

STRANDED IN OKLAHOMA BY A CAR BREAKDOWN

By SAMUEL L. BLUMENFELD

ANY motorist who attempts a cross-continent trip is haunted by the fear that somewhere in the middle of one of America's vast unpeopled regions his car will break down. It was my misfortune to experience such a breakdown during a recent vacation trip. My car suddenly developed motor trouble, I was stranded in the most vivid town of the Oklahoma panhandle for five days, and ended by driving away in a car other than the one I had started with.

I am still trying to digest the lessons of that fascinating ordeal which, in retrospect, had as many sympathetic aspects as traumatic ones. It is a story I feel worth passing on.

I had already completed a beautiful trip from New York to California and was hurrying back east—low in cash and with only a few vacation days left—when the engine of my 1951 Buick developed a clattering noise such as I had not heard before, plus a few other alarming symptoms. Luckily, this occurred on the outskirts of a town which I shall call Cider City, Okla., pop. 1,900, in the western part of the state.

It seemed wise at the time to have the car repaired right there before continuing to New York. Naturally I had some anxious doubts; it was a Sunday morning and the town looked suspiciously dismal and quiet. I stopped at a service station thinking hopefully that the trouble might be nothing more than a bad spark plug. I explained this theory to the young attendant who courteously tested the plugs. They were all in perfect condition.

Hint of Pessimism

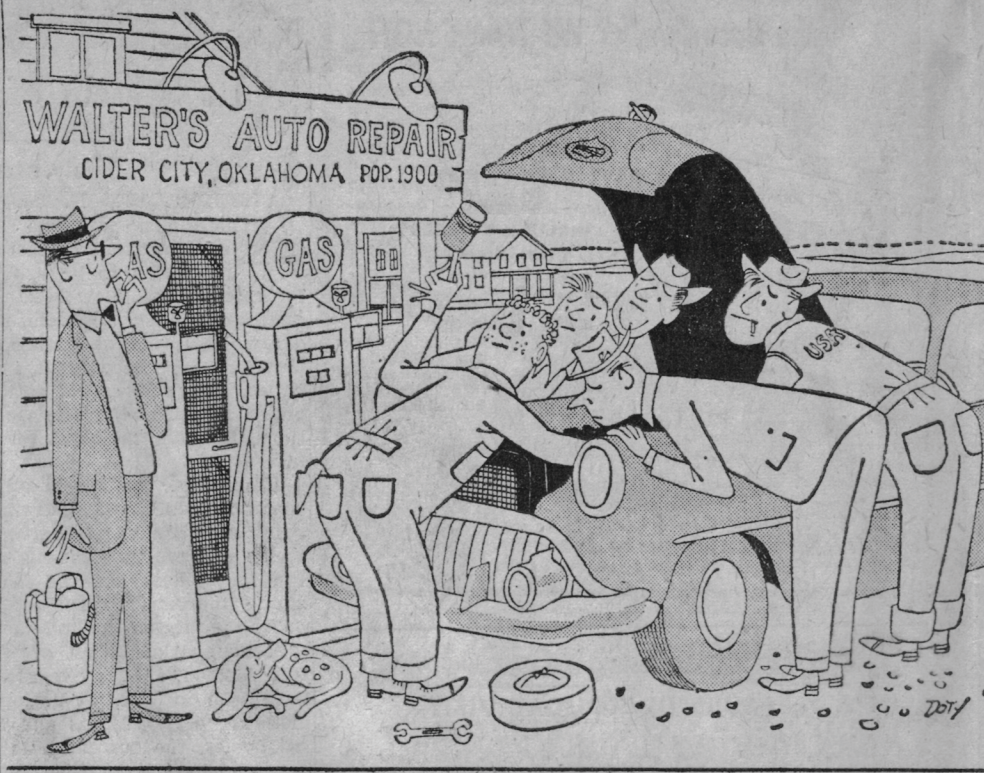
When I asked about getting the car repaired, he smiled and shook his head. "This is a bad place to get anything fixed. You better go on to the next town. There ain't nothing here."

