

Road Trip

By Ross K. Anderson, Jr.

*Editor's note: During Labor Day weekend at the beginning of our First Class Year, September 1962, 4th Co mates **Ross Anderson** and **Vic Dean** set out to drive a Model A Ford 900 miles from Tallahassee, FL to the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, MD. Fifty-five years later, Ross' widow Susan Anderson discovered that this trip was chronicled:*

"A few swipes of the dust rag around Ross' Lucky Bag caused more than a stir of dust bunnies today when a 4 page single-spaced, hand typed piece of history fell out of the USNA yearbook. It appears to be an addendum to a letter written to Ross' parents chronicling his three day adventure returning to Annapolis (from Florida) in a forbidden car for 1st Class year....a model A, of all things! I believe Vic Dean was R's co-conspirator, though his name is not spelled out fully. Well written, funny, a grease monkey's mechanical delight, it offers a view of the high spirited nature of the USNA attendees that ought to be treasured and perhaps preserved."

"Vic" is indeed Victor Edwin Dean, appointed from Winter Park, Florida, now of Daytona Beach, and Ross' company mate from 4th Co., USNA '63. Vic had memories of this trip after 55 years:

Ross apparently wrote this letter soon after we got back to USNA. I had not seen it or heard about it until you sent it to me. I remember I did tell the story at one of our reunions but don't remember which one. Here are my memories of how this trip came about:

Following First Class cruise in August 1962, I returned to our family home in Winter Park, a suburb of Orlando, Florida. Shortly after arriving, I received a phone call from my classmate Ross Anderson who lived in Tallahassee. He asked if I wanted to ride back to USNA with him in a 1928 Model A Ford. He had just bought the vehicle and planned to drive it back to Annapolis and then sell it for a good profit. The Washington area was sure to have a lot more people interested in these cars so he would get a good price for his.

Well, it certainly would be a different way to end First Class Summer, so I agreed. I took a bus to Tallahassee and met him and we left on Sunday of Labor Day weekend. We had to be back to USNA before 1700 on the following Tuesday.

What follows is Ross' letter, with some footnotes providing Vic's 'rest of the story.' Susan asked that it be shared with the class.

Speaking of old cars... To begin with Vic and I made it back on time all right. But we made it with only ten minutes to spare before the 6 P.M. deadline of Tuesday September 4. This was the culmination of three quite adventurous days on the road.

After our departure for the Northland from the steps of 502 East Call, Tallahassee that pretty Sunday morning, we headed up the Thomasville highway. Zipping easily along at about fifty mph, it looked like the beginning of a very enjoyable trip even if it was a slight bit bouncy.¹ Then about 9 miles out, not 15 minutes on the road, the engine broke into the most horrible choking, coughing and missing fits I had ever observed in the three previous days in

¹ [Vic] When were speeding down the back roads of Georgia it was my responsibility to hold on to the inside of the roof to keep it from flying away. It was made of wood and was not attached to the frame at all.

which I worked on it. In fact we sounded like mobile Fourth of July with all the backfiring.

Then with one helluva big bang the whole exhaust system blows off at the manifold joint, leaving nothing but a short pipe spewing red hot exhaust gases on the metal and wood frame in the engine compartment. The racket was so bad that we had to pull into a wayside park to try to remedy the situation. We broke out our very sparse supply of tools and proceeded to bolt the exhaust back on after having cooled it off with some water. Which, incidentally, was afforded by some wide-eyed Latin tourists who were having a late picnic breakfast on the side of the road.

With the exhaust barely hanging on, we then proceeded northward. The engine persisted obstinately to miss and vibrate terribly, producing barely enough power to boost the car over the gentle hills at 25 mph. The frequency of backfires increased and by the time we arrived in Thomasville we were nervous wrecks, swiveling our heads constantly to search out any nearby aggressive "fuzz."

The total time for 35 miles was three hours. My God! Maybe we are gonna have to call for help from home like Dad said. But nawwww... WE'D MAKE IT!

