

## Cross-country Adventure

I remember once hearing it said that, during the Second World War, the ideal age for a fighter pilot was nineteen. Whether or not that was actually true, young men of that age typically possess some of the more important attributes for that kind of service. Two of them are: (1) excellent coordination and reaction time; and (2) an abiding sense of immortality—the confirmed belief that they could beat the odds. I was never a fighter pilot, but I did have an experience at that age that—as I look back on it now—demanded some of those same attributes. I was not yet in the military at that time, but military equipment played a major part in the experience.

It was the summer of 1949, although to properly set the stage for the narrative, I need to begin several years earlier, sometime around the end of the war. It started in a barn on a farm outside my hometown of Waverly, Iowa. In that barn, the farmer, a man named Vern Schield, had built the prototype for a small and relatively inexpensive excavating machine that could be mounted on the frame of a surplus GI truck. It was an extraordinarily timely invention. Surplus GI trucks were abundant and cheap. The forthcoming housing boom would create a tremendous demand for such machines. They could dig a basement for a house in a fraction of the time required by traditional methods—typically a man with a team of horses and a scoop. So this enterprising inventor and his brother, Wilbur, incorporated The Schield Bantam Company and began manufacturing these machines at a plant they built in Waverly.

Now, fast forward to the summer of 1947. A burgeoning manufacturing plant needs specialists in the tool trade, and Wilbur Schield's father-in-law, Robert Mong, was a skilled tool and die maker. So Mr. Mong moved his family from Pennsylvania to Waverly that summer and began working at the Schield Bantam plant. His older son Bob (not Junior—different middle name) was going to be a senior in high school that year. I was the same age and we became close friends that summer.

After we graduated from high school in 1948, Bob went to college and I continued working in the family greenhouse business in Waverly. The following summer, Bob had a job at the Schield plant, so we were able to continue our close relationship after working hours. Sometime around the first of August that summer Bob posed an intriguing question: "How would you like to go with me and the shop foreman out to Schenectady, New York and drive back some surplus Army trucks?" It was an attractive proposal and I'm sure I was ready to say yes the instant he stopped speaking. However, I was working in the family business and had to get leave from my parents before I could give him a definite answer. In fact the business had provided me one of the essential qualifications I needed to undertake the project. I was already licensed to drive a truck for hire.

My parents agreed to give me time off for the adventure and Bob and I began making travel plans to reach Schenectady by a specified date, when we were scheduled meet Don Pauley, the shop foreman, at an Army surplus depot and begin our journey back to Iowa. We planned to make two stops on our way there. First, we were going to visit the town in Western Pennsylvania where Bob had grown up and had attended school until that last year. He wanted to show me around the town, Franklin, and introduce me to some of the friends he had grown up with. Then because we had to go through New York City to get to Schenectady, we planned a day and two nights in The Big Apple, cramming as much as we possibly could into the time we had there. It was a most ambitious itinerary, but we were nineteen and indefatigable.

[NOTE: Bob and I remain in contact by email, so I sent a draft of this essay to him for his comments, hoping he might be able to fill in a few details where my own recollections have

faded. He graciously responded and I have appended notes like this in several places in the manuscript, where he has additional (or different) memories of the events of our travels.]

Those travels began in Waterloo, Iowa, the closest town where we could catch a train to Chicago. In those days, trains were the most common means of cross-country travel, although we planned to travel from Chicago to Pittsburgh by air. Typically, the train from Waterloo to Chicago was a sleeper that left at about midnight and arrived around ten in the morning. No details of that trip remain in my memory.

I do recall getting from the train station to Midway Airport (the only Chicago airport at the time), although I don't remember how. [NOTE: Bob recalls that "There were busses going to Midway available close to the railroad depot and we took one of those busses to Midway."] For me, being at Midway was no small deal. I had never flown on a commercial airliner and it was a pretty exciting prospect. The plane was a two-engine DC-3, a pretty common vehicle in those days, although I remember virtually nothing about the flight itself.

I do recall a few details of our brief visit to Franklin, PA, most notably having lunch in a local diner. I had never been in a genuine diner—the kind I had seen in movies or in magazine photos—shaped like a railroad car with a long counter and a string of stools. I had eaten at lunch counters before, but never in a real diner. What I remember most about that experience was the meatloaf I ordered. It was the best meatloaf I ever ate (with apologies to my mother and my wife, both of whom made wonderful meatloaf). [Bob recalls "The diner in Franklin was called Andy's Diner after the owner...I am 90% positive that the diner was modified from an actual old railroad car."] I also enjoyed meeting Bob's former schoolmates—particularly the females—and he was in his element showing me around where he had grown up. But we were on a tight schedule and, all too soon, we had to hop a bus for Pittsburgh to catch our train to New York City.

