

Bill Rea ? It was still a good party

I read an article last week that raised the question of why did Canada Day become such a bummer?

It was written by By Doug Firby, publisher of Troy Media, and it pointed out Canadians don't seem to be in the party mood they were 50 years ago.

He pointed out that in 1967, when Canada marked its centennial, we had a big party known as Expo 67 in Montreal, industries like manufacturing and fisheries were thriving and the Leafs won the Stanley Cup. Things seem to be different this year.

He referred to a lack of the optimism that was prominent 50 years ago. He also made some reference to guilt being felt over the treatment of indigenous people over the years.

I will agree that the partying might not be as enthusiastic as it was in '67, but I spent all day Saturday running around town taking in the Canada Day celebrations. What I saw at the locations I was able to get to were a lot of people having a good time. The closest I came to hearing sour notes concerned the weather, and the possibility that things might get rained out. They didn't.

I'm part of the group that was around and has memories of the festivities in 1967, although I'll grant I really wasn't in a position to appreciate much of the significance of the occasions. I was only nine at the time (I'll stop typing for a moment while some of you get out your calculators and others do mental arithmetic).

Canada Day had not been invented in 1967. We called it Dominion Day, and I spent Dominion Day that year at our neighbours' cottage in Muskoka. My father was making frequent business trips to Europe in those days, and took off on such a junket a couple of days before, taking my mother with him. So they dumped their offspring with the neighbours, and I'm not sure if Mrs. Harrison ever completely forgave them for the ordeal my brother and I represented.

My brother had a paper route at the time, delivering the Toronto Telegram, which would be replaced a couple of years later by the Sun. He was able to get someone to handle the route while we were away, but he got home to learn he had been given about a dozen extra papers for July 1. It was evidently thought they would be collectors items. If I recall correctly, my dad would have thrown all the left-over papers out the first chance he got ? he was never much of a collector.

The whole year seemed to be one big party in '67, but I think there is something of a party mood in the country again this year. In the weeks leading up to July 1, I think we saw a lot more colour. Flags were flown a lot more prominently than might be normal, and red and white were the prominent colours at a number of the community events, like Caledon Fair, Caledon Day, Inglewood Day, etc.

If Canada Day fails to cut it as a holiday, maybe it's because for school kids, it really isn't one. Any holiday in July or August really wouldn't count for kids because they get them off anyway. So what's the big deal?

When I was a kid, July 1 was never a big deal. In fact, I remember I felt a little bit robbed that they planned what was supposed to be the big national holiday for a time when I wouldn't get a break from school. To little kids like what I was in those days, that represents bad planning.

There might have been fireworks set off, but my family was never involved in that, as we were for Victoria Day. Even as I got older, it seldom seemed to be much of a deal for anyone.

When I first started working in Caledon, I remember covering Canada Day festivities, which basically consisted of a few dozen people gathering around the flag staffs at what is now known as Town Hall (it used to be the Caledon Administration Centre), singing O Canada and going home.

But things did gradually start to grow. By the early 1990s, there was a large celebration at the Caledon Fairgrounds which attracted huge crowds.

I went to work for papers in Toronto in the middle of that decade, focussing most of my attentions around what at the time was Canada's only borough, namely East York.

It might have been a relatively small municipality (considering some of the jurisdictions surrounding it), but the folks in East York definitely knew how to throw a Canada Day party. They would start with a Citizenship Court in the Borough council chambers at 7 a.m. (reputed to be the earliest Citizenship Court in the country that day). Then there would be a parade which traversed the bulk of the municipality, followed by a day-long celebration in a very large park, with the whole thing concluding with a very large fireworks show. Needless to say, it was a vey long and tiring day for the folks in the newspaper business, but it was also a lot of fun. So perhaps this July 1 didn't stand out as much from other years as it did in 1967, but I think the celebrations themselves have grown over time, so the difference this year might not have been as noticeable.

The celebrations have grown a lot in the last 50 years; indeed in the last 30. They have gone from next to nothing to a very full and tiring day. Maybe things weren't quite to the level of 1967, but I'm willing to bet they will be in 2067.

The problem is I'm likely to miss it.

