



The Riveting Story of a Busload of School Children that Disappeared

Where Are The Children?

A Bus with 26 Children Disappeared From a Small Town in California, Triggering a National Search to Locate Them and Bring Their Abductors to Justice

In 1976, a school bus with 26 children suddenly disappeared on its way home. A frantic search by police located the bus but not the children. What no one knew at the time was that they had been kidnapped and hidden in a buried truck. News of the disappearance became a national story.

With time running out, and the authorities unable to locate the children or even communicate with the kidnapers, it was up to the children and their adult driver to save themselves. Against all odds, and with extreme courage, they literally began clawing their way out until they were free.

Zman interviewed one of the 26 children, Larry Park. To this day, Park is haunted by memories of the ordeal, which his mind plays over and over again. He helped us reconstruct the entire harrowing event, providing us with firsthand details. Read the dramatic account that kept America on edge for weeks.

- *Shimon Rosenberg*

It was a comfortable summery day in the sleepy farm town of Chowchilla, in central California. A school bus meandered down the winding, dusty streets between farms and uncultivated fields, carrying a group of children home from school.

It was Thursday, July 15, 1976. The United States had just finished celebrating its bicentennial a week earlier. Summer school was due to wind down in just a few days. Naturally, the children were excited about their upcoming summer vacation and the atmosphere was spirited.

That day the children had gone on a special trip to the town swimming pool. The heat in the San Joaquin Valley region is oppressive in July and the swim was a real treat. The children were in a happy, boisterous mood. Bus driver Franklin Edward Ray was having a hard time maintaining order on his bus.

It was 4:30 PM when Ray stopped to drop off a child. The child ran home excitedly, completely unaware that he had avoided a horrific nightmare by just moments. Ray made a right turn and continued driving. He slowed the bus down as he prepared to make a sharp left turn. There was a stop two blocks away where several children were to get off. But the bus never made it to that stop.

Just as he was about to execute the left turn, Ray noticed a large white van blocking the road. He slowed and tried to pass the van on the left, but a masked man sprang out of the driver's side. The man was brandishing a large gun in his left hand. His right hand was held up in an unmistakable gesture for Ray to stop.

Ed Ray pressed the brakes obediently and the man from the white van ran over to the bus driver's window. "Open the door and get to the back of the bus!" the man barked.

Ray opened the door, but did not budge from his seat. The masked man walked around the bus and stood on the bottom step. He looked over the children and then turned to Ray. Before Ray and the children could get their bearings, two more masked and

armed men emerged from the white van and ran over to the stopped bus.

Chowchilla is a sparsely populated city to begin with, and not everyone attended summer school. So Ray's bus was a conglomerate of twenty-six children of all ages, ranging from five to fourteen. The children were terrified.

The first man, still standing on the bottom step, began screaming at the driver, "I told you to go to the back of the bus!"

"What's going on?" Ray asked. "Who are you?"

That is how the most memorable event ever to take place in Chowchilla began. Our account draws on research from the official archives of Chowchilla and the local newspaper, the *Merced Sun-Star*. The majority of the information, however, comes from the recollections of one of the kidnapped children, Larry Park. Seated directly behind the driver because he was taking medication for a hyperactive condition, Park noticed the van immediately when the bus stopped. From the beginning he literally had a front row seat to the nightmare that was about to unfold.

Park was six years old at the time and was on the bus with his eight-year-old sister, Andrea. They had been born and raised in Chowchilla, where their parents worked hard to provide for the family. Park still lives in the region and he relives the nightmare of the kidnapping on a daily basis. When we asked him to describe on a scale of one to ten how well he recalls the details of the event, he replied "Ten."

That should not come as a surprise, as the terrible ordeal was seared deeply into the conscience of each child who lived through it. Many of them recall the event as clearly as if it had happened yesterday. In Park's case, though, there is an additional explanation for why his recollection of the incident is so good. He has a near-photographic memory, which he readily admits is both a blessing and a curse. Regardless, his memory is so sharp that he can recollect minute details others have long forgotten about.

When Park's memoirs about the kidnapping were printed in an ongoing series in a local newspaper, Michael Marshall—one of the heroes of the story—expressed his surprise that any of the children could have such a clear memory of every detail. Marshall, the eldest child on the bus that fateful day, confirmed every fact mentioned by Park.

The Abduction

Ed Ray was a graying farm owner in his mid-fifties who drove a bus as a side job. After so many years of heavy labor in the fields he had developed broad shoulders and powerful muscles. Still, he remained a congenial and straightforward man who was well-liked by all. He had been driving school buses for so long that some of the children on his route had parents who had been school children on his bus. Ray was reliable and punctual, and parents trusted him implicitly.

Now Ray was stumped. It didn't make sense that armed men were holding up his bus. These kinds of things didn't happen in Chowchilla. In fact, no school bus had ever been held up before in America. What could they be looking for on his school bus anyway? Money?!

For Ray, the audacity of these men was astounding. How could they order him to give up control of *his* bus?! He was responsible for these children! But it became very clear that any attempt at resistance could cost him his life.

"Get to the back of the bus!" the masked man shouted again angrily, "and don't ask questions!"

Ray stood up from his seat and walked down the aisle to the rear of the bus. "He didn't take his eyes off the men," says Larry Park, "letting them know in his own way that he would hold them responsible if any of the children would be harmed."

The moment Ray stood up the first man climbed onto the bus. The second man followed. That man held up his gun and pointed it directly at the children. The first



Chowchilla, California.

man shouted at the children in the front seats, "Go to the back of the bus!"

Larry Park felt a chill go down his spine. He was too young to comprehend fully what was happening, but the belligerent demeanor of the masked men was unmistakable. Park stood up from his front seat and started walking backward to the back of the bus. He was too frightened to turn his back on the armed men. Park sat down in the seat next to his sister.

The other children had varying responses. Some stared at the intruders hoping that the entire incident was a practical joke. Others were trembling. Some in the front of the bus were so confused and frightened that they were completely paralyzed.

The first man stepped forward and forced the children from their seats, sending them all to the back. Anyone who took too long was yelled at. When they had all moved, the kidnappers were separated from the children by rows of empty seats.

Now one of the men spoke to his hostages. "Sit in your places and keep quiet. If you listen to what we tell you to do nobody will get hurt and you will see your parents soon."

The man sat down in the driver's seat. His partner climbed onto the bench behind him, gun pointed at the children. Some of the older children couldn't restrain themselves

