

# **North Bay in the 1950s and 1960s**

## **Stories by Michael Oldfield**

GHOSTLY RUINS AND MUSTY MEMORIES

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## **GHOSTLY RUINS AND MUSTY MEMORIES**

by

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In 1985, at the tail-end of a summer holiday, I journeyed back to my old hometown of North Bay in Northern Ontario where I had grown up and gone to school and, strictly on a whim one day, drove out to visit the old TV station where I had taken my first hesitant steps into the world of broadcasting. On May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1958, fresh faced and eager, I had ridden the bus out to the small town of Callander on the shores of Lake Nipissing and then trudged up the hill to where my future employment lay. As I drove through that small town once again, I noticed that little had changed and there up ahead was that familiar hill with its steep winding road which was tricky in summertime and almost impassable when the winter snows fell. Once at the top, the road continued for almost a mile, climbed another hill and there it was....the old station where I had laboured for four years as I learned the basics of the business. Even the parking lot held memories for me. In the fall of 1958, I had purchased my first car, a little English Austin, of which I was immensely proud. On the third day that I had driven it to work, I parked on the upper level of the lot, left it in gear or so I thought, got out and shut the door. Not being overly familiar with the intricacies of the stick-shift transmission, I had actually left it in neutral and when I shut the door, it started to roll forward. It continued on its merry journey down into the lower parking lot, narrowly missing several other cars, rolled off the end of the lot and into the woods! Since I was on duty in 10 minutes, there was no time to do anything but leave it there. At lunchtime, I and several of my huskier co-workers pushed and heaved the little car out of the undergrowth and back onto solid ground. Almost immediately, the story of my runaway car became the stuff of legends and I was not allowed to live this one down for many weeks. My other memory of the parking lot was that the company had installed electrical outlets all over the place so that we could all plug in our block heaters in wintertime. Nightly temperatures regularly dipped to 20 below zero Fahrenheit and on the late shift, we had an unwritten rule: nobody left the parking lot until all the guys had their cars started and running.

The TV station itself had gone out of business a few years prior to my return visit in 1985 and the building had been purchased by a businessman who planned to turn it into a large storage facility. I spoke to the people who were now in charge of the old premises and told them I had once worked there. They were very accommodating and invited me to have a look around.

I opened the front door and, just as I had in days of yore, commenced to walk down the long hallway. Well, there I was, folks...in the place where it had all begun for me; the place where I first got my feet wet and was transformed from a nervous, anxious kid into a competent audio operator who yearned to work on bigger and better shows. But fate did toss the occasional banana peel in my path. One week after I had been hired, I walked down the very same hallway feeling quite jaunty and eager, with my jacket thrown over my shoulder. As I wheeled at the end of the hall to enter the control room area, my jacket caught on the edge of a large standup ashtray which stood against the wall, and tipped it over. Sand and cigarette butts went flying across the hall and through the open door of the General Manager's office which stood opposite. Suppressing a scream of shock and horror, I scrambled into the boss's office on my hands and knees and began scooping up sand and butts as quickly as I could. The Great Man behind the desk leaned forward, peered over the top of his glasses, and in a cold and menacing tone asked me what I was doing. Fervently hoping that the ground would open up and swallow me, I spluttered and stammered as I did my best to explain that the ash tray had been knocked over and I was cleaning up the mess, that I was dreadfully sorry and that it had all been a hideous accident. He Who Had No Sense Of Humour About Such Things said, "Hmmmph!", and warned me not to do it again. Needless to say, I didn't. The G.M.'s office where I had once befouled the carpet was now just an empty shell.

A little further along the hallway were the large windows where visitors could look into the telecine and control room areas and at the end of the hall was the staircase which led to the basement level. Down below was the company boardroom where the local businessmen who composed our board of directors had met once a month. Along one entire wall, our set designer and graphic artist, Heinz Gaugell, had painted a large mural showing our broadcasting antenna towering above the surrounding landscape. The painting was still there and immediately I flashed back to a distant sunny afternoon when the station's stills photographer, an energetic

