

Chaff

Editor's Note: Since this is to be last issue of *Touchstone* done by me, I thought I might include in this Chaff a story from many years ago that involved me.

During the summer months of the final two years of my theological studies, I worked as an instructor with a driving school. Since at that time there were only a couple of companies in Winnipeg offering that kind of service, we were extremely busy. I often worked from 8 in the morning until 10 at night. It was busy partly because Winnipeg, like other Canadian cities, had finally adopted stringent rules for their driver tests. And it was partly because it was the early 1950s, and the post Second-World-War prosperity was allowing many middle-aged people to purchase their very first car. Even though our training cars were equipped, on the instructor's side, with a steering wheel, a brake and a clutch, a high degree of alertness on our part was necessary. It's a very steep learning curve for a middle-aged person to sit in the driver's seat of a car for the first time in their lives, and get the hang of twisting and turning safely in busy city traffic — let alone managing to parallel park — when the car has a manual transmission, no power steering, and by present-day standards is almost the size of a Crown Victoria. Those long hours were full of tension for all of us instructors.

One day I went to pick up a new customer. I was informed by the office that the street she lived on was torn up for re-paving, so I was instructed to pick up the client in the lane at the back of the houses; her home was only three lots in from the avenue. She was standing waiting for me beside a garage which, like so many built in the 1920s and 30s, at least in this part of Canada, was a basic wooden frame covered on the sides and roof by light metal sheeting.

Instead of being a middle-aged woman, which I had expected, the customer looked as if she had just reached the legal age for driving. My first question to a new client was always about whether they had done any driving before, and the girl said she had been out with her father a couple of times, but his nerves couldn't take it any

more. As soon as we started off, however, I could tell that she was a natural. After some initial advice on how to handle a clutch so there is no jerking, and to change from a push and slide motion in turning the wheel to a hand-over-hand pattern, she went through the lesson without a hitch. I was completely relaxed for the first time in days.

At the end of the lesson we were turning back into her lane. She had shifted to a lower gear, as I had suggested, but she turned too sharply. She tried to correct, but her hands on the wheel slipped back into their earlier awkwardness and it was clear that she needed to stop. But she hit the gas instead of the brake and we shot forward like a ball out of cannon. The picket fence went down before us and we struck the metal garage broadside, going right through it. I got to the brake and clutch just in time to prevent us from crashing head-on into a tree just beyond the garage.

The garage was a heap of rubble. When we recovered our composure she explained that the garage belonged to their next-door neighbours, who were on vacation. She couldn't imagine what they were going to say, or what her Dad was going to say, about what had happened. Meanwhile, I backed the car out and looked it over. There was barely a scratch on it. The bumpers in those days were solid metal. We agreed that her Dad would phone my boss about insurance matters. I asked if she intended to keep her appointment with us for the next week and she said she did, unless her Dad vetoed it.

When I came for her some days later she was ready. She told me her father had phoned the neighbours and prepared them for what they were going to find when they returned. The garage was still a pile of rubble, but she and her father had propped up the fence, since it wasn't actually damaged; it had simply pulled away at both ends. It did look funny, though, with tire marks running up it. Her subsequent lessons went perfectly, and she was soon ready for her test, which she passed easily. For the rest of my time as an instructor, however, I never relaxed my vigilance as I had done during that lesson, even with clients that seemed like naturals.

— Mac Watts