Flivvering to the Harvest Fields

By Grant E. McClatchey •

Old Sweden and Young America Go Through Storms to the Wheat Harvest.

I gave the crank an impulsive jerk and was greeted by a pop, followed by a series of bangs.

"Well, Oscar," I said to my big Swedish companion, "do you think she will make it?"

"She yust has to. She yust has to!" he repeated. "If she don't—"

He didn't finish the sentence; he didn't need to to convey the meaning to me. Just fifteen dollars and a "Model T" between us, and the North Dakota harvest fields seven hundred fifty miles away. Furthermore, we had to make it in two days, for Ole Holien's machine was due to "pull out" Tuesday morning, and every man had to be on hand at the start or somebody else would take his place. Any other year we would have worried little about losing our places on the regular "run," but this year it was different. With South Dakota practically burnt out, transients would flood into the Red River Valley...
from all directions, and it would be luck indeed to get work for which we had not pre-arranged.

With tent poles banging on one side and luggage packed on the running board, we rattled out to the highway in the early grey of morning and headed the flivver northward. It couldn't have run sweeter. With my foot holding the accelerator flat against the floor boards we rambled along at near fifty, and mid-morning found us along the shore of the little crystal-like Wall Lake. The August sun brought out its quiet beauty, but we had no time to stop and admire; consequently, as we passed its northern extremeties, I once more pressed the gas feed to the floor.

I was congratulating myself on our good luck when Oscar punched me in the ribs and pointed toward the horizon ahead. My eyes followed his gesture in time to see a far-off flash of lightning, cutting sharply through a low-lying bank of clouds. This gave me little concern, but my Scandinavian friend knew his clouds better than I. In a surprisingly short time dark, tumbling clouds, remindful of the smoke rushing from a puffing locomotive, piled up menacingly in front of us. We barged ahead, regardless of the clouds, and less than an hour after leaving Wall Lake we were skirting along the edge of the lapping waters of Storm Lake, dark and ominous compared to the gem of a lake we had just passed.

huge drops of water began to splatter on the windshield; then all at once the rain came in torrents. Flashes of lightning cut staggering paths across the sky, followed by deafening roars of thunder. I could see scarcely fifty feet ahead, but determined to keep moving I slowed down to fifteen or twenty miles per hour, and even that was too fast. We drove slowly on in silence, each confident that the storm would soon blow over; when without warning "Lizzie" gave a staggering cough, and began sputtering along on three cylinders.

"Tjuflyka!" ejaculated Oscar, and as I pulled to the side of the road he grabbed for the coils without waiting for me to shut off the ignition. He pulled them from the coil box, at the same
time delivering in Swedish a eulogy on electric shocks. Grabbing a blanket, I helped him wrap the coils to protect them from the water that came in through every available opening.

“If we let them get very wet,” he warned, “we will bane in for it. Might not even get started again today.”

The sky gradually grew lighter, and fifteen minutes later the rain had slacked sufficiently for us to replace the coils with a minimum of danger of wetting them. The motor started without much difficulty, but it jumped convulsively along on three cylinders for a mile or two until the wet connections dried.

About noon we reached Spirit Lake, and shortly after twelve o’clock we passed from Iowa gravel to Minnesota tar. Our spirits were high; we were ahead of schedule in spite of delays, and no obstacles were in sight. But a few miles farther on the road changed from a dull earth color to a glistening black. A sign read: DRIVE SLOWLY—FRESH TAR. We willingly complied, for every revolution of the wheels flung tar in all directions. Suddenly I noticed a bump-bump-bump effect as I drove along. I turned to speak to Oscar, but he was leaning out the window craning his neck for a look at the wheels.

“Tjuflyka!” He motioned for me to stop. “Of all places for a flat tire, this bates them all!” he growled, as he viciously jerked a jack from the tool box.

WE REPLACED the tire with the only spare and climbed back in the car, exact replicas of the fabled tar baby. We chug-chugged forward again at the same snail trot, but strangely enough I soon noticed the bump-bump feeling again. So did my companion, and as I stopped again he leaped from the car, addressing the tire in Swedish phrases that I am sure he did not learn from Swedish classics. The spare we had put on was now as flat as the traditional pancake, and as smeared with tar as is a pancake with syrup. There were only two things we could do, sit there and patch tubes or drive to the next town on the rim. We chose the latter, and in mid-afternoon our Ford limped into Windom. We parked behind an oil station on the bank of the Des Moines River and started scraping off
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tar and patching tubes. Every patch seemed to cover the last hole, but each time when we tested it in the river we would find one more, until at last one tube had nineteen patches and the other had ten.

We finished patching just as the sun went down, but we were too worn out to take the road again that day. We pitched our tent on the bank of the river, rolled up in our blankets, and mocked the rippling water with our snores.

WE BROKE camp before daylight the next morning, and once again hit the road. Only a little over thirty miles was our record for the afternoon the day before; that meant a long, long run for a Model T, if we were to reach our destination in time. The morning passed slowly as the towns passed in review. Olivia—Wilmar—Alexandria—Fergus Falls. We ate a snack as we drove, stopping only for gas and oil. As we went north the price of gas increased, and the weight of our pocketbooks decreased in an inverse ratio. We crossed the Red River at Fargo in late evening, but without stopping to eat we took the road to Grand Forks. At the Forks we pooled our resources, spent our last penny for gasoline, and headed our flivver to the west. A hasty mental calculation disclosed that we should have enough gas to get us within a few miles of the Holien farm. We anxiously counted the last five miles; each minute brought us closer. A dark blot finally loomed against the sky ahead.

“Oscar, can that be—?” I started to ask.

“Glory be, it is! Ole’s grove!” Oscar finished for me.

I swung the car from the road and headed it for the barn, where we would spend the remainder of the night. The engine sputtered, coughed, and stopped. We coasted to a stop about a hundred yards from the barn.

“Umph,” Oscar tried to growl through a yard-wide grin, “Now ay’ll have to carry my blankets clear over there.”