

A PROFILE OF PERCY SALTZMAN

What has become of Percy Saltzman, once foremost among Canada's best known weathercasters, and the first person to be seen live on Canadian television? Today he lives modestly in semi-retirement in Toronto, caring for his wife Rose, a stroke victim, and taking delight in the achievements of his son Paul, a film maker, and son Earl, a computer system designer. At 65 his wit, salty humour and ebullient style have not forsaken him, although his health has suffered somewhat lately.

For more than twenty years, beginning September 8th, 1952, the official opening of the CBC's English T.V. service, Percy's name was synonymous with the weather. His face became familiar in homes from Fort William, Ontario (now Thunder Bay) to Montreal, Quebec. His skill as an interviewer was recognized and first used on CBC's *Tabloid* show, then nationally as co-host on the CTV program *Canada AM*, then finally on a program called *Free for All* aired by CITY TV in Toronto. For many years he could also be heard each evening on Canada's largest radio station, CFRB, in Toronto. It was there that he stunned host Bill Deegan, the announcer with the deep brown voice, with a joke about cold weather which was developing across the prairies.

Saltzman, (deadpan): "Bill, I feel sorry for the donkey riders in Saskatchewan."
Deegan, (after an eloquently silent hesitation): "Donkey riders? In Saskatchewan?"
Saltzman: "Yes, it's so cold out there, they're going to be frozen to their asses!"

Percy entered the weather business more because he was looking for a good job rather than because of a particular interest in the subject itself. Actually he had planned to become a doctor. After completing his pre-med courses at U.B.C. in Vancouver with very high marks, he moved to Montreal in 1934 to attend McGill University. His courses in medicine didn't work out too well, so he dropped out, and in 1935 met and married Rose who was working in the dress trade. For a while during the Depression era, he worked in a factory operating a sewing machine. He quickly found another job as a linotype operator in Toronto and moved there on April 30, 1937, a date vividly impressed in his memory because it was the day of the Chicago Steel Massacre. In 1943, he heard from a fellow worker about the govern-

ment's urgent requirement for weather forecasters. Leaving his \$15 a week printing job, he became a wartime meteorological officer with the British Commonwealth Air Training Program (BCATP), the big push to train aviators for the war effort.

The young man who had been born one of four children to a Jewish family in Winnipeg, who went to public school in Neudorf, Saskatchewan, then to Vancouver seeking opportunity, finally had come full circle to a job which would lead him into the spotlight as a celebrity. At first sight, this task of forecasting the weather for air training flights, briefing aircrew, and teaching meteorology to student pilots seems an unlikely vehicle to propel anyone onto the screens of a million home television sets. But, when asked about how he came to be Canada's first T.V. weatherman Percy replied that his experience in presenting the weather provided him with the germ of an idea how to put it across to the viewer. He drafted a proposal for the CBC, went down to their studio for a try-out, and found himself hired to present a seven minute weathercast on a puppet show called *Let's See*. This was a program designed as a billboard for the remainder of the evening's activities, and was broadcast at 6:45 p.m. Prior to the official opening of the English TV service, the CBC had aired intermittent trial broadcasts, and because the notorious Boyd gang was at large, "Wanted" posters were aired as part of the trials. "On September the 8th., 1952" said Percy, "when *Let's See* came on the air just before the opening ceremony, and mine was the first live face to be broadcast, the people at home remarked that at last the gang had been caught."

Percy's evening activities caused a certain amount of friction with his regular employers, the Canadian Meteorological Service. As he puts it, "they didn't quite like the idea of an official weather forecaster mixed in with the puppets, so I understand they bitched heavily behind the scenes." After six months however, the CBC began putting news on the air, and started their first public affairs program called *Tabloid* which included a two or three minute time slot for the weather. This was the show which changed Percy Saltzman from a weatherman to a show business personality, and finally led to his involvement with ACTRA and a showdown due to his stand on the americanization of Canadian entertainment. Never one to mince his

words, he was quoted publicly in the early 1970's as saying that the biggest single agency for the americanization of the Canadian people was the CBC. In a somewhat bizarre turn of events, Percy claims that a window cleaner, who had been working one day at the CBC offices, called to say that he had overheard certain uncomplimentary remarks being made about Percy by CBC executives.

