

The Long and Winding Road to Silver City – by Craig McAlister

In every vintage car group, there are those diehards who believe fervently that a major piece of the preservation of automotive history involves driving our machines as they were intended to be. Among the groups that subscribe to this philosophy are the owners of vintage Bentleys, T Series MGs, Packards, Morgans, and the humble but ever reliable Model A Ford.

Though many in the Treasure Valley As chapter like to tour, most prefer to limit their touring to paved roads. That is on well traveled roads with opportunities to purchase fuel and to stop for a meal. For some, driving their Model A down a gravel road is considered something of a travesty.

So, last summer when our chapter's tour director, Dave Larson, suggested a run up to the ghost town of Silver City, the response was either hot or cold, with absolutely no middle of the road. The stony silence from many stated the obvious – the mostly gravel and dirt 30 plus miles round trip after leaving paved roads was no place for a treasured antique automobile. However, a few of us diehards were quite excited about the idea.

The last time I had driven a Model A to Silver City was in the spring of 1979 as a much younger man in my gone, but never to be forgotten, 1930 Deluxe Roadster. I was part of a Model T tour that included a few Model As. Interestingly, several of the Model Ts had mechanical trouble while the As made the trip seem effortless having no trouble at all. As a Model A owner, I couldn't resist pointing this out to some Model T owners who did not seem to appreciate having this particular point emphasized. As I told them at the time, one cannot keep a good horse down. As I said, I just couldn't resist.



I really enjoyed that run to 'Silver' and when it was suggested that we do it again, I was quite interested and determined to convince as many in our group as possible to experience the kind of driving that was prevalent in Idaho during the Model A era. I also had to convince some that the road once we left the highway was not really all that bad. However, having one friend tell me I was an idiot to take a nice vintage car up to Silver did not exactly help my cause.

Silver City is roughly 70 miles south of Boise in the vast Owyhee County desert. Idaho State Highway 45 makes the drive to the intersection with the Silver City road fairly easy though there are limited places to purchase gasoline after leaving Nampa. As a result, some fuel planning needs to be taken into account along with any extra water needed to cope with leaking water pumps and boiling radiators in the intense summer heat.

Silver City is a fascinating, partially restored nineteenth century western mining town. It was established in 1864 after gold and silver were discovered in the surrounding Owyhee Mountains. By 1866 Silver City had a population of about 3,000 and was once the largest city in the Idaho Territory before Idaho achieved statehood. The mining boom ended around the turn of the century, and by World War II the city was pretty much abandoned. Silver City was one of the first places in Idaho to have electricity which it got from the equally historic Swan Falls Dam, which is still in operation on the Snake River. During the war, the electrical service was discontinued as much of the city's wiring was salvaged for the war scrap drives.

Today Silver has just a handful of permanent residents though most of these folks leave town for the winter leaving the Silver City in the hands of a hired caretaker to protect the town from vandals and storm damage. At 6,000 plus ft., Silver City receives some serious amounts of snow, and residents often return in the spring expecting to find equally serious amounts of damage to their buildings. Many of the houses, and what were once commercial and public buildings, have been restored. Some electrical service has been restored. In short, Silver

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City is one of those very rare time capsules that have survived. A great deal of Silver City's survival as a relatively intact ghost town is due to the fact it is not on the beaten path and only those very determined to get there arrive at all.

The approximately first six miles of the Silver City road have been paved in recent years, but after the pavement ends, the road is a mix of dirt and gravel with a fair amount of dust thrown in. Depending on the severity of the previous winter and the resultant spring thaw, some ruts in the roads can be found along with ever present hard rock outcroppings that poke thru the road surface in spots, defying the efforts of the Owyhee County road crews that grade the road each year.

All this combined with opposing traffic on a road with a fair amount of width variances, climbing grades to elevations of approximately 6500 ft., and the attendant needs of an 80 plus year old vehicle, makes for one of the most interesting of driving experiences.

Dave chose to make this run in late August. And though temps in southwestern Idaho had dropped below the near 100 degree mark, we were still experiencing temperatures well into the 90s. With some of our Model As having a tendency to boil over a bit, the unfortunate trait of the Model A water pump to leak, usually at the most ill timed moment, and gasoline with ethanol being the only fuel available, I was beginning to wonder if this trip was a good idea.

In the days leading up to the trip, I prepared the Model A as best I could and packed the appropriate tools and spare parts. My close friend, and long time fellow Model A'er on many other short and long tours, Greg West, signed on as my navigator and one of the club photographers.



The few brave and adventurous souls that agreed to make the tour, met up at a location in south Nampa taking the highway out to the desert to meet up with the road to Silver. Those in our group included Elvin and Elaine Hightower – '31 Pickup, Norm and Shirley Dean – '30 Pickup, Jeff Caldwell and Nancy Lyles – '28 Roadster, Fran and Bobbie Everett – '29 Pickup, Craig McAllister and Greg West – '29 Phaeton, Dave and Brenda Larson – '30 Tudor, and Gale and Betty Maxey in their modern pickup.

The trip up was almost incident free with the exception of my phaeton. It decided it did not particularly like being asked to climb steep grades topping out at approximately 6500 ft. and doing so on a warm afternoon with ethanol-laced fuel. All this and skinny tires on loose gravel made climbing the last big grade into Silver – aptly named the New York grade – cause for some minor heart palpitations.

Then there was the final stretch into Silver – heading downhill now on the infamous New York grade. With any sort of brake failure or significant brake fade, the last quarter mile into town can be interesting as there is no place to make an exit. This is a good time to remember what the old time Model A drivers always warned about; 'Keep her in 1st gear, retard the spark, and DON'T RIDE THE BRAKES!'

This spot includes a broad curve overlooking the valley the town rests in at the bottom of the grade followed by a short bridge over a small creek. Immediately after the bridge is the entrance into town. This is yet another place to stay alert due to the width limitations of the road and the odd opposing traffic.

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restored Our Lady of Tears Catholic Church.

Arrival in town was cause for a bit of excitement as the local residents, for the most part, did not know we were coming. Dave had contacted the owners of the Idaho Hotel a few days before to ask about the possibility of having lunch at the hotel. The owners were happy to have us as were the owners of other structures in town. We were though chided a bit for not letting more people know we were coming as tours of some of the buildings could have been arranged.

As it was, we were offered several impromptu tours of various privately owned structures. These included the Silver Slipper Saloon (now a private residence), the Silver City Masonic Lodge (which is presently for sale and still has its original 1880's wall paper in the main room on the upper floor), and the magnificently

After lunch at the Idaho Hotel and the building tours, we took inventory of each car's condition, made sure all was well enough to leave, and headed back to the valley via the same road we took to get into town. Going down grade was a lot less of a strain on the Model As and after reaching the highway again, we stopped to top off radiators and head our separate ways back to Nampa, Boise, and other points.

Of all the tours I've taken in a Model A, or any other old car for that matter, this one I enjoyed the most. All who made the trip felt the same way and there are plans to make it again next year. Some of our members after hearing how much fun we had, seem to regret not making the trip. I have noticed though, that officially, Silver City is not on next year's tour schedule.

Too bad.... I guess we will have to form a sub group of the Treasure Valley As. Maybe we should call ourselves the Treasure Valley Rough Riders. Or perhaps the Treasure Valley Square Wheel Touring Society.

No Dust, No Glory!

Photos by Craig McAllister and Greg West

