

TELEVISION IN THE EARLY SIXTIES

By Tommy Hourigan

This article was prompted recently by a trip down memory lane with some of my Grange contemporaries. We recalled long bygone times when we had our earliest experiences of television, back in the early 1960s.

In those days, TV sets were few and far between, and only a very few homes possessed one. Of course, black and white picture was the order of the day. There was a single TV channel initially.

It was during those times, before most households could have a TV set installed through affordable rental arrangements, if a capital outlay was prohibitive, that a number of very kind and generous people conspired to bring television to many of us in Grange, especially children and adolescents, well before most would have the medium at home. This article is as much about acknowledging the generosity and caring of those people, as it is about recalling the thrilling experiences.

Liam Hayes, married to May Clancy, aunt to Angela, Jack and Seoirse Clancy, was a wizard at electronics, a man very up to date with television technology. Liam worked for Reynolds Electronics. He and May lived on the Ennis Road, Limerick, opposite the Gaelic Grounds.

Liam and May frequently visited family in Upper Grange, and at a stage in the early 1960s, Liam started to bring a TV set and all of the associated paraphernalia, including reception aerial, to Grange. It became practice in 1962 for the home of Connie and Nora Brosnan and their family (neighbours of the Clancy family) to host the showing of television programmes, mostly on Saturday and Sunday evenings, though occasionally on Friday evenings as well.

In one respect, the viewing of TV programmes at the Brosnan home had a sad rationale behind it: Georgie Clancy, a young family man, died in a tragic accident at work in 1962, and it was out of kind consideration for Georgie's widow, Mary, and her children, Angela, Jack and Seoirse, that Nora and Connie Brosnan conspired with Liam and May Hayes to make TV available at the Brosnan home, rather than at the Clancy home. As it transpired, that arrangement continued for a considerable time. In those times, it was unusual during a bereavement to even listen to the radio at the home of the bereaved.

Excitement amongst us children reached fever pitch on the day that Liam might be expected from Limerick, and a good number of children and adolescents would gather in the vicinity of the Brosnan home, well before 6 pm. Emotions ran between pure excitement to the dread of disappointment and perhaps fear that there would not be room for everybody. There is no doubt that television had assumed an extraordinary importance for us younger folk, and I suspect for more than one adult as well.

As I recall, a large number of children, maybe as many as twenty, would descend on the Brosnan household from around 6 pm and onwards, taking up prime viewing positions in the living area of their home. There was a long wide bench for seating as well as chairs. Patsy Madden (nee Brosnan) has reminded me that the same wide and strong bench was used by Connie and Nora, from time to time, to hold a pig being slaughtered for the provision of meat for family consumption. It should be said that the bench was always spotlessly clean. The bench seat provided opportunity for some adolescents, experiencing the first innocent stirrings of romance, perhaps imaginary and unreciprocated mostly, to strategically choose where to sit.

When I look back now, I realise the enormous imposition that we children made on the Brosnan family, especially on Nora and Connie. As I recall, Connie would come in from work well after six o'clock, probably tired and hungry, to be faced by a crowd of children who had invaded his home to watch cartoons, westerns and adventure films. We watched hurling and football matches as well on All-Ireland Sundays. During all of this, Nora had to perform the tasks associated with keeping house and family. There were five children.

There is not enough that can be said in praise for and appreciation of the generosity, kindness and tolerance shown by Nora, Connie and their family. I doubt that any child ever failed to gain admittance to a TV viewing, and only the kindest words were ever spoken to visiting children. As I recall, children came from Lower (both roads) and Upper Grange and from as far as Lough Gur. The initiative taken by Liam Hayes and the ultimate neighbourliness of the Brosnan household combined, in my view, to provide a social service at the time of some importance. Through the medium of television, many children were given early access to mind-broadening, learning and questioning, not to mention sheer entertainment.

Some of the TV programmes of the era that come readily to mind, include series such as *Rescue 8*, *The Fugitive*, *The Virginian*, *Rin Tin Tin and Rusty*, *Green Acres*, *The Monkeys*, *Get Smart*, *Bat Masterson*, *School Around the Corner* and *The Flintstones*, not to mention an inexhaustible supply of traditional cartoons as well as western, adventure and other entertaining feature films.

