

Dad's Model T Fords

By John T Craft

12-10-2001

When my twin brother George and I went to Odessa, Missouri, for our 50th Class Reunion on August 4, 2001, we took the opportunity to do further research on Dad's old car that he used to drive to the coal mines.

I had always thought that Dad worked out the purchase of this car by painting a three-story house, but I didn't remember the names of the people he did this painting for or what year the Model T was.

On a previous trip to Odessa, George learned that it was Lloyd Van Meter's dad whom our dad did the painting for. Jim Van Meter, a son of Lloyd, was a classmate of ours and was at the Class Reunion. We told Jim we wanted to visit with his dad and find out more about our dad's Model T Ford. Even though it was late when the Reunion adjourned, Jim said that his dad was probably still up and that we should stop by to see him. We drove over to Lloyd's house and rang the doorbell. Lloyd came to the door but was preparing for bed, so we agreed to meet at Morgan's Restaurant out on old Highway US 40 in the morning.

We had the most enjoyable visit with Mr. Van Meter. He told us he was 88 years old and that he was born on the seventeenth of January 1913 and that his nickname was "Rip." He told us the story of how our dad had acquired the Model T. Lloyd told us that our dad had taken the job of painting the barn and some out buildings for his dad on their farm located three miles east of town. He said that our dad would walk out to the farm every

morning, worked all day painting, after which he would have to walk the long trek back home.

Lloyd's dad owned a 1917 Model T Ford Touring car that he bought at an auction for \$17.50. When Dad had finished painting the barn and out buildings (not a three-story house like I had always thought) and it was time to settle up, and since Mr. Van Meter hardly drove the Model T, he asked Dad if he wanted cash or the car. Since Dad didn't have a car and certainly needed one, he chose the car in payment for his labor.

The painting and car deal was consummated in the summer of 1938. This little 1,480 pound Model T Ford would have been 21 years old when Dad became its new owner. Our older brother Ernest remembers that we lived on South 4th Street in Odessa at the time.

In 1917 the Open Touring sold new at a new low price of \$350 including side curtains. (See the side curtains on Dad's car shown in photo below.) The lowest price car was the Open Runabout (one-seat) selling at \$345 complete with side curtains. The highest priced car was the Closed Sedan selling at \$645.

During the Ford Motor Company's 1917 Model Year (August 1, 1916, through July 30, 1917) over a half million (568,128) Model T Touring cars were delivered to Ford dealers. This was the most popular 1917 model accounting for 77 percent of the total production of the 735,017 Ford cars built during the 1917 model year. This also was a milestone

year for Ford as the Two Millionth Model T rolled off the assembly line on June 14, 1917.

All Model T engines had 4 cylinders with a displacement of 176.7 cubic inches, were rated 20 Brake Horsepower at 1600 rpm and capable of pushing these little three pedal cars to a top speed of 42 mph.



Twins, John and George Craft in their backyard at 213 North Russell Street in Odessa, Mo. Dad's 1917 Model T in background. December 10, 1939.

Dad Enters the World of the Model T

Dad was born on August 6, 1902, on a farm southwest of Cuba, Kansas. He was 10 months old when the Ford Motor Company was officially incorporated on June 16, 1903. Dad grew up with the Model T; he was 6 years old when the infant Model T was first introduced to the world on October 8, 1908.

My uncle, Frank G. Craft, later told me that the first Ford in the Craft family was not a Model T, but rather was a Fordson tractor that Granddad John Treavor Craft bought new in 1919.



Frank G. Craft is standing in front of the tractor and Henry W. Craft operating the tractor.

The Fordson farm tractor was a result of Henry Ford's experimental development of agricultural tractors which started back in 1915. On July 27, 1917, Henry Ford organized a company to manufacture this tractor as "Henry Ford and Son Inc."; hence, the name Fordson. There were 56,987 of these tractors built that year. Uncle Frank said the price Granddad Craft paid for this tractor with an Oliver Gang Plow with two 14-inch bottoms was \$900.

This had to be an exciting time for Dad. What an inspiration at age 17 to be able to master the operation of this modern piece of machinery and then to have this experience kindle a desire to learn its mechanics. In the fall of 1919, Dad enrolled in Ray's Auto & Tractor School in Kansas City, Missouri, and received a certificate in the spring of 1920.

The Model T Family History

Granddad John Treavor Craft bought his first and only car, a 1917 Model T Ford Touring in 1922. Granddad never did learn to drive. This car was just left sitting in the shed except when Dad would use it to court Mom before they got married.

