

Tramp
A True Steam Adventure
by
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Chapter Two
On the Road

A slight wind blew down the street. The boy shivering under a blanket in the bed of the Ford TT. The festivities of the night before turned over in his thoughts. He had drunk his first beer. Russell had entertained the crowd around their table with stories of the wild ocean and faraway places. The seaman sighed at ever leaving the sea. "Well boy", Russell said to the boy, "What shall we call you?".

"Dave, my christian name, will do", the boy replied. Drinking and dancing with the B-Girls had reduced his reserve. The workers from the dam urged him on to his fifth beer. Dave was going to follow Russell to New York City. There take ship around the world. The magic of the night roused an adventure in the boy greater than the next ride and chance to earn a meal. Dave grinned. Life was looking up.

The man was nowhere in sight when the boy jumped down to the street in front of the bar. Dave's head and gut wished he had not engaged so freely last night. He took the jug of water from the cab and drank deeply. The bag of meat, cheese and bread drew his attention next. Too queasy to eat, the boy made two sandwiches to stick in his bindle. A crumpled handbill from his shirt pocket wrapped the food. California needs men to pick fruit, it read. If work here could not be found in Las Vegas, then on to the land of paradise. Yesterday that was the plan. It may still be.

The way now tugged towards the west coast. Without the celebration of the bar, doubt set in. Yet, a smile crossed his lips when remembering the night. Life at sea must be better than here.

The driver's door of the Ford open. Russell slid behind the wheel. "Proud of you boy. Now we have to ready this rig to travel."

The boy chewed over his two minds as the truck headed back to the junkyard they had passed coming into town. No more thumb out. The danger ahead would be shared with a crackerjack. The past of waiting for next year's crop over. The boy swallowed, smiled, "What's first?"

On the way to the junkyard for spare parts Russell ticked off a checklist. Once there, scavenged belts, hoses, leaf springs, tires and water pumps stacked beside the Ford TT. Whatever the mate thought would be needed for the 1,800 mile journey over very bad roads. The boy's overalls, wellworn before, were filthy and ripped after climbing over and under the wrecks.

Morning became noon. Camping gear, a tarp and tools added to the load in the bed of the truck. Russell showed the boy how to tie the tarp over the sideboards. The boy set to the chore of stowing the purchases in with the spare parts and tires. The man returned from General Goods store carrying a loaded box on each shoulder. In one box of canned goods the man dug out a pair of overalls and a shirt. "We can't start this auto tour with you looking like a tramp."

"I'll pay you back," the boy stammered.

"Don't worry," the mate grinned. "You will more than earn them before we reach Chicago."

The boy looked puzzled. "Why there? Thought we were headed to New York City." The man pulled his own handbill from his pants pocket. When the boy read, his eyes widened. It proclaimed a Century of Progress at the Chicago 1933-1934 World's Fair. The boy thought a moment, then held up his foot. The ragged shoe poked cardboard through a hole in the sole. "Can I buy a pair of shoes before we leave?"

Russell pulled a tenner out of his wallet. Eyeing the boy, "Take this and the clothes as an advance on your pay. What name should I enroll on the wage draw? "

"Dave is my Christian name", the boy said proudly.

The man slapped the boy on the back, laughing. "Driving this beast and helping out when needed will do for a start! Now, get sturdy boots for \$5. You might want a pair of gloves, also." Sixty miles southeast of Las Vegas, Russell pulled off of State route 69. In the fading light, he bounced the truck behind a hill to where the ground was flat. They set about building a campsite. Russell set about digging a small fire pit. The man then hefted flat rocks to ring the hole. He sent the Dave to the truck for the box of food and gear. Russell placed a grate on the edges of the two rocks. Soon a small fire burned down to coals. Russell poured two mugs of coffee before tossing ears of corn wrapped in tin foil among the coals. Two thick steaks went on the grate.

The sizzle of large beef steaks barely kept the exhausted boy awake. He watched the fat drip into the fire. The flames hissed up. Since the end of May, he had thumbed his way down from the family dugout in South Dakota. Tonight he relaxed from the road. He thought of the night he left home.

