

Bill Rea ? Good and bad memories of the Ex

Have you been to the Ex yet?

I make a point of getting there every year. When I was really young, I went there for the rides and games. Eventually, I aged to the point that I was working, and usually would find something of local interest for whatever newspapers I was working for at the time. There are good memories, and some bad ones. It was at the Ex that I saw a man killed before my very eyes.

My wife and I made our annual trek down to the Canadian National Exhibition (CNE) grounds last Sunday.

It was partly an exercise in work for me. The Ambassador of the Fairs competition was going on, and Julie French was representing the Albion and Bolton Agricultural Society, so I had to get pictures of her. And there were other fair ambassadors representing areas covered by other newspapers in this company, so I took some pictures to go in those papers too. We also explored some of the buildings, asked a few questions about some plans we have for the home to people who looked like they would have good and useful information, and basically wore our feet out in the process.

Beth and I were two very tired people when we got home that night.

As I stated above, these trips to the Ex are annual occurrences that have been taking place since I was a little kid. I was born and raised a few miles from the CNE grounds, so getting to the site was never much of a problem.

Even as a little kid, my folks made a point of getting down there, usually for Labour Day.

For many years, my dad was in the habit of taking that last two weeks of summer vacation for his vacation time. Since these were the days of stay-at-home moms, my mother didn't have a job from which to book time off. We'd spend the two weeks at a fishing camp on Lake Nipissing, relaxing, playing, swimming and feeding fish, usually coming home the Sunday of the holiday weekend, and then spending the Monday at the Ex.

For the first couple of years that I can remember, my father worked in an office just a couple of blocks from the Princes' Gates, so he was able to park there, and we would walk to the grounds (both my parents were into walking in those days, even if their offspring wasn't).

My brother and I would get to go on the rides for a while, then the rest of the day would be spent roaming about the various buildings. There was also the great deal for little kids, consisting of a funny hat and a little bag filled with six chocolate bars. The walking around would go on until we were all too tired to see anything more.

From my parents' perspective, there was the advantage that since the kids were so tired, they didn't have much trouble getting them to bed that night. An important consideration, as there was school the next day.

As I got older, I found it was a lot more fun going to the Ex with my friends, as opposed to my folks. The fact is none of my buddies tried to restrict the number of times I went on the Wild Mouse, or gave me money-management lectures over the sums I was wasting on those stupid Midway games. In fact, if memory serves, I don't think we ever budged from the Midway.

There were a lot of things I had seen there over the years, but I had somehow always managed to miss the Canadian International Air Show. I tried a couple of times, but had trouble making it work. Some times, I couldn't get free the days the show was on. There was one time I was able to make it, and was standing in a crowd of expectant people when they announced the cloud ceiling was too low, so the show was cancelled.

It was this day (Sept. 3) in 1989 when I finally was able to take in the show, and I still have a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach at the memory.

One of the first acts in the show was a performance by the Snowbirds. While I had heard of them, this was the first time I had ever actually seen them perform, and I was suitably impressed.

But things were to turn bad.

There were a couple of planes that were in a dive, and for some reason, I focused on one of them. The plane was still dropping, and I started wondering when the pilot was going to pull out of it. The fact is, he didn't. I was still trying to figure out what was going on when I saw the aircraft splash into Lake Ontario.

I remember being puzzled at the apparent lack of reaction from the crowd. I figured either they hadn't been watching this particular plane as I had, or they hadn't yet grasped the reality of what they had just seen.

Then there was a moan of horror running through the crowd, and I saw another plane, in flames, falling into the water.

The show was delayed about an hour, and then resumed, and I stayed for it. I don't really know why I hung around, unless I thought it would be disrespectful to just turn my back and walk away after watching a man plunge to his death. I don't remember much of the show after that. There was just that feeling that we all have when there's something tragic on our minds.

The pilot, I subsequently learned, was Captain Shane Antaya. His craft had come into contact with the plane flown Major Dan

Dempsey, who safely ejected.

It was some years before I made any effort to take in the Air Show again, but I eventually did.

It was actually the first time Beth and I went to the CNE together, largely because I was interested in seeing the Air Show and had someone nice to see it with me.

The CNE grounds have changed a lot since the mid-1990s. Some buildings have gone and new ones have been constructed. There used to be quite a bit of parking on the site, especially under the Gardiner Expressway. And in those days, media passes handed out to guys like me included access to the parking area. I just had to wave the ticket at the guy at the gate and motor on in.

I parked the car that day, and told Beth she could get out.

?Are we actually in the Exhibition?? she asked, with a certain amount of awe in her voice.

I replied that indeed we were, trying very hard to maintain a casual tone.

She was impressed. She was supposed to be impressed. Used properly, a media pass can be a pretty effective courting tool.

I haven't had to use such tools for the last several years.

We just make a point of getting to the Ex to see what's there; at least once the work is done.

We'll get down next year too

