

Alice Megaro's Magical Trip

Congratulations to Alice Megaro for her remarkable accomplishment! She drove her 1929 Model A Ford from New York to St. Louis, and on to Branson for the 59th Revival AAA Glidden Tour. Alice's trip commemorates the first AAA long distance reliability tour by Charles Glidden in 1904 – exactly 100 years before Alice's magical trip from New York to St. Louis. Wow!

By Alice Megaro

Many of us have given a thought to driving across country in a car – adventure, free spirit, traveling west, music, the works. That's what I was thinking of

doing because I live in New York and the 2004 Glidden Tour was in Branson, Missouri.

Moe DeMott, an old friend and fellow Model A owner and I had restored my 1929 Model A 10 years ago. This would be my 10th Glidden tour and for long distances I'd used a trailer. Now that was not available and I was unsure how to get there.

Then I found an article saying that exactly 100 years ago, AAA chose New York City as the starting point for the first long distance reliability tour, ending in St. Louis. When I realized that St. Louis is on the way to Branson, I knew I had to do this.

Reading about Charles Glidden, I found he had been a helium balloon pilot. I had been a hot air balloon pilot and had even made my own balloon. I was feeling closer to Charles Glidden every day. It felt like he was encouraging me to go.

I called AAA in St. Louis and reached Mike Right, AAA Vice



100th Anniversary Tour -- Alice Megaro celebrates the success of her magical trip in her 1929 Model A Ford from New York to St. Louis at the Missouri History Museum in Forest Park, site of the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair -- both her destination and that of Charles Glidden on the AAA long distance reliability tour from New York to St. Louis in 1904.

AAA PHOTO

President of Public Affairs. He was thrilled about my plan since St. Louis was celebrating the 100th year of the World's Fair. No wonder it was the 1904 destination!

Mr. Right also mailed me a 25-page account of the 1904 trip which graphically made clear the reasons for the original tour. In 1904 road construction varied enormously between states and even towns. The original tour found lots of mud, highlighting the need for a national standardized system of roads and maintenance.

Maps, if they existed at all, were created by local car clubs but often did not match up to those of nearby clubs. The 1904 tour used an advance car to spread confetti to mark the route! Then there were the laws restricting car use. Horses ruled the roads and one group proposed that in an encounter, the car driver should take the vehicle apart as quickly as possible and conceal the parts in the bushes!

Finally, the tour hoped to

increase public appreciation of the car's reliability over long distances. In 1904, only one in 1000 people owned a car but by 1913, when the original Glidden Tour ended, one in 35 were owners. That's quite a change.

Feeling lucky to be living in 2004, I began planning what to do and what to take. The total mileage was 1,250 miles so I decided to break it into chunks of 200 miles a day. I had already done that for the 1996 Glidden when I drove the A from New York to Dearborn, Michigan. Two hundred miles can take between six to eight hours of driving a day, going just under 50 mph. Thank goodness that Moe DeMott was still able and willing to work on my car or none of this would have been possible.

The Model A Club lets you install safety features without being penalized at a show. I don't get the feeling all car clubs have this but safety features are a must-have when driving on the Interstate. I also had flashers, turn

signals, a fluorescent triangle at the rear, and a long mirror that lets you see all of the back and side windows.

And, of course, seat belts. To not wear a seat belt is to say there are no destructive, sleepy, crazy people with screaming kids in any of the cars around everywhere.

My philosophy on roads is that the vehicle behind you should be able to get around you. So yes, I drove the Interstate. Give me the open road of the Interstate any day where no one is stuck behind you for long

I had my trunk filled with tools and spare parts. An extra carburetor. Head gaskets. Flares in case of breakdown. An oil pan and grease gun. I took my AAA card, my sister's cell phone and a Model A membership roster so I could call on fellow drivers if I broke down.

Of course, I got excellent maps from my local AAA and spent hours charting my route. It puzzled me why Glidden had not gone through New Jersey (by ferry since the George Washington Bridge didn't exist) into Pennsylvania. Instead, he'd gone north to Albany and then west to Buffalo into Ohio. Oh, well. I know now why he did it. Hills! Pennsylvania has hills!

Glidden had taken quite an entourage with him...family, mechanics, etc. as well as traveling with about 100 other entrants. I hoped to travel with at least one other car and asked the tour registrar to send me names of other drivers in my area. They had high speed rear ends and overdrive so going with another car wasn't going to happen. Besides, I'd learned from reading about the Winton tour that if you have only one car for a tour, one car will do!

I was going solo but looking for a co-pilot. You'd get your own room, three meals a day plus snacks and on the days we broke down, you'd get extra ice cream.

There were people who wanted to go but couldn't take the time off from work and others who just thought I was nuts. My ideal was a person able to drive, stronger than me and preferably with some mechanical ability.

