



HIGHWAYS and BYWAYS

Road Trippin' - 60s Style

BY ERIC FINN, ESQ.

The year was 1967. Canada was awash with a patriotic frenzy celebrating 100 years of confederation, and Montrealers had opened their hearts to the world with Expo '67. I had graduated from McGill University, and to celebrate this milestone, my father felt it was time I had a car to get to my summer job. The car we found was far from ordinary. It was a 1958 Ford Fairlane teetering on its last legs. Rust had taken over most of the external panels, leaving gaping holes in the wheel wells of the trunk. The engine required oil nearly every time the car was filled with gas. But it was a hard top, and the interior was respectable. Despite the rust, it looked cool.

The car was great for getting back and forth to work, for weekend camping trips to the Adirondacks and for the occasional tour around Ile Bizard at breakneck speed with my buddies screaming encouragement from the back seat. In July, my employer shut down for two weeks, so I decided it was time for the ultimate road trip to Chicago to visit my brother and his family. I filled the car with camping gear, food, gas and oil and headed off to the United States.

I soon discovered that the road system in the United States and Canada had improved greatly over the years, no doubt due to the hard work of right of way professionals. I found expressways and interstates linking major municipalities, as well as multi-lane divided highways for bypassing metropolitan areas while coping with the large number of commuters congesting the road system. In more rural areas, the primary highway was usually composed of two or four undivided lanes. Then there were winding country roads, which were not only a scenic route to follow, but in many areas, the staple for transportation between communities.

My route first took me south through the familiar countryside of New York State. I camped for a night near the Finger Lakes, enjoying the calm countryside before continuing on to more unfamiliar cities and states. From there, I drove through Ohio, until I heard a loud scraping noise coming from underneath the car. At the first service station I found, the car was lifted on to a hoist to determine the problem. Apparently, the outer shell of my muffler had rusted off. The mechanic advised me that, in the State of Ohio, cars were not permitted on the road with defective

mufflers, not to mention cracked side windows, which happened to be another feature of my car. When I assured him that I was from Montreal and just passing through, he took pity on me and wished me well on my trip.

Next, my route took me through Youngstown, Akron, Columbus and Dayton, Ohio, all of which I remember as being very active industrial and commercial municipalities. In those days, Ohio was prospering as a major manufacturing state, yet I still managed to find a campsite where the beauty and greenery provided a calming respite.

Then it was off to Indiana and its capital of Indianapolis. Despite the traffic, I managed to drive down the main street at midday, when apparently everyone in the city had decided to take a drive as well. This was my first gridlock experience. As I crawled through the downtown area, the slow pace allowed me to look around at the buildings and people. Indianapolis looked like a clean and prosperous community, and if not for the gridlock, it seemed to be an enjoyable place to visit. Since I couldn't afford a hotel in the middle of a large city, I drove on through until I found a campsite on Route 41, directly south of Chicago. There I spent the night before heading on to my ultimate destination.

Looking at the map, the most direct route from Indianapolis to Chicago was Route 41. This was an area where interstates had not yet grown to the extent they are today, and still had only bypasses around the Chicago area. In Indiana, Route 41 was a two-lane undivided highway. My brother lived close to the lakeshore in Chicago, and Route 41 became the lakeshore road through Chicago, a much better option than the bypass. For many years, the roads connecting municipalities tended to pass through the older industrial areas of the city, and Route 41 through Chicago was no different.

Although 1967 was a year of celebration in Canada, it was a year of great unrest in the United States. Rioting had become part of day-to-day life in municipalities such as Detroit, Los Angeles and, yes, Chicago. The turmoil in Chicago in turned out to be only a preliminary event for 1968, the time of the Democratic National Convention. As I entered southeast Chicago, it became clear that the atmosphere was more than a little charged. While the action was yet to get underway, groups of young people were milling on the corners. Steel barrels stood at intersections with smoke rising into the air. Even though it was still early morning when I entered the city, it was quickly evident that a young, white man stood out in this mix of ethnic urban culture. As I moved along the road, a few sideward glances caused me to roll up my windows (even the cracked one) and lock the doors. Perhaps, the condition of my car helped me to blend into the community. I was later told that I was lucky I wasn't mistaken for a "cracker," a term for the poor white transients from the south who were moving north to the cities and taking jobs from the locals.

Nevertheless, I made it to my brother's home and spent a few days with his family enjoying the sights of Chicago. During the day, there were trips to museums and walks along the lakeshore, a continuous park for miles. Back then, the park was still used as a gathering place for youth trying to make their mark on their community. At night, we visited the area known as the "loop," where we enjoyed the ambience of the coffee houses and entertainment.

When it was time to leave, I decided to take the interstate bypass out of the city, passing quickly through the industrial areas of East Chicago and Gary, Indiana. On my way through Michigan, I stopped at a campground in the Kalamazoo/Battle Creek area and visited the Kellogg plant. Passing through Detroit, I stayed on the interstate, which took me directly to the Canadian border. The last night of the trip was spent at a campground near London, Ontario. From London to Montreal, the route was entirely expressway, Highway 401 throughout Ontario changing to Highway 20 once crossing the border of Quebec.

As I drove through the suburbs of Montreal, I realized that my car was making a distinctive knocking sound. I had recently read in the Canadian Automobile Association magazine that a knocking sound can be a sign of low oil. However, it could also mean you have an internal engine problem. Unfortunately, my knocking sound was a sign of an internal engine problem. The engine was blown. I managed to limp home the last few miles and made my way into the driveway. My father just happened to need a new car at the time, so he traded in both his car and mine. Mine paid for his car radio.

Since then, I have visited Chicago, Detroit, Indianapolis and a few places in between. These days, the trip is usually a short flight, where I find myself waiting for my luggage at the airport, lining up for a taxi or shuttle and staying in a non-descript hotel room. The trip just isn't the same. Of course, I could jump into my SUV and follow the same route, but the times have changed and the comfort of an SUV is a far cry from the coolness of a 1958 Ford Fairlane hardtop.



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