

North Bay in the 1950s and 1960s

Stories by Michael Oldfield

THE MAGIC BOX

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**Institute for
Community Studies and
Oral History**

**Nipissing University
100 College Drive
North Bay, ON, P1B 8L7
<http://nipissingu.ca/ICSOH/>**

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by Mike Oldfield

Before television came to North Bay we, along with most others, spent the long winter evenings twisting the radio dial in hopes of picking up some long-range aural entertainment. Even in 1955, when I was in my early teens, people would still brag about tuning in some distant American station and being gripped by a good mystery or suspense play. The radio entertainers of the day were as familiar to us as they were to any American audience and *Amos 'n Andy*, *Fibber McGee & Molly*, *Edgar Bergen & Charlie McCarthy*, *Jack Benny*, and *The Great Gildersleeve* were family favourites. Far-flung stations such as WBZ Boston, KDKA Pittsburgh, WMGM New York, and WLS Chicago came into our homes regularly...weather permitting. Anyone from that era could tell the same story of being totally immersed in some spine-chilling radio melodrama only to have the atmospherics change as a low or high pressure system moved across the Great Lakes and drowned out the radio play with long bursts of deafening static. WLS was one of my favourites because they broadcast *The Lone Ranger* and, if you were really lucky and the weather co-operated, you could hear the adventures of *Sgt. Preston Of The Yukon* and his dog, King, every night at 5 p.m. from this same station. But our days of radio delights were numbered and very soon, we would have an entertainment device with something to look at as well as listen to.

All during the summer of 1955, we had watched with interest as a large broadcasting tower had been erected on a hill near Callander on the far side of the lake and in October, our very own local station CKGN-TV went on the air. From that moment on, whenever we went into town, we would see a small crowd outside Bannon Bros. furniture store with their noses pressed to the glass, mesmerized by the flickering blue image on the television set inside. One by one, friends and neighbours began to buy TV sets and quickly realized that they had more friends than they ever knew, as mere acquaintances would drop by to view the evening's TV fare! One night in early December, there was a knock at our door. Two delivery men stood there with a large carton on a two-wheeled trolley. "Mr. Oldfield?", they enquired. "We have your TV set for you."

As they removed this magical and wondrous device from its cardboard box, I quickly saw that my Dad had blown the budget on this baby. It was a 21-inch Westinghouse floor model in a genuine imitation mahogany cabinet with an adorable set of rabbit ears perched on top. At long last, we had lurched into modern times; we were TV viewers!

I cannot remember everything that we watched on that first enchanted evening but I do recall some of the magic which glowed forth from our very own cathode ray tube. First, we watched *My Hero*, a sitcom starring Robert Cummings and then a very ancient western which was probably called *Renegades Of Rimrock Ridge* or some-such title featuring a Hollywood unknown by the name of Don "Red" Barry. I hasten to add that we would not have laid out fifty cents to see this third-rate cowboy shoot-em-up at one of our local theatres but there we sat, transfixed in our living room, as the hero in the white stetson galloped after the escaping bank robbers while firing 97 rounds from his six-shot revolver without bothering to reload. Next came a 15-minute programme starring singer Patti Page who was very popular at the time, followed by a British documentary series, *The War In The Air* and finally, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* with Ronald Howard as the indomitable sleuth. At 11 p.m., our station signed off for the night. Even after we had switched off our new TV set, we sat there in silence and watched as the tiny glowing dot in the middle of the screen slowly disappeared.

Our local TV broadcaster, like most of the independent stations across the country, was a CBC affiliate and much of their programming was shipped to them either on film or kinescope from Toronto, there being no network microwave connection at that time. In this age of High Definition TV and digital cameras, it is difficult to describe just how bad the kinescope image was but since we had little to compare it to, we simply assumed that this was the way that TV was supposed to look. Over the next months, we slowly became familiar with the CBC stars who had their own shows in those early days of broadcasting. There was the *Denny Vaughn Show* with Joan Fairfax, *Cross Canada Hit Parade* with Wally Koster and Joyce Hahn, *The Jackie Rae Show* starring the man who would one day be the uncle of Ontario's first NDP premier, *Pick The Stars* with Dick MacDougall, and later came a new and very intriguing panel show called *Front Page*

Challenge. But in our part of the world there was no argument as to which show had the biggest following; it was a Friday night offering from Montreal called *The Plouffe Family*. The terms ‘Anglophone’ and ‘Francophone’ had not been coined yet and all we knew was that everyone in our community tuned in to watch the weekly trials and tribulations of Mamma, Pappa, Napoleon, Guilleame, Ovide, Cecile, and the rest of the family. No Liberal government decree enforcing national bilingualism ever did as much to bring Canada’s two solitudes together as did the adventures of le Family Plouffe. Following the Plouffes on Friday night was everybody’s second favourite, *Wrestling From Maple Leaf Gardens*. Surely no one could have remained calm and relaxed in their chairs as Canada’s own Whipper Billy Watson and Pat Flanagan took on Hans Herman and Hardboiled Haggerty. We felt it was our duty to shout encouragement and to warn them when the villains were about to clobber them from behind. Anyone who dared to tell us that this was all fake and phoney would have been wasting his breath. This life-and-death-struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil had to be real, although we did marvel at the fact that these men could absorb so much punishment and walk away without a scratch on them. The big-time wrestlers got our adrenaline pumping but the midgets...Sky Lo-Lo, Little Beaver and Fuzzy Cupid...had us shrieking with laughter.

