FEATURE

Alphonse Ouimet

Canada's TV Pioneer

JACK BRICKENDEN

J. Alphonse Ouimet, the man who probably contributed more than any other Canadian in bringing television to this country, died at the age of 80. He had been actively involved in the development of TV since the early 1930s.

To the general public Al Ouimet was best known for his years as president of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation from 1958 to 1967. He was a professional engineer, so his route to the number one post at CBC was through the technical end of broadcasting. First, he was a research engineer in 1934 for the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission, which predated CBC, and then CBC operations engineer, then chief engineer, assistant general manager, general manager, and ultimately president.

He was also the first Franco-Canadian to achieve the position of president of a national organization.

Within the trade he had made his name as an engineer and visionary long before that.

Radio Vision

After graduating from McGill with his degree in engineering, Al Ouimet joined a struggling young company called Canadian Television Limited in 1932. This was a small, under-financed organization that was working on what was commonly referred to in those days as "radio vision". Today we call it television. He was Research Engineer.

"Radio vision" in the thirties was primitive, but it worked. The prototype TV receiving equipment that the fledgling company produced for commercial distribution in Canada was designed for CTV (no relation to the present CTV) by young Al Ouimet, who was still in his early twenties.

"We produced in those early days a very coarse picture which showed just enough detail to barely recognize one's own mother on a full face close-up," Ouimet explained. The receiver operated on the mechanical system of scanning and the picture was in black and red. A revolving lens disc traced 60 lines on the screen, compared with the 525 lines of the modern TV receiver. It was a bit like looking at a picture through a half-closed venetian blind. The company hoped to use this prototype to develop and sell commercially.

At that time the different experimental systems around the world used a variety of dummies to test their signals. NBC, in the United States, had Felix the Cat. The British had a papier mache head of some kind. Canadian Television Limited couldn't afford a dummy, so individual staff members used to take turns as "test pattern" while the others worked.

Al Ouimet was always in great demand because he had something the others didn't have. A close-up of Ouimet's face revealed a gap between his upper incisors that was the perfect focal point for the TV tests.

"Not only am I one of Canada's first television pioneers," he used to say, "but I was certainly its first test pattern."

But the CTV of 1932 was too far ahead of its time. The shoe- string company was technically successful but lacked the money to finance the development and broadcasting of their TV signals in those early untried days, and they went broke. They were also up against the technically-competitive electronic system of TV scanning which had begun to outstrip the mechanical system. The limitations of the mechanical system had become apparent in Britain, which had run the two systems parallel for some time and had concluded that the electronic process was the one with the future.

Al Ouimet's early TV set still exists and has been on display at the Museum of Science and Technology in Ottawa. Today's electronic scanning system, of course, has far outpaced the early mechanical method, but it is still possible to produce a scanning signal on the old 1932 model.

Ouimet was often concerned that he would be given credit he didn't deserve in connection with the 1932 TV receiver. In a note he wrote to CBC's publicity head on April 22, 1964, he said:

"I note that I am credited for having constructed that receiver entirely. This is an oversimplification. While I did design this receiver from an electronic, electrical and optical standpoint, I did not construct it mechanically. This was done by an associate named Goodridge, and he would probably be hurt if he happened to come across our CBC publicity in this respect. I believe it would be more accurate if the caption in the booklet (re the CBC Broadcasting Museum) as well as the explanatory cards accompanying the receiver would simply state 'the set shown here was designed by J.A. Ouimet...'."

The CRBC

In 1934 Ouimet joined the CRBC, the forerunner of CBC, as a research engineer. At the time he was hired one of his stated areas of responsibility was to explore the development of television for the people of Canada. He was the perfect choice for this assignment and kept in close touch with the television development of many other countries. He was soon recognized as CBC's undisputed expert on the new medium.

When CRBC was replaced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in 1936 he was made operations engineer and charged with the responsibility of organizing the management of CBC's rapidly expanding radio production, transmission and facilities. He became CBC's chief engineer in 1948. He was also appointed coordinator of television at the same time, and gradually assumed full responsibility for the establishment of the national television service launched in Canada in 1952.

He became general manager in 1953, the youngest in CBC history.

