

Shoulder to Shoulder

By Dave Kriplen

This is a tale of a road trip that lasted a lifetime. Fred and Ralph, both pioneer auto mechanics in Fort Dodge, Iowa, had ridden their motorcycles 80 miles to Sioux City to see the automobile races in 1913. They were young bucks with powerful motorcycles in the 100 MPH class. Ralph had a two-cylinder, chain-drive 1,000 cc Excelsior, while Fred was on a De Luxe machine with a powerful Indianapolis-built two-cylinder Spacke engine. Both bikes were big wheeled, small tired, heavy duty bicycle-like brutes.

The trip to Sioux City and back over dirt roads was uneventful, but what they saw at the races changed their lives. Most exciting were the Masons, with engines built by the Duesenbergs for the Mason Company, and the huge, thundering, J.I.C. race car, built by J.I. Case, the farm equipment manufacturer, and driven by Louis Disbrow.

While still full of excitement the boys told all of their pals that they were going to see the Indianapolis 500 the following spring. They planned to ride through to Indy in three days, see the race and ride back. They had no other takers.

On the morning of May 27th they started under threatening skies. They should have parked the bikes and boarded a train because rain and Iowa dirt roads were never a good combination. But what were they to do after months of talking about riding over to the races? It was time to show their stuff.

They traveled scarcely 25 miles before they encountered wet and muddy roads caused by previous rains. They pressed on but the mud became so deep and sticky that it was impossible to travel under power. The only way to move was to push the bikes off the road onto the grass shoulders and dig the sticky gumbo out from the space between the tires and fenders so that they could be pushed by main strength. At first, to assist in pushing, they tried to use engine power but since neither bike had a transmission, it was necessary to slip the clutch while moving at leg-wearying speed. This, of course, caused the clutches to over heat so that technique had to be abandoned.

By noon they had traveled about 40 miles, arriving at Ames where they picked up the modern gravel-surfaced Lincoln Highway that was a vast improvement over the muddy roads they had fought all morning, and they began to make good time. Fred was out front barreling along at about 50 MPH with his buddy close behind when a big dog sprang out in front of Ralph. He either hit the brute or was thrown from the motorcycle while trying to miss it and landed in the ditch unconscious. On down the road, Fred finally realized

that Ralph was not behind him. He returned, looking into the ditches on each side of the road until he found Ralph who was just regaining consciousness.

They checked the motorcycle and Ralph for broken parts but found only a ruined headlight. That could be a big problem. A further disturbing revelation was the discovery that Ralph's bundle of spare clothes and overnight bag had come adrift from the carrier behind the saddle and were somewhere behind them. All he had was the clothes on his back that he had worn all day while slogging through the muddy roads. But what the heck, they were no longer expecting a rose-garden stroll.

They resumed their eastward ride to Cedar Rapids where they spent the night. There were no motorcycle dealers or garages open so they left their bikes in a livery stable and, after paying up front, spent the night in a private home nearby.

The next morning they were off to an early start hoping to be near Indianapolis by evening. Some guys are slow learners. The road was full of ruts and pools of water that reduced their speed, and miles passed slowly. They were now on Alternate Highway 30 just past Ashton, Illinois, trying to out-run an ugly thunder storm when Ralph's front tire went flat. They tried to fix it before the storm hit but before they could get a patch on the tube, rain came down in torrents, and when the storm had passed the road was a sea of mud.

Just as well. They discovered that Fred's machine had a broken frame just behind the front fork. By then it was too dark for them to patch the tube so they pushed their motorcycles back to the motorcycle shop in Ashton. That was the end of the ride. They arranged to ship Fred's bike to the Chicago factory for a new frame and for the shop owner to patch Ralph's front tire and have it ready for his return. Exhausted, they went to the train station and waited for the next train to Chicago. End of story? Nope.

The next morning they caught a ride on the Monon to Indy. The train filled as it stopped for passengers at every town along the way. It became so crowded that the conductor requested that all single gentlemen move forward to the baggage car. Our boys gladly accepted the offer and sat with their feet hanging out the baggage car door until they arrived in Indy late in the afternoon.

They got rooms near Union Station and went out to see the sights. Two race cars drove by on their way to Speedway, which added hustle and bustle to the town. Up early the next morning, the two young visitors took the train out to the Speedway and made a beeline for the garage area where they spent the day looking through the fence into the open garages. They were impressed. Late in the afternoon they walked back to town.

