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Article Summary: Maggie Gehrke kept a daily journal of entertaining road stories on trips that she took with her husband Edward. This account of an excursion to Ainsworth is an example of the Gehrkes' quest for adventure and their teamwork in the face of mishaps on the road.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Margaret (Maggie) May Patton Gehrke, Edward Arthur ("The Bungalow Man") Gehrke

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A Thousand Mile Motor Trip Through Western Nebraska, 1916

*By Margaret May Patton Gehrke,
with photographs by Edward Arthur Gehrke
Edited by Jill Marie Koelling*

The twentieth century brought an enormous change in touring. Nineteenth-century tourists were members of the wealthy establishment and generally spent their tours abroad. With the introduction of assembly-line automobiles, shorter work weeks, and the consequent creation of leisure time, twentieth-century tourism was instantly democratized. Americans shifted from concentrating on mere survival to self exploration. They went touring.

Early automobile touring across Nebraska was an adventurous undertaking. Motorists encountered hundreds of miles of muddy roads, were unlikely to find assistance close at hand, and often had to rely on courage and their own resourcefulness to overcome travel hazards. By 1914, the year Edward and Maggie Gehrke bought their first Buick, the country was enthusiastically embracing the motor touring craze. Tourism was rapidly becoming the booming new American business and "tourists" abounded.

When the Gehrkes hit the open road in 1916, they became part of that shift in American social values.¹ Like other middle class Americans the Gehrkes bought a car and immediately set out to explore the world around them. Edward and Maggie were not part of the establishment. Leisure time, however, al-

lowed the Gehrkes, along with thousands of other Americans, to seek adventure and self-identification.²

Edward Arthur Gehrke was born in Seward County, Nebraska, on August 24, 1880. He was a successful builder and real estate agent in Lincoln for more than twenty-five years. He built an estimated 300 homes in the capital city and was widely known as "The Bungalow Man."³ One of his advertisements in the 1925 Lincoln City Directory reads, "Marry the girl—then see E. A. Gehrke, The Bungalow Man, for the most reasonable priced houses for sale or rent in the city."⁴

Margaret May Patton Gehrke was born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1883. Maggie, as she was affectionately known, spent most of her life in Lincoln. It is not known what brought Maggie and her mother to Lincoln, but it may have been Maggie's wish to attend the University of Nebraska. On October 26, 1905, when Maggie was twenty-two, she married Edward Gehrke. Five years later she graduated from the university.⁵ Apparently Maggie did not pursue a career, but chose instead to work at home. She and Edward had no children. Edward died in 1939 and Maggie died in 1978 at the age of ninety-five. Although she lived a virtual lifetime after her widowhood, Maggie never remarried and took only a few trips later in her life.

Edward and Maggie Gehrke were the quintessential early motor tourists. They

sought adventure, escape, and enlightenment through touring. Between 1914 and 1939, the Gehrkes traveled extensively across the United States in a succession of Buicks, one fondly called "Red Peter." They spent weeks together on the road, encountering a full measure of "motorist calamities." The Gehrkes camped in city parks and ranchers' fields, and toured one national park after the other. They enjoyed fishing, hiking, and soaking in the scenery. They bought souvenirs at the curio shops and sent postcards to friends back home.⁶

The most important aspect of the Gehrkes' tours across the country is the records they kept. Edward was an avid photographer and every trip included his Kodak as part of the "outfit." Gehrke knew how to compose in the camera and his photographs evoke stirring visions of mountain vistas and serene lakes. They not only present a clear view of touring life, but also capture the intensity of the adventure, the thrill of newly cut mountain roads, and the excitement of sliding off a muddy path and barely missing the bridge. Motor touring was not easy, but Edward Gehrke captured the "calamities" with gusto.

Maggie was an exceptionally talented writer, who kept a daily journal on every trip. She told a story, rather than just summarizing the day's events. Maggie's writing is unabashed, revealing

