

KIDNAPPED IN A MODEL T FORD IN 1922

MODEL T FORDS AND THE KEYSTONE COPS

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IT

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KIDNAPPED IN A MODEL T FORD IN 1922

Most of my associations with automobiles in "the old days" are pleasant memories, but there was one vehicle, an early 20's Model T coupe that I remember with some trepidation but, I must admit, some humor also because the incident was somewhat bizarre to say the least.

The story took place in Los Angeles where my family lived for about two years. I have written about my childhood in previous columns-about cars for early movies and a trip through the national parks.

I was about six when this incident took place but I remember it very clearly. One afternoon my mother went shopping and left my sister and me with our great aunt, Anna Knontz. She was born in Germany, as were many of my mother's relatives, and spoke broken English.

We were sitting on the front porch when a Model T coupe stopped in front of the house. A rather young, fat man got out and approached us with a long green box. He asked if this was the home of George L Brown because he had some cut flowers to deliver. Aunt Anna didn't quite get the drift of the questioning, so old smarty-pants John spoke up and told him that this was the home of Alton Brown. Mr. George Brown was my uncle who lived about 8 miles away. The young man looked crestfallen and said that he had to make this delivery or get fired and he had no idea where to locate my Uncle George. Up spoke young John and said, "Oh, I know where he lives. I'll go with you and show you the way."

At the time, none of us thought of the "fishy" part of the whole thing. Why would he deliver flowers to our home on Winona Avenue when Uncle George lived in another section of Los Angeles on Ventura Avenue?

However, Aunt Anna thought it would be all right for me to show him the way and my sister seemed to concur, so off we went. I remember noticing that the man's black derby hat seemed a bit too small and that the cigar he lit didn't smell as nice as the ones my Dad smoked.

I told him to head toward the large oil fields that we always passed on the way to Uncle George's but when they came in sight he turned around and headed in what, I believe, was a southerly direction. I told him that he was going the wrong direction. His smiles suddenly turned to scowls and he hit me on the side of the head and told me to "shut up" and "that he was kidnapping me."

I remember asking him just exactly "kidnapping" was. He told me that "kidnapping" meant that you were taken away by someone and then your parents were notified and that they had to pay a lot of money to get you back. I told him that he couldn't get any money from my father because he was far away in Pittsburgh on a business trip.

He seemed to be surprised at this information but then he leaned over and leered at me saying that my Uncle George had plenty of money and that he would pay plenty to get me back. I believe that it was at this time that I told him that Uncle George didn't have much money because my Aunt Louise was in the hospital and that my Cousin, George Jr., was a policeman. (Both were lies) who would come looking for me.

To my surprise he turned the car around and headed east toward the area where my family lived. Before the days of traffic lights there were policemen every few blocks who whistled and turned around a stop and go signal to keep traffic flowing. At every one of the signals, I would poke my head out the window and yell, "help! I'm being kidnapped!" the various policemen would stare at us and then motion the car to proceed. I kept up the yelling routine whenever we were stopped but to no avail.

Suddenly, however, I realized that we were on Western Avenue, a long street that leads to downtown Los Angeles and was only two blocks from our home when it passed the bakery. I remember shouting "There's our bakery." The fat man in the derby hat stepped on the proper Model T pedals and pulled over to the curb. "All right, you little monster, get out and run home. Don't tell any of your folks about this or I'll come back and get you again!"

I jumped out and headed for home as fast as I could run. When I arrived at my home, my great-aunt and my sister were on the front porch enjoying a lemonade.

I remember someone remarked that the trip didn't take very long and that mother would be home soon. I kept the incident to myself until Mother did arrive and then when the entire story was told I received a severe scolding as did my great-aunt Anna, -for going off with a stranger and my aunt for letting me go.

Shortly after this incident my mother captured a female burglar in the house next door who threatened to "get back" at her small children and my sister and her friends were followed home by a man who said he liked little girls, so not long after this Mother said that she would not live in Los Angeles any longer and we moved back to smoky old Pittsburgh for good. I guess I'm still the only living person who was unsuccessfully kidnapped in a Model T Ford.

MODEL T FORDS AND THE KEYSTONE COPS

Ever since the first Model T rolled off the assembly line in 1908, the "tin lizzy" has been the butt of hundreds of jokes, cartoons, and photographs. The movie industry was quick to realize that just having a few T's in a movie would make an audience laugh.

The famous Keystone Cops drove, were run over, and smashed up hundreds of them. Many of their movies were made on the roads leading to Santa Monica beach, a few miles from Los Angeles. My family used to drive to the beach on weekends and I saw many movies being made there.

