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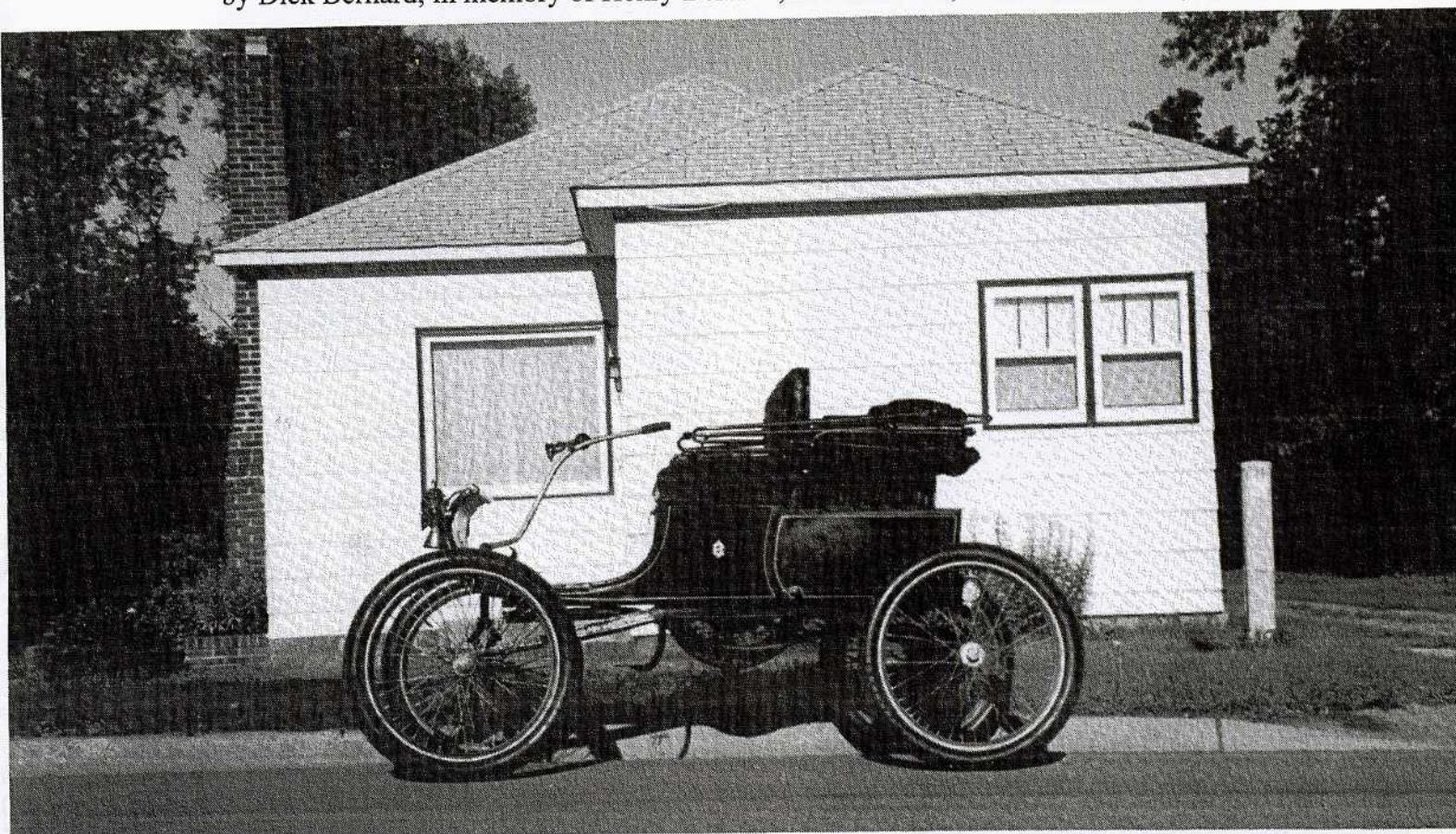
La société canadienne-française

Editor: Dick Bernard

#105

GRANDPA'S AUTOMOBILE

by Dick Bernard, in memory of Henry Bernard, December 22, 1907-November 5, 1997



Henry Bernard Sr's 1901 Oldsmobile, in front of his original home in Grafton ND in Summer, 1997.
Photo taken by Tony Bowker, present owner of the voiture.

