



# A BIRTHDAY JOURNEY

By David Mathews

**W**hat's your idea of a road trip? Is it piling into the family SUV for a cross-country camping vacation? If you're more minimalistic, perhaps a "two-up" motorcycle trip with your sleeping bags and tent bungeed to the sissy bar, or maybe a back roads bicycle tour? Would you like to have every turn and stop planned, or simply get behind the wheel and see where the road takes you?

My road trip was on the slightly more spontaneous side. It came about not from long-term planning, but from opportunity and good fortune. My mother's 94th birthday was rapidly approaching, but because she lives in South Carolina and I in Wisconsin, our visits are infrequent. With no mundane business commitments in the immediate future, and a forecast promising agreeable weather, I decided to combine Mom's birthday celebration with an early fall drive through the farmland, the small towns, and the mountains, and over the rivers that lay between us.

Because I've been a "car guy" since my dad first let me drive

the family four-door Plymouth, I decided to drive Ruby, my 1960 T-5 cabriolet. I acquired Ruby six months earlier from its third owner, who sold it reluctantly because of health reasons. She'd been well cared for, personalized with period modifications, energized with a healthy C motor and Bursch exhaust, and seemed anxious to stretch her legs whenever we were on the road.

However, one does not simply slide behind the wheel of an old car and embark willy-nilly on a 2,500-mile journey. It's prudent to prepare for the unexpected. However, Ruby passed an examination of her condition with a clean bill of health. With a cardboard box full of spare parts, a fan belt, oil, and ignition bits and pieces stored behind the passenger's seat, I felt confident and ready to go.

I plotted my route to include more state and county highways than four-lane interstates and tollways. Those roads provide a sensory experience that super-highways simply don't. I planned to visit my boyhood hometown, New Palestine, Indiana, and cross over the massive steel



Bug-splattered but still smiling, parked by a South Carolina cotton field.



suspension bridges of the Ohio River. I wanted to see the miles of board fence, starkly black against green pastures, that corralled Lexington, Kentucky's thoroughbred horses. I was eager to drive through the Smoky Mountain foothills when shrouded in pinkish morning fog.

The day of my departure dawned red-orange, with clouds rising on the horizon. Wishing to avoid rain that would cause poor visibility, I left several hours earlier than planned. With storms in my rearview mirror, I navigated Chicago's traffic and crossed into Indiana without incident.

The flat farmland of northern Indiana, with its fields of three-bladed wind turbines and acres of yellowing soybeans, was a welcome contrast to the frenzy of Chicago. Exiting I-65 for a welcome dose of two-lane backroads, I stopped for lunch at the USA Family Restaurant in Reynolds, Indiana, a farming community where patriotism ran as high as September corn, and the daily specials were anything deep-fried. From there, a drive through Indianapolis, then on to New Palestine.

What had been a small farm community could now boast of its own traffic signal, a McDonald's restaurant, and a tattoo studio. How life had changed from the time when I was sent to the principal's office because my hair touched my shirt collar. New Palestine was bustling when I drove through, as a football game had drawn in folks from around Hancock County. We didn't have a football team in 1966—back then, the stadium was just a cornfield.

Saturday was warm and clear. Slowed only a little by the town's local harvest festival, I headed toward Cincinnati, through a town with five names, depending on who and when you asked—Carrollton, Finley, Kinder, Reedville, or Tailholt, as the "Hoosier Poet" James Whitcomb Riley called it. Then over a greenish-brown Ohio River, through Kentucky's undulating landscape, and past Knoxville, Tennessee, with its amazing golden Sunsphere, a 26-story structure with windowpanes of 24-karat gold constructed for the 1982 World's Fair.



Steel girders reflect a unique lattice design on Ruby's front fender.

I stopped in Kodak for the night. Kodak has two memorable attractions... the Chop House, the area's best casual restaurant, and the most god-awful cloverleaf intersection on the face of the earth. The Chop House features steaks, ribs, and chops to die for—and one might do just that trying to get there via the I-40/State Road 66 interchange at exit 407. An abominable convergence of highways, byways, entrance ramps, exit ramps, side roads, and access roads, no doubt locals park along the periphery to watch unassuming travelers attempt to navigate that mosh pit.

