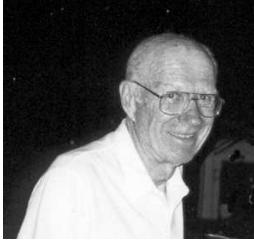


# A Model A Challenge To The Far North

By Bill Lancaster

**A**fter completing a trip to Alaska in 1985 in my 1930 Model A Coupe, I knew that I wanted to go again. At that time, the Dempster Highway, ran through the Yukon to the Northern most place in the Northern Hemisphere on a public road, Inuvik, Northwest Territories, Canada. In 1997, another road, the Dalton Highway, was opened to public travel in Alaska to Prudhoe Bay, which is considerably further north than Inuvik. I decided that these are two roads would be a suitable challenge for a great adventure in my 1930 Blue Coupe. Inuvik, Northwest Territories is reached by driving 456 miles each way on the Dempster Highway, a dirt road, from the Klondike Junction 25 miles east of Dawson City, Yukon. Prudhoe Bay, on the Arctic Ocean, is reached by driving 496 miles each way on the Dalton Highway, 457 are on dirt roads, from Fairbanks, Alaska. The dirt road driving mileage for these highways adds up to 1,826 plus another 726 on other dirt roads for 2,552 dirt-road-miles of the 10,136-mile trip. Two other Model A's would accompany me on this adventure. One, driven by my son Will with his wife Karla and seven-year-old son Christopher. The other driven by friends Steve Berry and his wife Joann.



## Plans and Preparations

We planned to depart on this adventure immediately following the 1998 MAFCA National Convention in Reno, Nevada.. The goals were set to reach the most Northern and Western points in both Canada and the 49 U S continental states. The Northern points would be Inuvik, Northwest Territories, Canada and Deadhorse, Alaska; and the Western points, Anchor Point, Alaska and the Yukon/Alaska border. The additional goals would be to drive the entire Alaska Highway and take as many different routes that we could to see as much of the area as possible. The intended route, basically followed during the tour, would be from Reno to Winnemucca, Nevada and then North on Highway 95 through Idaho, British Columbia and Alberta to Lake Louise and Jasper in the Canadian Rockies. From there, the route would take us to Hinton, Grande Cache, Grande Prairie, Alberta and Dawson Creek in British Columbia, the beginning of the Alaska Highway. The country would be mostly plains with rolling hills, changing to more rugged hills and mountains as we continued West. We would stay on the Alaska Highway to Watson Lake in the Yukon Territory.

Considerable planning is necessary to minimize potential problems on such a tour. The 1985 trip to Alaska and several trips across the USA provided the background for tour preparations. Dirt roads present their own challenges - protecting the radiator, the windshield and forward facing glass and painted surfaces from rocks, and guarding the engine from road dust

I installed a conventional stone guard and attached a plastic bug screen in front with tie wraps. This worked quite well on both trips.

The windshield, wind wings, cowl lights,

head lights and the MotoMeter glass were shielded by Lexon, a very tough plastic, attached with duct tape. Lexon scratches easily, so much care must be taken washing it. The windshield Lexon was mounted in front of the windshield wiper. Rain-X® was applied and worked very well in keeping the windshield clear of rainwater. Under heavy mud conditions, I stopped frequently to clean the Lexon. The Rain-X® did a very good job. Without it, there would have been numerous cleaning stops. The Lexon protectors were used only while driving on dirt roads, 21 days of the 36-day tour.

Protecting the front facing portions of the fenders was another problem, entirely. Because of the compound curves, flat sheet material will not fit properly. I fitted small strips of magnetic sheet on just the front facing portions of the fender surfaces. These were placed as closely to the next one as possible. Then I applied duct tape over the magnetic material. The result was a contoured cover that did not come off, yet was easily removed. They were quite effective and worked quite well for both trips.



