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A 60-year love affair with a Model A roadster

by Clifford M. Denny

[Editor's note: In the early 1970s, I was a teenager who desperately wanted a Model A. My father was a member of a public-speaking group called Toastmasters. One night, he came home from a meeting and told me he'd met a fellow named Cliff Denny, who owned a Model A roadster. It would be many years later that I'd meet Cliff. In the meantime, I'd acquired and restored my 1930 Town Sedan. I've now owned that car for 40 years. But that's nothing compared to the six decades that Cliff has had his roadster. This is his story.]

I really wanted an antique car, and — after much haggling — my father finally relented when I found a 1931 Model A deluxe roadster in mid-summer 1956. I had just turned 19.

Previously, in the spring, I had found a Model T touring in Lexington, Virginia. The plan was for my mother and



Cliff Denny took advantage of a recent unseasonably warm February Sunday afternoon to take his 1931 Model A roadster out for a drive.

me to drive it east over the Blue Ridge Mountains to our home in Powhatan County near Richmond, Va. My father said that would be ridiculous to spend \$450 for that car. I now realize crossing the mountains would have been insane

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It's dues time

Check your mailing label on the back page of this newsletter. It will look something like this.

HENRY & CLARA FORD****
2831 DEARBORN WAY
TOURING KY 12345

If you see a series of asterisks (****) next to your name, you haven't paid your dues for 2016. That means you'll soon be dropped from the mailing list and will stop receiving this newsletter.

Don't let that happen! Send your \$20 dues — today — to **Mike Tearney**, Treasurer, at 4890 McCowan's Ferry Road, Versailles, KY 40383.

And don't forget, your national MARC dues must also be kept current. **You must be a member of the national MARC to remain in good standing with our local club.** Send your \$45 dues directly to MARC national headquarters in Michigan.

Let's do lunch at Michael's Restaurant on Feb. 20

Our January activity got snowed out, but — weather permitting — we'll make up for it on Saturday, Feb. 20, by traveling to Irvine, Ky., for lunch at Michael's Restaurant. **Kenny and Kristin Brake** have made the arrangements.

A group from Lexington, led by **Delmer and Linda Dalton**, will depart at 9:30 from the new McDonald's on Richmond Road (just inside New Circle Rd.)

Another group will follow **Bruce and Linda Bailey** departing at 9:30 from the Redi Mart in Crab Orchard.

Note: *If the weather forces cancellation, members will be notified by email. If it looks questionable and you haven't received an email, call one of the leaders mentioned above. Their phone numbers can be found in the red box on page 2.*

Cliff Denny marks six deca

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in that car, since all I knew about the function of the three pedals in a Model T was what I'd learned from a book.

I soon learned of a lady in Richmond who wanted to get rid of an old car that was taking up space in her garage since her husband died. I took a friend, Jerry, with me to look at it. "Oh, Cliff, it's a jewel," Jerry said. "If you don't buy, it I will." He knew Model A's because he and his buddies raced them on country roads. The cost was \$325.

The car was robin's egg blue, painted with a brush. The top was almost new. There were no inside panels, no wind wings, and no outside mirror. The rumble seat consisted of two seats from something else, and was not attached. It had yellow-spoked 16" wheels with V-8 hubcaps and sealed-beam headlights. There was no luggage rack. There was a radio in the rumble seat compartment with control knobs protruding through the center of small shelf just behind the front seat. The antenna was mounted on the left side of the cowl behind the side-mounted spare tire.

The horn was a modern one.

Mr. Hunt, the father of another friend, was a mechanical/electrical engineer. He rode in it and told me the rear axle bearings were worn out. (I'd thought the grinding noise was normal.) He and I worked on fixing this. A country mechanic, Mr. Williams, let me borrow his spring spreader. Bearings were replaced and Mr. Hunt showed me how to make the differential gaskets out of brown paper. With help, I got the rear end back together and on the car. And there it has been ever since.

After scouring junk yards, I found the proper 19-inch rims. I think they cost no more than a couple of dollars each. They were naturally rusty. I kept the ones that looked the best to me.

Mr. Pickles was a neighboring pig farmer whose enterprise was far enough away to be undetectable at my house. For years, we knew him by his dull Model A pickup, which he drove so slowly that we hated to get behind him on curvy roads on our way to Richmond, 18 miles away. And it was especially disagreeable should he be ahead of us on our return. He carried two 55-gallon barrels in the bed of his pickup, containing slops from restaurants in Richmond to feed his hogs.

Mr. Pickles and I became great friends. I first ventured through the woods to his establishment, a simple unpainted house and pig pens. Mr. Pickles only drove Model A's. When one wore out, he parked it in his woods on the edge of his clearing, where there were several others, and would find another. He let me pick through them for what I needed — gratis. I believe the only things I got from him were 'proper' headlights to replace the sealed-beams, and rear bumperettes. Jerry gave me the old 'aoga' horn that rides on the car today.

