

Old Cars, Muddy Trails Recalled

By DALE GADDY

Today a young man zooms down the North Carolina highways with no concern for the condition of the expansive ribbons of concrete on which he drives, or for the machine which he manipulates. Progress has afforded him a sleek, shiny, sports coupe with tubeless tires and automatic transmission. The roads have become freeways, winding on and on from sea to sunset, with seldom, if ever, a break in the wide pavement.

Mere decades ago the scene was quite different, as most pre-World War II drivers can testify. What were called roads then were little more than paths—paths which inevitably became beds of mud.

Few bridges existed and almost no good ones could be found in the western section of the state. If one had to get to the other side of the Watauga he simply forded the creek—and usually in his Ford.

The "T" Model (and other cars) were slow to make their appearance in the hills of Watauga County. Folks didn't get around much in those days—not, at least, by means of a motored vehicle. Relatively few persons had need of venturing outside the county. And those outside the county found it no easy task to venture into the now acclaimed Holiday Highlands.

But little by little, progress came even to northwestern North Carolina. Roadways were hewn out of the mountains. The cars came. And the weekly bonanza of excitement—watching a real "sure 'nuff" car get gasoline pumped into its innards—became a must among hill dwellers.

Eventually, other cars made their appearance. The Essex, Viking, Marquette, LaSalle, Oakland, Whippet, Chevrolet, Nash, and Oldsmobile were among everyday discussions at the barber shops in town or wherever auto-enthusiasts congregate to discuss cars.

Travel wasn't easy, regardless of the make or model of car the Wataugan of the early 1920's drove. Even today, roads in the county are sometimes steep. But in the 1920's, it took a good deal of daring and a lack of fear to navigate the old tin lizzy over a Watauga County road.



AND ACROSS THE HILL . . . CAME THE MAN AND THE TEAM

In Boone proper, the first service station was erected on the corner of Depot and King streets, where Todd and Higgins Esso now stands. Built by Floyd Ward, it soon became the most popular place in town—especially when someone chug-a-lugged their belching buggy up to the glass-topped gas pumps.

Prior to that time, gas had been hauled to Boone in barrels. Recalls Ralph Winkler, "We used to bring up 220-gallon of gasoline in four barrels from Lenoir. The gas sold for 55 cents per gallon in those days.

"We used to pump it out in one-gallon cups and then pour it into the car tanks. This was back in 1917, '18, '19."

Later, according to Winkler, various grocery stores throughout the county began adding gasoline pumps. Within a few years gasoline pumps of various

types and styles were on the market.

Tires sold for as little as \$1.50, if they were second-hand; \$2 more if new. Automobiles sold for as little as \$400 just thirty years ago. Of course, bumpers and spare tires in those days cost extra.

Naturally, high-priced cars were on the market in the early days, but few of the classic models found their homes in Watauga. Wataugans were, basically, working people. Somehow, luxury cars just didn't fit the Watauga scene, yet.

During the summer months, autoists found travel especially irritating. Dust was thicker than mountain butter. Many was the girl whose Sunday dress was spoiled on the weekly motor ride to the white steeple.

And if it wasn't dust that bothered motorists in the early days, it was mud (see photos).

Some of the worst roads in the state—and perhaps in the nation—were in western North Carolina at one time.

But the state had not grown financially or politically to the point where good roads could be built and maintained. Through the fault of no one in particular, the Wataugan waded on through the winter mud and breathed the dusty air of a summer day.

Not only were early cars used with difficulty, but at certain times of the year they were not used at all. When winter came, few (if any) cars were in use. The roads were bad; the weather was severe; and the urge to travel simply for the sake of traveling was practically nil.

Most of the cars were set up on blocks, the tires were taken off and were wrapped in paper, and the battery was placed near a stove so as to keep it from freezing and bursting.

Today in the United States there are more than 75 million automobiles, buses, and trucks registered. In 1930, less than three million new cars were sold, as compared with seven million new cars sold in 1961.

As the mad race for horsepower and fancy seatcovers continue, a few of the older, more durable cars are still making their way up and down the narrow concrete canyons of towns and cities across the nation. Watauga, late to open its area to motor traffic, has few of the early relics. But their owners are no less proud of their "A" models and rumble-seat racers than the most particular Detroit antique auto collector.

According to the Boone license bureau, 5,214 automobiles

are registered in Watauga County this year. Of these, only 26 are of the pre-World War II car, or less than .005 per cent.

According to the local license bureau records, the oldest car still in use in the county is a



HE GOT HIMSELF A HORSE



"IT OUGHTER COME OUT'N"



MUD STALLS THE TRAFFIC

1929 Ford owned by James Matheson of Sugar Grove. Matheson also owns a 1939 Chevrolet coupe.

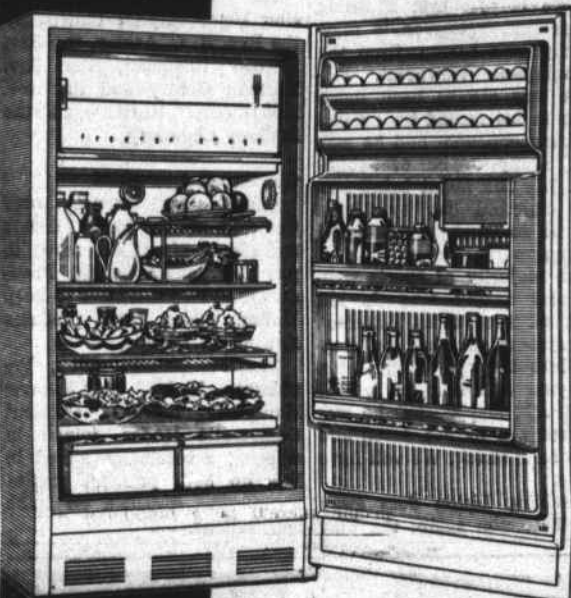
Seven 1931 autos are listed, two 1935, 1937, and 1938 cars are registered, and one 1936, three 1939's, and eight 1940's are licensed, the bureau records show. Three are Plymouths, twelve are Fords, and eleven are Chevrolets.

Scattered throughout the county, from Tamarack to Blowing Rock, Deep Gap to Valle Crucis, the cars are vivid images of the once colorful past—the days when mud was deep and cars were strong.



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