In turn, Dad bought his first car about the time of Mom and Dad's wedding.



Ruth, Clarence, Tabitha, Henry, Forrest,
John Treavor, and Gertie Craft

It was a 1915 Model T Ford Touring with a brass radiator and was completely missing a top. Mom and Dad got married on May 18, 1924, and drove this car to Colorado on their honeymoon. Can you imagine driving a 9-year-old topless Model T Ford from Haddam, Kansas, 470 miles one way, to see The Garden of the Gods, Seven Falls, and Pikes Peak, on the dusty roads of that era? This would take a minimum of two and one half days barring muddy roads, flat tires, breakdowns, or running out of gas! Certainly, a trip of this magnitude would have required that plenty of extras be taken along. You would also want to take extra motor oil, gas, water, an oil can, and a small can of grease. You also would need a spare tire and tube, a tire repair kit, and a tire pump. Don't forget a tarp, (in

case of rain), the tool kit, and baling wire. Take some extra food along too. What a great romantic adventure!



Henry and Tabitha Craft on their Honeymoon
Seven Falls, Colorado

This was the roaring twenties, a time when the automobile brought about a new age of exploration for ordinary people. The Model T was Mom and Dad's ship of discovery out on the seas of the mid-western plains and beyond to the mighty Rockies. They were "footloose and fancy free" and for the first time in their lives were experiencing this great new sense of freedom.

After their honeymoon they returned home to Haddam, and for the next 13 years Mom and Dad farmed, raised sheep and hogs, and did custom work around this farming community located in north central Kansas. Dad taught himself to shear sheep, and he did this for a few neighbors. The future looked bright and promising, and they started a family. For the first few years, all went well for them. Then along came the Stock Market crash of 1929 which ushered in the Great Depression and the Dirty Thirties.

Along with the downturn of the economy, came the years of drought, low prices, and very poor crops. Mom and Dad were always optimistic, believing that the next year would be better than the last. Dad borrowed from the bank to buy a threshing machine and furnished a threshing crew and did custom work in the area. Dad would be gone a week at a time running the threshing crew, so Mom and brother Ernest had to tend to milking the dairy herd of 12 cows and do other farm chores. Another older brother Charles, had to ride herd on his younger twin brothers while these chores were being done.

Hard Times for the Craft Family

By 1936 things were looking bleak, and most of the farmers in the dust bowl, which extended from Texas all the way through the Dakotas, had either voluntarily held farm sales or were forced to have them by their creditors. Most had roped what personal belongings they had on top of their cars, to running boards and fenders and even to the back of their cars and had headed to California.

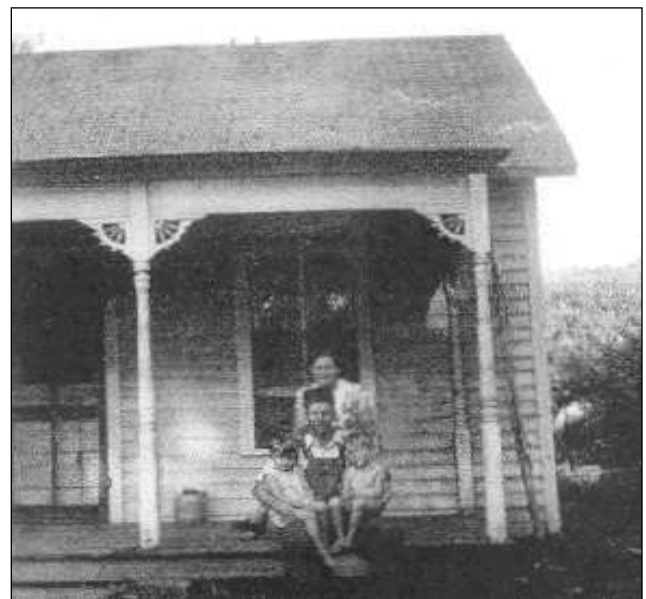
Dad was overextended at the bank and owed a large feed bill on his dairy cows.

The bank foreclosed on him and had a farm sale to satisfy the debt.

Dad and Mom moved the family to Washington, Kansas, where Dad got a job with a Pipe Line Company walking and inspecting the lines. In the spring of 1937, he heard there might be work at the Standlin Pipe Line Company at Odessa, Missouri.

With only 35 cents in his pocket (not enough to buy gas for the car), Dad hitchhiked 235 miles to Odessa to see if he could get a job. After successfully landing a job with Standlin, he worked until he had earned enough to come back to Washington, Kansas, and get his family.

