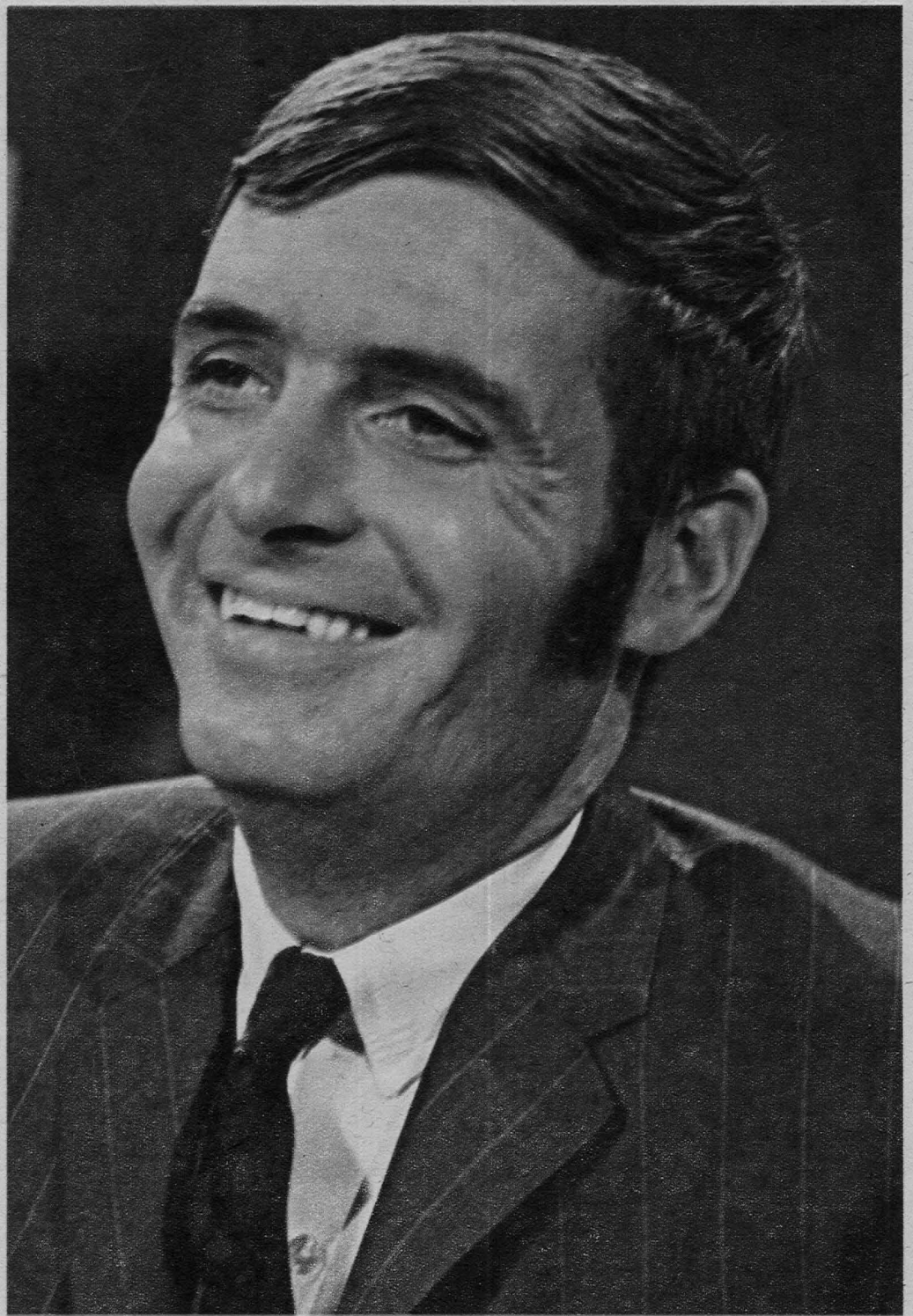


The host of a daily CBC-TV program in Montreal, Seven On Six, the author displays the sideburns he has carefully nurtured and defended over the years.



