

Dearly Departed Spokes

By Ed Archer

Enthusiasm with no limits! Ed Archer and Larry Streeter, sparkplugs of the Santa Clara Valley Chapter and its Endurance Run, entered in the 1972 Baja 1000 race with a 1909 Model T replica. In spite of many warnings that "it couldn't be done they proved that, indeed, it couldn't. At least not in 1972. But, wait until next year!

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Every year, in November, about five thousand people, mostly men, gather in Baja California to systematically destroy millions of dollars worth of automobiles of almost every description in the annual Mexican 1000 off-road race. This year there were cars of every description, since two Bay Area men decided to show Parnelli Jones how a 1909 Model T could run the race! Naturally, Parnelli Jones was terribly worried when he saw it, and his \$62,000 Bronco shook all the way to the starting line.

After much pro and con, Ed Archer of Hayward, and Larry Streeter of Fremont decided that instead of restoring just any old Model T Ford, they would faithfully recreate one of the two Model T Ford race cars built by the Ford Motor Company in 1909 and then entered in the famous New York to Seattle Transcontinental Race.

The idea was originally broached at a gab fest after the first board meeting held by the newly elected officers of the Santa Clara Valley Chapter of the MTFCA, a meeting meant to map out the club's goals for the year 1972. While almost everyone there was of the opinion that a guy would have to be nuts to try, the two nuts were there! When the flak about the undependability of the T, etc., got too heavy the two nuts began to defend it and before you could say "Baja, Larry and I decided that come November First we would be driving our own entry in the Baja 1000 - a Model T Ford!



Enroute to the impound area for the technical inspection.

As the months passed we kept talking about the race to LaPaz, but were doing very little to get a Model T restored in order to enter. The word began to get out about the '09 Racer, and Bill Brommer of *Quality Products Co.* agreed to donate a winged-script brass radiator for the car. Paul Hannan and Butch Gilbert of *Hannans Automotive Machine Shop* laughed their heads off when they heard about it, thinking someone was making a joke, but when they found it to be serious they donated the rebuilding of the engine.

In July the talking slowed up and the big push began. Since the job was to be finished by October, in order to have plenty of time to road test the car, we didn't consider four months too little time to do a complete ground up restoration! That is if you lived with the car instead of with your family. Of course, with all the other projects that we were involved with there wasn't really four whole months to work but there was never any doubt (?) that the job would get done. By September things were shaping up; the new wheels arrived, these courtesy of Clint Darmstead of *The Vintage Wheel Shop*; pieces were being put together and it looked like we might finish by - maybe - March or April 1973.

October First - road test time - with nothing to drive! Now the *real* push began. People started coming over to lend a hand. Dan Erceg, Tim Butterick, Don Reeves, Peder and Arne Jorgensen, Tim Stangland, Bill

Fairless, Frank Giordano, Steve Lehto, Wayne Sheldon I and II, John Bertolotti, Doug Doyle, Mike Daly, Ben Holder and last but not least, Larry's next door neighbor, John Pemiz, who has no interest in antique cars but really got involved in this one. He really worked like a dog the last couple of days and probably the *least* reason was that our garage was next to his bedroom and the only way he could get some sleep was to get rid of us once and for all. Between these people and others unnamed who could give only a few hours of much appreciated work, the motor was started up the first time on Sunday morning, two A.M., October 29th, just three days before the start in Mexicali. The car sported a completely stock chassis except for the three-speed Muncie transmission mounted behind the engine. Around three A.M. the last of the unpaid hired hands departed, except for Dan Erceg who put in more time and effort than anyone except for Larry and myself. The car was road tested around six A.M. and after a few last minute repairs, was loaded on the trailer and we were on our way!

Since Watsonville was only about 130 miles out of the way (it would have taken more than that distance to stop us) we decided to stop by the swap meet being held that day. Watsonville is a "must attend" event for virtually all antique car enthusiasts. Larry and I figured that almost everyone who had worked on the car would be there and should have the honor of the first rides in it while it was still fresh. After the race it was possible that there wouldn't be enough left of it to ride in! Our appearance surprised almost everyone since Watsonville is a bit off the road to Los Angeles. The "maiden voyage" trips around the swap meet grounds were appreciated and enjoyed by all.

