

Driving in the Dark

When we lived at the Lake of the Pines near Sacramento, California, we took trips several summers to Colorado and Illinois to visit our families. It's about 2,000 miles from northern California to St. Louis. The trip from California back to the Midwest was a long trip by car, especially for a family of six. Traveling four days was an exhausting experience for everyone. Driving across Nevada, for example, was extremely boring - I likened it to driving across 500 miles of kitty litter. Kansas wasn't much better. Sometimes it was very hot, and the air conditioner didn't always work, which compounded the discomfort.

On our way to St. Louis we would stop at a motel about noon, so I could sleep during the day. I would typically drive at night when it was cooler, and Jeannette and the kids would sleep on a mattress we placed in the back of the station wagon. If I had driven during the day the kids would have crawled all over the car and the younger ones would have grabbed my neck with their sticky hands from the back seat. In those days we didn't have to put children in constraints or booster seats. We were fortunate to never had a major accident during all the years we traveled with the kids unrestrained.

We stopped at motels every 500 miles, so the kids could swim in the motel pool during the day while I slept in the room for at least 6 hours. I would get up about seven in the evening, have dinner with the family, and get back on the road by sunset. The kids would fall asleep about 10 in the evening and I would drive all night. The next morning when the kids woke up we'd stop for breakfast and check into another motel.

One year on the way home from St. Louis driving through western Kansas we once had an exciting mechanical breakdown. We had left Salina, Kansas and driven during the day rather than at night because the weather was cooler than normal, and I didn't need to use the air conditioner. Late in the afternoon the temperature warmed up enough we needed to turn it on.

I didn't remember at the time that you shouldn't turn on the air conditioner in our old 1973 Ford station wagon when speeding down the freeway at 70 miles per

hour. The old-style air conditioners didn't have a clutch in the compressor mechanism. When I flipped it on the sudden surge of power sent such a shock to the alternator that the belt flew off the pulley, sparks and smoke flew from under the hood, and the alternator died.

I immediately pulled off the road and left the engine running in case it wouldn't start again. I yelled to the family to get ready to jump out if the car caught fire or exploded. I exited the driver's door, ran to the front of the car, and opened the hood to find that some of that oily rags I stored near the engine had caught fire. I put them out as quickly as possible and checked the fuel lines and electrical wiring for any damage. Everything looked okay and the engine was running fine, so I closed the hood. As I reentered the car Jeannette wanted to know if they should get out. I told her, "No, everything's fine." She was highly skeptical and very nervous for the next hour as we continued toward Denver.

I knew I would need to install a new alternator. In the meantime, we would have to drive without the air conditioner in the heat for the rest of the afternoon. I decided to drive to a car parts store in Longmont, Colorado, where I bought a new alternator. I installed the alternator in the parking lot of the Napa dealer and continued to visit my mom near Ft. Collins, Colorado overnight.

What I didn't know at the time was that when the alternator shorted out it also caused another important piece of equipment to fail, called a voltage regulator. I didn't replace that part in Longmont, so as we drove to Ft. Collins and visited my mom for several days the battery was not being charged, even though the alternator was working. I noticed when we were at her house that the car didn't start easily. When we continued our journey from Salt Lake City a few days later it barely started.

We left very early that morning while it was still dark, and I noticed that the headlights seemed unusually dim as we drove westward. And then it occurred to me what had happened - I was running only on the battery because the voltage regulator had been fried. By that time, we were driving across the Bonneville Salt Flats, some 50 miles west of Salt Lake City, on one of the most desolate stretches of highway in the country. There were no towns, no gas stations, nothing, for at least two more hours. And, it was still dark! I had to turn off the headlights to

preserve what little charge remained in the battery or the engine would likely stop running soon.

When I turned off the headlights I could barely make out the edge of the road. I slowed down and crept along in the dark. Soon I noticed the lights of an 18-wheeler in my mirror. I was afraid he might not see me in the dark, so I turned on my lights until he passed me. I realized after he passed that I could follow him in the dark with my headlights off. I pulled in behind him about 5 or 6 car lengths back and followed his tail lights.

We made it into the little town of Wendover, Utah on the border between Utah and Nevada as it was getting light. I needed a new voltage regulator but since it was Sunday morning no parts stores would be open. We also needed to eat so, while having breakfast, I had the battery charged at a nearby gas station for about an hour and a half. This newly charged battery would have to get us all the way home across Nevada and into California.

We didn't have to use the headlights the rest of the way because the sun was now up, but neither could we use the air conditioner. The Nevada desert was extremely hot in August, but we had no choice. I needed to be back at work the next day. So, we drove for over 12 hours of sweltering heat all the way home. Driving in the heat without air conditioning and a station wagon full of kids reminded me of some of the trips my parents had taken when I was young.