

# A Stock Model T Ford in the Great American Race



*From an unreliable parade car to a long-distance runner - Cliff Raisbeck's 1911 Torpedo roadster made a dramatic transition.*

by Clifford C. Raisbeck

Andy Warhol said that everyone is famous for 15 minutes. My opportunity for fame arose in the Great American Road Race (GAR).

The GAR is an annual timed vintage automobile endurance rally from coast to coast, over 4,000 miles. Cars are model 1936 and earlier. Some safety requirements must be met, and modifications are supposed to be contemporary, more or less.

While I have known about this race for some years, the real granddaddy of all old car races, this episode began last August when my wife, Marge, who is no couch potato, sat down at the TV and punched ESPN, a channel we never watch, and-ah, fate! There in full view and uncensored was an hour-long report on last year's Great American Road Race-very old cars, terrible conditions, long distances. She said, "Cliff, look at this. We can do that! With that the project began.

I had a 1911 Model T Ford Torpedo roadster which, after 10 blocks, had been unable to com-

plete the 1989 local Fourth of July parade (4,000 miles??). I now needed to completely rebuild the car and add certain accessories, including an overdrive and distributor, if we were to make the race. I managed, in a few weeks, to locate all the things I needed and began the overhaul. The engine was rebuilt, including hardened valve seats, aluminum pistons, and a counterbalanced Model T crankshaft. Some sealed bearings were inserted in the rear axle and fourth main bearing. Rocky Mountain brakes were added-a Model T Ford, of course, really has no brakes otherwise. "Four wheels and no brakes" was to be our battle cry and warning across the country. The gasoline tank was pressurized using an old brass hand pump to overcome any vapor lock problems at high altitude. A Ruckstell rear-end was rebuilt and installed.

The car was accepted for entry and I acquired a navigator, John Kerby-Miller, a fellow skier and a helicopter pilot.

It had been a consuming ambition of mine since I was in high school in Milwaukee to drive a Model T across the United States, but such an

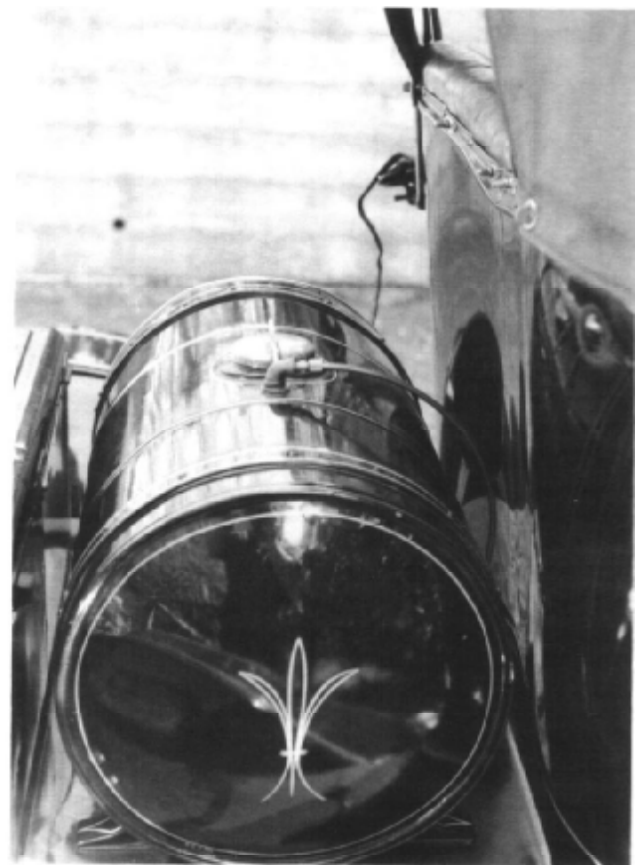


*Left: An external hand pump was operated by the navigator to pressurize the gas tank to overcome vapor locks in the mountains. Below: The gas tank modifications are visible at the top of the tank.*

opportunity obviously rarely presents itself. I had acquired my first Model T at age 16 and then bought a number of them at \$10 apiece to obtain the gasoline ration stamps during World War II. I was often late for school because my T wouldn't start and spent so much time in the principal's office that I nearly flunked out of high school. I rolled one over in a terrible crash. The Dean of Men had long since written me off, the neighbors hated me, and my parents nearly gave up on me—all for the love of the old Model T Ford. Nevertheless, I acquired knowledge and skill sufficient to arise to the challenge of the GAB.

