



Four decades in transit

BILL GLADDING / TAVISTOCK GAZETTE

Harold Bender is in his 44th year driving a school bus. He started with the Oxford County Board of Education and now drives two routes to Waterloo-Oxford District Secondary School in Baden. *Tav. Gaz. p. 1 Jan. 22, 2014*

In the summer of 1970, while Harold Bender was driving the combine for a neighbour, Shorty Wettlaufer drove into the field to ask if he would consider driving school bus. Forty-four years later, Harold still gets up before dawn to ready his school bus for the day's run to Waterloo-Oxford District Secondary School.

Harold's first employment was with the Oxford County Board of Education to Hickson Central Public School. He drove a 72-passenger bus with three students to a seat and 6-8 standing in the aisle. "Obviously, those conditions are totally unacceptable today," he said. However, "It was more cost effective than taking individual students to the school of their choice as we do today," he added.

There are more than twenty buses servicing the Tavistock area these days with students being picked up for schools in Woodstock, Stratford, Kitchener and New

Hamburg from elementary and high school to public, private and French Immersion schools.

Harold drove many different routes over the years at Hickson including a Tollgate School run. He also transported as many as five physically-challenged students during that time.

"I picked up one child at her door and carried her to and from the bus and then repeated the routine at school," Harold recalls. Today, there are special mobility buses that do all that mechanically.

In 1974, Harold went to spare driving for part of a year, but then went back to full time for a total of 25 years at Hickson. For all those years he drove 7 miles twice a day to get to his bus. When the opportunity came for a high school run with the bus parked in his own yard, "I left Hickson with somewhat mixed feelings," he said.

In September of 1995, Harold started with Scott Bus Lines which later became Sharp Bus Lines. At 7:25 each morning he has three pick-up points in Tavistock and five stops on the townline. After

dropping the students off at W-O, he heads back into New Hamburg for three more stops. It takes about 12 minutes for that run. In the afternoon the route is reversed.

His last stop each morning is the coffee shop in New Hamburg where he can catch up on the latest news. Sometimes there's four buses lined up in the

parking lot while drivers debate the day's weather and events.

The students being unfriendly when they get on the bus is not an option, Harold stresses. He greets them with 'Good Morning' and expects them to respond accordingly. And when they get off, it's 'Have a good day.'

Harold has always clung to the philosophy of treating people the way he

wants to be treated. "I don't think raising my voice is a very effective way of communicating," he said. Although he may have had a few discipline problems on the bus over the years, he said, sometimes he had to look in the mirror to see if the kids were still there - especially Monday mornings. "It's rewarding to hear adults make positive remarks about the years when they travelled on my bus," he added.

People ask if students are different from forty years ago and Harold usually responds, "Not much, but they definitely know their rights." He's also asked if high school students are more difficult. "It's easier in some ways," he said. "When you ask a public school child to sit down, they will for a minute or two until they forget. High school students generally have a longer memory," he noted.

Growing up on the family farm on the 16th line of East Zorra, Harold's