

Cable...

VISION OF THE PIONEERS

An Anthology by:
STAN THOMAS

*Carl & Hots &
Kandigun Hill
Phone 2904*

CHAPTER 34.

ROLF HOUGEN, CABLE PIONEER IN WHITEHORSE, YUKON

TERRITORY

One morning in May, 1986, CCTA pioneer E.R. Jarmain presided at a brief ceremony welcoming Rolf Hougen, President of Northern TV Systems in Whitehorse, Yukon, to the association's Honour list.

As Mr. Jarmain read the citation listing the accomplishments of the new northern member of the honoured group, Rolf Hougen was mentally recalling some of the highlights.. .and low points.. .of his 30 years in the cable industry. That official certificate, sounds very dignified: "In recognition of distinctive achievements and dedication which have significantly enhanced the ability of the cable industry to serve the Canadian public. But it wasn't always honour and glory!

Rolf Hougen worked with his parents in the establishment of a depart store in Whitehorse. He had just returned from his European honeymoon with his bride Margaret in the late summer of 1955 when together with a young Whitehorse lawyer, (now Senator) George Van Roggen, he travelled to Ketchikan, Alaska, to have a look at the new cable TV system there. It was built from scrap, had a single channel, and broadcast in black and white. Nevertheless, after the trip Rolf came home convinced it could work in Whitehorse. He travelled to Seattle to look at TV equipment; George Van Roggen and Erik Nielsen, another Whitehorse lawyer who later became the Yukon's longest serving MP and the Deputy Minister of Canada, negotiated a contract to use the Yukon Electrical Company's power poles in Whitehorse. They conducted a feasibility study based on an initial hookup fee of \$100.00 and a monthly user fee of \$10.00 for a single channel, broadcasting four hours per day. Rolf had contacted CBC TV and various film distributors regarding a supply of 16 mm film and that was pretty well as far as it went.

There were no vast hordes beating down the door, with money in hand, ready to sign up for cable service. So, it was decided that until there was an increase in the number of potential subscribers, and until more program material was available that, the cable project would be placed on hold.

A little flutter of interest was felt in 1956 when two technicians from Vancouver heard about the original cable idea and came up to Whitehorse. They talked to Rolf Hougen, who turned over the contracts and information that he had gathered and let them give it a try. Since Hougen's Department Store now known as The Hougen Centre sold Hi-Fi's, records and TV sets, they stood to gain a lot no matter who operated the system locally. Unfortunately, the two Vancouverites Roy Marshall and Doug Kasper soon ran into difficulties.

A rescue in the form of financial assistance came in 1958 when the pair persuaded the NHL star Neil Colville to help finance their shaky venture known as WHTV. Trouble arose again when Doug Kasper withdrew, and Roy Marshall died tragically. Neil Colville was forced to move up from Vancouver to protect his investment. Jack McGill, a hockey colleague of Neil's was a silent investor. Bert Wybrew who worked for many years at WHTV joined the organization.

Rolf continued his own involvement. If the cable system failed, some 300 televisions sold and financed by Hougen's Department Store would be useless. The buyers would have nothing to watch. The system was in its infancy. There was one little camera in Room 215 of the old Whitehorse Inn (now torn down) located at the corner of Second Avenue and Main Street. There were two miles of cable around the town. Bert Wybrew and Neil Colville climbed the poles and

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wired up subscriber's homes during the day and operated Northern TV Systems at night. They worked 16 hour days, seven days a week.

The first cable television station in Northern Canada never really had a "dry" run, namely because the hotel roof leaked like a sieve whenever it rained in the summer or the snow thawed in the winter. During these times the lone operator on duty had to keep moving buckets around to catch the leaking water. According to an article Whitehorse writer Don Sawatsky wrote in 1970, "the only dry spot in the whole room was the shower stall, where they stored their film".

Bert Wybrew was a former car salesman and had managed the bowling alleys downstairs at the Whitehorse Inn, he told Sawatsky "It's the type of experience you wouldn't want to undergo again, but looking back on it all, you wouldn't have missed it for all the world.. .it enriches a person's life, particularly the humorous aspects of it."