The GAB this year was a 4,065-mile rally of 112 cars, handicapped according to age, driving four legs a day for 12 days—300 to 470 miles daily through the Catskills, the Poconos, Canada, the Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains and the Eisenhower Tunnel above 11,000 feet, and across the 120-degree desert to San Diego and Disneyland at Anaheim. Now, in a 1931 Packard V12, that ain't much—but in a nearly “stock” Model T that maxes out at 50 mph (unsafely), there is little margin for breakdown, repairs, or sleep. Our real goal was not to win but to finish the race without being disqualified.

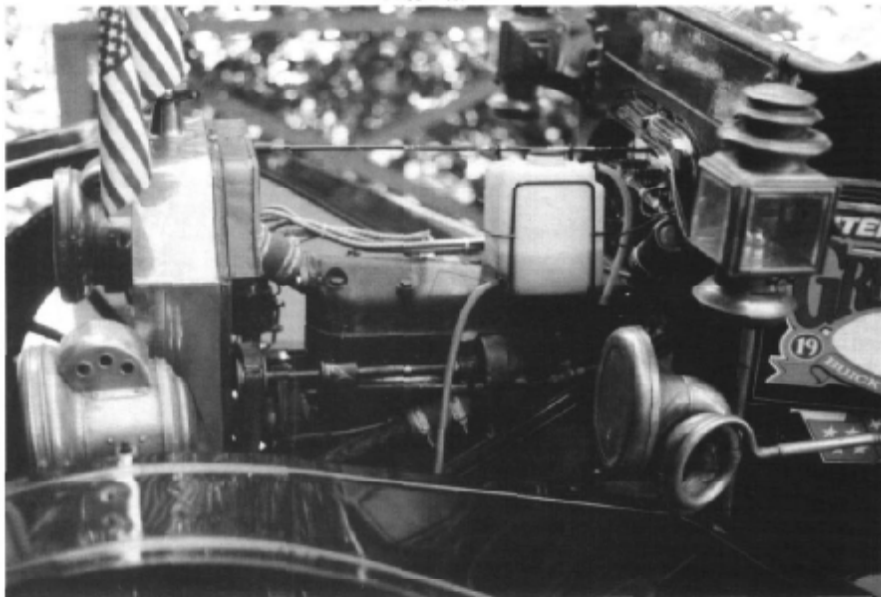
The GAB is a rally scored on the closeness to a perfect time. Four long legs each day are timed with precision. Being too early or too late adds that number of seconds or minutes to the score. As in golf, the lowest score wins. Beyond that, each vehicle must finish each complete day less than one hour late overall to avoid disqualification. Since our T did well on the flat but extremely poorly uphill, we found that to remain in the race,



we had to leave early, drive as fast as we could, and arrive at the first timing points early and the last timing point significantly late. In addition, we had to drive through pit stops, lunch breaks, etc.,



Above: Would two spares be enough? Only one was needed in 4,000 miles.  
 Below: Although fitted with a water pump, the car also carried a modern overflow catch tank.



with the briefest of pauses. Thus, we missed out on much of the social aspects of the race but built up a lot of Model T driving hours. Our other goal, however, was to see the real United States on highways and byways as our fathers had at 30 to 45 mph and without a top.

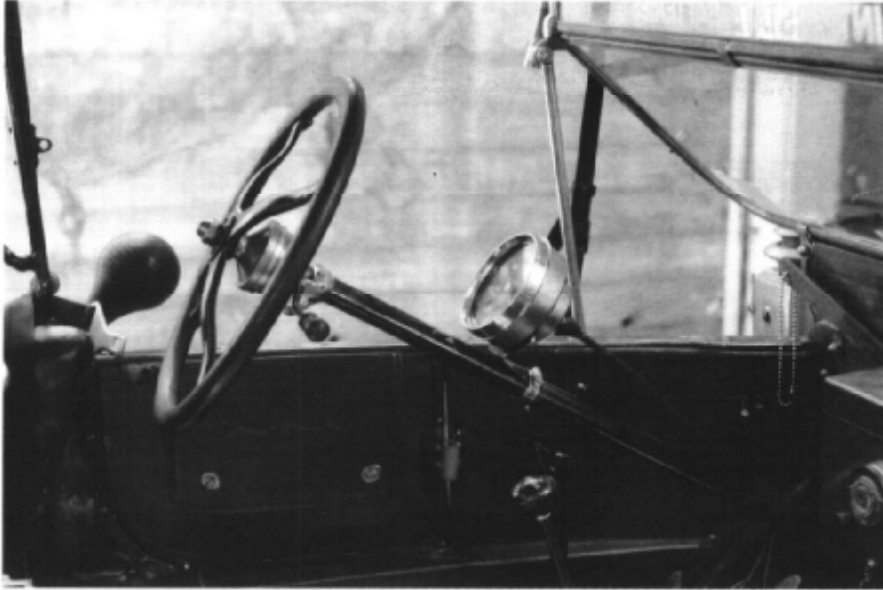
Let me tell you that between the bizarre people on the East Coast and crazy people on the West Coast, there are about 200,000,000 great hard-working Americans who make the tools and the machines and raise the food that allow us on

