

by Jim Crozier

Part 1 – Seattle to LA

It was Summer 1971 in Seattle, that I bought the 1959 Chevy Impala for \$150, got it tuned up, and headed for Pennsylvania via the Southern route. I ignored the occasional engine miss I felt when I got the car up to highway speed.

I had been in the Northwest because a couple rich guys from Seattle had come to NYC the previous season, looking for a show to bring west. They liked *Touch*. They aspired to be theatrical producers – if they actually knew how to do that, it was not in evidence—but for me, who had been living in the basement of that East Village theater on one burger a day and \$5.00 a week, the gig was fabulous. As Musical Director for the show in a union town, I got double scale, which came to about \$500 per week. That was some pretty serious bread in those days. We were guaranteed a 4 week run and lived in the Virginia Hotel, right next door to the theater at 2nd and Virginia, downtown.

Trouble started being obvious when the engine would sputter and cut out going up the mountain at Crater Lake, I was able to summit by driving in reverse (though I had to stop several times to keep the engine from overheating). Typical of the whole trip, I drove around the top of the mountain – around the lake, stopped at every overlook, and went back down. I suspected that it was just the fuel pump, don't know. Heading southwest, I drove through the Redwoods, and spent that first night in the "Surf Hotel" in Crescent City, California.

The next day, I headed south on US101, which starts out pretty close to the coast, but then starts running down the valley east of coastal ridge. After a hundred miles or so of this, I decided that I wanted to cut over to California Highway 1. I was probably somewhere near Ukiah and I saw a little road on my Rand McNally map. It started out pretty direct and paved, though clearly not a highway. The road then started heading up, and getting smaller, then turned into a logging road, although it appeared to be maintained at some level. The switchbacks became more and more extreme. I don't recall having engine trouble then, but I was likely backing off the gas frequently to keep it from stalling. I also don't recall encountering a single other vehicle on that road, and I only recall seeing one "hippy homestead" after leaving the pavement.

Approaching the end of daylight, and climbing one more switchback, I rounded a corner onto the west side of the ridge and into the sunset! I was way above the coastal clouds, looking down on the Pacific Ocean, with the sunset shining directly on top of the coastal fog. Thirty minutes later, I was down on the coastal highway, traveling south after dark, enveloped in that thick fog. The engine is now running really poorly, so by the time I got to Cotati, about 50 miles north of San Francisco, I found an Esso service station, parked, went to sleep in the back seat, and waited for the mechanic to show up in the morning.

I still wonder if the immediate problem was still as simple as a bad fuel pump, or a clogged fuel filter, we shall never know. The guy at the station did a compression check and

determined that at least one cylinder had no compression, and a couple others were weak. So he set about preparing to pull the engine from a wrecked Chevy II that was sitting there, with the thought of putting it into the Impala. In the meantime, he had basically destroyed my car, and, predictably enough, this approach was shown to be a really bad idea.

OK, that leaves me with plan B, and plan C. Plan B was beautiful: a 1956 Chevy Bel Air that had just been completely rebuilt, including a new engine, for \$500 (or maybe \$600).. I had \$200 in traveler's checks. Predictably, Dad did not agree to financing me on plan B, and of course that phone call also included a thorough review of all of the stupid things that I had done to get me into this situation – especially that I had not consulted better resources when I bought the first car – and of course, why did I think I needed to buy a car in the first place: *Get on a bus, come home...*

The other "opportunity" was that 1960 Ford Galaxy 500 he had recently acquired to rebuild, but hadn't finished (or maybe even started) yet. For \$175 it featured a 390 cubic-inch engine with a four-barrel carb, a pair of blown out glass packs, a gray primer paint job, undersized steering wheel, and big barefoot gas pedal. That, combined with my scrawny beard, vest with no shirt, and camo cavalry hat, really claimed a *look* This was the Viet Nam era and there were a lot of guys coming back that looked just like that.

I don't recall exactly how many hours I was hanging out at that service station, but I do know that it was about 9am when, with the fog so thick I couldn't even see the bridge, I crossed the Golden Gate into San Francisco!

Well, I think I spent all of about two hours driving around San Francisco. The only specific thing I remember about the visit was my drive down Lombard Street. I didn't know it was a "famous" place until years later. Then I went over to Oakland and Berkeley, drove around for a while, picked up a couple of young hitchhikers, got up on I-5, and drove to Los Angeles.

I dropped the kids off somewhere down near Santa Monica and then set about finding the home of a cousin somewhere in the Valley. I don't know where I was then, and I certainly don't know now, but I did find the house. I then had to go back out to find an Esso Station that could do a brake job the following morning. I had driven through a little rain on the way down from the Bay Area, and noticed that I didn't have any brakes when they got the least bit wet – as it turns out, it was metal-to-metal on all 4 drum brakes. Anyhow, my cousin (my mother's first cousin, actually) welcomed me with limited enthusiasm. They had teen-age boys, and clearly I was a bad influence on the kids. (We have laughed about it since.) I spent the night on the couch and left early to get my brake job done.

