

UWO CONVOCATION

Londoner earns music degree despite disabling lung disease

Music has been a lifelong hobby for Harper Pettypiece, so when he could no longer play the oboe, he pursued a music history degree.

By Noel Gallagher
Free Press Education Reporter

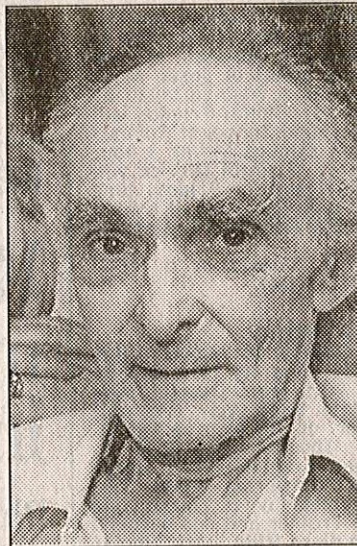
Harper Pettypiece will receive his bachelor of arts degree in music at a private ceremony in his London home today after missing his class convocation at the University of Western Ontario on Wednesday.

The short delay means little to the 74-year-old retiree who has taken 10 years and battled a disabling lung disease to earn his diploma.

"Music has been a lifelong hobby of mine, and I liked the idea of going back to school," says Pettypiece who just ended a 10-day hospital stay for treatment of the emphysema that has handicapped him the last 14 years.

Because of emphysema, Pettypiece can no longer play his favorite instrument, the oboe, endures frequent hospitalizations — seven during the last year — and must constantly use a portable, oxygen breathing apparatus.

"But the biggest obstacle was just getting up every day," he says, referring to his music history and theory studies. "I only took one or two credits a year but they always seemed to involve 9 a.m. classes."



Harper Pettypiece couldn't make it to Western to receive his diploma, so the ceremony came to him.

Pettypiece's musical career dates back more than 60 years to his hometown of Forest where he joined a boys band. "I was a coronet player but the bandleader was an oboist and wanted me to play the oboe," he recalls. "I didn't even know what an oboe was." Pettypiece joined the Canadian Navy and while stationed in England during the Second World War, met and married Joan, a Liverpool native who's been his wife for the past 51 years.

When the couple settled in Forest in 1947, he joined the staff of his family owned newspaper, The Forest Free Press, eventually becoming its owner, publisher and editor.

After selling the paper in 1971, the Pettypieces, who belong to the Bahai faith, spent more than four years in Iceland, where he was chairman of

the Natural Spiritual Assembly of Iceland and seven years in England, before returning to Canada in 1982.

Four of Pettypiece's seven children and several of his 14 grandchildren will attend today's diploma presentation ceremony.

"He's so humble about getting his degree but we're all so proud of him," says his wife Joan. "It's a great achievement."

True to his wife's description of him, London's newest university graduate had a parting message for The Free Press reporter and photographer who visited Wednesday: "I hope you're not going to make too much out of this."