

Boilerman earns degree 15 years after late start

By Pamela Sword
London Free Press

Pat O'Bright pursued a university education in the same way the tortoise raced the hare.

In the end, the slow-but-sure tortoise beat the bunny. Friday, 15 years after he took his first class, O'Bright, 58, stepped on stage during convocation ceremonies at the University of Western Ontario to receive a bachelor of arts from King's College.

"There was no great need to finish in a shorter time," said O'Bright, who lives at the King's College campus doing repairs and running the boilers in his job as a stationary engineer.

Living on campus helped him earn another distinction — in his 1½ decades of courses, he never missed a class. "I live right here. I never had a good excuse."

Besides not having an excuse, O'Bright credited his perfect attendance to another reason. "I knew the value of school. I had a motiva-

tion when the class night came." When he was growing up, he was "never a successful student." After completing Grade 9 in 1946, he quit school and went to work at Firestone Textiles in his home town of Woodstock.

Iron foundry and machine shop jobs followed and in 1949, the same year Newfoundland joined Confederation, O'Bright set sail as a merchant seaman. After travelling the world for seven years, he returned to Canada and 26 years ago went to work at King's College.

Influenced by his father's attitude toward education and the example of his predecessor at King's College, who returned to school to become a teacher, O'Bright decided to take a few classes.

First came studies at Central Secondary School. He had wanted to take two courses but, in those days, it cost \$10 for four subjects. A teacher persuaded him to sign up for four and drop the ones he didn't like.

O'Bright finished them all. More high school courses fol-

lowed and then university, after he was challenged by a professor. "He kept saying, 'When am I going to sign you up?' I said, 'How about right now?'"

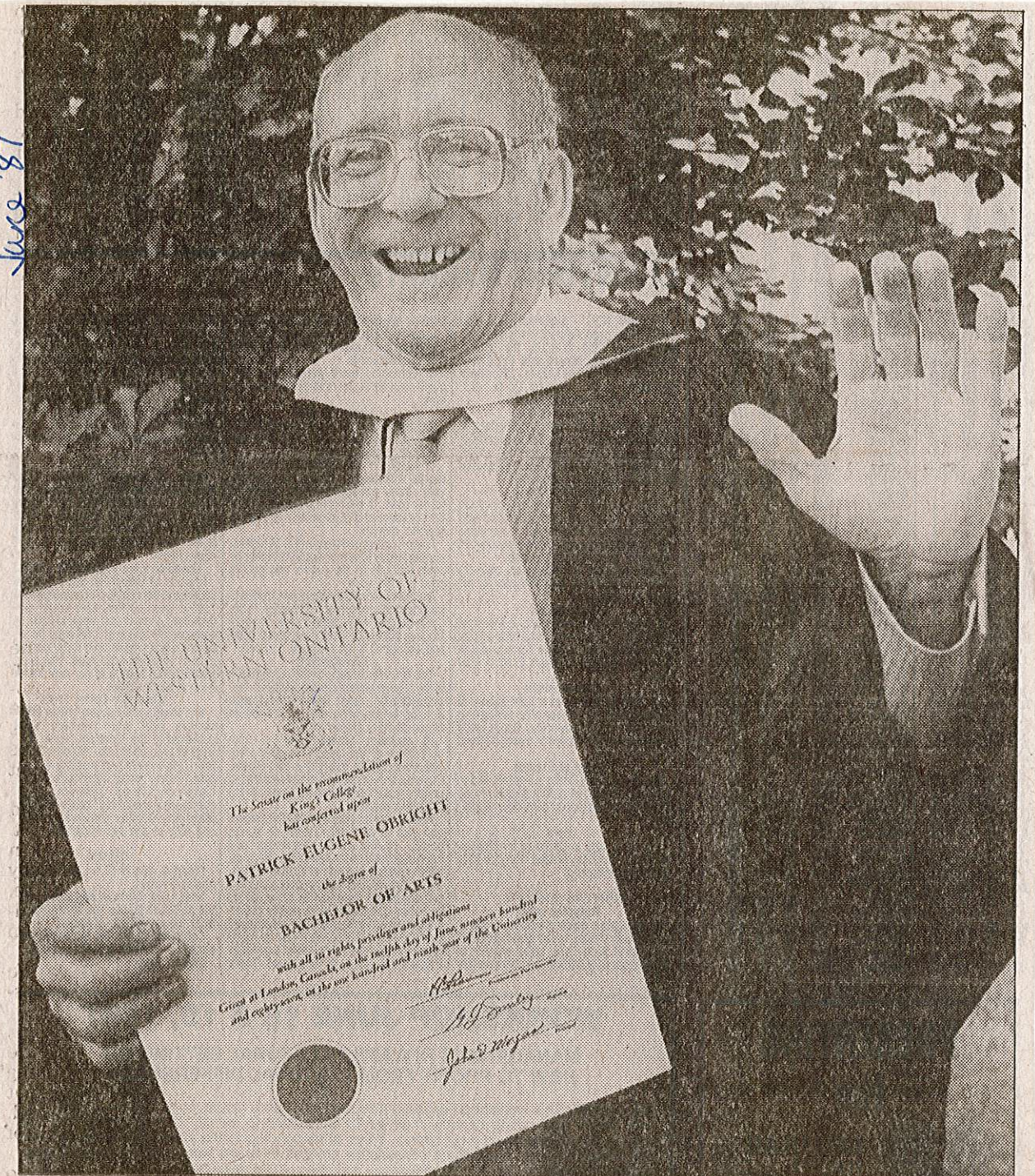
In all his years at the school, O'Bright was never treated differently because of his age.

"Students were willing to treat you as a student. Even when I meet students today, they treat me as a student. We went through the same anxieties about passing and failing."

O'Bright's interest in arts subjects grew from his concern for a sister with Down's syndrome. "I really wanted to know about social work to know how the system worked."

Of his courses in social work, psychology and religious studies, he is at a loss to choose a favorite. "They were all valuable to me."

O'Bright doubts he will take more courses but plans to continue learning. "I want to read. If education does nothing else, it makes you want to read."



Ken Wightman/London Free Press
Pat O'Bright was all smiles after receiving his bachelor of arts degree, earned after 15 years of study, even though his name is spelled incorrectly on his diploma.