Hit by a car: 50 years ago

Time has an uncanny and relentless way of simultaneously sneaking up on you and passing you by. What seems like yesterday becomes years in a flash.

May 9, 1975 was a warm and sunny spring day when I boarded the bus on a Friday afternoon at Melrose Elementary School. I was 11 and within weeks of finishing fifth grade.

The bus turned north on Hwy. 54 and started to leave the village. Across the street in front of St. Kevin’s Church my mother had stopped her car and flagged the bus down. She had missed the bus departure by about 30 seconds. She wanted to pick me up to accompany her shopping.

The bus driver said: "Chris, your mother wants to pick you up" and I looked out the window and saw her standing next to our car across the road.

I gathered my books and stepped off the bus to cross the road. The next thing I remember was waking up on a mattress being transported by ambulance to the Black River Falls hospital.

A few steps into my journey across the road a southbound vehicle on Hwy. 54 struck me. As my brother Kevin – who was on the bus with my cousins and neighbors – vividly described “you flew into the air.”

Unconscious, I was lifted off the pavement and transported by a passerby who had a mattress in the back of his pickup. We were met by the ambulance about halfway to Black River Falls about 16 miles away.

"Did I get hit by a car, Ma," I asked, as I was being transferred into the ambulance. “YES,” she shrieked before I passed out from the pain.

My injuries were bumps, scrapes, bruises and a broken right pelvis. A few inches and it could have been my spine. With the car traveling at least 40 mph, that could have been my final moment.

Kevin said I should be impressed by the size of the dent I put in the front of the car that hit me.

The location of the fracture was not conducive for a cast, so I was confined to bed for a few weeks before I learned how to use crutches. It was torture for my active body. I missed the rest of the school year.

Today school buses are equipped with flashing red lights and a stop sign that extends from the body of the bus – all visible warning signs that drivers need to stop. In those days there were no stop sign extensions and the bus driver never activated the flashing lights.

The school district had a policy that the red flashing bus lights were not activated where there was curb and gutter. I don’t know why – those in the know are gone now. I suspect it was because the district had no regular bus stops in the village.

The district changed its policy after my accident. It may have been a little encouragement from my late father who was on the school board.

In our litigous world today, the lawyers would have been knocking on our door with possible cases against the driver of the car, the school district or the bus driver to find someone at fault who would pay dearly.

That's not how things were done then. I doubt my parents consulted a lawyer. They were able to get my medical bills covered. I suspect the insurance company gave the folks a little extra money because I received $100 for my "pain and suffering,” – a few zeros short of what could have been paid.

But I was happy because I used those proceeds to purchase a brand new 10-speed at the Coast to Coast Hardware Store in Blair. I rode that bike for many years until it was stolen when I was a student in college.

I was young and a quick healer. But psychologically it was hard on Mom, whom I sure felt she was to blame. For months afterward she would grab me if there was a car anywhere close to us when we were crossing a street.

Long-term I ended up with my right leg a little shorter than my left leg and had frequent lower back pain until I started wearing a heel lift. Hard to say whether that was the result of the accident.

The May 14, 1975 Melrose Chronicle featured a photo on page one that showed me being transferred into the ambulance. I made the news in the days before I wrote the news.

I probably landed on my head and that’s what made me a journalist.

I consider myself lucky.