

## Bio for VCU Hall of Fame

### Herm Reavis



Herm Reavis, Executive Vice-President of Mel Wheeler, Inc., owner of radio stations WSLQ-FM, WXLK-FM, WSLC-FM, WFIR-AM and WVBE-AM/FM in Roanoke, VA, recently commenced his 60<sup>th</sup> year as a Virginia broadcaster...and is still very active.

Herm was born October 14, 1932 in Reavistown, a small village in Grayson County between Galax and Independence, VA. Reavis has been very influential in helping shape and guide Virginia radio and television for almost 60 years. He entered into the broadcasting field more by accident than intent. He began his broadcasting career in October 1947 at the age of 14 at radio station WBOB in Galax. While listening to Bill White's 'Club 300' show one night (the station phone number was 3 0 0) he heard White announce that he needed some "young fella" to assist with his nightly radio request program. The following morning before going to school, Reavis walked more than three miles to the radio station to apply for the job only to find that Mr. White had gone home upon completion of his shift the night before. Later that day he made the walk back to the radio station, met Mr. White and was hired. Reavis' first duties in radio were to answer the 'Club 300' telephone, take requests from callers, select records (78 RPM's then) and ready them for Mr. White.

During high school, he worked part time at the station before and after school, after football or baseball practice, weekends and during the summer etc. Needless to say, his exposure on radio made him a rather popular guy with his schoolmates and around the small town. His responsibilities with the station increased by doing additional duties such as remote broadcasts of 'Man on the Street', Fourth of July and Christmas street parades, engineer for Sunday School and Church services three times each Sunday, play-by-play broadcasts of the Galax High School Maroon Tide football games and automobile racing long before the days of NASCAR. He served as emcee at the world famous Galax Fiddlers' Convention and the Saturday Night Jamboree while still a teenager. Yet, he says, the idea of making a radio career never really occurred to him.

In 1953, a relative who was a radio and TV engineer in Roanoke, told Reavis about the newly formed WRIS radio; he applied, was hired and signed that new station on the air in February 1953. He soon became a popular icon known as "**Uncle Herm**" with his "**Squirm With Herm**" *boogie and blues* radio show giving way to the new bobby sox and drive-in generation which was witnessing the new Rock 'n' Roll revolution. This new generation came to idolize its radio heroes and Reavis was **THE** radio personality in Roanoke radio. In the days of *block programming*, he had a R& B and a country show as well as announcing daily "swap shop" programs and obituary columns on the air, reading funeral announcements from the daily newspaper (very unlikely forms in today's tightly formatted radio).

Reavis was a "real gone hip shaker" and a "jive maker" and his fans were told that being "crazy, cool and copasetic" permitted them to "shake, rattle and roll, blow flatted fifths" and to be "hep with pep" at all times. They then became members of the "Squirm with Herm" club. Other Roanoke area radio stations later picked up this trend and modern radio was here to stay.



Some of the early experiences associated with Reavis' radio activities included traveling with Jimmy Dean and his band to Nashville for Dean's first recording sessions with Mercury Records. During that time Dean's fiddle player, Buck Ryan, wanted to record an untitled song. He titled it "Uncle Herm's Horn Pipe." Herm introduced to local radio audiences a well-known singer Wayne Newton and his brother Jerry, who as youngsters lived in Roanoke. They were regular visitors for a while to Reavis' early morning broadcasts on WRIS. During that same mid ' 50s period, he introduced a then-unknown young man known as Elvis Presley before Presley's rise to fame and his celebrated appearance on the national Ed Sullivan Show. Presley was one of seven artists on the RCA Victor show card playing in Roanoke at that time and was so unknown that he was listed Number 7 on the line up of artists.

Herm gave up his personality status in 1956 to become general sales manager of WSLS AM/FM radio, part of Shenandoah Life Insurance Company's AM/FM television operation, which was later to become part of Roy H. Park Broadcasting. In 1972 Reavis was named general manager of the newly formed WSLC-AM and WSLO-FM when WSLS radio was sold to Mel Wheeler, Inc., the current owner of the two Roanoke stations plus others that have been added in recent years. Reavis led WSLC-AM at a time when block radio was the norm, into a more contemporary format, which included targeted Country Music, NASCAR Motor Racing and Virginia Tech Sports, news and information. WSLC-AM soon became the ratings leader in Roanoke radio, a position it held regularly until 1980 when FM radio signals became more numerous and listener acceptable. WSLO-FM at 200,000 watts is still one of the most powerful FM radio stations in the United States.

