

**MY TRIP FROM CALIFORNIA IN 1919 WITH AN
OVERLAND TOURING CAR**

Oscar Smithers

1874 - 1968

Oscar Smithers was born in Canada about 1874.

He was a first cousin of James Edward Patching

↓ WALTER PATCHING

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In the fall of 1913 I bought a studio in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario and moved there in October. During the years of World War I had a successful business, and in 1918 when the war was over I had a staff of six girls who were quite capable of carrying on without me. So -- when I had a letter from my old friend, Herbert G. Thompson, who had been in Los Angeles for many years, saying that he did not expect he would live much longer, and would like to see me again, I left the studio with the staff and went to Los Angeles in January, 1919.

Thompson and I had been pals from school days. We ran away from home together when we were about 10 or 12. He was from an orphans home and lived with a neighbor family. When he was about 14 his mother took him to Toronto and we did not see each other for many years. But about 1902 we got in touch again and he came from New York City to visit me in London, Ontario. He came most every year till around 1906 or 1907 when his health got so bad the doctors advised him his only chance was a warmer climate. So he went to Los Angeles.

On my arrival in L. A. I took a street car out to where he lived in Edendale. He was at the corner waiting for me. He was living in a small cabin alone and had been working part time for a firm closing out of business and had only a few days more to finish his work there. After that we visited several days. We had to take a street car every time we went anywhere so I decided I would buy a car. Had in mind to buy a studio and locate there.

After about two weeks of looking around, I bought a studio in Alhambra a few miles from L. A. There were living quarters with the studio and we moved out there. For a time he seemed to be improving and we were getting along fairly well. However, the last of February I received a wire from my sister, Amanda, that father was very ill and for me to come at once. Father was living on a small farm near Parkhill, Ontario. I left the next morning leaving Thompson in charge. I arrived back home in time for father's funeral. He had passed away on the day I got the wire.

The next day after the funeral I arranged with my sisters' Amanda and Laura to take charge of winding up the estate, and started back by way of S. S. Marie. Found everything there going in good shape but a big commercial job had come in the girls could not handle, so I stayed and finished it. This took several weeks so I was away over six weeks before I got back to Alhambra. Thompson had been ill again and got a friend of his to operate the studio till I got back. Found things in bad shape. Thompson left the next day for a sanitarium where he had been several times before. So, when a man from Oakland came in and offered to buy the studio, I sold it.

While I was at S. S. Marie I packed all my personal effects in a large box and shipped it by freight to Alhambra, so I had to wait till it came.

I had found another old friend, Tom Poulton, of boyhood days, living in Los Angeles. He insisted that I visit with him till the box of freight came, so I moved over to his home on West Temple Street. We had often hunted together back home, so when he got off work every day at 3 o'clock, I would pick him up with the car and we would go out rabbit hunting. We always got as many as we wanted in a short time, and would bring them home. His wife was a wonderful cook. Never had anything like her fried rabbit. I was there nearly two weeks before the box came.

When I sold the studio I decided I would drive back to S.S. Marie. So, after disposing of a lot of my stuff I couldn't pack in the car, I started back on May 8th.

Stayed the first night at a hotel in N. Bradly, California. Arrived in Oakland the next day. I left the car at a garage and went over to San Francisco and found Charlee Reeder another old schoolmate. We sat up most of the night visiting.

Went back over to Oakland the next morning and drove to Sacramento. Stayed at a hotel there overnight.

The highway then known as the Lincoln highway turned north from Sacramento to Colfax and over the Rockies by way of Truckee. When I arrived at Colfax the next day I found that the highway had not been opened all the way across. The road had been closed all winter so I left the car at a garage and took the train over to Reno, Nevada.

The morning before I crossed from Frisco I called at a photo stockhouse and was told there was a good studio for sale in Reno. I went over and stayed a day looking it over. However, did not buy it and went back to Colfax. Got the car and got to Emigrant Gap where they told me the crew clearing the road would be a week or more before they got through.

