

## Going West in a Model T Ford

by James Burdick and Jim Kackeison  
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by Paul Duncan

Book Review

In the summer of 1919, Bill Kackeison a 28-year old machinist with the Overland Automobile Company and his brother Jim, a 22 year old assembly line worker for Elmira Eclipse Company, left their home in Elmira, New York on a road trip to California. They were driving a 1916 Model T Roadster that they had remodeled with a speedster body. They added oversized clincher tires, rebuilt the steering and “souped up” the engine.

The author, James Burdick, reviewed the trip with the younger brother Jim years after the 1919 trip and was asked to “put it in writing”. By the time of publication in 2017, both Kackeison brothers had died.

The book is short, well written and tells a compelling story of automobile travel in the U.S. just after World War I ended. Chicago is 650 miles due west from Elmira, New York and it took 7 days to drive in their Model T. They camped out and really no problems with directions, roads or the Model T.

They drove for 9 days to travel the 1000 miles between Chicago and Denver. They stated: “In 1919, one literally traveled by the compass and sun west of Chicago. Every mile was a challenge.” The roads improved in Nebraska where they traveled on the Omaha, Lincoln and Denver (OLD) highway. This highway had been designated by the Transcontinental Highway Association in 1911 and in 1913 tire-shaped metal signs on top of 12-foot posts were placed along the route.<sup>1</sup> They carried a pistol and scared away two likely robbers in Nebraska. They

worked harvesting wheat in 100 degree weather and after only one day quit. They suffered their first flat tire. They obtained work at a hospital in Denver. Jim developed abdominal pain and was operated on for a ruptured appendix. Fortunately, he recovered and they were on the Southern Route to California in three weeks through New Mexico. They traveled the 1000 miles to LA in 39 days.

They drove their T to the top of Pike’s Peak (14,115 ft.). They arrived in New Mexico over Raton Pass and recounted : “The brakes on our Ford got so hot coming down the summit of Raton Pass, that Bill chopped down a tree and chained it to the rear axle.” While camping in New Mexico, they

encountered both wolves and cougars. They passed through Albuquerque and drove on to Magdalena. From there, they headed to Phoenix via the Salt River Canyon. Along the way, they observed a Navajo Squaw dance and discovered that kerosene could be substituted for gasoline in their T.

They arrived safely in LA after driving 55 total days and then sold their T. They found work in LA but after a few months returned by train to New York. Travel across the US in 1919 was not for inexperienced drivers. Some of their road descriptions fit stories I remember my father telling me about travel in a Model T around Denver in the early 1920’s. I recommend this book to anyone interested in early cross country travel in a Model T.

