



Horatio's Drive: America's First Road Trip

Dayton Duncan, Ken Burns

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The companion volume to the PBS documentary film about the first—and perhaps most astonishing—automobile trip across the United States.

In 1903 there were only 150 miles of paved roads in the entire nation and most people had never seen a “horseless buggy”—but that did not stop Horatio Nelson Jackson, a thirty-one-year-old Vermont doctor, who impulsively bet fifty dollars that he could drive his 20-horsepower automobile from San Francisco to New York City. Here—in Jackson’s own words and photographs—is a glorious account of that months-long, problem-beset, thrilling-to-the-rattled-bones trip with his mechanic, Sewall Crocker, and a bulldog named Bud. Jackson’s previously unpublished letters to his wife, brimming with optimism against all odds, describe in vivid detail every detour, every flat tire, every adventure good and bad. And his nearly one hundred photographs show a country still settled mainly in small towns, where life moved no faster than the horse-drawn carriage and where the arrival of Jackson’s open-air (roofless and windowless) Winton would cause delirious excitement.

Jackson was possessed of a deep thirst for adventure, and his remarkable story chronicles the very beginning of the restless road trips that soon became a way of life in America. **Horatio's Drive** is the first chapter in our nation’s great romance with the road.

With 146 illustrations and 1 map

Horatio's Drive: America's First Road Trip Details

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From Reader Review Horatio's Drive: America's First Road Trip for online ebook

Jennifer says

An often interesting (though sometimes repetitive) account of the first successful journey across America by car. Horatio Jackson was definitely optimistic - most of the trip was unpaved roads and in some areas, towns were few and far between. Of course, the tires were incredibly unreliable, and it seemed like the men had to repair something every few feet, but they made headlines almost everywhere they went.

The geography of the trip was interesting - I could imagine a teacher using this book in the classroom. And the best part were the clippings from newspapers, letters, and telegraphs, as well as the photos. My only gripe was that the book was only about the actual journey; the places they visited received short shrift. The author mentioned that Jackson rarely commented on the scenery or the places, but it would have been nice if the author had made up for that (since this book is the companion to the Ken Burns' documentary, I know that the film probably paid more attention to the scenery).

Tom Schulte says

This is my second time taking in the Dayton Duncan-Ken Burns audiobook about plucky doctor-turned-adventurer Horatio Jackson's historic first crossing of the U.S. continent by automobile. The challenges, the individual triumph, the unplanned three-way race make for a compelling, exciting American tale. Cameo narration by Tom Hanks and, at the NYC end, George Plimpton, and others make for a great, exciting, entertaining telling. However, Ken Burns' lengthy, self-indulgent introduction borders on narcissism and takes away from the initial energy, while Duncan's panoramic road trip paean and excessive Walt Whitman quotes take away from the already perfect conclusion: Horatio finally making it home.

Christine Martin says

I will admit to being a bit of a Ken Burns groupie. I actually got to see him speak in person once. Such a thrill. I've been working my way through all his documentaries, although I don't think I'll ever be able to do the Baseball one. Sorry.

I've had Horatio's Drive in my Netflix queue for a while and somehow stumbled upon it over at Audible. I snapped it up. How fantastic! Yes, I did miss not having the photos, but before long I was deep in the story. What a great story. I love car trips. Well, driving period. It has been one of my dreams to drive cross country. So, to get to hitch a ride on the first ever cross country car trip was crazy awesome.

The bonus features, which consisted of an intro by Mr. Burns and an essay by Mr. Duncan, bookended the story beautifully. My love of history, driving, traveling and the open road are all touched on here. It is so cool to know that I share a passion, other than history, with one of my idols. =)

Another great history lesson!

Kathryn says

This is the companion book to the documentary film of the same name. Thanks to Netflix and Amazon prime, I am able to indulge my love of documentaries on almost any topic and that is how I ended up watching the film and then reading the book.

I thought I would end up just skimming the book, after all I had already seen the documentary, but both the story and the writing grabbed my attention and I read every word of it.

Horatio's Drive took me back 113 years with the adventures of the two men, Horatio Nelson Jackson and Sewall Crocker (Horatio's mechanic), along with a bulldog named Bud that they picked up early on the trip. Much of the story is told from Jackson's letters to his wife, which, because I did see the documentary, I read in Tom Hanks' voice.

