

The Road to Denver

by

Vera Marie Teape

Some time ago, Jesse H. Day of Athens, Ohio sent us a copy of a pamphlet published privately in 1907 by his grandmother, Vera Marie Teape MacKelvie. The pamphlet, reprinted here in its entirety, describes the adventures of Vera and her mother, Nancy Minerva Teape, as they motored their way across the Hawkeye State in the early days of automotive transport. Readers will note not only the travelers' amusing descriptions of the midwestern landscape at the turn of the century, but also their impressive mechanical abilities. Mrs. Teape and her daughter appear to have handled all but the most difficult repair work during the course of their 1,000-mile journey.

Nancy Minerva Teape was born in Marble Rock, Iowa in 1859 and was a well-known botanist and water colorist. She moved to Idaho in 1904 and remained there until her death in 1933. Her daughter Vera was born in 1885 in Rockford, Iowa, where Mrs. Teape's husband had a jewelry store. A prominent vaudevillian in the 1920s and '30s, Vera Marie Teape MacKelvie died in Glendale, California in 1967.

— Ed.

Do stop the machine quick, for I do believe that man has—yes, he *has* several crates of ginger ale. We must have some." I jumped out and hailed the man and bought one bottle. We were hilarious. It was such fun to drink out of a bottle when we were going 15 miles an hour over the loveliest roads! The sensation of riding was a new delight, for we hadn't been in an automobile for months.

We were all alone, just mamma and myself, and were headed for Denver. As yet we were only five miles from Chicago, our starting point. We had a good deal of trouble through the traffic, but now we were out of that horrible busy city, so we would not experience such trouble again. One chain was loose and had come off while riding over the bumpy pavement on State Street. My, the teams and cars

are enough to unnerve a professional chauffeur, let alone two nervous women! We were right on the car line when the machine stopped. I jumped out and tried my best to push the auto off the track. A crowd appeared as if by magic. A man quickly located our trouble and replaced the chain. We still felt a little shaky, but the ginger ale was good, the morning air fine and the prospect of a successful trip glorious. "We must christen our machine. She shall be our Baby Bullet. The name was used before on a very poor machine, but the name is good. I will guide while you drink, mamma." "Oh, won't it ——?" The machine had seemed to go straight up into the air. It landed with an awful jar and stopped. I couldn't tell at all what had happened. All I knew was that somehow my head was nearly jounced off my body and that something *had* happened. We were terribly frightened. It seems I had run over a large stump nearly hidden by the weeds and grass by the roadside. We were sure the machine would refuse to go, for it had stopped of its own accord. I cranked the engine, and, surprise of all surprises, it started working away as hard and as regularly as if nothing had happened; also when mamma pressed the foot pedal it bounded forward, evidently none the worse for the jar.

The scenery was a treat to our western eyes. In the heat of the day we would stop in the shade of the immense groves and lie on the wild bluegrass, watch the few white clouds above us in the clear blue sky and idly plan and map our way. Each time that we started on again it was with a new delight. The sensation of traveling swiftly and yourself controlling the machine, whose every sound you understand, is something only those who have experienced can at all conceive. We grew to love our Baby Bullet as if it were a living thing. Certainly there is something very human in machinery. A machine can take this as a compliment or not just as it likes. Sometimes when traveling under very adverse circumstances our machine would

go ahead so nobly and do so well we could not but praise it, and then again — but, of course, there was always a reason, although sometimes we *never* found out that reason. I think there is a good deal of English blood in Baby Bullet, anyway.

Just before entering Bristol we found that the nut on the sprocket wheel holding the chain was gone. What to do was a question. At last I conceived the idea of using heavy copper wire which we had with us, by fastening the wire through the cotter pin hole, and twisting it firmly around in place of the nut. We wasted lots of time and I was horribly dirty, but I rather think most men would have had the machine hauled to a repair shop. The wire held so well that we found it unnecessary to stop at Bristol.

When we stopped in the different towns, as we did to obtain gasoline, mail letters, get our meals, etc., a large crowd would always gather and stand and look at us and the Baby Bullet as if we were a curiosity. At first we found it very embarrassing, but later became accustomed to it. It was prompted by friendly curiosity and a desire to help, if help was needed. Men would ask us where we were from and where we were "bound for;" "how we had made certain hills or sandy stretches; how fast we could go; what we thought of the 'Orient Buckboard' and how many miles we made a day." In reply we told them we were traveling from Chicago to Denver. So far we hadn't found it necessary to be helped up any hills or through any stretch of sand. We could make only 20 miles an hour since we had had the low gear sprocket wheel put on. Of course, we thought our Baby Bullet was all to the good. That last question we preferred to avoid, for 99 miles was our best day, and somehow people expected us to make at least 250 easily. The conversation always ended something like this, "And you two ladies are all alone? Well! You certainly have got lots of nerve." We didn't see why they thought it took nerve, but everyone did think so, and everyone predicted failure.