Wybrew's great sense of humour stood him in good stead many times. Being the only operator in the so-called "studio" had its drawbacks and a sense of humour was often needed. He was interviewing old time Yukoner "Buzzsaw" Jimmy Richards when he made the mistake of mentioning Yukon poet Robert W. Service. As usual it was a live broadcast, and Wybrew stiffened in horror as Buzzsaw snorted "That damned liar, damn liar. Imagine telling folks about Sam McGee bein' cremated. Damn liar. I knew Sam McGee well and he wasn't burnt. Imagine teachin' kids lies. Damn liar".

There was no one else in the studio to turn off the camera, Wybrew recalls, so all he could do was sit there and wait for the tirade to end and the irate phone calls to begin. At that time there was a real Sam McGee in Whitehorse, as well as the fictional hero from Service's poem, as most Yukoners knew. So everyone who watched the program thought it was a great interview!

With never more than two people on duty at any given time, it meant that one operator was alone in the studio and the other person was out repairing a line, fixing a hook-up or trying to sell the ads.

By 1960 business was so bad, they had dropped back to broadcasting four hours a day, but they had a tiger by the tail and couldn't let it go. One early "log book" which was really just a school scribbler, covered a four hour program period with the simple statement "Camera on window". This meant that the operator had simply aimed the camera out the second floor office window and was showing viewers at home the people going about their business Cifl Main Street; in and out of the bars, in and out of the government liquor store behind the hotel..live entertainment, most certainly but not greatly appreciated by the unwitting.

There was live coverage of sports events, however. Bert Wybrew's favorite was always announcing "In just a moment we will bring you bowling from the Inn Alleys right here in Whitehorse. Then he would unplug everything, grab the one and only camera, the voltage regulator and a microphone and dash down the stairs into the bowling alley often trailing yards of cord. He would hook everything up again as quick as he could and start live broadcasting. He gave a ball-by-ball account of every bowler most of whom were so nervous in front of the camera they couldn't throw a strike if their lives depended on it!

At news time, with a shortage of manpower, Wybrew recalls that often, one man was alone reading in front of the camera. Under such circumstances emergency measures were required. Bert came up with a small piece of wood, rigged to hang on a nail over the lens of the camera. A piece of string was attached to the wood which ran down to the drawer in the news desk. Then, when they were ready to present the news, all the announcer had to do was set the camera on a predetermined spot, switch on the sound, quietly tip-toe over to the desk, sit down and slide the desk drawer open, which, in turn swung the little piece of wood away from the lens. A real Mickey Mouse set up, but it certainly worked!

Despite its problems, WHTV wasn't off air during scheduled time for more than five hours in the first ten years of its existence. TV experts who dropped by to see the tiny station all declared "that it won't work". But Bert Wybrew just replied "it's a good thing we didn't know that in the beginning because if we did.. .we wouldn't have tried it".

Neil Colville was a great guy and a fantastic hockey player, but not the greatest reader. He had a tendency to get a bit rattled when he was on camera. He also had a terrible temper. One continual problem Colville had was remembering to flip on the sound switch before he started reading the news. He would also always take the phone off the hook so no one could interrupt the newscast. As a consequence his audience some-

times had to sit in front of their television sets and watch him move his mouth, silently. It was truly a great show because everyone knew what the fiery-tempered Colville would do when he realized that no one had heard him. Sure enough, when he reached down to switch the sound off and found it off already, he would pound his fist and mouth some blue comments, then the sound would click on and he would say “Heh heh. I guess we had better try that again”.

Actually, the viewers enjoyed their personal involvement in those pioneer days. They got used to watching delayed broadcasts of tapes such as Christmas parades in June. Sports events were sometimes months and even years late before they got on the air at WHTV. The 1957 Grey Cup classic reached the Yukon and Yukoners in 1959. The football films they got of other Canadian games were solely used by the teams themselves as game films for study and there was no play-by-play commentary. Sometimes, the station’s operator would do the commentary as best as he could.