Part 2 – LA to PA

With new brakes, I headed for Las Vegas in the late afternoon. Running across the desert, I watched the temperature gauge rising. It never really got into the red, but I was nervous; it was a long way between service stations, and water was scarce. I dropped into a couple places (Esso stations please – I have all of about \$7 in cash at this point, maybe \$20), and ended up just pulling the thermostat, don't know if that was a good idea, but I stopped worrying about the temperature gauge.

When I got to Las Vegas, I was amazed that it actually looked just like it did in the movies! I never saw a place that I cared to stop, so I just dropped my chopped hot-rod into 2nd gear (remember the big engine and blown out glass packs) and "tooled down the strip" – goin' for the look!

Leaving town, I tried to get some sleep in the back seat, parked on the beach at the edge of Lake Mead, but I was restless. After an hour of trying, I just started heading south. It was on the climb after crossing over the Hoover Dam that I met him, the hitchhiker. I seem to recall that his name was John, but I can't be certain.

He was on his way to Boston. John said that he was just going to walk down to route 66 (I-40) thinking it was just 10 miles – with no water. I had just checked the map, it was 100 miles, with no dots on the map between where we were and the Interstate.

Looking at the map now, I don't know exactly how we did this, or how long it took, or when or where we slept (I know we never stopped at a motel), but the next port-of-call was Albuquerque. I know, however that we stopped at every overlook on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon, and drove through Flagstaff at least once.

In Albuquerque, we were scheduled to visit an uncle of mine for a couple nights. He was a retired Lt. Colonel from the Army, and the manager of the Officers' Club there. As we approached the city limits, John says, "There's something you probably ought to know, I'm AWOL from the Air Force Base at Las Vegas.". I suggested that we probably shouldn't mention that to my uncle.

Uncle Jim had a rec room with a pool table, and a well stocked bar. John was a very good pool player (I am not). John and Uncle Jim had a wonderful time together.

The next place I planned to go was a visit to another Aunt and Uncle in Pascagoula, Mississippi. I probably drove non-stop from New Mexico. I remember very little except that I had essentially no cash, John didn't have much money, if he had any, so essentially every purchase had to be on my Esso credit card. I also remember that I was driving between 80 and 100 mph pretty much the whole way, even through Dallas/Ft Worth, but we did slow down when. some how, I was driving through downtown New Orleans BUT NEVER STOPPED TO GET OUT!

In Pascagoula, Uncle Red had rebuilt the rec room after Hurricane Camille – they had lost the boat – but the rec room was new and the pool table had been restored. So, once again,

my AWOL hitchhiker entertained my uncle with his pool playing ability, and we enjoyed a couple days of the liquor cabinet and easy living.

What should have been the last leg of the journey started simply enough, just go to Mobile and head to Cincinnati on I-65 (it was mostly done by then), but every time I stopped for gas and oil (yes, that engine did burn some oil, especially at 90 mph), I kept noticing that it seemed that the engine was in there crooked...hmm.

So, at Covington, Kentucky I find a place to look into it – essentially non-existent motor mounts – and got them fixed. When that job was done, it still made a funny noise...hmm. So, back into it, pull the transmission, broken fly-wheel. Now, I might have been able to get away with it, it had been flexed so badly, for so long, because the engine and transmission had been basically "floating" for 3000 miles. It had broken all the way around in a circle about half way out from the center, and the outside part had then been turned against the inside part and lodged against it. Well, it got replaced – another few hundred on the Esso card.

When we got back on the highway, the speedometer didn't work, but I was *not* going back to get that fixed. I really don't remember if I ever did, it had over 90K miles, which in those days was a lot.

I dropped John off as I exited I-90 in Erie, PA, then proceeded to Warren, PA with my California Ford. I had just been driving it with the plates that came on it, DFP777, and never registered it (I had had insurance for the 59 Chevy, but it probably would not have worked if I had needed it), and all I had was the "pink slip". The rules in California are really different than the rules in Pennsylvania. It was a few weeks and a few more dollars (legal exhaust system, for instance) before it became Pennsylvania car.

I took it to Indiana, PA where I returned to school. Over the next year and a half, the power steering went out, then reverse went out, and if I had ever had insurance, it expired. The car did have one last adventure in March 1972 when my girlfriend and I went to New York City for the Grammy's when the *Touch – Original Cast Album* was nominated. After that trip, it pretty much got left in the parking lot behind the dorm at IUP – I got a letter when I was home for Christmas that it had been towed and that I could have it back for \$15. I didn't have the money.

As for the Esso Credit Card? Well, Dad paid it off. I don't know what the total was, something over a thousand bucks, which in those days... I have to remember this story whenever my children incur "unanticipated debts" or require forgiveness of some other nature.

Jim Crozier, the day before Fathers Day, 2007; in memory of Thomas Jay Crozier who died the day after Fathers' Day, 2006