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Benjamin Walker has operated Metro buses for 41 of his 66 years. He doesn't miss the diesel-fuel fumes of the older buses he operated. Photo by Ned Racine



Ben Walker Nears End of 41-Year Metro Career. Or Does He?

By NED RACINE

(June 6, 2007) In April 9, 1966, while the unmanned Soviet spacecraft Luna 10 orbited the moon, preparing for a cosmonaut landing that never came, Benjamin Walker began a 41-year mission here on earth.

Walker, a North Los Angeles Division 3 bus operator, has worked for Metro and its predecessors for 41 years. At the May 25 celebration of Division 3's 100th anniversary, he received a certificate commending his years of dedicated service.

But when he began, Walker never anticipated a lengthy career in transit. "No. Not at all. When I started the job it was just from year to year, and everything just kept adding up."

In April 1966 Walker had just finished a two-year stint in the United States Army, including a tour of duty in An Khe, Vietnam. "I got out of the military, and I was looking for a job. Transit was there and I said, 'Well, let's go for that.' "

Walker, who had been working since the eighth grade, began doing odd jobs with the Rapid Transit District before becoming a bus operator. The native of Jackson, Miss., finds his work much the same, despite the passage of four decades, except how computers and radio have changed transit communications.

'Communicate by land line'

"When I started, the only way you

Benjamin Walker operated these buses when he joined Metro in 1966. He likes the way power steering in modern coaches makes his life a

could communicate with the dispatcher was by land line or they had telephones on utility posts all over the city...you could use those and [the phones] would take you directly to the dispatcher."

"Back then, you were out there by yourself. You couldn't hit a button and get assistance. You had to deal with whatever came up . . . [Now] If you get into a problem, you can get help out there."

Walker describes his operator training as "two weeks of classroom and going out on the road. Then they would take you to the [Los Angeles River] bed. Give you a driver's test and stuff like that. Then they would assign you to a division."

Walker recalls that new operators generally spent three days on each line, depending how many lines were run out of each division. He began by operating 2100 Series buses at Central City Division 1, before moving on to divisions 5, 2 and 10. He has worked at Division 3 for 15 years.

Now working the 201 line from Wilshire and Vermont into Glendale, Walker finds the passengers he transports are different.

"They have changed as far as I'm concerned because I don't work late now. When I was working late in the afternoon and at night, you've got a different brand of passenger . . . compared to the morning, when you've got mostly working people and shopping people."

'A good, secure job'

Looking back, Walker would still choose to operate a Metro bus. "It was a good, secure job. I just basically had a high school education. I was looking for something to work. And the only thing you had was General Motors and the aircraft industry and stuff like that. And transit was a decent job earning a fairly decent living"

His present work is much easier "because I don't have to work the harder lines." The newer buses also make his life easier.

"The newer buses have really good power steering. The old buses didn't. When you turned a corner you had to work with it. These you can turn with one hand." He laughed when he said he doesn't miss smelling diesel fuel all the time, as he did with the older buses.

Walker, a Los Angeles resident, looks to his passengers as a measure of his job performance. "Working a regular line, you've got regular passengers who ride with you every day, and they're very nice. They get on and speak. They treat you with quite a bit of respect. As long you're getting that, you know you're doing a pretty decent job."

Although his wife has not asked him to retire, Walker sounds as though he has begun considering it. "Hopefully, this will be the last year,"



Walker said. "Of course, I said that last year. But it's just like anything else, I'm getting older. You know, you can only drive them so long."

"As they say, you get into a habit of getting up and going to work. And I thought about leaving, and then I was wondering, 'What are you going to do 24 hours a day?'"

Although he has not chosen a post-retirement hobby, the solitary nature of fishing appeals to Walker. Something that does not involve too many people? he is asked. "Yes," he answers, laughing heartedly.