Nancy Minerva Teape (courtesy Jesse H. Day)

Illinois is a lovely country. The roads were all good except for a few newly worked ones. For many miles the route follows the river. The country about Yorkville is by far the most beautiful place we passed through.

When we left Geneseo we were not very sure we were on the right road, in fact I'm not sure that we took the right road yet. We had not heard of the ferry at Colona, in fact did not know there was a river to be crossed at this point. We were enjoying the winding road, shaded on either side by the thick growth of trees, and were very much surprised when we rounded a corner and saw before us, not ten feet away, a large river. We were going on high speed, and it was all mamma could do to turn away toward a swamp and throw in the reverse levers and put on the brakes in time. We considered that a very narrow escape. The ferryman had seen the performance and came hurrying down to where we stood. On inquiry he told us that the river was so high that we would have to drive full 30 feet in water 20 inches deep to get on that ferry, because the river was so unusually high. He told us not to think of trying it, but to go ten miles out of our way to



Vera Marie Teape (courtesy Jesse H. Day)

the bridge. He said that the day before a large machine had driven to the ferry successfully, and that decided us. We certainly could if they could. The man shook his head and insisted that the other machine was a *very* large one. We insisted on trying, although we had never driven in water before. A team had driven up meanwhile and was waiting to cross the river. They drove on the ferry first and then we backed as far as possible and started the engine and made the plunge. Our hearts were in our mouths, but we put on a brave front. We hit the water full speed and splashed right through without apparently retarding the speed. We were really quite surprised and very proud of Baby Bullet. The men on the ferry had stood ready to help pull us up, and when we dashed up they had to jump to get out of our way. We all had a good laugh over it except one man, who didn't seem to see anything funny to laugh at. Perhaps it was because we had come so near running over him.

Before we reached Moline we spent fully two hours cleaning the plug, screw, and blade, refilling the gasoline tank from the supply we carried with us, and trying to locate some trouble,

for we had very little power and were making such poor time. We even found it difficult to pass teams that were going in our direction. We stopped at an empty schoolhouse and washed from the pump and fixed our hair the best we could, and tried to make ourselves think we looked presentable. We did get *so* dirty! The roads were dusty and the engine was black, and we came in such close contact with both.

We passed through Harlan [perhaps Milan], thinking it was Rock Island, and inquired the road to Davenport. We were directed over the Arsenal Bridge. We started over the bridge, but were hailed by a policeman, so we stopped and waited for him. After asking where we were from, he explained that everyone was required to have a permit, but if we called "Chicago" to the other gatekeeper he would know we were tourists and let us pass. We thanked him and were very glad we had been directed as we had, for it saved us driving through Rock Island with a "sick" machine, and we so enjoyed the beautiful drive through the Arsenal Grounds. This is one of the finest drives in the United States, I imagine. We passed the Arsenal buildings, all duplicates of each other and very fine and imposing. We saw all sorts of war paraphernalia and picturesque rows of cannonballs piled in triangular forms.

In Davenport we stopped at an auto-bicycle store for repairs. They found nothing wrong but one weak battery, which they threw out and replaced. We stayed here all night.

The roads here are good with the exception of a few steep hills. There is a great quantity of luxurious vegetation. We had made a very late start from Davenport, but wished to make Marion before dark. When we passed through Mechanicsville we knew that if all went well we could get there nicely. On the outskirts we inquired the way of two elderly men who were driving past. One of them was very much alarmed lest we should lose the way, and looking in the back of the buggy drew forth a county map. He came up to us and with his pencil



An Iowa auto repair shop, ca. 1910

showed us which road we should follow. He explained that it was a very poor map and started in correcting it. He placed several white schoolhouses on the other side of the road; also removed bridges, placed principal farmhouses, etc. He gave us the map, but he had kept us so long that it was beginning to get quite dusky. It seemed a strange, hilly country with winding roads. We were so afraid something might happen, that we would have to stay out all night. As far as keeping on the right road was concerned, we could have taken no other, unless we jumped a barbed wire fence to follow an old disused road. When we arrived in Marion it was quite dark.