In addition to being a radio programming pioneer, Reavis also helped shape Virginia radio by being a mentor to many young people who have moved on and up in our communications field. Under his leadership, WSLC-AM boasted one of America's most prominent DJ's, King Edward Smith IV, who was widely recognized and honored by the nation's Country Music industry and was inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame. Smith died in 1981.

Many of radio's best programmers and management executives have either worked with or for Reavis over almost 60 years. He is widely respected for his conservative approach to keeping radio wholesome with family values and community and civic involvement. Mel Wheeler Inc. stations have received many civic, community and governmental awards for their excellence in support of nearly every worthwhile cause.

Additional to his Roanoke management duties, Reavis participated in management of Mel Wheeler Inc. stations in other states and in ownership of radio stations with Mel Wheeler and others in Louisiana and Nebraska.

Herm and his wife, Sue, live in Salem, VA. They are proud to claim seven children, 11 grandchildren and one great grandchild. Throughout his lifetime, Reavis has been active in community service.

"I've been a mayor, a governor and president several times", he says, referring to various civic and community positions he has held. Among those positions are:

- Mayor of Galax during Boy Scout Week in the 1940's
- Governor of Roanoke Moose Lodge in the late 1950's
- President Optimist Club Downtown Roanoke in the 1960's (Named one of 13 Distinguished Presidents in the U.S. during his presidency.)
- President of the Roanoke Bowling Association in the late 1950's
- Named to "Roanoke Bowling Association Hall of Fame"
- Received several awards and honors for his contributions toward establishing Junior Bowling Association; hosted a 26 week live junior bowling television program Saturdays mornings from local bowling lanes
- Received *awards for leadership* in Loyal Order of Moose community affairs
- Senior Patrol Leader to a national Boy Scout Jamboree; Boy Scout summer camp counselor and assistant scoutmaster.
- Honored for *dedicated service* to the Junior Achievement program
- Cited by area judges, law enforcement officials and community leaders for originating and promoting programs and campaigns in support of anti-substance abuse; and the D.A.R.E. program. Recognized by Virginia Association of Broadcasters for substance abuse programs
- "Lion of the Year" of the Williamson Road Lions Club with 10 years perfect attendance.
- First ever "Associate Member of the Year" of the Roanoke Regional Home Builders Association
- "Associate of the Year" of the Roanoke Valley Board of Realtors
- Member Virginia Association of Broadcasters. Served on the Board of Directors for eight years.
- Received the "C. T. Lucy Distinguished Service Award" in 2000. This award is named after the founder of the Virginia Association of Broadcasters and recognizes the member's career in broadcasting and service to the industry and the association.
- Served on Board of Directors for: Better Business Bureau, Roanoke Valley Sports Club, March of Dimes, Salem Rotary Club, American Cancer Society, the United Way and the American Red Cross.
- Named American Cancer Society "Volunteer of the Year" in recognition of leadership in recruiting drivers for the "ACS Road to Recovery" program.
- Recipient of '*Excalibur Award*' of the American Cancer Society 6 consecutive years for his station's support in the fight against cancer.
- Named "Citizen of the Year" by the Salem-Roanoke County Chamber of Commerce.
- Paul Harris fellow of Rotary International. Recently completed 15 years perfect attendance in the Salem Rotary Club.
- City of Salem Police Department Citizens Academy graduate 2003
- City of Roanoke Police Department Citizens Academy graduate 2006
- Honored for "*outstanding and dedicated service*" to Fraternal Order of Police.
- Named NASCAR Motor Racing affiliate manager of the year.
- Member of Virginia Tech Hokie Club.
- Performs monthly volunteer work at the Salem Food Pantry and Salem Clothes Closet.
- Member of the "Team Virginia" military support group.
- Affectionately referred to as Roanoke Radio Reavis... "*Mr. R.*" "*Your Favorite Radio Man*"

*"I am very proud to have been in a position to afford young people an opportunity to become involved in broadcasting, remembering the opportunity that was given to me as a youngster. Many of my hires were mistakes ...bad judgment on my part...but those who advanced and became successful for themselves and the broadcast industry have made it all worthwhile." Herm Reavis*