

Cars

Cars are part of twentieth century living, a necessity but not something to get sentimental about. I admire people who cherish their cars, recognize their personalities, and give them names. But as long as our current car looks reasonably presentable and performs flawlessly, I'm content. What happens in and around the car is the factor that influences my memory.

I can vaguely remember the 1934 beige Chevrolet, a family car which I occasionally drove during my later high school days. I recall with somewhat more detail a blue 1938 Chevrolet, the first car Paul and I owned. We bought it in 1944 in Portland, Oregon, when the Justice Department transferred Paul back to Washington, D.C. His travel expenses were covered, but mine were not. We calculated that his rail and food allowance would cover our expenses on the road and give us a chance to use some of his leave on a visit to Dallas. We hadn't been home in what seemed a very long while.



I had to get a driving license. It was the first driving test I had taken. My early license, not used for several years, had been issued by mail. The man supervising my test made charitable allowances for my nervousness and advised me to practice on the open road on our trip across the country. He felt that gasoline rationing would keep the roads from being crowded, thus making me no menace to traffic.

We packed most of our belongings into the trunk of the car, along with a spare recapped tire. The rest, our books and record collection, along with a suitcase for the road, went into the back seat. In this fashion we set off, bidding our neighbors and Portland a fond farewell.

My first rotation at the wheel came after lunch as we reached the mountains of southern Oregon. It proved quite an initiation. I had never driven on any but straight roads in very flat country. As Paul nodded off for a well-earned nap, I discovered that the hairpin curves, one side of the road up against the mountain side and the other dropping off into well treed, steep valleys, were decidedly daunting. We hadn't met any cars since I began driving. To use the inside of the turns seemed the logical way to keep the car on the road. Gripping the steering wheel with all my strength, I took all of them on the inside whether they belonged to me or not. I wasn't exactly relaxed about my solution, but it worked until Paul awoke. He suggested that I pull over at the first safe place, took the wheel, and

explained to me how one safely drives mountain curves. My system would have worked, for we met no cars the rest of the day, but I was glad to have learned the safe way, and I've used it many times since.

Wartime driving, even at the slow speeds legislated, was rather hard on well worn tires. We changed several flats and bought a few more retreads as we progressed across the country. But flats were simply part of the journey. One, not our first, occurred just east of Reno, Nevada, on a stretch of road overlooking a railroad track some fifteen feet below us. Some Hispanic railroad workers entertained us with shouts of encouragement and songs while we changed the tire, and they cheered us as we got back on the road.

Shortly afterward we stopped at a lonely desert store for something to drink. Waiting in the car, I was surprised to see Paul rush out after only a few minutes, slightly tilted and without the expected bottles of Coca Cola. He hurriedly started the car and left in an uncharacteristic cloud of dust. He soon slowed to the legal speed and began emptying his pockets of many, many nickels. While waiting for the drinks, he had idly inserted five cents in the one slot machine the store boasted. JACKPOT! There were several rather rough looking hangers about in the store who looked far from pleased at his good luck. He quickly decided that they considered that jackpot theirs, since they had provided the nickels for it. He made a quick, judicious departure. We counted almost thirty dollars but had to travel a good many miles before we could finally satisfy our thirst.

We took pot luck for night accommodations across the country and some of them were memorable. One in New Mexico was a spacious bedroom, large enough to accommodate a large party but with no hot water. We were always able to find some place to stay until we reached the expanses of west Texas, where we found nothing. Finally, just before dawn we parked in the Palo Alto courthouse square for an uneasy nap in the front seat of the car. I woke first and changed seats with Paul so that we could push on to Dallas. He sleepily reminded me that in the event of a blowout I should not step on the brake.

He went back to sleep and I drove down the straight, unpopulated highway. As we neared Fort Worth, with home a rapidly approaching reality, my happy reverie and Paul's peaceful nap were shattered by an explosion. Yes, it was a blowout. I instinctively hit the brake - hard. The resulting swerve could have been serious if there had been a car near or if the terrain hadn't been flat and level. I was badly shaken. I've never had another opportunity *not* to step on the brake during a blowout, but I think all these years later I would still remember what not to do.

The visit at home was fun, seeing family and friends, and we went on to Washington without any more traveling excitement. The farther east we got the more cars we saw and the more motels we found. Once we reached Washington, we had to sell the car in order to buy furniture for the Arlington apartment we found. And so ended the saga of our first car.