

Tin Lizzie Driving Lessons

The following is from the November 2006 issue of Skinned Knuckles.

By Neil Maken

Henry Ford changed the way we live. Like the man or not, admire his convictions or not, Ford's Model T motorcar altered the speed and direction of our country and the world.

This is not going to be an analysis of Ford himself, or of his Model T. Volumes have already been written on both subjects. And this article is *not* intended for those of you who regularly drive Model T's. This is for those of us who have that opportunity only once in awhile, or who have never driven a Model T.

I've driven several, but not proficiently and not regularly. And each time I get into a 'T,' I have to run a mental (and sometimes physical) review of how to drive it. Because the engineering and control layout of the 'T' differs so much from later automobiles, it is a challenge to get into one and immediately change your mind set from the traditional (left to right) clutch, brake, throttle configuration.

It's tough to learn about riding a bicycle just by reading about it, and if you've only ridden once or twice, it still takes getting used to each time you get onto the saddle. But by identifying the pedals, controls, levers and 'pulls,' you can do that mental review before you get into a 'T' next time.

A couple of warnings based on personal experience: Before you try to drive a 'T' for the first time, let an experienced driver show you how and talk you through it. Let him/her take you for a drive while you watch both hands and feet and their coordination. And when you get behind the wheel, practice where there isn't traffic, where you have a clear path behind you and where you can drive for half a mile or so without having to make a number of forced stops. (Once behind the wheel, remember what Ol' Henry was credited for saying: "We can guarantee every nut in the car except the one behind the steering wheel.") And most importantly (again, personal experience), if you have to make a panic stop, your foot will automatically and unconsciously go to that middle pedal. That's wrong! Avoid areas and situations that could warrant a panic stop until the Model T becomes second nature to you.

After 1919 (optional) and then on all Ford Model T's after 1920, the car came equipped with an electric starter. 1918 and earlier model T's were crank-start. Electric starters were optional until 1927 on passenger cars and even then, the electric starter was still optional on the truck.

You should be aware of how to start

the car, even if it's running when you try to drive it, because chances are really good that you'll stall it. Like most older cars, each has a personality — sometimes that personality is ornery — and each car is just a little bit different in how it's started. Regardless of what we write here, a number of 'T' owners are going to respond with, "that's not how I do it," or "not on my car." So with that in mind, use this as a general outline of how to start it. Ask a 'T' owner how he starts his car, and what special tricks, shortcuts or prayers he uses to get his "Lizzie" going.

The controls

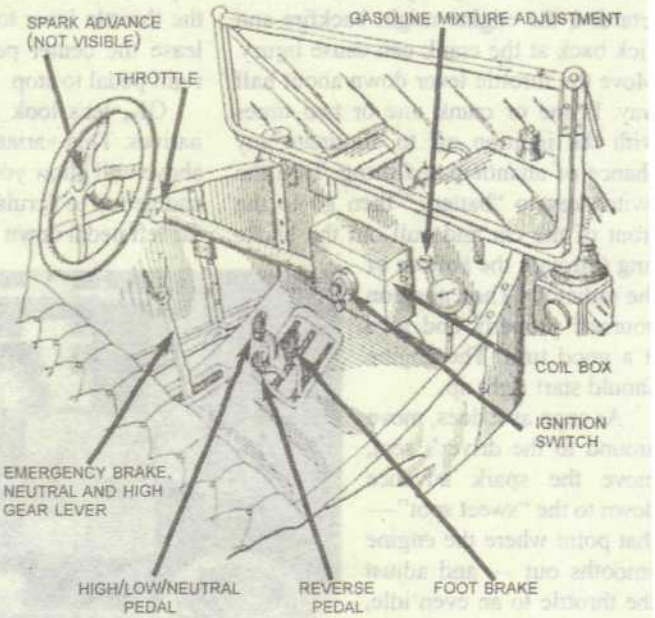
There are three pedals on the floor. The pedal on the far left is the "neutral/low/high" pedal. The pedal in the center is "reverse" and the pedal on the far right is the brake. Wait, it gets even more confusing.

To the left of the driver is a lever at hand level. This is the emergency brake, neutral and high gear selector. On the left side of the steering column (just below the steering wheel) is the spark advance/retard lever. On the right side of the steering column is the throttle lever.

On the instrument panel is the ignition switch. It may be just a knob or it may be a key. It may be a two-position switch or a three-position switch (more about that in a moment). There may also be a choke knob and a carburetor mixture adjustment knob. On a later Model T equipped with an electric starter, there will be a starter button on the floor board. At the front of the car are a starting crank and a choke knob. It's sure more complicated than your Ford Taurus, isn't it?