I remember how we would gather near the foot of the high cliffs above the beach and watch as they shot scenes of Model T's plummeting from the tops of the cliffs with dummies in them. Sometimes the director would shout up through his megaphone that the crash wasn't spectacular enough. They would then get another car and send it crashing down. I recall that on one occasion they used four or five flivvers before the director was satisfied. It was a thrilling afternoon for a bunch of small kids in knee-length bathing suits with eyes wide-open with excitement and wonder.

The movie companies also used the dusty roads near the beach for their chase scenes. They would have two or three "fugitive" cars and several "cop" cars full of actors in their old-fashioned helmets, driving intricate patterns of circles and cross-overs. They drove them about 15 miles per hour, but by taking only about eight frames per second the finished films made them look like they were going about fifty. They were really hilarious, as most of you know.

Today a good car chase is still exciting and often funny. They are more refined and realistic but I still like the old ones I saw them make at Santa Monica, when I was a small boy of six. Yes, folks, that was show biz!

WHAT IF AUTOMOBILES NEVER CAUGHT ON?

I have been thinking about why people own, restore, and drive antique cars. Some people enjoy taking a rusty, hopeless looking collection of metal parts and putting them back together so that they will have a rare, beautiful vehicle that they can drive. They will then seek out others who have done the same thing and they will exchange snapshots taken at various stages of the restoration. These photos give them "bragging rights" that are well deserved. When the car is completely restored, the owner will go in one of several directions. He might treat his vehicle like the crown jewels and trailer it to all the car meets and drive it only long enough to park in the designated spot so that it can be judged. If the car does not win a prize, he may become very upset and perhaps he may say so and question the ability of the meet judges the way a basketball coach questions the calls of the men in the striped shirts during a close game. The person might also have a discussion with the judges and perhaps let it be known that we will not bring his "pride and joy" to this particular meet next year. Nobody wins because they know that we will be back to try again next spring.

Then there is the fellow who restores his car so that it will run well and safely so that the whole family can pile in and drive to a meet. The car isn't and never will be in showroom condition, but the whole family enjoys it and secretly hopes that it won't win a prize. You know the kind he's thinking about, the one with the gold colored touring car on a pedestal flanked by two angels holding torches on laurel wreaths. If he does win an award of some kind, he usually takes it over to show Aunt Bessie who owns three lively cats. He "forgets" he left the trophy there and then waits hopefully until Auntie calls and breaks the sad news about the breakage.

The things that the family will remember about the meet are the friendly people, the picnic lunch eaten while sitting on the running boards, the thundershower, and how sweet and clean everything smelled on the way back home.

Yes, old cars and car meets are lots of fun and the companionship and camaraderie are the things that make the hobby worthwhile.

Let's just suppose that the "new-fangled" gas buggy never really "caught on" at the turn of the century.

Where would be today and would be better off? Before you answer, think about it carefully.

The automobile is the leading cause of people getting into trouble. Just look at the pages of your daily newspaper. John Doe ran into Mary Roe and both vehicles were "totaled." Did you ever hear of a man on horseback running into a lady riding sidesaddle? Would both horses be killed or have to be shot? Not likely. Then we read that Henry Smith had all of his tires cut and his shotgun was stolen from his front seat. Can you picture someone cutting the feet on a cowboy's Palomino and then stealing his rifle from its case beside the horse's front shoulder? No way, Jose!

How many people today would be arrested for driving their buggy too fast through town? It is true that US Grant was given a ticket for driving his carriage in a reckless manner in Washington while he was President, but he was probably singled out by some disgruntled Democrat policeman.

Just think of the hundreds of people who end up in jail and prison for stealing automobiles. When the horse was king, there were horse thieves but their number was few because a strong tree branch and a few feet of rope helped to keep this type of felony to a minimum.

Just think back and you will realize that a license was not required to own or ride a horse and insurance (if there was any) must have been very cheap.

We all have noticed how many people seem to end up in court after being caught driving under the influence. This never happened to carriage and buggy drivers a century ago. They could go somewhere and celebrate and when it was time to go home all they had to do was unhitch old Dobbin, crawl into the seat and say, "Let's go home Dobbin!" and in a little while there they would be at the barn door. Try doing this tonight in your 1987 Thunderbird.

Just imagine once more that Mr. Ford, Mr. Packard, Mr. Vinton, and a hundred other men decided to raise horses instead of raising the hood. We would be at an antique horse show and the announcer would say, "and now, ladies and gentlemen, we present the oldest rider in the country and the oldest horse. Folks, meet J.D. Diffie riding his fifty year old mustang!"