That night was spent in Long Beach at the home of the Howard Genrichs, who had previously invited us to stay with them. It was quite a surprise to learn that they and Rick Rawlins had decided to come down to Mexicali to see the start of the race. When it was discovered that some parts had been left behind in the melee, Howard dug around in his loot and came up with some replacements.

After a surprisingly short drive across California's desert, Calexico loomed on the horizon about 7 P.M. We drove over to Mexicali to take a look at the impound area, then returned to find there wasn't a motel room to be had. Another fifteen mile drive took place until we finally found a place to stay.

Next morning we drove the racer over the border to the impound area where we were received with surprise and, almost, dismay. The car wasn't allowed into the impound area until we had registered, so Larry stayed with the car while I went in to get the job done. Mexicans turn out for any sort of contest and the bigger it is, the more that turn out. When we arrived at the impound area it was surrounded by a solid sea of Mexican spectators, and the sound of the Model T turned them all around as if drawn by a magnet and then they converged on the strange newcomer. I had to swim upstream to get into the impound office and after that the situation deteriorated. When I came out forty-five minutes later, the car was in the impound area. The officials had taken pity on the car when about 10,000 kids came over and began pawing it, to Larry's horror.

The first and most continual problem occurred when we drove up to the impound area and the NORRA (National Off Road Racing Association — the organization that puts the race on) official directing traffic



Inside the impound area and they wouldn't let us out. Me on the left; Larry on the right.

announced that we couldn't come in since we had the wrong number on our car. The racer had the number 1 painted on the hood as in 1909, and according to the Baja rules, numbers 1 thru 60 were reserved for motorcycles. Since the T was numbered one, it had to be a motorcycle. Since it obviously was not a motorcycle, they didn't quite know what to do with it. We started in the first of our many explanations to officials that our assigned number was 285 and that the number painted on the hood had no significance in this race at all. It was very difficult for the officials to understand this and the problem continued until we saw the last of the Baja road race. Actually, the problem was solved when the number 285 was painted on a pillow case and tied on the hood. That opened a new problem, discussed by many, as to the origin of the pillow case. Nevertheless, Number 1 was finally 285, and more important things could be given attention.

In the impound area the racer was run up on a ramp where it was given a tech inspection. Nothing was found to be wrong except for a minor fuel leak. Technically, once a car enters the impound area, it remains there until the start of the race. However after pulling a few strings the officials took pity on us, lifted the ropes and opened the high cyclone fence so we could return to the motel and pack the car for the race. As soon as we finished packing we returned it to the impound area where it was given a special place to park, directly under the lights, so the guards could always see it.

The officials had been quite reluctant to have the T entered due to its condition. They considered it too nice to be ruined and advised us against running the race. When informed that the car had been built especially for the Baja race, and that we fully expected it to be ruined, and that we didn't mind at all, they quieted their conscience and took our \$375 entry fee.

The driver's meeting was held at 7 P.M. that night, with about 900 present. Among the warnings issued, great stress was placed on the unusually bad weather in the area due to a hurricane and just plain rain. Many sections of the paved road were washed out, dry ground was now soggy with mud and quicksand, and the route was some eighty miles longer than previously due to the rerouting from Mexicali instead of Ensenada.

I guess this is as good a time as any to tell about the terrain in Baja. Baja California is a peninsula in the western part of Mexico, separated from the Mexican mainland by the Gulf of California. It consists of a long extension of the mountains of Southern California. Because of road work near Ensenada, the usual starting place, located on the west side of the peninsula, the start was changed to Mexicali which is on the east side. As a consequence, the entrants had to drive across these boulder-cluttered, nearly roadless mountains, which was not a welcome addition to the already almost impassable landscape enroute to the LaPaz finish line.