Frank Prozak — Weekend Magazine

Canadian journalist Peter Desbarats sported a fine set at a time when they were rare and people thought them weird. Across the land the clean-cut look was the rule. Ignoring pressures, threats, homicidal barbers, he fought the lonely fight...and won

The War On Sideburns Is Over

By Peter Desbarats

I'VE KNOWN for some time that the war was over.

For more than a year, they've been acceptable in the younger, faster fringes of such professions as law and architecture. Early in 1968 there was a sudden proliferation among CBC announcers in Toronto, age notwithstanding. The last bastion to succumb was the federal cabinet — a beautiful pair of silver icicles on Transport Minister Paul Hellyer.

But victory is far from sweet, you'll be glad to hear, Mr. Allison. I feel today like a Visigoth in Rome, a crusader in the centre of Jerusalem, Cas-

tro in Havana or the first Negro in the White House. Where do I go from here?

In the kingdom of the clean-cut, the sideburned man was a revolutionary; in the hairy world of 1968, I have been overtaken by my own success. A has-been at 35.

Like an old general slumbering over his bloody memoirs, I dream of the battles of '56, the first year that I carried my sideburns across Canada like twin black flags of anarchy. I remember the sunlit morning when the editor of The Winnipeg Tribune, Carlyle Allison, declared that my sideburns

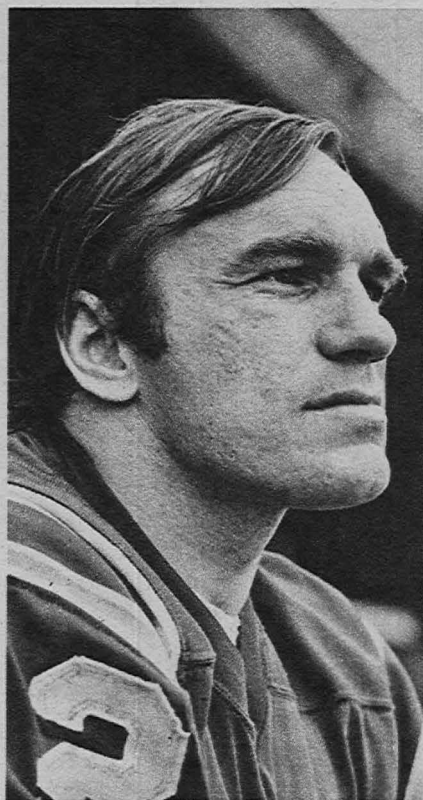
were ruining the bright image of Canadian journalism on the western plains. I remember my response. (Undoubtedly he doesn't, so I can quote myself with abandon.) "The sideburns," I replied, "are only the remnants of last year's beard."

He went deathly white to the crown of his head and the subject was never again raised except in the form of baleful glances. As far as I know, this was the first victory for the sideburn in Canada and — little did I suspect it — the dawn of a new era.

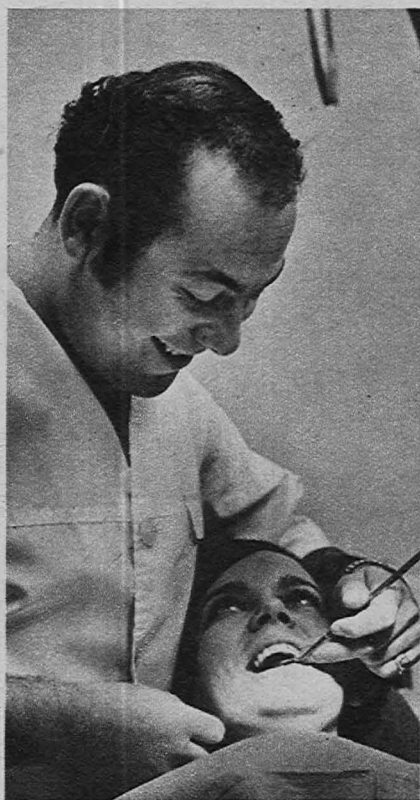
My own discovery of the sideburn was by accident. The beard I men-

