



Outfitted for "the road" in 1915, the Blum family with a brand new seven-passenger Buick poses before starting the California pilgrimage. Front left, Otto and father E. J. Blum, both deceased; Nona, now Mrs. Edgar McKinney of Kissimmee, Fla.; Al, deceased; Berdie, now Mrs. Herman Thibode of Miami, Fla.; Mother Anna, and author Fred.

So You Think You Had A Camping Trip

By FRED G. BLUM

Sept. 12 marked the 57th anniversary of the end of my family's 7,717-mile camping trip from Monticello, Wis., to California and back.

It took three happy months in 1915 and all seven of us have thought about it hundreds of times since.

The seven were Dad, Mother, my two younger brothers, two younger sisters, and I. Dad was a reserved, ambitious, second-generation Swiss who had been a successful country schoolteacher before becoming an equally successful general store owner. Mother was an enthusiastic, dynamic, plump, practical woman, always able to find friends; Al, a wiry 15, Nona, 11, Otto, 9, Berdie, dimple cheeked, always smiling and 7 years old, and I was an impetuous, persistent fellow of 20.

The inspiration for the trip came about this way:

In the early spring of 1914, Al and I spent slack time in the office of Dad's store looking at a trade-magazine called "Automobile Age." Many different kinds of automobiles were advertised and we decided to write to several manufacturers, suggesting that they donate a car to Al and me so we could make a transcontinental trip to California along the

scarcely charted routes. In return for their kindness, we would write articles describing our trip and featuring their brand of automobile.

By the time the replies arrived, we were thoroughly determined to make the trip.

Since none of the manufacturers thought as highly of the idea as we did, we were forced to fall back on our own resources. Al earned all the money he could by selling newspapers and by doing part-time clerking in the store. I worked on the county-road building-crew that summer. During the following school year at the University of Wisconsin, I did odd jobs and skimped and saved every penny I could.

My parents' first interest in our plan was a firm decision not to permit Al and me to take such a dangerous trip alone. But towards winter, they gradually became more and more interested in the exciting tone of our plans, and finally decided that they, too, needed a vacation—their first real one since their 1893 honeymoon.

Equipping for the hegira was a combination of wise purchasing, practical fabrication, and old-fashioned make-do Dad bought a brand-new 1915, seven-passenger, Model 55 Buick, from which we removed the two folding seats. In their place between the front and back seats, we installed a galvanized iron box made by a local blacksmith to fit exactly inside the tonneau. It held lots of groceries and utensils.

We ordered a silk tent, which had a built-in floor, screens, and flaps with multiple sets of snaps, enabling a tight seal at the front of the tent. The flap could then be thrown over the top of the car and secured by several ropes.

With her Swiss thrift, Mother spent hours during the winter making blankets of discarded clothes, which she flattened out, covered with blue denim, and then quilted. These served sometimes as our blankets and sometimes as our mattresses.

We carried no pillows but instead used

rolled up sweaters, jackets, or any other handy article of clothing. We carried the clothes, blankets, tent, and additional cooking utensils on rack resting on the left running board. Thus, the two left doors were unusable throughout most of the trip.

We bought three canvas water bags—one five-gallons, the others two and one-half gallons. These we always kept suspended from the outer roof supports. The water usually tasted brackish but the insulation in the heavy canvas and the thick corks kept it surprisingly cool. Water was hard to get, and in some places was non-existent or, at best, impotable. We had read in our research that impotable water could be improved by the addition of lemon juice. So, fresh lemons were part of our stock whenever we could get them, and they served us well.

Our foods were the easily transportable and preparable ones—bacon, potatoes, beans, evaporated milk, and cocoa. Nona had announced before the trip that she might not agree to the occasional breakfasts planned in the interest of time—plain evaporated milk with cocoa added. But when the time came to drink that, she decided that it wasn't the worst thing in the world.

At 9:30 a.m. on June 12, 1915, we had our picture taken in front of our car, just before leaving. We took considerable pains to be properly dressed—dusters and bonnets for the women, and boots, leggings, caps, gauntlets, and goggles for the men.

