



ENTERTAINMENT IN MID-20TH CENTURY COLLINGWOOD

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In the 21st Century it is hard to visualize a time only 65-70 years ago when homes in Collingwood had no television, computers, tablets, portable telephones, cell phones, telephone answering machines or social media. Lest one think that the citizens of town were terribly deprived of information and entertainment in those distant days, there were, in fact, quite a number of sources available.

As for news, information and music, most people who had a radio listened to the Toronto stations which were the nearest signals (CKBB in Barrie went on the air on August 31, 1949 but could not provide the calibre of programming of the Toronto stations). The CBC had two coast-to-coast English language AM radio networks before television reared its head. The Trans-Canada Network consisted of CBC-owned and privately-owned affiliate radio stations across the country, with CBL Toronto being the flagship. The Dominion Network consisted of the flagship CJBC Toronto while the rest of the stations across the country were privately-owned "affiliates". These networks played traditional

classical music, organ recitals, dance bands, carried the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts, dramas and public affairs programmes and were listened to primarily by older generations. There were also children's programmes like "Kindergarten of the Air" for preschoolers, and public school broadcasts which required the Collingwood Board of Education to purchase a number of radios, and, let us not forget hockey broadcasts from Maple Leaf Gardens where the announcer Foster Hewitt was a fixture from the day it opened in 1931.

Privately-owned CFRB Toronto ("1010 On Your Dial—Ontario's Authoritative News Voice") was an institution in many homes, mine included. When Jack Dennett read the news on CFRB at 8:00 a.m. it was Canada's version of Walter Cronkite. With the advent of the Rock and Roll era by the mid-1950's the younger generation listened to CKEY and CHUM and their parents and grandparents thought that the language had suddenly been changed. For those who had the luxury of a phonograph, new records could be bought at The Record Bar at Brydon Electric. The records (singles) were, up until the late 1950's, mostly 10 inch shellac 78 rpm discs, fragile and very breakable. In fact, Bert Brydon told me that when the records came in from Toronto on the train, half of them were broken when he opened the boxes despite the fact that the containers were labelled "Fragile—Handle With Care". Perhaps that expression was the signal for the CNR Express people to throw the boxes even harder. Throughout the 1950's "78's" co-existed alongside the newer vinyl 45 rpm records (singles) and 33 1/3 rpm (albums). As an example, Pat Boone's original recording of *Love Letters In The Sand*, the 'B' side of *Bernadine*, was released on a "78" in the spring/summer of 1957 (without the whistling intro found on later reissues), whereas his recording of *April Love* (the 'B' side was *When*

The Swallows Come Back To Capistrano) was released in October of the same year on a “45”.

People in Collingwood could also tune in the signals from powerful stations south of the border in the evening and listen to the popular American comedy shows like *Amos ‘n Andy* and *Jack Benny*, to name but two of a great number. Many of these American shows, daytime soap operas and evening dramas were also carried by the CBC. I remember sitting with my father and listening to *Jack Benny* on the radio (Benny was on radio until 1955). To this day, I remember sitting with my grandmother in her living room listening to Frank Sinatra singing *Love And Marriage* (1955 recording). My grandmother’s radio was a huge old floor model about four feet tall and the amplifier had tubes in it the size of pint milk bottles.

Regarding printed news, there were several choices. Many a Collingwood young person had a paper route delivering Toronto newspapers after school. People with Liberal sentiments read the *Toronto Star*, and those with Conservative leanings read the *Toronto Telegram*. And everybody read the Collingwood *Enterprise-Bulletin*. The town paper came out on Thursday afternoons, cost 10 cents and had two sections. Among its pages were columns from correspondents in small communities scattered around the countryside such as Ravenna, Maple Valley, Badjeros, etc. These were “social” columns somewhat similar to the fictional weekly *Letter From Wingfield Farm* by Dan Needles. Items went something like this: *Jessie Dinglehoofer visited Elsie Greenbush last Thursday afternoon and they had tea—* something I’m sure everyone in Collingwood was breathlessly waiting to learn. For some reason, the correspondent didn’t tell us what brand of tea bags Elsie used. Another item I remember told of two men who

had a good look at a bear standing on its hind legs somewhere up on the mountain. Walt Wingfield would be impressed and perhaps envious that these news items preceded him by several decades. On weekday evenings before we had television, if our parents didn't need to go out to a meeting or a movie, it was common to sit in the living room after supper and read the paper and/or listen to the radio. And let us not forget that many people in those rural areas also learned the local gossip by listening in on the many telephone party lines that were so common back then.

