

THE FIRST AUTOISTS ACROSS WESTERN NEVADA
BY
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The manner in which some of our ancestors came across the Silver State in the early days is the focus of this short article, and the travails and headaches of Nevada's pioneer motorists have always been of interest. Among those who once could have testified about the experience were the first two men who drove a motor vehicle over the Sierra Nevada and across the western section of our state, Alexander Winton, president of the Winton Motor Carriage Company, and writer Charles R. Shanks of the Cleveland Plaindealer.

At the turn of the century, most Americans had serious doubts that the automobile would ever supplant the horse. Manufacturers thus had a selling job on their hands. Several of them believed that they could get a leg up on the competition by becoming the first to have one of their vehicles driven across the country, but Alexander Winton was the first to give it a try.

Departing from San Francisco at 7:15 am, on May 20, 1901, in a twelve—horsepower Winton touring car, they mired down in the mud near Port Costa and had to wench themselves out with a block and tackle. Thereafter, they wrapped ropes around the tires to help keep their vehicle from slipping off the road. After twelve hours of steady driving, they reached the ranch of A.W. Butler, nine miles south of Rio Vista where they spent the night. They got as far as Gold Run the next day and confronted Dormer Pass on May 22. Forging several streams, they finally hung up crossing Cascade Creek, breaking the vehicles front drive assembly. Shanks walked back to a railroad telegraph station where he wired the Winton factory in Ohio for new parts. A telegram was also sent to L.S. Keeley at Emigrant Gap asking him to come rescue them. Repairs were made on May 24, but Winton and Shanks got their vehicle only as far as Summit Station where they stayed the night at a hotel.

Truckee and Hobart Mills were reached the next day, May 25, and they stayed over a day before continuing on to Reno by way of Dog Valley Grade on May 27. Members of the Reno Wheelmen, a bicycle club, met them at the Mayberry Ranch west of town at 9:30 a.m. and escorted them into town for breakfast at the Riverside Hotel. Half the town was on hand to see the Winton drive down Virginia Street, and several horses bolted as it approached. Reno's main thoroughfare was little better than the roads the autoists had traversed the past few days - all chuckholes and mud from recent rains, described by a reporter as a disgrace to a town half the size of Reno - so they felt right at home.

Another rainstorm hit as they departed for Wadsworth later in the morning, and the auto was covered with mud when they arrived. Local residents warned them about the sand hills east of town, but they decided to persevere the next morning. Shanks later described the ordeal of getting over the Wadsworth Hill as "like the remembrances of another beastly nightmare". Rains came again, the wind blew a gale and they cut sagebrush to stuff beneath the wheels to get a little traction. Even so they ended up pulling themselves out with their trusty block and tackle.

Arriving at Desert Station at 5:45 that evening, they spent the night with Southern Pacific section boss D.H. Gates and his wife, who made their home in a box car which doubled as an office and cookhouse for a dozen section laborers stationed there. They plunged through four unabridged streams going north to Lovelock the next day and built their own railroad tie bridge at one point to get across a bad washout. A mile south of Lovelock, they stuck in a mud hole and Shanks walked into town and brought George Stoker and his team back to pull them out. Winton stalked rattlesnakes out in the sagebrush while awaiting his rescuers and had several sets of rattles as souvenirs when they arrived.

They took lunch at Lovelock and picked up four cans of gasoline which had been shipped in by rail. The Winton drew a good crowd, but they pushed on to Mill City later that afternoon, arriving just before 5:00 p.m. The railroad agent there said that the "quicksand" they would encounter on the run to Winnemucca could barely be negotiated by a horse and buggy, but Winton insisted upon giving it a try. They made two miles. "Progress was slow," Shanks later wrote. "The sand became deeper and deeper as we progressed. At last, the carriage stopped, the driving wheels sped on and cut deep into the bottomless sand. We used block and tackle, got the machine from its hole and tried again with the same result. Tied more ropes around wheels with the hope that the corrugation would give them sufficient purchase in the sand. Result: wheels cut deeper in less time than before."

Shanks finally suggested that they return to Mill City and ship the vehicle to Winnemucca by rail, but Winton refused. "No sir," he said. "If we can't do it on our own power, this expedition ends right here, and I go back with a knowledge of conditions and experience such as no automobilists in this or any other country has gained. If I attempt this game again, I will construct a machine on particular lines. No man who expects to operate in the civilized portions of this continent would take the machine for his individual service about cities and throughout ordinary country, but I tell you it will go through sand - and this quicksand at that!"

Winton was correct in his prediction that someone would get across the country, but it would be an Oldsmobile, not a Winton, which would make the trip. He and Shanks hiked back to Mill City and made arrangements for the car to be extricated and shipped by rail to Cleveland. They themselves remained overnight before catching a passenger train on east. They would never return.

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