

Troubled El Camino in the snow

Early morning weekend paper route, winter 1977-78 (?) 14 or 15 years old.

I walk out of the house on 54th & Columbus around 4am to a beautiful snowfall. It's usually a pleasantly quiet time doing my weekly paper route in the wee small hours, except for that morning with a car engine revving loudly up the block near 55th. At first I paid no attention, on my way across the street towards the paper shack garage as usual. But the car engine was getting louder, so I looked over to see it bashing into the curb, repeatedly! *Crazy!* I immediately saw the potential for this loony to possibly hit one of the parked cars — better not be Dad's Buick! I watched surreptitiously from near the Oslund's house on the corner.

The car halts from bashing the curb, centers, then guns it *full throttle ahead!* Down Columbus Avenue, passing me by with no chance to stop at the intersection! I watched this nutcase drive full speed all the way down, crossing 53rd, 52nd and on — plunging into the frozen Minnehaha Creek with a loud crash!

Shocked by seeing this unbelievable scenario, I race to the nearby paper shack garage a block down on Park Avenue, to see if my fellow paperboy cohorts witnessed this insanity too. First, good friend (and fellow music obsessive) Matt arrived, who (recently) recalls, *"I think I was on 52nd and Park and saw the car fly by on Columbus and then heard the crash."*

Meanwhile, the sound of sirens blared in the near distance to the rescue. Neighbor Mike eventually joined up, hearing the commotion (impossible not to by now). We headed to the creek to see the damage. Waiting for the ambulance and fire engines to leave. It didn't look good for the driver. We saw

the body bag on a stretcher carried away to the ambulance.

Getting to be sunrise soon, in the dim winter light could see it was an orange El Camino, burnt and shattered in the frozen creek bed. Glass and plastic shards lay about scattered about from the wreckage.

Here's another recollection from Matt : *“I remember the steering wheel melted from the fire, looking like candle wax drippings. 1970s car and probably 1970s drinking. I've tried to find a news story about this crash without success.”*

This was probably the worst accident I ever witnessed. But was it an accident or a deranged suicide mission? The unfortunate driver was probably drunk and certainly far too disturbed to drive.

- Dean Gustafson, April 2024

Oh by the way, thanks Matt for the additional memories!