I was a little taken aback by this regional cynicism, but got into the car and drove away. The country ahead of me looked flat and uninhabited and the motor, showing little power, sounded as if a bottle opener had got into it.

The next town, Guymon, was sixty miles away, and the thought of stopping dead in the middle of this vast empty stretch was frightening. Cider City, I thought, could not be as bad as all that. It had at least four gas stations. So I headed back hardly suspecting that this was my good car's last two miles or that Cider City would claim me as its own for the next five days.

At the same service station I explained the situation to the attendant. He listened sympathetically and then conferred with his employer. The latter, an unshaven, curly-headed man in air force fatigues, gave me the names of several possible mechanics and told me where to look for them.

I spent the next two hours urgently trying to get someone to repair the car. But it was still Sunday and no one was around. My sense of urgency was getting me nowhere. The best I could do, in fact, was to arrange to have the car looked at first thing in the morning by a place called Walter's Auto Repair on dry, dusty Main Street. I hoped that the repair would be



made with dispatch and that I would not lose much time or money; optimistically, I took a room at the motel for one night only.

The story here divides itself into two parts—the mechanical one, or the nightmare, which involved the car's repair; and the pastoral one, involving my daily life as a temporary Oklahoman.

That first day was spent hanging around the service station. Dan, the attendant, who was to become my best friend during those five days, was quite inquisitive. He had never been to "New Yoke" and wanted to know a lot about life there, especially that of a 30-year-old book editor.

At the same time I learned something about him. He was 20, from another part of Oklahoma and, that Sunday, merely working at the station for extra cash. His regular job was with a seismograph crew which was drilling holes and making test explosions in the area in search of oil and natural gas. He was living in a rooming house with another member of the crew, a young Texan named Jerry, whom I met later.

Filling Station Fun

Many people dropped into the station that day, cross-country travelers in splattered cars, and local friends of Dan and his employer. The drawl was thick, the vocabulary explicit, and the meanest jokes usually about Texans. I gathered that Oklahomans in general were a friendly, gregarious race.

The nightmare began on Monday morning when Walter's chief mechanic, a short, wiry redhead, removed from the engine two worn-out parts and discovered a broken connecting rod.

"You drove it too long," he said ominously. "This car ain't worth repairing." I laughed at his sense of humor.

Since there was no Buick dealer in town, all of the new parts had to come via U. S. mail from Amarillo, 130 miles away. It seemed that a three-month-old bus strike had cut Cider City off from the rest of the world as far as public transportation was concerned. The mail train was the only means of getting anything in or out of the town.

This was great cause for anxiety, since time, in this case, was of the essence. I asked if things could be speeded up if I hitched to Amarillo myself to get the parts. The answer was overwhelmingly negative.

But I decided to hitch to Amarillo anyway, not for parts but to avoid passing an aimless day in Cider City. That was a mistake, for Oklahomans and Texans were not giving rides any more and it took me longer than I expected. It seems that five years ago or so a motorist in the area had been robbed and killed by a hitch hiker. And so, my rides came from Mexicans, Coloradans, one Texan, and two New Yorkers. When I returned to Cider City on Tuesday afternoon expecting to find my car ready at last, I was greeted with the glummed expressions. In my absence they had found two broken pistons. I was stunned. Why hadn't they discovered this yesterday? This meant another call to Amarillo for additional parts and another day of waiting. I was beside myself with anger. Had I known about the pistons I could have easily picked them up in Amarillo myself that morning.

That evening, my friends, Dan and Jerry, were very good about taking my mind off my troubles. They suggested our going to the local movie to see Lana Turner. That had a calming effect. That same evening we became friendly with a congenial young salesman from Oklahoma City who sold drilling bits. He joined our group, and, after the movie, we played poker in Dan's room, using match sticks for chips. That night, by the way, I also spent at the motel.