WHTV truly pioneered. It was the first cable system to present local interviews, news, weather, and live coverage of social events in the town. This was only made possible because with 400 customers in 1964, they finally broke even. It was a champagne day but they couldn’t afford to buy champagne, so beer had to do.

A year or two later, Rolf recalls going to Toronto to ask for CBC’s help with Kinescopes offered on a six month delay basis. Thus began their operation in Vancouver, where an operator recorded programs shown in Vancouver which were then shipped by truck up to Whitehorse to shown approximately one week later. About the only regular program they paid for in 1966, according to Ken McKinnon, now the Commissioner of the Yukon, but a pole-climber, lineman, ad-salesman in the early days of WHTV was the “Untouchables” which they showed every Sunday night.

Instead of seeing Don Messer celebrate Christmas in June, programs now came in on a one-week delayed basis. Continued progress was being made and soon sports, current events and news were being sent by C.P. Air and shown in Whitehorse only 24 hours later. News shown in Vancouver at 11 p.m. on a Monday night was seen in Whitehorse at 7:00 p.m. Tuesday evening.

As a result of the dramatically improved service, more customers signed up. The WHTV account book began using black ink and the little station finally began to grow. They were able to buy some new equipment. The studio had by then moved to a larger space in the basement of the Whitehorse Inn, where empty egg cartons covered the ceiling for soundproofing, and a wooden kitchen table with three straight backed chairs provided all that was needed for live interviews. In the centre sat the TV host, flanked by guests who sat stiffly, elbow to elbow, staring into the spotlight, and the camera. After a few experiences like that, any one of those early operators could have taken over the National’s desk with no problem!

Bert Wybrew went on to become Mayor of the City of Whitehorse, where presiding over Council meetings was a cinch. He later retired to Vancouver and Ken McKinnon took over as Manager.

In the fall of 1969, WHTV moved to new studios on the second floor of Hougen's new building at Fourth and Main, together with their radio station, CKRW. It was a whole new world. What had begun with a total outlay of some \$8,000 worth of equipment had now become an inventory of well over \$100,000; including 6 video machines, two video Rovers, three studio cameras, eight monitors and a 16 mm projector. In 1970 there was a total staff of nine full-time and part-time people at WHTV. Cable hook-up now cost the customer \$25.00 plus a monthly charge of \$15.00. The number of channels had increased from one to five. It was actually beginning to look like a valid professional operation, but there were still plenty of opportunities for local kids to come down on Saturdays and learn how to fill in as weekend operators. Almost anyone with a program idea was given a chance to try it.

There had been "local origination" of one kind or another (even if it was just goldfish swimming in a bowl in front of the stationary camera) ever since 1958. Now WHTV became the first cable system to cover live "question period" in the Yukon Legislative Assembly. This was long before the House of Commons bared itself to the TV cameras. WHTV set up in the City Council chamber and carried entire Council meetings usually with no operator to change the view throughout the three hours. They were on hand to record election campaign meetings; "Rendezvous" the Yukon annual outdoor carnival, outdoor events, dog races, parades and can-can dancers. There was a daily one-hour phone-in show, a Story Hour lady, Consumer's Affairs program, dramatizations of Yukon History and religious broadcasts. Community service was the basis for nearly all programming. The Red Cross, the Cancer Society, the Salvation Army, every service club in town paraded in and out of the studio, telling their story, asking for support, and reporting on results. It was all grist to the mill.

Rolf Hougen's commercial radio station, CKRW, in 1969 was the first radio station north of the 60th parallel. By that time, Rolf was the majority shareholder in Northern TV Systems. He was very fortunate in the quality of the people who joined the staff in those early days; Rod Wheeler, according to McKinnon, was a genius of a technician. George Steiger was a cable engineer who later moved to St. Louis, Missouri and then Chicago, Illinois and became very successful as a cable operator himself after becoming a "Northern Wizard". Barry Mitchell, another early staff member, went on to greater projects in Vancouver.