tioned was acquired in 1955 during sojourns in a series of cheap Spanish hotels whose hot water systems all went on the blink, after years of faithful service, as soon as I checked in. Preposterous as this sounds, I was inclined to believe it after observing that no Spaniards had beards. This meant that they had (A) a constant supply of hot water or (B) hormone insufficiencies. Theory B, as I soon discovered, was too dangerous to discuss so I cultivated Theory A, my beard and my own private drought.

By the time I left Spain, the beard was rapidly obliterating all traces of



*Bobby Taylor,
Toronto Argonauts*



*Ray Starr,
Toronto dentist*



*Dr. H. J. Donsky,
Toronto physician*

face. It was like a muffler of unkempt raccoon. In Paris, when I visited a barber's salon, he refused to touch anything unless I included the beard in the deal.

"If you walk out of here with something like that," he said, "I might as well close up shop and go to Algeria."

An hour later, my bland North American face had been completely transformed by a narrow Satanic beard which swooped down the length of my jaw to a lethal point in front of my chin. It was my first lesson in the effective use of hair, an art unknown to my generation at home. Parisian taxi drivers stopped trying to cheat me. Women looked at me with a kind of fearful distaste, but at least they looked.

A few weeks later I was in London where beards, even then, were fairly common. But I grew tired of maintaining the beard — it took twice as long to shave every morning — and one day, taking a firm grip on my razor, I started to remove it.

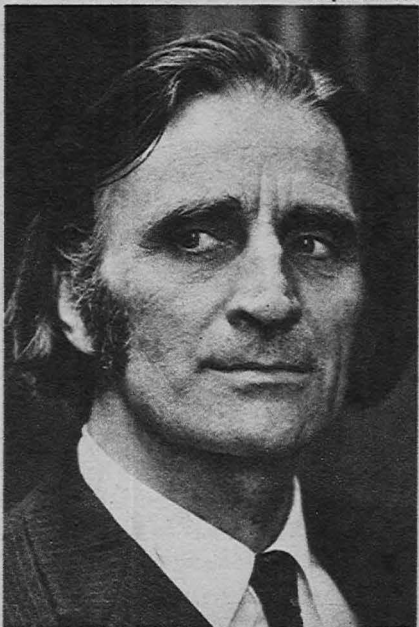
Soon I was down to a Mexican moustache. No . . . that didn't work. Off came the moustache, and the only remnants of my beard were two vertical strips of hair in front of my ears.

I looked at them curiously. For a moment, I could hardly recall the old Victorian term: Sideboards? Sideburns? But they weren't bad. A bit of the old Satanic look was still there. No maintenance problem apparently . . . in fact, they reduced the shaving area. They seemed versatile. Still experimenting, I left one sideburn as a rakish mutton-chop sweeping under the cheekbone and sliced down the other one to a conservative squared-off pillar. The length obviously could be varied a bit to allow for local prejudices. Easy to grow: You could just



*Herb Gray,
Liberal MP for Windsor West*

Capital Press



*Charles Fisher,
Hansard reporter in Ottawa*

let them sneak down the sides of your face. And no one else, at least since Valentino, seemed to be wearing them.

In short — EUREKA!

As long as I remained in England, the sideburns were unobtrusive among thousands of local eccentricities. But in Winnipeg they stood out like 80-storey skyscrapers. In the west end of Winnipeg, at any rate.

Now and then a sideburn could be discovered along the crummier reaches of Main Street (now urban renewed) where the Indian male, with difficulty, tried to retain shreds of his original masculinity. In the nice sections of town, where the battle had been lost generations ago, the clean-cut look was the rule. Everything above the ears was for hair, everything below for face.

