

Bill Rea ? Park had lessons learned

A lot of people would be reluctant to admit it, but not me.

I have always had a certain affection for the nostalgic, and for things that have happened in the past, especially my past.

There are those who would say that's not a good thing to think. They argue one should always be looking ahead, and not back.

I agree that there should always be some focus on what's to come, which is one of the reasons why I started writing my column for the July 4 paper before I had even seen a copy of the June 27 issue. But I also believe there should be time for reflecting on what has gone on before, be it on achievements realized, problems overcome or lessons learned. Besides, some of the memories are just plain fun.

The last week or so has included a number of news items of what is to be done with Ontario Place.

It was once a state of the art amusement park on Toronto's waterfront, connecting with the Canadian National Exhibition grounds, but it seems its glory days are now well in the past. What I know of what it is today is what I read. It's been many years since I walked the grounds. My lasting impression of the last time I was there is there was no impression at all.

That's a little sad.

The role Ontario Place played in my younger days was relatively small, but there were some significant moments.

It probably should have played a bit more of a part, since it was only a mile or so from the house in which I pretended to grow up, yet I got down there seldom, and normally only when I had to.

The first summer it was open, my mother and I spent a day there. I was a teenage boy spending a day in the company of just my mother at an amusement park, meaning I had next to no fun at all.

There were other, more meaningful memories. When I was in Grade 12, a whole bunch of students from my high school music department performed at what in those days was known as the Forum. That was an experience that would be very hard to forget.

It's also important because it was Ontario Place where my wife and I went on our first date. It was March 1993, and a documentary on Titanic was being shown at Cinesphere. I didn't want to go alone, so I phoned this woman who I had gotten to know covering weekly garbage dump protest meetings (these were the days of the infamous Interim Waste Authority), and she was prepared to go. I was able to get second-row seats for this film. Watch a full-length movie on the wide screen at Cinesphere from the second row, and you'll soon get the idea that your eyeballs are being smeared across the screen like paste. If anyone ever offers you second-row seats in such a facility, tell them to throw in some cash, and maybe some Aspirin.

For reasons I have never been able to quite figure out, Beth agreed to go out with me again, and again, and again, etc.

But the major memories came in the middle of those two previously mentioned experiences, when I spend part of a summer working there. This was during the height of Ontario Place's popularity.

In terms of being satisfying (both in a monetary and spiritual way) the job was certainly wanting. But I made reference a couple of paragraphs ago about ?lessons learned,? and in that regard, the experience had some value. The pay was terrible, and the working conditions would have been far beneath the dignity of a lot of sophisticated kids. I have spent the last couple of decades trying to forget the uniforms we were obliged to wear. But a buck is a buck, and I learned around that time that a crummy paycheque is a lot better than no income at all. Kids who have trouble finding summer work might want to rethink what they would be willing to do.

I was a bus boy at one of the restaurants at the park, which just happened to be very close to the Forum.

These were the days when once people had paid to get into the park, they could walk into the Forum for no additional charge to watch the show. If there was a major attraction performing that evening, the joint would be jumping, and we'd all be busy. There were many nights when some major rock band would be on the bill, and they would close the gates to the park at 6 p.m., simply because the crowds were overwhelming. It was such evenings that I saw some very memorable acts of hooliganism, most of it alcohol induced, along with a couple of the finest fistfights it has ever been my pleasure to watch. It being a Provincial facility, the grounds were patrolled by OPP, and I picked up an appreciation of some of the garbage cops have to put up with too.

But I also learned the value of being willing to do the less-than-desirable jobs. No matter how tough the economic times might be, it is only the most foolish of bosses who will get rid of an employee who is willing to clean out a bathroom sink into which some drunken lout has barfed, and do so for the good of the company.

Bosses, I learned that summer, could be appreciative too.

I was working the day shift one day, and it was getting near quitting time. The owner of the establishment called me over and said he was short-handed for the evening, so would I mind working a double shift? I knew I needed the money, so I said I would.

?Thanks,? he said. ?Sit down for half an hour, and I'll get you something to eat.?

A burger appeared in front of me a couple of minutes later, and the boss personally plunked down an ample mug of beer to go with

it.

What is it they say about the little things?

Those were sort of good old days, but it looks, from what I have been reading, that they have been relegated to history. But it's still a valuable chunk of real estate that should be able to attract crowds, if the attractions are done right.

The way liquor laws are, there might be fewer sinks that need cleaning out, and second-row seats might be cheaper