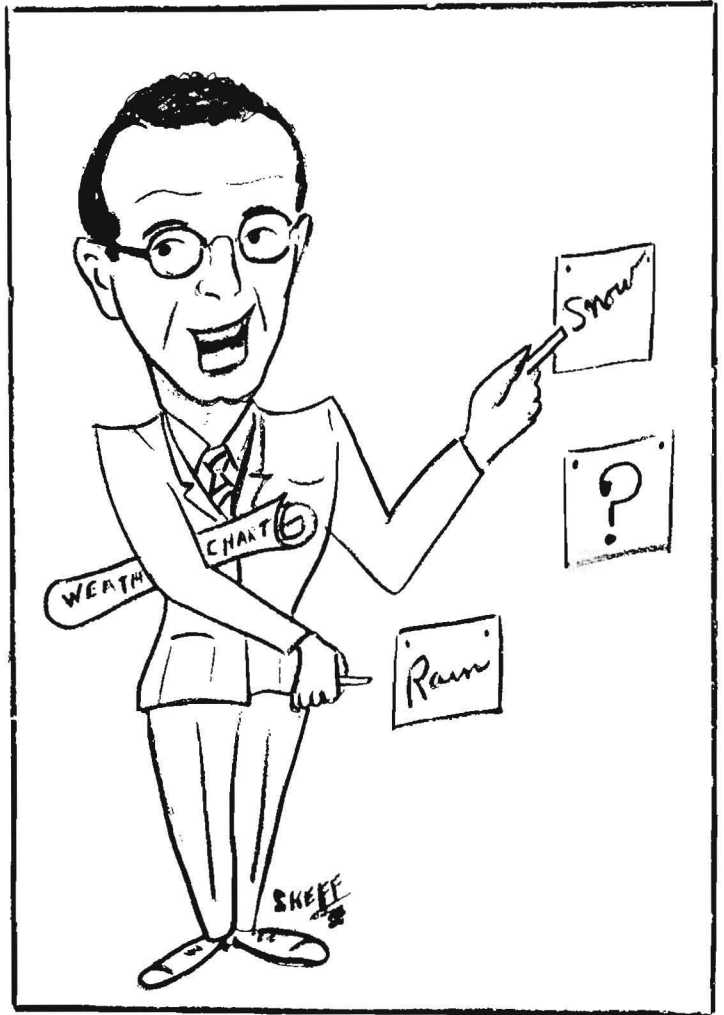
Preceding this feud though, were twenty good years of nightly weather and interview spots on *Tabloid*. Percy was sometimes called upon to add padding (when guests failed to arrive for example), and was expected to spin out whatever he had to do for any length of time. Producer Ross McLean, as a gag, decided one night to see just how long Percy could ad-lib. Unbeknown to the victim, it was announced to the viewers that "tonight ladies and gentlemen, we are going to let Saltzman run-on until he slobbers to a drought." Percy did his weather, then began looking around for his closing cue, only to see grinning faces. He quickly realized what was happening, and luckily was able to fall back on some reading he had been doing about satellites (a novelty at that time). Using his well known blackboard scribble, he began expounding on rockets, trajectories, G-forces and orbital speeds. After ten minutes he was just beginning to enjoy himself and could have gone on for twenty. "They finally got fed-up," he said "and then they took me off because they had other things to do. So it sort of back-fired on the guys, but it was lucky for me because if I had dried up and looked embarrassed, they would have had the big hee-haw in proving to the whole world that Saltzman could run dry."

Searching for a way to neatly cut-off the weather, he developed his well known signature of flipping his chalk stick into the air and then catching it. At the end of one program, the producer cut away just before Percy had time to catch the chalk, then the next evening, began the weather with the

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PHOTOS. Top left, instructor Percy Saltzman (front row, centre), poses with a graduating BCATP meteorology class in 1945. Top right, his famous TV flip of the chalk. Below, Percy muses in front of his weather-board after completing a report during the early days of television in Canada.





Top left. Percy Saltzman makes a spectacle of himself during a 1957 interview with Jayne Mansfield on the CBC program *Tabloid*. Top right. A Saltzman caricature drawn by CBC viewer J. V. Skeffington in 1953. Left. "A sexy forecaster" was the comment of the viewer who snapped this picture of Saltzman clowning on screen in 1955.

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chalk falling into his hands. The Saltzman style was rapid delivery, colorful words and wit. His blackboard became an instant chaos of chalk lines, and it was said the he finished his program with more chalk dust in the cuffs of his pants than on the board.

How About That was a science demonstration program that Percy developed and which ran for two seasons (1954 to 1956). He spent every spare hour in his basement dreaming up projects for the show. "Once, while standing in front of the demonstration table, live before the camera mind you, with a Van de Graaff generator working up a good static charge, I'm too close, not realizing my penis is right opposite the metal there. The next thing I knew, I got a heavy charge right through it. And on camera, you know, you can't do anything. I didn't let the public know, but I sure got a

charge out of them that I didn't want." Another embarrassment was the trick of allowing atmospheric pressure peel a banana. First, the skin of a banana is just barely separated into three. A piece of burning paper is put into a glass bottle of the right size, and the banana corked into the neck. As the oxygen inside is consumed, atmospheric pressure forces the fruit of the banana into the bottle while the skin peels down the outside of the glass. Said Percy, "I did that trick at home a dozen times. It worked perfectly. I went down to that studio, and there on camera live, do you think that damn thing would peel for me?"

In 1968, Percy decided to retire from the Canadian Meteorological Service and devote himself entirely to his television and radio work. While continuing the weather commentary for which he was renowned, he also conducted interviews and rubbed shoulders with the rich and famous. On the one hand, school children, given weather

assignments by their teacher, would place tracing paper over the TV screen to copy his daily weather maps. On the other, viewers could watch him interviewing people such as Jayne Mansfield or Rocky Marciano.

When a person, who has come to personify the weather as much as Percy Saltzman, retires after thirty years, what then is their attitude towards it? In reply, Percy said "when weather ended for me in 1973, finish! I haven't read a weather journal since, or even subscribed to one. I don't read the forecasts or listen to them particularly, or watch them on the air. If I'm interested in knowing what's happening, I look out the window. All the things I hated people to tell me when I was in the weather business."

Maybe so Percy, perhaps you have forgotten about the elements. But even after seven years of retirement from the TV weather-board, many people still remember you as Mr. Weather.