After some attempted repairs in midtown Thomasville and some volunteering of help by some pretty gals with a set of sugar-coated southern drawls that could not be beaten, we proceeded ever onward. Then another fireworks display and then onward again at an excruciatingly slow 30 mph. Needless to say, we were off to a very poor start for a 900 mile trip.

Slowly we worked our way toward Moultrie and through that community and on toward Tifton. By this time the motor was running so poorly that I thought the trip was over for sure. Then a stench filled the car and smoke started pouring through the floor boards. It swirled around Vic's feet and clogged the interior of our fine vehicle. The heat was unbearable. It had to be a fire!

I jammed on the brakes and drove the "A" Model into the ditch alongside the road. Vic bailed out and threw open the engine hood. The smoke billowed out and I jumped out to help. Somehow we extinguished the flames. It seems as though the terrific heat coming from the open manifold had ignited the wood part of the chassis and also the floor boards. Things were really black at this moment in the trip. Really black!

Then we figured that if we could get to a gas station by driving fast enough we could keep cooling air flowing over the wood so that combustion temperature of the wood would not be reached. Maybe we could keep the thing from burning up.

By extracting a few more miles per hour out of the auto, we managed to make it to the outskirts of Tifton and a rundown gas station. It was quite a perplexing problem. I tinkered and tinkered and just could not figure out the difficulty.

Then it hit me: The points! Of course, they were loose and probably had vibrated shut. Sure enough that was the problem. By stripping the threads slightly after making the proper gap, they were properly set. But we couldn't fix the exhaust: the pipe just would not fit into the manifold securely enough so it would not be blown out by the high pressure of the exhaust.

The heck with it, we'll drive fast and keep the frame cool so it won't catch fire. We'll just

have to risk the terrific noise and the cops. On the road again, the engine for the first time was purring just fine now and we were making 60 with no strain at all. It looked good now, really good!

The small Georgia farms and towns now started to really fly by with increasing speed. We were golden, so to speak, now. The countryside gradually developed into the rolling hills of northern Georgia with the "A" pulling over the slopes at no lower than 50 mph.

Then we pulled off of the side of the road 10 miles south of Soperton, a small rural community 100 miles from Augusta.. The purpose of the stop was to check the engine and also the maps. With everything okay we hopped back into the buggy and cranked her up.

There was then a tremendous backfire; stunning us momentarily and then billows of black gasoline smoke. We sprang from the car and tore open the hood. Good God! The whole engine is on fire! What to do? No rags to smother it with, nor any water. The ditch! Plenty of sand. By this time the flames were licking dangerously close to the gas tank, which was located in front of the driver's seat. I glanced at our only worldly possessions piled high behind the front seat and shuddered. This damn thing could blow up!

We dove into the ten foot ditch and clawed at the sand. Scrambling up the steep sides we desperately blasted the flames with the sand in hopes of blowing the flames out. But there was no apparent result for a while. Then finally we snuffed the fire out after about 10 minutes of frantic labor. Then we sprawled exhausted along the roadside trying to catch our breath while two carloads of farm families watched in amazement.²

Whew ... that last one was way too close.

When we had regained our composure, we climbed in and crossed our fingers. There was no apparent damage from the fire so we hoped she'd start. Sure enough the old baby cranked right up with not a bit of difficulty. We were rolling again.

The cause of the fire was really pretty simple. It seems as though while we were stopped, gas had overflowed on the block of the engine from a leak in the carburetor. When we drove at high speed the air flowing over the carburetor evaporated the leakage. So when we stopped gas dripped on to the engine and the backfire ignited it. We'd have to keep at a good speed to keep this from happening again. No more unnecessary stops after that one, brother!

The hills grew steeper and, steeper. But everything was working fine, so no sweat for a while. As we crested the top of a high hill, we ran over an apparently large rock or sumpin' because the rear end literally jumped off the ground, jerking the car around slightly. Nothing bad we surmised as the speedometer began to show 65 on the backside of the hill.

