

## Horatio's Drive

### America's First Road Trip

By Dayton Duncan and Ken Burns

Alfred A. Knopf, New York, Publisher, 2003

**Hardback Book** 173 pages: includes B&W photographs, selected sources and credits

**Video:** Ken Burns: *Horatio's Drive: America's First Road Trip* (DVD), PBS Home Video, 1hr, 47 min, CC Dolby, Color, 2003. Streaming on PBS and other sites

by Paul Duncan

Book Review

In the forward to this book, author and noted filmmaker Ken Burns discusses his affinity for road trips and how he remembers the details of past road trips he has taken. Taking a road trip is a valued and planned for family pastime and part of our unique American culture.

This book "Horatio's Drive" tells the story about America's First Road Trip that took place between May 23, and July 26, 1903. The trip started in San Francisco and ended in New York City. The route covered 5,000 miles: traveling through northern California, Oregon, Idaho, Wyoming, Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio and finally across New York to New York City.

In 1893, the first gasoline-powered-vehicles were produced in Massachusetts. One year later, Henry Ford built his quadricycle. Three years later, Scottish immigrant Alexander Winton formed the Winton Motor Carriage Company in Cleveland, OH. In 1901, Winton was ready to attempt a drive across America but his first attempt ended after 500 miles. Around this time, he met Henry Ford who beat him in a race at Gross Point, MI. In 1903 the Winton Touring car had a 22 HP horizontal 2-cylinder engine driving a unique 2-speed transmission with a separate clutch for each speed and chain drive to the rear axle. The gears were in constant mesh. There were contracting band breaks on the rear wheels. A water-filled radiator took up the entire front of the car.

In May, 1903 Dr. Horatio Nelson Jackson and his wife were in San Francisco after a business trip to Alaska where they were investing in gold and silver mines. Jackson was a 31 year old Vermont physician who had retired from practice after contracting a mild case of tuberculosis. He had married a wealthy woman who supported his many adventures. While at the San Francisco University Club, Jackson commented that the "automobile was more than a rich man's toy." He boasted that he could drive an automobile across the country in less than 3 months. A Club member wagered \$50 that Jackson couldn't refuse. He purchased a used 1903 Winton automobile for \$3,000 that had 1,000 miles on the cyclometer and two worn rear tires. He found a 22-year-old gasoline engine mechanic, Sewell Crocker to ride with him. Four days later, they set off from San Francisco to the East Coast.

Thirty days after leaving San Francisco and while still in Wyoming, they became aware that two additional automobiles, a Packard and an Oldsmobile, had left San Francisco heading to New York City by a different route.

The Packard and Oldsmobile soon experienced difficulty that slowed their driving.

During the 1903 trip, Jackson's Winton also suffered potentially trip ending mechanical problems. They experienced a broken front axle, 2 broken springs and on two separate occasions, the connecting rod bolts to the crank shaft sheared. There were blacksmiths in every community along the way who could repair many of the broken parts. The connecting rod bolts, however, had to be ordered from the Winton factory in Cleveland and

shipped in by train. Jackson also had a sense of humor. Along the way, he bought a young bulldog named Bud for \$15 and fitted the dog with a pair of goggles (see cover picture left.)

What makes this book so appealing to me were the historic pictures and the text that was recorded during their trip. The authors of *Horatio's Drive*, Dayton Duncan and Ken Burns, researched 1903 newspaper accounts and also include excerpts of letters written by Jackson to his wife who was home in Vermont. One quote from the *Alturas (California) Plain Dealer*

newspaper reported the following, "Quite a flurry of excitement was erected (Friday) evening by the arrival of an automobile. Very few of our citizens had ever seen this, one of the wonders of the century, and large crowds gazed with curious interest at the horseless wagon." Jackson and Crocker finally arrived in New York City in 63 days before both the Packard and the Oldsmobile also reached New York.

I read the book and also watched the PBS documentary DVD also titled "Horatio's Drive." The video included modern views of the terrain that they traversed. I recommend both the book and the companion DVD that documents the first automobile trip across America.

During the decade following this first roadtrip, transcontinental automobile races became popular events. Only 6 years later, in June, 1909, the Ford No. 2, a stripped down Model T initially won a New York City to Seattle race driving 4,106 miles in 23 days! Five months later the Model T was disqualified for changing engines but Henry Ford still used the "victory" to market his popular Model T's!

**Reference:** <https://content.lib.washington.edu/exhibits/aype/race.html#:~:text=The%20declared%20winner%20of%20theNew%20York%20in%2023%20days>

