How Did We Survive Without A Car?

By Clancy Strock, Contributing Editor

Yesterday, while I was stuck in 5 o'clock traffic, a startling memory popped up: My maternal grandparents, who both lived longer than most, never owned a car!

Grandfather Stevens walked to work all his life, a hike of more than 2 miles, rain, snow or blazing heat.

When he finally retired, he walked a dozen blocks or so every day, the last three up a steep hill, to the Odd Fellows lodge where he played pinochle with old pals. And he was still doing it when well into his 70s.

Meanwhile, Grandmother Stevens and an aunt hiked "downtown" for their shopping, perhaps treating themselves to a tuna sandwich at the Woolworth lunch counter.

Groceries were just a matter of phoning in an order and waiting for the delivery boy to knock on the back door. For longer journeys, there always were grown children or good neighbors who chauffeured them hither and yon.

Yes, you really could have a nice life without an auto, although I'm sure my grandchildren can't imagine it.

My mother trudged 3 miles to teach in a one-room country school. Dad courted her in his buggy pulled by a blind horse named "Barney." It's hard to believe, but Dad stated that after taking Mom home from a date, he could curl up for a nap on the buggy seat and Barney would reliably find the way back to the farm. Show me your $50,000 luxury car that can do that today. And we think we've made so much progress!

My transportation until I was well into my 20s was a trusty bicycle purchased at the local Gamble Store for something like $18. It took me to high school and a variety of odd jobs. It accompanied me to college, too.

Out-of-town trips were a simple matter of standing by the highway with your thumb out. No one worried about picking up hitchhikers in those simpler times.

A Bike Bassinet

Back in school after World War II, both my bride and I had bicycles to haul us back and forth to class. And when our firstborn came along, we bought oversized baskets for both bikes so she could accompany us.

When I got my first real job, in Columbus, Ohio, I discovered the marvels of mass transit. Getting to work involved two bus transfers and a 10-block walk, a total trip of an hour each way. The good part was that there was plenty of time to read the newspaper in the morning and catch a nice nap on the way home.

Then we moved to Minneapolis, where trolley cars were still in use. I'm sure my early resolve to move someday to a warmer climate was born from standing on windy corners in below-zero weather listening for the "clang-clang" that announced the arrival of the next car.

Trolleys were dandy, but grocery shopping and such were not a loat of fun, what with two wee ones to tote along.

Eventually, things took a giant leap ahead when we could afford our first car. I'm sure many of you Reminisce readers vividly recall what a great day that was. Remember the thrill? What luxury. What freedom.

Then Came Car Pools

However, it was still a world of one-car families and one-car garages. When Dad took the car to work, Mom was trapped at home.

The answer was to carpool, just as Dagwood Bumstead is still doing today. And, yes, one member of the group was late every morning. And you could depend on at least one of us to request a stop at the grocery store on the way home.

“Nancy called and asked me to pick up milk and a couple of other things.”

Or one of the group was stuck at the office with a late-running meeting while the other three of us twiddled our thumbs.

But there were lots of good things about a car pool. Having companions to talk with made the 45-minute trips go by a lot faster. We all worked for the same company, so there was gossip to be swapped and rumors to be evaluated. Eventually, our four families became close socially, which was a huge blessing, considering that none of us was native to the area.

Of course, those who lived in or around big cities had trains and subways and buses to haul them hither and yon.

At one time, Milwaukee had a quirky train that passengers called the Cannonball. It consisted of a locomotive and two passenger cars that made a 40-mile morning run into the city, sat idle until 5 p.m., then returned to whence it came. One memorable morning, it actually got lost before reaching the station.

Today, commuting by auto is, frankly, a mess. And the root reason is simple: Most cars have just one occupant. And you can’t help but think that if each one had just even two passengers, the congestion would be cut in half.

On the other hand, watching other people relieves much of the boredom. I'll never forget the morning in bumper-to-bumper St. Louis traffic that I watched a young lady comb out her hair, do a complete eye-makeup job and apply lipstick, all while driving 65 miles an hour.

A common sighting was men with the morning paper propped on the steering wheel, scanning it while shaving with an electric razor and sipping coffee.

Several big cities have installed commuter lanes, available only to cars with multiple passengers. Recently, a lady was arrested for using one of those lanes all by herself. Her defense in court was that she was pregnant, so that counted as two people. The judge was not impressed. Nor was the officer on the Golden Gate Bridge who apprehended a resourceful soul whose passenger turned out to be a nicely dressed department-storemannequin.

So, in my lifetime, we have gone from shoe leather and bicycles to the expectation that everyone but the dog must have their very own car. It's hard to sell a house with just a measly two-car garage.

That's what they call progress. But sometimes I think we all might be better off with Barney the horse. Petroleum may be running out, but there's always room to plant more oats.

I know…I was there.