

North Bay in the 1950s and 1960s

Stories by Michael Oldfield

LOG CABIN BROADCASTING

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Whenever I see one of those documentaries showing how Milton Berle was one of the pioneers of early television, I have to suppress a laugh or two. Uncle Miltie's show originated from a modern studio with the most up-to-date equipment available at that time and he was surrounded by highly professional and well-trained technical and production people. Compared to Mr. Berle's crystal palace, my first TV station was an electronic chicken coop. CKGN-TV, the CBC affiliate in North Bay where I began my broadcasting career in 1958 had one...I repeat, one studio camera. The tiny control room held three people: a switcher/director, an audio man and a maintenance technician who looked after camera video. Behind the control room was the telecine area and behind that, the transmitter. Telecine or audio was where most technical operators started out and, if you showed any promise, they let you try your hand at switching. Once you learned to switch, you automatically became a director and had to wear an intercom headset so that you could talk to the cameraman. Absolutely everything we did went live and direct to air. There were no videotape or kinescope recording devices. Furthermore, we had no script or production assistants and no stop watches. While directing a live show, you kept one eye on the clock and mentally counted down to the top or bottom of the hour. When they weren't taking turns operating the camera, the three-man studio crew erected and dismantled all the sets, rearranged the lights for each production, and put up the displays for the live studio commercials. There were no floor directors; cameramen passed on all the cues to the on-air talent and if an announcer needed a cue card for a live commercial, he or she wrote it up themselves on a cardboard sheet and hung it on the front of the camera. As part of their regular duties, announcers also had to write their own commercial copy and office secretaries were often pressed into service as fashion models if required for a live studio presentation. No one was paid any extra money for these additional chores.

Prior to the advent of the transistor, all broadcasting equipment was powered by vacuum tubes which generated a great deal of heat. With no air conditioning save for a small fan, control room temperatures in July and August were sweltering. Telecine, where all the slides and films originated, was one of the most demanding of the technical jobs and during the nightly hour-long live newscast, a good telecine operator was worth his weight in gold. All film commercials, whether they were 60 seconds, 30 seconds, or only 10 seconds in length, came on a separate spool and a good telecine man always kept a large stack of empty take-up reels handy to save himself the job of rewinding film during a busy period. The telejector (slide machine) held only 24 slides which often necessitated doing slide replacements on one side of the machine while the other side of the telejector was live on-air with a slide commercial.

The audio operator sat at a Northern Electric six-input console where he controlled the studio microphones and operated the Ampex reel-to-reel tape recorder. The two turntables at his side kept him as busy as any radio disc jockey because every segment of every show was introduced with a slide and a theme from a record. His prime studio microphone was the Electro-Voice 646; a durable piece of gear which looked fine as a desk mike but was very large and ugly when worn around someone's neck. A male announcer wearing a suit could use a 646 as a neck mike and not look too bad but women in sweaters and blouses who had to wear this beast looked like they had a plumber's pipe wrench hung around their necks! Apart from switching and directing all live shows, the switcher also manned the telecine controls which started and stopped the 16mm projectors and changed the slides from the telejector. This he did with his right hand; his left hand adjusted the video dials which controlled the brightness and contrast of slides and films. The starting wage was \$30. a week but if you proved yourself to be an apt pupil, learned quickly and worked hard, you could be making as much as \$37.50 a week in just a few months. Everyone got two days off per week but if you worked on a Saturday or Sunday, you worked the whole day from 10 a.m. to midnight with no extra pay. During the week, the shifts were roughly 8 hours long and you got a meal break, usually 30 minutes, whenever someone was available to relieve you. If you made a

mistake which caused the loss of a commercial on air, you received a very long and loud cursing out from the station Operations Manager. If you lost several commercials, you were fired the next day. Needless to say, this was not a union operation.

One of the minor benefits of working at a small station was that they would let you try your hand at just about anything, if you showed an interest. My first foray into the studio quickly convinced me that I should remain in the control room. Operating a small giraffe boom was alright but trying to truck the General Electric camera across the floor and stay in focus was an art that I could never master. The one-eyed monster and I just did not work well together. But, apart from switching, directing, and producing (if you could call it that!), I did learn to edit film in a crude sort of way, wrote some promotional copy, built the table-top set and a hand puppet named Boris the Dragon for one of our kids' shows, and I even appeared on air on several occasions.

For a one-horse station, we did a great deal of live programming including a daily early morning show, afternoon women's show, a nightly hour-long newscast, several country music shows, a summer guide for tourists, a weekly teenage dance party, children's programmes, and we even had a spooky zombie-like character who sat up in a coffin to introduce the Saturday night horror film. I stayed at this station for four years and spent the last two trying to get out. But jobs in the industry were not easy to come by in those days and you had to be patient and wait for an opening at a real station in the big city Toronto.

Years later, whenever I encountered someone who had graduated from the television course at the Ryerson Polytechnic Institute or had started at some large CBC or CTV station, I often thought back to the primitive surroundings in which I got my first taste of tv broadcasting. I guess I would call it The Television School of Hard Knocks where you learned to make do with what little you had, got used to low-budget productions and realized that things were probably not going to get much better. In that regard, I think that those of us who were in television in the 1950's can all be regarded as pioneers..... just like Milton Berle.