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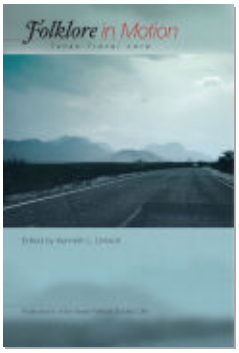

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THE FORD EPIGRAM

by Newton Gaines

A unique form of American folk-lore is the Ford epigram. It may be defined as a short saying, witticism, epithet, or slogan written on the side, fender, cowl, hood—indeed anywhere on the "Model T" Ford.[1] Although truly folk-lore, its first notable characteristic is that it is written, a characteristic which it shares, I believe, only with the disreputable writing on walls and fences. Another characteristic is that it is a by-product of a mechanical triumph. This distinction it shares with the railroad song. It happened that one Henry Ford and his engineers developed a gasoline engine that lasted longer than the body of the car it propelled. When the sad appearance of the family Ford caused Dad to buy a new machine, perhaps graduating to a Chevrolet or Buick, the son of the family fell natural heir to the old "Model T" to do with as he liked.

He could do but little with it, though, for his purse was flat. A coat of enamel or Duco was out of the question. A sufficient quantity of either would cost too much at one time. As it stood, the old Ford was impossible, even for a young fellow. It didn't look good, and it didn't look entirely disreputable. The latter state, provided that the demoralization was complete, was greatly to be preferred to obscure mediocrity. To accomplish utter disreputableness then, the young fellow began to devise all manner of witty epigrams and to embellish every conceivable portion of his Ford with them.

Never did any form of lore spread more rapidly than Ford slogans. They outran the cars on which they were painted. A young Texan, for instance, drove his emblazoned "flivver" up to Chicago or New York. Upon this occasion he was inspired to unusual originality—or effort at it—by the excitement incident to his getting ready for the trip. He added new quips to the ole ones, and started gaily forth. In every village through which he passed his wit

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was duly admired and his slogans quickly adopted by other young owners of old Fords.

The foregoing account explains in part why this body of lore is not the product of "knitters and sitters in the sun," but is rather an expression of a very lively American youth. Young people in all parts of the United States contributed about equally to the Ford epigram, and so rapid was its diffusion that the folk-lore became even more uniform throughout the country than our American language.

The youngsters today are moving (or have moved) on to other interests. The much-used epigrams have become trite, and Dad's old cast-off "Model T" is wearing out, even in the motor. Modern youth, flaming or otherwise, finds no fun in pushing worn-out cars up hills. Soon this evanescent product of youthful inventiveness may disappear and be largely forgotten. Far less numerous now than formerly are dilapidated cars covered with epigrams.[2] But the future of fads and crazes cannot be foretold with confidence. They come and they go and, like "these bones" they may rise again.

I applied the word *inventiveness* to the creative power of youths who compose Ford epigrams. But they are, as B. A. Botkin has pointed out, largely adaptations from any and all available sources, the more modern the better. No copyright law protects the inventor or original adapter, and less ingenious or more imitative owners of rambling wrecks appropriate his gems with heartbreaking speed. Like slang, they soon become public property, and trite, and many have gone or are going to the scrap heap, along with the junk which they adorn, now "Henry's made a lady out of Lizzie." The Ford jokes, too, have changed. A typical "Model T" joke concerned the conversation of a Ford and a mule on a country road.

"Who are you?" asked the mule.

"I am an automobile," answered the Ford. "Who are you?"

"I am a horse," the mule replied.

A "Model A" joke used to run something like this: The driver of a Cadillac was making about fifty miles an hour when a new Ford passed him so fast that he seemed to be standing still. The Ford owner, however, stopped his new car a little farther up the road and hailed the Cadillac owner.

"Are you familiar with the standard gear shift, Mister?"

"Why, yes," replied the Cadillac owner.

"Then will you please show me how to get this thing out of first gear?"

