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WATCH THE FORDS GO BY: THE AUTOMOBILE COMES TO OLD BELL COUNTY

by Kenneth W. Davis



Richard Lee Strout and E. B. White gave verbal immortality to Henry Ford's tin lizzie in an essay which once helped freshmen struggling to become literate learn how to string colorful anecdotes together to make sense. Their celebrated essay, "Farewell, My Lovely," focused primarily on the wonder of Ford's inventive genius, the Model T—that vehicle which revolutionized twentieth-century America. In old Bell County, the arrival of mechanized transportation brought Model T Fords, Saxons, Maxwells, Buicks, Cadillacs, and a host of other brands now perished, gone with the exhaust fumes and the dust of unpaved roads. Among these many kinds of automobiles there were some which attained the status of folk objects for their stamina, their contrariness, their comfort, or for their near-epic feats of whatever sort. To a Texas folklorist, the antics of the people who herded these snorting mechanical behemoths over those dirt roads of old Bell County are even more interesting than the legends about good mud cars, fast road cars, splendid courting vehicles, and those which doubled as runabouts hauling feed and seed.

My grandfather, Henry L. Perkins of near Bartlett, was one of the first to own an automobile in Bell County. He started out with a Maxwell, which he kept until Buicks became popular, sometime in the mid-teens or a few years later. Then, he bought the biggest one the Buick agency in Temple could coax from Detroit: a Buick touring car powered by a straight six. The engine was called "the Victory Six," and it generated enough power to propel the heavy car across the mud road between Gooseneck and Schwertner regardless of the depth of the ruts. So great was that Buick's reputation for being able to negotiate those pre-New Deal unpaved

roads that the hangers-on and the two barbers in Schwertner regularly waited outside the two-chair shop after big rains to watch my grandfather, a tall man who looked exactly like William Faulkner, come chugging along the Gooseneck Road, his black Buick knocking heroically but never once stalling out. The frame of the car leveled the ground between the ruts. As is often the case among the folk, fortunately, all sorts of stories and several wonderful out-and-out lies grew up about the prowess of Henry Perkins' Buick. One such whopper held that when the Bartlett-Schwertner-Jarrell Railroad Company's only steam engine was on the fritz, the engineer telephoned for Mr. Perkins' Buick to pull the seven or eight heavily loaded boxcars into Bartlett. I know this yarn is a lie, but my grandfather once solemnly assured me that the Buick could have done the job if the need had been great enough.

But the best of the yarns about the coming of motorized transportation to Bell County tell of people learning to drive this new wonder, the automobile. Automobile agencies sprang up everywhere. In the still somewhat small town of Bartlett there were once at least four, perhaps five agencies, as they were called then. Now, the correct term is dealership. These early agencies were concerned with selling cars. They didn't worry much about customer relations such as teaching the new owners how to drive the mechanical wonders sold to people who for years had driven only horses or mules. In one instance of a sale to an uninformed buyer, a comic folk yarn found its genesis.

The Ford agency sold a Model T touring car to a man and his four sons. Not one of these five males had driven even a primitive iron-wheeled tractor. But the dealer told them that driving the car was easy: one lever made it go faster or slower; another device was the brake control. The dealer didn't tell them just which was which, but did get the car pointed toward the Ivichec farm and cranked the motor. Then, the Ivichec men were on their own. With cautious experimentation, old Ligi Ivichec, the family's whiskered patriarch, learned quickly how to steer the device and a bit about speeding up and slowing down. By the time he and his stalwart sons reached their farm east of Bartlett, Old Ligi was as

proud as some Slavic king of old as he herded the smoothly chugging Model T along.

But when he turned into the family's front yard, he realized to his great terror and embarrassment that he had not the slightest idea about how to stop his wonderful vehicle. So he slowly circled the house. By this time, his smiling wife and his six daughters were all on the veranda waving and laughing and shouting their joy at the arrival of the long-promised Model T. Old Ligi gravely saluted them and made yet another turn around the yard. This pattern kept repeating itself until Ligi feared dark would fall and the cows wouldn't get milked. So, he had a strategy session with his oldest son, Tor.

Tor had been through the fifth grade several years earlier and was considered the family's intellectual. But book learning or no, Tor was no match for the native cleverness, the horse sense of his now sweating father. Old Ligi told Tor that when the Model T slowed down, Tor was to jump off and get the crowbar, a five-foot-long piece of solid metal tubing used to pry things, dig postholes, and the like. Then, when Ligi slowed the Model T again, Tor was to jump back on board. Only that much of the plan was made known. Tor, ever obedient, did as he was told.

When he was back in the car, Ligi told the heaviest of his sons, Stanislaus, an enormous hulk of a man, to take the crowbar, crawl out over the hood to the front of the Model T and on Ligi's signal, to jam the crowbar into the ground. One does not have to be a student of physics to guess what happened. The huge young man positioned himself and the crowbar. Ligi gave the signal, and the young man sailed through the air as if propelled by some demonic force. He landed in the silo pit and was only somewhat bruised. In rage and humiliation, Ligi did the only thing a family patriarch could: he drove the Model T into one of his magnificently structured haystacks and the machine stalled out. One account of this yarn holds that the car stayed there until it rusted to the ground, but that story is a flat-out lie; I rode in that old Model T when I was attending first grade at Hackberry School. The car was nearly twenty-five years old then, but still ran quite well.