Early race day morning they were on a train to Speedway. They bought tickets in Grandstand C and then went back to the chain link fence around the garages.

Thirty cars started and 13 finished. Rene Thomas was the winner on a Delage at an average speed of 82.47 MHP. Barney Oldfield on a Stutz was the best placed American, finishing fifth. (In those days, drivers tended to be described as “on” rather than “in” a race car.) The two young men walked over to the southeast turn and Ralph was impressed by the big white Duesenberg that Eddie Rickenbacker chauffeured through the turn. Two years later he was riding through that turn in a big white Maxwell with Rickenbacker at the wheel. That afternoon, that possibility never entered his mind.

The trip home was not any better for Ralph than the one to Indianapolis. Presumably Fred had an easier trip. He went by train to Chicago to retrieve his motorcycle from the factory and then took a train home with his motorcycle in the baggage car. No more is known of Fred. Ralph retrieved his motorcycle from the shop in Ashton and ended up shipping his motorcycle home from Waterloo, Iowa, after the rear tire blew out. He slept in the train station to save money and was stopped by a rail road dick who took him for a bum riding the rods. All in all, he figured it a satisfying trip and he returned to work at Prays’ Garage at 18 bucks a week. But having seen the Duesenberg-built Masons at Sioux City, the powerful Duesenbergs at the Speedway and the bright lights of Indianapolis, he became restless and determined to work with racing cars. And what better ones to work than Duesenbergs.

The Duesenberg brothers, Fred and Augie, were established in St. Paul, Minnesota, in a small building on University Avenue at the St. Paul-Minneapolis city line. Fred was the designer and Augie the shop manager. Ralph resigned from his job at Prays’ shop and took a train to St. Paul where he went immediately to the Duesenberg shop for a job. He was accepted at once and began work the next day at 20 bucks for a 55-hour week making racing car engines. Duesenbergs would not make passenger cars until later. Augie Duesenberg was always first at the shop in the morning and the last to leave at night. Seven-thirty in the morning to after ten at night were the regular working hours except Sunday when they knocked off early at about three in the afternoon.

Augie liked Ralph’s work and gave him the responsibility of modifying two huge 800-HP race boat engines and building one new engine. Commodore James A. Pugh, a wealthy Chicago sportsman, had commissioned two special Duesenberg engines for a 40-foot hydroplane he had christened Disturber IV. He had built the boat to challenge for the Harmsworth Trophy in Europe. The race boat was shipped to England in 1914 but the war broke out before it could be unloaded from the deck of the ocean freighter.

On return of the boat, the engines were removed and shipped to the Duesenberg shop in St. Paul to be disassembled, inspected and rebuilt. Each 12

cylinder engine had two six-cylinder blocks assembled end to end. Bore was 6.56 inches with a seven inch stroke giving a displacement of about 900 cu. in. The single piece crankshafts were over ten feet long. The engines were left hand and right hand rotation and each drove a 24-inch propeller with 40-inch pitch.

Fates were smiling on Ralph one night about 10 o'clock. While he was trying to start a new engine with a hand crank, the crank jumped off the crankshaft dog, hitting him in the nose, busting it and knocking him back. Fred was there and took him to a doctor. After he was patched up they went back to the shop and started the damn thing. Next morning, you guessed it, Ralph checked in on time at 7:30 AM. From that time on, Fred kept an eye on Ralph and when the team left for Indianapolis, Ralph was on the team.

A certain Major Carpenter was in charge of security at the Speedway and lived just south of the grandstands. Mrs. Carpenter fed the Duesenberg team as well as drivers Art Klein, Joe Cooper, their crews and several others. They all slept on the grounds in an unheated open air shelter fitted with wooden panels to break the wind. Augie shared the meals and shelter with the crew. Often as not, they slept in their work clothes.

After a one-day weather delay, the race started with riding mechanic Pete Henderson sitting shoulder to shoulder with driver Eddie O'Donnell and mechanic Jack Henderson shoulder to shoulder with driver Tom Alley and mechanic Billy Chandler next to driver Ralph Mulford on the three Dusies.

So what was the man sitting shoulder to shoulder with the driver supposed to do? Riding mechanics were necessary in the early days of city to city racing in Europe. The first organized race was Paris- Bordeaux-Paris in 1895. Many of the drivers were wealthy sportsmen and they were not about "to get out and get under," nor were they qualified to repair anything, so they had their "man" trained for such duty. And since those races were run over primitive roads, there were many times when mechanics were obliged to change a tire, jury rig a part, or push the car up a hill, out of the mud or out of a ditch.