When they made the big move from the basement studio at the Inn of the second story of the new broadcasting building, Ken McKinnon recalls how they all worked feverishly to establish a duplicate set of wires so that no interruption of programming would occur. WHTV went off-the-air at midnight Saturday and was broadcasting from

the new studio at noon on Sunday.

WHTV was operating up until that time, under a Communications Licence. Using CBC Kinescopes, buying some film, recording Vancouver programs on video then shipping them North, using some local live programming and commercials, the station was all things to all people. Then, the Broadcasting Act loomed up over the horizon.

In 1971, in Regina, Rolf B. Hougen, President; Ken McKinnon, Program director and Bud Hoyles, their engineering consultant, appeared before the CRTC with an application to amend the cable television licence for Northern TV Systems (WHTV) in Whitehorse. They wanted to receive U.S. TV broadcasting, and also of course applied for renewal of their licence to continue cable TV. No opposition had been filed. The men asked to expand their station's capacity to a 12 channel broad-band system to meet the regulatory requirements. Eight program channels were to be offered; one for CBC/TV Frontier package (to be delivered by Anik satellite by January 1973); one channel for CT' channel 8 from Vancouver; one channel for local origination and another for educational programming on Channel 8, the PBS Channel from Seattle. One channel would be reserved for the Yukon Department of Education and two for programming from the U.S. stations KOMO, KING or KVOZ. One channel would be for community service, information, weather etc. The system would carry AM station CKRW and one channel of FM background music. Rolf Hougen said "these amendments to the WHTV licence had been made necessary by the changes and rapid development of Broadcast TV policy in Canada during the previous six months". The target date for the commencement of these services was set for September 1972, with a full/time/live service from CBC on Telesat, Canada's Domestic Satellite System, to start January, 1973.

The Yukoners told the CRTC hearing that when they began WHTV the CBC had not even discovered the North. They were pioneers. By recording video tapes in Vancouver they were, in fact, installing distant head-end facilities that provided a very similar service to the present microwave systems serving Vancouver. They said the Yukon was distant and quite different from other areas of Canada; what is standard in the south was not necessarily applicable to the north. Therefore special consideration was needed.

"Whereas news from the world and the rest of Canada is required, we believe that local news using quick and simple production techniques showing people and events is essential and we would not be doing our job in the community if we did not put emphasis in this field". "This is not because of recent CRTC directives" they said, "it is what we have been doing successfully for many years". They continued, "We live in the community and we believe we know what the local people want, but in order to retain a maximum number of viewers, with the coming of satellite TV we are asking for broadening of our program service. This results in maximum customers producing a profitable operation, which in turn permits us to involve ourselves even more in the community".

Advertising had been part of WHTV's revenue source since 1958. Under a clause in CRTC policy guidelines permitting the selling of ads under "exceptional circumstances" Hougen emphasized that his operation had costs above and beyond those of any conventional. CAN system in southern Canada. These included some \$15,000 per year to fly video tapes daily from Vancouver to Whitehorse. The recording operation in Vancouver cost a further, \$25,000. Maintenance costs in the Yukon, where climatic conditions can vary from 40 below zero to 40 above in a 24 hour period; higher salary structures in the north and even the Broadcast News service, costing \$715.00 per month in Whitehorse, (whereas most stations paid about \$250.00 per month) all added to a higher operating cost for WHTV.

Advertising income for the year ended September 10, 1975, totalled \$35,896.00 of which local ads contributed \$11,871.00.

