



LIXQ

Remember this call signal?

"ZLIXQ" looks like a meaningless jumble of letters. But for a few thousand Aucklanders it is a fond memory—the now-silenced call sign of New Zealand's pioneer television station.

The story of that station is also the story of a hustling, 49-year-old businessman, Mr Al Bell (pictured), a Belfast-born Northern Irishman who decided more than five years ago that the arrival of television in New Zealand was too long delayed.

And he did something about it.

He makes no secret of his motives: As a radio manufacturer, he wanted to manufacture and sell television sets. he also hoped to run a commercial Tv. station.

Mr Bell, who still speaks with a Belfast accent though he left Northern Ireland more than 30 years ago, recalls: "Something had to be done to stimulate public interest in television, to make people ask, 'Why haven't we got television?'"

"Public demonstrations of television were not enough. People had to be able to see it in their own homes. There was only one thing to do, and that was to start an experimental station."

It was no simple task. Much of the complicated equipment

that Tv. transmission requires had to be fashioned from makeshift materials.

New Zealand radiomen who had been studying television from books, and some English migrants who had had practical experience in television, succeeded in building a transmitter and a camera.

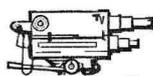
Mr Bell applied for, and received, a special licence to operate an experimental station. The top floor of his radio factory in Dominion Road was converted into a studio.

Hundreds of pounds in equipment and time were being poured into the project. It was on a Sunday evening in May, 1957, that the first test transmission took place.

The event attracted little attention. There was only a handful of sets — some made by the Bell organization with imported tubes, and some which had been brought to the country by immigrants.

For a select few there was fascination in those early transmissions, of test patterns at first, then of films and "live" presentations.

Word about the station grew. Mr Bell built up his camera strength from one to three and continued producing sets. Many Auckland entertainers—among them Pat McMinn, Johnny Devlin, and Noel McKay — leapt at the chance of working in front of live television cameras.



By the time the then Minister of Internal Affairs, Mr Anderton, appeared on Bell television in October, 1958, to speak about a visit to the Antarctic, there were about 250 sets within range of the station's weak, 200-watt signal.

Mr Bell was putting a rather wide interpretation on the terms of his experimental licence, which specifically barred "entertainment."

Any transmission, Mr Bell used to say with his tongue slightly in his cheek, was educational in the sense that it was providing training for staff and was wholly experimental.

Post Office men, responsible for seeing that the terms of the licence were carried out, did not always see that point of view.

The station was told to use only its own staff for live presentations.

The live shows went on. Factory foreman Frank Baker became the compere of a panel

programme. The panel members — Barbara Quinn, Bridget Hooton, John Myers and Norm Enchmarsh — were all staff members.

The company secretary, George Whiterod, appeared with readings from the Bible.

Mr Bell himself went before the cameras a talk about a visit to Japan.

Films from airlines, oil companies and similar concerns made up the bulk of the programmes. At its peak, the station was operating on three nights a week — Sundays, Mondays and Thursdays — up to a maximum of four hours a night.

For the man who was then chief engineer, Charlie Rowse, and for the chief cameraman, Cliff Maxwell, there were plenty of technical problems, not the least of which was the need to change from the English 405-line system to the 625-line system in mid-stream.

The weak signal, the maximum allowed under the experimental licence, put many thousands of Aucklanders out of range of Bell programmes.

No-one will ever be able to measure precisely how much effect, if any, Bell transmissions had in accelerating the development of television in New Zealand.

But Mr Bell is sure to say that his activities were at least partly responsible for Broadcasting Service beginning test transmissions from the 1YA building, Shortland Street, on February 23, 1959.

Ironically, although this was an event Mr Bell had intended to stimulate, it created the problems for him.

Because of the greater power of the Broadcasting Service transmitter, the picture quality of Bell transmissions suffered by comparison. There was a danger, he felt, that comparisons could damage his manufacturing business.

But Bell transmissions carried on into 1960, always evenings when the Broadcasting Service's Channel 2 was "off the air."

The first hint that ZLIXQ was nearing the end of its era came in mid-1960, when Bell suddenly withdrew the panel programme.

The end finally came on September 1, 1960. The prime reason was Mr Bell's nagging fear that comparisons of the station's signal with that Channel 2 could damage the name of his firm.

That night's transmission from ZLIXQ was the last.