just take without saying a thing. Or "Do Bee a good sport when you lose;" "Don't Be angry if you get tagged out." "Do Bee good boys and girls for your parents! Don't Be rude to your mom and dad." Lots of little pieces of advice were offered in this way throughout the show, reminding the children in the group (and therefore at home) to be good boys and girls. Also, the Do Bee was accompanied by an action-rhyme for the children, as follows:

"Start buzzin' buzzin'. Here's your chance.
Everybody's doing the Do Bee dance.
Just let your wings fly, your arms fly too.
Then buzz around round and round... Do-body-doo!"¹³

In some markets, Do-Bee balloons, painted with a sketch of the character, were made and sold. When the balloons were inflated and then released, they would fly around the room slowly emitting a buzzing sound. Miss Joyce notes that, "Because the toys of the show were seen often, the *Romper Room* folks put them into a toy line that was sold in the local stores. Not cheaply, I might add. Now I see all kinds of toy lines that are sold in tandem with some movie release."¹⁴

Originally (until 1981, when the show was overhauled and re-titled *Romper Room and Friends*), the show opened and closed with Mattel's Jack-in-the-box (this Jack-in-the-box was a fixture as a toy on the show as well) plunking out its "Pop Goes the Weasel" tune to accompany the "Romper Room" title card. And, music was used throughout the show as a regular accompaniment for games. Miss Joyce would always ask "Mr. Music, please." or "We're ready, Mr. Music." to prompt the background music to begin playing.

I submit that *Romper Room* and its contemporaries, through the demonstrating of the effects of good behavior, especially in a school setting, put John Dewey's concept of growth in education to work: "growth must specify the direction in which growth takes place, the end towards which it tends."¹⁵

II. Eyewitness Account – The Interview with “Miss Joyce”

Though I regret that too many years passed before I could interview Joyce Kramer about her history with the show and her views on its impact, the interview finally occurred in the fall of 2016, and from it, as seen in the previous section as well, came valuable information regarding how she became involved with the show and her recollections of the show’s processes. References in the previous section and subsequently here to my mother Joyce Kramer are by her TV moniker, “Miss Joyce” to honor her influence on the hundreds of “Do-Bees” who still remember her that way from the magical experiences of their youth with *Romper Room*.

Miss Joyce Auditions

One day in September of 1964 Joyce was watching TV with all of us (my brothers, sister, and me) when she saw an advertisement on the KTVO Channel 3 for a Kindergarten teacher. Having recently graduated from the University of Iowa with a Kindergarten through 9th grade teaching degree, yet currently unemployed, she was immediately intrigued. As the advertisement ended, she thought that maybe this could lead to her first job in the community, although she did question, “Why would a TV station have a need for a Kindergarten teacher?” She figured that question would be answered soon enough and she was bolstered by the fact that not only did she have the requisite degree in-hand, surely most other Kindergarten-certified teachers had already been hired by local schools. She reasoned she would have less competition. So, she picked up the phone and called the station.

Despite her thoughts of “less competition,” this call must have taken a high amount of courage, especially when she found out more of what being a Kindergarten teacher on-air would entail. She was especially concerned, not with being a “TV teacher,” but with the idea of being a TV “personality.”¹⁶ Not only did she have zero acting experience (aside from a memorable turn as “Buttercup” in her junior high’s production of Gilbert and Sullivan’s *HMS Pinafore*), she had never been in front of a television camera.

Following the phone call and introductory questions and answers, station management executives contacted Mother for a face-to-face interview. She recalls being interviewed on camera, where she fielded questions about “mundane subjects” like what Christmas meant to her, a favorite childhood memory, and her favorite desserts. She also recalls skipping around the studio while singing “The Farmer in the Dell,” which she believes really set her apart from any other applicant. No one can skip and sing like Mother Joyce, as my

siblings and I well know, then and now. Sure enough, a few days later a KTVO representative again called and informed her she had the job.

She rode the bus downtown to the KTVO studios (Dad used our only vehicle to drive to his teaching/coaching job). When she signed the contract, she remembers the station manager stopping her and, noting that she had listed on her application that she had four children, asking her point blank whether she would be getting pregnant again. The Civil Rights Act was not in existence quite yet, or undoubtedly the manager would have resisted asking such a question. (It is also interesting to note that, in spite of being married with four children, the show stipulated that she be called “Miss,” another sign of the times: teachers were stereotypically unmarried women). However, such questions did not come up again as he obviously saw Mother as the right individual to make *Romper Room* a hit for the KTVO viewership.



