

SURVIVING DRIVING by Ernie Bies, Ottawa, April, 2014, updated March, 2020

Everyone who has driven on Northern Ontario roads has stories of the occasional fender bender, vehicle collision or even encounters with wildlife. While I've never been up close and personal with a moose, my elderly mother did have her initiation many years ago. My brother in law was driving home to Hearst from Kapuskasing in his van with Mom riding shotgun when they had their brief encounter of the worst kind. The van and the moose were totalled and my mother had another story to tell. My nephew Doug had a similar experience in 2004, writing off a brand-new Windstar and a moose near North Bay.

I've been fortunate to walk away from a few minor mishaps and three total wrecks, none the worse for wear.

Taking the Bush in Northern Ontario - 1958

Who among you Northerners hasn't "Taken the Bush" at least once in your driving careers? This usually means going off road and coming to rest in the light brush with minimal damage, but with an opportunity to say you are part of an exclusive club. My experience was minor and involved my Dad's Case tractor when I was twelve years old, and it was more taking the ditch than the bush, but it's all I've got. We had moved into Hearst from our farm 12 km to the south in 1957 but we still maintained a large potato patch at the homestead that needed cultivating. I was thrilled to drive the tractor out along Hwy 583, pedal to the metal achieving a top speed of twelve miles an hour, while my father followed an hour later in the car. The old Case did not have a windshield, though I would have preferred a bug screen. My Dad told me to avoid any traffic by yielding onto the shoulder. Unfortunately, two of the five or six cars I would normally see on this trip were meeting just before the right angle turn at Camire's corners, so I had to give way onto the shoulder. As they passed me and we were three abreast, I realized, to my horror, that my shoulder was coming to an end at a large culvert. I could not swerve back onto the road because of the passing cars and I just froze. The next thing I knew I had jumped the creek and was about to roll down the embankment. I remember scrambling off the uphill side of the tractor as it slid down the slope, unsure, to this day, how I avoided the large rear wheel that was still turning. Somehow, the tractor came to rest on its side at the bottom of the embankment without



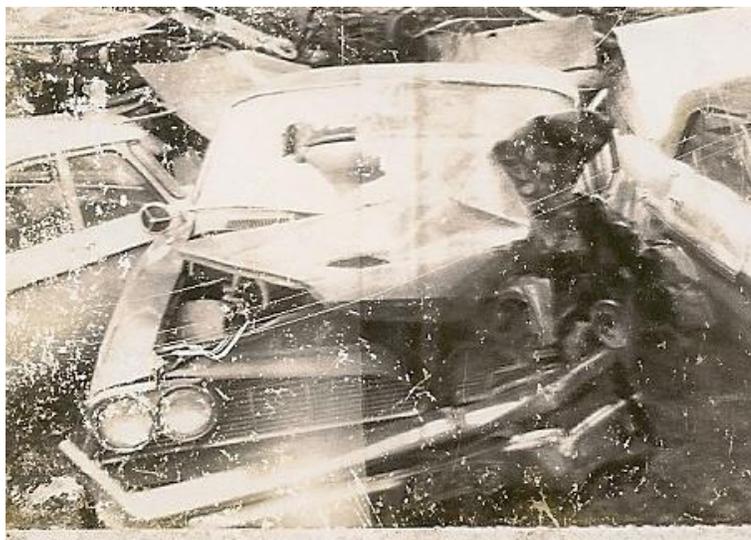
rolling over and I was left to wait for my father and ponder my predicament for about an hour. When he arrived he just asked if I was all right and set about to right the tractor. He enlisted two tractors from Mr. Camire and hooked them up to our Case, one with a long chain hooked to the front and the other at right angles to keep it from tipping. My father rode the

tractor back up the slope, gave Mr. Camire the standard "couple of bucks" for his help and we were again on our way to complete our chores, me with a whole new understanding of the limitations of driving on gravel shoulders.

