



THE DAY TELEVISION CAME TO STAY - H. David Vuckson

This story originally appeared in the former Enterprise-Bulletin newspaper on September 25, 2015 to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the beginning of Channel 3, CKVR TV in Barrie on September 28, 1955. This is an expanded version of that story for the 65th anniversary of the start-up of local television in Simcoe County and central Ontario.

In the early 1950's, long before the advent of Cable TV or satellite dishes and the hundreds of channels that can now arrive in your home through a slender wire, few people in Collingwood had a television. Those few had, of necessity, on their roof, a tall, expensive mast with an electric rotor to turn the antenna toward two distant cities. CBLT in Toronto had signed on September 8, 1952, originally on Channel 9, switching to Channel 6 a few years later. In Buffalo, WGR (Channel 2) signed on August 14, 1954. WBEN (Channel 4), "The Buffalo Evening News Station", had been on the air since February 1947.

Speaking of tall, expensive masts, on opposite sides of Hurontario St., two early sellers of television sets had very tall towers with multiple antennae pointing in various directions to bring in those distant signals from Toronto and Buffalo in order to demonstrate this new wonder. Russ Campbell was located in Julian Ferguson's 3-storey Regal (later Global) Insurance Building which, years later, would become the Dorchester Hotel (Russ Campbell would later move to another building farther south at #210). Directly across the street was Bert Brydon's store.

Russ Campbell's tall tower was on the roof of the insurance building and became the tallest object on the Hurontario St. skyline. Brydon's tall mast was on the roof of the 1-storey service shop at the rear of his store. It was a new type of skyline for downtown Collingwood. Both of these towers blew down in separate windstorms but with the advent of Cable TV they were not needed. The skyline returned to its previous appearance and the Town Hall clock tower regained its position as the tallest object on the main street.

Convenient, easily-obtained reception came to Collingwood on Wednesday, September 28, 1955 when CKVR TV Channel 3 began broadcasting as an affiliate of the CBC from Little's Hill near Barrie (the "V" and "R" stood, respectively, for Valerie and Ralph Snelgrove, the owners of the station). From this high point of land, the original 225-foot-high transmission tower blanketed an area from Owen Sound to Peterborough and from Orillia to the north end of Toronto. Now, sales of televisions exploded and a forest of antennae of different shapes and sizes sprouted on the roofs of Collingwood homes. Those who did not want to deface their roof installed the antenna in the attic or, more simply, had a "rabbit ears" antenna sitting on top of the set. The vast majority could get only one station: Channel 3 from Barrie. The strong signal from Barrie interfered with the signals from Channels 2 and 4 in Buffalo that people with the expensive rooftop setups had become accustomed to prior to Barrie going on the air.

Two months later, CKNX Channel 8, also a CBC affiliate, signed on from Wingham—"the smallest town in the world with both a radio and television station".

Wingham was much farther away than Barrie but those with a rotor could turn their antenna to the south-west or, alternatively, one could buy an antenna specifically designed for Channel 8 reception and have it mounted on their roof mast; at the TV set a knife switch was used to alternate between the "Wingham aerial" and the "Barrie aerial". It was a new art form to see the variety of shapes, sizes and heights of TV antennae on the housetops—pity the stalwart installers sliding around on a snow-covered roof and freezing their fingers in late 1955 to have it hooked up before Christmas. Those selling televisions must have made a lot of money in late 1955.

Appliance stores would have one or more sets turned on in the front window and because television was such a novelty, this guaranteed a “sidewalk audience”. Season 3, episode 19 of the show *The Real McCoys* broadcast on December 10, 1959, opened with a view of a western movie and then showed the faces of four members of the McCoy clan intently watching the movie and passing a bag of popcorn from one to another until the camera turns and reveals they are watching a TV in an appliance store window from the sidewalk outside. The salesman turns the TV off because the store is about to close and then comes outside to ask if they enjoyed the show. It turns out they enjoy the show *every* week outside his window, and so begins the process of deciding to buy a television and how to afford it. Scenes similar to this were repeated all over the continent as people became fascinated with this innovation in entertainment. One can see a clever marketing ploy by the producers of *The Real McCoys* by running this episode just two weeks before Christmas Eve 1959. I wonder how many families were prompted to get a television set for Christmas that year by this episode if they saw it at a friend’s house.

