

The secret life of Gabby Horman: Former catcher had successful Nashville music career  
by BRIAN P. HEILMAN

Members of the 1950s Winona Chiefs baseball club were, by all accounts, treated like movie stars during pro baseball's peak years of popularity in Winona.

Fans flocked to games by the thousands. Images of the players floated around town on posters, trading cards and newspaper pages. Chiefs manager Hugh Orphan allegedly claimed that the hardest part of his job was keeping his popular, young, single players focused on baseball instead of their adoring fan base (mostly young women).

When the era of movie stardom for ball players departed Winona, the Chiefs returned to lives of quiet obscurity and family values.

All but one, that is.

Gabby Horman was perhaps the most popular Chiefs player of the 1950s, with the young ladies of Winona especially. In addition to starting as catcher for the local club, Horman was an aspiring rockabilly musician.

Often, Horman would take the mound after Chiefs victories for impromptu concerts. Whether to listen to his crooning of the self-written tune "Moon Over Sugar Loaf," or simply to admire his good looks, young ladies flocked to the field for these post-game performances.

Legend has it that Horman, in true Conrad Birdie fashion, lifted the heart rate of every woman in Winona whenever he passed them on the street. Some ladies, eager for a personal slice of Horman's hunk-pie, called him out of the blue.

This was fine and dandy for Horman and his followers, but the poor Winona family whose phone number was just a digit away from Horman's didn't appreciate the phenomenon.

Once, when the mother of this family told a mistaken caller that Horman didn't live in her home, the caller angrily replied, "Oh! You just want to keep him all for yourself!" then hung up, stricken with heartache.

Horman's reign of fame in Winona was short-lived. When the Chiefs' popularity waned, Horman and many other players skipped town to find bigger fields, paychecks, or, in Horman's case, stages.

This is the point where Winona's collective memory has forgotten the so-called "Crooning Catcher." Yet Horman's legend did not die when he left Winona.

Only his name did.

Horman, hoping to break into the rockabilly scene, took on the pseudonym Webb Foley (combining the names of famous country musicians Webb Pierce and Red Foley).

As Webb Foley, Winona's beloved crooner put together an entirely respectable music career, recording with such artists as The Jordanaires (Elvis Presley's frequent collaborators) and touring side-by-side with Rockabilly Hall of Fame inductee Dennis Puckett.

At the time, Foley's touring life wasn't quite as glamorous as his streak of fame in Winona.

"I know that Gabby wasn't paid much," said Puckett. "he pulled a trailer behind his Buick convertible. If we wanted to sleep, we'd go back there and put a canvas top over the instruments and have a sleep."

But nowadays, Foley's career has gathered a sense of mystique among record collectors. Rare Webb Foley 45s sell on eBay for hundreds of dollars. A compact disc collection of his recordings with the Jordanares is available right now on eBay: for the low, low price of \$199.95.

Horman's songs, including "Little Bitty Momma," "Makin Plans," "The Last Thing On My Mind," and many others, represent an important moment in the formative years of rock-and-roll music.

Foley was outdone by Elvis Presley, who shared his interest in rockifying country tunes, but nonetheless maintains a high reputation among record collectors.

"Webb Foley was an obscure and honestly underrated 50s rock-and-roll performer whose music ranges from Elvis Presley-style rockabilly to Johnny Cash-style country," said one website offering Foley's 45s for sale. "After playing with people like Dennis Puckett, the Stinson Brothers, Floyd Cramer and Boots Randolph, Webb Foley unfortunately faded into anonymity."

In honor of the lovelorn young lady who was denied her chance to talk to the studly Gabby Horman on the telephone, I checked to see if the supposedly anonymous Webb Foley was in the phone book.

He is.

In Nashville, Tennessee.

Where else, really, would a 79-year-old rockabilly star choose to retire?

But alas, some things never change. I called the Foley home in Nashville, only to have Mrs. Ruth Foley, Webb's wife, inform me that she didn't know where her husband was. Or when he'd be back.

And thus, I was denied my slice of retired rockabilly hunk pie. In my mind, Gabby Horman a.k.a. Webb Foley is on the road again, playing "Moon Over Sugar Loaf" for whomever will listen, sleeping on top of his instruments, recalling his glory days as Winona's crooning catcher, and feeling young.

"He loved his time in Winona, he talked about it all the time," the timid Mrs. Foley told me.

Finally, Winona can return that favor to this long-lost, name-changed, heartbreak kid.