In the 1950's the *Enterprise-Bulletin* had columns titled "40 Years Ago" and "50 Years Ago" in which news items from the files of its several predecessor newspapers from the first quarter of the 20th Century were reported in brief. I was always fascinated with these items and the history of Collingwood and little did I realize that sixty years later I would be writing similar columns.

Before television was widely available, many people went to the movies occasionally or, in some cases, frequently. Two movie theatres on Hurontario St., the Gayety and the Regent, operated six days a week and were closed on Sunday. Collingwood factory workers finished their shifts at 5:00 p.m. and, in most cases, supper was ready shortly after they arrived home, leaving sufficient time to eat, change out of their work clothes and still have time to go downtown to the show which started at 6:30 p.m. Both theatres usually showed a double bill or a mix of a movie, newsreel, cartoon and short subjects on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. For Thursday, Friday and Saturday the movies would change, giving the town's residents a choice of potentially eight different movies a week. Newsreels at the theatres ran 8 to 10 minutes and changed a couple of times a week and were a common source of

recent national and international news before television eliminated the need for them. They were shown in glorious black and white as an announcer with an authoritative voice provided the commentary over the background sound of a large orchestra playing military-sounding music. The theatres also ran a Saturday afternoon Matinee for children when admission cost as little as 5 cents depending on one's age. For that nickel you might have got a Roy Rogers western, some cartoons, and maybe The Little Rascals or the Bowery Boys. Matinees could be raucous with several hundred wired kids. At the Gayety Theatre when kids were acting out, Rose Russ would walk down the aisle and shine her flashlight at them to get them to quiet down. It usually worked. When, in the 1960's, Joe Russ wanted to have Sunday evening movies, he stressed that the show would not begin until 8:00 p.m. so that it would not interfere with Sunday evening church services that began at 7:00 p.m. but as we will see later, television was already making the Sunday evening church service an endangered species.

In the good weather months the Collingwood Drive-In Theatre ("Show Begins At Dusk") on the 4th Line of Nottawasaga Township (now known as Fairgrounds Road) was open and offered even more movies to choose from as well as a place for young lovers to study biology in the dark on the bench seats that were common in cars of the era. Drive-In theatres were known as "The Passion Pit" for good reason: the windows of many cars were steamed up due to the activity taking place inside them. There were also the jokes about smuggling extra people in to the movie by hiding them in the trunk and driving off after the show with the speaker still attached to the car window. The screen structure of the Collingwood Drive-In Theatre still stands on the overgrown property across the road from the Great Northern Exhibition grounds, a

rusting monument to a forgotten part of 20th Century popular culture. The Drive-In even negatively affected the income of baby sitters in the summer months because parents could take the kids with them to the show and let them sleep in the back seat.

The Collingwood Grand Opera House which had been attached to the rear of the Town Hall since the 1890's, had outlived its usefulness by the late 1940's and had become a fire trap. After ten years of the Great Depression and over six years of World War II, there was a pent-up demand for new things. As Scotty Carmichael has recorded, there was a move by the sporting element in town to build a new arena and the question was put to the people in a 1947 referendum which passed. The Grand Opera House wasn't so grand anymore so it was demolished and replaced with the Community Arena which opened in December 1948 and became a year-round place for a variety of activities. In the winter there were hockey games and ice skating. The new Arena was said to have an ice surface the same size as that in Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto, a prestigious claim for small town Collingwood in the postwar era. In the summer there were bingo games, wrestling matches, dances, roller skating, "twirleramas" and many other activities.

Art Bull, a radio and TV dealer and repairman, had a sound truck with several large horn-type loudspeakers on the roof and he would drive up and down the main street broadcasting to drivers, pedestrians, merchants and their customers the coming attractions at the Arena. Art Bull was the "Town Crier" of that era; today he would likely be arrested for distracted driving—driving with one hand and reading from prepared notes in the other but in the 1950's he was the nearest thing to social media.

The coming of television when CKVR Channel 3 in Barrie, affiliated with the CBC (the only television network in the country at the time), signed on in September 1955, heralded a massive change in the culture. Movie theatre operators were afraid that television would kill off the theatres with people staying in their own living rooms for entertainment. Because new movies could not be shown on TV for some time following their initial release in theatres, this resulted in a revival of movies from the 1930's and 40's being shown on television. Starting in 1957, CBC, still the only television network in the country, began a programme called "Great Movies". It was hosted by Fred Davis of CBC's *Front Page Challenge* fame and was presented on Saturday nights in place of *Hockey Night In Canada* when the NHL season was over. For the older generation this was a reconnection with movies they had seen in their youth. For the younger generation, it was an introduction to classic movies made up to two decades before they were born. Movies on TV further eroded attendance at Collingwood's two theatres and because Great Movies played through the spring, summer and fall months before NHL hockey started up again, it may have somewhat affected attendance at the Collingwood Drive-In Theatre as well.

