

DURANT ODDESSY

By

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In June 1936, I was a Private in the United States Army. I was 22 years old and was drawing \$21.00 per month in salary. I had just received transfer orders from Fort Douglas, Utah to Fort Benning, Georgia. I wanted to drive to my new station so I purchased a 1928 Durant Sport Roadster for \$50.00. It looked pretty rough and had three bullet holes in the back but seemed to be mechanically solid with nearly new tires. I decided to check out the engine bearings before I went on the road with it. I removed the connecting rod bearing caps and most of the bearings fell out on the ground in quarter inch pieces! I decided to take a chance so I pieced the bearings back together and held them in place with wheel bearing grease. I filed the rod caps down until I got a good fit. The engine seemed to run OK but I was only getting about 50 miles to the quart of oil and the radiator was stopped up which caused the engine to over heat.

I obtained a five-gallon can of 50-weight engine oil and two five-gallon cans of water and loaded up and was on my way. Climbing the steep mountains of Eastern Utah I experienced fuel starvation. Most of the cars of the era provided fuel to the carburetor by a vacuum tank mounted on the firewall. The way this worked was that a vacuum pipe from the engine intake manifold ran to the vacuum tank. From the tank another pipe ran to the gas tank. The vacuum tank had a float-controlled needle valve that closed the vacuum off when the tank was full. The gas ran by gravity from the vacuum tank to the carburetor. The problem I was having was that climbing the mountains I was running at almost full throttle most of the time. The engine was burning fuel faster than the reduced vacuum could furnish it to the engine. So at intervals I would have to stop and let the engine idle for about five minutes so the vacuum tank could refill with gasoline. I could then drive about a half mile before I had to repeat the procedure. Driving on level ground at normal speeds the vacuum tank system worked well enough to provide continuous driving.

After two days on the road, I arrived at my Grandparent's cattle ranch near New Castle, Colorado. My uncle was a pretty good ranch mechanic. We decided to bypass the radiator core by soldering twelve half inch copper tubes from the upper chamber to the lower chamber of the radiator. This improved the cooling to the point that I could cruise at 35 miles per hour without overheating.

After leaving New Castle, I headed south towards Texas. Close to the Texas state line, a small woman accompanied by 12 children flagged me down. The kids were like doorsteps and the woman was about 4'11" tall. Some of the kids were bigger than she was but she had them all under control; when she barked they jumped. They had been walking along the highway for two days without food or water. I had no food to give them but they sure depleted my water supply in a hurry! We loaded kids wherever they would fit or on anything they could hang on to. This was neither comfortable nor safe but she was desperate and was willing to take any chance. There were three or four kids in the rumble seat, two or three of the smaller ones in the woman's lap, two sitting on the front fenders and the rest were standing on the running boards and hanging on. Only one of them nearly fell off. He wasn't hurt because I saw him lose his grip in time to stop before he fell.

We finally reached Fort Worth, Texas where the woman knew someone who might help her. So I off loaded everyone and got ready to be on my way again. She came up to me and planted a big kiss on me and told me I was the nicest man she had ever met. She then turned and walked away with her kids in tow and never looked back.

I hadn't eaten in two days so I bought a hamburger for five cents. Leaving Fort Worth I picked up a hitch hiker and put him to work driving while I caught up on much needed sleep. We drove on for two days and two nights until we were in eastern Alabama. My assistant driver finally asked if we were ever going to stop and eat? I had 65 cents left and we needed more gas to make Fort Benning. Gasoline was 12 cents per gallon and I needed five more gallons. I told him if he had any money we would stop; he didn't so we drove on.

My Durant had a straight exhaust pipe with no muffler. It was rather loud and would really rattle when I revved the engine up and let off the accelerator. I finally reached Fort Benning and had parked behind the barracks. I decided to celebrate the end of my epic journey by zooming the

engine a couple of times. Standing on the sidewalk was a small man dressed in uniform trousers and under shirt. He remarked that my car was pretty loud. Me being young and cocky I asked him what business it was to him? He smiled and went inside of the barracks.

After I cleaned up and got into uniform, I reported to the company orderly room to check in. I knocked on the door and a very pleasant voice said, "Come in!" There sat my little friend from the street, complete with his company first sergeant's stripes decorating his sleeves. He said to answer my question about what it was to him, that he felt that I would be well versed on the subject before we parted company. He said he had a job for me that might teach me to be humble. I said that I was sorry that we had gotten started on the wrong foot but I could take it so dish it out; he succeeded quite well! For a noticeable period of time thereafter, I was on the "Timber Detail." We were armed with man powered crosscut saws and double bitted axes. A cross cut saw has a blade about seven feet long and about eight inches high. There are straight handles two feet long on each end. This was the forerunner of the chainsaw. We deforested the area that is today known as Lawson Army Airfield at Fort Benning! I don't remember how humble I became but I sure was in top physical condition.

My straight exhaust pipe resulted in another minor annoyance. I had stopped at a Honky Tonk (beer joint) near Columbus. When I left I revved up the engine upon takeoff and a car with a red light came along side. I received a \$2.50 ticket, which I couldn't pay. I ended up doing ten days on the county chain gang popping rocks with a sledgehammer for ten hours a day! When working, there was a nice man with a double-barreled shotgun who tried to make us feel at ease. He said; "That contrary to popular belief, there are some people wandering aimlessly about who thought I was put here to shoot you if you rejected the county's hospitality or had visions of leaving prematurely. This is not the case at all. In fact, I think that would be real mean. We want you to feel happy and relaxed during your brief stay with us. So I have been put here to keep people from bothering you, so get the hell to work and be real careful not to get me peeved". Oh boy! The food was terrible too.

After driving my Durant some 2400 miles from Utah to Georgia, I put another 6000 miles on it around Fort Benning before the rod bearings finally let go. There was a soldier who wanted to buy my Durant. When the engine failed, I removed the battery so it couldn't be started. When I next saw him

I told him that I was going to be nice and give him the car! Shortly after this a post order was issued that all derelict cars, etc. were to be removed from the post within seven days. It seems that my victim had to pay \$75 to have it hauled away. A few days later he came raging up to me and said that the car I gave him wasn't worth a damn! I asked him what kind of an idiot did he think I was? After all, if it had been any good I would have kept it!

I had tears in my eyes as I watched my faithful little Durant being hauled away to the scrap yard. It had served me well.

Some other items of interest include:

1. My Durant had a top speed of 55 miles per hour.
2. It averaged 25 miles to the gallon on my trip from Utah to Georgia.
3. As I recall, the Star Automobile was identical to the Durant except for trim and badges.
4. When I was a boy living in Los Angeles in 1923, I saw a Star or an Overland demonstrating the rigidity of the frame by driving with one front wheel removed.

I hope this information has been possibly entertaining or informative for you. Thanks for the opportunity to tell this story. If you have any questions please feel free to contact me.

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