

THE MODEL T, UNCLE LOUIE, AND E. B. WHITE

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We saw a relic from the past, stuttering down the street about two weeks ago: a shiny, black and boxy Model T Ford rolling along on its wooden spoke wheels and looking for all the world like the one our bachelor uncle, Louie, used to drive in the early Twenties.

Uncle Louie, an accountant, lived with the family all his life. He was a shy but humorous man of methodical habits, dedicated to his work and a small number of regular interests, which included reading, crossword puzzles, the radio, baseball and Ford automobiles. Naturally, he was a compulsive record keeper, and, going through his papers after he died at the age of 76, we found the bill of sale for his first Model T, bought in 1921, which cost \$434, complete with an extra tire and a running-board tool box. He was a fastidious car owner—who pampered and polished a succession of black, two-door, closed-car Model Ts—an expert on diagnosing their ailments and a wizard at tinkering with their motors. When the Model Ts disappeared from the scene, he reluctantly progressed to the Model A, and then on to the V-8, but he remained loyal to the two doors and black color until the very end. The Model T, however, was always his first love and favorite.

If we remember correctly, the last Model T came off the assembly line in 1927, but for another ten years or so, the old Tin Lizzies continued to haunt the roads, defying the change to streamlining, freewheeling and the fancy styling that eliminated running boards. Millions of middle-class families owned one, and to a whole generation that grew up during the automotive explosion of the 1920's, it was the American Car. The Model T differed from other makes in that it had a planetary transmission, something once described [New Yorker, May 1936] as "half metaphysics, half sheer friction." There were three floor pedals to push on and at least two hand levers up on the steering column. The gas tank was under the driver's seat. The choke was a wire sticking out of the radiator. There was a dipstick to measure the gas level, and there was a hand crank to start the motor.

Since nearly all new Model Ts were bought completely unadorned, it was up to the owner to create his own version. Once you learned to master the timer and look after the Number One bearing, its mechanical features were simple enough that most owners could do their own repairs. More help was always obtainable from the Sears Roebuck catalogues, which devoted a special section to the Model T and contained a complete line of parts and accessories, as well as a host of other functional and decorative additives that could be screwed, bolted or welded onto any surface of the car—from axles and snubbers

and shock absorbers to red safety reflectors for the rear end, radiator caps with wings, rear view mirrors, hood silencers of black rubber or leather strap, side-wing windshields, running board luggage racks and a flower vase for the doorpost.

We remember the Model Ts fondly throughout all our childhood, although by the time we reached the family car driving age, the Depression had come and our never fulfilled longings got redirected toward the newer Model As. Uncle Louie's Fords, like himself, were pretty staid and conservative and not for the young at heart.

Our real favorites were the sport models we rode in for the three summers we spent with our cousins out in Los Angeles. The cousins were a large family: six girls and a boy, ranging in age from 15 to 27. In the family were two 1927 Model T roadsters with rumble seats, and another marvelous, open roadster concoction with an ancient Ford body and chassis, gussied with a souped-up motor housed in nickel plate, two spot lights and a floor shift with an agate ball head. It never rained during those Southern California summers, and the canvas roadster tops hung permanently from the garage roof rafters. On weekdays and weekends, with sometimes seven or eight of us piled into one car, we rode with the wind and the sun and the fresh alkaline air (these were pre-smog days) to the hills, to the beaches, to the lakes and mountains and to the desert.

Perhaps the most enduring tribute to the Model T was the classic essay by E. B. White, written in the mid-thirties when it was about to disappear. He titled it, "Farewell, My Lovely." [New Yorker, May 16, 1936,] White was a genuine member of the Model T generation and he described, as only he could, many of its eccentricities and some of the trials of owning one. In his opinion, the old Fords were obviously conceived in madness; he felt that any car capable of going from forward to reverse without any perceptible mechanical hiatus was bound to be a challenge to the human imagination. One of his tricks to getting a Model T started was to give the front end crank a few nonchalant upward lifts with the ignition turned off, then, with the ignition turned on, catching the crank on the downward stroke and giving it a quick and forceful spin. If this didn't result in a broken wrist from the crank recoil, the engine would almost always respond "first with a few scattered explosions, then with a tumultuous gunfire, which you checked by racing back to the driver's seat and retarding the throttle. Often if the emergency brake hadn't been pulled back all the way, the car advanced on you the instant the first explosion occurred and you would hold it back by leaning your weight against it." In a touching bit of nostalgia, he could still feel his old Ford "nuzzling me at the curb, as though looking for an apple in my pocket."

Uncle Louie felt that his 1920 Fords were a breed apart. He agreed wholeheartedly with White that the Model T was "the miracle that God had wrought . . . the sort of thing

that could only happen once, like nothing that had ever come to the world before.”

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