

Driving Out West in 1940

by John W. Cross

Introduction

In 1940 my mother's cousin, Lois Dean, invited her to join Lois's family on a cross-country car trip to visit National Parks. Their planned itinerary began in their home town, Montclair, New Jersey and included visits to Rocky Mountain National Park, Mesa Verde, the Grand Canyon, Zion, Bryce, the Grand Tetons, and Yellowstone. Recently, I discovered my mother had kept a detailed diary¹ of this adventure. I found it in a dusty old box of her papers, along with snapshots taken by one of the Deans.*

Growing up, I can remember my mother mentioning the trip, explaining it was a sort of *Thank-you* from the Deans for a personal sacrifice she made on behalf of the family. Her father, and grandfather had both recently died from cancer, one right after the other. When her father was first given his diagnosis, my mother had just finished her studies as an art student in New York City and was working in the advertising department of B. Altman and Company, a luxury New York department store.² To deal with the family crisis, my mother put her art career on hold and stayed home to care for her father and then her grandfather over the course of several years as they suffered terminal cancer.



My mother's diary and snapshots.

My mother told me she had been physically and mentally exhausted by the end of this ordeal. By then she was 26 years old, still living at home.³ Just at that moment, her cousins came to the rescue with their generous offer. Lois and her husband Edgar Dean invited her to accompany them, their children (Adelle, 13, and Robert, 10) and Edgar's older brother Prentice (*Prent*) on their western trip, at their expense. The plan was for my mother, Lois and the children to go by train to Washington, DC, where Prent lived and then drive west in Prent's car. Edgar wouldn't initially go along on the drive, but would travel with the family only as far as Philadelphia, joining the party in Denver.

Prentice Dean, had done post-graduate study in economics at Princeton in 1923⁴ and since 1934 had held a position in Washington with the U. S. Tariff Commission.⁵ It must have been a senior position, since he drove a 1939 Buick Series 40 Special Sedan, a deluxe model.⁶

Lois's husband Edgar, an MIT graduate, was employed as an engineer with Public Service the local New Jersey power company.⁷ On June 27 Edgar accompanied his family only as far as North

*The diary was written in pencil on now-yellowed paper, much of it very faint and hard to read. Some of it I could make out only by scanning the pages and increasing the contrast. My transcriptions were dictated using *Speechnotes*, a voice-to-text cell phone app, and there may be odd errors missed by my proofreading. However, the accompanying photographs are in excellent condition with subject information written on the back.

Philadelphia. From there, the diary indicates he transferred to a train for Atlantic City.⁸ I suspect he was unable to get away from work at the start of the trip because of company business in Atlantic City.

My mother, Lois and the children continued on the train to Washington, where they were met by Prent.⁹ According to the diary, Prent charged his gas purchases.¹⁰ Previously, I wasn't aware gasoline credit cards were in use by 1940, but it was unusual enough that my mother mentioned it frequently. In 1940, gasoline sold for an average price of \$0.18 /gallon (\$3.35 in 2021 prices).¹¹

In Washington, the family stayed one night in the *Bellevue Hotel*,¹² now called the *Kimpton Hotel George*, just one block from Union Station.¹³ My mother complained how hot it was in Washington compared with Montclair, but Prent assured her it was just normal heat for June in Washington.

The next morning, the family left the capital bright and early with Prent driving. After Edgar joined the party in Denver, he occasionally drove. My mother's diary never mentions Lois taking the wheel, so she may not have had a driver's license. In the years before the Second World War male heads of households generally had authority over choosing and driving automobiles.¹⁴ Although some women always drove, their numbers were relatively small. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

From Washington, Prent drove north through Frederick, Maryland to meet US 40 in Pennsylvania, then took US 40 due west as far as Denver, arriving July 3. From Denver the party made day trips into the Rocky Mountains until Edgar finally arrived by train the morning of July 5.¹⁵

8:10 a.m. On to Union Depot to greet Edgar...The Denver Zephyr 5 min late, but a red plush carpet laid out to greet the King. A beautiful silver streamlined train. Much happy chatter...birthday gifts for Adelle. A stop at the Court House to legalize some deeds,[†] then to the P.O. [post office] We did manage to get Edgar's bag in [the car trunk] despite kidding[‡]....¹⁶

The early part of the diary is highly detailed, describing each meal, each accommodation, the weather, and road conditions. Further along, my mother began to leave out more routine events. The diary indicates the family ate most of their meals in coffee shops. My



Prent Dean in the Rockies checking the radiator of his 1939 Buick, covered in dust. The engine had overheated climbing mountain roads.



