

'Bicentennialitis' gets great antidote

WHEN JEAN Shepherd laughs he has the devilish sound of the guy clear across the tavern who just heard a good dirty joke.

Come to think of it, Shepherd always talks like he has stage-center at the neighborhood bar. His nightly radio show on New York's WOR is a remarkable one-man bull session that has made him an Eastern Seaboard legend.

Generally speaking, the man has come to be recognized as one of America's truly great satirists, equally proficient at vitriol and affection.

Until 1971 his radio gig, his witty pieces for Playboy, and books like "In God We Trust; All Others Pay Cash" had brought Shepherd fame as a verbal romantic, who, by bathing his humor in a blue-collar motif, had rendered himself acceptable even to nonliterary types.

Then he got into television and, amazingly, his fascinating gift for capturing the flavor and humor of Americana grew even more irresistible.

THE PROGRAM was called Jean Shepherd's America. The PBS public TV network ran it once, twice, then a third time. Now it's coming back again — at 10 p.m. Monday

starting July 14 over WTTW—Ch. 11.

Describing Jean Shepherd's America isn't easy. I still contend that the 13 half-hour programs include some of the finest TV ever created, a combination of

Gary Deeb
TV-Radio critic



rambling monologs and stunning videotape photography.

Shepherd's small crew simply roamed the country with their portable "minicam," shooting beautiful pictures while Shepherd acted as a sort of gabby Middle American tourist.

The results were golden.

One program, based on the American love affair with cars, had Shepherd tooling along in his Fiat, extolling the virtues of the open road, white lines, potholes, trucks, windshield wipers, and steering wheels. Ah, steering wheels.

"There are few more sensual experiences than to have a magnificent steering wheel in your hands," Shepherd rhapsodized. He even called life's journey "the turnpike of existence."

ON ANOTHER delightful show he waxed romantic about railroads. An overworked topic, to be sure; but Shepherd kept it fresh. He even threw in the outlandish tale of his Army buddy, Ernie, who stepped off a troop train somewhere in Louisiana to get himself a beer . . . and was never heard from again.

One night Shepherd spent the entire half-hour fishing in a lovely Maine river and wistfully recalling his youth in Hammond, Ind., when he and his dad went

crappie fishing in a malodorous pond populated mostly by Sinclair oil drums.

He visited the Florida Everglades and shot the breeze with an old hermit named Seaweed Ernie. He brought us into a Milwaukee gin mill to eavesdrop on the beer drinkers. He got stuck in a mountain snowstorm and took refuge in a motel at Little America, Wyo.

Then there was the program that focused in on food. I mean literally.

The show consisted of 20 minutes of tantalizing closeups of the dishes America loves best — everything from broiled hamburger to shrimp creole. Shepherd capped that show with a step-by-step analysis of how to eat a Maine lobster. "It's better than a sexual experience," he declared.

Cracking open the shell of the lobster tail, dipping it gently in melted butter, then chewing and swallowing the tasty prize, Shepherd oozed ecstasy. "I just want you to know there's more to life than Hostess Twinkies," he said.

ANOTHER TIME Jean went to Alaska to escape commercialism and the big-city rat race. As he bade us farewell and marched proudly along the Alaskan shore, he suddenly stopped, bent down, and picked something up.

"Country Club malt liquor," he said, quizzically — and the big dramatic buildup he had brilliantly woven collapsed into comic relief.

But the rollicking Shepherd turns dead serious when he discusses his storytelling art. "I'm a comic, a humorist, y'know? I will see things all around me, and I will get an idea for a story; and I will set it in a mythical childhood," he explains.

"You see, most of the people who listen to me and understand me do not consider my stuff memorabilia. I'm a dramatic monologist, like a fiction writer.

"Part of writing fiction is to draw from your own observations of life, and so I'm like a tribal storyteller. A lot of people aren't used to that, especially on radio or TV. They hear me and they don't know what to make of it."

MORE THAN anything else, Jean Shepherd's America attempts, often successfully, to humorously reflect some of the common, everyday experiences of life in this country.

As such, it's a sparkling antidote to those red-white-and-blue Bicentennial specials the commercial networks keep choking us with.