

Excerpt from:

FIRST      By Lee MacDougall

The two driving forces in Kirkland Lake were gold mining and hockey. I had nothing to do with either. I never liked the violence of hockey, and whenever I was on skates I would practice gliding around the rink like Canada's sweetheart, Karen Magnussen. My father had worked in the mines before I was born, but by the time we moved to Kirkland, he was an employee of Ontario Hydro. He started work at eight thirty, so we could avoid the frigid walk to school if we helped get the car started. Like every teenager, my brother Billy was desperate to drive, and anything to do with the car, even starting it, was a step closer. This entailed him forcing the kitchen door open if the snow had drifted against it, unplugging the car's block heater, prying a frozen car door open, and praying that the cold engine would turn over. As it warmed up, I would help him scrape the ice-covered windshield, or shovel the steps. If the snowplow had been by, and there was a wall of ice and snow at the end of the driveway, we would attack that as well.

The car seats would be frozen, so it felt like we were sitting on cold boards. If it was forty below or colder, and it often was, the tires would also be frozen, and the first block or two would feel like we were riding in the Flintstone's car, with square stone wheels. My father would have the heat on high, and his window partly down, which was as he said, "the only damn way to keep the windshield from fogging up." This never worked. He would still have to scrape the inside madly as he drove, and would grumble about the condensation from our breathing. He was usually smoking, so whoever sat behind him had to endure the biting wind from his open window, and the odd burning ash from his cigarette. We fought for the front seat.

The term "break-neck speed" would best describe his driving style. By leaving at eight twenty-two, he could swing by my school first, hit the high school a minute later, then squeal off and make it to the Hydro yard by eight twenty nine. If there was no traffic, and no train at the crossing, we made it easily. If there were cars lined up at a stop sign, the curses would fly, and he would drive up the shoulder, or cut through a gas station. He was always late.