

The 1921 Model T Ford Roadster

As many know, I never tire of talking about my old '21 Model T roadster. My interest in antique cars began in the early 1950's because of the activities of my dad's business partner, Norbert "Nups" Schnakenberg. The first old car he acquired was a 1917 Model T touring car found in an old barn south of Concordia. We restored it as a spare time activity at the lumber yard. Later, he found a 1910 T (with brass radiator) in the Blackburn, MO area. That car was in surprisingly good shape with the original leather seats. After it was restored, it became very popular at parades and weddings. The car was carried on the lumber yard's books as an asset (with depreciation) for many years.

Locating My Own Car and Parts

Although I was only a college student at the time, I finally had a chance to buy my own car. While delivering lumber to the shop of a couple of local carpenters, Henry and Herbert Alpers, I noticed the hood of an old car peeking through a pile of scrap lumber next to their shop. When I asked them whether it was what I thought it was, Henry replied, "Yep. That's our old '21 T." I asked if they were interested in selling it to me and they said they would have to think about it.

The next time I returned to their shop, they had uncovered the car so that I could take a better look at it. It was not a pretty sight. The windshield was missing and the seat upholstery was gone. Then I noticed that the rear wheel and fenders, as well as the rear axle were missing. They explained that those had been removed for the running gear of a trailer they had built. (That was a common practice in the old days.) When I asked how much they wanted for what was left, Henry said "How about five bucks." Needless to say, I jumped at the offer. That was within my schoolboy budget. So I paid them on the spot and dragged the remnants back to the lumber yard to begin my restoration effort.

While many of the old cars and parts had been melted down because of the scrap drives during World War II, there were still a lot of junk parts to be found if you knew where to look. People in the area saw the car at the lumber yard, took an interest in it, and it became somewhat of a community project to help me locate the missing parts. I was able to pull a rear axle out of a "holler" on Milt Uphaus's farm, but I don't remember where I found some wheels with the wood spokes still in good shape.

The Tires

The Model T's of that era had 30x3" wheels in front and 30x3½" wheels in the rear. The theory was that the front wheels would cut a rut in the mud and the wider tires in the rear would then get a better grip. Back then, one could still buy 30x3½" tires mail-order at Montgomery Ward (which I did) but not the narrower front tires. Fortunately, Arnold Bodenstab, the father of one of my friends, was a Firestone dealer at that time and I was able to special order the 30x3" tires through him. Now I had the car on wheels so that it could be moved around.

The Engine

Another of my friends' father, John Ziegelbein, was a mechanic at a local car dealership. He offered to spend a weekend tuning up the engine at no cost just for the fun of it. Soon we had the engine purring. It was a beautiful engine with a special higher compression flat head that the Alpers brothers had installed on it. The engine would start with a single turn of the crank if you set the spark advance just right. Up to several hours after running, it would compression start (without cranking) just by turning on the ignition and letting the spark coils fire the residual fumes in the cylinders.

Starting the Restoration

The body was removed from the car so I could work on it. At first, I had a great time just driving it around with only the running gear. A driver could sit on the gas tank that was mounted below the seat. One of the accessories on the car was a steamboat whistle installed on the exhaust cutout. When someone pulled on the attached chain, the shrill whistle could be heard for miles around.

But the time had come to begin restoring the car to a more presentable condition. The lumber yard had a newly built annex with plenty of room in it. So I set up shop there. First, the car was stripped down to its individual parts, cleaned, inspected, and replaced if worn too badly. I located another junk Model T Ford on Chas. Sprinkle's farm that I was able to use for replacement parts. Model T parts were interchangeable for a number of years. Between the two of them, most of the car could be rebuilt. I spent many evenings after work until almost midnight one summer working on the car. (I would quit for a nightcap before Palace Café closed for the night.)

