

THE DRIVING LESSON

By Gladys Whitlock

It has been many years since the acquisition of a driver's license first began to be accepted as the rite of passage by which an adolescent became an adult. Cars still had manual gear shifts and clutches and your driving intentions were signaled with the proper position of your arm out the window.

With the approach of my sixteenth birthday, I eagerly requested my father's services as driving instructor. After a number of such requests he finally consented.

Driving to a vacant lot two blocks from our house, he began the first lesson by showing me a number of times how to start, shift into first and move forward a few feet and then stop. "To stop," he emphasized, "step on the brake and the clutch at the same time or you'll kill the engine." After several demonstrations of this important maneuver he relinquished the driver's seat to me.

The even release of the clutch with the gradual increase of pressure on the gas pedal required more coordination than I had realized. After killing the engine a few times, I finally started across the field with a roar.

Dad shouted, "Stop!"

I reacted instantly. We almost went through the windshield (seat belts were not yet thought of) and I killed the engine again.

After about forty-five minutes I had learned to start the car, coordinate the clutch and shift through the forward gears without destroying the gear box. At least, Dad said he hoped I hadn't done too much damage. He was perspiring pretty heavily by this time. So was I, and the weather really wasn't that warm.

Next, he showed me how to manage the reverse gear.

I drove around the field several times, starting, stopping and backing the car with Dad getting more and more exasperated every time I killed the engine or made the car buck like a rodeo horse. Every inept move increased my sense of incompetence and reduced my desire to try to control this complicated piece of machinery. Driving was not the simple thing it appeared to be from the passenger seat.

When my father could no longer take the nerve strain, he instructed me to leave the lot and drive down the street to our house. There was not another car on the street, but he seemed pretty apprehensive the whole two blocks.

“Park next to the curb,” he commanded.

I wound up about five feet away.

“Try it again.”

I backed up and tried again, only killing the engine once in the process. This time I was about three feet away from the curb.

“I’ll try it again,” I offered.

“No,” Dad said a little grimly. “That’s close enough.”

As we stepped up on the porch, Mom asked, “How’d it go?”

Dad pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead. “Never again,” he said.

I finally learned to drive many years later when I married a Marine. He’d been through World War II and he wasn’t afraid of anything.