The family loaded all their belongings into a farm wagon box that dad had fitted onto an automobile chassis, hitched it to the folks' 1933 Plymouth, and headed for Odessa, Missouri. We moved into a small house at 415 South 4th Street in the southwest part of town on March 29, 1937.



Uncle George and Aunt Ardeth Newton with twins John and George Craft on the front porch at 415 South 4th Street

These were hard times for the family. Shortly after the move to Odessa, the finance company picked up the 1933 Plymouth because the folks were unable to keep up the payments. This left Dad without transportation and relegated him to walking to work or depending on someone else for a ride. Mom came down with the measles while pregnant and gave birth to a stillborn girl. This was a very devastating, psychologically difficult time for Mom and Dad. From this time on, Mom's health began to decline.

Then in late fall, the family suffered another blow when Standlin laid Dad off from the pipeline.

Dad had never worked in a coal mine before, but needed a job and heard that the mines over at Higginsville, Missouri, were hiring, and so he boarded the train for the 18-mile trip and got hired. He would work all week and then return home by train on Saturday evenings.

On one of those occasions when Dad returned home that winter, he brought brand new clothes for the family which he bought at J. B. Hereford's Dry Goods and Ready-to-Wear Store on his walk home from the depot. George and I got brand new overalls which we excitedly put on and started jumping up and down around the living room. Dad also bought a large family-size Hershey bar to share, and he handed George and me each a piece which also added to the pleasure. George and I were in a height of ecstasy; we had new overalls and were eating store-bought candy! This was our 1937 Christmas but without a Christmas tree because there was not enough money.

Dad continued working in the coal mine through the rest of the winter. Working conditions in the coal mine in wintertime weren't so bad. It was hard work, but at least the temperature was a constant 62 degrees underground. However, as spring approached and the days started getting longer, it became harder for Dad to keep working in the mine. He yearned for daylong sunshine and fresh air.

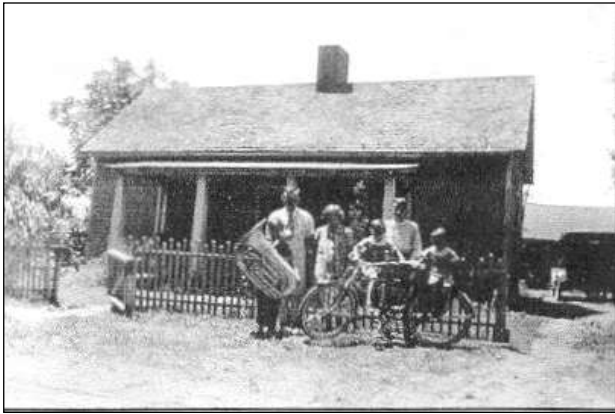
Just about all the farmers around Odessa had a few head of sheep which provided them two cash crops a year, wool and lambs. They needed someone to shear for them, and since Dad had learned to shear sheep back on the farm in Kansas, this was a great opportunity for him to take leave from the mine until next fall. Dad's shearing equipment consisted of two pair of hand blades, a wet stone and a No. 3 coffee can that he used for keeping the stone and water in for sharpening the blades. He carried these in a gunnysack thrown over his shoulder as he walked out to the farms to shear.

As the shearing slacked off, Dad would take on jobs painting houses, barns, and out buildings. It was then that Dad took the 1917 Model T in payment for his labor, described in the beginning of this story.

With the Model T Things Started Looking Up

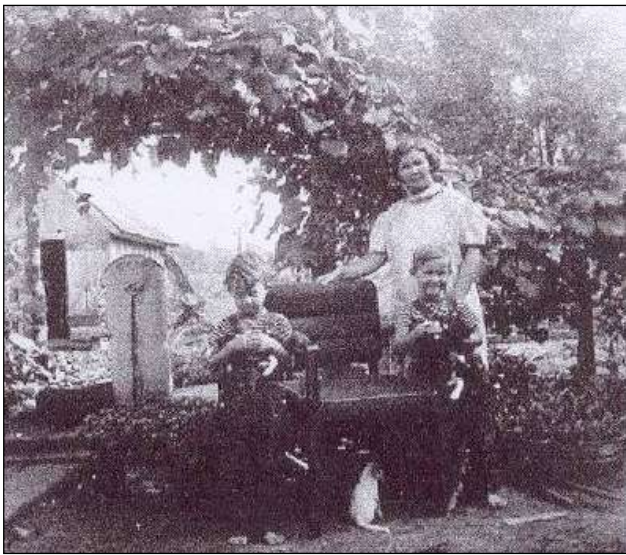
Shortly after getting the Model T, Mom and Dad bought the house at 213 North Russell Street. This was an older house sitting on two lots. It had a long coal shed at the back of the property along the alley, an old washhouse with an attached small tin shed, and a small chicken house. The yard had several fruit trees, apple, peach,

Bartlett pear, and cherry. The place also had two arbors of Concord grapes, one



Charles (holding Ernest's Tuba) Dad, Mom, and Ernest. Twins George and John sitting on Ernest's bicycle. This is in front of house at 213 North Russell Street. 1917 Model T in driveway.

draped over the water well pump and one over the entryway to the washhouse and tin shed. We moved into this property in July of 1938. The mortgage payments on this property were \$7 a month.



