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Percy Saltzman - Then and Now

For fans of early Canadian TV, Percy Saltzman's name is a household word. In 22 years of weather broadcasts on the Global and CBC networks, his vigorous blackboard scribbling and animated presentations earned him a legion of fans and a place in Canadian television history.

A weather career was not a logical progression for a man who studied premed and worked as a typesetter. Fortunately, a friend convinced Percy "The Weather Service" was ideal for him. Once persuaded, he studied by day and worked at night to make a better life for his family. During his Service career in the forties, Percy did the occasional radio science program. So when he "heard there was going to be television" in the early fifties, he decided to pursue opportunities in the new medium.

Proposals to televise weather broadcasts met resistance because early program planners didn't think people would be interested. But Percy's luck prevailed. On September 8, 1952, he became the first person ever seen on CBC English Canadian television. Concerned that weather alone couldn't hold viewers' attention, the network decided he needed a gimmick. Percy started off the evening's programming at 6:45 p.m. with "Let's See", a 15-minute program co-starring his puppet "friends" Uncle Chichimus, Hollyhock and Pompey. (In

those days, telecasts ended at 11 p.m.) The four of them would do a little skit, preview the evening's line-up, then Percy finished with a weather forecast. Months later, once the network gained confidence in him, Percy was allowed to work as part of a news/interview show...minus furry "friends".

Early TV was full of glitches. To boost potential "sex appeal", the network bought him a toupee to cover his balding head. Viewers loathed it so Percy happily reverted to his natural look. Problems with glare from his spectacles were solved using frames with no glass in them. Letting the home audience in on the joke, he once scratched an itchy eye right through those phoney "glasses".

Saltzman says TV weather has changed dramatically since his day. Data came by teletype; an early form of FAX machine sent the weather map. Percy never used cue cards or teleprompters. Making his own analysis from Weather Service data, he spent hours preparing for each broadcast. He memorized data, carefully chalked in the weather map by hand and delivered his forecast under strict time limits.



Percy Saltzman in full flight.

Today, Percy Saltzman lives in Toronto with Audrey, his second wife. (Audrey says she knew her husband long before he met her - as a nightly TV visitor in her home for many years). Still recognized on the street by fans, Percy was the only North American interviewed recently for "High Pressure Heroes", a British TV program on TV weather's early days. Rumour has it there's a book in the works. We eagerly await the next chapter. Thanks for sharing your story with us, Percy!

