

Putting truck drivers in an honest, affectionate light: TV's 'Movin' On' still popular for myriad reasons

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There's a reason the 1974-76 TV series "Movin' On" about the lives of two independent truckers has stood the test of time and is available on demand (on Hulu for example) and revered in the U.S. and around the globe.

There's a reason why it's still popular today with truck drivers, their children and grandchildren. Why? Let's see, there were truck races, two moral, upstanding guys who were always ready to help somebody in need, lots of action and fist-fights, multiple shots of the green Kenworth they drove and did we mention truck races?

There were also guest appearances by a plethora of stars — some who were famous at the time you may not have heard of and some you know now who were making their first forays into acting. Samuel L. Jackson played a cop. A cop? Frank Gorshen, MacKenzie Phillips, Tina Louise ("Gilligan's Island"), pro footballer Roosevelt "Rosey" Grier, John Ritter ("Three's Company") and many other TV shows and films) also were on the show in addition to many others.

But the major reason for the continued popularity is that the TV series, unlike most mainstream media today, portrayed the two truckers and the job of trucking in an honest and affectionate light.

It was on location in New York City shooting the 1973 film "The Seven-Ups" with producer/director Philip D'Antoni ("Bullitt" and

"The French Connection") that producer Barry J. Weitz got the idea for a show that would end up as the NBC TV series starring two truckers he called "In Tandem."

"I was at the Bronx terminal market and I saw these owner-operators coming in delivering" their produce, he told *The Trucker* recently.

"I had done a lot of research. I had met a lot of them; I went to a lot of truck stops around Los Angeles and spent a lot of time in the South booking music acts and I hung out at truck stops because I liked the food better. I got to know these guys."

He wrote up the characters of Sonny (Claude Akins), a career owner-operator with a slightly crusty exterior but a heart of gold and Will (Frank Converse), a college kid who's new to trucking but is seeing it through Sonny's eyes and coming to love it.

When Weitz presented the idea to NBC they loved it, although the head of NBC didn't think TV audiences would understand the reference to tandem axles in the title and changed the name to "Movin' On." It would become a kind of working man's "Route 66."

Weitz then contacted country music legend Merle Haggard to see if he would write a song for the show. "I had known the music of Merle Haggard and the Bakersfield (California) sound. I thought he would be great to do the theme song. ... I called him up ... we went bass fishing and he said 'I'd love to.' He came

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All "Movin' On" images courtesy of and ©2015 D&R LLC /Squawtyna Films LLC

All photos are never-before-published stills from the NBC TV series "Movin' On," which ran 1974-1976.

Film and TV stars Claude Akins (left) and Frank Converse who played Sonny and Will respectively on the 1974-76 "Movin' On" TV series about two independent truckers pose in front of the show's iconic green Kenworth.

Truckers Final Mile charity providing respect and dignity for N.A. truck drivers



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Around the Bend

We know truckers put their backs, their hearts and their souls into their job, but there also are those who put their blood, sweat and tears into helping other truckers.

One of those is Robert Palm of Castle Rock, Colorado, who in 2013 founded Truckers Final Mile, a charity with the mission of assisting grieving families in bringing home the body of a driver who has been killed while on the road, helping families reach a driver who has been injured while on the road arrange transportation home, help unite family with a trucker who has had

a heart attack or some other medical emergency on the road, or help a driver return home to deal with a family emergency.

More than 800 drivers a year die on the road, according to figures from the Federal Highway Administration, Palm said, and more than 20,000 annually are injured badly enough to be transported from the scene in an ambulance.

Driver injuries and deaths are not only from collisions, Palm, a 30-year career driver, said. It can be from heart attacks, murders where drivers are shot and killed in their cabs in unsafe parking lots and more. "We had five or six this year who passed away in their truck; it was a huge summer for that," Palm told *The Trucker*. "The [government] stats aren't counted for that. We lose 2,000 to 3,000 a year on the road. You don't hear about the poor guy who passed away after making a delivery and was found two days later."

One driver passed away while parked at the receiver's lot in Idaho Falls, Idaho. "He had his dog with him and we got the dog to his sister's home [via a trucker] ... and a trucker took the driver's remains home.

"It's a silent thing that goes on out here with Canadian, Mexican and American drivers. We move the [countries'] economies. We're out here every day. Some companies bend over backwards to help a driver in any situation" while others, not so much.