The train must have arrived at Grand Central Station fairly late in the evening, because our whirlwind tour of The Big Apple didn't begin until the following morning. That night, we took a room at the Commodore Hotel, which sat virtually on top of the railroad station. You could walk from the station to the lobby of the hotel without going outside. You can imagine how impressive that was for kid from Iowa with little experience as a traveler.

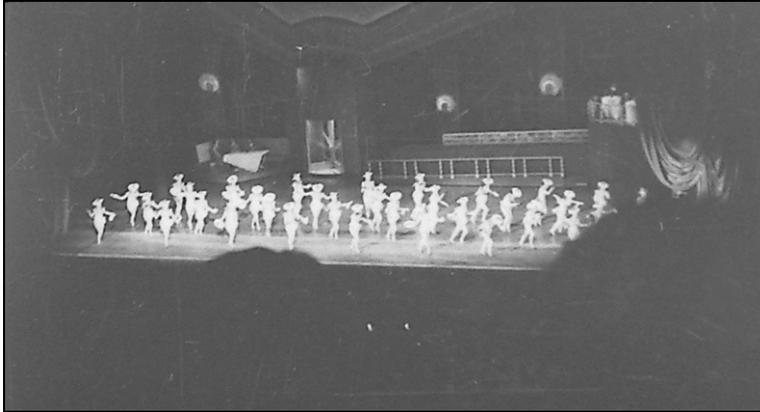
I don't know how we determined a schedule and itinerary for our day in New York, but it was predictably a full one. We had to be in Schenectady by the following morning, so we didn't have any time to waste. We walked everywhere we went. At that time, the Empire State Building was the tallest building in the world, so our day had to begin on the elevator to its observation deck. Two things I remember about that experience. The first was the elevator ride. I had ridden in my brother's airplane many times, but that elevator matched it in the excitement of defying gravity. The second was the view. It was a disappointment because of the haze. We could see the parts of the city closest to the skyscraper, but Central Park was mostly just a blur.

I was a bit of a camera buff in those days and I must have taken my 35mm camera along on the trip, because I have discovered among some



old photographs two black-and-white negatives taken on that day in New York. One of them was a shot of the Empire State Building as shown above.

The next scheduled stop on our whirlwind tour of Manhattan was the Radio City Music Hall, where we planned to see an afternoon movie followed by a live show featuring the Rockettes. Also included in the live entertainment that day was ventriloquist Senor Wenses. First, however, we had to get something to eat. Our choice that day was pizza at one of the many little eateries near Times Square. In 1949, pizzas were still pretty much unheard of in our part of the country, so it was a treat for us to stand and watch the chef skillfully whirl the dough into disks that would become the crusts of a pizza we would later enjoy for lunch.



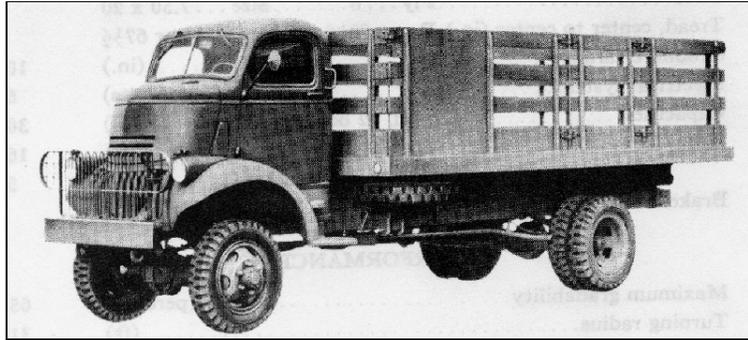
I don't remember what movie we saw at Radio City that afternoon, but I certainly remember the Rockettes. The second photograph I salvaged from that day was this one of that celebrated troop of dancers. Being in the live audience for Senor Wenses, whom I have seen on TV many times in the years since then, was a most captivating experience for me. He was an absolute riot.

Whatever we had for dinner that night, it had to be pretty much on the run, because we had one more stop on our adventure before we had to head back to Grand Central to catch a train to Schenectady. We wanted to see a Broadway play. At the time, three possibilities looked inviting. One was "Where's Charlie" starring Ray Bolger. The second was "The Death of a Salesman" starring Thomas Mitchell. The third was "Mister Roberts" starring Henry Fonda. I don't think it took us long to agree that "Mister Roberts" would be our choice—and a great choice it was. It was one of the most memorable experiences of my life.

