

THE LICENSE

By John S. Halbert

The day I was fifteen years old, I took and passed the written test and held in my hand what was probably the second most important piece of paper of my teenage years--my driver's permit. (The driver's *License* was the most important paper. In third place was my future letter of acceptance to college.) All along, dad had had a firm policy that I would do no driving until I got my permit. So, except for a few excursions up-and-down the driveway, before I turned fifteen I had never driven a car.

The very next day after my fifteenth birthday, with Dad just along for the ride I drove the big Buick Roadmaster 130 miles from Birmingham to Sheffield--with about half of those miles on the Interstate Highway! According to the survivors--I did just fine.

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Over the next year, I practiced and drove thousands of miles, all of them, (unfortunately) with one of my parents sitting on the front seat beside me. Through it all, I became a decent driver, and in particular was pretty good at driving in reverse. From the beginning I could drive a half-block or more---at a good speed---in a perfectly straight line. Dad, on the other hand, zigged and zagged all over the place, usually bumping into the curb, or nearly running into a ditch. I could tell he was miffed at how much better I could drive a car backwards than he could.

One thing I did have to learn the hard way was to slow down before making a turn at an intersection. One time, I forgot this important detail and we ended-up in an old lady's front yard. She hustled out of her house in a dither waving a walking stick at us. It took all dad's powers of persuasion to convince the woman that our intentions were harmless even though our car---with us inside---was practically sitting on her front porch!

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Finally the big day arrived for the driving test. Several of my friends had forewarned me that one of the officers--a hard-nosed State Trooper named "Mr. Romans", was particularly difficult toward male teenage drivers, and to try to avoid him, if possible.

Dad and I arrived early in the morning and parked the Buick near the side entrance to the Court House in Tuscumbia, where they gave the examination. Before the test, several officers poked around the cars---a vehicle had to be in perfect order to be used for the test. An officer came to our Buick and began to look it over. Up to this time, the Roadmaster had never had any problems, but both tail-lights chose that very moment to stop working! The officer waved us away---no examination until the lights were fixed. We rushed to a nearby mechanic and got both rear bulbs replaced, which solved the problem. But by the time we returned, it was late morning---and no more driver's tests until after lunch.

An hour later, a rotund officer burst out of the Court House door and hustled toward us. I glanced at the name-tag on his uniform and did a double-take. "*ROMANS*". Oh, no! He was the

"Officer Romans," about whom my friends had warned me! This was the man who was notorious for his tough treatment of teenage drivers!

"Get in!" the trooper ordered. I opened the door and nervously slid behind the wheel. The portly patrolman settled into the right-front seat beside me. The car's springs groaned with his weight. He put on some metal-rimmed, dark-green sunglasses, which, along with his "Drill Instructor's" hat gave him the look of the arch-typical highway officer. While I sat fidgeting, he scratched something on a clipboard pad, then turned to me with a scowl. "Start the engine!"

With trembling fingers, I turned the ignition key and stepped on the starter pedal. The big Buick Roadmaster's V-8 engine rumbled to life. Officer Romans pursed his lips and scribbled on the pad. "Pull out onto the street and drive down to the next intersection!" I stuck my arm out the window (we had to use *arm* signals for the test), and gave the Buick a little gas. Carefully, I maneuvered the car to the location he indicated. Without looking up, Romans recorded something on the clipboard. "Turn right!" Slowly, carefully, I rotated the steering wheel ---remembering to use the arm signal---and we entered a short street. "Pull up to that space over there and parallel-park!"

Parallel-park---something I had never before done!

Wonder of wonders---I parked the car without any scratch whatsoever. "Drive back to the Court House!" Romans scratched something on the clipboard. "Park in the same place where we started!" '

Was this all there was to the test? In a daze I maneuvered the Buick back to a curbside parking spot at the side of the courthouse. For some (long) moments the stocky State Trooper wrote on his pad, then tore off a page and handed it to me. As I numbly stared at it, the officer took off his sunglasses. His gruff manner seemed to loosen a bit. "I could tell from the start you could drive all right," he said. "But you'd be surprised how many people fail because they aren't really ready to drive. You did fine!"

Then, Mr. Romans did two surprising things:

He smiled.

He put out his hand to me.

I shook it.