ESCAPE ROAD

Like the first girls you kissed

The first cars you drive hold the sweetest memories

By Roger Barlow

Have you driven a Velie or Stoddard-Dayton? A Stearns-Knight or even a Model T Ford? Had you been a boy in the 1920s not only would these names and a hundred more such as Jordan, Chalmers, Diana, Moon, Kissel and Hupmobile be familiar, but you might even have learned to drive on one of them.

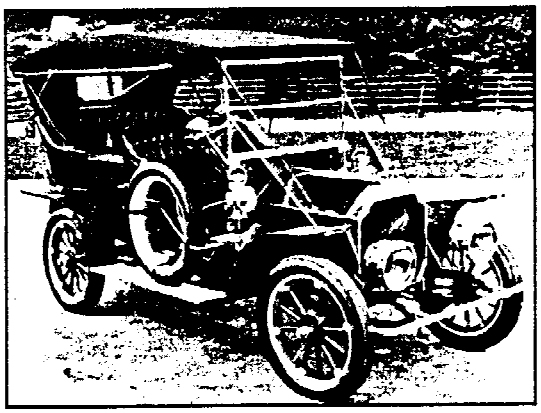
I was lucky. I was a youngster when cars with magical names were commonplace. If not seen every day on the roads of Minnesota or North Dakota, their advertisements graced the pages of the *Saturday Evening Post* and so their lines and, almost more important, the shape of their radiators were well-known.

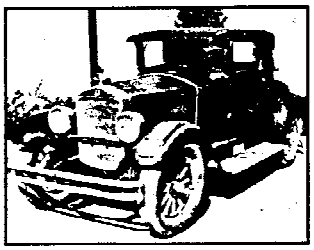
Radiators then were real and different. More than mere amorphous air inlets, they actually cooled the water and were the distinguishing characteristic of most cars. A fine car had a unique and often noble radiator. You knew what marque it was the moment a car came around a corner ... if you knew anything at all about cars.

Even though neither my friends nor I had ever seen a Rolls-Royce, had one come by, we would have known it instantly by that most noble of all radiators, just as we would have recognized Mary Pickford by those most devasting of all curls had she appeared in our midst unannounced. I never got to meet Mary Pickford until she was, I find it hard to say, a rather old lady, the curls long gone, and the first car I ever fell in love with wasn't a Rolls-Royce, but it did bear a notable name: Stoddard-Dayton.

I was eight or nine. We lived on a farm about 40 miles west of Fargo, N.D. Times were hard, as they always seemed to be for the growers of wheat, unless there was a war on. One late summer day a car I didn't recognize turned into the lane leading to our farmyard, its engine coughing and making other protesting noises, then stopping a hundred yards from the house. Its driver was looking for work in the harvest fields and my father hired him. We had a garage but no car, so while the two men pushed the nine-year-old Stoddard-Dayton up the slight grade, I was ensconced in the front seat and "drove" it into the garage. My first experience at the wheel.

When our wheat had been cut and threshed, the itinerant laborer moved on to other farms, leaving his car until he had money enough to have it repaired. He never returned and over the next year or two I spent many a happy hour pondering the complex valve mechanism of the old Stoddard-Dayton or sitting behind its wheel in the dark garage, imagining the two of us with a high cloud of dust in our wake on the exciting way to somewhere.





As a boy, author pretended to drive a broken-down Stoddard-Dayton (new 1908 model above), but first conquered a clutch shift on a 1926 Velie (like one at left)

But it was on the ubiquitous Model T that I actually learned to drive, this time on a farm in Minnesota. I think I was taught by the daughter of our Scandinavian neighbor. If you have never driven a Model T, you can't imagine how much it differed from a conventional modern car.

The Model T's epicyclic transmission was the unique aspect of this most famous American car. No gear lever. Gears were shifted by one's feet! There were three pedals on the floor. You pressed the left one down to move off and held it down for as long as you wanted to remain in low gear. When you wanted to be in high gear, you simply let that pedal all the way up. As simple as that. Let halfway up, that pedal gave you neutral; at that point you could press down the middle pedal with your right foot and be in reverse. The third pedal was a brake ... inside the transmission. There was no gas pedal. Speed was regulated by a lever on the steering column. People who owned Model Ts often refused to drive cars with conventional gearshifts and vice versa.

When I went to live with my great-uncle Ed, who owned a new 1926-27 Velie, I watched and studied his every move with clutch, gear lever and gas pedal—hoping for the day he would ask me to take the wheel. It did come, and I acquitted myself as to the gearshift born! The Velie was the product of a family corporation in the farm machinery center of Moline, Ill., and was deservedly popular in the farm belt. Indeed, it was an attractive sedan with low gearing and a very flexible engine. Its four-wheel hydraulic brakes were external-contracting bands and so were subject to icing up in winter, often instigating spectacular skids. One got quite used actually to going down the road sideways.

I was 15 the first summer I got a job in the North Dakota harvest fields myself. The family I worked for had a large Stearns-Knight touring car with which I was sometimes entrusted for errands and bringing food and drink out to the men in the field. At the time the sleeve-valve Knight engines had something of the cachet and glamour of four-valves-per-cylinder heads today. I remember the ability of the rather grand Stearns-Knight to so easily pull through the soft soil of the harvested fields and then sweep, silent as the wind, along the paved roads to the movies on Saturday evening. The big drawback to these engines, though, was that before the advent of low-drag, multigrade oil, they were almost impossible to turn over in zero weather if not kept in a heated garage.

I've survived the intervening 60-odd years to drive a total of 100 automobile marques (*marques*, mind you, not models) and that total climbs slowly after about 50. Pegaso, Isotta Fraschini, Duesenburg, Talbot-Darracq, Bugatti, Rolls-Royce, Cord, Daimler come readily to mind as illustrious examples, but like the first girls I kissed, I remember most fondly those very first cars I drove ... that poor derelict Stoddard-Dayton, the Model T, the Velie and the Stearns-Knight. Were any of them saved from the scrap yard to achieve immortality of sorts as part of a car collection somewhere? Could that Stoddard-Dayton I visited at Harrah's be the one I "drove" into our empty garage in North Dakota in 1921? ■