By Dick Bernard, Editor

7672 157th St W #301
Apple Valley MN 55124

Editors note: This story is dedicated to the memory of my father, Henry Bernard, born in Grafton ND, December 22, 1907, died in Belleville IL, November 5, 1997. Henry learned to drive in his father Henry's 1901 Oldsmobile,

the car pictured above (the car in the picture is the exact same vehicle in which Henry learned to drive). The family had lost track of the vehicle for all of the 1990s, but in a truly serendipitous series of events rediscovered the car in late September, 1997. Henry Bernard saw the above photo, and made tape recorded recollections about the car less than a month before he died. With grateful thanks to Rene Collette of San Diego, who saw a September, 1997, article about the

car in the Grafton ND newspaper, and sent it to me; and to Tony Bowker of the San Diego area, the current owner of the car, I offer the following recollections

Henry Bernard, my grandfather, owned the 1901 Oldsmobile for over 50 years. I saw Grandpa drive the car in several July 4th parades in Grafton, North Dakota, his home.

I knew Grandpa for 17 years. He was 68 years old when I was born, and died at age 85 in 1957. From a kids point of view he was a great Grandpa.

Henry migrated to the Grafton ND area from rural Quebec, just south of Quebec City, most likely in the early 1890's. He was probably in his early 20's when he arrived in this frontier town, which had been founded only a few years earlier in 1882. His older brother, Joseph, had come to the area in 1888.



Henry, photographed in Grafton probably not long after he arrived from Quebec, at age 22, 1894.

Grandpa was a common man, one about whom no books were written, nor newspaper

articles published. But he seems to have been a very interesting man.

He had only a first grade education in Quebec, and that education was in French, and early in his life he went to work. He talked about working in the lumber mills at Ste Marie-Beauce; being a lumberjack in the area of Berlin Falls NH; mining asbestos at Thetford Mines PQ.

As a kid, I knew him to be a great raconteur. Others who knew him, including my Dad, paint a picture of a very intelligent, proud and ambitious man, who was never one to back away from a fight - and usually won. I often wonder what he would have accomplished had he been able to complete a college education, rather than ending his education at grade one. He was a big man for the times - about 5'11" 190 pounds according to his Spanish-American War enlistment record in 1898.

He began a long career as chief engineer of the Grafton Roller Mills sometime in the early 1900s; was very active in the Grafton Volunteer Fire Department, and was its president; and is said to have been among the founders of the Grafton City Park.

He married Josephine Collette of nearby Oakwood ND in June, 1901. Three children were born to this union: the second, Henry, was my Dad. Josephine and Henry were married 55 years. Josephine died in 1963.

THE 1901 OLDSMOBILE

It is not known for certain when Henry Bernard first came into possession of the Olds, but thanks to Dad, Tony Bowker and others, a pretty clear picture has emerged about the history of this car.

It is known that this Olds was the 369th produced by Oldsmobile in 1901 (Oldsmobile's Centennial was 1997. The 1901 Model was apparently the first to be produced by Oldsmobile in any quantity.).

The car was first owned by J.A. Risvold, who bought it for \$650 - a princely sum in those days.

This horseless carriage apparently created some consternation in the town of Grafton. The Centennial History of Grafton says this, quite clearly in reference to the 1901 Oldsmobile: "...Risvold...brought the first automobile to the city. It was a one cylinder, four and one half horsepower chain driven car with a steering lever. Referred to

as a “nightmare” at first, there was talk at the time to have the city council pass an ordinance forbidding the owner to run the



The 1901 Olds with “T. Roney at lever....” This photo is undated, but goes back a long way. Until learning its true “birth year” this year, assorted versions called the Olds of 1897, 1902 or 1903 vintage.

contraption upon the public thoroughfares....” (p. 186).