The next day was the most discouraging day we had. Leaving Marion we went through Cedar Rapids, Vining, and stayed all night in Toledo. We took the wrong road and wandered about on all but the right road, retracing our way often, going up hill and down, through heavy sand.

In this part of Iowa horses are very easily frightened. The drivers frantically waved for us to stop, which we did till they turned down some lane or led their horses by. I cranked the engine that day till I thought my shoulder was forever displaced. This part of the country is not so prosperous-looking. There are a great many foreigners.

Sometimes it was very funny to see how frightened the drivers were when the horses didn't seem to care at all. I remember once in particular. We were coming down a long hill and saw far ahead a team coming toward us. The occupants must have seen us a long way off, too, but just as we were within a few rods of them the woman started screaming and grabbed the white lap-robe and waved it frantically for us to stop. She snatched the lines from the man with the other hand, but the poor horse stood with bowed head, not knowing anything was going on. We did our best to stop, but didn't succeed till we were directly opposite the rig and then how the engine popped!

The road from Toledo winds this way and that through the timber near the Indian Reservation. There were Indians in plenty. They looked very picturesque with their bright clothing and seemed to fit that country. The roads are good, but were up hill and down.

We stayed that night and most of Sunday in Denison, Iowa. That evening we were traveling from Dow City to Honey Creek, and as the sun set and the shadows lengthened among the trees we became terribly frightened. Everything looked so weird and awful! We were driving by the side of the bluffs that looked like mountains in the dusk. I reached back of the seat and opened the valise and got out the revolver and held it in my lap. We could hardly see the winding road enshadowed among the trees, and found it necessary to toot the horn continually for fear of running into someone. Oh, *what* a voice that horn has! It is so nerve-racking. We were glad to see the lights of the hamlet. Even the *feather bed* was welcome.

In the morning we awoke early, having spent a wretched night. We worked about an hour as usual cleaning and fixing the machine for the day's trip. When all was ready we cranked and cranked, but the engine refused to start. We must have worked another hour before we located our trouble. The engine was full of the oil we had put in just before stopping. We had an awful time working the oil out. We squirted lots of gasoline into the relief valve and opened something underneath the engine and cranked and cranked. At last we got it started. We never oiled the engine just before stopping a second time, I'll tell you!

We spent the rest of the day in Omaha. We went to a garage and had the machine thoroughly overhauled. The proprietor was perfectly lovely to us and allowed us to go back in the workrooms and watch them fix Baby Bullet. The workman was fine and explained everything he thought we could comprehend and possibly a little more that we *did* comprehend.

They ground the valves, readjusted the carburetter, cleaned the gasoline tank, changed our batteries, took off the wheels and greased them, and I guess that was all. They said we had kept the machine in fine condition. We felt quite proud. We had made the states of Illinois and Iowa in one week.

We made splendid time out of Omaha. Baby Bullet was certainly at her best and the roads were fine.

We stopped in Columbus and got gasoline and mailed some letters. When we returned there was the usual crowd of men and boys standing looking at the machine. I tried to crank up, but absolutely to no avail. The crowd grew larger and larger. People wondered what was the matter and offered help, but we knew they couldn't *help*, not understanding anything about it. However, I let a man try cranking it just because he insisted. Once we got it started and succeeded in driving slowly around the block and onto a side street, leaving behind us the crowd. We put in a fresh supply of gasoline (although the tank was not empty), changed the batteries, cleaned the plug and screw and blade, took apart the engine and examined the valves and springs, opened the carburetter and worked over three hours. Still the engine seemed absolutely dead. We were very tired and climbed up in the seat and read the little book of instructions till we nearly knew it word for word. I said I thought since we *couldn't* fix it we had better waste no more time, but telegraph to Omaha for a professional. Mamma said, "Well, but wait a minute. I'm going to readjust the carburetter." I felt sure that that would do no good, for it had been going fine, until we stopped, the way it was adjusted. Mamma cranked only once and the engine actually went. Some one must have turned the pin under the carburetter. We were mighty glad to find out that was all that was wrong and wasted no time starting, for it looked very much like rain and we thought that we might ride out of it.

