

The Muddle

by Alfred Petrowske

The year was 1948 when Nickie came by bus all the way from Chicago, Illinois, to the little village of Waskish in northern Minnesota. She came to exchange the vows of marriage with a young man named Bud Petrowske—me.

My father Fred, brothers Adolph and Jim, and I operated a bait business in the summer months and owned several trucks. This was ample transportation for getting around, but for personal use I owned a 1930 Model A. The car had once been a roadster, but the rumble seat had been removed long ago and in its place was a crude pick-up box. The car had seen much better days, but it would “get you there.”

Like other Ford As and Ts, our Model A had a personality of its own. When Nickie came back from her initial trip to get the mail from the Waskish Post Office, she was hopping mad. “Every time the car hit a bump, the horn honked! All the people waved at me and so I had to wave back, and most of them were *men!*!” she said, with fire in her eye.

I found the shorted wire and repaired it. Nickie took my word that the Model A was fixed and the next day went for the mail again. That time she came back dragging the entire exhaust system, muffler and all, clattering and banging along. The motor, freed of its muffler, was bellowing like an old tractor and attracting a lot of attention. But nobody was waving this time; they just turned and gazed in profound wonder. Nickie wasn't waving either. Both hands on the wheel, she steered for home in grim determination. I think that's what is sometimes referred to as “true grit.”

But the muffler was repaired, Nickie became reconciled to her Model A, and the two chugged happily along together.

Then one day Nickie burst in through the back door of our little house. “Come and see what's wrong with the Model A!” she exclaimed. “The fuel gage is on empty and I can't get any more gas into it.” I looked out the window to where one could clearly see the gas pump. (You know how the gas tank on the Model A is set up above the motor next to the dash. The gas cap sits just ahead of the windshield, while the radiator cap is on ahead.) Well, there sat the Model A, both doors hanging open. I would swear that the headlamps were showing a look of absolute despair. The gas hose looped down to the ground and up into the radiator. Nickie had been trying to fill the radiator with gasoline. The gas tank was empty.

The calendar moved on to 1950 and a time when Nickie and I stayed in a room partitioned off from the tar paper mess hall of a winter logging camp. There Nickie took care of our new baby, Peggy, and cooked for the men while I worked in the woods.

On Christmas Eve, we were going home to be with my folks. Coasting down the last slope just a few miles from our destination, we were all snuggled up in our Model A. Overwhelmed by our feeling of prosperity, I said, “You know, this isn't such a bad little car.” The words were barely out of my mouth when the rear end of the car came down on the road with a **Bang!** Whereupon the left rear wheel passed us up, sped down the road in the light of the headlamps, bounded over the far snow bank, and disappeared into the woods. It just does not pay to challenge a Model A Ford. It's like telling the school mischief maker that he's been a pretty good little boy.

By a happy coincidence, our brother-in-law Carl Johnson and his family were not far behind us. They stopped, of course, when they saw our predicament. So we hitched a ride with them to the Christmas gathering.

Ere the social time began, a group of the men went back to rescue the Model A. The car had no spare wheel, but a big telephone pole was taken along to serve the same purpose. A logging chain, attached to the top of the pole was used to drag the pole down the road to the disabled Model A. There the left rear of the car was raised and the pole was shoved underneath until the rear axle rested on the big butt end of the pole. The top of the pole thus ran out the front end of the car where it could be chained to the bumper. So then the car had a literal sled runner on the left side. So the Model A came home riding piggy back on a telephone pole, sliding along on the packed snow and ice of the road. Another wheel was found to replace the one that was damaged, and our little car was back on the road again. “All's well that ends well!”

We retained the use of the Model A a little longer, until Peggy grew to be our little toddler. She also had a cozy relationship with the car and would laugh at its peculiar antics. As a child will, she shortened the name of the Model A to the most descriptive one possible—she just called it the “Muddle.”

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Are you perhaps wondering what ever became of the “Muddle”? I would like to tell you, but first, a description of our lifestyle and livelihood in that far north village of Waskish would seem necessary. You might remember that I said Dad, my brothers, and I were bait dealers in the summer months. This had begun when Dad purchased a minnow seine and encouraged me to sell some minnows out of a live box kept in a roadside ditch.

After a few years, however, I went round the world away: to Chicago for a year, then back home to be with Dad in the woods for a few months, then to England, France, and Germany for three years of military service during World War II. I was finally home again in 1946.

Meanwhile, Dad had taken on the minnow business as his full-time summer occupation. At the time of the incident of the “Muddle,” there were two concrete holding tanks, 10' by 16' each in size, housed in a shed with another tank outside at a lower level. And there were two one-and-a-half-ton Ford trucks equipped with tanks for hauling

minnows. These trucks brought minnows into the tanks, trapped or seined in Red Lake, or hauled in from the pot holes and lakes of the prairies to the west. The same trucks hauled the minnows out again over routes that covered hundreds of miles; not only to Red Lake resorts, but also to such places as Lake of the Woods, the Rainy River, and Rainy Lake along the Canadian border.

As to the storage of the minnows, Dad had discovered years ago that when large quantities of minnows are stored or hauled, the water must be continually agitated to supply oxygen. This we accomplished with spray nozzles and jets. Even water coming in from the well was treated in this way.

However, during the early days of rural electrification, power outages were fairly common; this would cause our system to fail. If the outage occurred at night, the first one out in the minnow shed in the morning might find the tanks white with the upturned bellies of dead or dying minnows. Every available person would be engaged in trying to restore life-sustaining oxygen to the water, often by raising pails of water and pouring the water back into the tank. In spite of these efforts, the loss of minnows was sometimes tragic.

I love to rig, and so the first remedy for the situation was a dipper-like device that would close the circuit of a battery-powered buzzer if the water supply failed. This would sound an alarm in the house, alerting everyone to the pending catastrophe. But human flesh is too frail to bail water for very long, certainly not for hours. To the rescue came the "Muddle." I removed the running gear and then cut the car in two just back of the transmission, leaving only the cowl with the all-important gas tank. The entire unit was then mounted on timbers. A pulley was installed on the transmission stub shaft with a V belt to a water pump that was plumbed in to the existing water system. By closing one gate valve, opening another, and starting up the Model A motor, water was drawn from the lower tank, pumped through the aerating system, and dropped again to the lower tank.

Many a time we were lulled back to sleep by the chuckling sound of the "Muddle" faithfully pumping water out there at the minnow tanks.