When I had packed the car for the trip I fixed it so I could sleep in it using two cushions for a bed. Had a wool pad for a mattress. So, with a pillow and blankets it made a good bed and I slept the first night in the car at Emigrant Gap.

The next morning, May 16th I shipped the car on a Railroad flat car to Truckee and rode there on the train. Got the car about 6 o'clock that night and drove to about 10 miles from Reno, Nevada and camped. Had enough cooking utensils to make breakfast and supper, usually getting the noon meal at any place I found suitable.

Up at day light next A.M. and got through Reno before seven o'clock. The road from Truckee was all down grade. Rough in places and with low gear and both brakes, it was sure a tough job, the radiator boiling most of the time.

May 17th. IN NEVADA

On the way to Wennamucca I saw several survey parties laying out the new Lincoln Highway. The road then, except for a few miles out of Reno, was mostly a trail through sage brush. About ten that morning I went through a small village, crossed a bridge, and found the road branching in several directions. No signs or marker to tell which road to take. I had stopped a few minutes when a car came along. I asked the driver which way to turn and he pointed over his shoulder to the left turn, so on I went.

In about a couple of miles the road narrowed down to a trail along the bank of a creek just wide enough for the car. Had to go another mile or so before I came to a place where I could turn around. I had reached the end of the road in an Indian Reservation. Went back to the village and inquired about the road and told the blacksmith, who also sold gas, about the wrong directions the driver of the car gave me. He laughed and said the Baptist Minister was the driver. He told me the right branch to Lovelocks and had dinner there.

The trail all that afternoon followed the U.P. railway around a range of mountains, but was fairly good and arrived in Winnamucca that evening. Camped at a garage. Made 202 miles that day.

May 18th.

The weather had been fine so far but was getting warmer. Got to Battle Mountain middle of the forenoon. A few miles from there the trail turned across a flat about ten miles wide to a river. This flat had been surveyed for the new highway and the right of way was cleared of all brush about ten rods wide. The ground was loose lava dust and a car would bury itself almost to the running board. What trail there was, was mostly ruts. And once you got into a rut you had to stay. I stopped at a garage before starting over and was told that I must have an extra supply of water for the radiator as it was necessary to use low gear most of the way across.

I had a mexican water bag so filled it and started across. At the end of the first mile the radiator was boiling so stopped for it to cool off. I then thought if I let most of the air out of the tires it might help. So I let the air down to 25 lbs. all around. In those time, tires had up to 70 lbs.

Started out and was able to use 2nd gear the rest of the way and got over the river without stopping. The car was covered with dust so I drove up to the top of the bank on the other side before pumping up the tires. There was a brisk wind blowing and I unloaded most of the luggage and got rid of most of the dust.

Got the pump to refill the tires. When I got to the left side next to the brush -- buzzzzzzz. There was a rattle snake coiled, ready. There was no argument. I just backed away and drove to some flat rocks where I was sure there was no chance of any more rattlers. Got to Wells that night and camped at a garage -- 198 miles.

May 19th.

Every morning was up at daybreak and tried to get a good way in the forenoon before it got hot. For as soon as the tires got hot then I was lucky if I didn't have to fix a flat tire several times during the middle of the day. Ordinary patches put on with cement would go out in a short time. So I bought a vulcanizer which was much better, as the patches held.

The highway still kept near the railroad which would be crossed and recrossed several times a day. One place close to the tracks the railway had a gang putting in a new culvert. It had rained the night before and before I knew it I got into a piece of loose mud right up to the axles and was stuck. The foreman of the gang came with his men and just picked the car up and carried it out and set it on the other side.

Several times either I would catch up to a freight train or it would catch up to me and in several places the road would be so close to the track I could talk to the crew.

That day was having dinner in a small town when the train crew came in to eat. They were quite interested about my trip and gave me tips on the road ahead. Got to Montello that night and camped. 200 miles.