A fun and easy read, I only wish all history could be learned with books like this!

Kenneth E Tubman says

Well documented story based on what little the writer had to go on. Mainly letters to his wife while on the road. As Dayton points out in the end of his book, he desired a more descriptive journal of Jackson's drive regarding the scenery, societal encounters including more about his fellow driver mechanic and even the dog.

I would like to see this vehicle at the Smithsonian someday.

Luke says

Wish it was 10x longer. Interested to checkout the documentary.

Tom Schulte says

This is my second time taking in the Dayton Duncan-Ken Burns audiobook about plucky doctor-turned-adventurer Horatio Jackson's historic first crossing of the U.S. continent by automobile. The challenges, the individual triumph, the unplanned three-way race make for a compelling, exciting American tale. Cameo narration by Tom Hanks and, at the NYC end, George Plimpton, and others make for a great, exciting, entertaining telling. However, Ken Burns' lengthy, self-indulgent introduction borders on narcissism and takes away from the initial energy, while Duncan's panoramic road trip paean and excessive Walt Whitman quotes take away from the already perfect conclusion: Horatio finally making it home.

Dave says

An amazing little book about Horatio who on the base of a 50 dollar bet became the first person to drive across the country in "one of those new fangled automobiles". This is a fun story to read, with lots of pictures, and first person resources. It is the companion piece to a Ken Burns film, which I plan to see. If you want to read something a little bit different then you will enjoy this book.

Dori Sabourin says

As accustomed as we are today of driving a car, we never fathom the challenges of driving in the early 1900's. After placing a bet, Dr. Horatio Nelson Jackson, his sidekick, Sewall Crocker, and their mascot, a bulldog named Bud (who was acquired on the way) set off to drive from San Francisco to New York. Many deterrents impeded their travel, flat tires, broken down parts, hunger and sleep deprivation were among them. Soon other teams of drivers followed, each trying to outdo the others, some had to turn back but Horatio and his team prodded on, proving to themselves and the world that driving across country could be done. I recommend this book to history buffs and car enthusiasts who delight in adventure.

Jacqui N says

One May evening in 1903 at the prestigious University Club in San Francisco, after a spirited debate on the subject, Dr. Horatio Nelson Jackson makes a \$50 wager with another gentleman that an automobile, in fact, could successfully cross the continent. Four days later, after procuring a Winton #1684 automobile; Sewall Crocker, a former professional bicycle racer with gas engine knowledge; and eventually Bud the dog as his trip companions, the road trip began. There was no support team, no sponsorship, no detailed maps, very few established (or paved) roads outside of the city, and no roof to their very open car...

I love this book and the fact that someone made the effort to put this wonderful story together. My only gripe with it is that I wish the book was more comprehensive, covering the trip across America in more detail. However, the author himself has the same complaint that H. Nelson Jackson neglected to record his trip in much detail either. The format is almost scrapbook-like with lots of old photographs, and reproductions of newspaper articles and auto ephemera. Adding an element of excitement was the simultaneous account of two rival continental crossings in Jackson's immediate wake. The author brings to the forefront how very American piling stuff into your car and going on a roadtrip is, and how much the automobile is part of the American identity.

Alejandro says

I read this for the geography challenge because I figured a book about a cross country trip was bound to fit in at least one place. It ended up filling my Northwest slot. It's a charming book about a ridiculously under-planned adventure to drive across the country before that was a practical or reasonable endeavor. Well worth the short length, if only to hear the stories of the people met along the way. The drive was undertaken because of a bet between those that said the car was the future and those that said it was a passing fancy, a toy for the ultra rich. The bet was won and the car was of course the future, but if nothing else the trip

demonstrated that at the time the car was a toy of the ultra rich, with the whole thing costing several times the cost of the car, as well as more than most people back then would earn in a decade or two.

Jeanne says

Book blurb book for July. Book on tape, well done. Turns out we can't make it to the meeting but glad we read it.

gaudeo says

A fascinating story of the first cross-country trip by car. Thanks to photos and letters that have survived all this time, along with newspaper archives, Burns was able to recreate this journey on the page. The result of a bet, the men's trip began with little planning, and they survived constant breakdowns and the loss of supplies on the bumpy route, even two parties of competitors, to become the first to cross from San Francisco to New York. It's a fun book, and I recommend reading it with a friend.
