

Congratulations!

Lloyd Robertson: Another 50 Year Milestone

by Heather Vale

The Stratford Festival is not the only local treasure celebrating a 50-year anniversary in 2002. This June, Stratford native Lloyd Robertson of CTV, the longest working full-time newscaster in Canada, celebrates 50 years in broadcasting, including over 45 years in front of the television cameras. From the earliest pioneering days of television to the highly technical wired world, Lloyd Robertson has been there, done that, and is still doing it.

Robertson permitted this reporter an insight into his outstanding achievements. Some would use this milestone to climb on a pedestal of ego, or rest on their laurels, but not Lloyd Robertson. Always focussed on the job at hand, an interview was granted on the basis that it would not interfere with Robertson's regular work load.

It's 4:45 p.m. on a typical day in CTV's national newsroom in northern Scarborough. Chief News Anchor Lloyd Robertson, his jacket hung neatly over the back of a chair, is trying to open a computer program to write a promo spot for that night's news that he has to record in less than ten minutes. "Sometimes these things just don't do what you want them to do," he says about the computer.

Two minutes later he has the word processing program open and is typing away. Another three minutes and he finishes the script, which is promptly lost somewhere in a digital black hole. Two minutes after that it's been retrieved, fed to the TelePrompTer, and ready to roll. Robertson does one rehearsal, then nails the spot in one take. At 4:55 p.m., the whole process is complete and the promo is sent to CTV's servers for broadcast Canada-wide.

For half a century, Lloyd Robertson has been working days just like this one. Except it used to be a manual typewriter, then an electric one. "Technology has changed this business entirely," he explains, "and the big challenge for broadcasters like myself, and others who started when I did, was to keep up with this technology, to understand it... but never to let it overpower you, because if you let it... then you can't do your job."

Even as a child, Robertson was interested in radio and the programs he heard like Wayne & Shuster, Fred Allen, and Jack Benny. The eureka moment came when the teenage Robertson stood under the



Pictured above: Heather Vale and Lloyd Robertson at the CTV News national news desk where Lloyd delivers the news each night.

at the CBC, longer than most broadcasters' whole careers. Then on to Winnipeg, which "offered the opportunity of working in television as well as radio, and I thought, I may as well try this, because at that time... television was brand new," says Robertson. "There'd be maybe one or two people... who would have television sets, and they'd invite you in to watch the Ed Sullivan Show on Sundays, or the hockey game on Saturday nights, and that would be about it."

The mysterious new medium of TV presented a learning curve to the young broadcaster. "I did learn about it... the hard way, but still the best way, that is on air, making your own mistakes as you went along."

In the early days, television news was very fundamental. They would read copy from a paper script, trying to memorize a few lines at a time before looking up at the camera, since there were no TelePrompTers. Video didn't exist either, so footage was shot on film, "which took a long time to process". Film from overseas took up to a week to arrive, "so news was by no means instant in those days, other than news that you would read... off wire copy." These days, video cameras and satellites have changed all that. "You can literally switch from Toronto to London to the Middle East to Argentina... in a matter of a couple of (seconds)," Robertson says.

And not just the technology has changed... so has on-air presentation and the proliferation of newscasts. "I think (news) people are spiffier now, they've become more aware that news is something that can be a successful operation for television stations, in the sense that news can make money, so news programs are very popular."

After Winnipeg, Robertson spent two years in Ottawa, then moved to Toronto. He went on to anchor CBC's National News from 1970 to 1976. It's a coveted job among Canadian news anchors, and after

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Even as a child, Robertson was interested in radio and the programs he heard like Wayne & Shuster, Fred Allen, and Jack Benny. The eureka moment came when the teenaged Robertson stood under the CJCS radio broadcasting platform listening to the announcers as the troops, home from World War II, marched down the street to City Hall.

"I was told by the minister at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church... that I should really go into the Ministry because of the voice," Robertson says about his deep, resonant pipes, that were apparent even at 15. But a career in religion didn't interest him, and neither did sales. He worked part time as a shoe salesman while going to Stratford Central Secondary School, but told his manager he wanted to pursue a radio career. "You'll never make any money, and only one in a million gets anywhere," was the reply.

Nonetheless, the brash young 16-year-old Robertson went to CJCS and got a job doing anything that was required. "When I finished high school, luck dawned, because three announcers quit at the same time," he says. He knew the operation, and was suddenly working a twelve hour shift doing the Rise and Shine morning show, the Noon Run including commercial readings, the afternoon newscast, and Uncle Lloyd's Birthday Club. He was "busy at 18 years of age, from the get-go," and has never looked back. It was June, 1952, exactly 50 years ago.