May 20th. UTAH

This morning crossed into Utah. Crossed the salt marsh of Great Salt Lake and passed through the outskirts of Ogden and camped that night at Kosmo. Had a lot of tire trouble and made only 150 miles.

May 21st.

More tire trouble. The road through Utah was over rock most of time which sure ripped out the tires. Had six good tires when I started but had to buy two new ones. Stopped in a town and had difficulty at a bank trying to get some money. Was about to leave when the manager, who had overheard my talk with the teller, came over and fixed me up. Said I was wearing the wrong lodge pin.

Got two new tires and was off again about noon. Crossed into Wyoming and around four o'clock got into Lyman. It was about the average small town - wide street with cars parked in the center of the street. As I drove along noticed several groups along the sidewalk. They looked me over and acted as though they were going to stop me, but after looking at my car license waved me on. From their actions I decided there was something unusual going on. A few miles out of town a bunch of 8 or 10 cowboys with their horses were about 50 yards off the trail. One came out and I expected he would stop me. But when he looked at my license plate he turned back.

Further on I noticed an empty rifle cartridge box beside the trail and about two or three miles further I came to a ford car in the middle of the road. The engine was running but there was no one in sight. About a mile or so the road turned down and around a river bank. About half mile further I crossed a bridge over the river and noticed a car parked on the other side where there was a good camp site.

There were two women with the car and when I asked them if they would mind if I camped there also, they said they would be glad to have me as their husbands had gone back to Lyman for some car repairs and they were afraid to be alone.

After parking the car I got out my fishing tackle as the river looked promising. Had just made the first cast when a ford car came past and stopped the other side of the bridge. The driver got out and came back to me. I thought he he said something to me about not being allowed to fish there. When I started to explain he then said he was deputizing me. Said there was no danger but to come with him.

When we got to his car he picked up a Winchester rifle so I told him I had one in the car. He asked if I had any cartridges and told him the magazine was full. So he told me to get it as he had only two left in his own gun. When I got it he took it and asked if it was in good shape and pumped in a shell and took a shot at a tin can across the river. Then he told me to take his and he would use mine. We got in the car and started up the other bank.

He told me he was after two horse thieves. They had been around Lyman for a week or more and had been making trouble so the marshal ordered them out of town the day before. They went out to a ranch several miles from town and stole two horses. The rancher called the sherriff, the man I was with. He picked up a deputy and caught up with the thieves where I had passed the empty ford back on the trail.

When the Sheriff ordered them to stop they headed for the river bank and several shots were exchanged. One of the horses was shot just as they got to the river bank. The Sheriff and his deputy then crawled to the bank and saw the two trying to cross the river. The deputy knew the river and said the only ford across was about half a mile around a bend and the Sheriff was to take the car and cross to the other side and head them off there.

By the time he had told me this we were up on the other bank. He turned off through the sage brush till we got about 100 yards from the bank. He stopped and told me to wait till he went to the bank and looked over. He saw the deputy, who had followed them, shooting at them as they got across and were hiding behind some trees. When he saw the Sheriff on the bank he waved to the other side of a bend and said he would keep them covered. The Sheriff and I then went to the other side of the bend. He told me to stay back while he crawled close enough to look over. He came back and said they were on the river bank right below us. We could hear the deputy shooting to keep them watching him. The Sheriff said we would both walk to the bank and he would give them one chance to surrender and if they showed any attempt to resist, to open fire on them when he gave the word.

We went to the bank and could see them laying on the grass watching the deputy. The Sheriff yelled at them to surrender or we would shoot. When they looked up and saw us, one of them turned his rifle to fire at us, but the other in uniform grabbed the rifle from his companion and said for us not to shoot, that they would surrender.

