

Student and Bus Driver Louis “Buzzy” Carter

I’ve lived my entire life in Aldie, VA. I’m the 6th or 7th generation of my family to live here. I was born Nov, 1946 and began attending Aldie Elementary in 1952 (1st grade). I lived close enough to make the 5 – 10 minute walk to school every day. It would take less time if I cut across some fields. Only White students attended Aldie Elementary all the time I was there (1st – 7th grade). It was after I started attending Loudoun County High (1959 -1965) in Leesburg, that Loudoun County Public Schools (LCPS) began to integrate.

Beginning in 1959, I rode a school bus to Loudoun County High. It was a 1952 International Harvester and carried 60 passengers. Normally, the bus was full. It had a 5-speed standard transmission and a heater that didn’t do much for those at the back of the bus. Truth be told, in cold weather frost would form on the inside of the windows in the back of the bus. Other than that, the bus was in fairly good condition: upholstery was intact, there were no places where rust had eaten through the floors or walls of the bus. Monthly maintenance insured all the lights, wipers and turn signals worked, fluids were checked and changed and the chassis was lubed. My 1st year of high school (8th grade), my bus driver was Tommy Slater. My 2nd year of high school my bus driver was Robert Smith. Both were Aldie neighbors. Only White students were on that bus then.

Aldie being a rural area, it wasn’t uncommon for young people to begin driving trucks, tractors and such between age 10 and 15. If the need arose, you could even find 16 year old adolescent driving the Aldie fire truck. We were a tight community and neighbors (Black or White) were always willing to help one another if needed. I was 16 when I became a student bus driver. It was my sophomore year (1962/1963). I drove a school bus through my senior year in 1965 (Mon – Fri). Technically, I’m a third-generation school bus driver for LCPS. My grandfather (Ira Carter) drove in the 1930’s and 1940’s. He’d pick up Aldie Elementary students from around Middleburg, Aldie and over by Watson Road near Gilbert’s Corner. He owned a grocery store and driving for LCPS was a way to earn extra money. When he started delivering mail, my father (Louis senior) who worked as a mechanic, began driving for LCPS. My father and grandfather drove the same route, delivering students to Aldie Elementary. My grandfather and father drove a private bus owned by my grandfather. In those days there were a few privately owned buses contracted by LCPS. Records show those drivers were on a different pay scale than the one used for drivers of county-owned buses. Of course, drivers of private buses were responsible for the maintenance of their buses. By the time I started driving, there were no private buses carrying LCPS students to school. Being a third generation LCPS bus driver wasn’t unusual. Many families had multiple generations and various family members driving buses for LCPS. By the time I started a family, LCPS had discontinued employing student school bus drivers.

I’d gotten my Operator’s License in 1961 and my Chauffer’s License in January 1962. By that time, I’d been driving different vehicles around Aldie for 5 or 6 years. The process of qualifying to drive a school bus (getting a Chauffer’s License) required that you first have an Operator’s License, then you’d have a couple of road test sessions in a school bus. These were conducted under the direction of one of the LCPS employees that worked in the county bus garage. That person would give you general directions on where to go and which turns to make. The buses were mounted on truck chassis, so your turns would be wider than those you’d make in a car. You also had to practice the procedure for crossing railroad tracks. You’d pull up to the railroad tracks and stop before you crossed. A safety patrol person would leave the bus and cross the

tracks, making sure there were no trains coming from either direction. That person would give the driver the "all clear" and then you could cross the railroad tracks, pick up the safety patrol person and be on your way. You had to do two of these road test sessions, each lasting 2 – 3 hours. If you passed, they'd take you to fill out the application for a Chauffer's License. At that time, Virginia had three classes of driving licenses: Learners Permit, Operator's License (Driver's license) and Chauffer's License. A Chauffer's License allowed you to drive many types of vehicles, including cabs, dump trucks, 18-wheelers, heavy duty wreckers, fire trucks and of course school buses.

I drove the same 60 passenger International Harvester that I'd ridden from 1959 - 1962. My route covered Aldie, Middleburg, parts of St Louis and Oatlands before I rolled into Leesburg and Loudoun County High. High school students would disembark, I'd park the bus and attend class. It was bus number 7. At that time there were only four 60 passenger buses in the LCPS fleet.

It seemed LCPS bought 5 or 8 new buses every year. These replaced the older buses. Older buses were made 'reserve' buses and used for emergencies. I was part of a group of fellows that drove new buses from a factory in Ohio to Loudoun County. It was the Superior Coach Company in Lima, Ohio (1909-1980). We'd ride west to Lima in a single car. The trip to Lima was overnight. We'd arrive there early the next day. When we got to Lima and went to get our assigned buses from Superior's lot, we might find buses with near flat tires or insufficient fluids in the engines or transmissions. Superior assembled school bus bodies on truck frames. These were Chevy truck frames. Their primary concern was the assembly of bodies to frames. Then the assembled buses were stored in a lot. We'd have to enlist the aid of a local service station to get the buses ready for the road. Once all the buses were ready to roll, we'd assemble a caravan and head east back to Loudoun County. We'd travel together to make sure everyone got back safely. Once, after passing through Columbus, Ohio, we noticed that the last bus was not with the rest of the caravan. After waiting for a bit with no sign of the missing bus, we sent someone to look for the missing caravan member. We wondered if the bus had suffered a mechanical breakdown, flat or maybe been involved in an accident. Eventually the bus was found and rejoined the caravan. We asked the driver what had happened? He stated that he'd lost sight of the rest of the caravan coming through Columbus and got lost. That's when we discovered he couldn't read very well. He couldn't follow the road signs. From that point on, his bus was placed in the middle of the caravan. Drivers were paid a flat rate. What you didn't spend you could keep. To increase our profits, we'd do things like negotiate with service stations over the price of fuel. Back then the cost was \$0.25 -\$0.30/gal. We figured given the number of buses, a volume discount was fair. Service stations would work with us. On one return trip I stayed overnight with a cousin in Hagerstown, Maryland. I was just too tired to drive anymore that day.

