

**DESERT ROAD TRIP IN A 1919 CHALMERS**

**MARKING 100 YEARS OF THE AUTOMOBILE**

**CHILDHOOD MONEY PROBLEMS**

**SCANDINAVIAN AUTOMOBILES**

**MY, HOW THINGS HAVE CHANGED**

## DESERT ROAD TRIP IN A 1919 CHALMERS

Probably the most memorable automobile trip in my life took place when I lived in California and I was about five years old. It was in the summer of 1921 that my Dad decided to take a couple of weeks off and make a tour of some of the national parks.

Since we were planning to live in Los Angeles only a short time, we didn't own a car so Dad bought a second-hand 1919 Chalmers which featured a "California" top—a sort of fabric-covered hard top with windows that slid up and down. I remember that it was tan in color and had a trunk on the back. I also remember that there was a special rack of three cans on the running board—red for gas, white for water, and blue for oil. We also had a couple of canvas water bags hung on the front bumper for extra water.

We started our trip, complete with cooking gear and a large tent, heading for Yosemite. We started out in late afternoon so that we could cross the Mojave Desert at night. That was the only way it could be done in the summer. We started across the desert just as darkness fell and soon found out that the "road" was just two tracks in the sand. My mother put my sister and me in our pajamas and my dad removed his shirt. It still felt like a blast furnace and we ground along the tracks and every once in a while Dad stopped and walked ahead with his flashlight. He told us later that he didn't want to alarm us but the tracks were drifted over and he was looking for the road ahead. Our destination that night was Bakersfield and I don't know how far it was but I do remember that it was long after midnight before we arrived and stayed at some motel for the night. I'll skip any accounts of the scenery, which everyone knows about but will mention a few of the other incidents that flash back after a half a century.

I recall us grinding up mountain roads in low gear, the smell of burning brake linings at the bottom of steep hills and how, on one occasion, the Chalmers started steaming and Dad opened the hood to find the fan belt in tatters. He took off his own belt and fitted it on the flat pulley and we took off after waiting a while for the radiator to cool and giving it a couple gallons of water.

On one occasion we left our rubber air mattresses outside the tent to "air out" and an Indian, we were told by fellow campers, put one of them in the sun for a better look and it over heated and stretched until it looked like the Hindenburg, but didn't end up like the ill-fated German dirigible.

While we were at Yellowstone we saw a Model T Sedan that looked like it had been bombed. It seemed that a camper left a slab of bacon on the back seat and two bears decided to get a free meal. They tore the rear door off, smashed the glass and finally went in through the roof.

In conclusion, I believe that back in 1921 there were few or no paved highways in California although there were some plank roads, which were somewhat hazardous because of loose boards, nails, and huge splinters that could puncture almost any of the tires of that period. All in all, it was an exciting trip for an impressionable youngster like me and I have never forgotten it.

## **MARKING 100 YEARS OF THE AUTOMOBILE**

This year the automobile marks its one hundredth anniversary and I have a few observations about it. About thirty years went by before the manufacturers and their customers finally realized that the automobile (called a horseless carriage for a long time) was not a buggy with a motor and that it had special problems. Until about 1925 nearly all US autos were open touring cars. Cars with closed bodies had problems with engine fumes and heat and the tall wooden creations of coach makers shook loose or fell apart. When roads became better, tires were larger, and bodies were stamped out of steel; a reliable closed car could be made.

People of wealth, however, purchased town cars or limousines made by coach makers and the driver or chauffeur sat outside as he did when driving a coach. Then, of course, most body styles were those used on horse drawn vehicles such as sedan, cabriolet, coupe, brougham, and landau. We still can't seem to kick the habit of calling our instrument panel the "dashboard" which we should remember was the front part of a buggy designed to keep mud, dust, or rain from covering the driver's feet or lap.

It is interesting to see quite a few different makers of cars today sporting hood emblems. Why? Because people like them even though they have no function whatsoever. For the first fifty years of the automobile its weak spots were the tires, the lubrication system, and the radiator. Since the radiator had to be filled constantly, the filler cap was placed so that it was readily accessible. As time went by, some companies began to beautify their caps and soon we had Greek and Roman gods and goddesses, birds, animals, and wings of all sorts. The Boyce Company made a fortune when they introduced the moto-meter which gave the driver an idea of when his radiator was going to boil over. Just before World War II the filler cap was placed under the car hood and the temperature was recorded by a gauge on the dash—excuse me, instrument panel. There went to the moto-meter and most radiator or hood ornaments. What a pity!