The deputy then said he would keep them covered so the Sheriff told them to come up the bank with their hands up. After they got started the deputy crossed the river and picked up the rifles they had left. They were two tired boys as it was a long climb with their hands up. When they got up the Sheriff stood them apart and told me to keep one covered while he searched the other. As the Sheriff went around the prisoner to the side next to me his holster with a six gun was open. The one I was watching turned and started to drop his hand to grab the six gun. He got the muzzle of my rifle in his back and told him to keep his hands up.

By that time the deputy had come up and we started back to the car. A posse in two cars arrived and we all got in the cars and went back to the bridge. The Sheriff thanked me and offered to pay me. I told him that having taken part was plenty for me.

The two horse thieves were brothers. One had either escaped from prison up in Idaho or was paroled. The other had just got out of the army. The Sheriff told me the one was a dangerous criminal and that we were lucky to get them with so little trouble.

I then cooked my supper and camped for the night. 75 miles.

May 22nd. IN WYOMING

Started early next morning and got to Castle Rock that night.

May 23rd.

Made 120 miles. The next afternoon the car seemed to be losing power. Had to shift on grades that up to then the car would go over in high easily. Along towards evening it got worse, so when I got to Tie Siding I stopped at a blacksmith shop with a gas pump. There was no mechanic there so I camped and worked at the car till dark.

Was up at daylight and decided the trouble was in the engine and pulled off the head. Decided the trouble wasn't there and put it together again. I started up again but was just the same. I was packing up when a stranger came and watched me packing. When I told him the state the car was in and that the nearest chance for repairs was Cheyenne, he asked if he could ride with me. 204 miles on 22nd.

May 24th WYOMING

Before starting we got an extra supply of food and were on our way about ten o'clock. The stranger, Lee Shaffer, said he was a hobo. Would work a short time when it suited him and then beat his way on the railroad to any place he had in mind till his money ran out. He said he had had no permanent home in 15 years. He would head south for the winter, the follow the wheat harvest north from Kansas. He said he had beat his way on every other way of travel but an automobile and seemed quite pleased when I told him I would be glad to have him as I explained that we might have to push the car over the grades. That was alright with him. He was of medium height and looked to be around 35 years old. Was clean looking and wore clean shirt and overalls and a light suit coat.

It was 40 miles to Cheyenne and half way we had to cross the summit, the highest point east of the Rockies. There was a monument there marking the summit. We would get up as much speed as the trail would permit down grades and get up the next as far as the car could get. Then I would hold it with brakes while he got out and I would put it in low gear and make a few yards. Then he would block the back wheel with a block we brought for that purpose. In that way we got over the summit about 3 or 4 o'clock.

As far as we could see from there it looked all down hill but we had to stop and block over a number of stiff grades before we got into Cheyenne about one o'clock.

Found a garage where they told me the car would be repaired and ready the next morning at 8 o'clock. I took a bag out of the car and as we came out of the garage he asked me if he could ride with me the next day. I told him he could and that I was going to find a hotel, which I had planned to do each Saturday night, to have a bath and change to clean clothes for the next week.

When I got to the garage the next morning Lee was waiting and said he found a place where he got into a poker game and was doing alright till the game broke up. Only made 40 miles.

May 25th. WYOMONG

The garage mechanic told me the chain that drove the timing gear had slipped and that I should have a new chain if it gave me any further trouble. We started and were getting along fine for about 35 miles when we came to the next grade. The same trouble again. So I pulled off the trail and we were debating what best to do when a car came along and stopped. (Those days no one passed a standing car without stopping) The driver came and asked what was wrong. He said he was a garage mechanic so when I told him the trouble he showed me where to adjust the carburator. He said that by changing the adjustment each time the chain slipped I could manage to get to a town where there was a garage and have a new chain put in.

We went on and had to make several adjustments before we got to Sidney, Nebraska about four o'clock. The garage there did not have a chain but would telephone Scotts Bluff and would have one sent the next morning.

