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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Early Troubles Of Automobiles

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THE EARLY days of the automobile here and the bitter anti-auto campaign waged successfully for a long time, is one of the more entertaining stories of the past. Mrs. J. H. Cerry put me on the trail of the yarn when she called several weeks ago to ask if I remembered that people once drove on the left side of the road instead of the right as we do now.

Her call brought me in touch with many people as we discussed the pioneer days of the automobiles here, but more particularly with Allison MacLeod, dean of the automobile distributors here now, who recalled several interesting facts for me, and steered my research efforts most helpfully. Allison started part time as a boy with A. Horne and Company when he was still in school. He's been at it ever since.

INCIDENTALLY the rule of the road was changed in an amendment to the traffic act - it had another name then - in 1928. If the late date surprises many of you, it surprised me too, but I looked through "The Laws of Prince Edward Island" from 1913 until I found the change 15 years later.

It was Allison's father-in-law, the late T. B. Grady, and Frank MacMillan, a bank manager in Summerside, who brought the first automobile to the Island, a Ford two-cylinder, in 1904. Mr. Grady was later superintendent of the Island division of the railway here. Sometime later W. K. Rogers brought in the first new car which he described as "a two-cylinder, double opposed Russel". I am using some of the information Mr. Rogers conveyed in a long letter to the Guardian May 9, 1934, along with information gathered from many other sources.

Cars Banned Completely In 1908

MR. ROGERS, who was one of the pioneers in getting cars accepted in P. E. I brought in a new Russel in 1907, and that made five cars in all, but it was five too many, for the legislature passed an act in 1908 which banned cars from all Island highways. Penalty was \$500 or six months in jail for violators.

I'm talking of cars powered with gasoline engines. Father George Belcourt brought to Rustico in 1886 a steam-powered car which was a cumbersome affair, apparently, and Mr. Rogers notes that a steam car was brought here by a Charlottetown syndicate about 1900, that was used to take people around Victoria Park and other interest spots for 10 cents.

The opposition to cars was violent and expressed in some colorful and unusual ways. George W. MacPhee, St. Catherines, later an MLA here and then an MP for Yorkston, Saskatchewan for many years, wrote that "it would cost \$35,000 to widen the

3500 miles of road in the province”, and of course this would be wasted. How any man figured to widen a mile of road for \$10 even in those days of low costs, is beyond understanding.

LETTERS to newspapers were numerous and vociferous, as they demanded that cars be kept off the roads. Here are a few of the suggestions:

“Total exclusion from highways” I’m quoting from Mr. Rogers letter which recalled some of them - “Autos must be hung up for all time ... a \$500 tax ... we have no right to allow such a nuisance on P.E.I.... only a foolish fad of millionaires and fools”.

Efforts To Open Roads; Drink Helped

THE BAN was eased in 1913 to open “certain roads” on three days a week - they couldn’t run on Tuesdays and Fridays, market days, nor on Saturdays and Sundays. But the row was so hot, the government hedged a bit and said only roads on which 75 per cent of the residents signed an agreement would be opened. So Mr. Rogers spearheaded a campaign, organized three teams of canvassers and they left the market square at 10 a.m. each day to work.

NO POLITICAL candidates ever worked so hard, or more resourcefully apparently. When all else failed the canvassers invited the residents to join them in a thirst-slaking drink. After that the going was easier, sometimes, I am told.

Finally A. E. Arsenault, now a retired judge of the Supreme Court, but a former premier, ended the battle when he declared all roads open in 1919. His government had been defeated in an election and he got an order-in-council passed before he left office, he reports in his memoirs, a copy of which Guardian Editor Frank Walker kindly loaned me.

MAJOR T. E. MacNutt crossed the Rocky Point ferry in the first car when he went to the South Shore in 1914 to transport seven people for garrison duty in Halifax. I believe Norman MacDonald, later a crack tug-of-war man, will probably recall that trip. He used W. K. Rogers’ car which was driven by his son Keith, the man who founded CFCY about a decade later.

First Car Charlottetown to Tignish

A. E. B. Murphy, MC told me that he drove the first car from Charlottetown to Tignish. Again it was the Rogers car and it was a summer Sunday in 1916. Murphy, then a young officer, was grabbing the only chance to see his family in Tignish before shipping overseas, and he drove the car, he told me, to take that much responsibility off Mr. Rogers, who was kind enough to make the car available. But no charge was ever laid. Mr. Rogers was fined several times, although he never paid any.

HE WAS fined \$200 and costs for taking Col. S. R. Jenkins to Tignish after a deserter and the same amount for taking a Lieutenant MacLean to see his family at Georgetown one Sunday, his only chance before shipping on Tuesday. MacLean had tried without success to get horse transportation and Rev. George Taylor of Zion church, later a chaplain, asked Rogers to make the trip. There are many other examples, I mention these only to show how seriously the anti-car law was taken.

Motorists met many obstacles along the country roads. One trick was to bury the cutter bar of a hay mower, or the cutting knife, in sand so it would cut the tires of the unwary motorist. They cost \$30 to \$35 then, Mr. MacLeod tells me. Several Rose Valley neighbours tried it once but a prominent Charlottetown citizen spotted it before he hit it, as the lights picked up a part of the steel that was uncovered.

All Four Tires Were Ruined

FRED WOTTON who drove the mail from Breadalbane to Victoria when I was a boy had one of the first cars in our part of the country - I think it was the first, though I'm not sure. He had all of his tires cut once, by a hay knife buried in the sand somewhere in the Covehead area. He was coming from Caledonia and took the much longer route, apparently, because more direct roads were closed to cars, though his son, Fred Wotton, Charlottetown could not be sure when he talked to me about it.

Mr. Wotton also had people meet him on the road with pitchforks, trying to stop him, or turn him back, and that was not uncommon in those early days. That would probably be about 1917, his son recalls. His dad also told him that many times when he stopped his car to lead frightened horses by, the drivers were sometimes more excited than the horse.

OTHERS BARRICADED roads with stumps, trees, old farm machinery or other junk, anything to stop the hated autos. And many just used the pitchforks and threatened to pierce the tires unless the motorist turned around. Tires then were three and one-half inch affairs, were rim clinchers and would stay on the rim even when deflated. If the tire was ruined anyway, the motorist sometimes limped home without taking it off the rim, Allison tells me.

There were no service stations in those early days but most country stores had gasoline for farm engines, so that was no problem. There were few good automobile mechanics then, and more than one stalled car was worked over pretty completely on the road before it was discovered the gasoline tank was empty.

A CHARLOTTETOWN motor company was organized here once, but no cars were ever built, although MacKay Brothers who ran a carriage shop at Georgetown moved to Amherst and built the MacKay Car. It was a good car for its time, Mr. MacLeod told me.

I'm running out of space again and I've only touched a few high spots. I'm sure many of you will have interesting things to tell me about those early days, and I'd like to hear from you. If I get enough, I'll run another column and review them. I hope to do another column anyway on the mechanics of those early automobile days. Mr. MacLeod has given me a few names and I want to talk with them and possibly with others.

I HAVE space, I hope for two other items. I wish the man who wrote me about horses - the letter was really good - will let me know who he is so we can have a chat. And a man came in last Friday with some additional information, I am told, about the snow blockade of 1875 which Mrs. Eldershaw told me about. I hope you'll come back, sir, so we can have a chat. Only don't come on Friday for that's my day to travel and hunt up additional column material.