John, George, and Mom with chair that will later be fitted with two front wheels and a swivel rear wheel.

The Model T certainly made life easier for Dad and gave us many childhood memories. I remember having several Sunday afternoon rides into the country in this old Model T. Dad would lift Mom up into the front seat and then step around to the front of the T and hand-crank the engine to life. He would then step back

around to the passenger side (there were no driver-side doors on Model Ts until 1926) and step up and over Mom's feet and squirm in between her and the steering wheel to get to the driver's seat. Sometimes the rides were just to enjoy the scenery and the beautiful farms on the dirt roads surrounding Odessa. Other times we might be making a special trip to fill gunnysacks with Black Walnuts from one of the farmers' walnut groves. Dad would prearrange walnut harvests with the farmer.

One time Dad drove down a quaint country lane and stopped under a couple of Persimmon trees. George and I had never eaten any of these small orange-red plum-like fruit goodies that Dad was telling us were so delicious. He picked one from the tree and popped it into his mouth, munched it a bit and spit out the seed and raved about how good it tasted. Then he picked a couple more and handed one to each of us and said, "Here try them." Dad was delighted in watching our faces as we each put them in our mouth and started to chew, puckered up and immediately spit them out sputtering. Dad was laughing at the antics and the faces we were making from the effects of tasting unripe Persimmons. It felt like our cheeks were drawing together and wringing out all the moisture in our mouth. From this funny experience (at least funny to Dad), George and I certainly learned how to pick ripe Persimmons!

Fun Riding in the Model T

One mid-September Saturday morning, our First Grade class gathered at the Alton Railroad Depot in Odessa to take our first train ride. We were to take the Eastbound

Puddle Jumper to Higginsville where our parents would be waiting in their autos to pick us up to take us back home. Dad was back working at the mine, so he would have to leave work early to meet us at the Higginsville Depot around noon. A couple of our classmates joined us for the ride home in the Model T Ford. Heading south on State Route 13 from Higginsville, we traveled past pictorial farmsteads with rolling lush pastures, white fenced lanes, and large red barns. As we came closer to Highway US 40, Dad would read for us the advertising billboards that were trying to lure the motorists west to Kansas City. After we turned west on Highway US 40 we started seeing more advertising of many different kinds. There were Tobacco Company, Oil Company, Bread Company, and Piston Ring Company brands painted on roofs and sides of barns that sat close to the Highway. The fence posts along the right-of-way were also used for advertising products. Dad read for us one of these equally spaced jingles: Car in Ditch—Man in Tree—Moon was Full—and so was He—*Burma Shave*.



Further down the road, Dad pulled into the filling station at the Mayview Junction to buy gas and bought us all a bottle of Nesbitt's orange pop to drink as we watched the owner pump gas for dad. The owner pulled the tall pump handle of the gas pump back and forth as we watched the gas swish into the graduated glass cylinder (on top of the gas pump) up to the amount that Dad had ordered. Then the owner took the filler hose that was connected to the glass cylinder and inserted its nozzle into the opening of the gas tank under the front seat of the Model T. The owner squeezed the nozzle handle, and we watched the gas disappear from the glass cylinder as it gravity flowed into the gas tank of the Model T. This was quite a fascinating show for these six-year-old First Graders. We climbed back into the Model T and continued our ride on home to Odessa.

This is what I remembered most vividly of our first train ride. It was not about the train ride, but rather it was the ride home with our dad in his old open 1917 Model T Ford Touring Car.

Model T Cold Weather Work

One of the profound memories that George and I have of Dad and his Model T are of cold winter mornings. George and I alternated mornings of getting up to make Dad's breakfast and pack his lunch. Dad would wake the one that was on duty shortly after 4:00AM. When our warm feet hit that cold bedroom floor, we would hurriedly grab our clothes, shoes, and socks and scurry into the kitchen to sit on a chair by the Warm Morning Stove to put them on. Dad was always up a little before 4:00AM to make sure that Ernest had left for his job at Dougherty's Dairy

and would then re-stoke the kitchen and living room stoves. At that time he would also fill the large teakettle with water and set it over one of the three burners of the kerosene stove to heat. This warm water would be used later in helping to start the Model T.