Although I didn't fully realize it at the time, the pressure in Winnipeg must have been tremendous. Photographs from that era indicate that, at intervals, my sideburns shrunk until they barely extended to the ear-lobe level. Today this wouldn't even be defined as a sideburn but at that time, in western Canada, it was enough to attract cold stares in every main street from Burnaby to Kenora. People would ease up only after learning that I was of Montreal origin.

"French?"

"Not since my grandfather."

"But it's a French name?"

"Certainly."

"Thought so. Well, never mind, how about having a drink and letting our hair down . . . ah, yes . . . well, how about having a drink?"

Back in Montreal in 1960, the sideburns began to descend and broaden out at the base. The big problem in those years was to find a sympathetic barber. The initial visit to any barber

Continued on next page



Nick Auf Der Mar,
CBC-TV, Montreal



Jean-Pierre Gysin,
Montreal artist

Frank Prazak — Weekend Magazine

THE WAR ON SIDEBURNS IS OVER

Continued from preceding page

shop was sheer torture, and I'm not referring only to small towns. Some of the salons in Montreal's largest hotels were as anti-sideburn as one-chair efforts in rural Ontario.

Sometimes I suspected that there was a tonsorial conspiracy. My persecution complex became so enormous that I used to crouch in the chair like an Olympic sprinter on the blocks.

"Just a trim, please."

"That's all right, sir." (Click.

Bzzzzzz.)

"Hey! Put those down! I want scissors on the side and I want those sideburns left exactly the same length."

"But sir, you know we always use the electric . . ."

"I know, but if you would just try it with scissors . . ."

"You'll have to take your hands away from the sides of your head, sir."

Eventually I found an Austrian barber in Montreal who didn't have homicidal tendencies toward every sideburn he encountered. During those days, in the early 60s, I was travelling a great deal and Willi could usually tell where I had been.

"*Mein Gott*, Halifax again!" he would cry, or: "*Ach*, you got the same man in Edmonton."

Foreign trips weren't as tough. In Pakistan, I once put on such a fierce preliminary performance that the barber did nothing but comb everything this way and that for half an hour, click his scissors in the air and sprinkle perfume on top. I was so relieved that I gave him a tremendous tip. In the bowels of a large London hotel, I once discovered a fossilized Victorian relic who fell on the sideburns with little croaks of delight as if old Dizzy

himself had suddenly appeared in his chair. I also went to Japan at that time but . . . that's funny . . . I can't remember whether I had a haircut or not.

The last battle opened in the fall of 1966 when I started to appear regularly on CBC-TV in Montreal. By this time, mine were no longer the only pair of sideburns in the city, not by a long shot, but the response during the first weeks of the program indicated that I might as well have worked in full Beatle regalia. When the camera tilted down one evening to reveal, below the trousers of my grey pin-stripe suit, a pair of half-Wellingtons, the protests reached a crescendo. For about three months, in sporadic burst, irate taxpayers wrote letters to the CBC complaining about the sideburns and boots, both of which threatened the values built by our national broadcasting service during years of hockey, football, Bonanza and Don Messer.

Today there remain only isolated pockets of resistance. A private Montreal TV station fired a sideburned announcer last summer. The Montreal Alouettes bounced a sideburned and medallioned Negro during the past season. High school principals occasionally go on hair-cutting campaigns (when the students let them use their offices). But on the whole, fashion has overtaken the sideburn this year with a rush. It's almost ready to join the grey flannel suit.

Where do I go from here? There seem to be two possibilities: Let everything grow, shave everything off. But the pop singers have done the first and Yul Brynner the second. I suppose that I'll stick with the sideburns for the original reason: I like them. If they and I last long enough, perhaps we'll totter through this Victorian revival to wave the old banners once again in a new era of clean-cut conformity. ◀