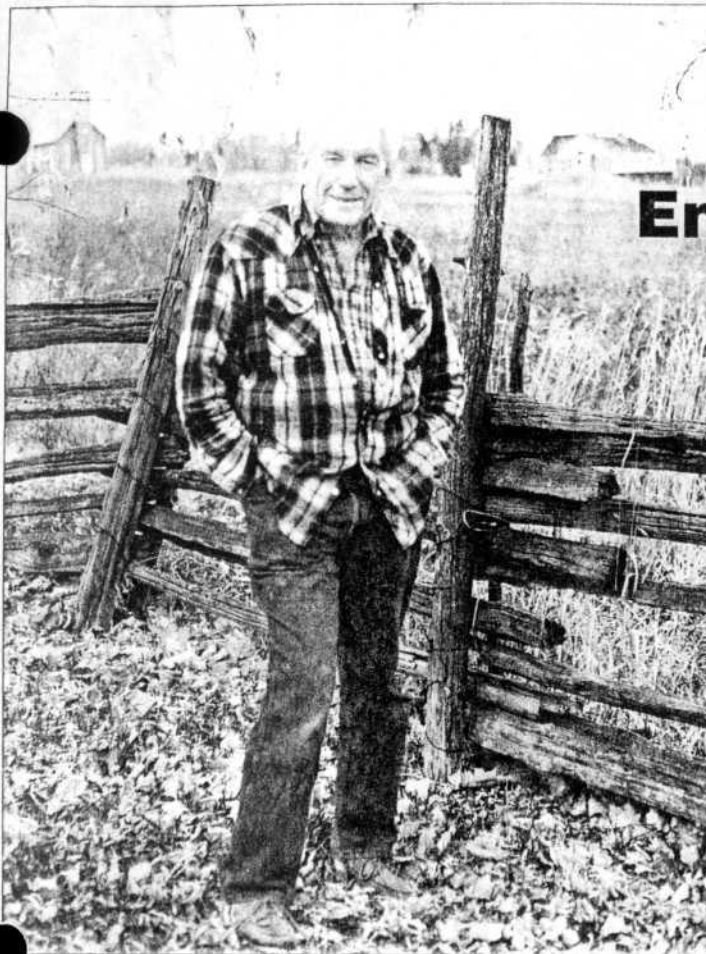


Roy Bonisteel: Enjoying his rural roots

by Ruth HOWARD



The renowned writer, broadcaster and television host enjoys the rustic setting of his old farm home near Trenton. In the background, left, is the old Johnstown church he has restored for community events.

Photo: Ruth Howard

A popular television or radio show can quickly turn a broadcaster into a well-known personality. As host of the widely watched program *Man Alive* on CBC television from 1967 to 1989, Roy Bonisteel enjoyed great popularity. He circled the globe for his interviews with world figures, and had a weekly audience of one and a half million. Under his leadership *Man Alive* became one of the most respected current affairs productions in Canadian broadcasting. The show won Bonisteel two ACTRA awards: the Gordon Sinclair Award for Excellence in Broadcast Journalism, and the award for Best Television Host in Canada.

But it is not just for his broadcast career that Bonisteel is quickly recognized wherever he goes. In 1994 this tall man with ruggedly handsome features and a shock of wavy white hair received the Distinguished Canadian Award for his contribution to Canadian literature and humanitarian pursuits, as well as to broadcasting. As well, Bonisteel has many honorary doctorates, and was recently named a member of the Order of Canada.

Bonisteel is first and foremost a writer. He admits freely that his writing ability led to his career in broadcasting.

"I always felt I could write. In school I excelled in composition, grammar, literature, spelling. I seemed to have this knack of putting words together."

He credits his mother as being the source of his literary skills. "She was always reciting poetry, even when she was doing housework. Mom knew the works of famous poets by heart. I used to be just enthralled with her reciting. She even did a pretty good job on the accents in Scottish poetry. And I remember the dramatic way she recited *The Highwayman* and *Horatius At the Bridge*. Even as a baby I was hearing this poetry, so poetry was the first kind of literature I knew."

Bonisteel was the 10th and youngest child born to a hard-working farm family during the Great Depression. He could read before he started school, and as the skill grew he read everything he could find. During his childhood and adolescence there was no public library accessible to him, and it was a challenge to find enough books to read. By the age of twelve, he was an avid newspaper reader, and his burning ambition was to become a newspaper reporter.

While Bonisteel was in high school the war was still on and farm help was scarce. The 15-year-old drove a farm truck, collecting the big milk cans to be taken to the local cheese factory in the mornings before he went to school. Long hard working hours cut into his studies and the young Bonisteel became increasingly unhappy with his situation. After a year he dropped out of high school, went to the newspaper office in Port Colborne and announced to the publisher: "I want to be a newspaper reporter."

"Well now, it takes a little more than just wanting to be."

But the convincing lad was given a chance and soon proved his worth. A few months later, he was hired by *The Intelligencer* in Belleville, and eventually, the *Trenton Courier Advocate*.

"I used to do a lot of stories from the air base (CFB Trenton) where something was always happening. I was there one day when a seaplane came in and crashed on the base. The pilot was killed. The Belleville radio station wanted the story, but until the military could do their investigation, I was the only one who was free to talk to the radio people. So the reporter interviewed me. I did a little clip for them and they put it on the 6:30 p.m. news. The next day the manager of the station called me and said that I had a good voice for radio. He offered me a job."

Public interest in Bonisteel grew steadily. So did his own