As consumers became hooked on television, the new medium changed the format of mealtimes for many people as well. The popular legend of the invention of the frozen TV Dinner is that Swanson pioneered this innovation in late 1953 when they ended up with more than half a million pounds of unsold turkeys following American Thanksgiving (Thursday, November 26th). One of their executives is said to have conceived the idea of a frozen turkey dinner to prevent the vast amount of frozen turkeys on hand from spoiling. The various ingredients of the meal (turkey/dressing; green peas; mashed potatoes) were placed in separate compartments in an aluminum tray which was heated in an oven for 25 minutes. People could now watch television and eat a complete pre-prepared meal right out of that aluminum tray. This convenience was greatly helped by the fact that in 1952 collapsible TV trays or tables had appeared and these went hand-in-hand with the TV dinners.

Many televisions at the time stood on the floor in resonant wooden cabinets with a solid lumber core and fine furniture quality veneer and contained a good-sized loud speaker similar to older radios. Musical programmes were heard in Hi

Fidelity sound. The speaker in our first set, a 17" RCA, was a 12-inch woofer—larger sets might have additional speakers (tweeters) for even better sound. As TV's grew smaller and more portable in later years there wasn't room for woofers and tweeters and then, small, so-called "extended range" 2-inch speakers became common but the sound wasn't the same.

Despite the wonder that television was in the 1950's, a frequent annoying issue with those early analog sets was the steadiness of the picture. All sets in those days had control knobs for "Vertical Hold" and "Horizontal Hold". These were necessary to keep the picture in sync with the incoming signal. From time to time the picture would roll up or down requiring adjustment of the Vertical Hold knob. At other times, the picture would corkscrew diagonally requiring adjustment of the Horizontal Hold knob. Since there was no such thing as a "Remote", someone would have to get up off the couch and walk to the set to make the adjustment to steady the picture and also to change channels and turn the volume up or down. In some families, a child served as the "remote" while the parents remained seated.

In Season 2, Episode 11 ("The Man In The Street") of *All In The Family*, which first aired on December 4, 1971, Archie's old TV is acting up. Gloria tries turning the contrast knob and the horizontal hold with no success. Edith says that when watching soap operas in the afternoon she jumps up and down on the floor to fix the picture. Michael advises Archie to hit the set on the side of the cabinet to fix it. Archie hits it hard three times with the palm of his hand and the set dies as an off-screen musical note slides downward while the defective picture decreases to just the dot in the centre of the picture tube that we oldtimers were all familiar with. Archie's old Black & White TV was now dead and he wanted to see himself on Walter Cronkite's evening news hour because he had been interviewed at work that day.

Collingwood's first Cable TV antenna was erected somewhere up on the Blue Mountain and was what was termed a "Parabolic Reflector". As the Cable wires were strung along the streets of town and residents subscribed, down came the forest of, by now, rusted rooftop aerials. However, there were issues with poor

and/or interrupted reception and then one day the Cable antenna itself blew down leaving subscribers with no reception. Some wished they had kept their rooftop hardware. A few (including my parents) cancelled their Cable and had a 40 ft. tower erected beside the house with a Channel 3 and Channel 9 (CFTO) antenna at the top. With the addition of a rotor and both a VHF and a UHF antenna you could get a number of channels without interruption unlike when the cable went out.

It always fascinated me to look through the wire ventilation screen on the back of our set and see multiple glowing vacuum tubes, wondering how it all worked to produce a picture in black and white. When colour broadcasts first became widely available starting in 1966 it was even more of a revelation. On December 23, 1972 no less an authority than Archie Bunker proclaimed that the three great moments in a man's life were: buying a house, buying a car and buying a colour TV (Season 3, the *Locket* Episode). Some people waited until the prices came down, meanwhile enjoying their black and white picture. In some cases, at least, when the original set died, it was time to splurge on a colour set.