By 1965, I was driving a new 1965 Chevrolet bus. The Chevy carried 54 passengers, had a 4-speed standard transmission and power steering. Its heater was better than the one in the International Harvester. When the weather turned cold, students riding in the rear of the bus stayed warm. Generally, student drivers didn't get the new buses, but it did happen from time to time. Student bus drivers weren't paid as much as adult drivers. As I remember, it was about half what the adult drivers were paid. In 1962 my bus only carried White students. By the 1963/1964 school year my bus had Black and White students. Integration of LCPS had begun.

At the start of every school year, drivers would meet with a school transportation official who would give them general directions for their route and the students to be picked up. Over a couple of weeks, drivers would refine that information. After a couple weeks of driving, drivers would turn in written directions including the number of students to be picked up on their route. This written, refined information could then be used by substitute drivers should the need arise. Of course, the students on the bus would also help direct substitute drivers. Some of those back road routes could get convoluted and drivers could find themselves turning around in driveways and back-tracking.

I'd leave Aldie between 7:15 and 7:20 AM to start picking up students. I'd take 50 west and turn right onto Sam Fred Road. I'd pick up two girls who lived there. I'd turn around on Sam Fred Road and take it back to route 50 and into Middleburg. In Middleburg I'd turn right onto Foxcroft Road and follow it north, crossing the steel bridge over Goose Creek. I'd turn left onto Snake Hill Road and left again onto Millville Road. I'd follow Millville Road to St Louis Road just south of the village of St Louis near the former horse training center (Training Center Lane). Two years earlier St Louis Road had been paved. Before then it had been dirt and gravel. In fact, the only dirt and gravel roads on my route were Snake Hill and Millville. All the other roads were paved. I'd turn left onto St Louis Road and follow it south to Route 50. Then I'd take 50 east back through Middleburg, pick up some students there, pick up some students in Aldie and head over to Gilbert's Corner. I'd turn north on route 15 at Gilbert's Corner headed toward Leesburg. At Oatlands I'd stop and exchange 6 or 7 elementary school students with high school students from another bus. That bus was headed to Aldie Elementary and had been working its way through the back roads north of Aldie picking up elementary and high school students. From the Oatlands, I'd continue north on route 15 into Leesburg and Loudoun County High. There were no shelters for students. After a few days, students knew when I would be at certain points on the route. They'd gather at that time for a pickup or sometimes wait in their parent's cars. I arrived at Loudoun County High around 8:50 AM. School started at 9:00 AM. Throughout the school year, I kept pretty close to this schedule so students along my route knew when to expect me. Some students were on my bus from 7:15-7:30 AM until 8:50 AM. My buses were generally full. In some instances, high school students were standing in the aisles. You'd never get away with that today. I estimate my route was 40 – 42 miles one way.

During 6th period, I'd leave class and start arranging buses for the afternoon trips to drop off students. The buses with the longer routes were arranged to leave before those with the shorter routes. Since my route was one of the longer ones, my bus was always 2nd in line. School let out between 3:00 – 3:10 PM. I'd leave the parking lot between 3:10 and 3:20 PM. My route would be the reverse of my morning route (40 – 42 miles). Depending on traffic, I'd get home between 4:30 and 4:45 PM. Drivers were responsible for putting chains on the tires if the weather called for it. My bus was never stuck in mud or snow and it never suffered a mechanical breakdown. Every now and then I'd detect a fouled spark plug misfire, but it didn't keep me from completing my route.

Drivers were responsible for keeping order on their bus. We all knew one another so there were no serious problems on the bus, though I did have a few colorful characters. Some of them could have had their own comedy show. Serious problems going to school could be reported to the principal or vice principal and dealt with that day in school. If I had a serious problem while dropping students off for home, I'd pull the bus off to the side of the road and turn off the engine.

There we'd sit until order was returned. Everyone wanted to get home so that didn't happen very often. This method worked extremely well if it were raining or cold.

In '63 or '64 I started carrying some of the Black students that had integrated Loudoun County High. I remember some of the Black kids on my route: Tommy Washington's daughter on Sam Fred Road, a boy named Baltimore, (nicknamed "Puddy") and two Stewart sisters near St Louis. I'd been playing baseball with Black guys from up around Deep Hollow Lane, Bowmantown and Buchanan Gap all through elementary school, so having Black kids on my bus wasn't a big deal to me. Before integration, when I was attending all-White Aldie Elementary, those kids had probably attended Bull Run Mountain Elementary on New Mountain Road. Only Black kids attended that school. In '63/'64 Black kids started attending the previously all-White Loudoun County High with me. Integration had begun. Times change.

I was a substitute LCPS school bus driver for 3 years after I graduated from high school. I also did substitute bus driving for my sister who drove a smaller bus for Leesburg Christian, a private school. Come to think of it, she never paid me.