I was to get none of the above. With five days to go, the last weekend, I was sitting at a picnic table with a girl and her mother. The mother said "How do you qualify? I'd love to go." "You would? Are you good natured because that is all I really need." And voila, I had a 76-year old co-pilot named Rhoda Stern!

I work at a Senior Center. The day before I left, I parked in front of the building. Mike Right had made two magnet signs for each door saying "100th Anniversary - NY to St. Louis" and I had 1000 calling cards made with this message on one side. I hung the map up at the Center. I would call every night so they could follow me on the trip. "Good luck, God bless, you're crazy, you're going in that?" The place was abuzz. Someone called the newspaper - "She's leaving tomorrow. Hurry!"

The first day we left at 6 am to get over the George Washington Bridge early. One hour into the trip the rain came down and never stopped. We'd been so busy we hadn't considered the residue of yet another 2004 hurricane.

The second day we started out on a beautiful 2-lane road, flat farmland with blue hills all around. Then up the hill, the car slipped out of second gear, making an awful noise and lurched to a stop. I had to keep the shift stick in position manually plus the emergency brake was flopping about. At the bottom of the hill, I got under to take a look. The emergency brake needed a pin - not a big deal. But the hill had cost us time. It had taken 2 hours to go 1-1/2 inches on the map so we were way behind schedule. To make our daily

mileage quota, we'd end up traveling in the dark.

Our next problem was a roadblock at our exit so we drove back to the gas station. A police car told us the town had been washed out, gone, no more town. He looked at our route and called ahead to verify that no other roads were out. I was worried about the headlights and both Rhoda and I were appealing to our guardian angels when one light went on. Good enough. The next day was a free day, anyway.

I had read the article on the Winton cross-country trip which suggested the idea of a planned day off. This was a good idea for two reasons: it could be used as a breakdown day if needed or a change-the-oil, grease-the-car day.

The third driving day we left so early, it was dark for the first half hour. I was going to get a good jump on the day and get our 200 miles in early. I was concerned about Indianapolis hub roads with lots of traffic all together, driving fast. Rhoda kept looking at the map "I can't find any of the towns." "We're going west, don't worry about it," I said. At day's end we had gone 100 miles over our quota. We were beat but happy.

Now that we were ahead of schedule, we took side roads. We saw a waterfall and found a small town that had an old Harvard store owned by a woman and a great donut shop. We had a wonderful time chatting with the locals. One farm couple were so taken with our enterprise that they prayed over us. "Watch over these two travelers," she stated. We both gave her a hug. It was a very special moment.

At the end of this day we were just 50 miles from St. Louis. There was a feeling of exhilaration. If something happened now, AAA would tow us in. (We had AAA 100 mile towing).

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Traveling companion Rhoda Stern joins Alice in celebrating her magical trip.

The next morning I got up at dawn and cleaned the car right outside the room. I wanted this car looking good. And we had more free time which we enjoyed at an artist's shop in a beautiful old bank. She advised us where to eat lunch and how to avoid the bumper-to-bumper traffic ahead. Was that our Glidden guardian angel looking out for us?

Entering St. Louis we were in very heavy 3-lane traffic. Our lane was in the middle with trucks on both sides. *Then the arch! What a beautiful sight on the Mississippi! We did it! We did it. Mike Right won't be disappointed. Hooray!*

I wanted a hotel overlooking the Mississippi so I could look at it and look at it. In all my traveling, I had not seen the Mississippi River.

The head doorman came right up. *"Park it right in front. You can keep it there the whole time you're here."* Very exhilarating. *"Hi, we made it, have a card. That's my baby. Isn't it cute? Here, have a card."* That night we ate in the rotating top of the hotel restaurant with a beautiful red sunset. *"We're here. I know. We did it."*

The next day we would celebrate, honor and acknowledge what others had done 100 years ago. We would be in the fairgrounds of the 1904 World's Fair. Mr. Right parked us right in front of the historical building where we had photos taken, recounted our travels and then got a tour of the World's Fair exhibit. We were given a tour of the whole city. St. Louis is second only to New York for the most Fortune 500 companies and it shows.

Charles Glidden had been a catalyst in my undertaking this trip. At first, the trip was just about getting to Branson but after learning of the historical connection to St. Louis, Branson paled in comparison. Why was the Glidden Tour meeting in Branson when St. Louis held the history? Mike said that



Alice shares memories of her trip for members of the Horseless Carriage Club of Missouri.

each year the city hosts an enormous antique car event and that St. Louis has a large auto history. In the early days, it was home to the largest number of experimental car manufacturers. Some still live there. In my opinion, the Glidden Tour really missed a unique opportunity.

All along the way, we had the feeling that Charles Glidden was on the trip with us. I am so glad I did it, and I really believe he's pretty pleased too!

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