Starting

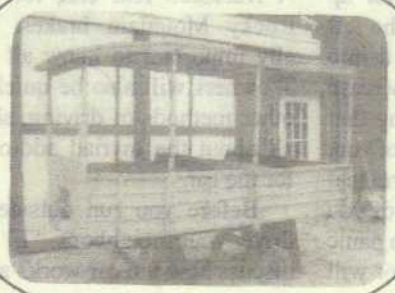
Assuming that the car is about a 1916-or-earlier model, the



car does not have a battery, just a magneto. The slightly later cars have both. After 1919-'20, they may also have an electric starter. Let's assume that the car that you are going to drive is a mid-1910s model with a magneto and a battery, but without electric start. Here's the drill:

Pull the emergency brake/neutral/high gear lever all the way back. This will not only put the engine in neutral (you can watch the left pedal move to the halfway or neutral position), but it will also set the emergency brake. Be sure that the spark retard lever (left side of steering column) is all the way up (re-

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tarded). This is very important; if it's not retarded, the engine might backfire and kick back at the crank can cause injury. Move the throttle lever down about half way. Prime or crank one or two times with the ignition off to eliminate any chance of unanticipated firing. Turn the switch/key to "battery," then go to the front of the car and pull out the choke ring (through the bottom of the radiator). Then position yourself properly and give it a good turn. The engine should start right up.

As soon as it does, move around to the driver's seat, move the spark advance down to the "sweet spot" — that point where the engine smooths out — and adjust the throttle to an even idle, and then move the switch rapidly from "battery" to "magneto." You're ready to go!



This young woman seems to have a good handle on the operation of her 1919 Model T coupe. Hint: the throttle lever is on the right!

Moving out

Before you start moving levers and pressing on pedals, sit back and review. The pedal on the far left is the "neutral/low/high" pedal. The pedal in the center is "reverse" and the pedal on the far right is the brake. You can drive using low and reverse only, if you are not going too fast or too far. Move the emergency brake lever into the center "neutral" position. (With the lever in the half-way position, it will keep the transmission from shifting into high gear.) Depress the far left pedal to the floor while increasing the RPM with the throttle lever. You will move forward in low gear. Release the far left pedal and move the throttle up while stepping on the far right brake pedal to stop.

To reverse, leave the emergency brake lever in the neutral position and depress the middle pedal "reverse." Use the throttle lever to increase speed. Release the center pedal and depress the right pedal to stop.

OK, let's look at a couple of alternatives. This variation of the procedure above will allow you to go into high gear and get up to "cruising speed." Press the far left pedal down just a bit to the "neutral" position, then move the emergency brake lever all of the way forward to the "high" position. Depress the far left pedal all the way to the floor to the "low" position while slowly moving the throttle lever down to increase the RPM. You're rolling! Don't lose your concentration; you'll need it. Once you have decent momentum, move the throttle lever up (to lower the RPM) and release the left pedal completely. That will shift it into "high." Use the throttle lever to increase the RPM and the speed. Assuming that you have a long, open road ahead of you, have fun. CAUTION: Make sure that you have plenty of room in front of you at all times. If you have to make an panic or emergency stop, your right foot will automatically go to the middle pedal and the left foot is going to go to the left pedal — it's intuitive, but by depressing the left pedal, you are merely shifting into "low," not disengaging the clutch.

To slow the car, use the throttle lever and gently depress the right pedal, the "brake." To stop the car, use the throttle lever to reduce the RPM, depress the far left pedal just slightly into the "neutral" position, and press down on the right brake pedal.

To reverse, come to a complete stop. Depress the far left pedal into the "neutral" position, and press down on the center pedal, "reverse." Use the throttle lever to control speed. Not too fast. Release the center "reverse" pedal and press the right "brake" pedal to stop.

There are variations to these procedures, and as you become more proficient, you'll learn how to make a "panic stop" and how to stall the engine. The only thing that will make you a better Model T driver is practice and more practice. And concentration on what you are doing.

The machine

Model T's had all kinds of accessories and improvements made for them. A Ruckstell rear end, for example, or Rocky Mountain brakes. It isn't really important to know all that. Model T owners will also be quick to tell you other methods of driving, shortcuts and all about the myriad add-ons available for the car.

Before you run outside and try to drive your neighbor's 'T,' let's briefly discuss how the car works and why pro-



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cedures are different from later cars.

The transmission in a Model T Ford is similar to a modern automatic transmission, except you do the shifting with your feet; there is no separate clutch to operate when shifting. It uses bands that tighten and loosen onto the transmission drums to engage and disengage the transmission and allow it to go into the two forward gears, the reverse gear and even the brake. The brake is *not* a traditional rear-wheel unit. It stops by tightening the band onto the transmission. That's what stops the forward movement of the car. The emergency brake does use linkage to apply shoes against the rear drums to (theoretically) stop the car in an emergency. They are small drums with very little surface area in which to grab. Count on the rear shoes to keep the car from rolling as a parking brake rather than to stop in an emergency.

Don't criticize the Model T system for being different; it was a different time and a different set of driving conditions. And if it was all that you learned and knew, it was a very manageable system. It worked for the 20 or so years of Model T production and it still works today for thousands of Model T enthusiasts. Driving a Model T is fun! You can feel the road and have a sense of speed not experienced in a newer car. While you are driving the 'T,' put your mind back 80 years or so. Think of the type of roads, the traffic conditions and the freedom of being able to hop into your "Flivver" and extend the range of your life from the farm to the city.

Sixteen million Model T's were built, and that durable machine survived in relatively great numbers. They are simple cars to work on and fairly easy to restore. Parts, both original and reproduction, are plentiful. The Model T Ford Club of America is one of the largest car clubs today with approximately 8,500 members. In addition, there are 140 affiliated local clubs, so there is sure to be one near to you.

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