

MY UNCLE LOU TURNER

A Reminiscence

by Roland de Grosbois



This reminiscence was written by Roly de Grosbois, a nephew of Louis Turner. In a 1982 letter to Louis' daughter, Eileen Boulais, Roly expressed his sentiments, "Your father was my boyhood hero and I never lost my feelings of great friendship and respect when I was with him. The piece is just a small tribute.

One evening in the early 1920s my mother took me by the hand up the broad steps of my Uncle Lou's house on Frank St. in Ottawa. I was only five years old at the time, but it's still fixed in my memory like a tintype. We had come to see the Great Invention. It was a large shiny, black machine sitting on a home-made stand in the parlour of the house. (A room only used for wakes, special guests or christenings.) Wheels were turning, shafts were moving in flawless rhythm, belts were whirring. People stood in hushed groups and talked in whispers, as if a loud noise might somehow disrupt the busy machine.

The invention was Lou's masterpiece. At a time when cars were still in the early development stages, he had invented an automatic transmission. The machine performed beautifully from minute to minute, powered by a small electric motor. He was my hero from that moment on.

Lou Turner was born at the end of the 19th century at a time when new and exciting inventions were being made so rapidly that they changed people's lives. They made the first half of the 20th century a very exciting time in which to live.

Lou was a dedicated tinkerer and innovator in the Henry Ford style, and the automobile was the perfect outlet for his inventive mind. I still remember the wonderful cars Lou owned and worked on year after year. They were, to my young mind, giant machines with big, powerful engines.

Lou organized a syndicate to help him raise the money for a pilot model and induced his friends and relatives to invest in shares.

There were many sides to Lou's life. He was a locomotive engineer and worked for the Canadian National Railways most of his life, starting as a youngster doing the most menial chores and worked his way up through the system to become engineer. In his youth he played violin in an Ottawa orchestra (with his sister Ida who played the banjo) and always loved that instrument. His mother often recalled that he was

a star hockey player with the local team in Rockland Ontario, where the family owned a farm for a few years. He was a very rough, tough player.

He met his first wife Laura Dent in Rockland. He married her in Ottawa and he lived there while working on the railroad. They had two sons who shared their father's inquisitiveness and sense of adventure. Tragically, one early spring afternoon while playing on the ice on the Rideau Canal near their home they fell through a thin spot and were both drowned. It was a great sadness for him. But more was in store as Laura died a short time later during the great flu epidemic that swept through Canada at the end of the First World War.

A few years later he married again to Clara Boegel and had a large happy family. In later years, after Clara died, he married for the third time to Mildred Peebles, a long-time friend of my family. Despite the sorrows of his life, Lou was a happy and dedicated family man. He had a strong faith in God and believed that everything happened with a purpose in life.

I remember the year 1928 vividly. It was an adventure to travel in an automobile. The main roads were paved in Ottawa, but if you ventured just 40 miles or so beyond the City limits, they were mostly gravel. At least they called them gravel, but actually they were just plain dirt, with deep ditches on either side to keep them relatively clear of water in summer and snow in winter. On Sundays everyone went for a "Sunday Drive" through the countryside. But the special event that year was to have a ride in the car that had the automatic transmission in it for the first time. As we chugged up and down the hills through the summer countryside near Ottawa, we listened to hear the automatic transmission working. We would go up a hill and everyone would ask "Is it working?" and the reply always was, "Yep, worked that time". Strangely, the engine always sounded the same to me but I took their word for it. I bragged to my friends that I had ridden in a car with an

automatic transmission. They wouldn't believe me.

Lou and his brother George took the invention to Detroit with everyone's hopes riding on the outcome, but the Detroit engineers turned it down. What a letdown it was. Everyone whispered of dirty dealings by the big car manufacturers but we never did find out why it was rejected.

Neither Lou nor George could come up with the answer and the small syndicate¹ went out of business. Even with this great setback Lou still continued to have new ideas for his cars. During the depression years, in the 1930s, he invented a way of running his car in the city on gasoline and in the country on longer trips, on diesel fuel. He used two fuel tanks; one of them was strapped to the running board of his car. I don't pretend to know how it worked, but I saw him turn a switch on his dashboard when he wanted to change from one fuel to the other.