But back to the Ford epigrams. Every young man who owned a "Model T" had to name it. On, near, or attached to the radiators were such signs as "Little Go-Creep," "Leaping Lena," "Galloping Snail," "King Tut's Chariot," "Puddle Jumper," "Public Enemy No.1," "American Tragedy," "Gimme Room," and "Mah Junk." Then there was "Lousy Lizzie," alliterative and inelegant, derived from "road louse," a name which Americans sometimes applied to the "Model T," and which the Mexicans approximated in the epithet "la cucaracha." In April 1928, an enterprising young Fort Worthian sold to adolescent Ford owners many well-painted placards bearing the name "Rolls Ruff." "Willys-Night-Out" and "Asthma" were other names. A T.C.U. sophomore named his machine "A Chemical Disturbance." Lindbergh's achievement accounts for the name "The Spirit of St. Vitus." Among the earliest of the Ford labels were "Baby Lincoln" and "Lincoln Pup," the latter printed on a placard I saw hanging on a new Ford in 1921—no doubt a bit of advertising by the Ford Motor Company.

The noisy, temperamental engine of the Ford came in for its full share of epigrams, which were usually written on the hood. Among them were "This can't go on forever," "That isn't a knock—that's static," "Just knocking along," "Sick cylinders—all five of them," "Stop, look, but don't listen," "So's your old man," "Boiler Room—Keep Out," "Born 1900, Died many times," and "Twin Two" (in imitation of "Twin Fours" and "Twin Sixes"). "Seventy degrees inside—and then some" was suggested by the signs on air-cooled theatres and barber shops. "Baby, here's your rattle," or a variant such as "40 rattles but no button," was one of the most appropriate inscriptions for the hood. The most famous of all Ford epigrams, "I do not choose to run," appeared in the summer of 1927 soon after President Coolidge's ambiguous pronouncement.

"This side up," placed on the cowl, was intended as instructions to Mother Nature in case the driver turned a corner too fast.

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"Windshield" might be written on the cowl when the glass itself was missing. "100 percent A Merry Can" was at times inscribed on the cowl, and sometimes nearer the radiator, as the name of the car. This slogan will probably be revived, now that subversive activities are being uncovered.

A "plus" sign on the left-hand fender and a "minus" sign on the right-hand fender of one student's car gave cabalistic road rules to approaching motorists. On the false door "Fire Exit" or "Ladies' Entrance" might often be seen, or "Use can opener, insert here, cut along dotted line." "Howdy, folks! We're from Texas, the land where men are men and women are governors," and "Pardon us—Ma did" were popular for wandering Texas cars at the height of Mrs. Ferguson's administration. "This car, like true love, never runs smooth" and "I repair automobiles—fix Fords" were sometimes telescoped to read "True Love," which might serve as the name of the car. Brake-conscious veterans of road accidents gave these "sage advices": "To save breaks, use brakes," "Common sense now or prayers later," and "You'll soon be cold if your brakes don't hold." Humorists longing for free perpetual motion labeled the gasoline tank: "Put in only one gallon at a time; I'm trying to wean her."

The rather thin sheet iron of the body of the "Model T," as well as the cheap enamel used in painting it, accounts for many epigrams. "Use no hooks," "Beauty is only tin deep," "The tin you love to touch," "Fishy body," "The spirit is willing but the body is weak," "If Noah had lived three weeks longer, he'd have seen me," "Don't laugh, girls; you'd look like hell too without paint," "Don't laugh; you may be old yourself some day," "Tin-tin-tin," "Strike matches here," and "Thanks—I'd rather walk," were widely popular.

Perhaps the hankering after flirtation produced these inscriptions: "Chase me, chickens; I'm young and full of corn," "Ladies only," "Get in, peaches; here's your can," "Hot cha cha," "Boop boop a doop," "Thanks for the buggy ride," "Good pick-up; four dames in one hour," "40 gals to the gallon," "Chicken, here's your coop," "Papa's Chicken Coop," "God's Gift to the Women," and "Don't rush me, girls."

Near the running boards were written "Watch your step," "Stumble Inn," "Girls Step Inn," or "Board of Education." A student whom I knew, in decorating his car for the home trip in June, varied this last sign to read "Bored of Education." He was. Springs, wheels, or worn-out tires account for signs testifying "Honest weight—no springs," "Danger—10,000 jolts," "Broken Arches," "Dis squeals," "Four wheels—no brakes" "Four wheels—all tired," and "Tacks Collector."