It was fairly late when we left the theater, but we soon discovered that New York really was "the city that never sleeps." As we walked back to Grand Central Station, the sidewalks and streets were just as bustling as they had been earlier in the evening. Back home, by this time, everyone would be asleep. We still had several hours to wait before our train was scheduled to leave, so I'm sure we spent some of it basking in the hum of Gotham nightlife. However, we had had a very busy day—and little rest since we left Pittsburgh—so we found our luggage where we had stored it at the station and sought out an isolated place where we could get a little rest before our train left. It was a short rest. Soon after I had stretched out on a waiting-room bench and was dead to the world, I felt a persistent tap-tap-tapping on the sole of my shoe. I awoke to find a big New York cop standing over me, insisting that could not sleep there. We sat up till our train departed a little later that night.

[Bob recalls, "Because of my relationship to Wilbur, he made sure we had enough expense money to stop in Franklin and in NYC...somehow \$100 sticks in my mind but I don't remember if that was for both of us or each one. Anyway what does stick in my mind was that we had the good sense to go buy our train tickets to Schenectady before we did anything else, so we would not run out of money and not be able to buy our train tickets. In fact we ran the money so close that when we had to take a cab to Don Pauley's Motel and we arrived approx. 5-6AM, we had to awaken Don in order for him to pay the cab fee for us because we were broke!!"]

By the time we arrived in Schenectady, Pauley had been there for a couple of days. He had picked out the six trucks we would be transporting and had just about finished putting three of them in sufficient working order so that we could take them on the road. We each would be driving one and towing one and the plan was to use the towed vehicles as sources of spare parts if we had mechanical difficulties along the way. My best guess from research on the internet is that these vehicles were 1½ ton, cab-over-engine, flatbed cargo trucks like the one pictured here.



These trucks did not have operational running lights, so we could only be on the road during the daylight hours. They were long wheel-base vehicles, each with an overall length more than 22 feet (and an empty weight of over four tons), so each of us was going to be managing almost 50 feet of length (and nearly nine tons of weight) on the road—and all of the roads on our itinerary would have two lanes only. In addition, it was the peak of the summer and those engines (straight-6 cylinders with 235 cu. in. displacement) would be putting out a lot of heat. It was going to be like spending the day sitting on top of a furnace. Looking back on that day, we probably should have been petrified at the prospect of maneuvering those vehicles out of the safety of the surplus depot and onto the highways of eastern New York state. But, as I said at the outset, 19-year-olds tend to undertake such challenges with extreme confidence and I'm sure we were both pretty light hearted as our convoy hit the road for home.

There was no way for us to communicate on the road, so we had to have our route, check points and emergency procedures well in mind before we started each day. Because Pauley was ultimately responsible for the mission, he needed to be at the rear of the convoy. That way, if one of us had trouble, he would be along shortly to address the problem. Of course, that meant that one of us had to be in the lead and we had to be constantly alert to the itinerary. As I recall, we pretty much stuck to two highways (U.S. 20 and U.S. 6), so we didn't lose our way much, if at all.

However, it was generally slow progress, even when everything was going well—and it often wasn't. I expect that we were lucky to average 30 MPH on a good day. These trucks were not built for speed, and the terrain and traffic regularly took their toll on our progress. For example, when we were in the hill country of New York and Pennsylvania, we could never make it over the hills without having to shift down—usually to second gear—for much of the incline. The transmissions on the trucks had five speeds forward. We seldom had to use first gear except to start from a full stop. So the routine going over the hills required us to get up as much speed as possible, in fifth gear, as we descended one hill and started up the next one, then we had to shift down as the ascent became too demanding—from fifth to fourth to third and finally to second. Then, with the engine screaming at maximum RPM, the heat in the cab would become intolerable, so I would open the door and stand on the running board with my right foot still holding the accelerator to the floor.

At the top of the hill, the routine would start all over. I would jump back into the cab and begin shifting up as the truck's speed increased, hoping to have no slower traffic in front of me as I barreled downhill to get a run at the next one. Regrettably, I wasn't always so fortunate.

Then I would have to slow down—or if I had enough distance and line-of-sight—I would pass the traffic with the pedal to the metal. Otherwise, I would have to endure a slow and torturous ascent without a running start—with any traffic behind me undoubtedly mumbling epithets at the driver standing on the running board of the truck ahead, blocking their way. That was the routine, mile after mile, as we traversed any hilly terrain. And it was on one of these cycles that I became the principal in our first major problem.