To give you an idea what it was like to travel during the 1930's through the Ottawa Valley I recall two trips with Lou. One summer he offered to drive my brother Paul and me to Barry's Bay, where we intended to catch the afternoon train to Opeongo Station and eventually get to our cottage on Aylen Lake. The Lake is about 120 miles west of Ottawa, and to get there by car meant a long dusty, tiring trip through the Ottawa Valley towns of Arnprior, Renfrew, Golden Lake, Killaloe and Wilno to Barry's Bay. Here we took a short afternoon train ride (on the one train a day) to Opeongo Station. The highway, if you could call it that, ended at Barry's Bay. From Opeongo we went by lumber wagon to the Dam where the lake emptied into the Opeongo River and then by boat to the cottage. The Armstrong and Martin Lumber Company provided the wagon and boat transportation. Paul and I intended to walk from the station to the cottage and open it a day in advance of the main arrival of the rest of the family and the provisions for a two week stay.

¹ See attached final statement

As you can see, Aylen Lake was a very isolated spot to spend a few weeks each summer. All of the provisions to last for a full holiday spent there had to be brought in with us. We brought cases of canned goods, large cardboard cases of bread; canned butter – canned everything. There was no refrigeration; we kept things cool in a spring near the cottage.

On this particular trip Lou volunteered to drive Paul and me to the "Bay" a day in advance as he planned to go to his own cottage on Bark Lake. We arrived at his place early in the morning because it took at least six hours to make the trip to Barry's Bay and we had to catch that four o'clock train. The drive usually was a slow one, for the pavement ended about two miles past Renfrew and that meant rough, dusty roads for the next 60 miles. Once past Golden Lake the road became just dirt, and single lane in places. It crossed the railway tracks twenty-one times between Golden and Barry's Bay. I know because I counted them. Usually on this part of the road after about an hour, I got violently sick, and then every half hour from that point on. And the hills around Wilno and Killaloe were steep enough to strain the engine in many an old car loaded to the top with provisions and clothing for a summer holiday.

When we arrived at Lou's place on the Driveway, he was ready to go. His car, with the big DB on the front (for Dodge Brothers) was piled high with trunks and boxes and bags. He had an extra gasoline tank strapped to the side on the running board and two spare tires were fitted to the back of the car. He had three more tied to the roof with the rest of the baggage. It was a top-heavy load.

We squeezed into the back seat as it was the only piece left among the bundles and packages. Lou had a brand new hand pump beside him on the front seat. But in the excitement of the moment we didn't realize the significance of that object. I asked him why all the tires were needed and he explained they were just insurance against any blowouts we might have. But he laughed scornfully at the thought. It was a fateful laugh.

About two miles past the city limits we had our first flat tire. The procedure for fixing a flat was very complicated at that time. After jacking up the car and removing the wheel, we had to take the tire off; then take the tube out of the tire and vulcanize a patch on the tube. It was a mysterious ritual, consisting of lighting a fire (Lou had a pail with rags and gasoline, which he set on fire), heating the vulcanizing iron and then clamping the iron over a patch on the tube. The tube was then pumped up slightly and held under water in the nearest ditch to see if it would leak. If the tube checked out we reassembled tube, tire and wheel, pumped it up and were on our way. It took time.

A mile further on, after the first flat, we heard a loud bang. It was another flat and another vulcanizing job. Another mile and "Bang", it was a blow-out and this time a change of tire was necessary. We ran out of tubes and patches, and all the paint was worn off the handle of the brand-new pump. In the meantime it was getting later and later. It became so late it was impossible to make the connection with the train in Barry's Bay. We began to wonder if we would even get home again. Finally on the fifteenth flat, Lou threw the last tube away and then had the brilliant idea to pack the tire with grass and hay pulled from the ditch at the side of the road. So we tore out fist-fulls of grass and packed the tire as tightly as possible; put the tire back on the car and were on our way again, this time back towards Ottawa and home. We didn't get too far. The car began to rise and fall like a man with one foot on the curb and one in the gutter. There was also a strong odour of burning hay coming through the back windows. The car was brought to a thumping halt, fortunately beside a ditch full of water, because the grass in the tire had compacted so hard, the weight of the car pounding on it had set it on fire. We grabbed cans, empty bottles, anything handy and doused the burning tire with water. We had already spent most of the day fixing flat tires and had only reached just a little past Renfrew. Lou took the last, fire blackened tire off the car and threw it disgustedly into the nearest field.

We headed back to Renfrew riding on the bare rim. He called Amy, who drove to Renfrew that evening and brought us back to the City. She also brought two good tires so Lou could return to Ottawa in his own car.

Once on a similar journey with Lou we had a different problem. It was with the car's cooling system. It was a touring model; long and heavy with running boards down each side, two large tires strapped to the back, straight up-and-down glass windshield, and a very large silver ornament on the front of the radiator. The water in the car's cooling system "became hotter and hotter as we drove along and the steam boiled and hissed under the silver ornament until finally the top blew off with a loud report and great clouds of steam and hot water shot out in a fountain effect. With the windshield wipers going full, we headed for the nearest water which happened to be a nearby ditch. We waited until the engine cooled down, then filled it up. A few miles further on the same thing happened. It was very funny to me at the time and I couldn't stop giggling despite the constant prodding from my Aunt's sharp elbow digging me in the ribs. (Meaning that we were Lou's guests for the ride and it was not polite for little boys to laugh at his troubles.)