Almost anywhere on the decadent "Model T" could be found some of the following: "We don't need any top; this car covered by mortgages," "Fresh Air Taxi," "Sun Parlor," "Sun Tan Special," "Ten more payments and she's ours," "Tiz for tired feet," "Beauty in every jar," "Leap in and limp out," "Pray as you enter," "She ain't what she used to be," "A wreck, but nobody killed," "An Accident Ready to Happen," "Do laugh; I was once the property of a Detroit millionaire," "rattles before it strikes," "Rambling Wreck," "Henry's Wild Lady," "Henry's Brainstorm," "Oh Henry," "O. Henry; I tell no tales," "99 per cent static," "Almost human." When the warping of the body of the "Model T" caused a door to stick shut, it might be marked "Closed—A Sign of Progress"—perhaps a borrowing from the State Highway Department. If a door would not close, it was marked "Open at all hours."

The rear surface of the "Model T" offered much space for epigrams. Here might be found: "To pass right, pass left," "Hit me easy; I'm a nervous wreck," "Detour" (with an arrow pointing to the left), "Coward, don't hit me in the back," "Don't scratch my back," "My rear is no bumper," "If you must bump me, use your head," "Don't rush me, Big Boy," "A rear tackle preferred," "Don't crowd; this is no streetcar," "School children—drive slow," "Danger ahead—soft shoulders, curves," "If you hit this car, you have gone too far," "Whoa up," "If you can read this, you are too damn close," "Excuse my dust," "Three days in this makes one weak," "Grumble Seat," "Look out—I may do something foolish," or "Follow me for parts."

If a Society for the Preservation of Decency in Ford Epigrams was ever organized, I have never heard of it. But some epigrams

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have been viewed with alarm. A former instructor at a university in Iowa informs me that about 1926 certain students were expelled for the use of two coconuts at the rear of a Ford with the legend "You can't call me Lizzie any more." The following may or may not merit expulsion: a rude picture of a tomcat running very fast, and inscribed "Seven miles to a dirt road," "Girls who smoke may put their butts inside," "Constipated—can't pass a thing," "Experienced women wanted," "Mayflower—the boat she came across in," "I'm old but I still get hot," (next to the engine). The *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* of May 1, 1929, contained an article which read in part: "Police Wednesday were busy trying to find a charge to place against youth who drive automobiles on which are written obscene lines and words." The officers were of the opinion that the charge of "public nuisance" or "exposure of obscene language" might serve their need.

Enterprising manufacturers of toys have not overlooked the opportunity to make a novelty that has sold in great numbers—a tiny tin model of a Ford car provided with eccentric wheels and a spring motor, and covered with epigrams selected by the manufacturer. The following are transcribed from two toy "Tin Lizzies" bought from Montgomery Ward about March 1929: "Barnum wuz right," "Spirit of Detroit," "Mrs. Often" (on the hood), "Love 'em and leave 'em," "Hotsie Totsie," "Rolls-Nice," "Rolls-Woice," "Leap Year—girls, leap in," "Lizzie of the Valley," "Car under construction; ride at your own risk," "Flappers' Special," "Don't hit me; I'm old," "Another Mistake," "4 everything breaks," "Not a coffin a car," "Here we are—and how."

The qualities that make the Ford epigram unique in folk-lore are these: first, it is a written lore; second, it is the by-product of a mechanical triumph; third, unlike the usual types of lore, it spread very fast; fourth, it is nearly uniform throughout the country: and fifth, it is purely the product of youthful minds.

Endnotes

1. This paper in substantially the present form, was read on April 19, 1929, at Fort Worth, before the annual meeting of the Texas Folk-Lore Society. A few sentences have been added here and there. Vivian Richardson had a full-page article on "flivver" labels in the *Dallas Morning News* for April 25, 1926. Since then other folk-lorists have been at work in the same field, notably B. A. Botkin, of the University of Oklahoma, whose excellent articles "The Lore of the Lizzie Label" and "Anthology of Lizzie Labels" appeared in American Speech for December 1930, and October 1931, respectively. Various newspaper cartoons and comic strips have also focused attention on the subject, especially in the late '20s and early '30s. Certain repetitions in all of these items (including this paper) were inevitable, since Ford epigrams rapidly became standardized throughout the country. It is hoped, however, that my approach will be found somewhat different from those of other writers.
2. For the few remaining ones this inscription might be appropriate: "Blitz-krieged but still doing business."

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