Henry Bernard, my father, described the car as having the engine in the back and under the seat, and the radiator under the floorboards. Before cranking to start the motor, the sparkplug was removed and a gasoline “charge” was put in the cylinder. The “drive shaft” was a bicycle-like chain.

THE HENRY BERNARD YEARS

We will probably never know how Henry Bernard first became custodian of the car. The process of speculating would create, perhaps, a more interesting story than reality.... Could it be...?

Henry Jr. remembers that his father initially stored the car for someone named Rindal. So there seems to have been at least one owner subsequent to Risvold and prior to Henry Bernard.

The original arrangement seems to be that Henry was to store the car in his barn behind their home in Grafton in return for some rent. It seems that this arrangement went on for some time, and that the Oldsmobile was never used. For some reason, Rindal did not pay the rent, and indeed left the area. Perhaps by the time Rindal left, he viewed the auto as a useless contraption - perhaps his new

location had no gas station and, besides, there was the expense of transporting the vehicle to the new place! At any rate, after a time, Grandpa Henry took possession of the car by default. This was probably before the advent of the automobile assembly line and more cars appearing in the town.

Dad’s earliest memory of the car is its being stored, on jacks, in a corner of the barn. Because it was inside, it did not suffer the ravages of weather. He recalls it was not useable, initially, because the tires were flat. And no tires were available - replacement parts from “Mr. Goodwrench” were not to come to pass for a long while.

In 1908, Henry Ford produced his first Model T, and cars became more accessible. People in Grafton and other places began to buy more cars. By 1917, quite a number of people in Grafton had cars, and replacement parts were available.



The Bernard family in Grafton about 1917. Standing in front is Frank Peter (who later was killed aboard the USS Arizona on December 7, 1941, at Pearl Harbor HI); seated were Henry and Henry; standing Josephine and Josephine. It was perhaps about this time that Dad first took the lever of the Olds.

Grandpa prided himself as a fixer of things, and according to Dad, came to the conclusion that the Model T rims were quite similar to the Oldsmobiles. He made the necessary changes so that the Oldsmobile would accommodate Model T wheels, and now the car was operative. For a time it became a useful car in the family, and it was, indeed, the car in which Dad learned to drive.

DRIVING THE CAR

In an October 10, 1997, interview with Henry Bernard, he recalled driving the little Olds.

First was the process of starting the car, earlier described. The crank for the engine was on the left side of the car.

A lever was the steering wheel. It certainly was not a speedway vehicle, having only one cylinder, and a bicycle type chain drive, but it did work.

Dad recalled driving his mother uptown in Grafton (a matter of several blocks). It was a rainy day, so they put up the umbrella, and motored down the street. When they reached their destination, he simply stopped the car in mid-street and had to be reminded by the local gendarme of the need to park at the curb.

Another time, some neighborhood ladies took the Olds to go to the country to pick berries. They encountered an overpass over the railroad tracks, and the Olds could not make the grade. So everyone but the driver got out of the car, and helped push it up and over (in the early days, overpasses were not the gently graded roads we now have - they could be quite steep. Their function was to get wagons and other conveyances over the railroad tracks, and convenience to the automobile driver was not a prime consideration.

It seems, from Dad's retelling the stories, that the Oldsmobile never got extensive use. The family had other automobiles. And by the 1920s it was already viewed as a curiosity by residents, rolled out on occasion to show to visitors. By 1932, it was permanently housed in the barn, and Marvin Campbell, who lived with the Bernard's and was a young teenager at the time, recalled that the kids clearly understood that they weren't to mess with the car!

(The Olds, from its vantage point in the barn, viewed hard times with the Bernard family. In 1927, before the Great Depression, both the flour

mill in which Henry Sr. was chief engineer, and the bank in which they had their savings, went bankrupt. Henry was only 55 years of age at the time. The family then subsisted on a small Spanish-American War pension, odd jobs, and Henry's work as a night watchman at the defunct mill).

