



CAST MEMBERS OF THE Over At Al's television show were (from left) Thelton "Tex"

Lancaster, Elrich "Bob" Hickman, Fred Hickman, Twiddle Perry Wood, C.O. "Hayseed" Thomas and Allen Compton.

PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

Many Remember Hickman Brothers From First Local Broadcast

BY TERRY POPE

When Wilmington's first television station began broadcasts on April 28, 1954, the first show on the air was "Over At Al's."

Two men from Hickman's Crossroads south of Shallotte remember it well. They were part of the country and western band, the Rhythm Range Riders, which helped make television history in southeastern North Carolina.

"I was scared to death," recalls Fred Hickman. "I had never done anything like that in my life."

The show ended after 18 months of six-days-a-week live broadcasts. Members, who had not been together for 35 years, met recently for a reunion in Wilmington. "Over At Al's" also featured comedy by Leland native C.O. "Hayseed" Thomas and was hosted by Allen Compton.

Elrich Hickman joined his brother, Fred, in the band and adopted a stage name, Bob Hicks. Others in the band were Thelton "Tex" Lancaster, playing keyboard, and vocalist Twiddle Perry.

WMFD television, now WECT TV-6 in Wilmington, offered the first broadcasts in the area with signals that also reached into Brunswick County. People still ask about the show and where the people are today, said Thomas.

There was something about "Over At Al's" that captured the hearts of area viewers. From 6 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. Monday through Saturday, families across the region invited the group into their living rooms via television, somewhat of a new invention for a community that had just received its first station.

"We got more fan mail from that little show," says Fred.

But what made it special? For many viewers, "Over At Al's" was the first show they had ever watched on television. Thousands of television programs and 38 years later, those same viewers still fondly remember the show and the two guitarists dressed in cowboy boots and Western

wear. Elrich has his theory about the show's popularity.

"It was the closeness that we projected," he said. "We were local people. A lot of people said they liked that. You don't see any home folks on television today. Just people that we don't know, or know only from television."

In the 50s, television stations relied on local programming more than national shows. WMFD ran "Over At Al's" live, relying on just one camera at its studio. The Hickman brothers had performed on radio, at square dances, in Thalian Hall in Wilmington and at school proms.

The first show was an hour-long telecast that went beautifully, said Elrich. The first song? He remembers it well, "Happy Roving Cowboys."

"Every act that came to town was on the show," said Elrich. "We had a good time. It was a very pleasant experience."

Famous singers would drop in and the Rhythm Range Riders would serve as their band. Miss America 1954 and the Sunshine Boys were on the show. The Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tenn., extended invitations to the band. But it could never find time to travel.

When the show ended, Fred entered the dry cleaning business. Elrich returned to radio broadcasting before he became a banker.

They formed another band, the Twilighters, which played in nightclubs from Raleigh to Myrtle Beach, S.C., on weekends for 20 years. Once a month for 12 years, they played at a club in St. Pauls.

Twiddle Perry is now Mrs. Wood, having married and moved to California. Thomas still does some broadcast work in Wilmington. Compton left to become a minister and did some missionary work overseas. He is now with the radio and television division of the Southern Baptist Association in Richmond, Va. "Tex" still lives in Wilmington.

"It was just a dream come true for me," said Fred of the reunion. "I had oftentimes wondered if I'd see everybody again. It was so great to see

everybody and to still know them after we've all aged. We'll try to do it again, if time stands."

Performing on live television had its special moments as well, said Elrich. Compton, who served as host, would often pop his head through the artificial window on the set. Elrich remembers the time Compton asked the group to learn a new song before the 6 p.m. show. They had little time to spare.

"We printed up the words on a piece of cardboard and taped it to the camera, like they have with teleprompters today," said Elrich.

Everything was fine until the cameraman started backing away to do a group shot.

"We started mumbling our words," said Elrich. "He kept rolling on back to where we couldn't see our words. We got tickled over that. We had a lot of fun."

It made local celebrities of the group. Out in the community, people would stop the Hickman brothers to say how much they enjoyed the show and to request a favorite song.

"They talked to me just like they knew me," said Fred, "and I didn't know them. We made a lot of friends. People would say, 'I saw you on TV again last night.'"

Even today, people will cut an eye toward Fred and look twice, like they see someone they recognize but are not quite sure. It's especially true with people who watched and remember the old television show.

"They know that they've seen me somewhere," said Fred, "but they can't quite put their finger on it."

Musical talent runs in the family. Elrich's son, Rick, is now lead guitarist for Crossroads, a band named after Hickman's Crossroads that performs in area clubs. Freddy Hickman, Fred's son, plays drums for Crossroads.

It took long hours of work to produce a 30-minute television show, said Fred, but there are no regrets.

"It was truly a great experience," he said.



TODAY, ELRICH "BOB" Hickman, standing, and Fred Hickman have fond memories of that 1954 television show. They live at Hickman's Crossroads south of Shallotte.



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