

101 CARS

It was 9:55 AM on Thursday August 14, 2008, and I had just returned from saying goodbye to my 1999 Toyota Camry. A tow truck from Insurance Auto Auctions came this morning to take it away, and I felt a sadness. It reminded me of the time I sold my jazz records to a record dealer. I mentioned that I would miss them, and he asked me if I wanted a few minutes alone with them.

We had driven that car for an additional 75,000 miles and most recently had taken a trip to Rochester, Toronto and Ann Arbor to visit our son David. And now I had just driven my Camry (I never gave it a name) out of the garage for the last time, and parked it behind the tow truck to make it easier for Mr. Bernier, the tower. I then patted the car on the hood, made sure I took the transponder, and left with a heavy heart.

That Camry has been through an awful lot with us. We bought it exactly six years ago from Elias Audy's Cypress Automart. A few months before, I asked Elias if he would look for a good, low mileage three year old Camry when he went to the auto auctions. He came up with this one which had 40,000 miles, was in great condition and had several bells and whistles, like a moon roof, and a remote. The reason we got rid of it was because we had been rear ended and the appraiser totaled it.

As usual, I am trying to remember the first car in my life. It starts with the fantasy in the spring of 1952 when, with our friends Sidney and Barbara, Sylvia and I came up with the idea of buying a car and taking a trip across the country. The only problem was that we didn't know how to drive. But that didn't stop us. We would take lessons and learn. So we took lessons, but we realized that we had to do more than take lessons: we had to practice, because we had to pass a driving test to get our driver's licenses. But how do you practice if you don't have a car?

We came up with the idea of renting a car. But you need a license to rent a car. It turns out that Sylvia's father, Sam Feig, had a driver's license, but he hadn't driven in years. When we approached him with the request that he rent the car, he was agreeable. There was a car rental agency on Jerome Avenue, so early one Saturday morning, Sam and I took the trolley to Jerome Avenue, rented a car for the day, and Sam drove it away. After a couple of blocks, I took over, drove it home, and Sid, Barbara, Sylvia and I spent the rest of the day practicing driving on the empty streets near the East River.

In 1952, practically all the cars were standard shift. We were working on perfecting shifting without stalling: give gas while easing off the clutch; figure out when to shift from first to second, and from second to third. We also practiced how to make a broken U turn; how to parallel park; and how to drive in reverse. There was a lot to learn. Toward evening, we returned to Fox Street, picked up Sam and drove back to the car rental agency. When we approached Jerome Avenue, we turned the car over to Sam. He got behind the wheel and as he was making a left turn onto Jerome Avenue, he hit one of the elevated's poles. Jerome Avenue is a difficult and unpleasant street to drive. The elevated trains of the IRT run above it, and it is heavily trafficked. Sam was horrified and

embarrassed. We told him not to worry; we had insurance. Humiliated, Sam drove into the agency's lot, we paid for the day's rental and the deductible, and sadder and poorer, we took the trolley home.

We did not let this unfortunate incident stop us. In fact we became more determined to go through with our plan to learn how to drive, get a car and drive across the country. Again, Sylvia's family was going to come through for us. Louis Pastor, Sylvia's brother-in-law, had become a used car dealer the year before, and when he learned that we were in the market for a car, insisted that he would get us a "cream puff" at a bargain price. The following week he came up with a green 1948 Ford. It looked fine and had low mileage. And it cost \$750 which sounded reasonable. Lou had really come through. So now we had a car, but we still didn't have driver's licenses. We needed someone who had a driver's license to be with us as we practiced: My friend Mel Schwartz. It was an imposition. He lived in Brooklyn, and he was busy, but he agreed to spend a Saturday with us. So bright and early, Mel came to our house, we showed him the car, picked up Sidney and Barbara and drove back to the empty streets near the East River to spend the day practicing. We really were beginning to get the hang of driving. The best driver among us was Barbara, but we attributed that to the fact that her father drove a truck for Horn and Hardart, and before that, for a milk company.

As the day was ending, Mel felt he had to tell us something he suspected about the car: he believed it was a repainted cab. Impossible! Our brother-in-law wouldn't sell us a repainted cab. Mel explained that, as a sideline, his brother would buy cabs in New Jersey, have them repainted and sell them in New York at a sizable profit. He then pulled away the rubber from around the door and there it was: the car had originally been yellow. Mel suggested we call the New Jersey Motor Vehicle Bureau, which Sylvia did first thing Monday morning, and discovered that our cream puff of a car had been a cab. We called Lou with the sad news. He was horrified, explaining that he had gotten the car from a wholesaler; that he told the wholesaler, whom he had dealt with before, that the car was for his sister-in-law and brother-in-law; and that he had been assured that it was a cream puff.

Heartbroken, Lou took the car back and returned our money to us. By this time, we saw the foolishness of our plan. The idea that four inexperienced drivers drive cross-country was a bit foolhardy. Sylvia and I began to rethink our plan and decided that a better way to see America was by hitchhiking. We suggested it to Sid and Barbara, but they demurred. Thanks, but no thanks. We couldn't hitchhike together—nobody picks up four people. We couldn't count on getting lifts to the same places at the same time. It really wouldn't work. We promised to send them post cards and began figuring out how we would hitchhike from New York to California and back.