The first night out, we camped alongside a railroad west of Dixon, Ill. The second night, we set up our tent in a sort of grassy square in the center of Wheatland, Iowa. With tacit consent from authorities, we helped ourselves to railroad and village sites quite often. In Santa Barbara, Calif., we parked on the lovely beach right near the center of the city, where 'we were considered (as we often were) one of the Seven Wonders of the Modern World! And in Holbrook, Ariz., we set up our tent in the backyard of a Chinese restaurant.

We also occasionally camped in farmer's yards, with permission. That often carried bonuses. In Grand Junction, Colo., for example, we camped in the orchard of a generous fruit-grower. In addition to giving us fruit, his wife invited Al, feeling ill, into her house and made tea for him.

Several days later, near Phillipsburg, we pitched our tent in the farmyard of a friendly farmer. He provided us with milk and cream and refused to accept any payment whatsoever. Actually, the only official campsite we found was at Manitou, Colo., which, was a municipal campsite with the unexpected facility of a water faucet.

In Colorado Springs, we stopped for gas at a place so unusual that it remained a highlight of the trip. It was the prototype of today's filling stations. The proprietor was an enterprising man from the East who was making a career out of selling oil products to automobiles. He had given his amazing business the amazing name of "Pike's Peak Petroleum Co."

However, we purchased most of our gas at hardware stores or at hard-to-find street side filling pumps. At some hardware stores, it was necessary to furnish our own gasoline can, have it filled, and carry it out again. At other places, there would be an outdoor pump at which we stopped, or there would be a 5-gallon can from which the storekeeper would pour gas into the tank. Wherever possible, we asked to have the gas strained through a chamois skin to keep out dirt and small stones.

Our fellow travelers formed a friendly fraternity with us. In Manitou, as Dad was chopping kindling wood with a hatchet, the hatchet slipped and cut his hand. A man hurried over, said he was a doctor, and bandaged his hand—beginning a long, trip-friendship.

At the same time, other fellow campers in Manitou talked about the dangers of traveling over the mostly unmarked desert roads of the

Southwest.

So mystery and fear of the desert led to three other cars joining us in what became a convoy to cross the desert. One was an Overland driven by the doctor who had bandaged Dad's hand another was a Ford from Chicago, driven by a young married couple; and a third was an Osage Indian from Oklahoma.

This convoy traveling remains one of the outstanding memories of our trip. Some times, to give the children—or, indeed, everyone—a change, one family would have one of its youngsters trade places with a child from one of the other cars, and the children would travel for an entire day with their exchanged families.

After traveling through the Petrified Forest (where we legally sent home a boxful of petrified wood that cost Dad \$10 to ship), we camped in a beautiful forest of towering pines several miles east of Flagstaff, Ariz. The air was so bracing, the fragrance of the pines so tangy, and, the smells from the bacon and eggs so inviting, that all of our spirits soared. And after this storybook supper, Mother innocently asked if someone would go and “distinguish the campfire.”

Desert travel did have its hazards. For instance, treacherous arroyos and washes were routine. And In Arizona one day, the driving was almost impossible, since we had to face a glaring sun continually. Because of that, our car almost met with a major mishap by getting off the narrow, sandy road. Occasionally, it was nip and tuck as to whether or not one or another car of our convoy could get back onto the road and out of the soft sand. As a result of the poor roads and waiting for each other, we could travel only about 6 to 10 miles per hour.

On July 18, after going through heat and what seemed like an almost interminable desert, we reached Los Angeles. There, we said goodbye to the last of our convoy, the good doctor's party. We looked into a big

mirror and were shocked to see how tired, tan, and dirty we looked.

Our main duty was to buy a complete set of new tires; the desert had baked the ones that had come new with the car. Then for about two weeks, we rented a cottage on Venice's Electric Avenue.

From there, we patronized fish markets, as Mother was eager to cook and taste tuna, halibut, and anything new she could find. We visited carnivals, watched a Hollywood picture in the making, and took various side trips.

