

# OPPORTUNITY

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*Painted Desert, Arizona, 1932*

## Through the Windshield

By ALFRED EDGAR SMITH

**G**OOD roads beckon to you and me, daily we grow more motor-wise. The nomad in the poorest and the mightiest of us, sends us behind the wheel, north, south, east, and west, in answer to the call of the road. And in addition to invitation, there is propulsion. The ever-growing national scope of modern business commands; pleasure suggests; and (in downright selfish frankness) it's mighty good to be the skipper for a change, and pilot our craft whither and when we will. We feel like Vikings. What if our craft is blunt of nose and limited of power and our sea is macadamized; it's good for the spirit to just give the old railroad Jim Crow the laugh.

Nevertheless, with transcontinental and inter-sectional highways, with local roads growing nationally good, with good cars growing cheaper, and with good tires within the reach of everyone; there is still a small cloud that stands between us and complete motor-travel freedom. On the trail, this cloud rarely troubles us in the mornings, but as the afternoon wears on it casts a shadow of apprehension on our hearts and sours us a little. "Where," it asks us, "will you stay tonight?" An innocent enough question; to our Nordic friends, of no consequence. But to you and me, what a peace-destroying world of potentiality. It is making motor-"interurbanists" out of us. We have a friend in Atlanta and another in Jacksonville, so what?

So we must be off like a rocket at break of dawn from Atlanta and drive like fiends and fanatics to reach Jacksonville before midnight. Or maybe it's Cincinnati and St. Louis, or Dallas and El Paso. We must not tarry, cannot, to see the wonders that thrust themselves at us 'round each bend; and why? Listen to the echoes in your own experiences as I tell you why.

The Bugbear is the great uncertainty, the extreme difficulty of finding a lodging for the night,—a suitable lodging, a semi-suitable lodging, an unsuitable lodging, any lodging at all, not to mention an eatable meal. In a large city (where you have no friends) it's hard enough, in a smaller city it's harder, in a village or small town it's a *gigantic task*, and in anything smaller it's a matter of sheer luck. And, in spite of unfounded beliefs to the contrary, conditions are practically identical in the Mid-West, the South, the so-called Northeast, and the South-southwest.

The typical confronting-condition and procedure is as follows: After a day of happy carefree meandering along good roads to the tune of from four to sixteen cylinders, a pleasant physical sense of tiredness makes itself felt and it is decided to stop at the next village, hamlet, or junction to seek a place to dine and to lay the weary head. Lights presently come to view, and assuming a look of confidence for

the benefit of the wife, we search anxiously and somewhat furtively for a dark-hued face. Presently we spy one and make inquiry in a low voice as to the possibility of securing a night's lodging. This first individual invariably answers you with a blank stare, and you suddenly remember certain mannerisms of your long-lost boyhood in the South (those of us who are from a month to a generation removed from residence in the heart of this pleasant much lyricized section) and we repeat the question slowly and in a way you know as well as I do. This elicits the information that there is no hotel for "us," there is no rooming or boarding house, but Mrs. X has a place where "folks stay sometimes." So away to Mrs. X's across the railroad tracks.

Mrs. X when aroused from dinner or from a rocker, regards our proposals with an expressionless stare, which we, being of kindred blood understand quite well. In our desperate need our early training again comes to the rescue and we disarm our hostess after a time and put her completely at her ease, so that it is guessed that we can be provided with a bed, and later under the influence of our overworked charm we are provided with a meal. It doesn't seem so hard in the telling; but remember we were lucky, any one of a number of things could have gone wrong forcing a continuation of the journey for twenty or thirty miles and a repetition of the procedure. And also, Mrs. X in the above case probably provides for us to the best of her ability, and her provisions, meals and otherwise, are without a doubt, the best to be had. But "best" is a relative thing.

Sometimes the procedure varies a little. Maybe we are fortunate and there is a hotel after a fashion. Or maybe we spy a druggist or some individual who directs us to a really nice home. Or maybe one of the members of the professions takes us in out of the kindness of his heart and the memories of his own experiences. Maybe, and maybe not. How many homes where "folks stay sometimes," there are, with sewage but no indoor toilet or bath, water pipes but no running water, feather beds to trap the unsuspecting, minute bed inhabitants, no screens, and so on without end. And imagine our embarrassment when we have had the good fortune to find a hotel after a sort, and then notice the proprietor unashamedly passing out halfpint bottles of some colorless fluid to an evidently well-established clientele; or the time when we found a surprisingly clean room through the good offices of a young lady drug clerk only to be kept awake by a cer-

tain type of music downstairs and the trooping in of young ladies and their escorts to occupy the other rooms during the hectic night; or pick one out of your own experiences. Remember the time they wanted to move the old man (who had been ailing with tuberculosis) from his bed to make a place for you, or the time you had to sit up all night in a chair with a light on to ward off the organized attacks of the vermin. Remember? Of course you do. And what to do about it?