During the winter, the first thing Dad did as soon as he got home at night was to always drain the Model T's radiator of water. If he failed to do so, the water would freeze and crack the engine block resulting in a very expensive repair bill. Dad would also drain the T when he got to work on the cold winter mornings. Antifreeze was available at the time and most popular was methyl alcohol that had good cooling ability but had drawbacks of boil away and flammability. Prestone ethylene glycol antifreeze, had been on the market since 1927. It would not boil away or burn. Possibly Dad didn't use these because he couldn't afford the expense.

As either George or I would start preparing breakfast, Dad would put on his overshoes, his fleece-lined coat, and cap with earflaps, and he would then head out the back door with the teakettle of warm water in one hand and the lit kerosene lantern in the other to begin the everyday ritual of starting the Model T. He would set the teakettle down in front of the T then step into the washhouse to retrieve one of the cattails that had been soaking in kerosene. Cattails are tall reed-like marsh plants with furry brown spikes of tiny flowers at the top of their stem, looking very much like a hot dog on a stick. Soaked in kerosene and lit with a match, they make a very good poor man's torch. Dad always had a large supply of

these as they grew in abundance along the banks of the railroad pond a block north of our house. Back at the T dad would lift the left hood, reach in and down to close the radiator drain petcock, and he would then reach up by the steering wheel and fully retard the spark lever. It would be set all the way up on the left quadrant, and the gas lever would be set at about four notches down on the right quadrant. Then he would turn the ignition switch on. He then poured the warm water from the teakettle into the radiator. Next, he lit the cattail, raised the right side of the hood, and held the torch under the intake manifold until the torch burned out. This would be long enough to get the intake manifold hot enough to vaporize the gas mixture when drawn through it on the way to the cylinders. He then stepped to the front of the T, grabbed the crank, pushed it in to engage the engine, pulled the choke wire, and cranked the engine through to prime the engine. Then he released the choke wire and gave the engine a swift crank. If the engine came to life, Dad would quickly step around to the left side of the T and pull the spark lever down to advance the spark. If the engine sputtered and died, Dad would again retard the spark and repeat the cranking process. When the engine kept running, Dad would step over to the well pump and refill the teakettle and then use it to finish filling the radiator. Dad would reset the gas lever and leave the T running before coming back into the kitchen to eat breakfast.

Model T Fords did not have starters until 1919. That year they were equipped with a complete 6-volt electrical system which included a starter, generator, electric lights, and storage battery. This gave the

luxury of turning the ignition switch to Bat (battery) then depressing the starter switch (located on the floor board) with the heel of your left foot to start the engine. After the engine started, you would turn the ignition switch from Bat to Mag (magneto) and continue running on the magneto. Since Dad's Model T was a 1917, he did not have this luxury.

After breakfast Dad would again put on his fleece-lined coat and cap with earflaps and head out the back door this time with the kerosene lantern in one hand and his miner's lunch pail in the other. He would step up into the Model T, sit down on the seat, place the lunch pail down on the floorboard, latch the door, and slide over under the steering wheel. Model Ts did not have heaters, so Dad would turn the kerosene lantern down low and set it on the floorboard between his legs and place a large comforter over his lap and legs to keep warm. He squeezed the handle of the parking brake lever and brought it forward to its most vertical position. He then pushed the *center pedal to back out* of the driveway onto Russell Street pushing the *right pedal to stop*. Heading north, he pushed the *left pedal forward into low* until the T was moving. He then released the left pedal at the same time pushing the parking brake lever all the way forward, allowing the *left pedal to move rearward into high* as he went around the corner heading east to another day working in the coal mine.

George or I would then go back to bed for more sleep until we had to get up and get ready for school.

Since I was only 3 years 8 months old when we moved to Missouri, the events

that took place in Kansas in this story are written from my memory of the stories that Mom and Dad told as we were growing up, and these were helped by consultations with my brothers, Ernest and Charles and Uncle Frank G. Craft.

In the sequence of Dad starting the Model T in this story, it was observed at a very young age. We remember Dad doing all of these things, not knowing all the reasons why.

Not until 60 years later and after owning and driving a Model T, would I be able to tell the reasons why and be able to explain the three pedals and operation of this wonderful national treasure, that our Dad once owned, the Model T Ford.