No, I believe that most of us prefer the smell of garages to the aroma of horse barns.

LISTEN TO THE OLD FOLKS – YOU WON'T REGRET IT

Just the other day, I drove down a little gravel road off the White Hill road to take some snapshots of a house I have glanced at for half a century. It was built possibly in the very early 1800's and was last owned by a man whose name was Luigi Petti. I often said that I would like to meet him since I grew up listening to Italians at work at my Uncle Tom's home. I could speak a little "Italiano" and I wanted to meet Luigi Petti. Somehow, I never drove down his little road to his house, nestled between two steep hills. I never ran into him in Stuarts Draft and nobody ever pointed him out anywhere I went. People told me that they knew him so I knew he existed as surely as his name was painted on his mailbox. One day a year or so ago I looked at the obituary column and there was his name, Luigi Petti. Somehow I felt very sad that I had never stopped to see him—to talk about the "old country"—Italy and tell him I visited Italy when Mussolini was dictator and then years later when he was gone—shot to death by his own people and hanged by his heels in front of an old gas station with his mistress.

No, Luigi and I never met to talk about these things, but there were moments in my life when I took the time to write to some of the pioneers in the automobile industry and automobile history. On that trip to Pittsburgh with Hyde Kerr in 1951 for the start of the Glidden Tour and the idea of a three-region meet, we met and talked with Col. Augustus Post. This distinguished gentleman was a pioneer aviator, a cross-country balloonist, and a participant in the early Glidden Tours. It was he who helped found the AAA and the idea of numbering highways and promoted the campaign for better roads in the United States.

Later that same year, I wrote to Colonel Post and he wrote to me about his problems driving to the Jamestown Exposition in 1907 and getting his big white steamer stuck in Virginia mud with no signs to follow. I treasure his letter very much and I enjoyed knowing this man who was a pioneer automobilist and whose name appears in most every book about automotive history.

I also wrote and received short letters from Montague Roberts, the early race driver who piloted the famous Thomas Flyer on the first leg of the race to Paris in 1908. He was so pleased to know that he was not forgotten by my generation and he told me about his early race. He invited me to stop in to see him if I got to his town in New Jersey and I said that I would try. Well, I never made the trip and I later read that Monty Roberts had died. We never met but I have his letters to treasure.

Another experience I had many years ago was meeting Mr. Louis Clark at the AACA Spring Meet in Yorklyn, Delaware. This old gentleman had restored his Autocar number one after it had gathered dust in the Autocar Truck museum in Ardmore, Pa. He brought it to the meet and I was one of the lucky young men he invited to ride around the field with him. I asked him why many of the pictures of his first car showed it with tires made of huge, thick hump ropes. He was surprised and pleased that I had noticed that and he told me that the original tires had rotted away and the company didn't want to spend the huge sum of money to have replacements custom made. When he decided to restore

his first love to running order, the Firestone Rubber Company, then run by Harvey Firestone, Jr; and antique car buff, had them made up as a gift for this elderly pioneer, who made automobiles and later a line of wonderful trucks.

Later, when I returned home, I wrote him a thank you note which he acknowledged with a postcard even inquiring about my sons, Jay and Jerry who shared my interest in the hobby. I'm glad I didn't put off writing to him as I did to several other pioneers. I was too late in finding the address of Ransom E. Olds before he died and when I wrote to Charles Brady King, I received a note from someone who handled his affairs who informed me that Mr. King was senile and unable to correspond with anyone. Mr. King drove the first automobile in the streets of Detroit and later built the King automobile and the Northern, which inspired a group of men to copy it closely and name their car Wayne which is why I wanted to know more about Mr. King and his automobile.

The other pioneer I was honored to correspond with was Charles F. Kettering, who developed the self-starter and later developed the process of adding lead to gasoline and called it Ethyl. Of course, now we have taken all of the lead out of our gas to cut down on pollution. Mr. Kettering, who was affectionately known as Boss Kett, sent me a card and a note for several Christmases and I suppose mine reached him. In spite of his fame and accomplishments, he seemed to be a very humble man and his last years he teamed up with Mr. Sloan of General Motors and co-founded the Sloan-Kettering Cancer Research Foundation which is doing outstanding work today.

I guess the central idea of this sermon-like article is "Don't put off writing or visiting those you might know that were associated with the early days of the automobile." You young folks---listen to your Dad's stories or your Grandfather's....you will never regret it.

TURNING BACK THE CLOCK IN OUR MINDS

When I was a small boy I apparently said, "I wish" many times and my mother would usually counter with that saying that has stood the test of time, "If wishes were horses, beggars would ride." It took me a while to figure out what she meant but when I did I realized it was true. However, at a tad over three-score and ten, I still wish for things but mostly for someone other than myself. I will mention some things I wish my grandchildren and young members of this club and other clubs could experience with me.