In 1937, the Bernard's sold their Grafton house and barn and virtually everything in them - except, apparently, the Oldsmobile. They began a pattern of living in the winter in Long Beach CA, and summers in a much smaller house in Grafton.

Henry worked out an arrangement with the City of Grafton to store the car in the Fire Hall area. This was perhaps an easy decision for the city to make, since Henry had long been very active in the Grafton Volunteer Fire Department, and indeed had been the president of the department.

The car stayed under cover except for the times when Henry Sr. drove it in July 4th parades. I remember seeing it drive past in the parades, and even then, in the 1940s and early 1950s, it was quite an attraction.

Dad recalls that these parades were community education events, and Grandpa was not enamored of driving the little Olds in the parades because he would then miss seeing all but the units in front and behind him. There were no videos or movie cameras in common use then, of course.

AFTER THE BERNARD'S

In the summer of 1956 Grandma Josephine had a stroke and became disabled for the rest of her life. Grandpa Henry's physical condition deteriorated quite quickly, and he passed away less than a year later.

Sometime in 1956-57, probably, Grandpa divested himself of the car, selling it to the Oldsmobile dealer in Grand Forks ND. There the car stayed for many years.

ON THE ROAD TO SERENDIP¹....

In about 1990 or so, Dad and I stopped at the dealership to see the car, and found that it had been sold to a collector in Colorado. We lost track of the car. It was subsequently sold to another party, and then to the present owner, Tony Bowker of the San Diego area. As previously described, it was true

¹ "Serendipity [coined by Horace Walpole (c 1754) after his tale The Three Princes of Serendip (i.e. Ceylon) who made such discoveries] an apparent aptitude for making fortunate discoveries accidentally." Webster's Unabridged

serendipity that brought us back in contact with the car. Had Rene Collette no longer subscribed to the Grafton paper, we would probably have never learned of the car. Had Tony Bowker not had a relative in Winnipeg, which is nearby to Grafton, he would have had little reason to come to Grafton. Had Tony not been interested in the human "roots" of his little car, he would not have tried to find out who owned it. Had Grandpa not taken an active interest in preserving the car, it would have long ago expired as a pile of rust somewhere. Had Rene not known who I was - we are relatives who share a long time interest in genealogy of the family - it would not have occurred to him that the article in the Grafton paper would be of interest to me. In short, many people, and serendipity, brought the car back into our families life. There are several more items to add to this list, but these will suffice.