In 1907, the Brooklands race track was built in England. It was the first closed circuit track built, and it largely eliminated the need for riding mechanics. However, old habits die slowly, and racing in the US favored riding mechanics until 1923 when the AAA made it officially optional.

Since the mechanics were along for the ride anyway, they took on a number of chores to help make the time pass quickly. I place their chores in the following order of importance:

1. Crank to start the engine
- 2 .Keep air pressure on the gas tank with a hand pump to force fuel to the carburetors.
3. Inform the driver of traffic conditions, particularly overtaking racers.

4. Check condition of all tires particularly the outside rear tire (which got the most wear.)
5. Thumb nose vigorously when passing a competitor, if in front of grandstand.
6. Keep clean, spare goggles ready for driver.
7. Encourage driver.
8. Supply driver with refreshments.
9. When stalled on the course, run back to pits for fuel, oil or spares.
10. Push or pull car as required.
11. Duck down and hang on to a knotted rope or leather strap attached to floorboards if driver was about to crash.
12. Pull injured driver from wreck.

Ray Harroun, a cracking good engineer and mechanic, entered the single seat Mormon Wasp in 1911 and survived a mounting drivers' protest that he would be unsafe without the aid of a riding mechanic to check on overtaking traffic. He learned of the possible protest planned to be lodged at the starting line and said something like, Hell, if they're only worried about how I will see cars closing from behind, I will rig up a mirror like the one I saw on a carriage in Chicago. Can it be that credit for invention of the rear-view mirror really belongs to a carriage driver in Chicago?

The best Dusie finish was O'Donnell in fifth place. Mulford complained of handling problems since his car was set-up with a locked differential and he was replaced behind the wheel by his riding mechanic Billy Chandler. (When Chandler took over the wheel it was something like a battlefield promotion). Meanwhile, Ralph and the pit crew spent nearly the whole race mounting new tires on wheels. Dusies were using Braender and Riverside tires that were not up to the job.

From Indianapolis the team moved to Galesburg, to Chicago, to Sioux City, to Omaha, to Burlingham and to Des Moines with an OK record but not worthy of a weekly letter home.

After the Des Moines race, Fred Duesenberg told Ralph that Commodore Pugh wanted him to take charge of the engines in his Disturber IV race boat and to remain with him until after the Wrigley Trophy race in September. As mentioned earlier, Disturber IV was a large and powerful race boat. It dominated the Wrigley Trophy races with Commodore Pugh steering from a seat in front of the engines and Ralph and the boat builder sitting behind the 24 cylinders, each of which spewed out clouds of oily black exhaust from their ten-inch long vertical exhaust pipes. Pugh then turned his sights on the world speed record on water. The Royal Yacht Clubs of England, France, Monte Carlo and the New York Yacht Club had been trying for years to build a boat that could exceed 60 MPH. Pugh thought Disturber IV could do it.

Ralph and the boat guy lightened the boat as much as they could and filled the fuel tanks with enough to power the boat through two up-wind and two down-wind runs. They were ready. On the next favorable day, they settled into their seats behind the engines and gave Pugh the high sign to hit it and hit it he did. The Disturber roared across a measured half-mile course inside the breakwater off Grant Park with a four-way average of 60.2 MPH. There is no record of congratulatory notes from any of the prestigious (sore loser) clubs.

Ralph fitted the engines with water cooled exhaust headers and installed two passenger seats up front for the Commodore's friends, dignitaries, and celebrities. As the season changed to early winter, he helped lay the boat up and stored the engines. After that, he returned to St. Paul.

Through the winter the Duesenberg race team of Ralph, Eddie O'Donnell, Pete and Jack Henderson, Bill D'Alene, Eddie Miller, Barney Newgard, Jimmy Murphy, occasionally Tommy Milton, along the shop guys worked on cars for the 1916 season. The race team was a compatible group and was often invited to either Augies' or Fred's home for a Sunday dinner.

Fred assigned Pete Henderson to drive one of the cars and Pete selected Ralph to be his mechanic. Improbably enough, two years after that fateful motorcycle ride to Indianapolis, Ralph was set to shoulder up to Pete through that number two turn where he had watched Rick on the Duesenberg in 1914.