Misery Shared

On Wednesday morning I made my customary appearance at Walter's Auto Repair. The bit salesman was there too. His car had broken down and he too was stranded in the town for the day. So both of us had a long breakfast and then played billiards at the Pastime Parlour. We also played several games of dominoes, surrounded by a few aged farmers for whom the Pastime Parlour was a favorite haunt and who

chuckled and murmured knowingly when either of us made a move. In that way the hot morning was whittled away.

In the afternoon we returned to Walter's Auto Repair. The pistons had arrived. As we examined them, it dawned on us ever so slowly that the pistons in my car were made of steel and that the ones we had received were made of aluminum. A series of frantic calls to Buick dealers in Colorado, Texas, Kansas and Oklahoma got us nowhere. We were told that General Motors had discontinued making steel pistons several years back and none were available. At this point I was blue with frustration. Whatever admiration I had ever had for the American automotive industry vanished for all time. Had I a 1923 Duesenberg I probably could not have done worse.

The Bitter Truth

It was then that Walter McDonald, the owner of the garage, made the fatal suggestion that I junk my car and get another. This made me sick to my stomach. My car had never given me serious trouble and the thought of junking it because of two measly pistons seemed absolutely absurd. I wondered if I were merely becoming the victim of panhandle fatalism or being driven to madness by a group of fanatic pessimists. Could the drought have left such a permanent psychological mark on the minds and souls of these people? But the prevailing opinions were that the car was not worth anything, certainly not a new set of aluminum pistons, and all the work that was entailed.

Had it not been for the company of my friends that evening, I might have had something of a nervous breakdown. The cost of these repairs, which were not repairing anything, had reached an awesome figure for any moderate budget, and time had just about run out on me. I had just enough time to get to the office on Monday if I left Cider City next day.

I had no idea how I was going to get out of this predicament. Should I give up, abandon the car and take a train or bus?

But there were no trains or buses out of Cider City! In addition, I had a trunkload of baggage and three new tires which I wasn't going to leave behind. Should I buy another car? If so, where and for how much?

We played poker, joked and talked, and I simply would not dwell on my troubles. It was difficult not to do so, but the only way to keep sane. The bit salesman was fortunate. His company was going to tow his car to Oklahoma City that night. He had a way out. Yet, when I went to bed that night, I still had not the faintest idea of how, when, or in what state I would leave Cider City, if ever.

By morning I still had not made up my mind. Junk the car and buy a new one? Persevere in repairing the old? These possibilities plagued me, and yet I had no more time to hash them over. Something had to be done right away. And so, when I finally realized, although reluctantly, that further repairs would not only be much too costly but would also keep me in Cider City for another five days, I gave up. I had had enough. I was going to leave Cider City that evening or never. And so, I took the decisive step, hitched a ride to Guymon and there bought another car, a model, in fact, similar to the one I was abandoning.

Farewell to Cider City

Back at Cider City I surprised the men at Walter's Auto Repair with the fait accompli of a new car. They agreed to dispose of the old car and send me whatever money above the cost of their labors they could retrieve. As I made these arrangements my mind was still teeming with doubts. Had I done the right thing?

In the evening, still feeling a bit shaken, I visited my friends, only to find that Dan had hurt his hand in a drilling accident. It was all bandaged up. Nevertheless, he was in good spirits. We drove around town in my new car and then drove over to Walter's front yard where my old car stood quietly in the moonlight.

I looked at its dark shape. For three years I had known its moods and pleasures, its aches and groans, its infectious exuberance. Only a few days before, it had sprinted up the Rockies, sauntered over the hills of San Francisco, and swept across the hot Mohave desert. Now it was motionless. It had died suddenly, so to speak, after a brief illness.

Jerry and I transferred my clothes and bags, while Dan, stubbornly and single-handedly, removed the three good tires. That insane gesture almost brought me to the verge of tears.

And now the moment of parting had come. I drove my friends to their rooming house, shook their hands and patted their backs lightly. I felt sad to leave, but in my pocket I had their addresses and they had mine. Maybe they would come to New York some day. I had a splitting headache and Jerry gave me some aspirin and I drank a glass of water. And finally I left them. I got in my car, turned down Main Street, and drove away.