We were 20 minutes' ride from town when we discovered that we had left our umbrella top, and since the sky was so black we turned back and spent about 30 minutes looking for it, thinking that it was near where we had been repairing the machine, as we had laid it on the ground with other things that were in our way. We couldn't find the umbrella, and no one we asked had seen it. We started again and in 25 minutes more were riding through a drenching rain. I was afraid it would put out the engine, but it did not hurt it at all. As for us, we were simply soaked. Our coats were in the valise back of the seat and we ran in the rain so suddenly that by the time I had succeeded in opening the valise and getting the coats we were drenched. However, we soon dried, but for awhile our teeth simply chattered with the cold. We stayed at Silver Creek all night. The next morning we drove through water up to the hubs to Clark's, where we left the machine and took the train to Mason City [Nebraska], where we spent a week visiting relatives. At the end of that time we were ready and anxious to resume our journey. We left Clark's at 1:20, and how we did enjoy the auto after riding on the cars! The drive that day was delightful. The roads were good and the country looked very prosperous with the large cornfields and alfalfa. We took supper and stayed all night at Wood River. We stopped two hours in Kearney and had Baby Bullet looked over. After leaving some miles—and we were driving in a deeply cut road out of which it was impossible to turn—we met a van filled with furniture and people. We tooted and the wagon turned out, but their big dog stood directly across the road. We tooted and tooted the horn, but the animal didn't seem to hear, and not being able to turn out, we actually ran over it. I don't know how badly it hurt the dog, as we didn't dare to stop and see, but I heard the poor thing howling when I turned and listened.

The next night we stayed at Gothenburg. We got up at 5:30, intending to get an early start,

having cleaned and generally overhauled the machine before going to bed. Now from Gothenburg to North Platte is 61 miles, and we were too low on gasoline to start such a distance without more; consequently we waited until a drug store opened and left that city at 7:30. We crossed the long and narrow bridge over the sandy Platte River and found the roads fairly good. We were delighted in recognizing certain parts of the road that we had driven over a few months before when going from Denver to Brokenbow. Among the familiar places was the home of an elderly farmer. He was the dearest old man with a snow-white beard. When we had stopped before, he had greeted us rifle in hand. He had been killing English sparrows, and took us back to the large barns and sheds and showed us hundreds of barn swallows flying in and out of their nests. He had protected them 20 years. Every spring they came and built their nests under the eaves. The air was fairly black with birds at that time. Their old friend delighted in their presence and seemed as proud of them as most men are of their children.

We soon came to the place where night had overtaken us before. We could well laugh at the remembrance of our past fear, for by daylight the country was beautiful. How we had sat and trembled that dark night, straining our eyes to penetrate the darkness, shaking at every sound out of the night's stillness, waiting for some unknown horror till sleep overtook us. We had not been prepared for camping and had no light for night driving. We had left North Platte late in the afternoon, hoping to make the next small town, but when twilight fell we decided to seek shelter at a farmhouse.

We drew up at a small sod house. I went in and asked if we might stay for the night, before I even looked at the woman who had opened the door for me. She was plainly a foreigner. When I went back and told mamma that we could stay, but they were foreigners, she said

we would *not* stay. She was even afraid for our lives when she saw the man of the house. He was an Italian and coming toward us. At mamma's command I grabbed the crank and was trying vainly to start the machine, while the man seemed to be quickening his pace at the signs of our departure. Several children were at his heels. The man was calling, but I couldn't understand him, for the engine had started. The man was still calling, but we sped away unheeding.

