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## A TOWN CRIER OF A DIFFERENT SORT

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We are all familiar with the ceremonial Town Crier of today in the elaborate, colourful costume, bell in hand, making public announcements in a loud voice and continuing a tradition that dates back to ancient Greece. Criers were the original newscasters announcing proclamations, laws, coming events, emergencies, etc. to the public when word-of-mouth was the most convenient way to get information out. The Crier also had/has a ceremonial role in the courts and I have a family connection to this particular aspect of their work. My great-great-grandfather Frederick O'Brien (1817-1866) was Deputy Inspector of Inland Revenue and Crier of the Courts in Barrie. The Criers typically begin their "cry" with the words *Oyez, Oyez, Oyez* (Hear Ye!)

In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Collingwood had a Town Crier of a different sort. David Arthur Bull was born in Burton-On-Trent, Staffordshire, England in 1899 and died in Collingwood in 1975. Art immigrated to Canada with his family when he was ten years old. His wife Hilda Lillian Fox (1899 London, England-1977 Collingwood), a school teacher by profession whom he married in Collingwood on January 1, 1929, taught at King George and Victoria Schools for nearly 30 years and, during a

teacher shortage, even served as Principal at Connaught School for a year. She will also be remembered by thousands of Collingwood natives as the “Storytime” lady at Collingwood’s Carnegie Public Library at the corner of Maple and Second Street in the 1950’s. My class would periodically walk the three blocks from Victoria School to the Library for Storytime. Mrs. Bull had quite a dramatic flair for telling stories. When Storytime was over, we were free to explore the Library and sign out books and, for those who were interested, we could explore the Huron Institute Museum in the basement. Sadly, Mrs. Bull became blind 10 years before her death.

Art Bull was a pioneer in Collingwood in the fields of radio sales and repairs and sound amplification in public spaces in the 1920’s. He installed the public address system in the Collingwood Arena (opened in late 1948) and also served as an announcer in the “gondola” for over 20 years. With the advent of television in Collingwood in the 1950’s, Art expanded his business to include the sales and repairing of televisions. One of his slogans in the Yellow Pages was “The Best In Sight And Sound”; another advertisement proclaimed, “We Sell The Best And Service The Rest”. Art and Hilda lived at 255 Birch St.

Art was an honest worker. In the early days of television, if people kept their original black and white sets long enough, the picture tubes would wear out becoming fainter and fainter and had to be replaced, a fact now forgotten by older people and totally unknown to young people today. Having to replace a picture tube was an expensive repair. It is a known fact that some TV technicians in that era very happily sold people a new picture tube even if they didn’t need one because they earned more money that way. At my house, in the 1960’s, our black and white set’s picture tube was getting faint and Art told my father that, unlike some others, he would first diagnose if there were another issue in the set affecting the picture quality before simply telling people they needed a new picture tube. That is what happened in our case—there was a much smaller, simpler repair that brightened up the picture at much less cost. At the time this incident happened it was late afternoon and my mother asked Art to stay for supper. This was when his wife was ill in hospital and going blind and he was so upset he couldn’t eat.

Long before the advent of the Internet, getting timely local information out to the citizens of Collingwood was largely dependent upon the newspapers and on posters in the store windows. The weekly *Enterprise-Bulletin* came out on Thursdays and Collingwood did not have a radio station for local programming and announcements until July 15th, 1965 when CKCB signed on as a “satellite” station of CKBB in Barrie.

A good way to get information out to the public was to “broadcast” it on the main street because a large audience was guaranteed both on the street and in the stores. In those days before any highway bypass (Pretty River Parkway) of downtown existed, King’s Highway 26 came into town on Hume St. right to the intersection of Hurontario St. and then proceeded down Hurontario to First St., continuing west to Owen Sound. In addition, Hurontario St. was *also* known as King’s Highway 24 which started/ended at the intersection of Hurontario/First/Huron Streets. With all of the highway traffic on two provincial highways passing through Collingwood having to navigate the main street and its four sets of traffic lights (at Hume and Hurontario, cross streets Third/Ontario, Second/Simcoe and First/Huron), traffic congestion grew and grew in the prosperity of that post-World War II era. As highways were improved, more and more freight was being carried by trucks and it seemed that long transport trucks passing through town had to shift gears about six times just to clear an intersection when starting up on a green light. When you add the traffic-slowing effect of this heavy through-town traffic to the activities of locals going downtown to shop, pay bills, get a haircut, etc. and backing their cars out of angle parking into heavy traffic on the main street, you can see why a bypass would become a necessity. In this time, traffic-heavy Hurontario St. was Art Bull’s captive audience—they could not escape his broadcasts.

