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## Boston's Bozo reflects on 50 years of clowning around

*By Bob Salsberg, Associated Press writer*

BOSTON -- It was the 1960s. Television was different. Growing up was different. But kids were kids, and Frank Avruch says they all loved a clown.

Each weekday, Mr. Avruch put on his makeup, his big red nose and the rest of his silly-looking costume and became Bozo the Clown. His only job for the next half hour was to make children laugh, have fun and feel good about themselves.

"I meet people today who say, 'You were part of my childhood,'" says Mr. Avruch, who hosted the popular show on Channel 5 in Boston from 1958 to 1970.

Mr. Avruch is still a television personality, still on Channel 5, but these days he's far more likely to wear a tuxedo than a clown suit and more apt to host a Boston Symphony Orchestra concert than a kiddie show. Newcomers to the area might find it difficult to imagine this debonair gentleman was once a clown on TV.

Mr. Avruch was the first Boston Bozo, but not the original Bozo. That title belongs to Larry Harmon, who launched the clown 50 years ago on KTLA-TV in Los Angeles. In a concept unique at the time, Mr. Harmon created a Bozo franchise, allowing local TV stations around the country to produce their own programs with their own clowns.

Of all the various Bozo incarnations over the half-century since, Mr. Avruch's was perhaps the most successful. Not only was it widely watched in the Boston area, it was eventually syndicated on several other markets around the country.

There was a studio audience of 125 children for each show, and a six-month waiting list for tickets, Mr. Avruch says.

"It took on a life of its own. It kept me busy five days a week, and on weekends I was booked at places like shopping centers and fairs."

The road schedule became so hectic at times that Mr. Avruch would not have time to change in and out of his Bozo costume between stops. The sight of the clown riding in the front seat of a car cruising down the highway drew gawks from some surprised motorists, and enthusiastic honks from others.

The "Bozo the Clown" show was a throwback to a different era in television. It aired in a late afternoon time slot, which nowadays is the domain of newscasts or tabloid programs. It aired live, which today is virtually unheard of for a program of that sort.

And in contrast to the heavily-scripted and tightly-formatted programs of the present day, Bozo and his pals entered the studio every day with only the roughest of ideas of what they would be on the agenda. This gave the program a relaxed, ad-libbed feel.

Mr. Avruch had no formal training as a clown and took the job mainly because he was bored with being a studio announcer. He was joined on the show by several sidekicks, including Oz takeoffs Clank the Tin Can Man and Mr. Lion.


The latter, played by Carroll Spinney, delighted children by writing their names on a blackboard and then turning the letters into an animal.

Mr. Spinney would later go on to become the man inside the Big Bird costume on "Sesame Street."

Bozo's popularity has waned over the years, even as the name has become a part of the American lexicon -- and not always in a flattering way. When then-President George Bush called Bill Clinton and Al Gore "bozos" during the 1992 campaign, he did not mean it as a compliment.

The ongoing 50th birthday celebration might spark a renewed interest in the TV clown, who is still seen in a handful of markets around the country. But Mr. Avruch says a serious Bozo revival might not be possible in the '90s, in part because today's children have different tastes.

"Kids now are so much more sophisticated when they grow up," he says.

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