Closing the Bars on the Quebec Side - 1967

My first near death experience was at 2:30 a.m. June 16, 1967. I had just moved to Ottawa and my house-mates Wayne, Sam and I were bar-hopping on the Quebec side with Paul Dallimore in his big blue 1961 Pontiac Parisienne. We made the rounds of our regular watering holes, the Chaud, Ottawa House and Standish Hall and, several quarts later, we closed down the bars in Pointe Gatineau and were heading home. People who have made that scene will remember a long straight stretch between two right angle turns on the road from Pointe Gatineau to Gatineau. There was a car load of young ladies in front of us and Paul was right up close behind, trying to get their attention, when suddenly they pulled off and we were blinded by on-coming head lights in our lane. Some other young bar-hopper was on his way home to Pointe Gatineau and when he had made the right angle turn at the other end, he pulled into our lane and, in his happy state, did not realize that he was in the wrong lane. When two full size American cars, a '61 Pontiac and a '65 Chevy, meet at speed, they make a pretty bad impression on each other and I had the misfortune of being in the front passenger seat, in those days, before seatbelts. I remember leaning forward to tune the radio when I saw the headlights, heard the impact and then I was looking through a huge hole in the windshield at the steam rising from the crumpled hood of our car. I was wearing beige chinos, that were the style of the day, and when I looked down they were turning a dark colour - red. Then I felt my face and it was a mass of blood. I got out to survey the damage on the car and people kept trying to get me to sit down. I had a partial dental plate and suddenly realized it was missing. People assumed my teeth had been knocked out in the accident and humoured me by looking for them on the road, but I found my partial on the dash of the car, wiped off the glass particles and popped it back into my mouth. I even had the presence of mind to find and dispose of the beer that we had taken from the bar by putting it in a nearby culvert. By this time I was feeling a bit woozy as the pavement seemed to be coming up to meet me. I sat down with a t-shirt, that someone had handed me, pressed to my face. I was a bit perturbed when people came to check on me and recoiled in horror when they saw my face. Finally, the ambulance arrived and, being the macho guy that I was, I climbed into the front seat with the driver. Part way down the road I checked the time and realized my watch had been torn off in the accident. When I mentioned it to the driver he slammed on the breaks and asked if I wanted to go back for it. I said it would wait and he took me to the Sacred Heart Hospital in Hull where I was put in the hands of an intern who just wanted to go home. Not realizing that I could understand French, he was merrily sewing up my face with surface stitches, commenting to the nurse that I was going to look like Frankenstein. The nurse kept telling him to admit me and he kept brushing her off. Finally, she stopped him by placing her hands on his, and sternly telling him to wrap me up and admit me. Later, laying in a bed with a bladder threatening to burst, I was relieved when a nurse came to my room and asked for a urine sample. She had brought me one of those silver bed-bottles which I proceeded to fill with used beer to within an inch of the top. The nurse took it gingerly, muttering as she walked away that she only needed a little sample. The next day I was in the capable hands of a plastic surgeon, Dr. Rosaire Voyer, who unwrapped the intern's work and proceeded to remove the stitches. He asked who had done this and said he wanted him in his office when he was finished. The nurse timidly said he was off duty and the doctor emphatically told her to get him in - Now! The windshield had done a number on my face coming and going. First, as I went through it on impact, and then, when I was pulled back into the car as my knees hit and demolished the radio and glove compartment. My face was scraped from forehead to ears, my eyelids were cut through, both cheeks and my upper lip were cut clean

through and I had a cut on my chin right to the bone, with pieces of glass left inside by the hasty intern. Three hours and three hundred stitches later, face wrapped like a mummy, I was sent back to my room. The stitches were in three layers, inside, in the middle and on the outside of my cheeks and lip. I was lying there pondering my fate, when this anxious woman came running to the room, looked at me and kept going. I realized it was my sister-in-law Gloria and called her back. Apparently, my sister Martha had called my apartment from Toronto at eight that morning to talk to me, and Wayne, my roommate who had been in the back seat of the accident car, groggily answered. Suffering from a mild concussion, and with about three hours sleep he told her that I had been in an accident and was in the hospital. My sister called the hospital and, limited with only High School French, she could not get any details about my condition, just that I was being operated on later that day. Half of my family jumped in a car and raced to



Ottawa to see me, not knowing what to expect. I spent a week in the hospital and returned to work looking like a guy who'd been on the wrong end of a few barroom brawls. The other driver was charged with impaired driving and unfortunately, he did not have insurance. The Quebec Unsatisfied Judgement Fund came up with about \$2,000 for lost wages, hospital bills and pain and suffering, of which my lawyer took 25%. I had just started a government job on May the first and was on the three month waiting-period for health care benefits requiring me to pay all the expenses myself. Never did meet the other driver, though he did show up in court but wouldn't look at me. He probably figured I should have been charged with leaving the scene, breaking and entering and littering. Luckily, the young ladies in the car in front of us, who had just managed to avoid him, stayed to witness and QPP officer Robert Desmarceaux laid several charges against him. When I went to see the car in the wrecking yard a week later, I did find my watch. Things were looking up.

