

Bill Rea ? Here it is, 50 years later

zAnother school year started Tuesday.

We experience this every year, and I always have a hard time being casual about it. I guess I have too many memories of being a kid, surrendering two months of idle freedom to the regimentation that was the classroom. I'm sometimes puzzled that so many adults don't experience the same feelings. Or are they just better at hiding them than I? The work world was something we took abstract note of in those days, when we overheard our fathers speaking of the grind (I went to school in the days when stay-at-home moms were the norm).

And while the day after Labour Day is one I always find meaningful, the one we just got through was especially so for me.

The Tuesday of this week, Sept. 3, marked 50 years to the day since my first day of school. I lives in Toronto then, but one would think such memories are universal.

To you youngsters out there (I mean the under-50 crowd), it does get a little scary when you can vividly recall events from a half-century ago. But I've always had a pretty vivid memory, so walk with me down Memory Lane now. I'll be gentle.

The really interesting thing is even as I started writing this, a host of memories flooded into my head.

While I was excited at the start of this new experience, I was also a little sad. My maternal grandmother had died about six weeks before, and I was upset that she wasn't around so I could share the experience of my starting school with her. That was also my first real contact with death, and I was still having a bit of trouble grasping what it really meant (I was still trying to grasp it a couple of months later when the Mayor of Toronto died, followed a couple of days later by the President of the United States).

In what was a family tradition by that point, we spent the last couple of weeks of the summer on vacation fishing on Lake Nipissing, at a family-run camp. And I remember the day we went home, with the lady of the camp (her name was Thelma) calling into the car, ?Have a good time at school, Bill.?

We were home by Labour Day, which played right into another tradition of my formative years. It was that day that my folks always took their offspring to the Exhibition. My brother and I played some of the Midway games, with the usual token prizes going to the ordinary folks who just participate (the good stuff went to those who showed some actual skill or exceptional luck). In one case, my token prize was a pencil, with the man (when you're just five years of age, any male in excess of a certain height qualifies as a man, regardless of his eligibility to vote, drink or drive) who handed it to me saying, ?Take this to school tomorrow.?

?How does he know?? I remember wondering.

And so the day arrived.

I had, of course, known that something was coming. There was the day a couple of months before, when my mother had taken me to the school to be registered. There were a bunch of adults (including, I guess, teachers) saying things that meant nothing to me, and my mom repeating them to me in the weeks that followed, in the form of admonitions of what was going to be expected of me in that torture chambers to which I was about to be subjected. It was all just enough to make me just a little apprehensive.

For reasons that I never understood, my mother dressed me up for me very first day at school. It was almost as if I was being dragged to Sunday school. But I also noticed that all the other kindergarten kids were apparently dressed up. It was going to be some time before we were allowed to dress down. These, after all, were the days when girls were not allowed to wear slacks (I remember the principal making an announcement to that effect on the PA) and blue jeans were frowned upon too.

My time in kindergarten was many years before kids in that grade were expected to spend the whole day in class. The half-day concept was the norm, and I started off my kindergarten career in the morning. My mother and older brother walked up the street with me for my first day of school. Passing one of the porches we noticed a couple of the older neighbourhood boys, named Eric and Jimmy, pointing at me and chanting ?Kindergarten baby, Wash your face in gravy!?

I had no idea what point, if any, these guys were trying to make. Eric had a brother Walter who was my age. He was due to start kindergarten that afternoon. At that stage in my life, I don't think I had any real appreciation of what gravy was. If I know anything about my brother, he probably wished he was up on the porch, having fun with Jimmy and Eric, but he knew Mom would not have allowed it. She, in fact, got a touch indignant with the taunting from the boys on the porch, and was seldom shy when it came to offering lectures on appropriate behaviour (I saw her do it many, many times).

Despite all the excitement, confusion and taunting from the porch, my most vivid memories was that first day of my public education was a terrifying one. Reflecting back, apart from the odd session with babysitters and the odd sleep-over involving my cousins, I had never been separated from my mother for very long. Yet here I was in a room with a bunch of total strangers, several of them in tears. I do know that I resisted, with difficulty, the temptation to join that group.

The teacher led the kids in song, and the sound was upsetting to me. I plugged my ears, but one of my classmates ratted on me, and

the teacher pulled my hands from the side of my head.

She was a veteran, when it came to dealing with frightened children who were coping with their first day of school.

While I remember how frightening that day was, I do remember I got through it and got home for lunch. In those days, my father made a point of getting home for lunch most days, and there was no way he was going miss this one. I heard his car pull in, and I bolted to the door, greeting him on the porch. I may have been through terror, but I just had to impart the excitement of the day to my Old Man. I have absolutely no recollection of what I said to him. I just know it came out, and he was appropriately attentive.

That is a happy memory.

And all of that was 50 years ago this past Tuesday.

There have been many days that have passed since that day ? more than 18,000 of them. Many of them I remember vividly.

Just think about what I might write for the 60th anniversary of my starting school