Another story about humans and machines in old Bell County involves a lady professor of music at Belton's Mary-Hardin Baylor Female College and Seminary for Women, the oldest institution of higher learning in Texas, chartered by the Republic of Texas in 1845. This lady professor—which is what the old-timers called her—was ahead of her time. She trooped about the country-side with a sketch pad and with some of those funny looking little note-books which are lined so that musical notes can be put in them to make songs and the like. She was a great admirer of what she called the rustic peasant life of Bell County. The truth of the matter was that most of the people weren't peasants; they were just poor, but the academician from Mary-Hardin Baylor enjoyed her illusions and few saw fit to enlighten her.

One fine fall morning when the mists were rising from the Middle Dars Creek just before it leaves the roadside to meander through the old Mazar pasture, this lady professor came upon a curious sight. One of Mr. Mazar's hired hands was trying to crank a reluctant Oldsmobile. The more the man tried, the more the vehicle refused to cooperate. In time, the man began to exhort in some quaintly melodic Slavic dialect whatever gods there were to do something about the situation. The lady professor was fascinated with the tonal qualities of the man's ardent prayers to those mysterious European deities. She knew a bit of some of the Slavic languages; she had, after all, attended Southwestern University as well as the mother ship, Baylor-Waco. She whipped out her composition book and began taking down the sounds, using a combination of phonetics and musical notes. She got the sense of it, she thought.

Finally, the uncooperative Olds opted to spring to fuming life and the hired man drove on. By this time, he was one furious Bohemian, and in his righteous wrath, he gunned the Olds for all it was worth. The car sprang to a terrifying quickness and seemed to take on a life, a purpose all its own. Its driver held to the huge steering wheel, transfixed by fear as the largest of Mr. Mazar's several haystacks loomed ever closer. In his utter terror, the man began to call more earnestly than before on those Slavic gods who

had helped him bring the mechanical monster to life. The lady professor was in an ecstasy: she sketched on her pad and she transcribed on her musical composition book. Now at last, she knew she had the material for the authentic musical folk-epic she felt called to write for production in her choral music classes at Mary-Hardin Baylor.

Just as the Olds began climbing the huge haystack, its fully possessed driver began what seemed a cross between yodeling and Gregorian chant. The lady professor all but expired in her complete delight at seeing and hearing this example of what happens when peasant and machine interact, or as some illiterate moderns would say, “interface.” The Olds and its driver disappeared beyond the haystack and were not harmed. The lady professor hurried at a high trot back to her Model T and sped frantically toward Belton and the serenity of Mary-Hardin Baylor, where she spent most of the next two days fleshing out her peasant folk opera as she now styled it. This lady was a true scholar, so when she had finished the piece, she loaded her Model T with provisions and trekked off to the south and the University of Texas—the one in Austin, of course. There she consulted a professor of Slavic Languages to be sure that her work had the ring of authenticity all scholars require of themselves.

The learned don at U.T. sat quietly for a time, then began humming the melodies and trying to figure out the words from the driver of the errant Oldsmobile. The lady professor was pleased; she knew that when music was good, it made people sing and hum and so on. But after a few minutes, the dignified U.T. professor turned red in the face and had a fit of coughing. He sweated some and finally put the manuscript aside and sternly admonished the lady professor from Baylor-Belton to burn all those sheets. The lady was considerably hacked at this turn and demanded an explanation. The U.T. professor reluctantly complied. He told her that what she had transcribed amounted to some of the most vile, filthy, obscene remarks ever to be heard in any language, Slavic, Germanic, or Romance. The lady from Mary-Hardin was appalled, but not convinced until in exasperation the

U.T. professor informed her that the driver of the Oldsmobile had commanded that vehicle to do various anatomical feats which are mechanically impossible for man, beast, or machine. At this, the lady professor left for the return trip to Belton, sadder but wiser.

The arrival of the automobile in old Bell County was important in matters of determining social status. Then, as now, you were what you drove. There were Ford people, Oldsmobile people, Cadillacs, Packards, and so on. In one tale from the early days of motorized transportation in Bell County, there are some familiar folk themes and motifs. The story involves Frederick George Skinner's Cadillac. Freddie George, as he was called for short, up and married into Temple society. He married into a lumberyard family whose name I won't divulge here. At any rate, his bride was a yuppie before the term was even dreamt of; she was a social climber of the first class. She agreed to move to Bartlett and live on Skinner's Hill, the more or less ancestral home of the Skinner clan, only if Freddie George would plumb the house for running water and install all the conveniences. The Skinner house thus became one of the first to have indoor facilities. And the rich young bride demanded the best automobile in the county so that she could get over to the Austin-Temple Highway, which was already graveled then—how modern can things be? On that fancy highway, she could roar along to Temple to attend bridge parties, high teas, and whatever else rich women do in their spare time to keep from being bored or whatever.