Finally we reached Arnprior, where Lou decided the trouble was a blocked waterline. He said the best cure was to put in lots of baking soda to clean it out. This time we drove about five miles when steam started screaming out from under the silver ornament. The pressure grew greater and greater until with a loud report the cap went flying, but this time instead of steam and water, great globs of white foam shot out or the red, covering the windshield and the whole front and top of the car in what looked like shaving cream. It was such a ridiculous moment that I doubled over with laughter as did everyone else in the car. Incidentally the baking soda trick worked for after we had filled the rad again with water we had no more trouble on that trip.

Lou's cars were usually overloaded and under powered which made it interesting when we

had to climb the steep hills around Wilno. It was like a roller coaster ride. Lou figured that he used so much gas to climb a hill that he would put the car in neutral and coast down the other side to make up for it. On a rough road in an overloaded car, the "free-wheeling" as he called it, was something to experience. As we swooped down the hills, I imagined we were reaching speeds beyond reason. The silence of the incredibly fast journey without power was broken only by the shrieking of the wind through the slightly opened windshield, the sound of the tires tearing through the loose gravel and the terrible shudders and shakes as we took each bump and hump, swaying from side to side, every moment feeling we would turn over or crash into the nearest ditch. When we reached the bottom of the hill, Lou would engage the motor, which came to life with a startling roar, and away we charged at the next hill. On the bigger ones, the car would negotiate the lower parts almost flying, but as we neared the summit, the car went slower and slower until just near the top, Lou would shout, "Everyone out." and we all piled out of the car and pushed it over the top. Usually we paused here for a few minutes to let things cool down and catch our breath before another wild ride began.

Nothing every seemed to phase Lou Turner. Even in the worst times he was always calm and sure of himself. After his retirement from the Railway he and Mildred lived at Aylen Lake all year round. He got the plans and dug his own septic tank and tile field. He also dug his own well by hand. Amy came by one day while he was digging the well and she describes it like this.

"Lou had a pulley rigged to the top of the well shaft. He would fill a bucket with dirt and rocks and haul it to the top of the shaft; climb up and dump it. He was lucky if someone came along and helped him dump the rocks. Or was he? I came along and looked down the shaft and Lou saw me. He asked if I would dump the load of dirt for him when he pulled it to the top. Somehow things went wrong. When it reached the top I managed to dump the whole load down the shaft on top of his head. It didn't bother him too much. He just kept on working - without my help of course."

Lou wanted to build a garage at Aylen Lake out of logs. He didn't want to cut any trees around his cottage, so he decided to build it with sunken water-soaked logs taken from the bottom of the Lake. He would cruise the shoreline looking for "deadheads" as we called them, in the shallow water. He fastened a logging chain around them and towed them to his wharf. Here he had block and tackle rigged over the building site and used his car to pull the logs up from the beach. He swung them into position using the car as his pull. He built the whole garage out of the soaking wet logs that must have weighed hundreds of pounds, and spiked them into place. The garage still stands at this writing, and probably will for many more years.

And that was my Uncle Lou Turner, the kind of practical, God-loving, man, full of patience, that built a country.

M. J. Turner Syndicate

Statement of Receipts and Expenditures for period, December 1st 1927

to December 26th, 1928.

Receipts

Calls levied on 47 scripts for 7 calls at \$10.00 per call	3430.00
Bank Interest earned	<u>3.91</u>
	3433.91
Deduct exchange on cheques	<u>.30</u>
	3433.61

Disbursements

Patent Fees	800.50
Manufacture of Model	195.91
Electric Motor for Model	25.00
Trip to Detroit	381.00
Designing Transmission	600.00
Gears	107.35
Motor Truck	150.00
Parts for truck	27.97
Miscellaneous Expenses	68.27
Patterns	190.55
Manufacture of Transmission	<u>1061.30</u>
Total Expenditure for period	3407.85
Cash Balance on hand in Bank	<u>25.76</u>
	3433.61

Certified Correct,

S. FOSTER

Treasurer.

This statement has been compiled by me from details supplied by your Treasurer. He has satisfactorily answered all questions which I have put to him and I certify that to the best of my knowledge and belief, that it is correct as to amounts received, disbursed and cash in Bank.

H. D. Carrans

Auditor

Ottawa, December 26th, 1928.