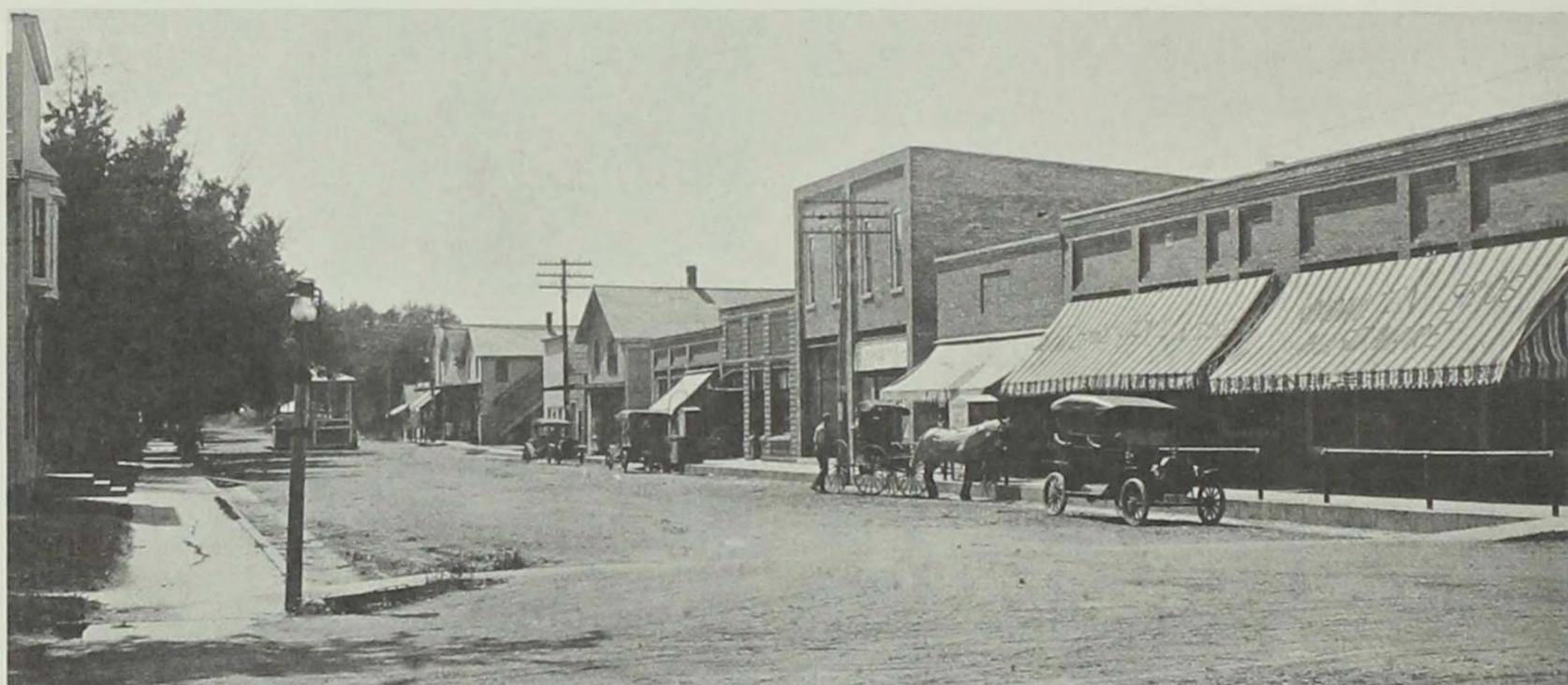
We went miles, and it had grown quite dark. Before us we saw what we took to be a house, around which was a high brick fence. There was a great abundance of trees. We felt very thankful, for we thought surely the tenants would be Americans. We decided the house faced the other road when we saw no gate; so with glad hearts we turned the corner and swung up in front of the gate, not to a house, but to a cemetery. The large white headstones sent a chill of terror through us. Again we sped on, a thousand times more frightened than before. In turning to find the gate we had left the main

road, but our one thought was to leave quickly that awful city of the dead.

Soon we came to a small house. Again I went and asked for shelter. The man at the door started to say he thought they could make room, but here his wife reminded him of her poor health and declared they could not keep us. I said we would not bother; we could sleep any place and would be away long before breakfast, and I suggested we were willing to pay as well. I was desperate. Still her poor health prevented. She would *not* keep us. I asked then of the man where he thought we could find accommodations. He did not know; said we were off the main road and would have to retrace our steps around that awful cemetery. I wanted to scream, and did cry a little. I wanted mamma to stay by their house in the road where we were all night, and not go on till morning. She would *not* stay near the house of such unhospitable people. She was indignant. She started the machine and we were off again at full speed, hitting many bumps in the darkness. As we passed the dreaded spot the white



Mesquakie Indians weaving in the summer shade



Buggies and automobiles compete for parking places in Floyd, Iowa at the turn of the century.

stones stared out and seemed to mock us. We drove on in the darkness three or four miles and at last stopped by the side of the road where we spent the rest of that long, long night. Later we found out that the cemetery was Fort McPherson.

