

Northumberland County's Friendly Giant

“Look up. Look waaaaayyy up.”

Not just “a Friendly Giant”, but *The Friendly Giant* called Northumberland County his home for over thirty years. **Robert “Bob” Homme** (pronounced “hummy”) was born in Wisconsin in 1919. His Norwegian parents were both high school woodworking teachers. During World War II, he was active in the Air National Guard, and promoted to Staff Sergeant, although he never saw combat. The study of psychology was one of his assignments. At the end of the war, he was classifying the servicemen being discharged - one of which was to later become a famous actor and director, but at the time of his discharge, he was Captain John Huston. During his military years, while stationed in New York City, he purchased a recorder, and took it along with him during his travels. It was to become his signature instrument, although he also played clarinet and saxophone.

By 1953, he was dreaming of creating a children’s program, and his wife Esther suggested a “friendly giant”. Homme’s dream came true in 1954 when “The Friendly Giant” was launched on Wisconsin’s educational television station, where it ran until 1968. Canada’s CBC also produced and telecast the show from 1958-1986. The simplicity of the show was legendary. It was never scripted, just outlined. Homme played three types of recorders. Wife Esther created the first giraffe neck for the puppet “Jerome”, using a beach towel adorned with blue spots, and finally attached to the custom-made giraffe head. The choice of giraffe was obvious to Homme: “The only logical character a giant could speak eye-level with was a giraffe. Jerome was 16 feet tall – my height.” A second puppet was a rooster, which belonged to his 4-year old son, Richard. Richard had already named the rooster “Rusty”.



To bring the puppets to life, a good puppeteer was required. His U.S. puppeteer was not coming to Canada but luckily, Homme heard a CBC radio program called “Out of This World”, which was written and performed in multiple roles by Rod Coneybear. “Rod was like a gift from Heaven. He could act, had imagination, and could play more than one part. He was ideal.”



Source: Friendly Giant Facebook page
<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100047391682801>

The set also came about in a remarkable way. Back in Wisconsin, he was working on a children's bedtime program, and the set was composed of very small props. While watching one of his own shows, he realized that his own hand rearranging the tiny furniture made him appear like a giant in comparison. Homme created another small set with his giant theme in mind, and the result was "The Friendly Giant" opening set that was never to change during the show's run.

Music was a huge part of the show. Homme selected "Early One Morning" as the theme, and was determined to treat his young audience to as many types of music as he could.

There were over 3000 15-minute episodes. He insisted that the first two minutes of each show be the same opening sequence that became a beloved invitation into his famous castle. In 1984, the CBC cancelled the show, and a huge uproar ensued. A stream of angry letters to the CBC, and questions in the House of Commons followed. The result was a short reprisal of the show for a few half-hour specials the same year. Homme's own opinion was simple: "I hate to see anything end, but I like repeats myself. It's like a good book – you don't read it just once."

Homme's minimalistic style also extended to not desiring exorbitant financial gains from the show. He refused to license his image or the show itself, beyond two CBC albums and one book. Rod Coneybear said of his friend, "He could have become a millionaire with Friendly Giant toys and other spinoffs, but Bob wouldn't commercialize his bond of trust with the kids."

It was in 1958 that Bob Homme first discovered Grafton, Ontario, during his drives east from Toronto and various trips to Expo 67. Imaginative road names such as "Shelter Valley" intrigued him, and in 1969, he and Esther purchased 50 secluded acres north of Grafton. The next year, a cedar log cabin stood on the site, and later evolved into a two-storey home with coach house, high on a hill and "with an excellent trout stream". With one of his neighbours, pianist Shelagh Purcell, he headlined at the Grafton Village Inn on more than one occasion. For the first twenty years, it was a summer home, but from early 1999 onwards, it was his premiere residence.



Source: East Northumberland's News
Source The Independent
March 11, 1999 – "Looking back with Grafton's Friendly Giant"
<http://empressbooks.com/archives/Homme.html>

He also joined the local Rotary Club and, with fellow Rotarian Wally Reid, formed “Time Share” a group that played in local nursing and retirement homes.

His friend, artist James Lumbers, painted Homme and his wife in several of his works in the “Moments in Time” series, which were infamous for featuring a faded image from the past in a present day setting. His image appears in “Lucky Strike”, “Gone Fishing”, and “Billy Nine Fingers”, in which he and wife Esther are a couple seated at a table listening to a honky-tonk piano player. Homme’s own Springer spaniel, Molly, appeared in “Old Friends”.

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Bob Homme (left), a Rotarian known to Canadians as television’s “Friendly Giant,” accepts congratulations after being invested into the prestigious Order of Canada by Governor General Roméo LeBlanc (right).

Source:
[The Rotarian](#)
February 1999

In the early 1990’s, he officially became a Canadian, having held dual US-Canadian citizenship prior to this. On November 2, 1998, he was invested into the Order of Canada as a Member. The ceremony took place in Grafton, with the arrival of then Governor General, Romeo LeBlanc who came to him, rather than have him travel to Rideau Hall. Homme had become too ill to travel. Following this investiture, he was able to use “CM” after his name as an official “Member of the Order of Canada”. Sadly, Bob Homme passed away on May 2, 2000, at eighty-one years of age, following a three-year battle with cancer. He is buried in Fairview Cemetery in Grafton, Memorial ID is 12566. His wife, Esther, joined him there in 2017. (Photo from CemSearch.ca)



An outdoor memorial service took place beside the Grafton Town Hall, and speakers included Rod Coneybeare, his puppeteer who brought Jerome and Rusty to life. Coneybeare himself passed away in Lindsay on September 5, 2019, at the age of 89. Inside the Town Hall, following the service, many local residents were able to look at wonderful displays of the original Friendly Giant set, complete with castle and miniature furniture, and all of his many recorders, silent and beautiful, on a long table.



Source: https://www.cobourgmuseum.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Homme_Panel_Compressed.pdf

“Look Up – Way Up! The Biography of Robert Homme”, by Grant D. Fairley, is an authorized biography available on Amazon, and was published on August 29, 2016. Mr. Fairley visited Bob Homme at his Grafton home on many occasions as he researched his book.

Sources:

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- History of Canadian Broadcasting – [Robert Homme \(1919-2002\)](#)
- Toronto Musician’s Association – [Robert “Bob” Homme](#)
- Maclean’s – May 15, 2000 – [A giant for small dreamers](#) / article by Andrew Clark
- [Friendly Giant Facebook](#) page
- The Internet Movie Database – [The Friendly Giant](#)
- [The Independent](#) (East Northumberland’s News Source) – March 11, 1999
- [The Rotarian](#) – February 1999
- CemSearch.ca – [Robert Mandt Homme](#)
- [Canadian Reference Centre](#) (accessible from the Cobourg Library’s Virtual Library)
- Cobourg Museum – [Robert Homme: The Friendly Giant](#) panel