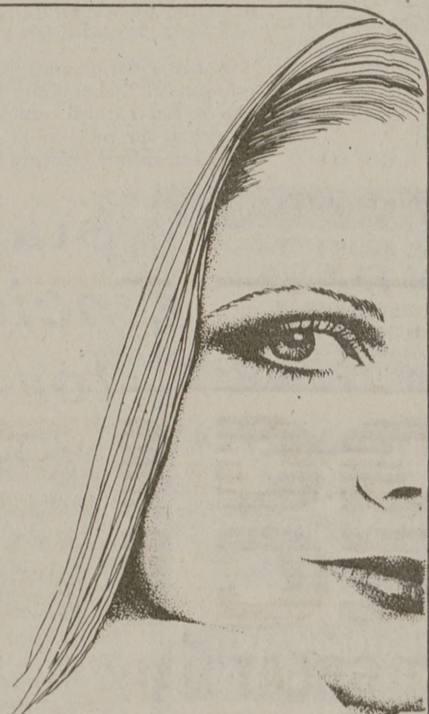


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Reunions common in Turkey, Texas

Wills' band members stick together

United Press International. **TURKEY** — Al Stricklin's first encounter with Bob Wills came 50 years ago at a Fort Worth radio station and Stricklin wasn't sure what to make of the animated young fiddler and his unusual brand of music.

Stricklin was working at KFJZ and Wills came to audition for a show.

"None of us had ever heard the kind of music they did — off-brand, rebellious music," Stricklin said recently. "We put him on and with all his antics and 'ah-haaing' we thought it was funny. But we put him on, gave him his own show, and the mail just poured in. They loved it."

Stricklin, like a good portion of the United States, came to love Wills' style — the eclectic, improvisational combination of black blues, Dixieland jazz and country that became known as western swing. In 1935 Stricklin became "the ol' piano-pounder" in Wills' band — by then known as the Texas Playboys — and helped put

out the tunes that would make a bit of music history.

"I feel that I was a privileged character to spend the years I did with Bob Wills," Stricklin said. "It was something special. You couldn't build a fence around our music. It was uninhibited."

Stricklin, who has retired to Cleburne, was one of about 30 former Texas Playboys who gathered in Turkey, Wills' hometown, April 25, for the 10th annual Bob Wills Day celebration. It was the largest congregation of Playboys since Wills' death in 1975.

There had been another Play-boy reunion the night before at

Billy Bob's Texas in Fort Worth, featuring old-time Playboys Stricklin, Leon McAuliffe, drummer Smokey Dacus and guitarist Eldon Shamblin.

"We get together to play like this about a dozen times a year and I wouldn't miss it for the world," Leon Rausch, a Playboys vocalist in the late 1950s and 1960s who still has his own band, said backstage at Billy Bob's. "It keeps me young. I really look forward to em."

Three generations of country music fans also look forward to the Playboys' reunions. About 5,000 people — teen-agers as well as craggy old-timers — pushed into the West Texas town of Turkey (pop. 600) for the Wills festival and a healthy crowd at the spacious Billy Bob's showed up to see the Playboys share a bill with The Drifting Cowboys, Hank Williams' old band.

"Between us and Hank's old band there's quite a bit of history out there," Rausch said.

In 1929 Wills gave up his barbering job in Turkey, grabbed his fiddle and headed for Fort Worth. Two years later he began to make it big as leader of the Light Crust Doughboys, advertising Light Crust Flour from Burrus Mill and Elevator Co. That ended when Wills had a falling out with the mill's general manager, W. Lee "Pappy" O'Daniel, who went on to be governor and U.S. senator.

After a stint in Waco, Wills and his musicians landed in Tulsa, Okla., and took the name "Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys" in 1934. He began putting together the band that would be his personal favorite and the most musically successful.

"In some of the bands after Tul-

sa, he had some of the best musicians technically, but the Tulsa group worked together best," said Dr. Charles Townsend, author of "San Antonio Rose: The Life and Music of Bob Wills."

Wills wanted his music to be a family affair for his audience and his band. With Wills in the lead, the band members formed a brotherhood that endures today. Ferguson, who now lives in Fort Worth and works at keeping his golf game in the 70s, and Stricklin recalled the family atmosphere among the Playboys on their flight from Fort Worth to Turkey for the Wills celebration.

One reason for the popularity was the down-home friendliness Wills and the Playboys cultivated as they toured.

"Bob had the same attitude about people as Abraham Lincoln," Stricklin said. "He said God must have loved the common people because he made so many of them. To him, it didn't matter if you had 5 cents or 5 million. He treated everybody the same."

"He had a rule," Ferguson said, "that we were not to leave a club without talking to someone in the audience. He wanted us to try to make friends. The old man was pretty sharp on things like that."

Wills kept his act on the road through three decades, six marriages, another generation of Playboys, binge drinking and failing health. In 1963 he suffered his second heart attack and the Playboys eventually were disbanded. Still there was a need to perform and he went on tour with Lambert, playing with house bands.

"At first we went out and everything was fine but I think about a year after I was with him he suf-

fered a slight stroke that affected his play and equilibrium," Lambert said. "He just wasn't the same. Toward the end on that last tour I did with him I had to steady him and whisper the words to him to 'My Mary,' which he had been singing since he was a child."

His last fling would come 3-4, 1973, when a host of Playboys got together in a Dallas studio to record a reunion album. Among the hand were Stricklin, Dacus, McAuliffe, Rausch, Shambly, my Alsop, Hoyle Nix, and guest Haggard and Wills were restricted to a wheelchair.

On the first day they recorded 10 songs with Wills adding "haas" and commentary in a squeaky voice. That night he suffered a stroke and never spoke from the coma.

"That next day, when we made it, we all sat around his heads down, wiping at his eyes," Stricklin said. "Finally he said, 'Look here guys, Betty called and said she wishes to finish this session like Bob would do it.'"

"We thought that at any time we'd get the call that he was gone. But we played better on that than we did on the third day. His body was so emotional, it inspired."

The same sense of "playboy way Bob wanted" exists today. When McAuliffe, who now works KAMO radio station in Tulsa, Ark., and Dacus, who now works the station for 19 years, together with Rausch, Shambly, Gene Gassaway, who now works outside Huntington, Ark., and rest, the performance is still lively and still appreciated.

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Woman thwarts car theft

United Press International. **HOUSTON** — A woman on her way to join her fiancée for pizza noticed a man crouched inside her boyfriend's Ford Bronco, jumped into the car and with help from a friend foiled the thief's escape.

"I'm glad I did it," Glenda Brownson said of the incident Monday in which she and Kathy Harrison wrestled a man trying to drive away with the Bronco. They noticed a man crouched

in the car as they walked through a restaurant's parking lot. They began banging on the car's windows and then climbed in.

Discovering the man was holding a screwdriver, the pair decided to stay together instead of go for their boyfriends.

The women said the man started the Bronco as they climbed in, then began driving wildly around the parking lot. One woman held the driver

around the neck and the other went for the car's brake.

"I'm trying to put the car in park," Brownson said. "I was yelling, 'Where's the key?' and she realized he had hot-wired the car."

"I had him around the neck and I was trying to choke him. He looked up, and he's trying to get down about 10 people in the parking lot," she said.

After the women got the car stopped, two men pulled the driver from the car and held him until police arrived. Suspect James Diamond, 20, was charged with auto theft.

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