Fender Protectors

The engine induction system was a more challenging project. I placed a filter assembly high in the engine compartment. Connecting the filters to the carburetor was the main problem. A tubing shop bent and welded an adapter for the carburetor. (In 1985, I used plastic pipe fittings which did not work out as the temperature is high enough to cause the plastic parts to sag and almost melt.) Tubes of thin walled, two-inch outside diameter, steel tubing worked out very well. To obtain a tight fit, the joint at the carburetor was made by slitting the tubing and fitting it over the bead on the carburetor, then clamping it to the carburetor. A carburetor heater hose connected the adapter to the filters. A part from an Airmaze screen assembly was used at the air filter as an adapter between the hose and the filter. A threaded rod was placed in the Airmaze part which allowed the filters to be assembled with a flat aluminum disc and wing nut. Two NAPA 2371 air filters (or one PM 5965), were used (they got very dirty and were replaced a couple of times during the trip). Each of our three cars averaged just at 20 miles per gallon for the 10,000, plus miles. This indicates that engine performance was not seriously affected by this air filter system.

The engine and drive systems of all three cars were very similar, reducing the tour spare parts requirements. The engines were recently rebuilt using modern valves, inserts for the rods and mains and all running the Brumfield 5.9 compression ratio heads. All cars had alternators (two were 12 volts, one was six volts); electronic ignition systems; and Mitchell overdrive units. These changes significantly improved reliability. The similarities made driving decisions much easier as we didn't have to consider different performance factors.

Several stretches of highway did not have gasoline available within the range of the Model A gas tank capacity. We considered adding a gas tank, but all approaches seemed to be quite costly and complex. Since the need appeared to be a one-time situation, we decided that each should carry approximately six gallons of gasoline in containers. Each car handled the containers differently, but it worked effectively. I had three 2.5-gallon containers and used them five times. It worked quite well.

### ***The Northern Adventure Begins***

We departed on schedule and had an uneventful trip to and up the Alaska Highway. The Canadian Rockies were Beautiful, rugged and quite spectacular. If one stays on the

paved roads in Canada, the driving conditions are similar to two-lane principal highways in the US. The weather may cause some concerns, as it can be very rainy and cold. We found plenty of lodging on the Alaska Highway and since there were only the three cars, we did not make any advance reservations, in most cases. For a larger group (like the ten cars on the trip in 1985), it would be wise to secure reservations in advance. *The Milepost®* \* is the best guide to current conditions for lodging, businesses and points of interest along the Alaska Highway and other principal roads in Alaska and routes to Alaska.

The trip up the Dempster Highway began at 8:00 AM from the Klondike River Lodge. The weather while we were on the Dempster Highway was very comfortable to warm. No rain was encountered, so we had lots of dust. The next gas station was 229 miles up the highway at Fort McPherson. The road conditions varied from somewhat smooth to very rough wash board and there were many sections with potholes. Typically on the Dempster Highway, we averaged about 35 miles per hour, not counting stops, indicative of the road conditions. We stopped approximately 46 miles up the road at a small interpretive center located near a campground with some trees. There were few elsewhere, as there is not much vegetation of any type along the road. A few miles farther on there was a pullout to view the high and very rugged Tombstone Mountains. The road follows rivers wherever possible making an easy drive with reasonably straight sections. Every so often, there are curvy hilly sections going between rivers. The road grade is not particularly difficult to drive, but missing the potholes is the challenge. Not all potholes were missed! We had lunch at Engineers Creek Campground 122 miles from our starting point. The screened enclosed lunch area minimized the effects of the numerous mosquitoes. After lunch we left the rivers and started a long gradual climb for about 38 miles where we added gas to our tanks from the containers and stretched our legs. We had driven 160 miles from the Lodge. From there, the drive was through rolling hills with some rugged mountains in the distance. We arrived at our destination for the day, Eagle Plains, located on a high bluff. This is the halfway point on the highway to Inuvik. The day was relatively uneventful. The cars performed well, the scenery was great. The motel accommodations were quite acceptable.

The following morning we were underway at 7:30 heading to Inuvik. The first stop was at the Arctic Circle for picture taking. The next stop was an

unplanned one. Will came on the CB and said he had a flat tire, the only flat anyone had on the entire trip. The 16-inch tire was quickly changed. The next day it was repaired and we determined that it was caused by a nail-like piece of shale rock. We were aware that this stretch of road went through a shale area, but didn't anticipate the flat.