By 1954 he had moved on to Guelph, then Windsor, where he started his 22-year run

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After Winnipeg, Robertson spent two years in Ottawa, then moved to Toronto. He went on to anchor CBC's National News from 1970 to 1976. It's a coveted job among Canadian news anchors, and after Robertson's departure the position was held by Global TV's Peter Kent, then CBC's Knowlton Nash, and now, Peter Mansbridge.

Robertson made the move to the private broadcaster CTV in 1976. Due to strict union rules at the CBC in those days, he says, "I couldn't write, I couldn't report, I couldn't actually sit down and do any of my own copy. CTV came along at just the right moment... because I had three or four grievances piled up against me at the CBC from one of the unions... and (CTV) said, 'come here, you won't have any of that.'"

Robertson says the money was good, but the real temptation was the fact that "I would have greater personal and professional growth at CTV than I could have had at CBC... Now I think they've changed a lot of those rules... because they knew that they had to come into the 20th century and get with it, because news in every respect was changing and the person out front had to be involved in the newscast."

Robertson reflects for a moment, then adds, "I can look back on it and say maybe I've helped some of my former colleagues over there, by making this move over here."

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He has now completed over 25 years as national news anchor for CTV. During that time, he has been voted Canada's most trusted news anchor by TV Guide readers 10 times, and Canada's favourite news anchor by readers of TV Times, the Toronto Sun and NOW Magazine. Robertson laughs at these accolades, and even seems a little embarrassed. "I just happened to come out as the most trusted, but I have no idea why. I think people get used to you, you're like an old slipper, you've been around so long," he says. "(But) you just try to do your job... the best way you can."

There have been other honours as well. Robertson has won three Gemini Awards for Best Anchor/Interviewer, the Radio Television News Directors' Association President's Award, the Canadian Association of Broadcasters' Gold Ribbon Award for Broadcast Excellence, and an induction into the CAB Hall of Fame. He was also awarded the Order of Canada in 1998. However, Robertson is equally dismissive of these kudos. "I don't worry about winning awards, I never have, I only worry about doing the job the right way, and if the awards come with it you appreciate that, but you can't say, 'oh, I've got to win a Gemini Award this year'," he says. But he does permit himself the small liberty of wearing his Order of Canada pin on his lapel as he delivers the news each night.

Besides awards and honours that "come with the territory", there's the Canadian tendency to make news anchors into the biggest celebrities around, as opposed to the traditional movie stars south of the border. "We've never had a star-system the way they've had a star system in the United States; I think that's why news people by their very presence... have become known, and people think of them as stars. I do not think of myself as a star. I have to perform some duties, so therefore I suppose part of what I do is performing, but I don't regard myself as a star, I'm just a guy who's around," says Robertson, in what I'm now recognizing as his trademark humility. Further removing the emphasis from himself, he is quick to point out that "I think we're developing (a star system) now, which is a really good thing... there are lots of shows now where people are getting better known."

One of Robertson's most memorable moments in television was when President Lyndon Johnson announced he wasn't going to run again, and made a 'plea for peace in Vietnam'. "I left out the critical letter 'L' in the phrase 'plea for peace'," laughs Robertson, remembering how his co-workers were rolling on the floor off-camera during his embarrassing moment on-camera. Another was "the landing of men on the moon in July of 1969. That was an extraordinary time, just to be a part of it, to be alive and see it happening was one thing, but to be there and help to interpret what was going on was an incredible high for a broadcaster."

Then, of course, "the greatest disaster I've covered (was) September 11th. I also was around for the Kennedy assassination, and it was big, but I think September 11th was bigger because the ramifications of September 11th are much greater; they affect us all and they are worldwide in terms of their intensity."

He almost didn't get to cover that story. Several years ago, Lloyd Robertson nearly retired, intending to give up the reigns to Canadian-born Los Angeles news anchor Keith Morrison. However, the feeling he was being squeezed out early by his successor, according to fellow broadcaster Knowlton Nash's book *Cue the Elephant*, led to Morrison's dismissal instead.

Now, retirement is no longer on Robertson's mind. "I still enjoy doing what I'm doing every day, I still enjoy coming in here, I enjoy talking about the news, I enjoy doing the news, I enjoy my colleagues around here, having fun and cracking jokes with them, and as long as I feel good about it, I think I'm going to be around for a bit."

As for the millions of Canadians who watch and trust Robertson each week, he will be welcome on air for as long as he chooses to stay there. With the surprising humility and gracious nature that are always present, despite his substantial professional achievements, it's no wonder he's occupied the top news position at CTV for over 25 years. I'm already making plans to interview him for his 75th anniversary

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