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COLUMN

Rat hunting was part of school day

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There have been episodes in my life that, in reflection, seem more like crazy movies than reality.

That thought went through my mind recently as I told my editor, Andrea Rondeau, about one day when I was in Grade 6 attending a rat-infested elementary school.

The school was built next to a river and rats, some very large, that live near the waterway were likely attracted to the school's garbage boxes where all the leftover food from the cafeteria was put out for pick up.

These were the days long before recycling, so the food scraps were not separated and were mixed in with the rest of the garbage, which was easily accessible to rodents.

It was a feast for vermin and the rats began inundating the school.

It was not uncommon to see the rats all over the facility and they would fearlessly run through the classrooms with impunity.

In today's world, this would never be allowed and I'm sure the health and school officials would have stepped in and closed the school until the rat problem was dealt with.



But it was almost half a century ago and the school's principal and teachers came up with their own rather bizarre plan to deal with the issue.

One day during morning announcements, the principal invited any students who owned pellet guns to bring them to school the next day for a rat hunt that would be held after classes.

I suspect any school principal who did that these days would be automatically fired and the story would have made national news but, as I said, those were different times.

So the next day, almost 100 youngsters got on buses and walked the streets on the way to school carrying guns, and occasionally shooting at things, and nobody even blinked an eye.

Today, a sight like that would

have police coming in all directions, but none of the passing pedestrians and motorists paid us any attention at all.

At 3 p.m., the games began. It was a poor school and we didn't have organized sports teams (at least none that I can recall), so the rat hunt could be considered an extracurricular sport I guess.

The teachers took us outside and instructed us to get in a line, about three feet apart, load our weapons and make sure nobody was pointing the guns at anyone else when the shooting began.

We were told that as we only had air guns, the best strategy to take down rats was to shoot the pellets straight at their heads to kill them because body shots would only wound them at best.

Then some of the teachers with hammers began banging hard on the sides of the garbage bin and rats began swarming out of there in every direction, including straight at us.

We frantically fired our guns in a panic and, while some of the shots were accurate and stopped rats in their tracks, most of the pellets were shot wildly and missed their

targets by some margin.

Rats ran between our legs in an effort to escape the slaughter, and I remember one even jumped on the shoulders of one my peers and he threw down his gun and made a frantic run towards the school trying to knock the rodent off.

All organization, if there ever was any, was gone and we began firing at any rat near us without taking into consideration that there were other people all around.

Amazingly, not one of the students or teachers was shot in the melee, and we successfully killed 22 rats.

I remember feeling frightened out of my wits when the rats came unexpectedly at us and felt fortunate to have survived the hunt with no injuries.

But, being young and stupid, we immediately began talking to the teachers about doing it again the next day.

But I think the teachers were shocked by the carnage they created and the fact that someone could have been seriously hurt and decided to terminate our new extracurricular activity for good.

Those were the days(?).

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