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Final sign-off looms for veteran broadcaster

By [Stephanie Waddell](#) on April 24, 2009



Photo by Vince Fedoroff

WATCHING HISTORY FROM THE MICROPHONE - When Ron McFadyen, seen in CKRW's studios this week, first signed on the air with the station, Pierre Trudeau was in his second year as prime minister, Richard Nixon occupied the White House, and the Beatles were still together. McFadyen's voice will disappear from the Yukon's airwaves in a week.

The voice that launched CKRW on an early November morning in 1969 will sign off from the station for a final time at the end of next Friday's 5 p.m. newscast.

Ron McFadyen is retiring after about a half-century broadcasting career that began at the age of 15. That's when he started hanging around a Cranbrook, B.C. radio station until officials with the broadcaster were persuaded to hire him.

It was a career that would see him move to Alberta and Saskatchewan before arriving in the territory on July 9, 1969 - 11 days before Neil Armstrong walked on the moon - to begin work getting the new private radio station started in Whitehorse.

At the age of 66, McFadyen says he is ready for retirement. He is looking forward to focusing on his family, doing work around the house, walking his dog and getting supper ready for his wife, Cathy, who is still working.

"The stars are aligned," he said in an interview Thursday of his pending retirement.

McFadyen actually began his working life in the sixth grade doing deliveries for a pharmacy so he could have money for extra-curricular activities.

Radio was among those interests he had as a young man, not just in getting on the airwaves, but also in how the equipment worked, building his first "short wave radio" when he was in high school.

That was back in the days of soldering wires together, adding speakers, seeing what spare parts from broken TVs you could get from local stereo stores and reading up on electronics from magazines, he said as he recalled his first experience constructing a radio in his spare time.

"So I had this piece of equipment and I was having a devil of a time making it work - and back then, you're dealing with high voltages when you're working and tubes and all that sort of stuff - and I think it must have been just like Alexander Graham Bell.

"I had this chassis and I had this wire all the way out to the kitchen where my mom and dad were and then suddenly, I heard their voices," he said. "I thought, 'Holy Cow, this thing actually works!'"

He later started hanging around the local radio station - CKEK - until they eventually hired him for shifts from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. through the week and weekend sign-ons.

That job led him to his career - and degree in "practical" - in radio, taking him initially to another radio station in Cranbrook, then on to a number of stations before he learned of the job with a new broadcaster taking to the air in Whitehorse.

"I didn't even know where Whitehorse was," McFadyen recalled with a laugh.

"I looked up stuff in the paper and there were two channels of black and white TV, Kentucky Fried Chicken, but you know (it's) the land of the Midnight Sun and something new."

He packed up his 1961 Volvo, filling it to the roof with his belongings and headed north, marking his July 9, 1969 arrival date in the dust on his dashboard.

Whitehorse would become home for McFadyen though, as the broadcaster reported the territory's history to radio listeners throughout the Yukon at both CKRW and the CBC.

That first morning, the CKRW building was full with people, like Hougen's owner Rolf Hougen, who had risen early and come down to witness the birth of a new radio station going to air at 6 a.m.

The next morning, McFadyen remembered, he was alone for the early-morning broadcast.

More than a few of those 6 a.m.-to-6 p.m. workdays during the first couple of years at CKRW took their toll.

Around 1971, McFadyen left the private broadcaster to take a job at Murdoch's gem shop, offered by his friend Mike Smith crafting jewelry.

Smith had noticed McFadyen's handiwork when they were out snowmobiling one time and offered him the job.

"I was burned out," McFadyen said of his broadcast career at that point.

It was time for a change, and the job at Murdoch's offered something new with the chance to tromp around the territory's gold fields on occasion to look for gold that could be used in the jewelry.

"I've seen large peanut butter jars full of gold nuggets," McFadyen said.

He just couldn't keep away from the radio business though, especially when a job opened up in the Whitehorse offices of the CBC in 1973.

McFadyen had always wanted to work for the national broadcaster, and though he didn't get a job there when he auditioned in the early 1960s, this time around, he did.

"I just loved working in radio," he said.

It wasn't always easy though, especially during strike action in the early 1980s, when McFadyen and others were on the picket line for a few months.

There's some things you just don't forget, McFadyen said, noting some of the comments made to him and others about the programming being better when they were on strike and so on.

When they finally returned to the air, those same people would call to get their community announcements on the air, he said.