THE OLDS GOES ON THE ROAD WITH MR. BOWKER

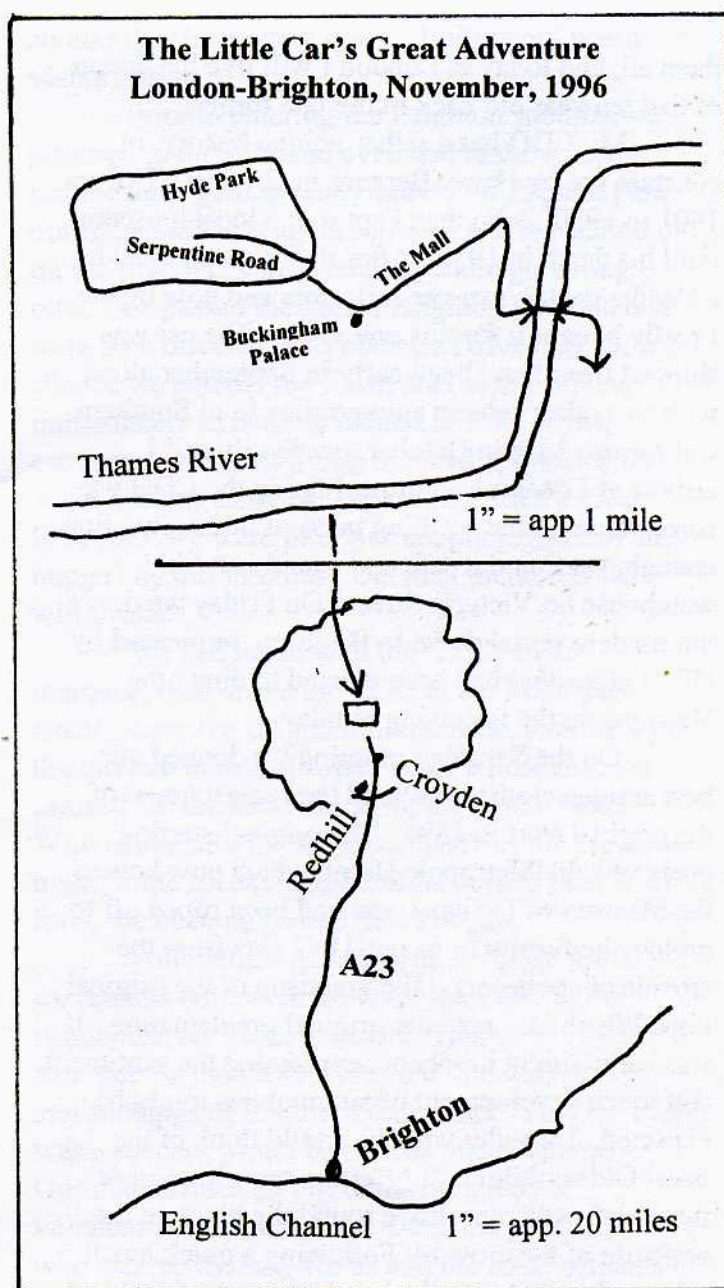
Especially because I knew Dad's health was deteriorating rapidly, I went into high gear to find out more about Tony Bowker. I found him, and he responded almost immediately - the miracle of e-mail! It developed that he was English by nativity, had lived about 30 years in the United States, and that the Olds had gone across the big pond (Atlantic Ocean) with him in late 1996. He sent me an article he had written and had published in several magazines in the United States and England ("One Man's London to Brighton" reprinted below).

I also learned from the Bowker's 1997 Christmas letter that the little Olds had been among 3,000 Oldsmobiles of every year at the Oldsmobile Centennial in Lansing MI in 1997, and had made NBC's evening news.

From humble beginnings in a Grafton ND barn, it has become an international "celebrity", thanks to the Bowkers!

ONE MAN'S LONDON TO BRIGHTON² by Tony Bowker

It's 6:30 a.m. on a damp, cold November morning in 1996 and I am cranking the 1901 Curved Dash Oldsmobile (CDO) surrounded by over 650 pre '05 antique automobiles in central London. Just how did I get into this predicament?



Nearly fifty years ago, World War II was over and the world was full of excitements to a suburban ten year old visiting his uncle who lived in London. A man of few words, one Sunday morning he invited me for a trip out to Redhill. A few hours later we were standing on the roadside expectantly waiting for the "old crocks". At the time I wasn't sure what old crocks were, but the expectancy of the crowds was infectious and after a while the first veteran chugged by. Over the next two to three hours, they continued to pass our location, climbing the hill of Redhill. To this ten year old it was heaven, my first motoring experience....

Since then I have owned motorbikes ranging from Lambrettras to Norton Dominators and automobiles from Model Ts to Porsches. I've loved

² See sketch map in next column.

them all, and today in London I will live the dream of that ten year old back in the late forties.

My CDO has a rather unique history, in constant use by Henry Bernard in Grafton ND from 1901 to 1930³, who then kept it in a local museum until his death in 1957. After that it was owned by a Caddie dealer, two car collectors and now by me. I really bought it for this one event. The car was shipped from San Diego early in September along with two other veteran automobiles from Southern California. Late in October, my family and I arrived at London Heathrow, hoping the CDO was somewhere in that seething mass of humanity. Sure enough, we found it safe and sound in a little warehouse on Victoria Street. On Friday we drove our modern rental down to Brighton, impressed by all the signs that had been erected to direct the Veterans on the following Sunday.