In the light of personal experience and of questioning friends, it seems that the real motorists' nightmare is the uncertainty of finding a lodging, rather than the type of lodging itself. The more so, as I am led to believe that a traveller must inure himself to a certain amount of discomfort and hardship, be he in any section of the United States, Canada, Europe, or wherever he may be. So the first and major problem is how and where to be sure of a place to stay. Obviously the answer lies in the compilation of an authentic list of hotels, rooming houses, private homes catering to the occasional traveller, tourist camps, and every type of lodging whatsoever, including those run by members of other races and open to Negroes; and the availability of such a list to our growing army of motor-travellers. Such a list would if complete, be invaluable (and I can hear your fervent amens) for I am convinced that within the area of every fifty square miles of the more frequently travelled sections there are lodgings to be found at all times. If we just knew exactly where they were, what a world of new confidence would be ours.

Up to date there have been, to my knowledge, two efforts to supply this need. The preparation and sale of one such list, which included hotels, rooming houses and the like, resulted in a bankruptcy. The other list includes only hotels, Y. M. C. A.'s and Y. W. C. A.'s, but it is most complete and authentic. It was compiled by Mr. James A. Jackson who is now the director of the Small Business Section of the Marketing Service Division of the United States Department of Commerce, with offices in the new Commerce Building in Washington. This list contains some 120 hotels, 31 Y. M. C. A.'s and 14 Y. W. C. A.'s in 35 States, the District of Columbia and Canada. I heartily recommend this list to you. Also I live in hope that some individual, organization, or publication with unlimited publicity at his or its command will attempt a more inclusive and complete list. I am sure it would not lack contributors. I think with what great pleasure I could recommend a private

home in a small town in Ohio, one in Missouri, one in Tennessee, and a hotel in Virginia.

The summer past, we turned the blunt nose of our Viking craft westward on the concrete-asphalt seas, and sailed away for new conquests and adventures. Starting from Washington, D. C., the first half of our journey was punctuated with the usual very short or very long runs between Pittsburgh, Chicago, St. Louis, and Ft. Riley, to take advantage of the presence of known friends and accommodations. And pleasant are the memories of our stay with real friends at these objectives. But somehow it takes the joy out of gypsying about, when you have to be at a certain place by a certain time, and there are one or two unpleasant memories of way stops between stations. Westward from St. Louis, we were advised to turn southward and wend our way through Texas and thenceward. But we refused and pointed our nose toward northern Colorado and Utah, if for no other reason than we knew that there were stretches of mountainous and desert country that boasted no Negro inhabitants, and we wanted the feeling of stopping when and where we wished, since accommodations must come from the other group, and one place was probably as good as another. We tried to run away from the Bugbear, but it merely changed its form and stuck close.

As we neared the Colorado State line we began to grow Tourist Camp-Conscious. (The West has reduced this business to a science). We found that cabins were cabins in name only, and ran the scale from one room cottages with a wood stove, to a modern detached apartment with sunken bath and locked garage with a connecting door. So following flivvers and Rolls Royces, we patronized the Tourist Camps. And here old Bugbear appeared in his new form.

It would seem that our sensibilities would be somewhat dulled by the continuous hurts they receive in this land of ours; but not so. Every time that a camp manager announced

his camp full for the night, or showed us to a cabin that was second rate in appearance, the thought persisted, "Is he doing this because I am a Negro?" Probably we imagined slights where none were intended. Certainly we have the pleasantest of memories of these camps, of the Mormons, of the Utah Indian (named Smith) who welcomed us royally and wanted to talk far into the night about Senator Smoot and things politic, of the Colorado hostess who insisted we would be more comfortable in her hotel than in a cabin, of cordial Californians, and others. Of course, occasionally we struck a Texan who had emigrated, and our sensibilities received new hurts when he would advise us that no accommodations were to be had for "us" within a radius of fifty miles. But it was balm to our wounds, when invariably we would go next door to a better camp (usually run by a chain syndicate) and be welcomed right royally.

And speaking of chain syndicates, a last word on this matter. As a group we have no reason to love these organizations as colored labor within their ranks is usually taboo. But having switched to a well known brand of gasoline because it could be found in any and all localities the length and breadth of this country and others, in all fairness let it be known that the employees were uniformly courteous, attentive, anxious to serve, and never failed to welcome us with a cherry good morning or evening, and to speed us on our way with well wishes and an invitation to revisit. And this regardless of locale (we returned through the South). Only the attendants at privately-owned stations were discourteous or apathetic. And yet, only the privately-owned stations employed an occasional Negro. A paradox, no? A typical example of a changing spirit in the cotton belt of the South, was the deft covering by an attendant at a chain station, of a sign on the drinking water fountain reading "For White Only," when the colored tourist drew up for gas and oil. This was three Summers ago, last summer the sign had disappeared.