the coasts to sell insurance, sue each other, and live as we see fit. These people are the real salt of the earth, and at every stop from Towanda, Pennsylvania, to Gila Bend, Arizona, people rushed up to give us food and drink and ask if we needed help. Well, we often did. A broken radiator in Des Moines was repaired without charge by a man who left his dinner and reopened his radiator shop. A broken frame was fixed rapidly and perfectly in Grand Island by "the best welder in southwest Nebraska. A flat tire and bent rim in Phoenix, Arizona, were replaced and hand-inflated by the local Model T club. Root beer floats, ice massages, bluegrass music, marching bands, local dancers, and many, many old car fanciers turned out to see us along the way. Always turning up was the old codger who first drove "in a car like that. The little towns, and even the open countryside, were adorned with flags and cheering people sitting on their porches and verandas watching the two-hour parade of Packards, Mitchells, Buicks, Fords, Model A s, a Winton, a

Stevens Duryea, a 1912

American La France fire engine, and many other vehicles.

We were the first and only "stock Model T Ford to ever finish the GAB. A couple of other highly modified Model Ts have made it. We achieved our goal by keeping the car within its reasonable parameters, utilizing careful preparation, and shedding lots of blood, sweat, and tears. We had no oil pump, fuel pump, or shade from the sun and finally, from Milwaukee west, no fan blades. It took two hands and two feet to keep that



*An oversized speedometer was mounted to the steering column and would tell Cliff that he was going slower than the more modern cars that were passing him. But the Torpedo had the last laugh — it finished, which is more than many of the newer and more modified cars could do.*

devil on the road-full throttle most of the time. On the flat this would achieve a dangerous speed of 50 mph and up the mountains a somewhat less dangerous speed of 7 mph. A tire on the right front wheel blew at 50 mph on the interstate highway west of Winslow, Arizona, and we really heard the angels sing. During three swerves across the road with four hands on the steering wheel, we came as close as we ever wanted to a lot of things. We promptly mounted a spare tire and zoomed on the way.

The route this year took us through Milwaukee, Wisconsin, my hometown. Here was my 15 minutes of fame. Recalling my high school days, I experienced the perfect dream of glory-to the cheers of thousands of flag-waving citizens, I drove past my high school, my grade school, my home, "the drug store, and my church in a Model T Ford, waving my arms triumphantly-wow!

I thought I could drive this race "alone, but in the final analysis it took a cast of hundreds. Without my incredibly fearless and devoted navigator and co-mechanic, we would still be in Pennsylvania. Our wives-who got less sleep than we did and who gathered the necessary helpers by each evening, got rooms for us, and got up and out of town in the morning before the race started-were essential. For them, the whole experience was something like that of the Eighth Air Force in England during World War II: they sent their boys out at dawn, not knowing whether they would ever

see them again. Something like 25 percent of the cars who started the race did not finish, and for us it was always marginal. Nevertheless, through tornadoes, storms - no floods - broken radiator, broken frame, broken distributor, blown tire, lost fan blades, we always, 12 times, finished within the hour limit and on our own power.

For those who might contemplate driving a "stock Model T Ford in this race, we recommend a fin tube radiator, a high head, a water pump, and an overflow water recovery system. You will need some modern type of band liner (we used

Custom Friction Kevlar without any adjustments>, a sealed fourth main bearing, a Ruckstell rear-end, sealed rear axle bearings, Rocky mountain brakes, hardened valve seats, adjustable valves, aluminum pistons, and a distributor. We also put demountable rims all the way around for a fast change of flat tires (we had only one) and carried two spares. Modern Babbitt tin alloy bearings with oil scoops are important. A method of pressurizing the gas tank in case of vapor lock is vital. Beware of gasohol; your sloshing compound will go through the fuel line to the carburetor, where the shellac will come off the cork float and the silence from your engine will be deafening. Tires must be kept inflated to at least 60 pounds to avoid that early 29th century demon, the slipping tire, which cuts valve stems. We kept the magneto in place and used a modern diode to charge the storage battery, which worked perfectly since we did not drive at night. The car, being a 1911, of course had no generator or starter. A four-dip pan was installed as a gesture to modernity since it keeps oil under all four connecting rods and allows access to any of them should they need adjustment.

Henry s Vanadium Steel still stands up, even when the humans and the roads cannot endure such overuse. Our little Tin Torpedo (Tortoise) now rests quietly in Sausalito, a true veteran, not yet anxious to be driven hard and put away wet. I am sure, however, that she will proudly make all two miles of the next Fourth of July parade.