young French-Canadian lad who obviously had no fear of heights decided that he was going to climb to the top of our broadcasting tower in order to get some great scenic shots. He was one third of the way up when Chief Engineer Gord Ballantyne spotted him and began yelling at him to come down and tried to convey the message that if he exposed himself to the radiation being emitted by the antenna itself, he would be a dead man. The young climber who did not understand the danger he was headed towards, just waved and called back that he was not afraid of falling. When he was halfway up the tower, the Chief Engineer had Vic Dionne the Duty Technician stand by the transmitter, ready to shut it down and put us off the air if our reckless climber got too close to the top. We might lose some commercials but at least the climber would not receive a lethal dose. The whole affair came to an abrupt ending when the General Manager strode to the foot of the tower and bellowed to the photographer that if he did not come down immediately, he would be fired on the spot. Faced with this ultimatum, he did the sensible thing and returned to earth. The red and white broadcasting tower had been dismantled and sold long ago and the boardroom where once, at an all-staff meeting, our boss man had paced up and down, chomping on his cigar as he laid out his plan that we should be the first station in Canada to do regular early-morning programming, was now a storage area filled with two-by-fours and sheets of plywood.

Next to this had once stood the Newsroom where our News Editor, two reporters and a sportscaster pounded out copy on their Remington and Royal typewriters. In a special little corner cubicle, the Broadcast News teletype machine clattered away, night and day, spewing forth great piles of paper which filled the cardboard box behind it. At regular intervals, one of the newsmen would tear various items off this lengthy scroll and hang them on nails which protruded from the wall, each with its own title: National, Regional, Weather, Road Report, Farm Markets, Women's, Sports and Miscellaneous for filler items such as *This Day In History*. Everyone kept an eye out for the pink stain which ran down the centre of the teletype paper which let you know that this roll was coming to an end. It was most important that the machine not run out of paper overnight. No wire copy meant no news.

This lower level of the building had undergone some reconstruction back in 1960 when we were taken over by the Roy Thompson organization. Since he already owned the local radio station

CFCH, he decided to amalgamate his interests into one building and thus, our radio colleagues moved in to our house on the hill. Small-town radio in that era catered to all tastes and played a wide variety of music. In the morning, there was light classical music and Broadway tunes on programmes with titles such as *Morning Matinee* and *Salon Serenade*. Later, it was time for the daily soap operas, *Road Of Life*, *Big Sister*, and a Canadian offering called *Laura Limited* to be followed in the afternoon by *The Procter and Gamble Hour* featuring *Life Can Be Beautiful*, *Pepper Young's Family*, *The Right To Happiness*, and Oxydol's own *Ma Perkins*. The top hits of the day were broadcast as teens were returning home from school. On Saturdays, they had *The Jazz Hour with Clarence Houston* for the Stan Kenton and Dave Brubeck fans followed by *The Western Caravan with Bernie Meighan* featuring traditional and modern country and western tunes. Sundays were heavily devoted to Christian broadcasting with such shows as *The Lutheran Hour* and The Billy Graham Crusades. On Sunday evenings, we heard the latest plays on the *CBC Stage* series.

The radio studio and its control room were now just bare rooms with only the white acoustic tile on the walls to attest to their former use. Next door was yet another vacant space which had once been our company cafeteria. Here, our cook, Mrs. Daniher, known to all as "Mrs. D.", dished out her daily lunch-time specials including one particularly delectable meatloaf dish. If you happened to be working the late or weekend shift, you provided your own food and brought it with you because there were no restaurants or cafes in the area.

Climbing back up to the main floor, I walked into what had been the control room area. Clearly visible were great dark squares on the linoleum floor where the two Eastman projectors, the slide and the tel-op machines, had once stood. Nothing remained of telecine now; not even an old discarded take-up reel. The control room proper stood on a slightly raised level and it too had been completely gutted. Gone were the General Electric video monitors for Camera, Telecine and Off Air, plus the tiny G.E. switching controls which allowed you to do little more than cut from camera to film to slide to network or, if things weren't going well, to black! The compact little blue Northern Electric console on which I learned to do audio with sweaty palms and fumbling fingers in my early days had been removed as had the McCurdy turntables where I had cued up my very first record and the durable old Ampex 600 tape recorder. Still, even with all of

those artifacts gone, I could close my eyes and instantly be transported back to the summer of 1958, sitting in that sweltering hot control room, grinding our way through one live show after another and tensing nervously when the phone rang, particularly if it was the 9002 line. This was the number that our boss, Bruce McLeod, always used to phone the control room and tear a strip off someone, usually the switcher/director because of something he had seen on the air that he did not like. On more than one occasion, phone calls such as these resulted in a luckless technical operator getting the chop next day because some commercial had gone awry.

