

6-1-2016

Review: 'Motoring West: Automobile Pioneers, 1900-1909'

John Alfred Heitmann

University of Dayton, jheitmann1@udayton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/hst_fac_pub



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

eCommons Citation

Heitmann, John Alfred, "Review: 'Motoring West: Automobile Pioneers, 1900-1909'" (2016). *History Faculty Publications*. 137.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/hst_fac_pub/137

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of History at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlange1@udayton.edu.

Motoring West: Volume 1, Automobile Pioneers, 1900 – 1909. Edited by Peter J. Blodgett. Norman, Oklahoma: Arthur H. Clark, 2015.

Motoring West is the first in a projected series that will examine the place of the motorcar in Trans-Mississippi America to 1940. Edited by Peter J. Blodgett, curator of manuscripts at the Huntington Library, the work brings together explanatory historical material that sets a critical and analytical context with a diverse collection of primary sources. The result is an interesting mix of readings that takes us well beyond Dayton Duncan's *Horatio's Drive* and the Ken Burns film sequel.

To be sure, this first full decade chronicling the appearance and gradual adoption of the automobile as both a utilitarian and non-utilitarian mode of transportation has enormous historical significance. With the automobile's introduction and initial diffusion, basic long-term societal arrangements subsequently crystallized in ways that endured for decades. Beginning with stunts and tests of reliability and ending with commonplace touring vacations that offered participants the opportunity for personal transformation as they communed with nature, each story in its own way incited this reader to get out on the road. But with a century separating past and present the experience is significantly different. The sheer physical challenges of motoring that confronted the pioneering automobilist in a region of the country characterized by vast spaces, formidable mountain ranges and deserts, and numerous rivers and streams produced a series of true adventures that make any modern day road trip with cell phones and GPS a walk in the park!

The various accounts included in this book are quite diverse. One group of writings originate from manufacturer-inspired trials that were orchestrated with publicity and marketing in mind. Thus we read of Alexander Winton's failed attempt to cross the US in 1901, written by his publicist Charles B. Shanks. A few years later M.C. Kraup would write of a more successful venture in a 1904 Packard "12 horsepower steed." Other narratives follow, singing praises of two curved-dash Oldsmobiles, "Old Scout" and "Old Steady," air-cooled Franklins, and Brush Runabouts. In an age where reliability of internal combustion engine cars remained a serious question, these trials, often taken on roads that hardly could be considered roads, demonstrated the practicality of a transportation technology to the American public. And perhaps just as significant, not only are ICE-powered vehicles proven to take automobilists where they need to go under the harshest of conditions, technological alternatives – steamers and electrics – were left in the dust. For in the arid west where could steamers possibly get water for their boilers? And is there possibly an electric cord long enough to recharge electric car batteries as one traverses the vast unoccupied stretches of western land?

A second cluster of writings center on how to plan and prepare for an auto journey. Taken from a wide variety of magazines that include *Outing: An Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, *Scientific American*, *Harper's Weekly*, *Munsey's Magazine*, *Sunset*, and *Country Life in America*, and *The Independent*, one wonders how many readers actually followed through on this advice by purchasing an automobile and then the

necessary equipment needed to venture out into what was largely wilderness. Perhaps the most valuable of tools to sustain the journey was the block and tackle, as several of the travel accounts attest. Shovels and guns were also at the top of any prospective traveling automobilist's list along with an ample supply of gasoline, tires and tubes. Indeed, inadequate tire technology was a formidable bottleneck to comfortable touring to at least the 1920s and the adoption of the balloon tire design.

Of course, touring during the first decade of the 20th century meant traveling in open cars, and thus protection from the elements was a must. Hrolf Wisby's 1902 "A Practical Automobile Touring Outfit," published in *Scientific American* addressed this subject, and it is a riot to read. Wisby suggests that in inclement weather, one should don a leather coat, a "proper" cap with goggles, buckskin gauntlets with wide cuffs, and rubber laced boots. In warmer weather a "Japanese style palm leaf sun hat" is advisable along with "canvas gaiters or leather leggings."

Finally, and on a more serious note, one theme stuck out to me as I perused *Motoring West* pages. Namely, Western railroads played a critical role in fostering the first decade of the automobile experience. Railroad right of ways helped traverse the land where there were no roads and bridges. The tracks themselves could be used if necessary, although the ride was far from comfortable. And finally, supplying travels with necessary parts proved to be an important job for the railroads. It was in this way that the railroads ultimately planted the seeds for their own demise as the primary transportation technology in the American West.

John Heitmann
University of Dayton