



Karim Shamsi-Basha/Post-Herald

FX network photographer Dante Pagano films square dancers at the Sheraton Civic Center Hotel in Birmingham.

City greets U.S.

Dancers hop on cable show

By Mitchell Diggs
Post-Herald Reporter

The Town and Country Cloggers and the Honey Bear Cloggers hit the dance floor early yesterday — before sunrise, in fact — with millions of sleepy people watching.

The three dozen or so square dancers, all dressed in matching red-and-white outfits, took their places just after 6 a.m. in a meeting room at the Sheraton Civic Center Hotel. Then, with Steve Kopman's "Goody Goody" blaring from a portable record player and everybody whooping and clapping, caller Mel Estes coaxed the group through its steps.

A couple of minutes into the number, a petite, dark-haired woman bounded through the sweating crowd, followed closely by a television cameraman. Skipping to the front of the room, she shouted words of welcome into a wireless mike. Then the lights dimmed, the music stopped and everybody broke into applause.

And just like that, Birmingham had bid the rest of the nation good morning.

The city is being featured this week on "Breakfast Time," the live morning show on the FX cable network. Today's show will include live reports from the Southern Living Test Kitchens, and field hostess Suzanne Whang will visit the Birmingham Zoo tomorrow morning.

The FX network, which is available on Birmingham Cable, Bessemer Cable and TCI Cablevision, went on the air June 1 with a mixture of new programming and classic TV reruns. "Breakfast Time," which airs from 6:30 to 8, is one of the fledgling network's anchor shows, publicist Maureen Nolan said.

"The best thing is that we don't try to pretend it's not live TV. There's times when we have fans



Field host Suzanne Whang laughs as square dancer Jerry Deener jokes with her about the square dancer's pledge.

just drop by, and we invite them in to have breakfast on the air with (hosts) Tom (Bergeron) and Laurie (Hibberd)."

Every day, the show includes spots from three "remotes": one in a park outside the Manhattan apartment from which the show originates and two more in various cities. Earlier this week, the show visited a shiitake mushroom farm near Equality in rural Coosa County and the St. Bernard Monastery in Cullman.

A typical show features music, news, celebrity chatter and interaction with the field hosts.

"This kind of television has never been done before," said remote producer Danny Tepper, who arrived in Birmingham last week to scout locations for the show.

The unpredictability of live television gives the show an edgy energy, Ms. Nolan said.

"Even at that time of the morning in New York, you can have hot dog-eating contests or whatever and, because it's New York, people

will do anything to get on TV," she said. "But in the South, we've found that's not always so.

"We were in Charlotte, N.C., and we went into a diner to do a piece on Southern cooking. We went in on a Monday to scout the place and it was packed, but they said, 'Oh, this is nothing. Tuesday is our really big day.' So we went back the next day and had the big satellite truck out front, and people would come up and see the camera inside, and they were outta there. I thought the waitresses were going to kill us because the place was dead."

Fortunately, none of the square dancers seemed camera-shy.

"This is amazing," Tepper said during a commercial break.

This is the first road trip for Ms. Whang, a former actress with a master's degree in psychology from Brown University who joined the network just last week. After only a few hours in Birmingham, she had become a fan of the city, she said.

By the end of yesterday's show, her new friends had her out on the



Field producer Danny Tepper, right, gives instructions to photographer Dante Pagano during the show.

Want to sample goodies?

If you've ever drooled over the goodies pictured in Southern Living and wanted a taste, here's your chance.

When the FX network's "Breakfast Show" visits the Southern Living Test Kitchens on Lakeshore Drive this morning, the producer plans to invite local residents to come over and have a bite to eat, publicist Maureen Nolan said.

"He's probably going to have a few people in to sample whatever they have cooked up there on the show," she said. "It'll give some local people a chance to be on TV and take part in the show."

Prospective tasters should rise early, though. The show airs live from 6:30 to 8 on the cable network.

dance floor, twirling and clapping for the camera.

"I'm usually pretty good at picking up choreography, but like they said, if you can walk and you can hear, you can square dance. That's what's fun about this show: I never know what I'll end up doing."