Freddie George was a good business man and farmer, and some said that when he died years later, he still had nine cents of the first dime he ever earned, but for his beloved bride, he shelled out whatever it took to get the best Cadillac the agency in Waco could provide. He hated to spend that much money and determined at once to do everything possible to make that Cadillac last forever. From his father, Big Freddie George, he learned the valuable lesson of applying Red-Top Axle Grease to keep moving parts on machinery from wearing out. So, on the way home from Waco, he stopped off in Holland at the Mewhinney Merchantile Company—everything from the cradle to the grave was their

motto: they had a mortuary as well as a dry goods department which sold baby clothes and diapers. At this old-time emporium, he bought four cans of Red-Top Axle Grease. He hurried home.

When he reached the freshly painted plank gate at the bottom of Skinner's Hill, he was a contented man. Few people in the county could afford plank gates; most had to be content with barbed wire (bob war) gates. And he had the Cadillac his beloved desired. And he had Red-Top Axle grease to keep that Cadillac young forever. What more could a man want? That night after supper, he cranked up the generator plant and turned on the lights in the newly constructed garage, the home for the Cadillac. He got out the Red-Top Axle grease and applied it lovingly and diligently everywhere there was any kind of friction possible. He even greased the brakes thoroughly. Very thoroughly indeed.

The next day was Sunday, and in honor of the arrival of the new Cadillac, Freddie George promised his bride they would drive all the way to Temple to attend divine services at the Episcopal Church, his bride's spiritual home. She somehow found the deep-water Baptists, the Campbellites, and the local Methodists a bit lacking. The bride was overjoyed; she would in an hour or so arrive at Temple's beautiful Episcopal Church in what was surely the finest motorized chariot in the county. Her pride was boundless in that car, her new dress, and even in Freddie George.

Freddie George turned the ignition and Mr. Charles Kettering's happiest invention, the electric starter, brought the mighty engine to life. Down Skinner's Hill Freddie George and bride began. And when he applied the brakes to stop for the opening of the gates, nothing happened. The heavy car gained more and more speed and with a great flourish of broken headlamps, twisted bumpers, and bent fenders, the massive vehicle hastened toward the deep ditch across the road from the ruined gate, and then into the shallows of the Middle Dars Creek. Had the lady professor been there to transcribe the dialectical variants in true folkloric-linguistic fashion, she might have earned a chair at Harvard. Neighbors a quarter of a mile away heard the pride of Temple society swear like a field-hand, and soon Freddie George answered



Don't grease every moving part

her in kind. It was a grand day for swearing. Some commentators argued that the event “served them high-toned Skinners right for being so uppity.”

A final instance of the interaction of man and machine in old Bell County is one which also illustrates how the coming of the automobile enriched folk speech as well as folkways. Max Beyer lived east of Bartlett and was a frugal man. When he decided to buy a car, he took down a shoebox full of twenty-dollar bills and walked three miles into town to the Buick agency. There he pondered the merits of three cars in the showroom before picking a sporty roadster. He paid cash, but demanded a few lessons. He had heard of what happened to Ligi Ivichec. The salesman obliged. Max drove out of the show room toward home confident that he

knew all there was to know. But Max was a bit deaf and felt that he had to hear the motor before it was ready for him to let out on the clutch—as the folk put it. He would gun the motor of the Buick until the car literally vibrated all over. Then, as today’s youth say, he dug out in a cloud of blue fumes, spewing gravel and dust. On a clear day, the men who worked at Crook Rosenbalm’s Gulf Station said they could hear Max when he left home—some two miles away. Of course, he had to have a new clutch put in about every three months, but he didn’t mind. He took a sort of pleasure from revving up the motor, then burning rubber, as we say today.

In every small town, as all of us Texas folklorists know, the elders consider it their bounden duty to train the rising generation in the ways they should go. Long after Max Beyer was gunning chariots through the Pearly Gates, the local mechanic employed a phrase which Mr. Beyer contributed to the folk patois of that part of old Bell County. When I first learned how to aim a somewhat rickety 1936 Ford V8 over the ten graveled roads of Bell County, the local mechanic, by then an elder in his congregation, sincerely admonished me not “to go pulling no Max Beyer.” By that he meant I wasn’t to dig out, burn rubber, gun the engine, and thus wear out the clutch.

Today’s youth, who for the most part drive vehicles with automatic transmissions, power steering, fog lights, rabbit hunting spots, and four wheel capacity will never know what it is to “pull a Max Beyer.” Now, in the shank end of my fifth decade, I still hear that pious mechanic’s serious admonition whenever I am tempted to roar across an intersection with my left foot longing for the comforting stresses a straining clutch provided when I was driving a ’36 Ford V8. Digging out with an automatic transmission just isn’t the same.



The Granberry family at the beach, 1941