Returning to the motel to go over the maps and



Official pose for the NORRA photographer just before the starting line up, sporting our new number 285.

try to figure things out, we found that Larry's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Streeter, had arrived. He had taken off work so that he could accompany Donna Streeter and Karen Archer on their trip down into Mexico where they would cross on the 150-mile ferry boat ride to join Larry and I (hopefully) in LaPaz. Shortly thereafter, Larry's cousins arrived from Nebraska, followed by Howard Genrich and his son Tim, Rick Rawlins and his friend Steve (who was familiar with Baja California and the roads we were to travel). The next arrival was Dennis Smith of the *Valvoline Oil Company*, a sort of PR man who supplies Valvoline to cars that want it, and slaps Valvoline stickers on cars when he can. He had taken a shine to the T racer and had been very helpful that day, supplying much needed information to Larry and I, as well as the Valvoline stickers (which were declined). Everybody got their heads together and everything was hashed out, and Larry and I finally figured that we knew as much as we were going to. Since Dennis had been so helpful we finally accepted a Valvoline sticker the next morning in thanks.

Since the starting time for our car was not until 12:45 P.M., a late and leisurely breakfast was enjoyed before starting to the impound area to steam up the car. The first motorcycle was off at 8 A.M., with the remaining participants leaving at one minute intervals throughout the day.

Arriving at the starting line we found it, as usual, completely mobbed by spectators. Inching our way along nearly a quarter of a mile, the T was totally surrounded by the throngs. The kids kept demanding autographs and we obliged. Finally the starting ramp came in sight and just before climbing it the technical inspector checked our fuel line to be sure we had fixed the leak. Surprise! We had, and we got our final OK. A



The most common failure in the Baja 1000 is wheels. Our spokes were scattered all over the road.

second later we drove up the ramp, looking down into a solid sea of faces, with practically no road in sight. The only way to go was to GO, so we got the green flag and took off, flames shooting from the short exhaust pipes coming from the hood. The crowd parted like magic and we were finally on our way.

Deciding to make time when we could, there were no holds barred on the paved road that left Mexicali. The first eighty-five miles were mostly well paved roads, smooth and fast. There were spots where the road was washed out, water having undermined the pavement and the top falling in leaving holes eight to ten feet deep. In a few places the road was gone altogether and had to be detoured around to get back to the paved section. There was very little warning, in most instances, that the road was gone. A sharp eye was the best insurance, and no difficulties were experienced in that regard.

A few miles from the first check point, the car coughed and sputtered. Unbelievably, we were out of gas! As soon as we pulled over, a young Mexican who had been behind us pulled over too, and with neither understanding the other's language, he and Larry went to the gas tank while I started looking the car over for anything that might obviously need attention. I found the right front wheel bearing was a little tight, and the Muncie transmission was throwing all of its grease out. While Larry was siphoning gas out of the Mexican's car, I loosened the front wheel bearing and refilled the transmission with STP, rather than the 140-weight oil that we had been using. From past experience I knew the STP wouldn't leak out, and while I had hoped the 140 would not be thrown by the transmission, I had packed the STP just in case. After Larry had siphoned a couple of gallons into the racer, we tried to pay the boy, but he refused to take a cent and went happily on his way.

At 3 P.M. we arrived at the first check point where a goodly crowd was waiting, and fell into line behind two trucks and a car, none race entrants, who were waiting to get gas from the old-time hand pump up into the glass globe of the gas pump. The two trucks insisted that the racer take their place in line, so we were on our way again after being sure that we had been officially checked in. As we pulled out of the official check point, we passed the Mag 7 pit crew which carries the gas and supplies for the drivers who are members of that racing group. They cheered the T on its way and were soon lost in the dust, as this point also marked the start of the dirt road which winds 125 miles over the mountains to the west coast of Baja.

