

Crossing America in 1923: a tent and a Model-T

By Lois Ashe Brown

WORTHINGTON

IN 1923 WHEN travel was a far cry from what it is today, three Pittsfield girls set out to see America. Today, of course, crossing from East Coast to West is no big deal; some make the trip back and forth weekly or even daily in the transaction of business or pleasure.

But in the '20s, travelers who left the comfort of their homes to explore the great expanses to the west endured rutted roads, poor overnight facilities and questionable eateries. Campgrounds sprang up along all the major routes, and by the late '20s as many as 15 million campers were claimed to be tenting and trailering their way across America.

This account is related by Clarissa (Chris) Henry of Worthington, who is now in her 91st year.

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She had earned \$500 for a project at the Pittsfield Girls Club financed by Mrs. Zenas Crane. With that sum, she bought a nearly new Model-T Ford from a friend.

She hadn't had the car very long when plans for the big trip began to take shape. Her sister, Elizabeth Henry, and her friend, Olive Cole, joined her in the adventure. At the time, Chris and her sister were between jobs, but Olive worked for the telephone company. She was refused a leave of absence, so she resigned. She was determined to go, even if it meant giving up her job.

In preparation for the trip, the girls purchased five new Kelly-Springfield tires. "Tires in those days were a major item," said Chris, "and one day out in Utah on a terrible stretch of road, we had five flats in the same day." She added, "Olive would sit in the back seat and patch tubes, at which she became quite adept."

Their camping gear included a tent, heavy army blankets, cooking utensils and food for a long journey. Much of it was stashed on the running boards and secured with the folding luggage racks of that day. "We knew nothing about travelers' checks and had about \$300 apiece in cash.

"Sometimes we slept crammed up in the car because the jack rabbits were so thick in parts of the West, and most of the time the ground was so cold that we would sleep on top of our tent rather than under it.

"Roads were just dreadful, sometimes just two ruts, and we had to be careful not to damage the car. It was no joke that the main street of America, Route 66, was referred to

as 'Rut 66.' Elizabeth and I did the driving and Olive sat in back patching tubes and keeping the accounts."

Heading out across New York state, they made their way to the Mississippi, crossing at St. Louis. There they picked up Route 66, which took them across Oklahoma, the Texas Panhandle, New Mexico, Arizona and into California.

Stopping off at Grand Canyon in Arizona was one of the highlights of the trip. There at the Bright Angel Lodge, they rented burros for the ride down into the canyon. "Sister Elizabeth was the daring one, and Olive and I — not wishing to be outdone by her — decided to go, too.

"My burro had a habit of grazing wherever he could and the guide cut a switch and told me to tickle him with it, but I told him my beast could go as slowly as he pleased, that I only wanted to get down safely." She tells of the scary descent along a narrow trail with no guard rails, and of the sure-footedness of the little animals.

"When we got to the bottom of the canyon, we were surprised to see the Colorado River as brown as coffee. There was only a primitive shelter and a campground, but we decided not to stay overnight. Back up at the lodge, we were glad to pay 50 cents for a hot shower. It was at the end of the trail that night when Olive's burro laid down and rolled, spilling her unceremoniously in the sand."

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All the way, they camped and cooked their own meals. Fresh fruit and vegetables were bought according to what was in season. Chris tells of one day when they stopped at a store and sent her sister in to do the shopping. "She went haywire in that store and spent every cent of our week's allowance for food. We ate well for a day or so, but the rest of the week was slim pickings. Thereafter, Olive and I decided to do the buying."

It was the long climb from Kingman up through Sitgreaves Pass to Oatman in Arizona, and down into Needles, Calif., that rattled their calm and made them stop to consider their finances. "We figured we would run out of money if we pushed on to the California coast, so we thought it wiser to turn homeward with stopovers in places where we knew folks," Chris explained.

Before leaving home, the Henry girls' aunt, Mame King Butler, had written to relatives of hers who had gone to Salt Lake City by ox cart from Windsor some years pre-

viously. She wrote to tell them her nieces from Pittsfield would be passing through there some time in the summer. "She had married our uncle, Bill Butler, and she told us to be sure to stop and see these relatives of hers.

"We found a campground at the edge of Salt Lake City and left our camping gear. Then we found their address with no trouble. Their daughters met us and ran to tell their parents that we had arrived and were going to camp. They had a small guest house in their orchard and would hear of nothing but that we would move right in to it.