Left to right: Robert, Lois, & Adelle Dean and my mother in City Park, Newman, Illinois.

[†] I have no explanation for the passage about legalizing deeds at the courthouse.

[‡] It was a running joke that my mother had brought a monster suitcase, much larger than anyone else's.

mother seldom mentions picnics, except for the first day, when their planned al fresco luncheon was rained out. The party ate well. Often my mother mentions ordering a stack of pancakes at breakfast and a steak for dinner. On the road, the family did not write or call ahead for room reservations. They usually looked for AAA-rated tourist cabins to spend the night, but sometimes checked into small-town hotels. If they didn't find something to their liking, the party would just drive on to the next town. In National Parks, they stayed in the main lodges. My mother often commented on the quality of accommodations. The party usually rented two adjoining rooms.

Several times my mother mentions purchasing post cards to send to friends back home, and on a few occasions, sending telegrams to announce their progress west. As she noted, the family stopped by the post office in Denver to pick up mail being held for them. In Denver the family also visited the local AAA office to get help planning their day trips into the Rockies.¹⁷

The diary often describes games the children would play in the car to pass time. Often, they counted things they passed: out-of-state license plates, farm animals, road kills, farm houses, etc.¹⁸ I was surprised how often my mother reported seeing goats and flocks of sheep.

True to her artistic training, my mother often detailed exact shades of colors she observed in foliage, soils, rocks and other scenery, and the shapes of clouds.¹⁹ Her diary also notes the appearance of local people and their living conditions. For example, through Pennsylvania, she describes the blackened faces of coal miners,²⁰ and, in Dust Bowl towns of western Kansas, she was impressed with the sadness, dirty clothes and worn-out looks of impoverished natives.²¹



Lois, Robert and Edgar Dean in Grand Teton National Park.

Such a long trip in hot weather was hard on both driver and passengers. Automobiles lacked air conditioning in those days. For example, Buick did not offer air conditioning until 1953.²² A photo of the Dean's Buick taken on Mount Herman July 3rd (see above) shows that by then the car (nicknamed *Penelope*) had gotten very dusty. Back in Denver on the 4th of July, Adelle and my mother suggested they wash *Penelope*, but "Prent vetoes the idea."²³

It is worth considering that in 1940 there were no Interstate Highways,^{24,25} nor even significant stretches of 4-lane highway.²⁶ Most highways were 2-lane blacktops, but my mother records that many of the rural roads in the West were paved with gravel or unpaved. She indicated that many mountain highways were narrow and lacked guard rails. Even not far from Washington, my mother described the route from Frederick, Maryland to US-40 in Pennsylvania as muddy and rutted.²⁷ The Dean Family's itinerary in the summer of 1940 was a significant undertaking.

After returning to Montclair, Peggy Goodman resumed her work as an advertising artist at B. Altman and Co. She continued working there until she married my father, a young naval officer, in 1943. After World War II Peggy moved to her husband's hometown of Memphis, Tennessee, where she

continued to paint and sketch. In Memphis, Peggy later organized a close-knit group of women artists called the *Artie-Annies* and became a civic leader in promoting the visual arts.

Selected photo scrapbook of the Trip



From top left:

1. Lincoln Home, Springfield, Illinois,
2. Lincoln's New Salem, Illinois,
3. Lincoln's New Salem, Illinois,
4. Tourist cabins, Newton, Illinois,
5. Hannibal, Mo. from Samuel Clemens' Home,
6. Family photo, Mt. Hermon,
7. Family photo, Mt. Hermon,
8. Robert and Adelle, Mount Hermon,
9. Peggy Goodman, Mount Hermon.