Later, while renting an apartment in San Diego (and riding our first automatic elevator), we visited the World's Fair. Farther north, we tried unsuccessfully to reach our 14 arms around a Sequoia tree, visited San Francisco's Chinatown, and compared its World's Fair with San Diego's,

Homeward bound, in Reno on Aug. 24, we stocked up on our familiar beans, evaporated milk, bacon, etc., against the upcoming desert. At Reno, we found another family with whom we were happy to share desolate Nevada. There was a thrifty, rather elderly couple, their married son and his wife. For years after the trip, we would gleefully quote the stock, rhythmical answer that the father gave when anyone asked where they were from: “We're from Taylorville, Ill.; our home is in Parsons, Kan.; and we have property in Oklahoma.”

Even thrifty Al and I once regretted their thriftiness. On-the third night out in the desert, they were running short of gas, and the father was very worried. Dad said that we boys could sell a full 3-gallon can that we'd been carrying.

Our friend asked us how much the gas was. We had paid 18 cents a gallon for it and told him that we would let him have it for the same price, even though it would cost 25 cents a gallon at the next available place. His reply was, “Well, I'll give you half a dollar for it since some of it must have evaporated by

now.” Dad signaled us to sell it to him for his ‘price.

Again we had bad roads. Once we stopped in Nevada to ask the road commissioner which of two routes we should take. He hesitated a moment, then said, "The roads are so poor both ways, that no matter which way I send you, you'll wish I had sent you the other way."

He was correct. We camped that night beside the dusty, lonely road. Not a single car nor vehicle of any kind passed us, and it was the most miserable night of our entire trip. The mosquitoes were so thick in our tent that we could kill them a dozen at a time with no visible effect on their numbers.

Dad and I decided that Mother and the three younger children should go back to Reno and take the train to Salt Lake, as we felt there must be a great deal of danger in crossing this desolate country. But redoubtable Mother insisted that they would go where we went, for better or for worse.

The next day, we started out for Lovelocks, Nev. The roads were bad, very bad, worse, and still worse. The entire distance we traveled that entire day probably wasn't much over 50 miles. That stretch was perhaps the most difficult to travel of the entire trip. There were practically no guideposts, and all we could do was to hope that we were on the right road—"road" being nothing but streaks of sand headed in mere general directions.

A bit of the time we traveled in high gear, but we spent most of the time in shifting from second to low and back to second gear again. Throughout the entire day, we never got out of the car or even stopped it for any reason whatsoever—always fearful of becoming stuck in the sand. Luckily, we met no other cars to get us off the tenuous track. Seventy-one miles and 11 hours after we started, we pulled into Winnemucca, Nev., and, exhausted, camped in a wide-open space near the village railroad station.

Through Idaho, with its intriguing

Shoshone Falls, we went; on through Salt Lake City, where we floated effortlessly in the advertised 22 per cent salt solution; into our beloved Colorado once more where we drove the Skyline Drive.

In rainy Iowa, we found that one of the new tires was ruined. Its red successor was also ruined within about 30 minutes of turning and spinning in the Iowa gumbo.

Our trip lasted three months to the day.

We had started out with a brand new car, had seven punctures throughout the trip, bought six new tires, and found them in very bad shape again upon our arrival home. The cost of our gasoline was \$9 with the prices ranging from an extreme low of 9 cents per gallon to 30 cents.

We had seen rattlesnakes, prairie dogs, eagles, jackrabbits, and small owls in the wild and around evening campfires we had heard coyotes howling and mountain lions calling.

Our trip furnished us with many, many hours of happy recounting to local homebodies, and with more nostalgic recounting in the bosom of our family.

It was the great, the pilot plan for successive successful trips, which various members of the family—as well as their children—made in the next decades.

It became a basis for comparisons—from then on any impossibly horrible road was compared with Winnemucca; heat was compared with the desert heat at the times we wore sweaters to keep out the heat, extreme thriftiness was occasionally echoes in terms of “—some of it must have evaporated by now—.”

And it gave us a greatly strengthened grasp of geography, as well as a certain sophistication and broadening.

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