Beginning the Job and Working the Job

Upon her hire, her first task was to travel to Baltimore, Maryland, for formal training in how to host the show. Baltimore was the birthplace of *Romper Room*; as such it accommodated the personnel and facilities for educating regional hostesses.

The training consisted of learning the show's format and useful teaching strategies. This included some training in how to address the multiple cameras, how to know she was on-air, and TV station lingo commonly in use. She learned that every week she would be sent a script of what educational concepts and activities to fill the 20 minutes with (the half-hour show minus commercial time). She flew back to Ottumwa and filming schedules were set, and two weeks later, shooting commenced.

As alluded to earlier, our mother's involvement as Miss Joyce meant involvement for her children as well. I remember my siblings and I served as actors in at least two commercials for sponsors of the show, but the one we all remember was for "Jungle Juice," some sort of fruit punch drink product made by one of the show's sponsors, Wapello Dairy. I remember us being told to run around and play (we had no problems with that direction – I don't recall any of us asking, "What's my motivation?"), then, on cue, we were supposed to sprint over to a picnic table and grab cartons of Jungle Juice, guzzle the concoction, then sprint back to the playing field, smiling and satiated. Running around and guzzling sugary liquids? My siblings and I could have started our own master class in such things, as well as horseplay and tomfoolery, so filming this commercial was a lark and a fun memory of how our mother involved her children in her television career.

Wapello Dairy deserves additional mention as supplying the miniature milk truck that some lucky kid got to "drive" (actually pushed by a camera man) onto the set at a crucial moment – delivery for snack time – during each show. I should know, I got to drive it once, and, in my own brain, I had achieved lasting fame. At least, it felt glorious to be the driver of the truck that carried in all the delicious chocolate milk and Jungle Juice for the children on the show. Also, in *Collected Writings on Education and Drama*, the author of "Drama as a Context for Talking and Writing" explains that depictions such as the milk truck "cause us to think from within the frame of the depiction and actually establish things outside the frame."¹⁷ Though not an allusion to the TV camera "frame," the point of the imaginative depiction applies and added to the show's magical qualities.

Other Observations from Miss Joyce

During our interview, I asked my mother to compare her time as Miss Joyce with the later public school kindergarten teaching she did for years in Ottumwa, Iowa. She replied, "I don't think the jobs were alike at all...except for the fact that they were both instructing small children. In a Kindergarten class you have at least 20 children and they don't care if they please you at all and their parent isn't watching them from a window off set. You have to win them over and gain respect before you can get them to listen to you. The teacher has to work through all kinds of "controlling" behaviors that have worked for them at home. On a TV set you always have the attention of the few in the studio and the camera man and the monitor. The script was controlled day by day and week by week. In a classroom you must get everything organized, manage and teach with little or no help from anyone else. In public schools, a teacher is really in charge. That's one reason why it is such a huge responsibility to be a regular school teacher."¹⁸

Other questions seemed to prompt summative thoughts about her *Romper Room* experience:

"It was all a pretty amazing for me to be a part of *Romper Room*. In those days TV was big, and anyone on TV was from elsewhere, as in cities like New York and L.A. Oh, there were well-known newscasters at KTVO but no local personalities. I was just an ordinary young mother with no television or really any acting experience. I was almost completely "off the streets," so to speak...

I think I rose to the opportunity and gained confidence as I went along. I remember one of the newscasters told me I should lower my voice when I spoke. I'm sure I was nervous, and my nervousness probably made me sound like Minnie Mouse before I consciously pitched my voice lower...

I think my friends were in shock when they found out about my job. (Her friend) Susan said my other friends were jealous. I never thought of myself as anything other than a teacher – I just happened to be teaching on TV.