A couple of visits to a plastic surgeon for dermal abrasion on my upper lip smoothed out a bump and now you know why I've had a mustache since then. Interestingly, the charge from Dr. Voyer for three hours of reassembling my face was \$100. The Plastic surgeon also charged \$100 for spraying my lip with some aerosol surface pain killer and taking a hand sander to it till I yelled for more spray. The scars faded over time, but years later I had a recurring lump on my temple and when my family doctor dug into it, he found a piece of glass left over from 1967. The real benefit of this experience was an ultimatum from Sandy to settle down or find another girlfriend. I made the right choice as we're celebrating our 50th this year.



Where Did You Get Your License, From a Box of Cracker Jack? - 1968

Though my father taught me to drive a car by the time I was sixteen, I did not have the need for a driver's licence until 1968 when I found myself driving a government vehicle up in Frobisher Bay. I walked into the local RCMP post and said I needed a license. Desk Officer T.A. Carriere asked me three questions. 1. Name? 2. Operator's or Chauffeur's? 3. Do you have \$3? I still have that first license and a snappy comeback when other drivers question where I got my license.

| NOTIFY OFFICE IF YOU CHANGE YOUR ADDRESS | | THIS LICENCE MUST BE CARRIED BY DRIVER | |
|---|--------------|---|----------------|
|  | | MOTOR VEHICLE OPERATOR'S LICENCE | |
| | | 19 68 CHAUFFEUR | Nº 9608 |
| NORTHWEST TERRITORIES | | FEE PAID \$ <u>3.00</u> | |
| ISSUED PURSUANT TO THE VEHICLES ORDINANCE. THIS LICENCE WHEN SIGNED BY THE OPERATOR, IS VALID UNTIL MARCH 31ST, 19 69 AND MUST BE PRESENTED FOR RENEWAL. | | | |
| O OR R | 19 67 | APPLICATION FOR 19 69 | |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | LICENCE NO. | RENEWAL ON REVERSE HEREOF | |
| SIGNATURE OF OPERATOR | | <i>Ernest Bis</i> | |
| NAME | | Ernest Steven BTBS | |
| STREET AND NUMBER | | Frobisher Bay | |
| POST OFFICE | | N.W.T. | |
| SETTLEMENT | | SEX M HT 5110 " | |
| OFFICE | DATED | ISSUER | |
| Frob. | 24/6/68 | <i>T. Carriere</i> | |

I finally had to get a big city licence in Ottawa the next year as I was scheduled to drive a government vehicle to Parry Sound. I enlisted my girl friend's MGB and the fellow administering the test was more interested in the car than in the test. He did make two notations about my driving habits before giving me my license though. On one occasion I used a city bus for a blocker as we made a left turn and he said it wasn't a football game, and then I passed a stopped delivery van and crossed the center line without signaling. That MGB was the vehicle involved in my second total wreck.



MGBs and Canadian Winters Don't Mix - 1969

My new fiancé and I were visiting her ex room-mate in Kingston in November of 1969 where we had gone to watch the Grey Cup game and to announce our engagement. A tremendous blizzard came up on our way home and by the time we got to Kemptville, we could not see the road or the shoulders. Her MGB was a fun car to drive but not well-suited for Canadian winters. She was driving very carefully when she saw some headlights approaching in the distance. Trying to give way to the right, her wheels went off the pavement and she lost control. In slow motion the car swerved across the road, onto the opposite shoulder and then back onto our shoulder, turning sideways and sliding along, plowing the snow until it was going over the car. Sitting in the passenger seat, I saw the snow build up and the car did a slow roll, coming to rest on its wheels half way down the embankment with the engine still racing. I reached over and turned off the key; we caught our breath and got out of the car, seemingly uninjured. A rag top doesn't afford much protection but the built up snow must have saved us from serious injury. One side of the car was pretty well banged up. I noticed that the trunk had sprung open and in the moonlight I could see marks in the fresh snow where the items from the trunk had been flung out. I

clambered down the slope and retrieved shoes, tools, a large ball peen hammer and various items, figuring they would be lost until spring if I didn't get them. The driver of the oncoming



car had stopped to help and since we were only a mile or so from town, drove us to the Police Station so we could make our accident report. The next day we had the car towed to Oliver's Body Shop in Ottawa. Even though it was considered a write off, Sandy insisted on getting her baby back on the road. Did I mention that we were seemingly uninjured? A few days later my buttock stiffened up and turned black and blue from

my waist to the back of my knee. I couldn't bend at my hip, sit down or sleep on my back. I was starting mid-term exams at university the next week so I had to lie on the floor on my stomach to study and write my exams standing up at a drafting table. I often wondered if that damage had been caused by coming down on the stick shift as the car rolled, but let's not go there.

