



Darlene's Silver Streak and The Bradford Model T Girls

John G. Butte

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Bill and Daisy Dorgan ran the popular Dorgan's Café on Main Street in Bradford, Illinois, for almost 50 years. Legend has it that Bill bought a six-year-old 1926 Ford Model T for his daughter Darlene, who immediately organized a summer vacation, inviting several girlfriends to join her camping in Devil's Lake, Wisconsin. Seven more summer trips, from 1936 through 1942, took these "twenty-something" girls through 44 states, Canada, and Mexico in an era when such travel by a group of coeds was not common. These gals seemed to find adventure at every turn, attending World's Fairs in New York and San Francisco and traveling to Canada to see the Dionne Quintuplets. Los Angeles, New Orleans, Atlanta, Washington, D.C., Toronto, and Montreal were all visited. They slept in jails and schoolyards along the way. They made the acquaintance of movies stars and moguls, as well as dignitaries and corporate leaders. There was a special, enduring relationship that developed between the girls and Henry Ford, who met with them twice. Most Model T's were black, but not Darlene's! She painted it silver, and on each trip, hand-painted red signage—called "Lizzie Labeling"—adorned the hood, fenders, and doors, telling the story of where the girls had been or were going. The car was nicknamed the Silver Streak. At first, the girls referred to themselves as the Bradford Model T Girls. Later they called themselves the Gypsy Coeds, a name that seemed to fit them well. There was a strong kindred spirit among the girls and an equally strong love for the old Model T that carried them on their road trips. Relive those eight adventurous summer vacations recreated from diaries, letters, newspaper accounts, and interviews, and learn how the author eventually found the Silver Streak, a true piece of Americana, and returned it to Central Illinois.

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