The Windshield

The car finally was beginning to take shape. With it parked in front of the lumber yard, people could see the progress and note what was still needed. One day, Marion Handley, the local trash collector, stopped in and commented that the windshield was still missing. He said that he thought he had one on his farm that might fit. (People may remember his farm with the large collection of Model A's [not T's] scattered around on it.) The next week, when he made his rounds, he had a windshield strapped to the running board of his Model A. Sure enough, it was a perfect fit. When I asked how much he wanted for it, he said "I bought it at an auction 10 years ago for 50 cents, so I think I need 75 cents for it." Obviously, I couldn't pass up a bargain like that.

The Right Rear Fender

After some months, I got the car into a nearly restored state, except that it was missing a right rear fender. Someone noticed the missing fender and told me that I might find one at an old Ford dealership in Blackburn, MO.

The dealership was owned by several brothers whose names I don't remember. During WWII, they closed up their shop and "went to war". After the war, they decided to go back to farming and never reopened their automobile business. One evening I drove out to see one of the brothers at his farm and he assured me that they should still have a fender. So he rode into Blackburn with me to check. He hauled out a set of keys and unlocked a creaky old door to the shop that hadn't been opened in years. He then proceeded to crawl up the ladder to a loft and came right back down with a fender wrapped in the original brown shipping paper. Sure enough, it was the right rear fender that I needed, still in new condition.

When I asked how much he wanted, he walked over to the parts department, brushed the dust off of a 1940's parts catalog, looked up the fender, and charged me the price in that catalog.

Upholstering the Seats

The last thing that was needed was to reupholster the seat and backrest. Jack Kammeyer had an upholstery shop as a sideline. Based on photos of old Model T's, he was able to build up the seat to look just like the original. He did a great job and I was very happy with the outcome.

Sometime later, when I had the car parked in downtown Columbia, I came back to see an older man admiring the car and patting the upholstery. He simply said, "They just don't make seats like they used to." Over 50 years later, Jack's seats are still in great shape.

I never restored the folding top on the car. The oak bows and thin metal tubing did not last. So I was never able to find an older roadster with the necessary parts.

The Car at School

Finally, the car was in good condition. I was itching to take it to school with me for the fall semester of my junior year at the University of Missouri, Columbia. So I drove it to school that fall (a trip of about 80 miles). It became a regular fixture at the university. I kept it parked in a short parking spot in front of the rooming house on Conley Ave. where I lived. Because the car was short, no one else was able to wiggle into the spot when I left; so the spot was still there when I returned. Because parking was scarce in the area, people regularly complained that I was leaving it stored there. (There was a 24 hour limit on parking on the street.) The police would come and mark a tire to make sure that I moved the car. Since I used it regularly, that wasn't a problem; but occasionally I didn't drive it for more than a day. If I saw the tire was marked, I would simply lift up the car by the axle (it was that light) and rotate the tire slightly. When the police returned, they would see that the chalk mark was not in the same position so they left it there. One time, I forgot. They towed the car away and I had to go to the police pound, pay a fine, and retrieve my car. A former roommate of mine, who was a journalism student, had the reporter night shift at the police station and was quite amused by the incident.

As winter approached, I did not want to leave the car parked out in the elements. So it was time to drive it back to Concordia. My friend and classmate Gilbert Ziegelbein volunteered to ride back with me. On the trip, we encountered a heavy sleet storm. Gilbert stood up and reached over the top of the windshield, scraping the ice off of the windshield as I continued to drive. Of course we made the usual stop at Boonville for the 19¢ per gallon gasoline, but didn't waste any time getting home. Needless to say, it was not a very comfortable trip.

When it warmed up the next spring, I had to bring the car back to school because Engineers Week was approaching. Gilbert again volunteered to ride with me. Shortly after leaving Concordia, we had an amusing incident. Old-timers will remember the Sweet Springs bypass on old US 40 over the Davis Creek bottom. A slightly elevated divided section was built there so that travelers could still get through when the spring floods blocked the old section.