Now that the convertible is once again a body style at a large extra charge, people can again have the thrill of windburn, sunburn, flying insect bites, and dust. It seems strange that people would pay a high price for all those inconveniences but they do. I would like to point out that when people in the teens and twenties drove their touring cars, they seldom put the tops down so they didn't get sunburned. They did, however, enjoy the smell of new mown hay, fields of clover and buckwheat, bakeries, and sun-drenched pine woods. Today, we put the tops down on our antique cars and subject ourselves to burning trash, skunks and diesel fumes.

So have we really much to celebrate? Every other felony or misdemeanor (one out of two) is auto related. We steal cars, we wreck cars, we leave the scene of a crime in a car, we make love in cars, and we take our last ride in a special automobile.

Automobiles in their first century have made a profound mark on civilization. They are dangerous, they are expensive, they can get you in trouble in a jiffy....but now they are a necessity and they are a lot of fun. I suppose the pattern of what could happen to car and driver was set back in 1901 on Prince Edward Island in Canada.....There were only

two horseless carriages on the whole island but, (you guessed it) they ran into each other and both drivers were injured!

## CHILDHOOD MONEY PROBLEMS

Americans have always enjoyed jokes and they seem to tell jokes about things that cause them concern one way or another. Most of the clean, humorous stories can be classified into these categories: spouses, doctors, churches or ministers, Pearly gates, teachers, minor ethnic groups, automobiles, and money. Election year and outer space jokes are actually just variations of some I have mentioned but I believe that whether they are joking or not, people seem to talk most about cars and money. As an example, just talk with an elderly man and he will tell you about the wonderful car he had sixty years ago which he gave to the junkman. If he still had this vehicle it would be worth a fortune today.

Now when it comes to money it seems that years ago nobody, especially children, had much at all. Just listen to any comedian, country singer, or self-made millionaire and you will hear how dirt-poor their families were. It really must have been rough since they had no government agency to find them another home, nobody to find them a job, "relief checks", or food stamps. It is increasingly difficult for today's children to understand some of the old proverbs or sayings about money. For example, you must now say "a nickel for your thoughts", or "I was so embarrassed I felt like two quarters" or even "a dollar saved is a dollar earned" if you want to impress youngsters these days.

When I tell some of my grandchildren about my childhood money problems, they listen in polite silence as I recall some experiences of the "good old days." My father did me a great favor by requiring me to earn the money for certain things I wanted, such as a new bicycle, a football helmet and pants, or a Saturday excursion on the streetcar to Kennywood Amusement Park. I had several options for obtaining cash, depending on the season. In late spring and summer, I could dig dandelions and plantains for ten cents a pound or in winter shovel out the walks and the driveway (it was a double cement track with gravel in between and about fifty yards long) for a dollar.

I learned a valuable lesson about the weeds. They were tossed into a bushel basket to await Dad's arrival to be placed on the kitchen scales and after my first mistake of leaving the basket in the sun, all future baskets were covered with newspaper and kept in the shade which doubled their value. I had one factor in my favor-we had several large lawns and a basket of non-dehydrated weeds weighed about fifteen pounds so it took only one summer to have cash on hand to purchase my red and white American Flyer with a rear fender rack and a fancy odometer which I attached to the front wheel. I almost forgot to mention that there was a built-in tool box that contained several wrenches and a small tire pump. Many years later I brought this bicycle to Virginia and sold it to a man for thirty dollars which included teaching his young son to ride it.

The football uniform took a longer time to obtain since I had to make a vegetable garden and sell the produce to sympathetic neighbors and several nearby relatives. But by the end of September, I had enough cash to purchase my leather helmet, blue jersey, and canvas pants with sponge rubber knee pads and bamboo rod thigh protectors. My mother surprised me by buying some shoulder pads and I was allowed to take a pair of my old high top shoes to Patsy Bonaccni, the shoemaker, to nail leather cleats on the soles and heels .Needless to say, I wore my new football shoes back home, clomping loudly on the sidewalk in hopes that a certain young lady who lived in the house across the street might hear me as I went by. (she didn't)

I might mention that there were no teams or sponsors for little kids and the only reason I was included on the team was because, although I was the smallest player, I could nearly always hike the ball to the right person at the right time. Another reason I was the center is because one of the players that played in the backfield owned the football we used and he ran the team. Also any lineman was allowed to catch a pass and I was occasionally used to surprise our opponents by taking a short pass in the middle.