By 1977, Rolf Hougen was getting interested in the possibility of satellite delivery of TV to other parts of Northern Canada. WHTV had grown to 12 channels of colour TV plus local productions. By August of 1979, he had submitted a "Down to Earth Proposal" for the use of satellites to deliver broadcasting signals, with particular emphasis on the requirements of northern and remote areas to the Department of Communications and the CRTC. The submission noted that since the early 70s there had been domestic satellites in Canada, such as Anik, but these were little used. The U.S. was ahead in transmitting via satellites but were providing unauthorized service to Canada. Northern and remote areas were getting some of these services but the only Canadian service was provided by the CBC. Rolf Hougen proposed a package of Canadian signals (minimum requirements in extension of basic services) and a combination of American satellite signals thereby making fuller use of ANIK systems. He told the Hearings 'The North has traditionally been the proving ground for new communication concepts and innovations, and again stands ready in this role'.

Rolf commissioned a consulting company, Gemini North, owned by Pat Carney who was later to rise to national political prominence to carry out economic and engineering studies. If Hougen's proposal were to be implemented, it would also change DOC policy regarding VHF, permitting "over the air cable" systems to develop in addition to regular cable systems.

Following the 1979 proposal, the government appointed the Therrien Committee to examine extension of service to northern and remote communities. In the meantime, Hougen put together a group of broadcasters from most Canadian regions for the purpose of applying for a licence to deliver four Canadian TV services and seven radio services to northern, remote and under-serviced regions of Canada.

In late 1979, at a meeting in Montreal, Rolf Hougen presented an outline of his concept, at a joint Board luncheon of the CCTA and CSN. The Directors were skeptical and critical of the new plans since they felt it would not work at \$1.00 per channel per

month. But it was clear (as Hougen noted in memos later) that the majority of the Directors found the concept interesting and would themselves move into that territory. For several months in the fall of 1979, Hougen had travelled from one meeting to another, in Edmonton, Toronto, Hamilton, Vancouver, with the CRTC, Telesat, CHCH, BCTV, CSN, CITV, CCTA and the Rogers group. By the end, having failed to reach an agreement with the cable industry, he invited Mr. Charles Allard of the City of Edmonton, Ray Peters of BCTV in Vancouver, and Stuart Mackay of CHCH in Hamilton to join with him to launch a joint undertaking. Later, Phillipe de Gaspé Beaubien joined the group.

On March 1st, 1980, at a special public meeting in Whitehorse, chaired by M. Therrien, Canadian Satellite Communications Incorporated or CANCOM as it is known today, made its presentation to the CRTC. Its President, R.B. Hougen said “residents of northern and remote communities have been denied a choice of alternate Canadian TV and radio services far too long.” Meanwhile, nearly 100 unlicensed earth terminals had been set up and were filling the void. “Unless some action was taken” he said, “there would be 300 in the next year or two”. There was a need to provide a Canadian alternative to US satellite reception.

The new Company offered a proposal to establish a Canadian satellite TV service designed exclusively to serve northern remote and underserved communities. The four principals, Hougen of Whitehorse, Allarcom Broadcasting of Edmonton, BC Broadcasting of Vancouver and Selkirk Communications of Toronto were preparing a formal proposal to be presented to the CRTC in Ottawa on March 25th, 1980.

They confirmed their plans to uplink 7 radio services (from eastern to western Canada) with full TV program services from BCTV, CITV, CHCH and French programming from CFTM-TV in Montreal. This would provide four, fully balanced Canadian TV program services, and minimize the time zone differential problem. CANCOM proposed uplinking Indian and Inuit multilingual radio program service in cooperation with native people, when such material became available.

One year after the Ottawa hearing in April 1981 the CRTC granted CANCOM a licence, for its \$21.8 million venture. The Yukoner who sparked it from the beginning, Rolf Hougen, was the first President and major share-holder. CANCOM had beaten out a host of competitors, “the big guns in the east” such as Global, Rogers, Crossroads, and MTV systems.

Throughout 1981 and 1982, Hougen was kept busy addressing business groups across Canada, giving interviews to trade magazines and making presentations about CANCOM to anyone who would listen. It was all very gratifying, the publicity was great, but unfortunately it wasn't putting money into the CANCOM coffers. Months of delay in obtaining licences for hundreds of member communities across Canada, meant CANCOM had to provide services before revenue began trickling in.