"The father of the family had taken another wife after he got to Utah, and we found that both wives were friendly and close as sisters; when one fell ill, the other one took care of her."

appeal to our tastes at first, but we came to regard them as a great treat.

"We had a lot of fun visiting with folks we met along the way. My sister Elizabeth was especially outgoing and flirted easily. Young men sometimes thought we were teachers and we never said differently. There was one chap in Utah named Otto who had an eye for me, but I found he already had one wife and I did not wish to be No. 2.

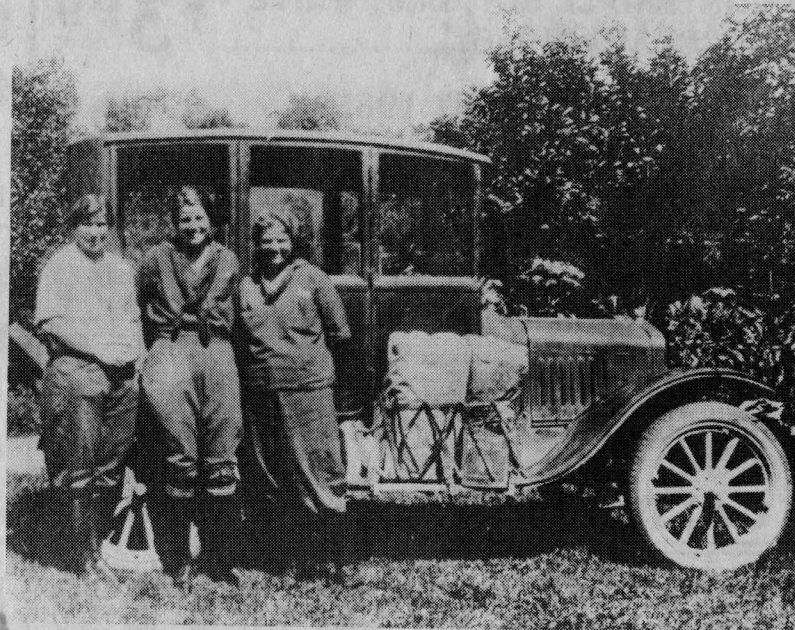
"On another night, we had found a heavenly green spot to camp and were rejoicing at our good luck, when suddenly we were soaked. It turned out we had pitched our tent in an area that was regularly irrigated, so we got wet when the water was turned on early in the morning.

"Once as we struggled along over

The girls arrived back in Pittsfield early in August, glad to be home, but out of work. Olive went back to the telephone company and was told that her resignation was never accepted and that her job was waiting for her. She stayed on for 45 more years.

Elizabeth was interviewed by Abby Aldrich Rockefeller for a position at the Bayway Community Center in Elizabeth, N.J., one of Mrs. Rockefeller's favorite charities, and there she worked for the next 19 years.

Chris went to work as a volunteer for the Community Chest, the forerunner of the United Way. It was when she went into the City Savings Bank to collect some pledges that she was hired to work there until her retirement in 1959, 35 years later.



Three intrepid adventurers — Elizabeth Henry, Clarissa Henry and Olive Cole — travelling cross-country in the Model-T. There was no trunk, so luggage was tied on the running board. Photograph courtesy of Clarissa Henry.

After a sojourn with these relatives of relatives, the three girls drove from Salt Lake City across Wyoming to Hebron, Neb., where they visited their uncle, Gridley Cleveland. He had gone west as a young man from Dalton. "The Cleveland Brook and Reservoir are named for his family," Chris declared.

They were welcomed at his home and urged to stay a spell. "Uncle Gridley kept telling us it would be all downhill the rest of the way home and that we should stay longer."

It was at his home the girls were served green beans with fresh sour cream poured over them. "It didn't

an unusually muddy rutted road, we lost our tent off the car. Further on, we were stopped and told it had been found and would be coming along soon. The man who had picked it up had telephoned ahead to ask that the car with three girls in it be stopped. We were forever grateful to him.

"Our clothes were sturdy, with little regard for fashion. We wore khaki knickers with tapered legs and high shoes, blouses and sweaters and warm jackets. We all had long hair. Bobbed hair was just beginning to be stylish. Later, Olive paid \$25 to have her hair bobbed and we worried that she might not like it and would be out all that money."