The actual task of organizing and building two parallel national TV services, in English and French, was formidable. Because of its much greater complexity and size, the TV service could not be brought in as a simple integrated extension of the existing radio service. It had to be conceived and developed as a separate entity.

To do the job CBC had to quadruple its staff from 1,500 to 6,000. Expenditures also climbed from $12 million to nearly $50 million in the first five years of television. The entire organizational structure had to be recast and decentralized. Totally new departments were created and existing services greatly expanded.

Thousands of new personnel were hired and, as none were available in Canada with previous TV experience, all had to be trained in the complexities of the new medium. Also, thousands of Canadian artists and performers were developed for the new medium and its entirely new program techniques and concepts. Commercial policies were reviewed and radically changed as sales efforts had to be greatly intensified to help bear the increasing costs. Commercial revenues were increased tenfold in the first six years. With the new technology large production centres, transmitters and buildings had to be constructed.

J. Alphonse Ouimet had led the most complex, sensitive and controversial public enterprise in Canada through its most difficult years. These were years which Peter Newman described as "the distemper of our times" and which were marked by ferment in Quebec and instability in Ottawa, by the worldwide crises of authority and confrontation, and by the sudden emergence of the permissive society. In meeting this challenge he brought to the discharge

Alphonse Ouimet

of his duties a rare combination of talent, education and experience. His perfect knowledge of both French and English, his academic preparation and his continued interest in humanities and science, his broad vision, leadership and total dedication coupled with his passionate love for his country served Canada well at a particularly difficult time in its political, social and cultural life.

Reg Horton worked in CBC Engineering under Ouimet during the early radio days and was the first TV technical director for the English network when television came to Canada in 1952. He recalls the never-ending struggle to get enough money to do his job properly. "We needed technical books," said Horton. "We were forever being told that the budget didn't allow for this item or that item. I remember talking to Al about this problem and he said: 'Well, if one person gets one idea from one book it's worth it.' We had no trouble getting technical books after that. Al believed that we could always afford quality."

"His work was always marked by a firm belief in the independence of public broadcasting"

T.R. Ide, former chairman of TV Ontario described Ouimet as "a passionate defender of public broadcasting, of a second CBC channel... a towering figure in a period of technological and social change."

Al Ouimet served CBC and the Canadian public for 33 years, nearly half of it as chief executive (general manager and then president). He had planned and built one of the most important television broadcasting systems in the world, both in terms of its programming and its physical and geographical dimensions. He had brought together a highly complex public service organization of about 9,000 employees of two cultures and many diverse disciplines, with a yearly budget of two hundred million dollars. Over the years he had managed well over a billion dollars without a single budgetary deficit.

In paying tribute to Alphone Ouimet at the time of his death, the present CBC president, Pierre Juneau, said:

"His work was always marked by a deep attachment to the Corporation, and by a firm belief in the principle of independence for public broadcasting... a principle which he continued to defend even after he left public life."

In addition to his nine degrees and honorary doctorates, Al Ouimet was presented with nine decorations and awards as recognition of his lifetime of service:

Ross Medal of the Engineering Institute of Canada;

Archambeault Medal of L'Association Canadienne Francaise Pour L'Advancement des Sciences;

Julian C. Smith Medal of the E.I.C.;

Fellowship of the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers;

Sir John Kennedy Medal... the senior award of the E.I.C.;

Made Companion of the Order of Canada, Canada's highest decoration;

McNaughton Medal... senior Canadian award of the I.E.E.F.;

Special Award... Society of Motion Picture and Television Engineers;

Canadian Council of Professional Engineers Gold Medal.

Al Ouimet was a Life Member of the Corporation of Professional Engineers of Quebec, Senior Member of the Engineering Institute of Canada, a Fellow and Life Member of the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers, Member Titulaire de Comite International de Television, and Member International Broadcast Institute.

After he left CBC in 1967 Mr. Ouimet oversaw a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization conference on broadcast satellite technology. He was president of Telesat Canada from 1969 to 1980.

Pierre Juneau: "He could justly be called the father of Canadian television." Al Ouimet might have been too modest to accept such an accolade, but those who knew him and worked with him have no such reservation. ■