

War Era Story Project 2012

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A 16 Year Old Truck Driver for Uncle Sam

The country was still at war with Japan and there was still a significant labor shortage in the summer of 1945. Although I was only 16, I was able to get a Government job. I was hired as a “rodman” by the U S Coast and Geodetic Survey. I had to report for work in Petersburg, Virginia. I packed my suitcase and my mother drove me to the Greyhound bus station in downtown Washington DC to start my trip.

In Petersburg, seven 16-year-old boys, including me, were sworn into Federal Government Service. The next morning after breakfast, our group went to a government storage yard to pick up five trucks that had been in storage during the war. Our party included the leader, a man who had a USC&GS Washington office job but was going to spend the summer in the field as a surveyor, his wife and their two young children, another surveyor and seven 16-year-old boys. Only when we got to the trucks was I told that I would be driving one of them to South Dakota, because I was one of two boys with driver’s licenses. I don’t remember how the truck assignments were made. I think I must have gotten the last choice. The truck I was to drive was a prewar Ford, probably rated at one and a half tons. It had a wooden cab that was so rotten that the driver’s side door had been permanently closed. Fortunately, the window would open. It was heavily loaded with equipment, while none of the other trucks carried any cargo.

For most of the next nine days, the leader drove the first truck, followed by his wife driving the second truck with their children. My truck was the third in line, followed by the other 16-year-old driver, with the other man driving the last truck. Two of the other boys rode in my truck. One was a good student; he had brought along several books to read over the summer. He sat next to me and read these books out loud as we traveled along. Since the maximum speed was only 35 miles per hour, we had many long stretches of boring driving to do. With no radio, tape deck, iPod or CD/MP-3 player, having him reading stories as we drove along greatly reduced the boredom.

The first night on the road, we stopped for the night somewhere on US 60 in central Virginia. Our lodgings were a “Tourist Court” consisting of seven small cabins in a row. Each cabin had one double bed and its own outhouse behind it. We never stayed at a motel chain or ate in a chain restaurant the entire summer.

The second day, as we got into mountains, I really began to have trouble shifting the gears in my truck. I had learned to drive with a manual gear shift. At the time I did not know that cars had synchronizers in the gear box, installed to make shifting easy, and trucks did not. At first, when going up steep hills I almost had to stop the truck to shift down to a lower gear. The situation was made worse for me because my truck was the only one with a heavy load. For reasons not clear to me, the two men did not

give me any shifting or other driving instructions, other than “to stay in line.” I had a lot of shifting problems on the mountainous part of US 60 in West Virginia. It was then that the other sixteen year old driver showed me how to double clutch when shifting into a higher gear. He also instructed me in the much more difficult process of racing the engine to synchronize the gears when shifting down to a lower gear. By the end of the second day when we arrived at Charleston, WV, I had most of the truck-unique driving skills well in hand except for passing big trucks on narrow roads. I never got comfortable with that.

We spent one night in Frankfort, KY. After breakfast, as we came out of the restaurant, I heard what sounded like cows mooing. On closer inspection it turned out to be German prisoners of war who had been loaded into open trucks to be taken to do farm work. It was the first I had seen or heard about German POW's in the Unites States, probably because they were never brought anywhere near my home in the Washington, D C area. There were a few armed Army guards around. The guards did not appear to be concerned about the POW protest noises.

The next evening in Lebanon, Illinois, we found a family-owned restaurant where for dinner we each had two large hamburgers, a 12 oz Pepsi, and a double dip ice cream cone for a total cost of 30 cents each. Keeping costs down was important to all of us. Our pay was \$28 for a six-day work week. Having to support myself for the summer far from home did a lot to teach me to tell the difference between my wants and my needs.

The ninth day, we arrived at Chamberlain, South Dakota on the Missouri River. That day I remember seeing the hundreds of American Indians. They came into town every Saturday. I had never seen an Indian before, except in the movies. By midafternoon there were so many they formed a solid line against the buildings on both sides of the entire main street.

After resting Sunday, I started my summer job on a Government Survey team working in the Dakotas. In September, I hitchhiked back to Washington just in time to start my high school senior year.