Lancaster Party at the Arctic Circle

The next day, we crossed the border into Northwest Territories from the Yukon. Ahead there were two rivers to cross on free ferries. The first one is at the Peel River and is a small cable ferry. We proceeded to Fort McPherson for gas, the only service between Eagle Plains and Inuvik. We enjoyed another picnic lunch at a nearby campground. The second ferry across the McKenzie River was just beyond Ft. McPherson and was a larger vessel not constrained by a cable. Then it was on to Inuvuk. We saw very few trees, but some ground cover and the ever-present fireweed which is a pretty purple. The drive was somewhat demanding from the driver's point of view, but enjoyable. The country is vast expanses and wide open. The planned one free day in Inuvik was spent differently by each one sight seeing. Some took "flight seeing" tours to the First Nations (native) city of Tuktoyaktuk. It was a pleasant change from the driving of the past few days.

The return trip was the reverse of the one up. The only point of note on the return trip occurred after waiting for the ferry at the McKenzie River. Attempting to start my car the starter just spun, but would not engage. We push started the car without difficulty. A bit later we stopped for lunch where I easily repaired the starter. One of the Bendix spring bolts was missing and was replaced from the spare parts I carried. (The bolt still has not been located, but is probably still in the flywheel housing!)

The next few days took us from Dawson City, Yukon, on to Chicken, Alaska, and to Anchor Point, Alaska, the most westerly point in the United States on a public highway. At this point, the other

two decided not to go to Prudhoe Bay. Therefore, for the next six days I traveled alone on a challenging adventure.

I left the next morning at 6:00 AM for Fairbanks a distance of 580 miles. It rained most of the trip. I was unable to see Mount McKinley as I drove past Denali National Park. It was a long uneventful day challenged only by the rainy weather.

## On to Prudhoe Bay

The next morning I left at 7:00 AM for the half way stop on the Dalton Highway, Coldfoot, Alaska, a distance of 260 miles. As there was one gas station on this section of the highway, I did not fill my three two-and -one-half-gallon gallon gas containers. The Dalton Highway proved to be the most challenging drive of this trip. The road conditions varied dramatically from smooth to stretches of many, many pot holes to vary rough wash board sections. Thus, speeds varied from about 45 MPH to barely 20 MPH. The weather varied from warm sunshine with dusty conditions to cool cloudy and damp conditions to rainy muddy conditions. Driving was always a challenge and affected driving speeds. The first stop was at the Yukon River where there was a gas station. I filled up. It turned out that this was the most expensive gas for the entire trip at \$2.05 per gallon. (I know that doesn't sound like much, today, but that was 1998!) The highway has many short grades over nine percent, as the road quickly drops to creeks and abruptly climbs back up. These grade conditions come up suddenly and are very hard on the brakes.

As one drives along this highway, there are periods of 30 or more minutes that no other cars are met. Then maybe a couple go by. These could be large haul trucks, cars, campers and even large motor homes. The Dalton Highway is called *the haul road*, as it is the only land link to the oil fields at Prudhoe Bay. It is an all-year highway, but in the wintertime it must be quite an adventure to drive as temperatures often get to -60°F. The record is -82°F at Coldfoot, Alaska. The scenery before the Brooks Range is beautiful, rugged and somewhat forested with many mountains, rivers and valleys. It is all quite expansive. The Dalton Highway follows the Alaska pipeline most of the way. The pipeline can be seen for miles ahead, since in most places it is raised some four to eight feet above ground.

I had picnic lunches every day while I was alone. Actually, there were no restaurants except at the evening stops. This day it was lightly raining at

lunchtime, so I prepared and ate in the coupe. At the pull out there was a group of trucks, one a wide load. I chatted briefly with the drivers. One said that if needed, he would haul me back. I replied that I hoped I would not have to accept his kind offer, as I wanted to drive the entire distance both ways, which as it turned out I was able to do. The Arctic Circle was again crossed this time in Alaska.