Dave hit the road before dawn. He did not want to upset his younger brother and sister. The parents knew he was leaving. The homestead might make it until next year with one less mouth to feed. Farmers were known as next-year people. Hang on until the rains come next year. Hitch-hiking with both a heavy heart and an eager desire for adventure, Dave traveled South. For over two months traveling, he sought industry of any type. Whatever farm, ranch or town he heard of that needed a hand Dave headed for. All he got was a meal and a barn to sleep in. Tonight the boy eased into comfort of the fire. The hope of the future with the man replaced the feeling of discord the road months before caused.

The third mate passed an enameled tin plate with a thick steak and two roasted ears of corn on it. Across the fire they ate. Hot coffee chased the meal down. A pipe came out of Russell's pocket, lit from a burning twig. Between puffs he talked of how easy getting a ship would be.

"Why?" Russell grinned. "Don't know why I left the sea now. It's a nice life aboard ship. You feast like kings and have a nice bed to curl up in. All for a little work twice a day!" From his other pocket he drew the picture of his wife. In the firelight, the boy watched the sadness grow in the mate's eyes. Whether it was from the loss of her or the sea mattered not.

Dave put an empty coke bottle on a stick. They had the cold drink before leaving Las Vegas. A luxury for both man and boy. Dave held the thick bottle in the fire. As the it began to glow he talked softly to Russell, the third mate. Another dust storm put his family's South Dakota farm somewhere over Chicago. Vehicles dragged a chain against the static electricity caused from the dust storms. Static electricity killed the crops and kitchen gardens. Because of the dust storms men quit shaking hands. The static charge between them would send them sprawling. Fence rows were easily walked over from the dirt piled up against them.

In time the bottle dripped glass into the fire. Rain was supposed to follow the plow. The first year, the family watched a bumper crop of wheat create a golden wave as a gentle wind moved across. Dave turned the stick slowly. The crops yielded less and less each year after the Big Plow Up. The one-way plow ripped up the deep-rooted grassland. The rich soil grew shallow crops. When the ten-year drought came, the fields withered. When the winds came, the land had nothing to hold it. The bottle dropped off the burning stick into the fire with a hiss. Dave rolled into his blankets and slept.

Russell stared at the flames thoughtfully. The journey east into the ravaged lands would test the Ford TT. He glanced towards Dave. The boy would do to ride the road with.

In the morning, they drank coffee while the biscuits baked in the buried Dutch oven. After camp was broke, coffee drunk and quick bread chewed, the truck traveled on to Kingman, Arizona. The Ford Model TT made twelve miles an hour on average. Top speed was 25 miles per hour. They never went over fifteen miles per hour though. Roads in the area during the early 1930s were largely in the process of being upgraded, often consisting of gravel or graded dirt rather than paved highways. The Ford truck took the ruts and potholes with little trouble, voyaging down the good sections of the

highway determining to hit top speed. State Route 69 would one day become Highway 93. The saying would be, "Pray for me; I'm driving 93."

In Kingman, Arizona, Route 66 headed northeast to Chicago. In 1857, Lt. Edward Fitzgerald Beale, a naval officer in the service of the U.S. Army Corps of Topographical Engineers, was ordered by the War Department to build a government-funded wagon road along the 35th Parallel. US Route 66 was first signed into law in 1927. Much of the highway was essentially flat and this made the highway a popular truck route. If they kept at fifteen miles an hour, the 1,803 miles would take twelve to fifteen days.

Russell parked the Ford in front of a lunch counter in Kingman. As Dave went inside, Russell leaned on the wall. As Russell watched the traffic, he loaded a pipe and struck a match to it. The vehicles coming from the East were overloaded with belongings, the family and dirt. He tapped out his pipe before going in.

Dave had ordered apple pie and a cold drink. Russell looked at the chalkboard menu. A bowl of chili and a milkshake looked good. As they ate, the burble of the diners became talk about the Japanese moving into central Arizona. The Japanese came from Imperial Valley of California to the central Arizona agriculture area because of drought. Arizona law forbids aliens, not eligible for citizenship, from owning land. Trouble was ahead.

Russell tasked the boy to inspect the security of the trucks load. The 3rd mate left. He came back from the grocery and hardware store carrying a box on his shoulder and a package under the other arm. He tied the box down in back. The package stowed behind the bench seat upfront. The truck pulled out of Kingman heading east on Route 66.