A Toyota Corolla is no Match for an LTD - 1976

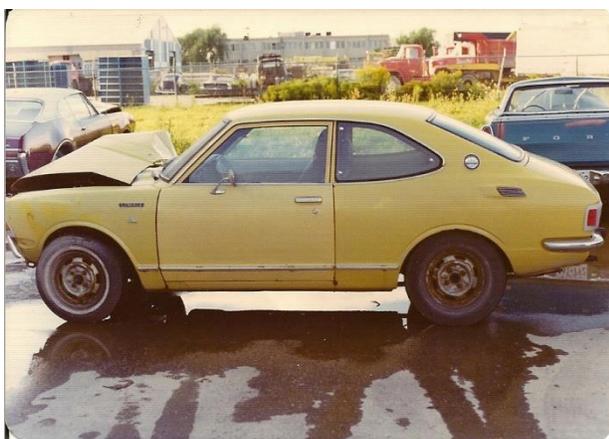
My third total wreck happened in Toronto in the summer 1976. We had a yellow 1971 Toyota Corolla and were visiting my father who had just been diagnosed with terminal cancer. I was visiting him at the Doctors Hospital and had to go out to Etobicoke to pick up my mother for an afternoon visit. Getting off the 427 onto Burnhamthorpe, I had a green light and saw that the two closest lanes on Burnhamthorpe were stopped at the light, but a driver in an LTD in the far lane was talking



to his passenger and making no move to slow down for the light. I started to break anticipating



him running the light and the back end of my car started to skid to the right. He came barreling through the light and I hit him on his rear right wheel. My Corolla folded back like a layer of tin foil, a total write-off, and he did not have a scratch. Maybe I knocked the mud out from under his fender. I banged my head, jammed my ankle and turned my wrist from the impact. To his credit he came running over saying it was his fault. When the police came to investigate, we were both put in the same patrol car, me in the back and the other driver in the



front. The officer said, "Who wants to go first?" and, being a gentleman, I said, "Go ahead". The other driver said it was his fault, he went through the light. The officer put his pen down for a moment and asked if he was admitting fault and he said yes, he was. The Officer said, "OK", took the report, and charged him. Within hours his insurance company was calling me trying to get me to settle. I told them I needed to make sure I was all right first. They actually came to my father's hospital with the papers a couple of days later. My cousin happens to be a lawyer and was waiting with me when they

came. He had a shopping list of demands which they accepted without batting an eye. I'm sure they were happy to get off that easily.



We rented a car and went back to Ottawa with about \$2,000 cash but no vehicle. After our two near-misses in small cars we decided we needed to move up to a larger vehicle. We soon learned that used car lots did not offer much for \$2,000 in those days. One dealer had the gall to try to sell us a car with a big oil puddle under it saying he would fix - no thanks. In desperation I checked the want ads in the Citizen and found a low-mileage 1975 Ford Maverick for sale. With nothing to lose I called the number

and when the phone was answered by an elderly lady in a quavering voice, I said, "Don't sell the car, we'll be right there". Audrey Lowe said she had only had the car for a year but her doctor had cancelled her license because of her poor vision, requiring her to sell it. She apparently

parked “by feel” as all four corners had minor dents in the bumpers. The car was in mint condition having been driven once a week from her parking garage to the grocery store about



two blocks away and only once on the highway. She proudly announced that she had taken it up to 50 mph - once. It still had the plastic coverings on the doors in the back seat. It was more money than we had available but Audrey dropped the price a bit and we were soon the proud owners of the “Blue Car” that stayed in the family for fourteen years. When the rust got too far ahead of us we sadly drove her to a wrecking yard in Stittsville but gave her the respect of going under her own power.

Temagami Turnover - 1991

My brother was very fortunate to walk away from a very serious rollover in a rock ravine coming into Temagami in 1991. Driving into the late morning sun, and approaching a curve, he suddenly found himself sitting on a rock in the opposite ditch



looking at the tangled mess of his car, not knowing what had just happened. The police arrived shortly afterwards and the officer was astounded that a fellow the size of my brother could have squeezed out

the window on the driver’s side. The car was a write off and he had a concussion but no serious injuries although he did get a helicopter ride to Timmins where he spent a few days in the hospital. His big regret was that he did not get up to Hearst to participate in the family garage sale that week.

