

## **Bill's Big Trip to DeKalb in Bessie**

The mid-week weather forecast for Sunday had been troubling as a huge cold front of storms was expected to sweep the DeKalb area. I was prepared to bag the trip but the morning weather was beautiful with a revised forecast for scattered thundershowers later on in the day. In a late morning phone call, Keith and I decided to carry on with our quest.

A month earlier, I had committed to help out a friend in the Kishwaukee Barbershop Chapter. Their Chapter Spring Show was today (Sunday, April 19) with a Show theme of old cars and old songs. They wanted some old antique cars parked in front of their DeKalb, IL, Hopkin's Park venue to grab their customer's attention.

I hadn't driven my 1930 Model A Sport Coupe very far from home since I purchased it last Fall. I figured that this outing would be a good opportunity for me to get the hang of driving this 85 year old, grand car-lady, named Bessie, on a 50 mile round trip. The previous weekend I drove two of my grandsons in Bessie's rumble seat to the gas station to fill up the gas tank. They loved the ride and the moving view. Yesterday I washed Bessie, checked her engine oil and transmission oil in preparation for this big trip. I found my detailed county maps and charted a route to DeKalb over small county roads to avoid traffic.

My friend Keith agreed to drive his modern car behind me, and it's a good thing he did because he witnessed my mistake, that could have been tragic.

We left my home in rural west St Charles about 1 pm in sunlight and found nearby Welter Road heading west without a problem. I got Bessie up to 50 mph and kept her heading down the middle of the narrow paved road. As hoped, no other traffic competed for a lane of this road. After a few miles, the road turned to gravel and Bessie reacted by kicking up a cloud of dust for Keith to swallow. As we neared DeKalb 40 minutes later, the paved Barber Greene road appeared and the dust storm subsided.

We turned left onto four-lane Hwy 23 in DeKalb, and found Hopkins Park less than a mile to the south. We entered the park and proceeded to follow a narrow road through it. Every 500 feet or so, we encountered another speed bump. Bessie's front wheels negotiated these bumps nicely but the rear wheels were thrown into the air to entertain Keith, following closely behind. We found the main park building and parked Bessie next to a 1950 Rambler convertible. How ironic since I grew up in Rambler City, Kenosha, WI. After a while, a 1931 Ford Model A, 4 door sedan parked next to me and then two more cars (a 1964 Chevy and a 2 seat Ford Thunderbird) joined the line-up of five cars.

Shortly before the Barbershop Show started, the other Model A owner noticed that my carburetor was leaking, as I had neglected to shutoff the gas valve under

the dashboard. I quickly closed the fuel valve and got a white absorbent rag out of the fancy storage box on Bessie's rear fender, to soak up the gas in the engine compartment. I left the rag under the carburetor to catch any subsequent leaks. Then I buttoned-up Bessie's engine panels, locked the car doors and entered the building for a two hour show.

Rain started falling during the Show and afterward when I unlocked the car doors, I was anxious to get under-way before darkness fell. I totally forgot about the rag under the carburetor.

Bessie started easily once I turned the fuel valve on again. As soon as I turned onto Hwy 23, a DeKalb policeman was lurking in his car behind me. I wondered if he'd stop me to look at the car and check my registration and license plate. Then he turned his patrol car into a donut shop parking lot and disappeared. I turned right onto Barber-Greene Rd heading east and brought Bessie up to full speed. Suddenly, my nose picked up on a burning smell and the gas soaked rag under the carburetor came to mind. I wondered: did the rag ignite? Was it touching the engine block? Could it cause conflagration or would it just burn out? I evaluated my options and decided not to slow down or stop. Shortly thereafter the smell disappeared.

Meanwhile, Keith watched as a white object with an orange tail exited from the under-carriage of my car and rolled onto the side of the road. As he got closer, he could see that this was a white rag, burning brightly. He wondered if I had seen the rag exit, but I hadn't. I was counting on my nose to tell me whether I would need to stop the car and rummage in the big box for a fire extinguisher.

The intensity of the rain was moderate and I silently thanked the previous owner for using Rain-Ex on the windshield. I exercised the puny, vacuum-driven, single blade, windshield wiper a couple of times but it really wasn't needed.

The rest of the trip home was uneventful as the gravel roads were wet and not dusty. I did get a sensation of the car floating over these gravel roads at 50 mph. Then I recalled the recent graphic Internet photos of Model A's involved in accidents during the 1930's and 40's, so I decided to slow down a bit. Model A's don't handle crashes or rollovers very gracefully. Think : car totaled out!

When I had Bessie parked safely in my garage, I lifted the engine panels and confirmed that the white rag had departed the engine compartment. The carburetor was not leaking during this inspection since I turned off the fuel valve after I turned off the ignition key.

Keith and I then sat down to a wonderful supper of homemade sausage lasagna, salad, friend chicken and brownies that my wife, Char, had fixed for us. This was a great way to end my first adventure with Bessie. Was I lucky? You bet! Now, where should I go on my next trip?

See photo of Bessie and Barbershop Performers below.

Bill Miller

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