I worked for the RF&P Railroad Company in Richmond the summer of 1957 as a draftsman. My boss was Mr. Aiken, the engineer. I had those rusty 19-inch rims, and didn't know how to remove the rust except by elbow grease. He took them to the locomotive shop and had them sandblasted. Also, as the holes on the frame were worn where the steering gear box attached, I designed a plate to alleviate this problem. The locomotive shop followed my design and made the plate.

The same summer, I had the car painted. The one-man body shop owner who did it told me the wheels should be orange. I thought the body was originally maroon — at least, it looked 'maroonish' under the robin's egg blue that had chipped away — so that's the color I chose for the

Central Ky. Region, MARC

www.ckmarc.com

President

Delmer Dalton
3245 Wellington Lane
Lexington, Ky. 40503
(859) 223-5078

Secretary

Judy Akers
2720 Cedar Rd.
Stamping Ground, Ky. 40379
(502) 535-6665

National Director

John Yates
1137 Rogers Rd.
Lancaster, Ky. 40444
(859) 548-4016

Vice President

Jack Kubik
3889 Foley's Trail
Lexington, Ky. 40514
(859) 224-8050

Treasurer

Mike Tearney
4890 McCowan's Ferry Rd.
Versailles, Ky. 40383
(859) 873-7590

Past President

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3945 Goshen Rd.
Stanford, Ky. 40494
(606) 669-0428

Board Members

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1535 Cypress St.
Paris, Ky. 40361
(859) 227-0695

Kristin Brake (2015-16)
682 Winding Star Rd.
Irvine, Ky. 40336
(606) 723-4652

Arthur Hollis (2016-17)
1507 Conns Lane
Lancaster, Ky. 40444
(859) 792-4143

John Baker (2015-16)
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(606) 348-5126

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(517) 819-0130

Darrell Webb (2016-17)
160 Woodridge Dr.
Lancaster, Ky. 40444
(859) 312-2549

Checkmark Newsletter Editor

Jeff Rhoads, 3813 Dicksonia Dr., Lexington, Ky. 40517 • (859) 273-9593

Email Checkmark: Checkmark@ckmarc.com

ades of Model A ownership

repaint. The man also hand-painted the pinstripe to match the wheels. The cost was about what I'd paid for the car originally, maybe more. He did an outstanding job, and it is still wearing his work to this day.

The same year, it got 19-inch tires, side curtains and interior, and wind wings. Its outside rear view mirror was strapped to the side-mounted spare. I made the side curtain irons on the farm forge at home. Mr. Williams replaced the kingpins; he had the proper two-stepped reamer.

In 1958 came a big trip with a friend, George, the son of Mr. Hunt. We went to Pawley's Island, South Carolina. On the way through North Carolina, a truck threw a rock that broke one of the headlight lenses. A junk yard had them for a dollar each; I bought three. Farther along, the fan belt broke. We limped to a garage where it was replaced, using a crowbar to overcome the difficulty of getting it under the crankshaft pulley.

At Pawley's Island, the car acquired sandy scratches — which it still carries — from girls jumping into and out of the rumble seat. This trip also took us to Atlanta, Charleston, and back to Pawley's. The wind wings did a good job of keeping us generally dry through several thunderstorms. There was a steady stream of oil running down the left front fender the whole trip. Whenever we filled the car with gasoline, we bought a quart of oil. That was just an expense of ownership, and nothing to be concerned about.

On our return, just south of Petersburg, Va., there was a sudden loud noise from the engine compartment. I kept driving, thinking I had run over something. Then the red column in the thermometer of the Motometer on the radiator cap climbed, and the car boiled over. We judiciously pulled off the highway to inspect. The water pump housing had broken and the fan was bent; a blade was stuck in the radiator. A man stopped and pushed us to a filling station nearby. The owner kindly allowed the car in his garage for the night. We rode a bus the rest of the way to Richmond. My father, amused, took us to our respective homes.

The next day George and I invaded junkyards for a water pump. One owner said, "You may find one by the back fence in the briars. Be careful of bees." Yes, and it had the fan on it too. We replaced the pump and fan as a unit. With George following, I made the drive back home, refilling the radiator every five or ten miles from a five-gallon can of water whenever the Motometer signaled trouble. A radiator shop fixed the damage after I got back home.

In the summer of 1960, with farm help, I removed the engine with a chain hoist. I had new main bearings poured; the cylinders re-bored; head ground; pistons, rings, timing gear and valves replaced; and a new clutch and pressure plate installed. I reassembled the rest of the engine.

In 1961, I came to Lexington, Ky., for a summer job with IBM. I drove the Model A from Richmond, Va. — over 500 miles — and back at the end of the summer.