McFadyen would remain at the CBC until 1996, reading the local news in the mornings and later informing Yukoners about how their athletes were doing at local and Outside events.

He became one of the first Whitehorse reporters among others at the CBC to travel to each of the Arctic Winter Games starting in the mid-1970s.

It was during an Arctic Winter Games in Yellowknife that he was joined by volleyball fans in listening to a gold medal match.

Rarely getting to listen to his own work during the Games, he managed to catch coverage he had done at one point. He was sitting in a car listening to it when a few people came over and asked if it was indeed the gold medal match. As the coverage wrapped up, he remembered, the listeners cheered for their team.

It was also covering sports that the energetic McFadyen learned how to interview children, one of the most rewarding parts of the job and with good reason.

Among his favourite memories in his job was being told by a parent about a young child who sat at the breakfast table hunched over his bowl of cereal until a report of his soccer game the night before came on.

The youngster began sitting up and listening, a wide grin spreading across his face as he heard the interview McFadyen had done with him.

On more than one occasion, the reporter would be questioned by his wife about why he came home with wet, grass-stained pants after a day of work where he

had just interviewed kids.

After this long in the industry, McFadyen is ending his career interviewing the children of children he spoke to years ago.

His work has also seen him interview the likes of Prime Minister Stephen Harper, the late CBC broadcaster Barbara Frum, singer Gordon Lightfoot and even a Playboy bunny over the years. Asked about the stories that stick out in his mind, he mentioned the strike by Yukon teachers early this decade.

At the time, the striking teachers were protesting outside the legislature, the chanting so loud it could be heard inside the government building.

McFadyen called the radio station to play back an interview with then-premier Pat Duncan, followed by a live feed with Paul Nordahl, then the president of the Yukon Teachers' Association.

In the background of his interview was the teachers' chants.

"It must have sounded pretty cool," McFadyen said, his excitement for live radio clear.

While radio provides an immediacy, live radio provides that at its best, and that's what McFadyen enjoys most about the media.

In 1996, he was one of eight people at the local CBC station to leave the corporation amid downsizing after he was offered a severance package - two months after he was diagnosed with leukemia.

"I was just devastated," he said.

It is a type of leukemia that is there, but not active, and now McFadyen makes an annual trip to B.C. for a check-up.

It's something that's made him focus on living for today and hasn't kept him from anything.

He enjoys a long list of extra activities like volunteering and running in the Klondike Road Relay, volunteering in the annual Kluane Chilkat Bike Relay and continuing his work with the Yukon Amateur Radio Association, which he helped start in the 1970s.

He also volunteers with Sport Yukon.

His efforts have been recognized on a number of occasions by organizations, most recently with a nomination for the Volunteer of the Year Award in the city for his work with the amateur radio association.

After his time with the CBC ended, he went to work at Radio Shack until a job opened at CKRW in 2000 and, once again, he just couldn't stay away from the radio business.

He was actually off of work for a few days on arguably one of the more newsworthy days into the territory's history when a Korean Air Jet, diverted from Alaska, was accompanied by Canadian and American fighter jets when it landed in Whitehorse on Sept. 11, 2001.

The flight was believed to have been hijacked, and much of the downtown was evacuated.

"The community panicked," he recalled.

What impressed him though was the Yukon government providing for the health needs of passengers on the plane, which was forced to sit on the runway of the airport, he said.

Over the years as well, McFadyen has learned to cope with Yukon conditions like the cold. At one point, he wired a hard-hat so it could be connected to radio equipment he could then keep in his jacket so it didn't freeze.

After decades in the business, McFadyen doesn't get nervous going on the airwaves. He has been complemented by former Whitehorse broadcaster and producer Les McLaughlin for never missing a broadcast when he had to phone it in.

Where his nerves kick in though are during those community events he's emceed in front of groups of 900-plus.

Still, he's taken on the role many times, providing the voice of countless festivities around the city.

Along the way, he has had the support of his wife, son Troy and daughter Suzanne.

"They're such a crucial part," he said, noting the hours he's been able to put in during the evenings covering community events have been in a large part thanks to his family's support.

More than once, McFadyen recalled his career with one line: "It's been fun."

After next Friday though, his voice will sign off one last newscast as he begins his retirement.

There's little doubt he will be busy as he continues to volunteer with the radio association and Sport Yukon where needed.