1923: Tampa to Denver in a Model T Ford

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By TED A. GOWER

In 1923 travel across country by car was somewhat different in many ways. Many roads, if not all of them, were very poor. It was in an era of new roads being built so there were many detours, some were hardly passable. Cars used too much gasoline and oils, and gas tanks were too small.

Local officials did not always look kindly to folks driving into town. Strangers were not always welcome. The good part of it was that travelers were safe anywhere along the road to rest or sleep in the car, day or night. People along the countryside were always helpful. Fuel was cheap and lodging was reasonable.

This account follows two 22-year-olds and two teenage brothers in a used Model T Ford cross-country to look for work as it was very slack in the Tampa area for electricians. They equipped the car with camping equipment to camp along the way and they headed out.

CAMPING ON THE SANTA FE

It was June 4, 1923, Monday at 6:15 a.m., when we had breakfast at the Manhattan Cafe as we left Tampa. As we approached Inverness at 12:30 p.m. we had lunch. We arrived in High Springs by nightfall and camped out of town by the banks of the Santa Fe River. Supper consisted of fried liver, a can of "Pork & Beans" and a cup of coffee. We had fishermen for company all night as they trolled the river.

Tuesday morning on June 5 we had fried eggs and coffee for breakfast. We then broke camp and left. Reaching Cairo, Georgia, by 5:30 p.m. we continued on to Bainbridge, GA, setting up camp outside of town along the Apalachicola River around 8:30 p.m. We enjoyed a good night’s sleep until sometime in the early morning hours when a riverboat tied up alongside of us, making the noise of loading and unloading.

Hot coffee for breakfast on Wednesday, June 6 at 4:45 a.m. as we broke camp and left. About 7:30 a.m. we came to another
branch of the Apalachicola River. We got stuck getting on and off the ferry. We arrived 21 miles out of Troy, Alabama, on the wrong road. We were having plenty of rain as we arrived back in Troy about 5:30 p.m. We were grateful for a very good piece of road we hit going into Montgomery. However, we had to stop ten miles out of Montgomery since our battery went dead. The area was pretty low and we experienced plenty of mosquitos.

**BLOWTORCH 'STOVE’**

On Thursday, June 7, at 5:45 a.m. we broke camp and rode to a stream where we could get cleaned up. Approximately 8:00 a.m. we were in Midway for breakfast. The hill coming into Birmingham gave us some trouble getting up it but, we coasted all the way down into town. Mr. Hamilton, father of one of the boys, arranged for our bed where he was staying and paid for our supper.

More repairs were needed on the Model T on Friday, June 8. We left town at 11:30 a.m. We arrived five miles out of Townly about 7 p.m. and it was raining again. We decided to camp out in an old house off the road. We boiled our water for the coffee with our blowtorch and ate pork and beans.
On Saturday morning at 5:45 a.m. we used a more conventional method of heating by using wood in the fireplace to cook our pork and beans. We also enjoyed jelly and bread with our breakfast. We broke camp and headed out. We hit a rock coming down a country road of Elridge, AL, which caused a leak in the crank case. This in turn caused the magnets on the flywheel to turn to the place where the rock hit. We stuffed a rag in it and rolled down the hill. At the bottom of the hill was an old sawmill that was shut down. A mechanic was working outside of it on his boss's car. Several men were standing around watching the mechanic. He told us he could help us as soon as he finished with that car. Over the hill about three miles was a grocery store, so Ronald, Andy, and John went down to buy some food. I stayed to help the mechanic with his work. Ronald and the boys got back and we had dinner. John went off and tried to find a place to sleep while Andy stood around and watched Ronald and me help the mechanic. We had a different menu for supper as we had salmon and peas with our coffee. The mechanic was still having trouble with his work and the "Crackers" finally dwindled off. We decided to hit the hay.