In 1962, IBM hired me — and again, the car made the trip back to Lexington. But under the threat of being drafted into the Army, I volunteered. In early March 1963, with side curtains installed and heater hatch open, I left Lexington in a sleet storm for Richmond, Va. The manifold heater was outstanding; my little inside thermometer hanging from the rear view mirror even registered a high of 35 degrees Fahrenheit inside the car. The sun shone the next day as I worked my way into Virginia, and the side curtains came off.

I came back from Germany in the winter of 1966, and then back to Lexington and IBM. In the summer of 1966, I drove the car back to Lexington for the last time.

In 1969, **Charlie Spurlock** honed the cylinders, and we put the engine back together. I lapped the valves then as well. My wife's cat, unbeknownst to me, played with the rod caps on a table, mixing them up. I discovered this when I found them and the bolts scattered on the floor.

All went reasonably well for the next 45 years.

John Yates supplied me with shock absorbers, pop-out ignition cable, speedometer cable and other bits and pieces for several years.

Sometime in the '80s, I replaced the wiring harness. Later, my daughter and I were driving the car when she smelled something. I thought it was from someone spreading roofing tar. Then it got worse and I saw green smoke inside the ammeter. I got the car into a nearby parking lot at once, and had it towed home. I had overlooked replacing the cable to the instrument panel. I soon fixed that.

I had also replaced the bottom plate of the distributor with a new one which was not exactly like the old one. It worked for a long while, but eventually when the engine heated, it would ground out. I still had the original one which I repaired and returned it to its proper place.

I replaced the front spring shackles in 2007; the originals had worn through the bushings. In 2010, I replaced the timing gear. The old one looked okay except

'MARC' your calendar

- ✓ **Feb. 20** — Lunch at Michael's Restaurant in Irvine (**Kristin and Kenny Brake**). See details on page 1.
- ✓ **Mar. 19** — Tour the Lancaster area — details coming (**Bruce and Linda Bailey**).
- ✓ **Apr. 30 – May 1** — Overnight tour to Buckhorn State Park (**David and Vickie Caudill**).
- ✓ **May 14** — Mystery Tour (**Jeff and Mary Rhoads**).
- ✓ **June 3 (Friday)** — Hot Air Balloon Festival in Danville.
While not an official CKMARC activity, this event may be of interest to members. For more information, contact **Bruce and Linda Bailey**.
- ✓ **June 11** — Picnic at Logan Hubble Park in Lancaster (**Bruce and Linda Bailey**).
- ✓ **July 16** — Keeneland Concours d' Elegance (**John and Becky Yates**).
- ✓ **July 30** — Tour the Georgetown area (**Mike and Judy Akers**).
- ✓ **Aug. 20** — Tour Jessamine County with visits to the Thomson-Hood Veterans Center and the High Bridge Festival (**Darrell and Joan Webb**).
- ✓ **Sept. 9 – 11** — It's CKMARC's turn to host nearby regional Model A Clubs for Drive Your Model A Day. Activities will be centered in the Paris area. **Jerry and Martha Baker** and **Bruce and Linda Bailey** are the organizers.
- ✓ **Oct. 15 – 16** — Overnight tour to Big Bone Lick State Park (**Delmer and Linda Dalton**).
- ✓ **Nov. 12** — Lunch at Biancke's Restaurant in Cynthiana (**Mary and Jeff Rhoads**).
- ✓ **Dec. 10** — Holiday potluck lunch, silent auction and election of officers at Southern Heights Baptist Church in Lexington (**John and Karen Blair** and **Jeff and Mary Rhoads**).
- ✓ **Jan. 21, 2017** — Winter potluck gathering at the Rabbit Run Recreation Center in Lexington (**Delmer and Linda Dalton**).

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for half a broken tooth. Ashley's in Lexington adjusted the front wheel toe-in. I had the top replaced through a friend of **Billie Bates**. In 2014, I installed cast iron front brake drums and new wheel bearings. The engine ran well with the familiar and friendly 'thunk thunk'. For some reason, I checked the timing gear. My heart sank; nearly all its teeth were destroyed. But it still ran.

Jeff Rhoads and **Delmer Dalton** helped remove the engine and transmission sometime around September 2014. Another friend and I then took the engine to **Jerry Baker**. Jerry totally rebuilt it for touring with expert care, and I got it back the following spring. Jeff and I rebuilt the transmission. Also, with the engine out, I replaced the rubber rear engine mount pads. Jeff, Delmer, **Herman Butler** and I reinstalled the engine and transmission along with other new components from Jerry. I got new tires, and Jeff and I mounted them at his house.

After the car was running again, there were minor bugs to work out, but I can safely state that the engine runs better than at any other time since I have had it, and I would warrant even better than when the car rolled out of the Ford assembly line in March of 1931.

I am still becoming familiar this machine's quirks. It's been a lifetime of learning, with hints and observations from our club members — for which I am very grateful.

For sale — 1931 Model A sedan. Good shape; green; needs TLC. \$7,500 OBO. Glasgow, Ky. (270) 261-1007 or (217) 369-4209.