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Model T's: Get on Board for a Trip Back in Time

When my neighbor rolls out his Model T, everyone wants a ride!

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Articles editor John Stark gets a ride with Earl Eklund in his Model T.
Courtesy of John Stark

On a recent Sunday afternoon, my landlord showed up on my front porch, ringing my doorbell. He was adamant that I come outside. "You need to see this," Sean said. Although of different generations (he's 20 years younger), we both appreciate things that have a history.

Parked in front of Sean's house was a two-seat Model T roadster pickup. Its black leather top was down. The vehicle was jungle green and had a shiny brass radiator that bore the familiar Ford emblem. The headlight and taillight rims, the caps on the wheel spokes and the side rearview mirror were also made

of brass. "McCullough and Company, Minneapolis, Minnesota" appeared on the side of the truck in gold embossed letters. It looked like a big, shiny toy.

Earl Eklund, the vehicle's owner — an 89-year-old widower who lives just down the street from me — was seated in the driver's seat, his hands on the wooden steering wheel. The Model T had been in his late wife's family since it was purchased new in Minneapolis in 1915. Sean introduced me to my neighbor. Earl knew from the excited look on my face just what I was thinking. "Would you like a ride?" he asked. *Would !!*

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I stepped atop the black metal running board, unlatched the small, knee-high door, and climbed into the cramped cab, taking my seat next to him. I was surprised at how high up one sits in a Model T. I felt like I was seven years old, when my father took me on Mr. Toad's Wild Ride at Disneyland.

Starting the car requires knowledge and agility. First Earl put his foot on the brake. He then put the spark lever up and the gas lever down — they're both located on the long steering column. Next on the checklist was turning on the ignition key. After reaching under the dashboard and pulling the choke rod out, he put his foot on the starter button, located under the floorboard. Suddenly the Model T came to attention, awakened as if it were a startled goose.

Earl took his foot off the brake pedal. *And we were off!*

"The car has two gears, high and low," he explained as we began our trip to nowhere. "It can easily do 40 miles per hour."

As we tootled through the shady, tree-lined streets of my neighborhood in Richfield, Minn., people waved to us from their front yards. One man gave us the thumbs-up. I felt like a politician, or a prom king. I waved back.

We bumpity-bumped over a railroad track that runs through our neighborhood before turning onto Nicolette Avenue, a busy, four-lane thoroughfare. As we drove south toward the Mall of America, cars pulled up alongside us so their occupants could get a closer look. "Drivers like to roll down their windows, lean over and ask me questions," Earl said. "Trouble is, they keep creeping closer and closer to me. I have to be careful that we don't collide."

The Model T's first owner was Earl's late wife's great-uncle, Lowell McCullough. Lowell invented a water pump for supplying water to homes and businesses. He had the black roadster painted green to match the color of his pumps, and a wagon maker built a box to replace the turtle deck (a metal trunk that's behind the cab on Model T's) so he could haul his wares.

Earl first saw the Model T in 1942 when he was hanging out with his future wife, Phyllis; they went to the same high school. At that time the car belonged to Lowell's son. "I guess I married the right girl," Earl said to me. He certainly did. He and Phyllis were married for 66 years.

The Model T was passed down to Earl from Phyllis' step-dad in 1983. Earl spent the next five years restoring it in his garage. A mechanical engineer at Honeywell for 47 years, he loves to solve problems and fix things.

There aren't a lot of Model T's left in America — many of the 15 million that were made between 1908 and 1915 were melted down during World War II. There aren't a lot of Earls either, everyday custodians and conservators of our country's past. People who see his car on the road are instantly connected to an era when life in America was slower. When you could take your time.

Earl belongs to T-Totalers, a group of Model T owners who bring their restored cars to fairs and car shows and take them on group excursions. "After I finished redoing the car, I entered it in a car show," Earl told me. "It won first place."

The car has proved a people magnet. When Minnesota Senator Amy Klobuchar saw Earl in the car at a fair, she came over and introduced herself. One day Earl drove the car to the Minneapolis-St. Paul Airport, where he works as a volunteer traveler's assistant. While sitting in the car, Earl was approached by Richard Gardner, the last surviving member of the 1940s musical trio The Harmonicats, who lives in St. Paul. They've become pals.

Though soft-spoken, Earl isn't exactly shy about meeting new people. Last year he attended an air show at a small nearby airport. He was intrigued by a restored World War II torpedo bomber, the kind of aircraft he serviced during his time in the Navy. "I wonder how I could get a ride," he mused in earshot of the pilot. Later that day Earl was flying over Minneapolis.

Word has spread that Earl is out and about in his roadster pickup today. As we approach my house, I see that other neighbors are waiting at the curb, hoping he'll give them a spin too. Earl beeps the horn: *Ahooga!*

In today's amped-up age of technology, Earl's Model T still manages to stop traffic. "How do you explain its appeal?" I asked him.

"People like to see something old that's still running," he said. "And if possible, they want a ride."

Tell me about it!