

My mom, Irv Weinstein and me

BY JIL MCINTOSH

I don't often get choked up over television personalities, but I must admit I wiped away a tear when Irv Weinstein retired from Buffalo's Channel 7 on New Year's Eve.

Irv was WKBW's anchor for almost 40 years and a fixture in our family for just as long. We always watched two newscasts each day, and although we lived in Toronto, one was always *Eyewitness News*.

It was probably because we seemed to spend as much time in Buffalo as Irv did. At least once a month, my mother would bundle me, my aunt and grandmother into the car and drive there to do some serious shopping. This was back in the days when prices there were half ours, and our money was around par or even — for just a little while — a couple of pennies higher.

My mother would wear her old, ratty clothes and carry a plastic bag instead of a purse. These would be discarded in the motel room and she'd wear her purchases back over the border. I tend to suspect that the customs officials turned a blind eye more often than she actually fooled them, but she took great pride in thinking that she had.

In the motel, as at home, we'd watch Irv on television. I was a child and not really all that intrigued with the news. But I was fascinated with Irv because he knew Commander Tom! Yes, he was practically best friends with the man who brought me my daily dose of cartoons and the birthday club on *Rocketship 7*.

Oh, yes, and the fires were exciting. I've often said that a typical Irv opening would go like, "World War III has just started, there's a missile heading straight for us, but topping tonight's stories, a three-alarm blaze in Cheektowaga!" Buffalo seemed to be always on fire when Irv was

in the chair.

I never realized just what fires were like until I found myself in one. We were on a shopping trip, heading along Genessee St. My mother filled her bright red Dodge Monaco with gasoline at a Mobil station — I still remember the huge Pegasus logo outside the store. After she did, the car didn't run properly.

It stalled at three lights. At the third, Mother turned the key, and suddenly what seemed to be steam poured out from under the hood. I thought the car was just overheating, but then Mother yelled, "Get out! It's on fire!"

A huge crowd had gathered, and someone called the fire department. They came quickly enough, but the fire wasn't extinguished until the car was damaged beyond repair.

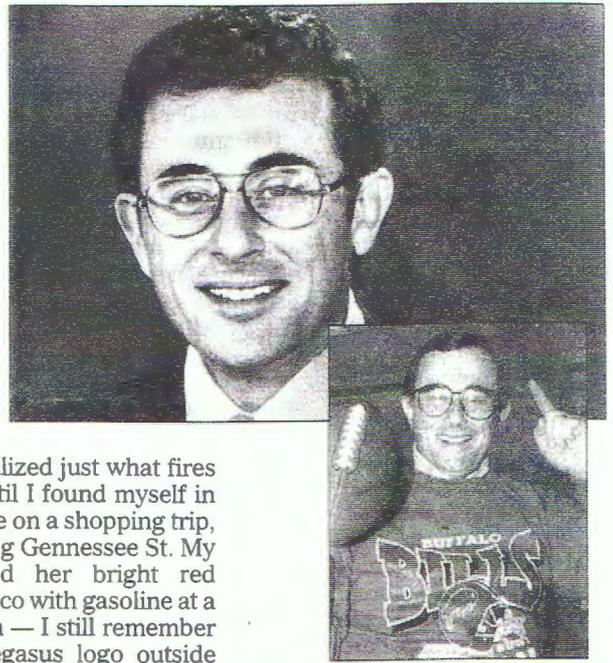
After they'd left, after the police had taken all the information and we were waiting for a taxi, Mother spied the call-box.

Buffalo back then still had a few fire call-boxes. They were glass boxes with little silver hammers, and you broke the glass to summon the fire department. Ever since her childhood, Mother had longed to pick up a hammer and smash a call-box.

She would never break one for no reason, but she'd never lost the desire. And here she was, 10 feet away from one, with a genuine excuse to smash the glass, and she'd hadn't seen it before it was too late. To the end of her days, she lamented her only chance to fulfil her childhood fantasy.

At the rental agency we got another car. The three insisted on finishing their shopping, and then we went back to the motel. As we always did, we turned on *Eyewitness News*.

There was Irv, in his chair,



TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTOS

THE IRV: Newscaster Irv Weinstein, top, is shown as he looked during the hey-day of *Eyewitness News* in the '70s, and, above, in a more recent picture.

looking straight at me. He took a breath, and said, "In tonight's news, firefighters battle a car fire on Genessee St." And there was our bright red Monaco, engulfed in flames, on Channel 7 *Eyewitness News*.

It didn't fix anything — we had yet to get home, and Mother faced the task of collecting from the insurance company and buying a new car. Still, she perked up considerably when she realized that Irv Weinstein had made her a celebrity. Even if she only appeared running though a shot trying to get a policeman's attention, she was still on TV. In fact, she was so thrilled that she actually forgot the call-box for a couple of minutes.

The call-boxes are long gone, as is my mother. And now Irv has left the airwaves as well.

Thank you, Irv. Thank you for all the broadcasts. Thank you for inadvertently making a long-ago, difficult day a little easier.

And if you're ever by this way, do you think you could get me Commander Tom's autograph?

Jil McIntosh lives in Oshawa.