But then I was asked to make appearances in other towns and be a Parade Marshall for Pancake Day (in the nearby town of Centerville), things like that, and I began to realize how powerful a medium television is. To this day people I don't know see me and say "Miss Joyce!" Of course wearing my hair the same way for 70 years helps to make me recognizable!¹⁹

The children on the show really made the difference of making the show a good one. They were darling and even if they don't do things right they were still cute. Children at home wanted to be on the program; I know you and your brothers and sister would tell me your friends asked questions

about how to get on the show... One time a little boy spilled some of his milk and said "Damn it!" on the air. The television cameraman twirled the camera away quickly. The boy's mother was embarrassed. In the light of what goes on with TV today that certainly was NOTHING. Really if they did something a bit off it made them cuter in my estimation...

My own mother was at home every day watching and she would tell me I needed to wear more lipstick or that my skirt was too short. I also remember one time a girl in the locker room at the YWCA kept staring at me while I was showering...like she was thinking, "Oh my goodness, I'm seeing Miss Joyce naked!"²⁰

If Mother was surprised at her celebrity, her progeny were as well. I recall some of the school children at my own elementary school looking at us in awe, whispers of things like, "their Mom's 'Miss Joyce'" but it is only in retrospect do I realize the effect of the show on we kids as well as mother. Mother admits she was not prepared for the local fame that accompanied her TV job:

"I never thought of myself as a 'star,' whatever that means. But I realized that TV had the power to make me a celebrity. I never have been "fixxy" (always coiffed and expensively dressed) and I didn't mess with makeup, though I did put on my lipstick and comb my hair to be sure. Anyway, sometime after I began the show Bob (my father) and I were at the grocery store shopping. Bob was in another aisle when he saw two old guys looking me over. One of them said 'Isn't that Miss Joyce?' 'Yeah,' the other one said to which the first one replied. 'Boy, they sure do a lot of work on her.' I had to laugh; what else can you do?"

Miss Joyce also recalled meeting by various happenstance people in Ottumwa who remembered her from the show. For example, she remarked, toward the end of our interview,

"I love running into people that want to engage me in their brush with the show. Did I tell you about the guy at the bagel store who pulled up his chair to sit by my friends and I and said, loud enough for me to overhear, 'There was this lady who had a TV show, you know. And she had this mirror. She was supposed to see me in it. Me, simple old Floyd. But every day, I mean every day, I would sit in front of the TV and she would never see me. I had psychological problems because of low self-esteem over being ignored.' My friends and I were laughing; it was really funny.

Finally, I said. ‘Your Mother should have written a letter to tell me about you because *Floyd* is not a name I would’ve thought of on my own!’ Well, he immediately pulled out his cell phone and pretended to call his mother and tell her that all of these years he had blamed the *Romper Room* lady but it was really HER who caused all of his identity problems. My friends and I were laughing so much. But, seriously, it has been incidents like that that made me really understand the impact that TV can have, for good and bad I guess.”²¹

Miss Joyce also told about another instance. Around 40 years after the show went off the air, she struck up a conversation, by chance, with a woman in a local grocery store. This woman remarked that she had become a nurse, but even in these duties she used dramatic methods nearly every day in dealing with her patients, helping to change their mental outlook from negative to positive. She attributed her ability to do this to her imbedded experiences as a child on the show. As they were parting, the woman said, “To this day I still think about the fun I had on *Romper Room* and how I loved being on it so much. I loved school from then on, and I want to sincerely thank you.”

Though brief, such instances underscore the strong elements of social awareness and social skills that the show emphasized to the betterment of the local children. *Romper Room*, both on KTVO and on other affiliates across the country, deserves a decided acknowledgement and appreciation for fostering children better prepared to enjoy formal schooling and succeed in its environs. Miss Joyce, my wonderful mother, should also feel proud in her role as the face of the show and the facilitator of the show’s success in southeastern Iowa and northern Missouri during the 1960s.

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Endnotes

* all images are from author's personal collection

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2. John Pulliam and James Van Patten, *History of Education in America* (New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2003), 26.
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7. William Glasser, *Choice Theory* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 269.
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19. M. Milner, *Reunion Brings Rompers Back to their Old Room* (Ottumwa: The Ottumwa Courier, 2006), 3-4.
20. Joyce Kramer, Interview with the Author (2016).
21. Joyce Kramer, Interview with the Author (2016).

22. Joyce Kramer, Interview with the Author (2016)
23. Joyce Kramer, Interview with the Author (2016).