The last 10 miles or so to Coldfoot were very rough, a wash board section requiring a slow pace. I arrived around 3:30 PM, checked into the modular type facilities that are the motel rooms. They are acceptable but no five-star accommodations. While servicing the car including filling the gas containers, I had pleasant chats with tourists and local inhabitants. There was a visitor's center with an evening program that was enjoyable.

The next morning I was underway at 6:00 AM. As it is day light almost 24 hours here, it is quite light for early starts. Again, the road conditions varied greatly based on the weather. At times, it was sunny and dry. At other times, it was rainy and muddy. Today, I encountered Atigun Pass at 4,800 feet, the only high pass in the Brooks Range.

As I approached, I noticed that the top of the pass was shrouded in fog. It was slow driving, not only because of the climb, but also, because the fog and light rain limited visibility. It did not last long. On the north side of the Brooks Range, there are no trees, but lots of low tundra. The road surface at times became very washboardly lowering speeds to 15-20 MPH. There were no pottys along this portion of the highway and no trees. However, since traffic was light and there were periods of 30 minutes when no other vehicles were encountered needs could be handled.

I stopped after driving some 160 miles and transferred gas from the containers to the gas tank. The truckers I had met the previous day at lunch were stopped and we had a brief chat about road conditions. They agreed that some of the sections of the road were quite rough. It turned out that the last 50 miles to Deadhorse, the public town at Prudhoe Bay oil complex, was quite smooth and speeds of 45 MPH could be maintained. I arrived at 3:00 PM. I had made it to the end of the Dalton Highway without any problems. The goal had been achieved. While there I met a Model A'er and we spent a pleasant evening talking about Model A's. He drove me around the public area and I got a feeling for the vast oil complex. The weather was overcast, cool, about 45°F, and windy.

The following morning was clear and 40°F. I left at 6:00 AM on the return trip and encountered very foggy conditions some 50 miles out. Listening to the CB radio, I realized that an oversized load was

coming towards me. The fog hid the true nature of the situation. An 18-wheeler ahead of the oversize load stopped and gave me a verbal picture of what was coming and indicated that I should stay put until it passed. As this road is on permafrost, it is built up above the surrounding ground for insulating purposes and there is no real shoulder, just an abrupt fall off. The road was 28 feet wide and the load was a 25-foot wide barge on a large flatbed trailer. Well, that did not leave much room for me, although some of the barge did hang out over the other edge of the road. I stayed there while the wide load went slowly by. There was a bit of clearance, but I am glad I was not moving during that time. In the end it was no problem, but could have been if the trucker had not stopped me and described the situation. This is typical of the strange situations, the challenges that occur on this highway and the help provided by those traveling on the road.

Since I had a better understanding of the highway, the rest of the return trip was less of a problem. I was able to see Atigun pass this time, as it was only overcast. Again, I stopped at Coldfoot and had another pleasant stay and chat with the locals. The road conditions were as challenging as they were going north. There were no problems with the Model A. There were two principal tire tracks down the road. For the best road conditions, it was better to drive down the middle of the road, staying to the right only when there is on coming traffic or on blind corners, or such.

After returning to Fairbanks, I spent about 45 minutes at the car wash particularly washing down the underside of the car. In order to keep the dust down and bind the highway surface materials to a hardened and "smooth" condition, calcium chloride is used. Thus, it is very important to wash this corrosive chemical off as soon as possible.

The next day I joined with the others in my party in the Yukon. The rest of the trip was relatively easy. The entire Alaska Highway was traveled, and I had met another self-imposed goal.

In summary, the 36-day 10,137-mile trip (2552 miles on dirt roads) was made with minimal car problems. We did service them regularly during this time and regularly looked them over. For the entire trip the cars performed quite reliably. I used 514 gallons of gas for the entire trip, which gave me a 19.72 miles per gallon. The other two beat me, both being somewhat over 20 miles per gallon (we all used Zenith carburetors). At times it was a very driver-demanding trip and definitely a challenging one. Some portions of trip are definitely not for everyone. However, I enjoyed the entire trip and am very pleased to have made it with essentially no problems. I would readily do it again. B