When the 1958 movie *South Pacific* was broadcast in the early years of colour TV, those watching it in colour thought their sets were going haywire because the film used various coloured filters in the musical numbers—*Bali Hai* in particular—to reinforce the exotic scenery and this played havoc with the colour and tint settings on the televisions of that era. The slide “Picture trouble is temporary—please do not adjust your set” was frequently displayed. In the early days of CKVR, if there was a problem with the picture or sound, a drawing of a little man named “Champy” with a big hammer aimed at an amplifier with the caption, “Don’t worry—we’re fixing it!” was shown. CKVR said “Any resemblance between Champy and Champlain is purely intentional—they are both pioneers in Huronia”.

Touring the CKVR studios off Essa Rd. was a wonder of the time. We were awed by the 704-foot-high transmission tower—the highest television tower in Canada at the time, erected in 1957, which dwarfed the original 225 ft. high transmission tower. Also among the infrastructure was the microwave tower to pick up CBC network programming from Toronto, the CKBB Radio tower, the TV and Radio

Studios, the control room, the transmitter, etc. “The Electronic Hill” they called it. Early on-air personalities became household names: Everett Smith, Bill Bennett, Don Gray, Charlie Tierney, Doug Garraway, Dave Compton, Milt Conway and Ralph Snelgrove. Many school-age children had their first exposure to the 3 Stooges on CKVR hosted by Dave Compton when their comedies were released to television in 1958.

It was exciting in the late 1950’s to go down to Barrie to attend a live Thursday evening broadcast of *Country Junction* as a member of the studio audience. The musicians were Canadian fiddle champion Mel Lavigne and the Blue Water Boys from Honey Harbour. The show, on the air since 1956, opened with the camera closely focused on Mel’s fiddle as he started his theme song “Cotton Eyed Joe”, an energetic fiddle tune written by Don Messer (there is also an American folk song of the same name). The time we attended, there was to have been a busload of 30 people in the audience—they didn’t show up. And since the studio didn’t have an “applause tape”, the eleven of us in the audience and the studio crew had to clap louder to make up for the lack of spectators. The studio had a Heintzman model ‘A’ upright piano. Later in the mid-1970’s in the era of video tape, I played some ragtime on that piano on two episodes of Alfie Fromager’s *Make Mine Country* show pre-recorded for later broadcast.

In March 1958, CKVR introduced a novelty, *All Night Theatre*. This played on Friday nights after regular programming ended. For some people like “night owls”, insomniacs and university students accustomed to staying up all night to cram for an exam or to get an essay written, it was an ideal way to start the weekend and then sleep all Saturday morning. Movies were shown through the night and early morning hours (with repeats) along with breaks for commercials, news and weather reports until the station “signed off” at 9:00 a.m. on Saturday.

In the mid-1950’s when there was a shortage of work at the Collingwood Shipyard, my father took an electronics course and got a certificate in case he might have to make a career change (which didn’t happen—he stayed at the Shipyard until retirement age). He assembled, from kits, a radio, a television set and an oscilloscope. With the main TV in the living room, the extra home-made

set was in the side “porch” (an enclosed entry room into the house). On Saturday mornings I could get up at 7:00 o’clock, have my breakfast in that room and watch a movie or at least part of a movie until Channel 3 signed off. *All Night Theatre* was so popular that CKVR started a “Night Owl Club” with membership cards.