Poww! What was that? The car swerved crazily and started to fishtail horribly. I fought the wheel. I pawed the brakes but then thought no, it may be a blowout. I flicked off the key but the car continued to accelerate on the long incline. Then it careened up on the two right wheels; then back on all four with the fishtailing increasing. Vic and I glanced swiftly at each

² [Vic] I vividly remember the flaming carburetor when we were in the middle of nowhere with nothing to put it out. It was burning very close to the gas tank which was located in the firewall between the engine and the passenger's seats. We finally thought of the sand in the ditch along the road. It worked and then amazingly the car started right up and we drove over the foot high pile of sand and on our way.

other and gulped. We're gonna roll for sure! Somehow the old buggy stayed upright and we plowed into the ditch at the bottom of the hill. A '56 Chevy then pulled up behind us and a fellow jumped out bringing a battered muffler with him. It is ours. How did he get that thing?

It turned out that we had again blown our muffler and exhaust system from the manifold and the wires holding it to the car had given way. The exhaust system then fell to the road and we proceeded to run over it, slicing our right rear tire in the process. That was the big bump. The tire had then blown and we had quite a joy-ride.

The fellow in the Chevy had been following us and had picked up the muffler when it fell off. He smiled a toothy grin and was off. We flagged the next car and drove to a nearby gas station to have the thing fixed. We finally got on the road again and then to Soperton. It sticks in my mind because a couple of pretty girls waved at us as we went through and also we had another damned blowout.

Augusta was finally made at 10 that night and I do say the circumstances were most unpleasant. A driving rain combined with a wiper-less car and also very leaky made finding a motel difficult. However we got on Route One and found a pad which needless to say was ecstasy after the primitive road trip.³

After a hearty breakfast the next morning at Hiram Johnston's (I had had nothing solid all day Sunday while on the road, but had merely bloated my stomach with moon pies and cokes at every stop) we were over the Savannah River and into South Carolina. The car was just purring now with the exception of no muffler. We were stopped twice by S.C. highway patrolmen and given official warnings for "a defective exhaust system". That was a real joke because we had no exhaust system at all; it was in the back seat. We then hit Columbia and took 2 hours out to have our exhaust pipe welded on securely. All was well now.⁴ By 1 in the afternoon Monday we had left Columbia in our oil smoke and were well on our trek northward.

We really were making time now. Camden, Cheraw, then across the N.C. line and Rockingham, Sanford, and Southern Pines flew past at 60 mph. Man, we were rolling now. The looks we received from people are almost a story in themselves. I remember in particular one gas station we flew by. A group of colored gentlemen were working with their heads in the hoods of several hot rods. As we blasted by and waved they snapped up to attention in unison and stared, bug-eyed and slack jawed. What a sight.

We slipped on through Chapel Hill and Durham where Vic used to live. We passed through these very pretty towns at sunset and were soon on the way to Petersburg, Va. to spend the night at Vic's aunt's farm. Darkness fell and the car was still clipping off the mileage to the tune of 60 mph. We were beginning to wonder if we really had a good car on our hands.

³ [Vic] The first night we stopped in Augusta and I calculated our average speed including all the stops for repairs etc for the day was 25 mph. We had traveled 250 miles in 10 hours. Even mids could calculate that this rate was not going to get us to USNA before 1700 Tuesday.

⁴ [Vic] When we arrived in Columbia the second day to get the muffler repaired we asked at a service station if there was anyone in the area who knew about Model A Fords. We were directed to a repair shop where the man who owned 4 or 5 of them was listening to a NASCAR race on the radio. He asked his friend if he would weld the muffler. After hearing about our travel adventure he completed the job and with no charge!

Then at about 10 P.M. approximately 40 miles south of Petersburg on the rolling hills of southern Virginia and US 1 the engine started chattering terrifically. It was the most penetrating godawful noise one can imagine. We slowed down. Still it continued. We hit the next gas station and dumped several quarts of oil into the engine. Still it clattered wildly. All I could think was loose rod, loose rod. This could mean real trouble.

