10-29-2020

Learning to Drive

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A World War I veteran, he had been born sixteen years before Henry Ford introduced the Model T to America. A rural citizen of deep southeast Alabama, he had missed the automobile's advent in his home state; municipalities had tagged cars even before the state began licensing them in 1911. Although aware of them, he would have had rare opportunities to ride in, much less drive, an automobile due to his family's rural poverty as well as its location. Perhaps things were different by the time Rufus went to college, where he crammed four years into eight.

Once he had spent some time at Troy State Teacher's College, Rufus taught school to earn money for college. Several years into his teaching career, he met Ruby, then "sparked" her. When he proposed, she accepted on condition of upward mobility. So he took every available civil service exam, eventually making his way to the nation's capital where he worked his government job during the day, kept books for the Good Roads Association (among others) at night, and found time to earn a law degree from Georgetown University. He married Ruby there and started his own family.

World War I's end rewarded his greater experience, education, and connections with new opportunities and the freedom to seize them. Rufus also faced new responsibilities as his family grew (his oldest child arrived near the end of 1919, her brother almost five years later). He saw opportunity in the post-war expansion of the Internal Revenue Service, particularly after its being tasked with enforcing Prohibition laws. Family lore relates the family traveling by automobile from the D.C. area to the IRS regional office in Nashville, Tennessee with his older child caring for her ill brother while rolling slowly through the summer heat. Rufus wanted to return home to Alabama, which the IRS had divided into two portions: Mobile, with its port, and all the rest, with that office centrally located in Montgomery. Mobile was taken, so he drove on to Montgomery in 1925.

In the "wild west" atmosphere of early automobile manufacturing, about 1,900 different U.S. companies made over 3,000 different models between 1895 and World War II, with the two great wars and economic depression winnowing out weaker auto makers (only eight were left at the Depression's end) and, by 1960, leaving only the "Big Three" automakers (Ford, GM, and Chrysler). Brand loyalty appealed to Rufus, who settled early on having only vehicles produced by Ransom Olds and his successors. Perhaps the snobbish appeal of a "not Ford" and "cut-above Chevy" appealed to the status-conscious Ruby. Whatever the reason, the family arrived in Montgomery in an Oldsmobile.

Prohibition merely added another layer to the Alabama tradition of making and bootlegging moonshine and following the socio-economic divide prescribed by "made" versus "bought" whiskey. "Bathtub gin" joined moonshine, but big money came from smuggled brand name potables. "Society" Montgomery in the 1920s boasted some of the "beautiful people" who followed in the wake of the famous and hard-drinking F. Scott Fitzgerald. He had met, wooed, and eventually wed wealthy socialite Zelda Sayre thanks to being stationed in Montgomery during the recent war. The IRS drew no distinctions between the two classes in its enforcement of the "liquor laws," as most people called them.

While class distinctions may not have affected IRS enforcement, they sharply affected outcomes. The law provided the IRS with the power to seize ill-gotten gains. Catching a moonshiner meant destroying stills, pouring out his product, and fining or imprisoning the miscreant. Sale of an impounded moonshiner's vehicle, with its specialized modifications, appealed to a small, select pool of potential buyers. The seller's presumption about the vehicle's suspected use deterred many in that pool from acting. Catching a smuggler gave the IRS the opportunity to seize goods attractive to a broader pool of potential buyers—a much more lucrative option.

As the person in charge of the Montgomery IRS office, Rufus was responsible for its operations and for following disposition directions for seized property. So after the Montgomery office seized an automobile he was not surprised to receive directions to ferry it to Atlanta for sale. At the appropriate time, he and one of his officers set out to execute their orders. Given the primitive state of roads (most were dirt outside metropolitan areas, and in questionable repair depending on recent and present weather), rare to nonexistent road markings, scarce accurate maps, slow speeds, and uncommon places to refuel or repair, traveling in pairs with contingency supplies was the only prudent approach to traveling.

About 180 miles away, driving to Atlanta would have taken about six hours presuming a charmed trip (especially no tire blow-outs) at maximum average speed. Rufus began driving, getting them out of Montgomery and a fair piece along their journey. After their first stop, he turned driving duties over to his partner. He noticed their less-than-smooth start but laid the jerkiness to unfamiliarity with the vehicle and its peculiarities. As speed increased, so did erratic behavior and course corrections (or over-corrections). After some near misses with ditches and trees crowding the narrow shoulder, Rufus directed his co-pilot to pull off at the next available side-road to the right.

A man of few words, after they had stopped Rufus enumerated their more harrowing experiences as prelude to his one question: "Do you know how to drive?" "I don't," his partner confessed. "We live in town and can't afford a car, so I picked up the rudiments riding with others—but I've never been behind the wheel myself." "This is your opportunity to learn, then," Rufus responded. "You can drive the rest of the way to Atlanta. It'll be good practice. Just remember—anything that happens to decrease the vehicle's value comes out of your pay."

They drove smoothly into Atlanta at the end of a nerve-wracking day and relinquished their prize dirty, but none the worse for wear, to the Atlanta office. After an overnight stay, they took public conveyance back to Montgomery. It was an experience that bonded them early in a decades-long relationship and remained enough of a high point for Rufus for him to recount it at his retirement gathering four decades later.