As predicted, television had its effect on the popular culture. Movie theatre attendance declined precipitously and within five years (by 1960) there were not enough people going to the movies to keep two theatres profitable in downtown Collingwood. In early 1960 the Regent Theatre was bought by Joe Russ of the Gayety Theatre and he operated it just in the summer months for a few years before closing it permanently at the end of July 1963. Rose Russ told me "It was a case of either them buying us out or us buying them out". After it was

purchased by the Russ family, the Regent also served as a source for replacement seats for a number of rows of ancient wooden seats down near the stage at the Gayety. These old seats were discarded and a similar number of seats were removed from the Regent to replace them, leaving a large expanse of bare cement floor down near the stage of the Regent in its final days. In more recent times a similar situation of loss of profitability occurred when video stores renting and selling movies were put out of business by movies easily available on the Internet.

Television had another effect on a long-standing tradition: the Sunday evening church service. People stayed home by the millions to watch and be entertained by the Ed Sullivan Show on Sunday evenings at 8:00 p.m. which came to us live from New York. Sullivan's latter-day vaudeville show became a Sunday evening fixture running for 23 years from 1948-1971.

Dances for young people included Teen Town at the Victory Village Community Centre (long-demolished) which was located on the lane running west off of Hurontario St. between 8th and 9th Streets. Built during the Second World War along with "wartime houses" when Stephenson's field was subdivided into 34 building lots, the Community Centre was opposite the parking area of what is now the Joseph Lawrence House B&B, the former home of Muriel Stephenson, whose house and estate had been owned by her family since 1911. [Those 34 lots pretty much account for the entire block bounded by Hurontario, 8th, Maple and 9th Streets. An old barn situated behind John Playter's house at 466 Hurontario St. was used for storage by Art Foley; in its place there is a newer style house on the first lot on the south side of 8th St.] By about 1950 when the town's three public schools were

beginning to bulge at the seams with post-war baby boomers entering the education system, the Community Centre was converted into a two classroom public school as a second annex for Victoria School on Maple St. for a few years and many of us boomers from the south end of town attended there until the new C.C.I. at Cameron St. opened in 1954, after which the old C.C.I. on Hume St. became Senior Public School, holding Grades 6, 7 and 8 for the entire town (except for St. Mary's Catholic School).

Once the pressure was off of the public schools, the building was converted back into a Community Centre and dances continued on into the later 1950's. Subsequent to this, the Oddfellows Lodge then ran a Teen Town dance in the Temple Building on Saturday evenings for a number of years. When the Regent Theatre closed for good in the early 1960's, the building became the gathering place for teens (The Drum Beat Club), although one business man on the main street referred to it as "The Bucket Of Blood" due to the fights that sometimes happened there. When the Oddfellows Lodge ran the dance in the Assembly Hall on the 2nd floor of the Temple Building, they stationed Chief of Police Dorsey J. Beckett in uniform at the top of the long stairs. Anyone intent on causing trouble or smuggling in alcohol soon changed their mind when the first person they saw at the top of the stairs was a police officer. The dance was advertised as "Adult and Police Supervised" and it provided young people a safe place to dance off their raging hormones and develop an appetite for late night snacks. In the summer months, there were dances at Sunset Point, at Cedar Grove down Highway 26 at the 2nd line ("No High Hat At The Grove—Where Dance Pals Meet"), and at the Dardanella at Wasaga Beach.

The Collingwood Shipyard provided the frequent spectacle of ship launchings in the 1950's, attended by crowds of people, some of them travelling great distances to witness what has been termed "an avalanche of steel" taking about seven seconds to complete. The importance of this mainstay industry to Collingwood cannot be disputed. School children were dismissed in order to attend launchings with their parents and much of Collingwood came to a standstill for these events. The 1950's saw the launching of 18 new ships beginning with three 620 ft.-long oil tankers, followed by a mixture of two package freighters, five smaller ships, generally 259 feet long, designed to fit the locks on the old St. Lawrence canals in the pre-Seaway era, and two large bulk carriers over 600 feet long. Less spectacular launches included a small 115 ft.-long ferry and two 130 ft.-long dump scows. The decade ended with the launching of Collingwood's first two St. Lawrence Seaway-size bulk freighters, well over 700 feet long. As the ships got longer and wider and heavier and made bigger splashes, the launches became more spectacular and attracted more people from far and wide.