With the chattering as loud as ever, we finally made the farm in Petersburg.⁵ After a good night's sleep, Vic and I proceeded to drop the oil pan. Working desperately, for we had to be at the Academy at 6 that night, we located the trouble. Sure enough we had lost some shims on the crankshaft and #2 rod was as loose as a goose. With no way to obtain a replacement part we were forced to hit the road. We were really short of time now. Only 6 hours to go. Plus the rod would surely throw between here and Washington. We were in a corner now and we had to move. On to the turnpike to Richmond. On that fine road we were again forced to bathe as we ran through a heavy downpour. The chattering got worse. We ground on through Richmond and hit US-1. I informed Vic as calmly as possible that it would be nigh on to a miracle if we made it to Washington.

Traffic was heavy on that four lane highway that Tuesday afternoon at 1 P.M. The road itself was also dangerously slick from the recent rain. A "Washington 95 miles" sign flashed by and then a ripping end grinding metal sound was heard on the roar of the wind. It lasted but a few seconds. Quickly I flicked off the key and headed once again this time for the last time, for the ditch with the clutch disengaged and the gears in neutral. It was a steep shoulder ending in a shallow ditch lined with rain-slick grass. The right wheels slipped off into the mud and grass and grabbed with a jerk. Up went the left side of that top heavy old baby and down we slid, skidding and sliding crazily, the both of us holding on for dear life. But true to form the old "A" Model came to a halt upright and three hours from USNA at 1:30 in the afternoon. We were dead for sure.

Penniless and with a mile-high load of baggage in the pouring down rain with only four hours until the deadline, we were truly in the definition of "a bind". Resorting to the humblest form of transportation, we extended our greasy wet thumbs. We must have been a pathetic sight in filthy white T-shirts with spotted bermudas. Then inside of 10 minutes a nice looking young fellow driving a '56 Ford pulled up. We threw the luggage in the back and we were off to D.C.⁶

⁵ [Vic] The second night we spent at my Uncle's farm house outside Petersburg. He lived in a house about 100 yards off the highway. It was a dirt driveway and when we drove towards the house it was almost midnight and very dark. As we got closer I told Ross that when we stopped that I would get out and start shouting "Uncle Earl. It's Victor!. Don't shoot! it's Victor!" as loud as I could. I was sure that he would be behind the door with a rifle. Thank goodness he heard me and understood who it was because as he opened the door he did have a rifle in his hands and saying he was glad I identified my self. I was even more glad he remembered who I was...

⁶ [Vic] [Tuesday morning] the Model A finally gave up and could not go another inch. The man who picked us up from hitchhiking was named Stuckey. I remember asking if he was related to the Stuckey stores we see along the highways. He wasn't but I still remember his name... He was traveling through Washington to go further north and his schedule wouldn't allow him to drive us to USNA. But he would take us to a taxi stop. The next problem--- we didn't have money for the cab to Bancroft. He again came through again and gave us the \$25-30 for the cab fee. We repaid him a few days after we were safe in the arms of Mother B, good ol' Bancroft Hall. I don't know if he was a real angel but he certainly appeared and helped us with a very difficult situation.

We fought our way through the 5 o'clock traffic of the teeming millions of government workers and grabbed a cab at 5:05. 55 minutes to go! We changed into suits in the filthy rest room of a gas station while the cabbie gassed up for the run.

What a sight! Suit and ties with greasy hands and dirty faces. We zoomed to Annapolis with 9 or 10 minutes to spare.

The next day I called a wrecker in Ashland, Va. and had them haul it to their garage. And there it sits until I can get my first weekend. It has apparently thrown a rod and I'm hoping I can fix it. The resale value is great for that type of car in the area around here.⁷

⁷ [Vic] **Epilogue:** As I recall, after Ross had it towed and after finding out the repair cost he decided to sell it "as is". I think he only broke even after all his expenses. The trip was not always a lot of fun but a great adventure...