By December 1983, the corporate head office of CANCOM had been moved to Montreal and public shares had been issued. The estimated start-up costs of \$21 million had risen to \$40 million. ABC, NBC, CBS, and PBS had all been added to CANCOM service. Early in 1984 Rolf Hougen sold some of his shares. to BCTV. The following year, Selkirk, Allarcom and Telemedia followed suit, making BCTV the major shareholder. Ray Peters of BCTV took over as Chairman of CANCOM, with Hougen continuing as a Director and as a member of the Executive Committee.

By 1985, CANCOM was serving all of Saskatchewan, including Regina and Saskatoon. By March of 1986, their service covered Manitoba, including Winnipeg. Two months later in May, CANCOM announced Direct-to-Home service, (DTH) and were marketing TSN, The Sports Channel. In Newfoundland, 151 communities had hooked into CANCOM. Across Canada, one million households were on CANCOM'S lists and as the annual report noted, "the cash flow turned positive".

As Bruce Parkinson pointed out in his May 1988 CABLECASTER article on CANCOM, he wrote; "When CANCOM'S income, cash flow and operating income levels for its history are graphed, the result looked like a V with its right arm extending further upwards, reflecting its recent profitability. In the four years, money flowed from the firm like a spring runoff from a mountain - to the tune of \$35 million." CANCOM'S then President, Andre Bureau, recounted that in the early days, "he sometimes had to go to the bank in person and plead with them to cash CANCOM pay cheques"

Behind the financial woes of the company was the fact that CANCOM required expensive satellite transponder space in order to have a product to offer; but there were several other obstacles that needed to be overcome. The infrastructure was not yet in place to receive the product; the regulatory process was unprepared to deal with the onslaught of applications and paperwork and an equitable, logical, pricing scale was not yet developed.

As Sheelagh Whittaker, Senior Vice-President and Chief Financial Officer (now President) told CABLECASTER IN 1989, "We had signals on the bird but no subscribers. The meter was ticking while everybody was figuring things out."

Once again the unsung heroes were the engineers "of the chewing gum and baling wire variety" who came up with remarkable solutions to the problems of supplying cable systems in communities of 75 households or less. From those little headaches to monitoring by remote control a broadcast signal they couldn't see in their Quebec Control Base (because they added two signals from Seattle and the "footprint" was Western Canada only), gives people some idea of the range of problems and innovation required to solve them.

“Once the laughing stock of the business community as it plummeted deeper and deeper into debt, CANCOM is now a symbol of the entrepreneurship and innovative spirit which still flourishes in this land” wrote Bruce Parkinson.

Two of the pioneers who began it all have gone onward and upward; Rolf Hougen became Chairman of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce in September of 1989, and his old colleague, Ray Peters, is now President of Western International Communications Ltd., CANCOM’S largest shareholder. Commenting on the new Chamber of Commerce chief, Peters told the Financial Post •’It was the vision of Rolf Hougen that got us involved in that project. Because of Hougen, people in remote communities have a service that we in major metropolitan markets take for granted.”

But through all the top-level conferences, trade missions to the capitals of the world, luncheon speeches across the country and interviews from coast~to-COaSt, there must be times when Rolf Hougen, the boy from the Yukon, fLOW a grandfather of 7, looks back with longing at those simpler times in WhitehorSe.

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As Bert Wybrew told Don Sawatsky (the writer) 20 years ago, “we had a program called “Rippling Rhythms” which played easy-listening music. We would set up the camera so it showed the Rippling Rhythms sign through a gold-fish bowl. The first time we tried that, one of the oldtimers phoned in. He was pretty excited “My God! What’s happening down there?” he asked I told him “Oh boy, have we got problems here today! The roof is leaking and there’s water all over the place!” “Yeah” the oldtimer replied. “I can see it on my screen and fish too!”

That 1955 vision of Rolf Hougen to cable Whitehorse; the innovation of many associates; their determination; that one camera and one projector sure started something!