Art had a sound truck with several large horn-type speakers mounted on the roof and for many years when a public address system was needed at an outdoor event or to make public announcements, Art was there with his sound truck. As a latter day type of Town Crier he would drive up and down Collingwood’s main

street over and over and as he drove he would announce through those large horn speakers the coming events at the Arena such as Bingo (Monday evening at 8:00 p.m.), Wrestling (Wednesday evening at 8:45) and Roller Skating (Tuesday and Friday evenings at 8:00 p.m.) and whatever else those who hired him wanted announced. Today this would probably qualify as “distracted driving” and get Art arrested but back then his main street announcing was taken for granted. He was the Town Crier of his day.

Art was hired to attend many ship launchings at the Collingwood Shipyard, positioning the sound truck near the platform erected for the dignitaries and their speeches. The last ship to be built in the old east yard in line with the foot of St. Paul Street was Hull #167, the *Tyee Shell*, a small canal-size tanker built for service on the west coast. She was launched on July 23, 1958. Usually, once the person who christened the ship had done their duty, the launch master would give the signal to the axemen to cut the ropes on the triggers and the ship would start to move sideways toward the water. Once the ship was settled in the water Art would put on a record of a military band playing *Anchors Aweigh* and this would blast through the speakers on the roof of the truck. Something unexpected also blasted through those big speakers that July day in 1958 and it was documented in 1983 by Robert Woodcock in his book *Side Launch*.

Mrs. G.E. MacKinnon representing Shell Canadian Tankers Ltd. was chosen to smash the bottle of champagne against the *Tyee Shell* just prior to the launch. Although the Collingwood Shipyard was, at that time, just one of many yards around the Great Lakes that side launched ships, Mrs. MacKinnon had never seen a side launching in her life, having experienced only the kind where the ship moves slowly and gracefully backwards into the water. She made her speech, smashed the bottle of champagne and then became horrified to see the ship start to move sideways away from her as it tilted over toward the water in Drydock No. 1 at what, to her, looked like an alarming angle. Thinking she had done something very wrong and was responsible for creating a disaster, she shouted into Art Bull’s microphone for hundreds of spectators to hear, ‘OH MY GOD, WHAT HAVE I DONE?’ Art must have got the record of *Anchors Aweigh* playing quicker than usual that day while shipyard officials attempted to calm down Mrs.

MacKinnon. I'm sure that many others were laughing. The *Tyee Shell* returned to her place of birth in Collingwood in 1969 to be rebuilt as Hull #194 and was renamed *Arctic Trader*. The cargo body was separated from the stern of the ship (wheelhouse, engine room, crew quarters, etc.) and later scrapped. A new forebody (bow and cargo tanks) was launched on October 17<sup>th</sup>, 1969 (without Mrs. MacKinnon) and attached to the stern in drydock to create a newer, longer tanker.

I was a drummer in the Collingwood Civic Band in the mid to late 1960's and in the summer when we gave Sunday evening band concerts at Sunset Point, Art Bull was there with the sound truck for Bandmaster J. S. Knights to address the audience and announce the program. People sat in their cars facing the band stand and had all their windows rolled down for the concert and, instead of applauding with their hands after each selection, they showed their appreciation with a cacophony of dozens of car horns instead. It was a very distinctive, familiar summer sound in Collingwood and Art Bull contributed to the success of this old tradition.

For many years both Mr. and Mrs. Art Bull played a part in the lives of many of us Collingwood natives whether via Hilda's Storytime sessions at the Library during our public school days as well as her many years as a school teacher, or when we heard Art's "Town Crier"-type coming events announcements up and down the main street, his voice on the Arena's public address system, his sound truck at ship launchings and outdoor band concerts or perhaps when he serviced the radios and televisions in our homes. After a long life of service to his adoptive home town, Art Bull, Collingwood's sound pioneer and unofficial Town Crier, died in the General & Marine Hospital on November 19<sup>th</sup>, 1975. His wife Hilda died in Sunset Manor on Christmas Day 1977. The history section of the Trinity United Church website records that a set of tower chimes was donated to the church in 1977 in memory of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Bull by their son Ron and their daughter Mrs. Shirley Clancy, continuing Art's legacy of broadcasting sound.

*David Vuckson is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O'Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. David and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B. C.*