On the Saturday morning we donned our best antique clothes to attend the re-enactment of the original start in 1896. The original starting place was the Metropole Hotel, which now houses the Ministry of Defense, and had been roped off to protect the twenty or so pre-1897 cars from the crowds of spectators. The grandson of the original Lord Winchilsea read the original proclamation. It was surprisingly prophetic, expressing the sentiment that much development of automobiles might be expected. I wonder what he would think of the latest Oldsmobile???? After the speech, most of these early veterans drove round the block to the applause of the crowds. Following a quick lunch we wandered over to the hotel where the CDO had been delivered. Sure enough, after we added a little water, gas and oil she started right up. We drove out of the basement parking lot into the streets of London, making for Knightsbridge that runs along the South side of Hyde Park. With surprisingly little problem we made our way to the underground parking garage at Hyde Park as most motorists gave us lots of space. Later that evening we attended the VCC dinner at Cafe Royal, the food was magnificent, more utensils that you could count on both hands and such superb service. The toast to the Queen was followed by several speeches. The chairman of the Jaguar Motor Cars gave a moving speech which was warmly embraced by all present.

³ This article was written based on incomplete historical information available to Mr. Bowker at the time.

The excellent company and small talk went on until late in the evening.

On Sunday morning we drove a borrowed modern up to Hyde Park corner and wouldn't you believe it there was a traffic jam at 6:15 on a Sunday morning.... We eventually arrived in plenty of time, the CDO again started right up and we joined the crowd of over 600 veterans that were assembling on Serpentine Road. Many familiar faces were in the crowds of drivers and passenger, including Royalty, present and past race drivers and entertainment celebrities. Promptly at 7:58 we arrived at the starting line and we were off. So much energy, time, effort and here we are on our way. In recognition of the centenary of the original event, the route went through Admiralty Arch, normally reserved for Heads of State, down Constitution Hill, past Buckingham Palace and up the Mall. This really was a dream come true. For the first few miles the route was closed to all but the veterans. The route then proceeded past the statue of Winston Churchill and his beloved Westminster Palace, more commonly known as the Houses of Parliament, over Westminster Bridge and into busy streets of South London that we shared with more modern vehicles. Every traffic light, traffic circle and significant junction were operated by the police who tried very hard to give us a clear run. On one occasion, a lady cop mis-judged our speed and we had to slow down as she was unable to clear the junction. She apologized, no need of course, but it was a wonderful gesture, typical of the day.

At Brixton we encountered our first hill. We were told that the event plans had called for three lanes on the hill, two for the moderns to go up and down and one lane reserved for the veterans. A couple of days before the event, the sewer line burst and the road was down to one lane.... Some smaller veterans drove up the sidewalk, later ones found a detour. We struggled up the hill, fighting the traffic. At the top, we thought we were home free when "bango", no drive and no brakes. Any experienced CDO owner knows this is a broken chain. It was then we found what holds the back axle on, yes, the chain. After feeling sorry for ourselves for awhile, we found a spare link, reconnected the back axle while spectators lifted the car and in less than an hour we were back on our merry way. We stopped in Croyden at a cafe that offered free coffee to contestants and the spectators

really crowded round the little car. The cafe owner had a gold mine for the day. A little while later we stopped at Redhill, checking gas, water and oil in the CDO. We made the hill with no problem, the little CDO pulling really well in the cool damp weather. All too soon we approached the George Hotel in Crawley where we had another coffee and had our route card stamped. Again the crowds were impressive, the newspapers later estimated that nearly one million people lined the route. I would guess that every car club in Southern England was out for the day, watching the veterans. At one pub we spotted a group of Morgan sports cars, probably over 50 in total. I wondered if Peter Morgan has ever seen so many at one time????

Until Crawley the route had been through congested suburbs of south London, complete with all the attributes of modern traffic. I recall one Model T tour where participants complained about the 30 traffic lights on one day's route. The London to Brighton route had exceeded that by at least a factor of ten. The London to Brighton is really quite unique.