One benefit derived from the electronics course my father took was that he was confident in testing tubes for a neighbour when their set was on the blink. My friend Harold Stewart who lived two doors away would sometimes call around supper time and say, “David is your television working?” Yes, our RCA was working, but Walter Stewart’s Motorola was not. My father kept some spare tubes at home and would take the most likely candidate—the 5U4G Rectifier in this case—with him. He knew his way around the chassis of a television and by replacing the Rectifier tube in Stewart’s set, the Motorola came to life again. Failing tubes was a common cause of television set problems in those days. An accusation was sometimes made by husbands that their wives had the set on all day, and were “burning out the tubes”. TV sets in those days could contain upwards of two dozen vacuum tubes and TV repairmen carried with them a portable tube testing device to diagnose the problem in the home and had a good supply of spare tubes in the truck and plenty more back at the shop.

Do-it-yourselfers could take the tubes out of a malfunctioning radio or TV to a self-serve tube testing machine usually found in a hardware or drug store. In Collingwood I remember a large such device in Sheppard’s Variety Store on the north-west corner of Hurontario and Second St. The tester had a number of different sockets for different types and sizes of tubes and if a tube proved defective, the store would sell you a replacement. On returning home and inserting the new tube in the appropriate socket the radio or television would usually work and give a sense of self-accomplishment and the satisfaction that a service call had been avoided. A “seating plan” for the location of the various tubes was printed either on the back of the set or inside the cabinet to avoid mixing them up. In later years as electronic technology moved away from vacuum tubes to transistors, the self-serve tube testing machines were not paying their way for the floor space they occupied and they faded from the scene. There

were stories about unethical technicians who sold people a new picture tube whether they needed it or not when there was no picture. When Arthur Bull came to our house to diagnose a poor picture, he told us that he did not sell his clients a new picture tube until he had checked for other causes of a poor picture and, in this case, he did find a fault elsewhere in the set and corrected it.

Two dozen or so vacuum tubes all glowing created a lot of heat and manufacturers provided ventilation openings on the back of the set. Despite this, some people would shove the set right up against the wall or against heavy drapes. An article in a TV technology magazine that my father subscribed to in the 1950's was titled "GIVE IT AIR!" explaining the necessity of allowing the heat of the set to vent into the room so that the inner workings would not fry themselves. It included a drawing of a television in distress, the picture tube showing an illustration of a grimacing face suffocating from heat, sweating profusely and tugging at its collar. There was also the warning not to have a jug of flowers on top of the set which could be knocked over by a cat, thus watering the interior and cooling it down permanently.

Before the days of 24-hour broadcasting, television stations "signed off" for the night. A voice-over would announce that the station had come to the end of another day of programming, state the call letters of the station, the location of the studios, the ownership, the channel, the power of the video and audio signal, etc. When that was accomplished, the National Anthem would be played and then the black and white, and, years later, the multi-coloured bar test pattern, would be displayed. CKVR's sign-off tune late at night in the early 1970's was the orchestral version of "In the Arms of Love" by Henry Mancini, a dreamy ballad released in 1966. Those familiar with the words, "the day has died away, let's find a hideaway, and share the promise of a new tomorrow, in the arms of love tonight" might have thought that Channel 3 was a "suitor" wooing the people of central Ontario. As the tune played, on the screen was a representation of stars in the sky labelled 3, 5, 8 and 11, the last three being repeater channels that CKVR had in Haliburton, Huntsville and Parry Sound, respectively. One by one the numbered stars "went out", number 3 being the last followed by *O Canada* and the test pattern.

Today when television programming is readily available 24 hours a day on computers and hand-held gizmos as well as in the traditional way, the history of its advent that I have described may seem positively archaic, especially the need for the vertical and horizontal hold controls. Flat screen TV's that hang on the wall like a painting have replaced the older bulky type and it seems that few, if any, repair them anymore. When the set dies, you recycle it and buy a new one. Hundreds of channels are available although I still wonder how many a person can watch without going crazy. Nevertheless, for those of us who were there in 1955 when television first began in Central Ontario, when we could get only one channel, it was a wonder of the 20th Century and it came to us from an electronic hill in Barrie.

David Vuckson is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O'Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. He and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B.C. where they enjoy Cable and a flat screen TV.