We had noticed a camp place just before we got into town so we drove back there and camped. Made a fire and cooked supper and sat around till dark. When Lee saw me making up the bed in the car he asked if I had an extra blanket. He said he would sleep under the car. When I told him there was plenty of room for both in the car he asked if I didn't think I was taking chances. I replied that maybe I wasn't taking any more than he was. He laughed and said it was the first time he had been used that way and climbed in.

May 26th. NEBRASKA

Had breakfast in camp and was at the garage when they opened. They called the Express Office but no chain had come. It would surely be on the noon train. But nothing on that train. So we would have to wait till next morning.

That night we got permission to sleep in the car in the garage. It had been a warm day and after we had supper in town Lee got a couple of bottles of beer, which we had brought with us to the garage. About dark we were sitting on the curb in front of the garage finishing the beer when a car came along and a man got out. He said he was the Sherrif and said we looked like a couple of bootleggers he was looking for. He asked a lot of questions - where was our car. We told him it was in the garage for repairs. He started in to search the car but the night man refused to let him in without a search warrant. However, I told the night man it was alright as far as I was concerned so the Sherrif took a look at the car. He said he would look us up in the morning but we didn't see him again.

We waited all day but no chain on either train. The Manager was away that afternoon but when he got back he called Scotts Bluff and found the chain had been sent by parcel post and should have been there the morning after he first had called. They went to the Post Office and got it just before closing time. We slept in the car again.

May 27th. NEBRASKA

We got the car on the road again that afternoon and got to near North Platte and camped. 78 miles.

May 28th. NEBRASKA

Started early and around 10 o'clock came to a fork in the road with no sign or marker showing which way to take. We decided the one which looked the most traveled was the way to go. After about 20 miles on this road we came to a town and found we had taken the wrong fork and had to turn back.

While I was having less tire trouble, the copper tube from the fuel pump to the carburator kept breaking. So stopped at a garage in the next town and had a new one put on. While we were waiting, Lee went up town and had a parcel when he returned. He put it in the back and after we got started again he said to drive slow out of town. As we reached the edge of town he told me to stop. He went to where some large cans were dumped and picked up a large square tin can, the kind soda biscuits were packed in, and brought it to the car, and said to stop at the first river or stream we came to.

It wasn't long till we crossed an iron bridge over a good sized stream. We stopped and Lee said for me to build a good fire. We always picked up enough board ends when we passed a new building being built for fuel. He took a small axe I had and flattened out the can on the bridge. He took it down to the water and scoured it with sand and washed it clean.

By that time I had a good fire going. He got the parcel and pulled out a T-bone steak which must have weighed all of two lbs. He covered both sides with butter and put it on the fire. Then he had a can of sweet potatoes which he put on with the steak. I never did have a finer steak. He sure knew how to cook that way. We had sweet rolls and coffee and when I felt I couldn't eat any more he brought out a box of fresh strawberries. He said that was a meal the hobos had in the jungles, as he called the railroad yards, when they had the money.

We camped that night west of Columbus. Made 178 miles.

May 29th. NEBRASKA

We were on the road early and arrived in Omaha about four o'clock. The farther east we got we found better roads. There was pavement several miles each side of the larger towns, but the longest strip since I left California was the 15 or 20 mile pavement into Omaha.

I had arranged to have my mail forwarded to the Post Office there. After picking up my mail we crossed into Iowa and camped at Woodbine, Iowa. Made 191 miles.

May 30th. IOWA

Since the roads, except near towns where there was the usual few miles of pavement, were much better, we had the best day so far; and camped near Mason City. Made 225 miles.

May 31st. IOWA

Early in the forenoon we crossed into Minnesota via Albert Lee and Dodge City. It rained late in the afternoon and we arrived at Rochester around 7 o'clock where Lee left me. His boyhood home was several miles from there and he said he was going out to see the old home but would not make himself known. He was a fine person and I enjoyed having him with me. Saturday night I went to a hotel.