About here one finds mostly prairie. There is very little land under cultivation. A small amount of corn and alfalfa is raised, and we saw some beet fields here but more farther west. The houses are mostly small and some are sod. The roads farther on are very uneven with deep-cut ruts covered with heavy grass. We knocked the chains off several times, partly because they were rather loose and we were not strong enough to tighten them. At last one chain broke when we were riding through stiff, heavy sunflowers which were very abundant in patches. The sun was scorching hot, it being almost noon and there was no shade. We were 18 miles from town and had no extra chain with us, so we knew we must some way manage to mend the broken one. We had only about four inches of strong copper wire, so we wrapped lots of fine wire around the broken link in hopes

it would take us a little of the way. I wrapped it very carefully and it looked quite secure. We screwed the chain on again, put on lots of graphite, and started the engine. That was as far as we got, for the minute the foot pedal was pressed the chain snapped. We knew there was no use trying the fine wire again, so we used the copper wire, carefully bending it the shape of the link. It went around just once with ends left to twist together. That might *help* hold, but we knew it couldn't hold alone, so we tried to bend a hairpin, but it was far too stiff. Mamma then straightened out two safety pins and we found that these bent a great deal easier. We wrapped these around the broken link and twisted the ends together as we had the copper wire. Again we tried the chain, but again it broke. Now perfectly desperate, we took small rope twine and bound the broken link with that, but with the same futile result. We worked three hours in the hot sun, then I remembered someone had once told us that if we broke a chain we could bind the small sprocket wheel with the broken chain and fasten it stationary to some part of the machine and go on one chain. I had suggested this to mamma, but she said we had

better not risk breaking the other chain; but at last when we saw one broken chain was as bad as no chain at all, we were ready to try anything. We bound the sprocket wheel, and the machine went as well as ever.

We went on the north side of the river to Paxon, at which point we were directed across the river to avoid hills. We followed their directions, and regretted it bitterly when we saw the condition of the road. It was a typical prairie country road and several times we came to great mud holes which it was impossible to avoid. When there was a hard or sandy bottom the machine plowed right through regardless of the depth of water, but in several cases the mud was so soft that the front wheels of the machine would sink in nearly a foot, while the back wheels spun around in the mud. Once I saw we were making no headway, but rather were sinking deeper and deeper in the mud, so I jumped out to lighten it of my weight and gave the machine a push. That was all it needed. Mamma stopped and waited for me on the other side while I waded out. We had to wait till mamma got through laughing. Someway she thought it terribly funny, and I suppose I did look queer, but seriously I very much preferred jumping to staying where we were and waiting for a team to haul us out. The water I jumped in was so thick with mud that even when my dress skirt did dry I was in a deplorable condition. The rest I will copy from my diary: Scared horse, which backed, knocking out lady. Front wheel backed over her. No damage done. Arrived in Ogallala at 4:30, where we spent the night. Terrible rain all night. Close lightning and thunder like artillery.

In the morning, with the help of our kind host, we mended the chain, making a rivet from a nail. Started about 9:45. Stopped near Crook and mended valve-spring, which had broken, by wiring carefully with fine wire. Held well. Machine *very* slow. Changed batteries, shortened pedal rod and worked all

morning. Helped man get horse's leg out of broken bridge. Passed through Sterling [Colorado] at 3. Dinner. Arrived at Hillrose 8:30 by moonlight. Splendid roads.

Woke up at 3; still bright moonlight. Thinking it was morning we got up and dressed. Started at 4. Passed large picturesque beet factory, all lighted up. Breakfasted at Fort Morgan. Met two autoists going in our direction. They were in a Maxwell in good condition. We told them of our broken valve-spring, which left us but little power, the compression being weak. They had no spring, but offered to go slow and assist us up bad hills and sand. We did not wish to detain them, so refused their kind offer. Made very poor time, over rolling, hilly country. Bought watermelons on road. Passed sheep and cattle herds. After passing town ten miles from Fort Morgan, machine stopped in sand. Wouldn't start. Sun *awful* hot. Valve-spring broken in new place; wired it. Went again, but not good. Got in Orchard 11:30. Best dinner on trip. Owner of hardware substituted spring. Machine barely went with the heavy new spring. Crossed to south side of river. Road rather sandy. Went through ranches to avoid sand, opening and closing five gates. Machine picked up right along. Guess the spring was getting limbered up. Went through *terrible long* stretch of sand O.K. We are told most autoists are hauled here. Passed gangs of ditch builders. Went up hilly, winding road by river. Roads here better. Arrived in Kersey 6:30. Arrived in Denver next forenoon. Roads fine near Denver.

We made the entire trip from Chicago to Denver without having been hauled out of sand, up hills, through water or even mud. The trip took us a little over two weeks. We were not out making time but to improve mamma's health. We had a thoroughly enjoyable trip, and another time would know better how to equip ourselves for a similar outing. □