This was not intended to be an account of my success in the financial sector, but to point out the simple financial goals of children in the "roaring twenties" who didn't hear the roaring of the adult population nor were they pushed by their parents into wanting to do things adults do....dating, sipping bootleg booze, or smoking cigarettes. No, we were satisfied with playing cowboys and Indians. The guys that had the cap guns and a supply of Kilgore caps, of course, were the cowboys, but a willow branch split at each end to insert a knotted string, a bird feather or some sort, and a loud verbal POW! POW! were all the props needed to be a full blooded Comanche or Apache brave.

I wish that I knew where my old single shot or my repeating cap guns were. They are going for fifteen or twenty bucks at the big auctions these days. I wonder if the Football Hall of Fame would be interested in a genuine old-time football helmet.

## SCANDINAVIAN AUTOMOBILES

About five years ago, Libby and I were in Scandinavia—a place we dreamed of visiting for many years. On our tours of each of these Nordic countries, I made a mental list of the different automobiles I saw and planned to write about them in this column. However, I decided to table that account and first write about the most interesting experience I had concerning antique automobiles. This occurred in Oslo, Norway near the end of our journey.

I must first explain that for the past ten years, I have been corresponding with a young Norwegian named Oyvind Breen, who was referred to me by a man who also has a Jeffery. Our correspondence revealed that both Mr. Breen and I are owners of a 1917 Jeffery Model 472, which was the last model made by the company to bear the Jeffery name, which gave way to Nash during that production year.

Now I must admit at this point that I was very fortunate to acquire my car in a semi-restored condition. It had first been restored in 1953 by the grandson of the original driver. Nelson Driver was kind enough to drive his car and trailer to Pittsburgh so that I could buy the car from an old friend of mine and bring it back home.

On the other hand, the Jeffery my friend Oyvind found on a farm was truly a "basket case". This vehicle he and his brother found had been licensed until 1935 and then the body and chassis, minus the engine, had been pushed out into a field to rust and rot for about 45 years of Norwegian winters. Meanwhile, the sturdy Jeffery engine had been removed and put back to service as the motive power for some sort of road building machinery. So much for the history of Mr. Breen's Model 472...

The Breen brothers struck a bargain with the farmer who owned the remains of the car and after picking up the rusted body sections and digging the wheels out of the soil, they found that most of the spokes had rotted almost to the wheel hubs and such vital parts as the steering wheel and steering column, the driveshaft, and some of the gears in the rear end, were missing. This sounds discouraging and downright hopeless, doesn't it? It would be for many collectors but not for Tor and Oyvind Breen., who incidentally, are identical twins. They began the restoration by making and fitting all the wooden parts of the car body. Since Oyvind is an engineer and Tor is a mechanic, the reconstruction work proceeded quite smoothly, although rather slowly, since these young men spend a lot of their time with their families. Most of the work on the Jeffery is done on weekends.

Oyvind and I met in the lobby of the Hotel Scandinavia using my Jeffery lapel pin as a recognition symbol. Once we met and had shaken hands, I was taken in his aged Datsun to his home about ten miles from the center of town. When we arrived, I really did a "double-take" when I saw his twin brother, Tor. They took me immediately to their little garage where the Jeffery was under construction. They also showed me a beautiful 1924 Model T Ford Touring. This car had also been a basket case and was skillfully put back together over a period of five years. Everything was beautifully done---the upholstery, the top, the engine room, and wheels. I am sure that it would score high at a Hershey meet.

Later, I was shown the Jeffery engine, the radiator shell with a perfect emblem, the fenders, and other parts awaiting restoration. I was told that they had contacted a man

in Texas who will send them a steering wheel and steering column in exchange for their detailed drawings of the wooden body parts. I was told that just about all of the missing parts have been located by means of correspondence and those parts still needed will be made by them in their shop.

After the interesting "parts tour", I was escorted to the second floor of their duplex home and introduced to their wives. This was followed by a late snack consisting of coffee and good Norwegian cake and other pastries. At this time, they showed me their scrapbook of photos and specs on the Jeffery car. I was really impressed by the manner in which they have researched this vehicle and realized that my collection of Jeffery material is a bit shabby by comparison.

