The Driving Competition

By Georgiana Blackburn

The year was 1955. I was 18 and a sophomore at Poteau Junior College. At age 60, Dad, known to us as "Mada," retired from the creosote plant in Panama and received a $1,000 lump sum. He wanted to purchase one large item that the family could enjoy, so he asked for suggestions.

I suggested a new piano. My suggestion, however, was not the winning one. My brother Ivan wanted a car. He believed that the car was more practical since the entire family would benefit from it for many years.

"Oh no, I'm going to hit him!" I covered my eyes with both hands.

Ivan was three years older than I was and he was one of my best friends. He had just returned after a three-year stint in the Air Force. We both attended PJC.

A few days later, Ivan drove into our driveway with Mada in the passenger's seat. His smile gleamed as brightly as the 1954 green-and-white Chevy.

This was our family's first car. Until now, our major mode of transportation had been "Pat & Turner." That's what Mother called walking; she said, "You pat your feet and turn the corner and you'll eventually get wherever you want to go."

Mada was more accustomed to horses. He didn't own a horse, but many times he had ridden in a horse-drawn wagon. He used horses to plow our garden. Otherwise he rode in cabs or someone else's car.

He told us that he had been quite young when he saw his first car. "In those days they were called 'horseless carriages.' I was fascinated with them and hoped that one day I would learn how to drive one. Now's my chance."

He turned to me. "Let's me and you see who can learn first," he said. "I'll bet I will be able to drive better than you and learn faster, even if I *am* older."

Then he smiled and told the rest of the family, "Ivan's going to teach me to drive."

"OK, it's a bet!" I responded with a laugh. "We'll see who makes the most mistakes!"

Mada and I climbed into the car for our introductory lesson. Ivan explained about the gears and the rules, and he taught us how to hold the wheel and how to steer. Never having been behind the steering wheel before, we were nervous, and we gripped the wheel too hard.

Ivan told us that we had to relax and just realize that we could do it. Then he took us out separately. He was a very patient teacher.

I learned to steer properly and I seemed to be doing well. Then I spotted a dog running across the road in front of me. "Oh no, I'm going to hit him!" I exclaimed. I covered my eyes with both hands.

Ivan immediately leaned over and steered. "You OK now?" he asked calmly. "Remember not to do that again, all right? You have to keep your

From Good Old Days Magazine, March 2007, Vol. 44, No. 3, Copyright © 2007 Good Old Days Magazine

eyes on the road and your hands on the wheel." When we told Mada and the family about it, everyone laughed.

Sometime later, my cousin Mary and I were sitting on the wooden bridge that crossed a ditch filled with rainwater and led to our driveway. We were waiting for Mada and Ivan to return from his driving lesson so that I could take my turn.

When I saw the car approaching, I said to Mary, "We should move."

Mary said, "There's plenty of room." But I stood up.

There was plenty of room, but one of the boards on the bridge was loose. When the car crossed the bridge, it raised the board—and flipped Mary into the ditch.

She was not hurt, but she told Mada, "You tried to drown me!" We all laughed. This gave me a reason to tease him about not knowing how to enter the driveway and trying to drown Mary in two inches of water.

Each day our driving improved. We agreed that Mary was to ride in the backseat and keep score so that she could report to me about Mada's driving and to him about my driving.

Aunt Jessie, Mary's mother, worked downtown. She had always walked the three-quarter-mile route both ways, no matter what the weather. But after we learned to drive, Mada and I took turns taking her to work.

One day after letting Aunt Jessie out of the car, I accidentally backed too far across the street and one of my rear wheels ended up in a ditch. It took me awhile to gently work it out. Mada teased me about needing to learn how to drive in reverse, but I was proud that I got myself out of the ditch.

A few days later, Mary reported on Mada's trip with Aunt Jessie. He had been driving behind Mr. Patty, who drove a wagon pulled by two horses. Mr. Patty stopped suddenly. Mada quickly applied the brakes, but apparently he was too close to the wagon because he nudged it.

The horses didn't move, but Mr. Patty slipped off the seat and landed in the space between the seat and the front of the wagon—upright and still holding the reins. He was not hurt, just surprised. After they got home, he and Mada laughed about it.

As the year progressed, Mada and I both learned to drive well. Mada got his driver's license. I was leaving the state after graduation and would have nothing to drive, so I didn't see the need for a license.

Mada relished his ability to drive for years thereafter. He and Mother often visited friends and churches in other Oklahoma towns. And whenever I came home, he drove to the Fort Smith Airport, some 32 miles away, to pick me up. We always enjoyed reminiscing about our driving competition and shared many laughs about it. ❖

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