

Learning to Drive

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My mother would only drive a stick shift, so that is how I learned. I think it was probably on our Edsel, a lemon of a car if there ever was one.

Now, learning with a standard transmission is a bit tricky. You have to coordinate the gas and clutch and, especially on a hill, the gas. This was Syracuse, NY. For those not familiar with the topography, it is located in a glaciated area with many rolling hills but, in addition, there are many very steep hills, both in the University area and off of Erie Boulevard, a main connecting street. These hills are the transition from the Lake Erie plain to an upland plateau.

We had to go up these steep hills fairly frequently because the “downtown” is down and our house was up on the plateau. There was the inevitable stop sign at the top of each of these steep streets.

Maneuvering in this situation is not easy. The transition of moving your foot off of the break, releasing the clutch and applying enough gas requires a learning curve as steep as the streets, or, better yet, you need a third foot. Starting up is especially hard if someone pulls up behind you, as the car tends to roll back while you are trying to give it enough gas to move forward and you might inadvertently roll back into the car behind you.

There was one particularly embarrassing moment in my training. Our church was located on a quiet street on the edge of town which exited onto a moderately busy road which we routinely took home. There was a relatively small hill before the intersection with the inevitable stop sign at the top. It was a relatively small hill, but enough to give an inexperienced driver a challenge. We needed to turn left and there was not what I considered great visibility. My mother let me try my hand at driving home from church. What could possibly happen between church and home? The trick of using the break, clutch and gas while starting up and turning left onto a moderately busy road proved to be a major challenge. While I stubbornly kept trying to proceed without stalling the car, refusing my mother’s help to operate the gas from her side of the car, our entire congregation was forced to drive around me. I was determined to master this challenge and finally did get going onto that road, or we would be sitting there still.

The other challenge in learning to drive was the lack of depth perception. “Watch out for that parked car” came out of my mother’s alarmed mouth more than once. Go slowly up to the stop sign was another admonishment. My mother worked hard to help me compensate. I didn’t hit any parked cars but I did bounce off of a couple of snow banks. After all, it was February in the snow belt.

In those days we still had Drivers Ed at school. We had to learn all about the engine, how to change a tire and how to change the oil. It was truly one of the most useful courses I had in High School. These were essential skills for when I lived in a very rural area in northern Illinois. No cell phone to call for assistance.

Part of the driving exam was parallel parking. I still take pride in the fact that I can parallel park without depth perception. I guess my current car can parallel park all on its own, but I never learned how to use that feature because I have felt no need to use it. Somehow it seems like cheating.

I have moved away from that standard transmission. The last vehicle I drove with a clutch was my stepfather's old van. I could only use it if I was wearing clogs with thick soles. Otherwise I couldn't reach the clutch. Since then, all of my cars have had automatic transmissions and seats that move forward so I can reach the pedals.