Needless to say, time passed rapidly and I reluctantly told them that I would have to leave because I would be leaving early the next morning for the airport and the flight home. I must mention that both of these young men spoke excellent English and they understood the names of the different car parts we talked about. They seemed pleased to hear the few sentences of Norwegian I was able to speak as we talked together. Thus ended an interesting visit which made me realize that the love of antique cars is truly international. Wouldn't it be nice if we could contact a few of the antique car enthusiasts behind the "Iron Curtain"?

Upon our arrival in Denmark, I was prepared to make a detailed observation and report on the self-propelled vehicles which moved the Danes from one place to another. I must admit that I was surprised by the number of non-self-propelled vehicles that could be seen on the streets of Copenhagen. There were hundreds, no thousands, of bicycles being ridden by young, middle-aged, and elderly people everywhere. Most large streets have special sections just for bicycles and at main intersection, there are traffic lights with stylized red, green, and amber bicycles to regulate the flow and safety of the two-wheeled traffic. I would guess that the more Danes ride bicycles than ride in cars. There are several reasons for this: First, almost the whole country is flat as Kansas and the winters are rather mild...much milder than we experience here in Virginia. Second, gasoline is almost three dollars a gallon and automobiles are very expensive since the Danes have not made any internal combustion propelled vehicles since the advent of the Hammel at the turn of the century. It was a frail-looking motor carriage with spidery, high wooden wheels and front-mounted carriage lamps. A few years ago, it was taken out of its place in a museum and it took part in the annual London to Brighton Run in Great Britain in November. How many Hammels were produced is not known, but it is a matter of record that no automobiles were produced in Denmark after 1902.

By now the reader will ask, "Well, what kind of cars DO they have in Scandinavia?" the answer is that they do drive quite a few different makes of cars....mostly European, but some Japanese and some from the USA. Most US cars are the small Chevrolets and small Fords (Chevettes, Escorts, etc.) with a few examples of Chrysler products.

I also happened to see a few antique American cars. There was a 1935 Packard 180, several restored '29, '30, and '31 Model A Fords, and several Chevys of the early 50's. The only other American antiques I noticed were ancient Internationals, John Deeres, and Ford tractors on some of the hundreds of farms we passed while touring in our sightseeing bus. For the enlightenment of the olden days farmers in our club, we noted many fields of barley, wheat, rye, and sugar beets. I should also mention that we saw the source of the famous Plumrose hams of the many pig farms we passed. There were lots of milk cows too, but very few horses.

I also remember seeing quite a few Volvos, Saabs, VW's, and a few Mercedes. I made a special effort to notice the trucks and buses used in all of the Nordic countries. Volvo led the way followed by Scandia, Mercedes, and a few British Leylands. I don't believe there were any Russian vehicles on the road. Since tourism is such a business over in Scandinavia, there are probably more buses than there are trucks, and in these small countries a large amount of their goods are moved by rail. In the cities, those who do not cycle, ride the city buses or the tandem trolley cars. This arrangement practically eliminates city traffic jams. Having grown up in a city that had a superb electric streetcar system, I enjoyed seeing those little double trolleys in all the Scandinavian countries including Helsinki, Finland.

At this time, I will jump on my soapbox (for those of you who are under 45, soap used to be shipped in large wooden boxes that were great for standing upon while making a speech or making a home-made racer or a roller skate scooter) and say I really don't know why the large US cities did away with their trolley systems. Richmond was the first US city to have one in 1885 and they lasted until about 1950. Streetcars were quiet, reasonably fast, comfortable, inexpensive, and absolutely pollution free.

Perhaps, we should turn back the clock and let people once again enjoy the pleasure of the trolley that could take you to the ballgame, an amusement park, or just for a cooling ride on a hot, summer night. It appears that the people of Scandinavia are behind us in transporting people.....or.....are they really ahead? I will let you decide for yourself.

## **MY, HOW THINGS HAVE CHANGED**

The year was 1989 and a small, balding man put down his harp and music sheet with a sigh of frustration. He, John Q. Public, had been in this heavenly location since he thought he ran out of gas in his 1917 Studebaker one dark night and lit a match to find out for sure. That was back in 1921 and he hadn't really checked on how things were going since then. Now he had a burning desire to find out what was going on so he checked in with St. Peter at the gate. After giving his name he was surprised to see St. Peter without his feather pen and large book. Instead he was squinting at a small box with a lighted screen mumbling, "John Q—John Pub—and finally, Ah here we are! John Q. Public—October 1921. Yes, John, you may make a visit to the USA, but I don't believe you will enjoy it. You can get in touch with me in 24 centur—I mean 24 hours. Good luck, John---I'm beaming you down right now."