There was just one stop remaining on my nostalgic journey through this Hall Of Memories...the studio. Our once-great showplace had been stripped down to its bare insulation. The grey, red and black limbo drapes had been sold as had all the lighting fixtures. I smiled to myself as I caught sight of the long crease in the surface of the studio floor and remembered how the General Electric camera would shudder and develop microphonics if the cameraman dollied across it too quickly. All of our on-air productions and our weekly live music shows came from this great empty chamber which now stood so silent. Probably more than a few musical spirits haunted this old house now, I mused.

Since ours was a small northern town, country music was king and we gave our audience the best musicians and vocalists to be found in the community. Irwin Prescott and the Mello-Tones, Vic Virgilli and the Laurentian Valley Boys, Fiddling Cy Crawford from Powassan and Leo Lamothe and the Westernaires all performed in this studio on regular occasions. The rafters may not have rung but the lighting grid certainly vibrated as some first-rate fiddlers set the toes of a thousand viewers tapping to the rhythms of *The Maple Sugar Two-Step*, *The Fireman's Reel*, *Father O'Flynn*, *Ragtime Annie*, *The Arkansas Traveller*, *Old Joe Clark* and *The Orange Blossom Special* with its long strokes of the bow across the strings to simulate the sound of a train whistle. Our older viewers took their country music seriously and although they enjoyed hearing a local interpretation of the latest song by Johnny Cash, Patsy Cline or Jim Reeves, they also wanted to hear such classic railroad songs as *The Wreck Of The Old '97* or *That Little Red Caboose Behind The Train*, family favourites like *That Silver Haired Daddy Of Mine* and *I Wonder How The Old Folks Are At Home* plus those timeless ballads of lost love, *Columbus Stockade Blues* and *I'm Thinking Tonight Of My Blue Eyes*; our homegrown country singing stars did not disappoint

them. Even on weekends, the joint would still be jumping as teenage girls in pony tails and crinolines and super cool guys with Brylcreemed hair, in suit jackets that hung down to their knees, jived, bopped and slow-danced to the latest songs by Ricky Nelson, Connie Francis, Bobby Darin, Brenda Lee and The Platters at our Saturday afternoon teen dance party.

Because the revenue from television ads was our life- blood, this studio was often awash in commercial displays including pleasure boats for Young's Marine, dining tables and chesterfields from Home Furnishing Company, suits from McCubbin's Mens Wear and used cars from Pitman Motors. Child tap-dancers clip-clopped their way across the concrete floor in hopes of winning amateur talent contests, professional wrestlers pushed and shoved and snarled at each other to promote their upcoming bouts at Memorial Gardens, the local Royal Canadian Air Force dance band played Glenn Miller tunes, St. Joseph's Catholic Girls' College choir sang Christmas carols and local politicians came here to promise that they would pave every dirt road in the township if only viewers would vote for them! Our nightly news, weather and sports originated from here as well as more episodes of *Romper Room* than I cared to think about and Canada's first early morning television show *The Clockwatchers* , had come from within these walls. We used to introduce our prestigious Saturday evening film *Cartwright's Home Movies*, by having the camera dolly towards a large model of a well-to-do home which was mounted on a breakaway platform. As the camera lens neared the wide picture window, the model would split apart, allowing the camera to pass through to reveal our host sitting in a tastefully decorated living room in the studio and waiting to tell viewers about that evening's film. Later on, after some set rearranging and careful lighting adjustments by the studio crew...all two of them...our late-night horror film on *Shock Theatre*, would be introduced by our very own Person Of The Living Dead sitting upright in a casket in his spooky old bat-infested abode with howling wolves outside the door. Yes, indeed; here we had created magic but now, the magic-makers and all of their electronic toys and talent had departed.

Now there was only this big empty building slated to become a warehouse and I was the only one on the premises who could remember the way things had been. In a few moments, I would be going too. Author Thomas Wolfe knew what he was talking about when he declared that you can never go home again. It's just never the same; the place will have changed and so have you.

Yet many of us persist in returning to the scenes of our youth to see if we can maybe step into the same water twice and experience life as it was back then. When I left this small TV station perched on top of a hill in 1962, I moved on to Kitchener, then Toronto and finally to Vancouver where I wound up spending 24 years with the CBC. Yet, something had drawn me back here. Perhaps I wanted to see the old place just one last time so that I could relive that sunny May afternoon of so long ago when I had hiked up here to begin my first real job and to enter the mysterious world of broadcasting. It was all new to me then and I was excited to be a part of it; every day I was learning something different and was proud to be part of a team that put TV programmes on the air. Blame it on my youth but that job was very special to me and that's not a bad memory to hang onto or revisit, now and then.

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