Besides children, a number of local adults became habitual TV viewers at the Brosnan home to see programmes such as the soap opera of the time, *Tolka Row*, and the quiz show, *Quicksilver*, hosted by the ladies' favourite, Bunny Carr. The

names of Mai Ryan and Mary Carey come to mind. A feature of the quiz show was a certain amount of time allocated to contestants to answer as many questions as possible – the time remaining to a contestant was visually indicated by an array of lights, which progressively became dim as time was used up. To protect time remaining, he or she was permitted to shout “*Stop the Lights*” a number of times during a game. “*Stop the Lights*” became a great catchphrase – used widely for many years. There was a Quicksilver joke that circulated amongst us youngsters that went like this: Bunny Carr, in introducing a contestant from Cork, asked him his name, to which the Cork man replied, “*Stop the Lights*”. Depending on who was telling and listening to this yarn, the said contestant was variably depicted as a Cork man or a Kerry man, for the most part.

For those who belong to subsequent generations, and who have a mind to do so, it is possible today to view over the Internet some of the ‘series’ mentioned above or excerpts therefrom. Those belonging to more recent generations may find it interesting or even perhaps comical to consider the *genre* of TV programmes that caused such wild excitement and preoccupation amongst my generation.

Every former child of that 1960s era, most likely, has his/her favourite TV programme recollections. I have two in particular, although, truthfully, all were captivating and thrilling.

The first was *Rescue 8*. According to *Wikipedia*, this was an American action drama series about the Los Angeles County Fire Department Rescue Squad 8. It premiered in 1958 and originally ran for two seasons with syndicated reruns continuing for almost a decade after that. It starred Jim Davis as fireman Wes Cameron, much later cast as Jock Ewing on CBS’s *Dallas*, and Lang Jeffries as the fireman Skip Johnson. Actresses Nancy Rennick and Mary K Cleary appeared in many episodes as the wife and daughter respectively of the character, Skip Johnson. *Rescue 8* produced seventy-four half hour episodes.

This series appealed to the males amongst us in particular, and after an episode we could be found on the following day with ropes and other aids, acting out a plot on rock faces and other such obstacles as we strove to deliver some imaginary and misfortunate persons from perilous situations and dangers. What simple fun we had, even if it might have bordered on the somewhat dangerous from time to time.

The other series was *The Fugitive*, which was a suspense story that appealed to all ages and genders. According to *Wikipedia*, this was an American drama series that aired on ABC from 1963 to 1967. David Janssen starred as Richard Kimble, a physician who was falsely convicted of his wife’s murder and sentenced to receive the death penalty. On route to death row, Kimble’s train was derailed over a switch (on railway tracks), thus allowing him to escape and begin a cross-country search for the real killer, a “one-armed man”. At the same time, Kimble is pursued by the authorities. And so, the story unfolds and develops.

The progressing story of Kimble, pursuing and being pursued, captivated our young minds and provided us with material for conversation, speculative prediction and play-acting. We took Kimble's dilemma much to heart.

In those days, the young Bulfins from Camass visited Lower Grange regularly. When recently discussing early TV programmes with Tom Bulfin (Camass), he mentioned two excellent cowboy series that were great hits with his family, *Have Gun Will Travel* and *Wagon Trail*. As Tom put it "The number of times the wagons lumbered across the plains of Mangan's and Moloney's fields here in Camass with John [his brother] keeping a beady eye out for renegade Sioux and Cheyenne braves....!"

We were captivated by other TV programmes as well. Jack Clancy reminded me recently that many of us saw live GAA senior championship matches for the first time on TV at Brosnan's in 1962. That was the year of the first live broadcast by Teleifis Éireann, now RTÉ. That first broadcast was the All Ireland Football semi-final in which Kerry overcame Dublin and went on to win the honours against Roscommon in the All-Ireland Final. Jerry O'Riordan of Lower Grange was a key member of that Kerry Team, and he played in the 1962 final. Interestingly, the captain of the Roscommon Team, John Oliver Moran, was employed by Roadstone at the time and was based at their Knockderk site (not far from Grange). In the hurling final of the same year, Tipperary defeated Wexford. We were GAA-mad youngsters and the thrill and excitement of being able to watch our idols in live action, albeit in black and white, is almost indescribable.

If by chance, Dear Reader, you share the recollections herein, spare a kind and fond thought for Liam and May Hayes, Nora and Connie Brosnan and all with whom you shared a bench at the Brosnan home, some of whom are deceased; may they all rest in peace. If you are of a much newer generation, take a moment to wonder at how lifestyles change so dramatically over reasonably short time spans and, particularly, how advancing and new technologies change lives utterly.

It is probable that those of us who still live and were entertained at the Brosnan home, all those decades ago, would not elect to forego the comforts and standards of living that we enjoy today for a return to those days. And yet, one might, from time to time, yearn for the relative simplicity of living that we knew then and to sit on the bench at Brosnan's and watch *The Flintstones*, just one more time!

