

Bill Rea ? Nostalgia not up to billing

I'm one of those guys who thinks about the past a lot.

There are some who don't think that's a healthy way to be. They advocate not dwelling on the past, but looking to the future. I agree that makes a lot of sense, but like many people, I nevertheless give a certain amount of attention to both.

I had occasion about two weeks ago to drive to Leaside, which is in Toronto. For those of you who need some bearings, think of the area of Bayview and Eglinton Avenues.

Actually, our sports reporter, Jake Courtepatte, was on vacation, and the Bolton Brewers were playing a game at Howard Talbot Park in Leaside. I decided to head out that night and watch the game, and I'm willing to admit nostalgic impulses had a lot to do with the decision. I did remember the name Howard Talbot Park, but had to resort to a bit of Google mapping to refresh my memory where it was. Once I got my bearings, I remembered the place well, but more about that later.

Leaside used to be the western component of what was known some 20 years ago as the Borough of East York, that is until the Mike Harris government abolished it and several other municipalities and created the megacity that is Toronto today.

I spent five and a half years editing seven papers in the area, leaving the company late in 1999 for the soundest of financial reasons ? it went under.

For five and a half years, I drove from Brampton (where I was living at the time) to Leaside every morning. The office where I worked was on Laird Drive, which is a couple of blocks east of Bayview. The thought of moving to Leaside or East York never occurred to me. Around the time I started there, I had just started going with a girl from Caledon, and was not anxious to move any farther away from her. Good thing too, because as of this past Monday, we've been married 18 years.

The trip to my former stomping grounds did created the desired sentimental effect, but also served as a good reminder of how little I miss some of the experience.

Driving along Highway 401 twice a day was a bothersome, although necessary task. Actually, driving to work every morning was not too much of a pain, provided I got an early enough start. So for a lot of years, I dragged my carcass out of the sack at 6 a.m. to get on the road before all the heavy traffic. It worked out that if I was heading south on Highway 427 before the 7 a.m. radio news ended, I was okay. I was ahead of the main body of traffic and would get to the office about 7:30-ish. But getting home at night was a real adventure, simply because I never knew what conditions I could expect. There was the odd night when traffic would be light, but most times I would run into some tie-up along the journey, and that is not my favourite way to kill time.

Of course I didn't always head home at rush hour. As is the case in Caledon, I had to work a lot of nights when I was in the city, so traffic messes were usually (not always) cleaned up by the time I headed home. In fact, I would often look for excuses to stay late at the office just so I wouldn't have to go through that ordeal.

After the ball game, I did a bit of touring around the former borough, as if I had nothing better to do at 11 at night. I drove over to the old Borough offices and did a quick spin over to the main shopping mall before heading home. Since nothing was open at that hour, I didn't bother stopping.

But things got tricky when I tried to get back on the road home.

During my time working there, I got into the habit of taking the 401 to Leslie Street and heading south to get to work. True, Bayview would have been a bit more direct, but traffic was usually heavier there, so Leslie ate up less time. Accordingly, I took Leslie to get back to the 401 that night and found the on ramp was closed; I guess for construction.

It wasn't a big deal. I just went further north to Sheppard Avenue, figuring I could get over to Bayview and get on the 401 that way. But life is never that simple, is it?

The on ramp from Bayview was closed too.

I proceeded south to York Mills Road, planning to get over to Yonge Street and try to get on the 401 that way, wondering, as I drove, what I would do if that ramp was closed too. It wasn't.

Along with the problems with getting home, I got a good lesson that nostalgia isn't all it's supposed to be.

Arriving in Leaside, I drove past the old office building. Our second-floor office used to overlook a large and rather archaic looking factory. Were I working there today, I would get nice view of quite an appealing retail plaza. Times change.

Since I wasn't sure about that traffic issues I might run into, I didn't bother with dinner before leaving home. I told she to whom I have been married for 18 years that I would grab something at the game. During the five and a half years, I had learned enough of the lay of the land to know there was a McDonalds that was about a two-minute walk from the ball diamond. Indeed, the only time in my career I covered an appearance by Ronald McDonald was at the outlet. Nourishment problem solved, or so I thought. Another change I encountered is that McDonalds is no longer there. Good thing I had a large lunch that day.

And I had forgotten what a complex Howard Talbot Park was part of. Not only does it border the campus of the local high school, but it includes a lawn bowling club, soccer pitches, as well as baseball facilities. And since it was a summer evening, all those facilities were in full operation. I had to park a couple of blocks away.

City living.

The ball game was the last of the events that evening, so after all was said and done, I walked by the diamond and soccer pitches and bowling green in search of my car. And as I approached the school building, I saw what appeared to be some animal. At first, I thought it was a cat. As I drew closer, I thought it was a little dog. Then I went back and forth between cat and dog before realizing I was closing in on a skunk.

Very calm and deliberate evasive action suddenly became in order. I guess I didn't have to back down to the city to encounter something like that. And while it's been a couple of years since I last encountered a skunk, that really didn't add to the nostalgic feel of the event.

But like I stated above, nostalgia doesn't always live up to its billing.