First of all, I wish I could fill up the old Jeffrey with kids and take them down a dusty country road where we would suddenly come to a stop. I might even shut off the engine and we would sit quietly in the car as a large flock of black-faced sheep flowed around us and a farmer and his young sons would guide them by us heading for a new pasture up the road. After a cheerful "thank you" from the farmer we would start the car and be on our way again answering a dozen questions about sheep.

Before long, the excitement would mount as we approached a long covered bridge. There might be a sign warning, "Motorists-speed limit of 5 miles per hour strictly enforced. Weight limit 2 tons." Of course , as we crept inside the semi-dark interior I would be anxiously questioned whether the Jeffrey weighed more than two tons and I would assure them that it weighed just about a ton and a half. We might see some pigeons fly up from their nests on the rafters or enjoy the boom-boom sound of the loose boards on the bridge floor as we rolled over them. It is a sound that once heard will never be forgotten. Ask anyone who has had that experience.

A mile or two down the road we slow down once more as we encounter a wagon piled high with sun-dried hay and we look up to see the driver in his straw hat motioning for us to come by. Then I tell all my young passengers to grab a small wisp of hay and hold it tightly. As we wave after passing, I tell them all to close their eyes and make a wish and don't tell anyone what their wish was.

When I was small I was encouraged by my parents to make a wish and I recall it was always the same wish. I wanted to find a five dollar gold piece in a haystack! Don't ask me why because I can't give you a logical answer. My sister Adele had a much better chance of getting her wish as she grabbed some hay. She wished that we would stop at a country inn where we would have a real tasty dinner. Smart girl!

As my young passengers settled down in their seats, they would smell a strong, sweet odor like fresh honey and I would tell them that they were smelling the wonderful scent of buckwheat in blossom. If we had been in a fast moving closed car, we would have missed this experience altogether and later we might have missed the exciting smell of cider just being made. Of course, we pulled onto the dirt driveway and stopped. Everyone was given a generous sample of fresh cider in a jelly glass. This would be followed by a chorus demanding a second round and then the purchase of a gallon jug

to be taken home. There would be a brief exchange of names with the farmer's children before piling back into the car and waving goodbyes.

Just a few miles further down the road, we see a man waving a red flag and a line of cars stopped on our side of the road. Ahead of us we can see a plume of black smoke and we know that there is a coal-fired steam roller at work. We don't mind waiting a few minutes because we know that we will see the steamroller and the tar truck in action. Suddenly, the first of the line of cars appears and finally the last car comes by with the driver holding the red flag out of his car window. We are in luck! Our car is the last in our line and we get to carry the red flag to the other end of the detour.

The problem of who gets to hold the red flag out the side of the car is solved by letting the youngest have the honor. Besides, it will be a good topic for discussion at the dinner table. Of course, we might also talk about the flights across the Atlantic Ocean by Lindbergh, Byrd, Earhart, or Chamberlain. What exciting times we live in! Great radio programs and now talking pictures. It seems to us that everything great has already been invented by now. What's left to explore? Fly a plane to the moon? That's impossible!

Once again we get up speed because we have a mountain road to climb. We are almost up to fifty and then we slow down for the winding curves that get steeper by the minute. I look at the motometer in front of the hood and see that the red liquid has climbed to the circle which indicates boiling. However, things will be better soon since we see a wide level spot and a sign which reads "water". The spring above flows into an old horse trough and since the sign says "safe drinking water" everyone scoops up enough to slake his thirst and to wash his dusty face. Well, almost everyone washes his face! Our collapsible canvas bucket is retrieved from under the back seat cushion and water is poured in cautiously while the engine runs slowly.

Suddenly, we hear a sound in the sky above us that sounds like a squadron of airplanes. It's coming closer and there it is! High above us is a silver giant airship as long as two football fields. We can see the white star with the red center and letters spelling our U.S. NAVY. Also we can just make out a long name painted on one side. It spells "Shenandoah". Wow! What an unbelievable sight! I answer a multitude of questions. Yes, there are sailors up there sailing the airship...about 25 or 35 of them and they are probably heading back to Lakehurst, New Jersey where it will be tied up to a mooring mast. No, they probably didn't see us waving but if someone did, they surely waved back.

Now we head for home---tired, dusty, hungry, and excited with plenty of stories to tell. Yes, those were exciting days in the 1920's and I wish---but there I go again---we can't turn back the clock except in our minds.