Lots of hills, switchbacks, and back roads filled day three. I followed State Road 66, turned onto Boyds Creek Highway/US-411, then snaked along infamous US-129 until it intersected with the Foothills Parkway. Ruby ran great. There's nothing better than a top-down, snorty sports car when sunny, blue skies and twisty roads rule the day.

After an exhilarating drive over the crests and down into the valleys of the Smokies, I sloughed through touristy Gatlinburg, headed east, brushed the western edge of the Cherokee National Forest past Asheville, North Carolina, and stopped in Greenville, South Carolina, for the evening.

Like many southern cities, Greenville's early prosperity came from plantations and cotton mills. By 1970, offshore manufacturing and cheap labor had shuttered most of its factories and brought economic stagnation to what was once was the "Textile Capital of the World." Forward-thinking city fathers would not let Greenville die. Together with state and local lawmakers, tax benefits and incentives were created to draw major manufacturers and corporations to the area. Now the West End is booming, the Liberty Bridge over Reedy River provides a glorious view, Henry's Smokehouse offers what is arguably the best barbecue in the state, and a leisurely walk to Smiley's Acoustic Cafe after a Greenville Drive baseball game at Fluor Field is easy-peasy.

Day four was to be a journey of 200 miles to Summerville, South Carolina, and a birthday celebration. State roads were the order of the day until I was beyond Columbia, after which I jumped on I-26 to Summerville. I was eager to get there... to take a cool shower... and to see Mom. Tall, skinny pine trees and kudzu, a green, leafy vine that chokes trees, obscures road signs, and threatens to overtake slow-moving pedestrians, dominated the landscape. Originating in Japan, the "vine that ate the South" was introduced to the United States as a ground cover and decorative shade. As with some good ideas, the plan proved better than the



Road warrior necessities—gloves, hat, atlas, and a cool drink.





Smiley's Acoustic Cafe is a 'go-to' Greenville hotspot.

practice. Kudzu *loved* the southeast, finding a hospitable climate, lots of vacant land, and a chance to grow unchecked. Robust and resilient, these invasive plants grow a foot a day during season. It has been estimated that kudzu now covers 7.5 million acres of countryside.

Four days and something more than 1,300 miles later (my odometer conked out during day two), I arrived in Summerville. In the early 1700s this area, known for its pine tree forests and beautiful azaleas, provided a respite from the summer heat, humidity, and mosquitoes of nearby Charleston. Summerville offers its own benefits and pleasures. Well known for its medical facilities, Summerville is also the “official birthplace” of sweet tea.

Yankees may wonder what the big deal is with sweet tea, but for those south of the Mason-Dixon line, sweet tea is an elevated art form. Black tea is the mandatory ingredient. After that... well, every self-respecting Southerner has their own recipe. Simply combining lots of sugar with a few tea bags and hot water ain't good enough. One must create a sweet syrup of sugar and boiling water to combine with the tea itself. A pinch of baking soda smooths the flavor. Enjoyed over ice with a slice of lemon, perhaps a touch of raspberry or peach, sometimes with a shot of vodka... now you're talking!

My mom's birthday party included sweet tea, two birthday cakes, many friends, several bouquets of flowers, and 24 greeting cards. She celebrated for two days, slept the next two, and demanded we provide three cakes for her 95th birthday. She's quite a lady—she'll probably outlive me.

Friday morning, with the party over, it was time to head back north. After checking the oil, the fan belt, and the tires, and after washing bugs off the windshield, I headed to Atlanta, home of the Porsche Experience Center—Atlanta (PECATL.)

The PECATL is not only Porsche's North American Headquarters, but also a sensory immersion into all things Porsche. Visitors can enjoy world-class dining at Restaurant 356, experience high-speed driving on a 1.6-race mile track, and drool over a collection of amazing cars that made Porsche an automotive legend. Visiting PEC was on my bucket list—driving there with Ruby was a bonus.

I reached the outskirts of Atlanta around 4 p.m. on Friday. Traffic around metro Atlanta lived up to its notorious reputation. Friday rush hour made it worse. Navigating it in a 60-year old car?



Tire SOUTH replaced the tube in my flattened Michelin XAS.

Worse yet. During my entire 2,500-mile road trip, I saw only two accidents. Both occurred that day in Atlanta, directly in front of me. Because of traffic congestion, I could not avoid running over debris.