June 1st. MINNESOTA

In some of the larger towns I drove through if I noticed a photo studio I would stop and call. Found some of the owners quite friendly. However, one I called on, who had several ads along the highway before I got to the town, seemed rather doubtful that I was a photographer. We talked a few minutes but he didn't offer to show me his camera room as most all had done before. His dark room was off the hallway where I came in and as I was leaving he came out and said that was his dark room. I stepped over to look in but he closed the door and stood with his back to it and said he had secrets in there. I told him he might have secrets in that dark room but there wasn't any in his show case down at the street entrance. He sort of grinned and said he guessed I was a photographer after all. When I mentioned that I might buy a studio he told me of a big studio for sale in Winona, Minn. I arrived there that night and stayed at a hotel.

June 2nd. MINNESOTA

Winona seemed like a very nice town. Found the studio which was well equipped but had been sold the week before. The new owner was quite friendly. The studio was well located and the best buy I had seen on the way across.

Left around 10 o'clock for St. Paul. It rained most of the way.

June 3rd.

The photographer at Winona had told me that the Zimmerman Stockhouse in St. Paul had several studios listed for sale. Found the store but they had nothing that I thought worth while so went on to cross the Mississippi at Hudson, Wisconsin. Had to have some repairs to the car and bought a new tire.

June 4th. WISCONSIN

Left Hudson about 8:30. The roads were muddy and slippery. It had rained several days. However, got through Mennominee, Eau Claire and Chippaway Falls and camped on the side of the highway. I had a light bulb on a cord that I hooked on to the battery and used it at night.

Was using the light to look over a road map when a car came from a small village ahead. Drove past and stopped and turned off their lights. From what I could hear of the conversation there seemed to be several in the car and were about to get out when another car came and smashed into them. Apparently some in the first car were badly hurt and I could tell from their talk they had been drinking. Then they blamed the cause of the accident on my car on the road side. They started to come over so I started the car and got away and kept on going for about 20 miles before looking for a place to camp.

At a farm house I saw a man with a lantern so I stopped and asked if I could camp in his yard. He looked me over and showed me a place beside his driveway.

June 5th. WISCONSIN

Found the roads through Wisconsin much better and well marked. Made good time and got to Marquette about 7:00. Crossed into Michigan and camped at Escanaba. Best mileage for any day of the trip. 236 miles.

June 6th. MICHIGAN

Ran into bad roads after a few miles out of Escanaba and poorly marked. Got on the wrong road a couple of times but got to Rexton about 8 o'clock and slept in a store.

June 7th.

Got away at daylight and arrived at Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan about 1:30. Had a bath and changed clothes and got the 3:30 ferry across to Sault Ste Marie, Ontario.

The total mileage for the trip was 3648 miles. I had one of the original tires left. The car worked fine and had no major repairs. I neglected to keep a record of the gas used, but on the whole had a splendid trip.

While I was a full month making the trip I enjoyed every day and never felt better. Even though 36 years have passed I still recall many amusing incidents.

One particularly was one day, I think it was in Wyoming, I noticed a large flock of sheep on a slope to the left and a herder's shack some distance from the trail. As I got nearer the herder came out and waited till I got there. He held up his hand for me to stop and asked me to post a letter for him at the next town. I asked him how far it was to the town and he replied that it was across a couple of coulees and two long looks. And without another word he turned and went back to the shack.

When I got to Rexton, Michigan the last night I asked the man in the store there, as I usually did when I camped off the highway, if I might camp next to the store. He insisted that I run the car in a shed in back of the store and sleep in the store. He had comfortable quarters and an extra bed. He was glad to have someone with him as there had been several hold ups in that section. However, nothing happened and he made breakfast for me the next morning. He expected his family to come that day and refused to accept any payment for the night's lodging. He had bought the store a few days before and seemed quite pleased that I had stayed.

Oscar Smith



It is possible that Oscar's car was similar to the one in these pictures.