Even though we may not have been a very sophisticated audience, it didn’t take us long to figure out which of the Toronto musical variety shows had a decent budget and which didn’t. Shows that had been produced with only a few dollars usually featured some modern jazz choreography performed by the Andy Body Dancers in bowler hats and leotards leaping around a couple of wooden ladders and some lighting stands in a bare studio against a black drape. The hosts of these shows would always saunter out, sit down on a wooden stool in a single spotlight and sing. And that was pretty much the whole show. I guess we were supposed to believe that this noticeable lack of sets, props and talent was very contemporary and “arty”. But the programmes that did loosen the purse strings a bit produced some good musical entertainment and gave us a fine array of female singers such as Juliette, Shirley Harmer, Sylvia Murphy, and Joyce Sullivan. One of the best produced and fastest-moving shows to come out of CBC Toronto at that time

was *Country Hoedown* with fiddler King Ganam, comedian Gordie Tapp, and singers Tommy Common, Tommy Hunter, and the Hames Sisters.

Our first glimpse of the American television offerings of that era as they were telecast by our local station showed that as usual, New York and Hollywood spared no expense in putting on a show. *The \$64,000 Question*, hosted by Hal March, was a very exciting and suspenseful show. We first saw it about one year before the big American TV quiz show scandal broke and two of the contestants stand out in my mind: a lady by the name of Joyce Brothers who was an expert on boxing and title fights, and a wonderful old Danish explorer and mariner named Peter Freuchen who knew all there was to know about sailing ships and the sea. Saturday nights gave us two of the most popular American shows. First, there was *Stage Show* with Tommy & Jimmy Dorsey and their orchestras which introduced a very young fellow named Elvis Presley who gyrated as he sang and sent the girls in the audience into fits of screaming. We thought that this was one of the funniest things we had ever seen and laughed uproariously at his antics. Little did we know of the lasting effects that The Pelvis would have on Western civilization. *Stage Show* was followed by *The Honeymooners* with Jackie Gleason as Ralph Kramden exploding into mad tirades against his long-suffering wife Alice or his pal, Ed Norton.

Sunday evenings gave us *Disneyland* wherein Uncle Walt showed us the delights to be found in his new theme park and a series called *The Millionaire* in which the filthy rich John Beresford Tipton regularly doled out a cool million via his secretary, Michael Anthony, to some deserving individual. Regrettably, he never seemed to come to our town! One of the most popular syndicated shows on Sunday night was *Life Is Worth Living* with Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, a no-nonsense, plain speaking Catholic man of the cloth who discussed the political and social events of the day and probably did more to spread the Word than all the money-hungry television evangelists who were to come along in later years.

After about a year, our local TV station was connected to the CBC Network courtesy of the Bell Telephone's microwave towers and we began to receive live broadcasts from

Canada and the U.S. Now, we could spend Saturday nights with Perry Como, Sunday nights with Ed Sullivan and watch Larry Henderson reading the CBC National News from Toronto every night at 11. Hockey and football games came to us live as did Royal tours and political conventions and we saw the one-and-only telecast of Rogers & Hammerstein's *Cinderella* starring Julie Andrews. Like thousands of other viewers, I sat spellbound on the edge of my seat as passenger James Doohan brought a stricken airliner down for a safe landing in *Flight Into Danger* on General Motors Presents. I can remember getting up early on a Saturday morning to watch the live demolition of Ripple Rock in British Columbia and, on a sunny autumn afternoon, I played hookey from school to see the final game of the World Series and watch my beloved New York Yankees with Whitey Ford on the mound, Yogi Berra catching and Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris hitting home runs, defeat the Brooklyn Dodgers and win the pennant. Just as people today feel that the Internet connects them to the world, so did we once we were hooked up to the CBC Network. We were no longer living in the boondocks; the world was now being delivered to our doorsteps.

It has been said that the 1950's were The Golden Age Of Television. Well...maybe. As with all eras, there was both good and bad. But TV was certainly fresh and new then and very much a novelty to everyone. Now, in the year 2006 as I click my way through more than fifty channels and find that I am either bored or disgusted by what I find there, my mind often wanders back to those early days when the excitement of television was still there and the magic box captivated us all.