All was fine until it wasn't. As I merged from I-285 to I-75, Ruby began to pull to the left, like a leashed dog eager to visit a fire hydrant. Although my destination was only half a mile away, Ruby's left front tire was losing air—fast. I squirted through traffic to the side of the highway, got out, and took a look. That tire was flatter than the proverbial pancake. Damn it! With limited options, I chose to pull out my bag of tools, removed the spare, assembled the jack, chocked the rear tire to keep Ruby steady, and got to work.

Twenty minutes later, sweaty and disheveled, I drove that final 2,640 feet to the PECATL campus and the Kimpton, a beautiful hotel adjacent the complex. After a quick shower and change of clothes, I headed to the rooftop restaurant for wings and a beer. The view from that rooftop was glorious. To the left—PECATL's racetrack. To the right—that famous “Fly Delta” sign at Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport.



Seeing is believing!





From vintage car displays and high-speed driving to world-class cuisine, the Porsche Experience Center-Atlanta is a “must see” location for any Porsche enthusiast.



Although my time at the PECATL was abbreviated, it was awesome. The drive around the track was crazy fast; lunch at Restaurant 356, fabulous. Leaving Atlanta, I headed north to have dinner with Gary and Connie Myers in Hiawassee, Georgia, about 130 miles away.

The Myers’ back deck overlooks the Appalachian Mountains. When the sun rose over those mountains early Sunday morning,

I was awestruck by the majesty and magnificence. The glowing, growing brilliance of the sun, burning brightly through blueish gray mist and low-hanging clouds, affirmed to me the power of an unseen, yet omnipotent presence.

After breakfast I headed northwest—US-76 past Lake Chatuge, north on 515, west on 64, back north on 141 until it intersects with 129, then on to Deals Gap and the infamous “Tail of the Dragon.”



This is the reason they call them the “Smokies.”





After a spirited twist of the Dragon's Tail, Ruby got a little gas and I, a bottle of water, at the Punkin Center Market.

Appropriately named in the early 1980s, this 11-mile stretch of torturous two-lane consists of 318 turns and countless elevation changes. “The Tail” is the go-to place in that part of the country for hotshot sports car drivers and sportbike daredevils. Despite a visible police presence and a 30-mph speed limit, accidents and spills are a daily occurrence. Enterprising cameramen, positioned strategically along the route, snap action images of every driver and rider who passes by, against the blur of stone outcroppings and scrub pines. Ruby barked and whined and thoroughly enjoyed the vigorous exercise.

After a pit stop at the Punkin Center Market in Maryville, Tennessee—gas for Ruby; a cold drink for me—we continued on through Knoxville and Lexington, finally stopping for the night in Cincinnati.

Monday and 400 miles to home. Back on US-52, we retraced our route through New Palestine, north on Mt. Comfort Road past the farm where I learned to drive a tractor and stack hay bales on a rickety flat top wagon, then onto I-70 for a short trip to Indianapolis, and north toward Chicago. Mindful of Chicago’s late afternoon traffic, I kept Ruby at a constant 75 mph, reaching the Chicago Toll Road at about 1:30 p.m. Other than the heat—another day in the 90s—and the noise—top down, windows down, trucks and cars all around—we made it to the Wisconsin-Illinois state line by 2:45 p.m. and onto my driveway at 4:30 p.m.

My memories... The early morning aroma of frying bacon and burnt toast, wafting from some distant kitchen. The sweet smell of mown hay and felled pine trees.

The sounds... The din of traffic. Twilight forest sounds. The happy chatter of children. Scratchy AM stations fading in and out on my Blaupunkt radio.

The conversations... “What kinda car is that?”

“A Porsche.”

“Is it real?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“Hey honey... that’s a *real* Porsche. You’re not from around here, are you?”

Nothing compared to the “oneness” I developed with my old Porsche. I felt every bump and wiggle from its skinny tires, worried about each cough the motor made and each smell that seemed unusual. But my God, what a glorious feeling to drive that car, open to heat, wind, sun, and occasional rain while driving the backroads of our beautiful country. Driving my T-5 those 2,500 miles was a road trip to remember. **356**



Abandoned gas stations and motels are frequent sights on Highway 25, between Cincinnati, Ohio and Lexington, Kentucky.