A few miles down the one-lane dirt road we had to make a wide turn to avoid an oncoming vehicle, and in returning into the ruts of the road the right rear wheel collapsed, throwing spokes all over the landscape and bringing the car to a halt on the left shoulder of the road. Fortunately we were far enough out of the way to avoid collision with other cars coming through. Since there were no extra wheels, these being practically the only thing not being brought along extra, at 3:20 P.M. the race was over for us. We have since found out that collapsed wheels are the most common breakdown to all racers on the trip, so it is perhaps no wonder we were no different than many others.

Almost immediately a camper coming from the opposite direction stopped and offered a ride in to the check point. Larry left and got out the last message to leave Check Point One that night. The exact message to the wives has not been revealed, but somewhere in it there must have been the word *HELP!*

The race committee does not supply any aid to cars in distress and it is up to the individual to get his

car towed out if and when he needs it, so at this point we were dependent on our wives and Larry's father to come after us. At this point they were somewhere on the road to Guymas, two hundred miles away. The wives were to check back for messages that night with the motel at which we had stayed in Calexico, so help would be coming sometime, although we didn't know when.

As soon as the camper let Larry off at the check point the Mag 7 pit crew came running over to find out what had happened to the Model T. When Larry told them they said that they had a trailer there and would be happy to tow us to the check point location, though, of course, there would be no one there since they were all pulling out and would be gone in minutes. Larry gratefully accepted their offer; the check point being on the paved road where it was visible for a good distance and where the wives would not have to go looking for us.

With cries of "good luck, etc.", the Mag 7 pit crew deposited the racer on the pavement near the old gas station, waved goodbye and left. Larry and I settled down to await the rescue expected within a few hours.

By 2 A.M. we had decided that the wives might not arrive at all, though we were still hopeful. By 3 A.M. we were so frozen with the bitterly cold desert air that Larry grabbed a flashlight and hobbled out of the racer and began scratching around looking for kindling wood for a fire. A few minutes later another flashlight appeared on the scene and to our surprise, a Mexican family lived in the shack next to the gas pumps. The man of the house came out to see what the noise was. Since he spoke no English, and Larry and I spoke only phrase book Spanish, we did have a communication problem. But it's funny how people can make themselves understood when necessary. He offered the accommodations of the insides of an old Dodge sedan which while battered, had all its windows intact and was at least air tight. Then for some reason he changed his mind and offered us a little room he had with a mattress in it, along with representatives of the local spider population. Larry declined and spent the rest of the night with the car, and finally got a fire going for some protection from the cold. I had been sick for the past four days and was so frozen at this point that the mattress and any inhabitants looked great!

At 8 A.M. Larry came in and awoke me and said he'd arranged for a ride for me with a man pulling his car out from the mountains. It was hoped that if I went to Mexicali I could arrange for someone to come and tow us out, since there was no assurance

that the wives had received our message, communications being so bad in that area. On the way to Mexicali I worried about where the wives might be; if Larry would have to spend another night out in the desert; if it was possible to get someone to tow us out; and in short, what we were going to do. I went back to the motel we'd stayed at and ran into a friend from the *San Diego Tribune*, who took me to the Villa Lucerne where the racing group had their headquarters. In no time one of the men unloaded his car from the trailer and we were on our way back to the car and Larry.

When we got back to the motel, the wives and Larry's father were waiting. They had missed us there by some five minutes and due to a misunderstanding with desk clerk, sat down to wait for Larry and I to arrive "in a few minutes. Some hours later, we and the T arrived and all were reunited with great stories to tell each other.

Before we had reached our first check point we had passed forty-five cars that had broken down, including the Edsel car team and one car that already had its engine out in the road being repaired by the driver and his co-pilot. Each team that was alongside the road cheered the Model T as it went by.

Next year will mark the Seventh Annual 1000 Mile Race, and Larry and I and the 1909 Model T racer are going to be ready and eager to give it another try.

NEXT YEAR will be the year of the "T" in Baja!



At 3:20 P.M. the race was over for Number 285. When Larry returned after going for help I was "doing my thing" sawing logs and dreaming of next year.