A car was following us as we approached that area and started filming the old car. When we continued straight ahead on the eastbound section, the driver of the other car who was not paying attention to the signs veered onto the newer westbound section. Gilbert stood up and waved his arms trying to signal that they were going the wrong way. However, the car proceeded on parallel to us and continuing to film us, thinking that Gilbert was simply hamming it up. Fortunately, there was no traffic from the other direction and the other car made it to the other end of the divided section without incident.

With the car at school, Gilbert had the honor of escorting St. Patrick in it to the knighting ceremonies on St. Patrick's Day.

A Moment of Fame

That same spring the Model T received a bit of notoriety. A Look Magazine photographer was in town to prepare an article involving fall fashions at college. He spotted the car in front of our rooming house and inquired if he could use it as a backdrop in a photo shoot. He asked me to bring it over to Stephens College for the photo session. When I brought the car, he asked me to stay in because it needed a driver, so I reluctantly agreed. After the session was over, I forgot about it assuming that it was one of many shots that would be cut.

When I returned from artillery summer camp at Ft. Sill, OK later that year, Concordia was buzzing. Someone hauled out the issue of Look Magazine and showed me the following picture.



Actually, I was embarrassed about the whole incident but at least the right rear fender achieved its moment of fame. A Stephens College student had her arm draped over it.

A Ruined Engine

When my senior year came, I obviously wanted to drive the Model T back to the university. At that time, old US 40 was a major two lane highway between Concordia and Columbia. I didn't want to hold up traffic so I drove the car a little faster than I should have. As we approached the long climb up to Marshall Junction, I revved up the car as fast as I could. Half way up the hill the car began to shake violently and came to a clattering stop. The crankshaft had snapped which caused the heavy planetary gear system behind the engine to drop down and break the rear main bearing. The engine was destroyed beyond any hope of repair.

After hauling the car back to Concordia, I then had the problem of what to do. I had another old engine, but it was not nearly as good as the engine I had ruined. I then spent weekends and holidays that fall and winter slowly replacing the engine and getting it into running condition. As winter approached, I needed a warm place to work on the car. Ralph Pape (not a relative) offered his Highway 40 Garage. He had pretty well retired by that time and didn't need the space. He and a bunch of his old cronies would sit around a pot-bellied stove in the garage and swap stories. Ralph would stoke the stove with

chopped up old tires until the sides of the stove began to glow red. He and his friends would watch me work, offer advice, and tell old car stories.

By spring, the car was running again but not to my satisfaction. I didn't want to risk driving it back to Columbia. So it stayed in Concordia while I finished my senior year.

Where Is It Now?

After graduation, I moved on and stored the Model T in my parents' empty garage. Only a few weeks after I left, a tornado ripped through the area damaging a lot of property, particularly St. Paul's Lutheran Church. My mother sent me a clipping from the Kansas City Star describing the incident. In the article, it said that buildings had been moved by the wind and that a neighbor's garage had been picked up and moved over onto the foundation of my parents' garage. Knowing that my car was stored in our garage, I obviously panicked until I saw an attached note that Mother had written. She said not to worry because the newspaper article was inaccurate. What actually happened was that the neighbor's garage blew around our detached garage and bounced off the rear of our house. Our well-built garage with a good foundation remained in place. However, I'm sure that the newspaper account has been repeated. That's how tornado legends get started.

The Model T sat in the garage for years except when I returned home for vacation. I would get it out and fire it up so I had some transportation while I was there. In later years, our kids enjoyed riding around in it. In fact, it was the first car that they drove. However, with shift pedals on the floorboard and the accelerator on the steering column, it was not necessarily good training.

As my mother grew older, it was time to move the car out of that garage. So I bought a flat bed trailer and towed the car to our home in Liverpool, NY (a trip of over 1000 miles). I made a space for it in our garage here where it sits to this day. It has only been brought out for a couple of car shows and for our youngest son's high school homecoming parade. Otherwise, it sits there quietly gathering dust.

I have owned it now for over 50 years. I was only the second owner and have had it considerably longer than the original owners, the Alpers brothers.