

Bill Rea ? I missed the school bus

School buses seem to be in the news a lot lately.

I know it's to be expected so early in the school year, as kids get used to riding them and motorists get used to sharing the road with them.

But this year, they have been taking up more than their fair share of the headlines.

We have the matter going on in Bolton, with a lot of youngsters being forced to cross Coleraine Drive to get to St. Nicholas Catholic Elementary School.

I know there is criteria involved in deciding who gets to ride a school bus to which school, and presumably these rules are established and implemented by people who know what they are doing. But that road, with all the truck traffic it attracts (which is almost certainly to increase in the months to come), is not one that elementary school students should be crossing. High school kids, maybe, but I wouldn't be enthused at the thought of endorsing something like that. This issue is not going away.

Meanwhile, we're hearing about problems in Toronto. They seem to have lots of buses, but are coming up short when it comes to finding people to drive them.

This issue, at least so far, seems to involve a great deal of finger pointing, with busing companies, school boards, schools and unions each getting a share of the blame. One thing I'm having trouble figuring out is why no one evidently saw this coming. If there was a problem in the works, those responsible have had some two months to work on it. I've also heard Education Minister Mitzie Hunter is taking some heat for not doing anything on this issue.

The thing that seems to be coming through very clearly is no one is apparently able to identify who the villains are in this piece. Nor does anyone seem to be able to say who's job it is to clean this mess up.

This issue is not going away any time soon either.

I am familiar with traffic situations in Caledon, and I appreciate that walking to school is just not an option for some young folks in town. My wife usually drives our niece and nephew to school, and there's the odd occasion when I'm pressed into that service.

If I seem to have trouble grasping the nuances of the situation, part of the problem might be that school buses had very little meaning for me when I was a kid.

I was born and raised in Toronto, and in those days, kids there walked to school. There were some who were allowed to ride their bikes, but I was not among them, at least during the years I was in elementary school. So I walked, like my father before me.

My dad was not one of those guys who would sagely tell me about the hardships he had to endure, like walking miles and miles to school with the trip being uphill both ways. He knew he could never get away with it.

He knew that I knew where his house was, and he knew that I knew where his school was. He also knew that I knew that amounted to a five-minute walk, tops.

He was an avid reader as a kid, and he told me the story that he dashed out of the school at afternoon recess (during the days when there was such a thing as afternoon recess) and ran home to pick up his book and start reading, mistakenly thinking the school day was finished. He entered the house, and his mother straightened him out in a big hurry. Dad told me he made it back to school with time to spare.

He had no pressing need for a school bus.

My trip to school was somewhat more involved. In fact, I'm willing to bet they don't let children walk the route I did some 50 years ago. I had to cross one street, which did attract a fair amount of morning drive traffic. But it was a residential area, so excessive speeding and heavy truck traffic was not an issue. Somewhat different from Coleraine.

Actually, crossing that street was the easy part of the trip. I and my school mates used to walk along a path between two houses and down a steep slope into a ravine. We'd cross a creek (the City had obligingly installed a bridge for us to cross). Then it would be uphill, traversing what used to be a municipal garbage dump that had served the former Village of Swansea, then up another steep hill and along a large sports field that served the school. Then there was another steep hill to the school yard.

The creek alone would be enough to cause concern for parents. Add to that the fact a lot of that route was secluded. There were no police cars patrolling that area.

There was a lot that could have happened. All my friends and I were, of course, under strict orders not to go exploring around the creek, and of course we did. There were a few other things we did that I will not go into. I did a bit of checking, and found that Canada does not have a Statute of Limitations.

But since little kids like me were able to get into this area, so could everyone else. I think parents were aware of that possibility in my day. Perhaps they are more aware of it today. These things do evolve.

It was a somewhat different story when I went to high school. True, it was all sidewalks, meaning no creeks. But it was a lot longer. By that time, I was regularly wearing a wristwatch, meaning it didn't take long to establish that by maintaining a normal walking pace, the trip took 25 minutes. I never actually measured it, but I estimate the most direct route was a little shy of two miles. But in keeping with situations, I did have to deal with a ravine. One street on the route involved a steep drop into a valley and an equally steep climb at the other end. The only tricky crossing was a Bloor Street, and there were good signals at that intersection.

There was no call for a school bus for me in those days.

There were, however, some mitigating factors. One was by that point I had parental permission to ride my bike to school, although that wasn't an option once the snow started flying. Another factor was my mother switched jobs roughly halfway through my high school career, and my school was sort of on the way to her office, so rides were available when cycling was out of the question and I didn't feel like walking.

So I do appreciate that times and conditions and standards change. And that which a kid would have been allowed to do decades ago on sidewalks in an urban area might not go over well today on the shoulders of rural roads.

But it is also a fact that elementary school kids should not be walking across a road like Coleraine.

Much of this column has dealt with nostalgia. It ends with reality.

