

Longtime bus driver sets the Pace

Through 20 years and countless miles, Harley Fleming gets riders where they're going

By Dawn Reiss
Special to the Tribune

It's a typical day on Pace Route 322, a route Harley Fleming, 57, knows well. He wears a patch signifying a million miles behind the wheel with Pace, and he doesn't plan on stopping any time soon. He loves meeting people and he likes getting to travel, even if it's a 26.4-mile loop he does every day.

This is Fleming's third loop of the day, but he doesn't mind. Even though he has a chance to pick a new route four times every year, he's chosen this one for a decade.

There aren't a lot of turns or railroad tracks, and it's a diverse group of people from 54th Avenue and Cermak Road in Cicero to Yorktown Center in Lombard.

There are the regulars and newcomers and those he sees now and then. There are business people, low-income workers, retirees and school-age children.

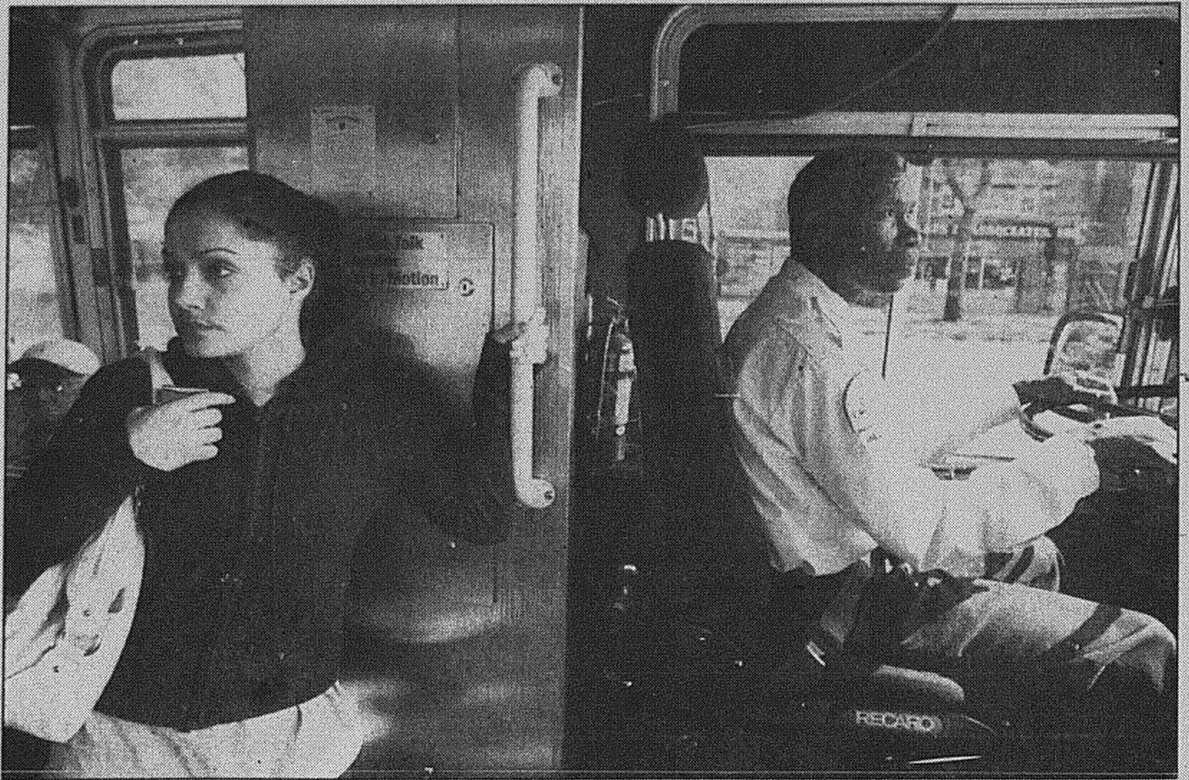
There are people who like mass transportation and those who can't afford to buy a car.

No matter their background or reason, they all agree that riding the bus saves money, even if it means giving up a little freedom. With Illinois gas prices among the highest in the nation, riding the bus is an option more people are considering.

Some ride to work. Others take the bus for school or shopping.

There are those who have suspended licenses and those who want to use less gas for environmental or political reasons. Others just want extra spending money for happy hour. Most just want to save money.

Here are a few of their stories: It's just before 2:08 p.m., and Fleming has been driving for a



Jennifer De La Torre of North Riverside waits for her stop recently on Pace Route 322, driven by Harley Fleming. Fleming has been awarded a million-mile patch by the suburban bus agency.

Tribune photo by Antonio Perez

few hours. The bus has a handful of people on it, including Trinetta Rogers, 34, who started taking the bus after too many unpaid parking tickets led to an impounded car and a suspended driver's license.

"One day I came out and they had booted my car," said Rogers, a single mother of two who lives in Maywood. "I couldn't afford to pay the tickets at that time. It was either rent or pay the tickets. That was it, I lost my car."

That was a year ago. Although Rogers knows she is saving money, she said there's "no way" she'd ride the bus if she had a car.

Fleming pulls the bus into Yorktown's parking lot. It's a chance to stretch his legs and take a 20-minute lunch break. Today it's a bottle of water, a banana and two granola bars.

Sometimes Fleming window-shops in the mall or reads scripture, preparing for the Sunday school class he teaches. Today, he stands outside and enjoys the summer sunshine.

It's a big change from the okra-and-corn, horse-and-chicken farm Fleming grew up on in rural Tennessee. After graduating from high school, he wanted to see the world, so he came to Chicago. After working as a busboy, he went into the Navy, becoming a sales and service office clerk on the USS Newport News in the early 1970s. Fleming then worked as a machine operator for 10 years.

Driving a bus gave him an avenue out of his factory job, a chance to make more money and meet new people. For the last 20 years, it's been his way of life.

"I like driving," Fleming said. "And I like being with people. I get a chance to help people. Just getting people from one point to another, on time, means a lot to people."

On the weekends, Fleming doesn't ride the bus. Instead he drives his 2002 Toyota Highlander to church and a few other places.

Fleming likes taking road

trips to New Jersey, where the oldest of his two daughters lives, and visiting relatives in Tennessee, Texas and Louisiana.

On any given weekday, Route 322 carries 2,200 to 2,600 passengers. Overall, Pace's ridership is up.

Average weekly figures (not counting weekends) show an 8.4 percent increase from 131,857 riders in May 2006 to 142,973 in May this year.

At \$1.50 a bus ticket, the price is less than half the cost of a gallon of gas. But those prices might not last long. Lawmakers are considering a quarter-percent sales-tax increase requested by various transit agencies.

Facing a \$50 million shortfall in a \$247 million budget, Pace may lay off 300 of 1,500 employees, cut suburban routes and raise fares this fall, said Pace media relations manager Judi Kulm.

After a quick inspection for trash, Fleming starts the bus up for another loop on Cermak.