



By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

On Dec. 17, 1989 — 35 years ago Sunday — “The Simpsons” animated series debuted on Fox with a special Christmas episode showing how Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa and Maggie acquired their lovable greyhound, Santa’s Little Helper.

The episode was watched by 13.4 million people — the second highest-rated program aired by the three-year-old Fox network at that point. It would be nominated for two Emmy Awards.

And, of course, “The Simpsons” is still on the air today, 3½ decades later.

THE ORIGIN OF ‘THE SIMPSONS’

James L. Brooks, producer of the comedy/variety “The Tracey Ullman Show” for Fox, decided he’d like 1-minute-long animated segments — called “bumper” — to broadcast as the show went to commercial breaks. He contacted print cartoonist Matt Groening to help develop the shorts.

Groening’s first idea was to base the shorts on his long-running “Life in Hell” comic strip but was stunned when lawyers pointed out he’d be giving up publications rights to his life’s work. Plan B was to develop a series of running gags involving a dysfunctional family.

Two cast members from “The Tracey Ullman Show” were hired to provide voices for the shorts — Dan Castellaneta played the father, Homer, and Julie Kavner voiced his wife, Marge. Nancy Cartwright auditioned to play the daughter, Lisa, but decided

The Simpsons as they appeared on “The Tracey Ullman Show”

playing the troublemaker son, Bart, would be more fun. Yearley Smith voiced Lisa.

Groening expected the animators in South Korea to

refine his drawings, so he created only quick sketches. This is one reason the characters looked the way they did in “The Tracey Ullman Show.”

“The Simpsons” bumpers proved so popular that in the show’s third season, the shorts were expanded into full segments of their own. They didn’t appear at all in the fourth and final season of the show: By that time, Brooks and Groening, at the urging of Fox, had spun “The Simpsons” off into its own half-hour series.

Fox wanted each episode to consist of three 7-minute shorts — at least until the audience adjusted to the idea of a half-hour series. Brooks and Groening talked Fox into greenlighting 13 full-length episodes for the 1989-1990 season.

The series was slated for an October debut. But production issues pushed that back two months.

KICKING OFF A SERIES WITH A ‘SPECIAL’ CHRISTMAS EPISODE

Originally, Groening had planned to launch the show with an episode called “Some Enchanted Evening,” featuring an evil babysitter voiced by Penny Marshall. But problems with the animation delayed production of the episode. It was then decided to use the planned eighth episode of the series, a Christmas-themed story, as the show’s debut.



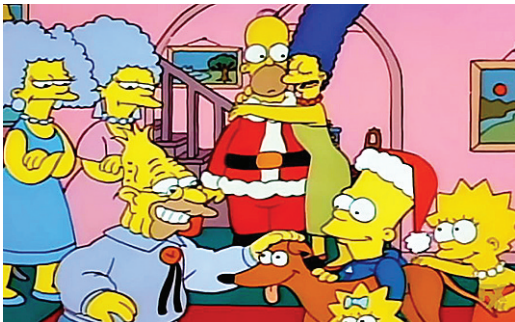
Homer and Marge find themselves broke during the Holidays. Homer quietly gets a job moonlighting as a mall Santa in hopes of earning enough money for Christmas gifts for his family. He earns \$120 but finds that after deductions for training, a Santa suit and beard, unemployment insurance and Social Security, his paycheck is for only \$13.



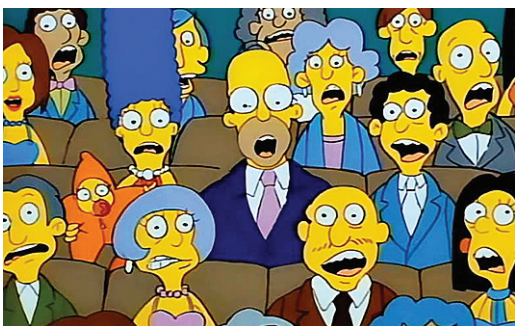
Bart finds out about Homer’s failed efforts and offers the best condolences he can muster: “If TV has taught me anything, it’s that miracles always happen to poor kids at Christmas,” he tells his father. “It happened to Tiny Tim. It happened to Charlie Brown. It happened to the Smurfs. And it’s going to happen to us!” So naturally, they go to the dog track.



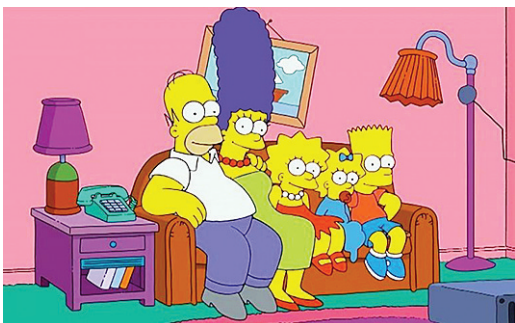
Homer and Bart bet the \$13 on a race dog named “Santa’s Little Helper,” with odds of 99-1. The dog comes in last place and is abandoned by his owner in the race track parking lot. Homer and Bart bring home their “present.” The producers later got credit for raising awareness of abandoned racing dogs. They didn’t even know it was an issue.



The “Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire” episode was written by Groening’s fellow cartoonist Mimi Pond. “It was not a great experience for me,” she said later. “I would rather focus on my comics.” One of the animators who worked on the episode was Eric Stefani — brother of Gwen Stefani and a member of the rock band No Doubt.



That first episode pulled in 13.4 million viewers, making it the second highest-rated show on Fox at the time. It would be nominated for Emmy Awards for Outstanding Editing for a Miniseries or Special — because this episode was considered a “special” — and Outstanding Animated Program. It would lose the latter award to the ninth episode of “The Simpsons.”



The second episode of “The Simpsons”—“Bart the Genius” — was broadcast four weeks later, on Jan. 14, 1990. That episode was the first to use the now-familiar opening sequence - Bart at the chalkboard, the family racing for the couch and so on. Groening created an extended opening to reduce the amount of new animation each episode required.



The six main voice actors — Castellaneta, Kavner, Cartwright, Smith, Hank Azaria and Harry Shearer — made \$30,000 per episode until 1998, when they demanded a raise. Which they received every few years, until Fox, suffering from lower ratings, asked them to take a 30% pay cut. These days, the six reportedly make \$300,000 per episode.

6	\$1,287	48	36	4	2	777	9
Times Lisa asks Santa for a pony at the start of the first episode of “The Simpsons.”	Homer’s winnings had Santa’s Little Helper won the dog race in the first episode.	Short “bumper” films featuring “The Simpsons” that appeared on “The Tracey Ullman Show.”	Primetime Emmy Awards won over 36 seasons by “The Simpsons.”	Emmy Awards for voice acting won by Dan Castellaneta (he’s received eight nominations.)	Peabody Awards “The Simpsons” has won: in 1997 and 2020.	Episodes that will have been broadcast after tonight’s, “Homer and Her Sisters.”	More seasons co-showrunner Al Jean says he expects “The Simpsons” to last.