



Owner-Operator's Business
Association of Canada
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...from the
director's chair

The Good Old Days?

Why does life so often look better in the rear-view mirror? I must admit, I like the look of, say, the Louisville Fairgrounds in my rear-view mirror come Saturday. At any trade show, after a flood of press events and miles of glitzy trade show booths, it feels good to leave it all behind. But many of us are inclined to look back through the metaphorical rear-view mirror of time and pine for the good old days.

As Gladys Knight says in her version of Try to Remember, "The winters were warmer, the grass was greener, the skies were bluer, and smiles were bright."

At a recent truck show I met a 60-ish fellow whose good old days would have been the late 1970s and 80s. He's unhappy with the nature of the job today and how there seems to be less camaraderie among drivers. Specifically, he bemoaned the fact that few drivers will stop and help another driver anymore, whether he or she is broken down, or maybe having trouble backing in somewhere.

As we talked, it became clear that what he really missed were the days when drivers had more discretion in their routes and deciding when to stop, maybe to spend some time over lunch with an old buddy.

"Those days are long gone," he said. "When we're stopped too long, we get a call from dispatch wanting to know why we aren't moving."

He was also on about today's equipment and how unreliable it is, how the electronic invasion has made it all but impossible to fix anything short of changing a fuse or a windshield wiper blade. He definitely isn't a fan of the advanced safety systems designed to prevent rollovers or rear-end collisions, but

he grudgingly admits that he likes his automated manual transmission.

Playing devil's advocate, I pointed out that those old 70s- and 80s-vintage engines did well if they made it 250,000 miles before needing an in-frame or an overhaul compared to today's engines (when they aren't sidelined by a funky sensor) that will easily run a million miles before you have to open one up.

"At least you could fix those engines on the side of the road without a laptop," he reminded me.

The threat of automation has my friend worried, too. He wonders if the occupation of truck driver could become obsolete once automated driverless trucks take to the highways. The fact is, there will be pretty limited applications for that technology, and it's at least a decade away. My aging friend needn't worry about being replaced by a black box. Even at its most basic (adaptive cruise control with assisted steering), the enormous cost of the technology will be a barrier to widespread uptake.

It's really the pace of change that my friend is anxious about, and who isn't? Technology, automation, telematics, and connectivity, have changed trucking – or at least the trucks – more in the past five years than in the previous 50, and that trend will continue. But what hasn't changed much is how trucking is done. Many drivers are fed up with running cross-country and having to lay over on the way home doing a reset.

A return to relaying loads in a hook-and-drop scenario would be good for those drivers who don't like extended tours of duty. The freight would actually move across the country faster if the relays were properly sched-



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uled, because carriers could cut at least two off-duty periods from the travel time.

Gone would be the real pressure on drivers to make customer appointments with 15-minute windows, and so too would be the additional pressure put on drivers to keep the freight moving, no matter what. With a return to that good part of the old days, electronic logging devices (ELDs) would ensure that drivers have predictable schedules to follow, and no more pressure from dispatch to keep pushing when weather or traffic conspires against them.

With all that's changing, even my grumpy friend agrees that trucks are more comfortable and capable today. He agrees that ELDs really aren't the problem, but the inflexibility of hours-of-service is. He doesn't disagree that some level of driver monitoring is not a bad idea, and he even concedes that the job is physically easier today than 20 or 30 years ago.

But, as bad as we think they are, these days will become, in Gladys' words, "the good old days of our children." Twenty-five years from now, the job will be as different then as it is now from the 70s and 80s. But one thing won't change, today's drivers will be the old-timers, and they'll still be grumbling. It's all a matter of perspective.

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