From top left:

10. Continental Divide, Wolf Creek Pass, Colorado, 11. Between Colorado Springs and Mesa Verde National Park
12. Visitors' Center, Mesa Verde National Park, 13. Mesa Verde National Park, 14. Peggy Goodman, Grand Canyon
National Park, North Rim, 15. Bryce Canyon National Park, 16. Yellowstone Falls, 17. Yellowstone National Park,



From left:

18. Family with a park ranger, Grand Teton National Park, 19. Ranger talk, Grand Teton National Park

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- 1 Goodman, Margaret H. *Personal Diary, June 27- July 24, 1940* (Diary). Unpublished three-volume autographic manuscript in the possession of the author. Technical limitations required scanning each volume into multiple pdf files. References refer to the volume, the pdf number within that volume and the page number within the pdf. Each pdf page spans two manuscript pages.
 - 2 Gray, Christopher. [B. Altman's; The Life and Death\(?\) Of a Palace for the Chic](#). New York Times, Jan. 28, 1990, page A.7.
 - 3 U.S., Social Security Applications and Claims Index, 1936-2007. Ancestry.com, publisher., Marriage record, Rev. Morgan Phelps Noyes, Central Presbyterian Church, Montclair, NJ 19 Sept.1942. Obituary, Memphis Commercial Appeal, *Memphis Area Deaths*, pub. March 12, 2003.
 - 4 Prentice Northrop Dean, A.B., Princeton, 1920; A.M., American University of Beirut, 1923. *Tax exempt bonds and the income tax*. 1923. Princeton. p. 610, **In:** *Twenty-Second List of Doctoral Dissertations in Political Economy in Progress in American Universities and Colleges*. The American Economic Review Vol. 15, No. 3 (Sep., 1925), pp. 593-615.
 - 5 Dean, Arthur Denorvan, and Dean, Carroll Sissin (Dean and Dean). [Genealogy of the Dean family, descended from Ezra Dean, of Plainfield, Conn.](#) F. H. Gerlock Publisher, Scranton, Pa., 1957. Library of Congress Call number 6793323, page 7.
 - 6 I was able to identify the make and model from the distinctive front grill in one of the photos. See: [Wikimedia Commons File:1939 Buick Series 40 Special Sedan.jpg](#). Accessed 20 May 2021.
 - 7 Dean and Dean (Reference **Error! Bookmark not defined.**), page 8.
 - 8 Diary, Vol 1, pdf 1, page 1.
 - 9 Diary, Vol 1, pdf 1, page 2.
 - 10 For example, Diary, Vol 1, pdf 1, page 4.
 - 11 [1940 Gas Price in Today's Dollars](#), LendingTree Refinance Calculator. Accessed 1 June 2021. A 1940 Chevrolet special Deluxe 4-door model got about 15 miles per gallon, and the Buick model probably got similar mileage. See: [1940 fuel consumption of a Chevrolet 1940 special Deluxe 4 door](#), Accessed 1 June 2021.
 - 12 Diary, Vol 1, pdf 1, page 2
 - 13 Matchbook cover (photo): [The Belleview Hotel, Union Station Plaza, 15 E. St. NW, Washington, D.C.](#) Accessed 30 May 2021 and [Kimpton George Hotel](#), TripAdvisor, Accessed 30 May 2021.

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- 14 Walsh, Margaret. [Gendering Mobility: Women, Work and Automobility in the United States](#). *History* Vol. 93, No. 3 (311) (July 2008), pp. 376-395.
 - 15 Diary, Vol 1, pdf 2, page 10 – pdf 4 page 2.
 - 16 Diary, Vol 1, pdf 4, page 3.
 - 17 Diary, Vol 1, pdf 2, page 9.
 - 18 Ibid
 - 19 For example, Diary, Vol 1, pdf 2, page 8.
 - 20 Diary, Vol 1, pdf 1, page 4.
 - 21 For example, Diary, Vol 1, pdf 2, page 5.
 - 22 Bhatti, Mohinder S. [The evolution of automotive air conditioning](#). *HVAC&R Nation*, June 2008. Accessed 30 May 2021.
 - 23 Diary, Vol 1, pdf 3, page 2.
 - 24 Watson, Bruce (July–August 2020). [Ike's Excellent Adventure](#). *American Heritage Magazine*. Vol. 65 no. 4.
 - 25 McNichol, Dan (2006a). *The Roads That Built America: The Incredible Story of the U.S. Interstate System*. New York: Sterling. p. 78.
 - 26 Parts of the *Arroyo Seco Parkway* (now known as the *Pasadena Freeway*) between Pasadena and Los Angeles, California opened in December 1938, but no part of the *Pennsylvania Turnpike* opened until October 1940. See: “New Highway Opens Saturday” *Los Angeles Times*. July 17, 1940. p. A12, and Dakelman, Mitchell E. & Schorr, Neal A. (2004). *The Pennsylvania Turnpike*. *Images of America*. Mount Pleasant, SC: Arcadia Publishing. p. 16.
 - 27 Diary Vol 1, pdf 1, page 3.