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How Far Can You Go on Two Dollars Worth of Gas?

Highway 17 into Ottawa from Carp is now March Road, but for the piece between Carp Road and Dunrobin Road, it looks much the same now as it always did. It's a straight road with a big hill at the Carp end. I drove it today again, as I have, pretty much every day for the last fifty years. There you would find, in the old days, the Hilltop Hotel and Dave Alexander's 24-hour Gulf Station. The Queensway extension had not yet been built to Arnprior, so there was still traffic enough on the highway to keep these businesses running.

My best friend, Ron, would drive his father's 1959 black hardtop Ford. It had hydraulic lifters. I didn't know then (and still don't) what hydraulic lifters were, but if we were parked at some A&W talking to the people next to us, we'd always mention the hydraulic lifters and they would "Oooh" in admiration. Perhaps they didn't know what they were either.

The Ron's Ford was a big step up from the other vehicle we had, as it were, at our disposal. The other vehicle was an ancient rusty yellow farm truck that belonged to my friend Dave's father. It was the original rusty Ford, I think, and had the habit of losing all the electrics when it went over a bump, which was, of course, often, on the gravel back roads we often drove. All the back roads were gravel in rural Carleton and many seemed quite remote from everything. Remote enough that we would be able to stow cases of beer by the culverts and be confident that no one else would find them.

I didn't have a car to drive, because I was too young. After skipping two grades in public school -- three and eight -- I had arrived in high school two or three years younger than all the other people in my class and this continued through high school. While all my classmates had their driving licenses by the end of Grade 11, I was still riding my bicycle into Grade 13. Which, of course, we don't have any more, but that's another story. The point is, that I was always a passenger when we went out on expeditions with the car, and at the time this story takes place, I was, I guess, fifteen.

Our normal approach was to go down to Neiburt's Esso station in Carp and buy two dollars worth of gas. Two dollars worth of gas could take you quite a way in 1965: to Almonte, perhaps, where we went to high school, eleven miles away, and to Ottawa, about fifteen miles away in the other direction. It also took a lot of time to earn two dollars in 1965 as well. Ron worked in Moore's grocery store in Carp and I think he earned twenty-nine cents an hour. That was about the same price as a gallon of gas in those days.

With two dollars of gas in the tank of the hard-top 1959 Ford we might go up to Almonte, pick up girls we knew from high school, then, as on the night I am thinking of, we might drive into Ottawa -- I can remember once going to see "Going Down the Road" at the Little Elgin in Ottawa -- it's now a chi chi coffee bar -- and then back to Almonte, and then home to Carp in the dark of the night.

But my point is not that you could drive forever on two dollars worth of gas, more that after our travels over the countryside we were constantly in danger of running out of gas. The last legs of our trips were always accomplished on the last dregs of gas in the tank.

On the night I am thinking of we were coming home down Highway 17 from Ottawa, and we were just passing Dunrobin Road when Ron announced that he was just about out of gas. We began

to debate whether the best strategy to get home was to creep along the road as slowly as possible or to floor the car and go as fast as possible to get as close to home as we could before the engine stopped.

Well, we were teenage boys -- on this night we were three in the car: Ron, driving, Dave in the middle and me next to him, beside the passenger door -- and so, of course, we decided to see just how fast the car with the hydraulic lifters would go on the three-mile stretch down the road to Carp.

And it turned out, the old car really would do a hundred miles an hour. At least, that's what the speedometer said, and we were flying through the night, just coming up to the Marchurst Road, when the engine stopped.

Ahead of us was the huge hill leading up to the First Line of March, the Hilltop Motel, and a little further on, Dave Alexander's all night Gulf gas station.

Would we be able to coast up the hill and then roll along the other side to the Gulf Station? It was hard to say. Certainly it would be easy to push the car to the gas pumps if we made it over the crest of the hill.

At this point, all of us had taken Grade 10 Physics and knew, or thought we knew, something about impetus. It would be easier to keep a body moving if it was already moving, than to try to push it from a stop.

So, while it might not be obvious to you now, it was quite obvious to us that what we needed to do was wait until the car slowed down enough that it was safe to step out and then get out and push the car to keep it going over the crest of the hill, so that we could push it to the Gulf Station on the other side. The problem was that we had just been going a hundred miles an hour and there was no motor noise or indeed any other help as we rolled through the dark night. How to tell when it was safe to step out?

Well, I decided that it was safe to step out at about thirty miles an hour and as I rolled over and over in the --Thank God -- grassy ditch, the car rolled up over the crest of the hill and was well on its way to the Gulf Station, with Ron and Dave pushing, by the time I got up and out of the ditch and started jogging after the disappearing car. They had both waited until the car was just about to stop before stepping out. Well, they had more experience, for they both were drivers, after all.

Is there a morale to this story? Perhaps if you're not sure how fast you're going, don't step out of a car. Ron went on to be an engineer, Dave to do some complicated technology job in the States, and I became an English teacher. Perhaps this story has some relevance to speed reading, or perhaps not. Certainly two dollars worth of gas doesn't take you as far to-day as it did us, then.

Rudi Aksim 6 September 2014