**A LOT OF RAIN**

Sunday morning we had fried eggs and coffee with crackers as the store had no light bread. We were tired of waiting on the mechanic so we started to tear down the motor ourselves. The mechanic had to take his job down again so the tools were kept hot between us. By 3 p.m. we had our car back together. We filled it full of cylinder oil from the mill and started for the next town. We hit Winfield about 5:30 p.m. and bought gaskets, shellac and three quarts of oil. We borrowed a socket wrench and put the new gaskets in right where we were parked. We left town around 7 p.m. and camped ten miles out of Winfield. It started to rain and our top was down, but it did us no good anyway. We stopped at the first place we could find.

June 11, it was Monday morning and we arrived in Hamilton about 7:30 a.m. and had a good breakfast. By noon we were four miles out of Tupelo. We had to stop for a while to let the rain slack off. Everything was soaked. Dinner was slim as it consisted of a box of crackers. We arrived in Victorie, MS, at 7:30 p.m. and were caught in a good rain. We stopped in front of an empty store and realized the connecting rod was burnt pretty bad.

We broke camp on Tuesday morning at 5:49 a.m. after getting a bucket of water and washing up a bit. Around 8 a.m. we stopped on the highway to change into some better looking clothes. Just 15 minutes later we picked up a tack just inside the city limits of Memphis, TN, and we changed our first tire of the trip. No jobs were available in any of the shops in town. Ronald had dinner and supper with Mr. Pierce.

June 13, Wednesday, we had our bearings tightened and wheel fixed. We finally left Memphis about 11:30. Out of Gates, we camped for the night in a graveyard by a church. It was worse than a boiler factory with all the noise from all the varmints.

**SOLD THEIR BLANKETS**

Thursday we broke camp even earlier at 4:45 a.m. and left Dyersburg, TN. By 8:45 p.m. we called it a night and camped just outside of Bardswell, KY.

It was June 15 on Friday when we had broke camp and took a ferry across to Cairo. There we sold Army blankets, cots, and tarpaulin for twelve dollars. At 4:30 p.m. we found a
job at last, at the Illinois Lumber Company that made ready-cut houses for Sears, Roebuck & Company. We arranged our room and board for $6 per week at the corner of Washington Street and 33rd Street. We had to park our car for our deposit for room and board.

On Saturday, Ronald joined us at the factory. On Sunday some of the fellows from the company took us for a ride around town. During the week we worked on the car after work and got caught up on cleaning, haircuts, etc.

On June 23, at 4 p.m. we left town and headed toward St. Louis. A few miles out of Camden, IL, we had hit a bad piece of road. We stopped for the night. It was a bad night as all of our camping equipment had been sold. We had a hour's sleep at most since we slept on the ground. Approximately 4:30 a.m. we cranked up and pulled out of Marissa, IL. At noon we had a chicken dinner. We made it to St. Louis by 3:30 p.m. and made arrangements for a room with one bed. This allowed for two to sleep on the floor. The cost was $6 per week and we used a suit for our deposit. We also put the Ford in storage for $3 per week. Ronald and I were separated by different jobs, so we divided out for the meals.

On August 12, Sunday, we left St. Louis at 7:30 a.m and headed towards Denver. While in Rockford, MO, we had to wait for a ferry. The charge was one dollar. On our route between Kansas and Missouri on the U.P. Trail we got caught in a lot of rain. Everything in our old Model T was getting wet. We stopped along the old muddy road for the night. An old gentleman came out of his farmhouse, way back off the road and invited us to come in and stay the night. I refused the offer because we were too dirty but admitted we would like to stay in his barn. The old gentleman agreed as long as we didn't smoke in the barn. We agreed to his condition, so he tossed some clean hay down on the floor. He also brought out clean quilts to sleep on. It was the best sleep we had had in some time. We rose early the next morning and folded the quilts and left. I am ashamed that we didn't wait to thank him. We had no name or address to thank him later.

It was August 16, 1923, when we arrived in Denver, CO, our final destination. Anything else would be a different story.