John thought of a line from Wordsworth "I drifted lonely as a cloud" as he floated over Augusta County in Virginia, wondering whether he would find any familiar landmarks—perhaps some buildings, an old road. Surely there wouldn't be any ninety-year-old people he would recognize—they would have changed in appearance too much. He wondered about automobiles. No, they wouldn't have changed much. They were just about as close to perfection as a mechanical vehicle could get....soft leather seats, rain curtains for winter or wet weather, lighted instruments of the dash, reliable two-wheel brakes and good tires. What would need improvement?

Suddenly he saw them. What in the world? Were those automobiles? Yes, but they were so strange-looking...like thermos bottles with wheels. The hoods looked like they had been stepped on by a giant, the rear sections were sort of humped up and the entire vehicle was short and appeared to be just about 5 feet high! How do people sit in them? And all that glass! They must roast inside with no way to keep cool!

John's attention was diverted by what appeared to be railroad freight cars moving down the highway by themselves. No, there was black smoke rising from the front end ---a small steam locomotive of some kind perhaps. Very strange new world!

Mr. John Q. decided to drift to the northeast and see what the new Studebakers, Packards, Maxwells, Jordans, and Clevelands looked like. Instead he saw strange names on top of poles which appeared to be part of parking lots. The names were Datsun, Subaru, Mitsubishi, Mazda, and Chrysler. He had never heard of any of these. Aren't Americans making autos anymore? No wait! There's a familiar name—Ford and there is Chevrolet and now Buick. That's more like it!

John drifted slowly up towards Mary Baldwin College to see what it looked like as the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was almost here. He could not believe his eyes. Young people in ragged, faded working men's clothing were walking arm in arm. The ones with short bobbed hair appeared to be female and some of the young persons with long hair were definitely male. Many were wearing what appeared to be old fashioned radio headsets used with radio crystal sets but they were twitching and jerking as they moved along and appeared to have some sort of serious nervous disorder. Where were those pretty girls in the white dresses from Mary Baldwin? Had the school turned into a country poor farm, an orphanage, or a branch of Western State? He was confused.

Looking for a familiar grocery store would be a waste of time so he just entered one that had large paper signs pasted on the windows promoting specials on coffee, fryers (whatever they were) and bananas. Inside, there were sights that were hard to believe. One side of the store seemed to have nothing but fruits and vegetables. But where were the barrels of dill pickles, salt mackerel, and soda crackers?

In one area all the meat was already cut up and covered with a clear film of some sort. There was not a roll of brown wrapping paper or a ball of string in sight. He was wondering where the butcher might be when suddenly a mirror at the back of the meat case slid open and a white sleeved arm popped out putting a pork roast next to the spare ribs. Very strange behavior for a friendly butcher....

Walking down several long aisles, John looked for a familiar trademark. Where was the box of cornflakes with the pretty young lady embracing a shock of corn? She was called the "sweetheart of the corn" and Mr. WK Kellogg signed each box by hand. There it was! The name Kellogg was on a box but there was no pretty girl---just a green headed rooster with a white dot for an eye peering around the Kellogg name.

On his way out, he did happily notice the Quaker man on the puffed rice, but all the other cereal boxes seemed to be covered with cartoons of animals and children. He had seen enough. Not much remained of the simple, friendly world he left suddenly sixty-eight years ago.

As he headed for his rendezvous point on Humpback Rocks, he noticed a group of happy people gathered for a picnic. A lot of the cars looked like the great old models and makes he knew. There was a Model T touring, a Model T coupe, a Dodge, a Jeffery, and a Buick touring and a tall Dodge four door sedan. At least those people knew what good cars were and they had kept them running all these years.

Glancing at the highway down below, he noticed a large car with red and blue flashing lights had forced another vehicle off to the side of the road and a uniformed officer approached the driver's window. A hand emerged holding what appeared to be a driver's license. Well, at least some things hadn't changed a bit since 1921! Looking skyward John shouted, "Beam me up, St. Pete! I've seen enough to last me for at least another century."