Palm speaks from experience. The 57-year-old started driving trucks in the Army and continued after he got out. He not only was in a serious crash in 1997, in 2010 he had a ruptured appendix while on the road and had to be hospitalized.

As word about the organization gets out via social media, the demand becomes greater.

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Courtesy: ROBERT PALM

ROBERT PALM



Claude Akins as Sonny (left) and Frank Converse as Will (driving) share a laugh in a scene from the "Movin' On" '70s TV series.

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in and recorded [his hit song "Movin' On"]. He understood what we were trying to accomplish with a trucker's series."

The show's pilot began with Will sliding out of control because of poorly maintained brakes. After he finally manages to pull to a safe stop he makes it to a nearby truck stop and calls his company and quits over the incident.

But then he meets Sonny, who talks Will into driving team with him.

"There's an honesty about it," Weitz said of the trucking profession, and "a dignity about how we treated the truckers with respect to the characters in the show. ... It's a very, very, very hard job. I wanted young people to know this is a great occupation [but] you have to know that trucking is extraordinarily hard work and also very dangerous. We wanted people to understand this and not take them lightly. This is heavy-duty stuff."

"If you're owner-operators you've got to work; you've got to keep the truck going. They understand the ups and downs of hard labor. You have to keep some jobs that don't put a smile on your face and I think we achieved" that look into the reality of the trucking lifestyle.

The show also had good writers, Weitz said, and the shows always had three levels, what Sonny and Will were delivering and the trucking business part of the job, the people they met along the way and the growing friendship between Sonny and Will. There was also the aspect that the two truckers would "do the right thing when nobody's looking ... that cowboy [hero] mentality."

Weitz knew the series should be shot around the country to keep it authentic. "Truck drivers were like the new cowboy if you will. I was intrigued with the owner-operator concept," he said. "That's why we moved it from place to place."

But moving the actors and crew around was harder than he realized. Looking back, he said, "It was like moving a circus. That's really what

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The nonprofit does so much for a driver's loved ones but they want to do more in the future if donations allow.

Beginning in January they hope to provide pro-bono counseling in the event of driver suicide or in cases of a multi fatality and in 2017 to start providing counseling for a driver and any family member.

This year, the organization launched its "Sleigh Bells and Santa" campaign to bring Christmas to the children of truckers who have lost their lives in the course of their employment or self employment. Additionally, they will grant a wish of a CDL holder that has a terminally ill child.

They partner with Missing Truck Driver Alert Network (missingtruckdriver.com) when necessary.

A Truckers Final Mile volunteer team works to provide the services 24 hours a day and it's funded by donations from corporate sponsors and individuals.

Financially, "it's been very tight," Palm said.

"I'm out six weeks at a time, traveling within 48 states, so I know what it's like to have that worry," he continued. As a lease operator, he started the organization from his 2012 Freightliner. "I drive a truck for my real job; it's hard to keep in communication with these companies to donate."

"We've been knocking on doors, mailing letters, anything we can do to bring attention to the program."

If you donate before year's end, you can take it off your income tax. To donate, go to truckersfinalmile.org and click on the donate button.

To donate to the Sleigh Bells and Santa nonprofit, visit gofundme.com/sleighbells.

If you have questions, partnership requests or want to volunteer, call Palm at (505) 288-2282.



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In addition to filming the "Movin' On" series all over the country at various locales, camera-men had to get creative about how to get close-ups of stars Claude Akins (left) who played Sonny, and Frank Converse, who played his sidekick Will, in the truck.

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it was like. ... There was an enormous amount of planning."

They worked their way down the West Coast shooting at various locations and then worked their way down the East Coast. Had the show continued they probably would have worked their way to the South, he said.

"I wish it would have continued longer," he said. "It was cancelled too soon. It was a matter of ratings. It's always ratings. We had huge ratings compared to today."

D'Antoni/Weitz Television Productions, their small independent company, owned the show, making it easier to cancel than a show owned by a huge conglomerate. "It's not like cancelling a Universal show," he said.

Weitz said although today truck drivers and trucking seem to have fallen out of favor with the public, he still holds them in high esteem, "probably more-so" today than then.



Truck racing was a big draw for viewers in the TV series "Movin' On" starring Claude Akins and Frank Converse as a team of owner-operators.

"The country needs the show more now" that it did then, he said, "because something has slipped" in the country's psyche. Americans don't understand the significance of the honest working man, "of what it means to be American. We have lost our way in some respect."

Would they consider bringing the show back? Well, let's just say they're working on it.



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