The Collingwood Civic Band (known as the Kiltie Band earlier in the 20th Century) gave Sunday evening concerts in the summer months using the band shell that used to stand on the site of the Y in Central Park. During my time in the band in the 1960's under Bandmaster Jim Knights, the concerts were held at Sunset Point and included Salvation Army hymn tunes and marches, military marches, operatic selections, euphonium solos, and Broadway show tunes. Indispensable to these concerts was Art Bull and his sound truck serving as a public address system. The audience for these Sunday evening concerts mostly sat in their cars and instead of clapping their hands for applause, it was

customary for everyone to sound their car horns (all at the same time) at the end of each piece.

A circus came to Collingwood circa 1953 and set up their big tents in Exhibition (now Central) Park on Hume St. There was a grand parade which went out the Patterson St. rear gate of the Exhibition Park and west down Hamilton/Sixth St. to Maple St; then north on Maple to First St.; then east on First to Hurontario St.; south on Hurontario to Hume St. and east on Hume back to the main gate at the park. The tail end of the parade was supposed to have the Calliope playing (this was a pipe organ that blew its pipes with steam—I called it “the steam organ”—it is usually heard and/or seen in circus movies playing the tune *Over The Waves*), but it did not appear in the parade because it was broken down.

A yearly event in town before its 99-year lease of Central Park ran out was the Great Northern Exhibition held on Friday, Saturday and Sunday in late September after Art Foley moved the furniture and appliances from his annual summer sale out of the exhibit building. Opening day featured the Parade of School Children as we marched along Hume St., each of us with a small Union Jack flag over our shoulder as “little soldiers of the Empire”, to the Exhibition Park on the Friday afternoon. The Great Northern continues yearly at the Fairgrounds on Fairground Road (4th Line of the former Nottawasaga Township) but without the opening day children’s parade.

Now there are literally hundreds of channels available on television instead of the one channel we had back in 1955, and various other digital devices bring news and entertainment to us almost instantly in our homes, motor vehicles, pockets and purses. In the era when radios

and television sets used to have vacuum tubes in their chassis we learned to be patient when we turned the switch on because it took a bit of time for the inner workings to “warm up” before there was sound and a picture. The appliances of today come on instantly and have accustomed younger people who grew up with modern gadgets to expect instant entertainment, communication and information. I read recently about a mother saying that her children become impatient when it takes Netflix 5 seconds to load.

Some of the things we relied on in the 1950’s like the *Enterprise-Bulletin*, the Regent Theatre, the Gayety Theatre (as strictly a movie house) and the Collingwood Drive-In Theatre, are all things of the past. Fortunately, the Gayety survives as a performing arts centre and movies are still available at the Galaxy Cinemas on Mountain Rd. Gone are the ship launchings and the Shipyard that created them, the Collingwood Civic Band and the Sunday evening band concerts. Despite these losses, entertainment and information abound today via digital gadgets, which can be downright overwhelming and can monopolize our time if we allow them to control us instead of the other way around.

One bright spot is the fact that the music of the past hundred or more years is not lost even if people smashed their old records and junked their turntables. The past is happily and delightfully preserved and available to be experienced digitally on YouTube. It seems that virtually every record ever made from the early days of acoustic recording on Edison cylinders and 78 rpm discs, followed by the era of electric recording from 1925 onward, covering the jazz age of the “Roaring Twenties”, the big band era and beyond to rock and roll, is available to be listened to merely by searching online. Recordings long owned by,

and traded among record collectors, are now generously shared publicly on the Internet. In most cases, they do not sound “scratchy and screechy” because they have been enhanced by modern methods to filter out the wear on the old records and therefore the fidelity on recordings more than 90 years old is truly amazing (my computer connects to the speakers in a flat screen TV for great sound). In addition to the availability of old records, silent movies can also be watched for free on YouTube including films by comedians like Buster Keaton, Fatty Arbuckle, Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd and Laurel & Hardy. Old radio programs and early television programs like *Jack Benny*, to name just one, are there as well—all at the click of a mouse. So if someone fondly remembers a hit record from the early 1950’s and their 78rpm recording of it was either worn out or broken sixty years ago, or they no longer have a turntable to play it on, it can now be heard again for free by searching it on YouTube.

The foregoing indicates that while some things such as the Sunday evening band concerts of old are no longer with us, there is plenty of entertainment and information available today through the convenience of modern technology, but it comes without the slower pace of life of yesteryear.

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