

Bill Rea ? I'll be very sad to see the end of standards



It's not easy being a dinosaur, and if you don't believe me, take it up with the next brontosaurus with which you find yourself in conversation.

There was a story in last Monday's Toronto Star that I found a little upsetting. It dealt with the gradual elimination of driving instruction on standard transmissions.

I think that's a shame, although I understand why it's coming about.

Driving a car with an automatic transmission is easy. I ought to know, I've done it lots of times. Driving with a clutch and stick shift is a lot harder, and again I ought to know that too.

At my parents' insistence, both my brother and I had to be trained on standards when we were learning to drive, and that was not a lot of fun. There are already a lot of things to keep track of when putting a couple thousand pounds of metal through the motions without causing damage or death, and the stress level is high enough when one is just learning. Trying to coordinate the manipulation of a clutch and gear-shifting mechanism just adds to the grief.

Again, I ought to know. I flunked my driver's test twice because of all the trouble I had mastering the damned clutch.

I finally got through, stuffed my brand new licence in my pocket and vowed I would never again drive an automobile with a standard transmission unless I was forced to do so; preferably at gunpoint.

In keeping with the firm resolve that has characterized most of my adult life, every car I have purchased since then has been a standard.

Thus, I felt rather sad when I read last week's article.

The story quoted driving instructor Allan MacDonald, and I could appreciate each of his words.

'You're always moving, always paying attention to your car and what's around you,' he said, 'always listing for the friction point.'

The 'friction point,' for the benefit of those of you who have never driven a standard, is the point at which the clutch has been disengaged enough that the gears take hold and you can step on the gas.

MacDonald was certainly eloquent, but I think I am too when I say that driving a standard requires you to have some idea of what you're doing. It's easy to fake it when you're at the wheel of an automatic. Again, I ought to know.

The point of the Star story was Young Drivers will soon have only one car in the Greater Toronto Area on which to teach students how to drive with a clutch. I think it's sad.

However, the point seems to be that kids are just not interested in going through that routine when they will likely never have to drive anything but an automatic.

As I understand things, there was a time when if you wanted to learn how to drive, you had to know about the clutch.

According to what I have been told through family history (I am neither a car enthusiast or a historian, so I willingly stand to be corrected), the first automatics came out around the early to mid-1950s. My grandfather got one of the early ones; a 1954 Dodge, which my aunt took over after Grampa quit driving, and which she kept on the road (with some difficulty at times, if memory serves) until the early 1970s.

So in just a couple of generations, it looks like the norm has become a lost art.

I drove cars (automatics) belonging to my parents for the first couple of years of my working life. Then I decided to take my first real vacation in the land of my ancestors ? Ireland.

That would require renting a car (actually cars, owing to the political geography of the place), and my travel agent, the late Ralph Ransom of Bolton, told me he could possibly get me access to standards in the Emerald Isle, but warned it would be frightfully expensive. He wasn't exactly pointing the aforementioned gun at me, but Ralph's point was well-taken and the advice was sound. For the amount of money it was going to save me, I resolved that I could learn to work a clutch all over again.

I was able to keep from dwelling on the fact that would have to concentrate on driving on the left side of the road as well.

It is amazing that when one is put in a situation they actually find a way to get through it. This is how it went with my refresher course in a place where everyone drives on the wrong side of the road.

Driving on the left side was a lot easier than I imagined (I think the fact that everyone else was doing it made it simpler).

But to my astonishment, I found shifting gears was actually fun. I spent a day driving through a couple of counties like a maniac, scaring one of my relatives badly a couple of times.

I bought my first car a couple of years later (when I could actually afford it), and insisted on a standard. In those days, it wasn't hard to find one.

I still find driving a standard a lot of fun, but I believe there are other advantages too.

As MacDonald indicated, I think standards are safer because they require more alertness. From the first time I drove an automatic, I always thought it was too easy.

They might be more economical too, although the truth is I have never done in-depth calculations. I do believe they are generally more fuel efficient. On the other hand, when the clutch needs to be replaced, you're looking at a chunk of change.

I well recall that with my first car. One summer I was starting to think about what I would do with my upcoming vacation time, but the car was causing me a bit of concern. First gear wasn't working very well ? Truth is it wasn't working at all.

I took the car into the dealership from which I bought it, and then heard the verdict over the phone, from the service guy who had mastered the art of monotone when delivering bad news. The clutch needed replacing. He told me what it was going to cost and it was almost (not quite) the exact amount I had set aside to finance my vacation.

Needless to say, I spent that vacation learning the true meaning of the expression 'there's no place like home.'

As well, from that time on, I started setting aside portions of every pay cheque to cover car maintenance.

There is another thing that common sense tells me, namely that since a lot of people don't know how to drive standards, that means a lot of aspiring car thieves can't drive them either. So I guess they are less susceptible to being stolen.

It's hard to understand why they're out of favour, but they evidently are.