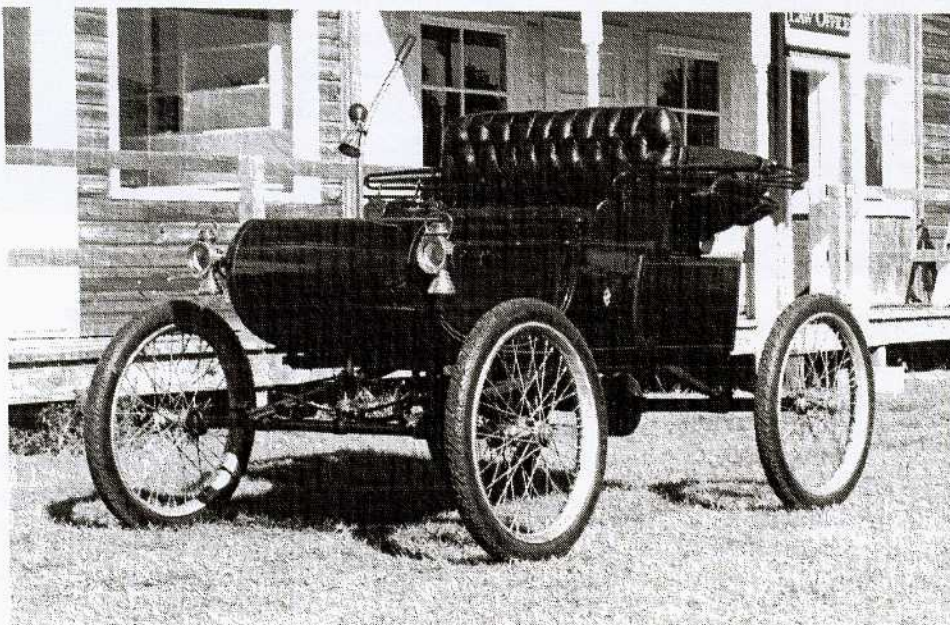
South of Crawley the cars moved off the A23, which is now a six lane divided highway, to the quiet back roads of the Sussex Downs. Many hills awaited the veterans, but the CDO was in great form, only slowing to accommodate other slower cars. Some were weaving across the road to lessen the gradient, others required some human horsepower. We just rolled along. At Cuckfield, we stopped to visit with our family, some of whom work nearby. After some refreshments and photo session, we were again on our way. On leaving Cuckfield, the route took us down rather a steep hill. I remember discussing with my navigator our plans

should the chain again break. Bailing out was a viable option....

Prior to entering the Brighton suburbs, we returned to the A23 and even had to move into a middle lane, getting really brave. At Preston Park our route card was again stamped and we started out on the final leg, surely nothing could go wrong now. We passed the famed Brighton Pavilion and were then directed onto Madeira Drive. By sheer chance we entered the finish area alone, no one immediately in front or behind and the crowd estimated at 30,000 lining the road applauded us. What a fitting entry to Brighton for such a great little car. We were interviewed, photographed and hugged by our families. Oh what memories that will evoke.

We had lunch with the family in the marquee, then drove the CDO to the Metropole Hotel, along the Brighton promenade, jostling with the modern holiday traffic. After a little rest, we dressed for the RAC dinner in the Grand Hotel. With essentially the same company as the previous night, same speakers and similar superb quality of food, the evening passed like a dream.

Following a good nights sleep we found the car haulers who were to return the CDO to the warehouse on Victoria Street. This would be the first step on the CDO's return to the warmer surroundings of Southern California. That the event was a success would be a gross understatement. Our thanks must go out to the hundreds of volunteers who staffed the route, the pleasant police who cleared the way for us and the RAC officials who helped those in need. It really was the fulfillment of a childhood dream, and unexpectedly it was even better than I ever expected.



*Holiday
Greetings
1997*

1901 Oldsmobile in
Grafton, N.D. 1997

*Tony & Heather
Barker*