The descending stretch of Hwy. 20 I was on had been cut out of the side of a hill, so that there was a drop-off on my left and the wall of a cliff on my right. There was slower traffic on the highway ahead so I was forced to slow down till I could pass. However, when I stepped on the brake, the pedal went to the floor without any resistance—and the truck continued to increase in speed. My brakes were totally gone. Yet, there was no way for me to pass the vehicle ahead of me, because a truck was ascending in the left-hand lane. Then, just as it appeared that there was no way for me to avoid a disaster, the shoulder on the left began to open wide enough to accommodate the width of my trucks. I swung my rigs across the left-hand lane just in time to avoid a collision with the oncoming truck, but continuing to gain speed as the shoulder widened into some kind of construction area.

Now, with some room to maneuver, I was able to begin shifting down to allow the transmission to slow the speed of the trucks. Fortunately, the construction area was a large expanse at the bottom of the hill, so by the time I was able to shift down into second gear I was on the level and going slowly enough to shift into first and turn off the ignition. The engine hiccuped a few times and then finally brought the trucks to a full stop. I got out and sat on the running board, shaking.

I don't recall now whether Pauley was close enough behind me to see what had happened, but I was still sitting on the running board when he drove up beside me—and I can still recall my first words to him when he got out of his truck. "I don't know who is driving this truck the rest of the way to Iowa," I told him emphatically, "but it ain't going to be me!"

He looked over my truck and satisfied himself that he knew what was wrong. Then he said that he would drive it to the next town and that I should drive his. Bob was in the lead vehicle at that time, but he would not go past the next town without assuring that we were both still with him, so we found him waiting for us there when we finally arrived. Don Pauley was obviously a very skilled—and very gutsy—driver, because even with only a couple of miles to travel, maneuvering those vehicles with no brakes had to be a real challenge.

The problem with my truck was the master brake cylinder, but we could not find a serviceable one on any of the spare trucks, so Pauley had to go to a local dealership to get one. However, it was a small town and they had none in stock and it had to be ordered. That meant we were stuck in a motel there for a day or two while we waited for the part to arrive. I have only vague memories of that stay, but I'm sure it was a colossal bore for two 19-year-olds with more appetite for excitement than a village in the hills of western New York could possibly offer at that time.

In recent years I have had frequent regrets that I did not have the insight to keep a journal of experiences like this cross-country adventure, but I didn't, so the reader will have to make due with what I can still recall after more than sixty years—which has a lot of gaps. Predictably, those gaps generally encompass times when things were going reasonably well, which was most of the time. In fact, I can only recall a couple more instances when the routine was interrupted sufficiently to provoke a lasting impression in my memory. The first occurred somewhere in the middle of the trip, when we were in relatively flat country and making reasonably good time.

The cooling system on my truck sprang a leak—not a major leak, but one that changed my driving routine considerably.

Apparently, in Pauley’s opinion, the leak was not sufficient to take the truck out of service immediately, because I drove it that way for at least a day. As I recall, I could drive possibly 20 miles before the water level in the radiator became too low to drive without damage to the engine. Then I had to stop and add water. Fortunately, we were driving through an area where small towns were frequent on the highways we were using, and service stations then routinely had water available without charge. So, we added a five-gallon water can to my equipment and this made it possible for me to fill the radiator a couple of times from the can between stops at the service stations. It quickly became a routine. I would fill up the radiator and the water can at each service station stop, make a couple of water stops on the road from the can in the next 30 to 40 miles, and then start looking for another service station. I don’t remember following that routine for more than a day or two, so we must have finally taken time to fix the leak, because it was not a problem through the rest of the trip. However, those frequent water stops had been adding more delays to our already snail-paced progress.

The only other memorable incident I can recall from the trip occurred when I was only about 25 miles from home. I was on a familiar stretch of road, making good progress, when the steering wheel began to shake violently. I stopped quickly and jumped out to see what was wrong and discovered that the lug nuts on the left front wheel had come loose and that the wheel was in the process of coming off. Three of the six bolts were already sheared off and the rest were barely holding on. Fortunately, the remaining three were still intact and it was possible tighten their lug nuts and secure the wheel well enough to finish the trip home.

Without having kept a record, I have no good idea how long it took us to make the trip, but it was slow. It had to be over a week, but I just don’t remember. [Bob recalls, “... if my memory is worth anything, somehow 5 days sticks in my mind as our total elapsed time from Schenectady to Waverly...”] Like most things in the life of a 19-year-old, events remain interesting—and memorable—only for the moment. Then other, more immediately interesting, things take their place. In fact, I’m sure that the experience of driving those rag-tag rigs twelve hundred miles across the United States in 1949 is a lot bigger deal to me now than it was then.

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