Meanwhile, down in Indianapolis, Rickenbacker made a deal with the Prest-O-Lite Company to manage its team of four Maxwell cars. Ray Harroun had designed and built the engines in his Detroit shop. They were four-cylinder engines with four overhead valves and two overhead camshafts. There were to be two drivers, two riding mechanics, a reserve mechanic and a combination pit manager and tire man. Rickenbacker was to be the number one driver and team captain and Prest-O-Lite gave him the authority to select his number two driver. That offer went to Pete Henderson who, after talking it over with Fred Duesenberg, packed his bags for the Prest-O-Lite Company in Speedway, Indiana.

The team plan was for Rick to drive fast and hard while Pete was to stay near the front of the pack but conserve his car for Rick if he needed it. With four cars and two drivers, the plan was to alternate the cars, shipping two ahead to the next event along with a full set of pit equipment.

The whole Duesenberg team was sorry to see their friend Pete leave, but none was more sorry than Ralph. However, a few days later he received a letter inviting him to join Henderson as his riding mechanic. Fred Duesenberg offered to assign Ralph to Tommy Milton's car but Ralph decided to join Henderson on the Maxwells. Ralph and the Duesenbergs parted but remained friends for life.

The Maxwell team got lodgings on the second floor of Rosner Drug Store at the corner of Main and 16th Street in Speedway. The building is still there. Rick stayed in a hotel downtown.

The first race was at Sheepshead Bay, New York, on May 13th. The number two car was out with a broken rod in a preliminary race but Rickenbacker finished in first place and collected \$6,000 in the 150-mile, main event. The two cars were then shipped to Chicago for a June 10th race. The team went back to home base in Indianapolis where two fresh cars awaited them for the Memorial Day race of only 300 miles in 1916. Rick started in second and Henderson in ninth position.

Rickenbacker's car went out early with a broken camshaft drive. At 150 miles, Henderson pitted for fuel, oil and tires. Rick jumped into the number two car with Ralph in it and took off. Later Ralph said, with Rick driving it was the fastest and roughest ride he ever had. This was no shoulder to shoulder ride, Rickenbacher drove with arms extended so widely that Ralph had to squirm down low to avoid them as Rick violently whipped the steering wheel in the turns to correct for skidding.

An accepted way for drivers and mechanics to endure the rough rides delivered by uneven road surfaces, friction shock absorbers, and stiff springs was to tightly wrap themselves in a long burlap strip taken from a new tire as it was unpacked for use. Ralph's wrap loosened during the last 70 miles so the ride became very painful. However, he knew Rick would not stop unless he passed out and maybe not even then, so he just sucked it up and paid the price recovering for the next several days. They finished sixth and collected \$1,400.

The Prest-O-Lite Maxwell team did not have a really good season but did about as well as the other top race teams. Rickenbacker finished third in the AAA Championship standings and Henderson, sixth. Rickenbacker won \$18,000 and Henderson won \$7,000. Ralph's take was \$400, which he used to buy stock in Ray Harroun's company. It never paid a dividend and folded in 1922.

The Hudson Motor Car Company had a successful 1916 season and elected to campaign three cars in 1917. Its chief engineer, F.T. Fekete, had developed a balanced crankshaft that was a vast improvement over the 1915 racers. The chances looked good for the Hudson team, so Ralph switched to it for the 1917 season. Ralph Mulford was the number one driver on the team and Ralph was assigned as his riding mechanic but no more shoulder to shoulder. The mechanic's seat was positioned about a foot behind the driver's seat giving the driver more freedom of arm movement.

Ralph Mulford with Ralph as his riding mechanic finished first at the Omaha 1.25-mile board track. The season started well, but after six races the Hudson company disbanded the team without explanation. It may be that the United States'

entry into WW I in April 1917 caused the management to have second thoughts about motor racing.

Ralph went off to enlist as a cadet in the air arm of the Signal Corps. He was discharged on June 8, 1919, as Second Lieutenant Ralph Campbell Kriplen, and made a decision that has deeply affected me. He recorded, "I was now unemployed with no immediate prospects. I had given up the possibility to return to auto racing. The risk of a possible accident which would incapacitate me for life was the main reason for this decision." Instead, he decided to settle in Cincinnati since that was where Miss. Alma Hater lived. You got it. They married and eventually moved to Indianapolis. Their children grew up in Broad Ripple in a home that had an occasional speedway old-timer stop in around race day. Pop loved his family and engines to the end of his life.

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