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A Thousand Mile Motor Trip

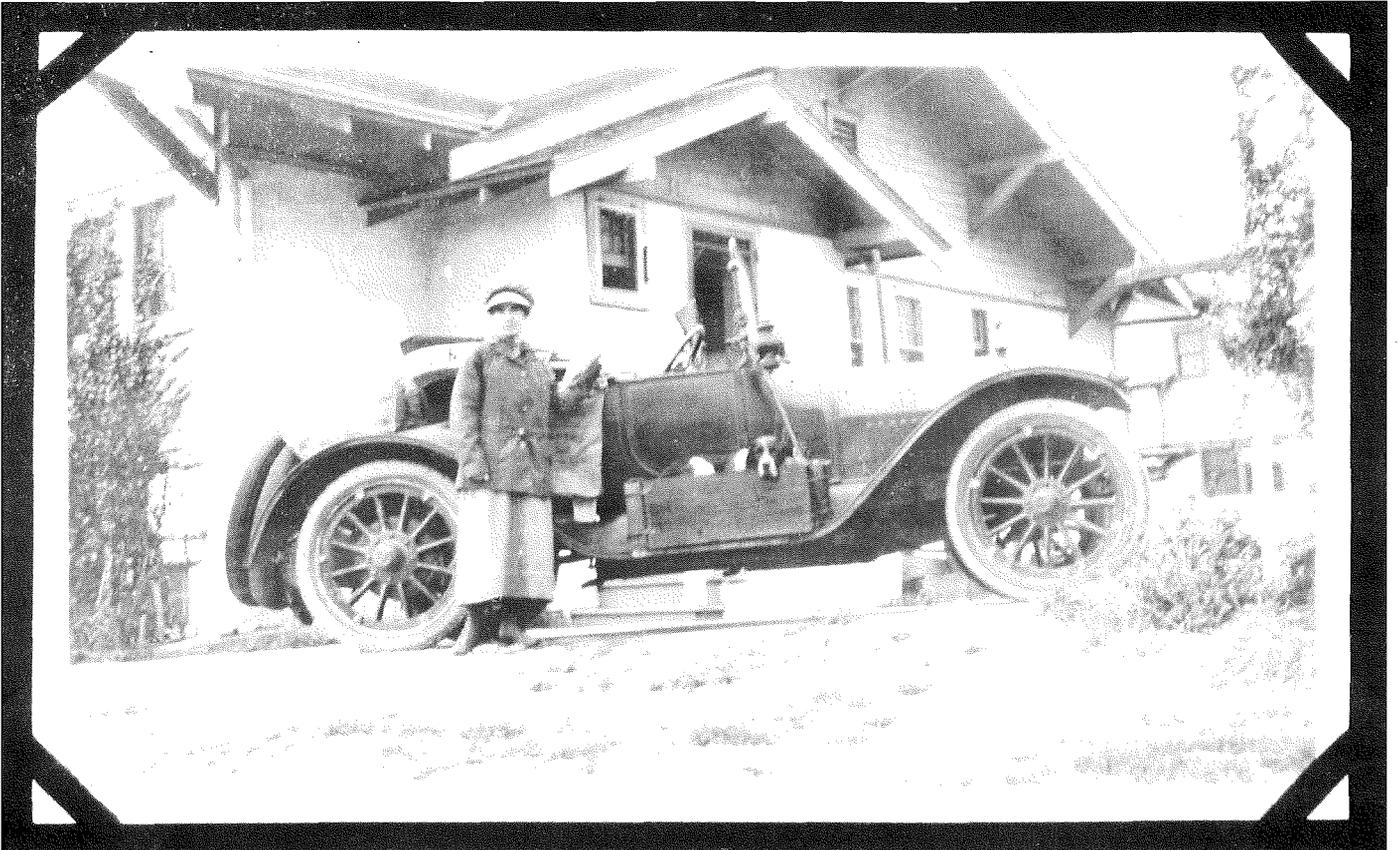
the depth of her love for Edward and the experiences of motor touring, while laughing at herself and the mishaps that plagued every trip. "Calamities are not even interesting any more," she remarked sarcastically in an entry from their 1916 trip to western Nebraska. Life on the road was so different from the everyday chores at home that Maggie repeatedly commented on her bliss at having escaped.⁷

What follows is the account of Edward and Maggie's 1916 "Thousand Mile Motor Trip thru Western Nebraska." This trip is a perfect example of the Gehrkes' quest for adventure and their teamwork to overcome the numerous mishaps they encountered on the journey. Edward and Maggie left Lincoln on a blustery October Sunday, headed for the lakes and good hunting at Ainsworth in Brown County. Maggie's spelling, gram-

mar, and punctuation from her journal and her photograph captions have been retained. Clarification provided to aid the reader's understanding appears in brackets.

Oct. 15. Sunday: The Day of Days again! This is to be our tenth trip—a thousand mile motor trip through Western Nebraska. The morning was gray and misty. We were away at nine o'clock. Perhaps it is true "that only fools rush in where angels fear to tread"—the Man and I did not think of it; however, when eleven miles out of Lincoln, we put up the top, covered the bedding with water-proofing, put a blanket around Pike, took off our gay pennants and by the time we had reached Seward everything was damp but our spirits, and the spick and span appearance of our outfit had utterly disappeared.⁸ We arrived at

York—60 miles from home—about one o'clock. Had dinner with Dewey and Alma, enjoyed Baby Frances, a two hour rest and were on our way again. The next 40 miles of travel the roads were skiddy and travel slow. We reached the Platte river at sunset. It was going down, a big red ball, across the way over the sand bars. But the day's difficulties were not over. Oh, no! We were to experience a full measure of the motorist's calamities! We ran the car in on what looked to be a hard stretch of level sand near a pleasant meadow—and stuck! The rear wheels ground in and sunk with every turn! We got out and deliberated on the next move; but plainly the Buick would not move for sometime. It was cold, night was coming, we were wet and tired from a hundred miles of hard travel. WE put up the tent near the car on wet sand and the



"All ready to start on a rainy October morning."

Lady hastened to make hot tea—blessed reviver of spirits! With the beds made and supper, the situation looked more cheerful—how we are tied by the physical. Next we went out and looked at the car; water was starting to seep in around the wheels and it was still going down a little from its own weight—in all probability before morning a ChinaMan would reach up from the other side and pull it thru! So unlike President Wilson we decided to act at once.⁹ We first found some planks near the bridge and dragged them up to the car, then the Man proceeded to “jack” the rear wheels up, while the Lady carried the light around, brought tools, and encouraged the Man with lies that the car was nearly level when it wasn't! At eleven o'clock the brave little Buick was planked out on the solid ground again, and we went to bed. Thus ended the First Day of the Thousand Mile Motor Trip at Camp No. 1 “Sinky Sand.”

Oct. 16. Who could help but be gay with the sun rising across the level stretch of the river and the air crisp and cold? Pike and I had a wild run up the sand. There was no body to see. Then we packed up the car at once and motored seven miles into Grand Island to breakfast. And how good that jolly breakfast tasted! And we were away. We found the roads heavy but better than skiddy. And then..... We had traveled about 50 miles and were just entering Ravenna, when we discovered that we had broken both springs on the car! We had not buried the little “demon of ill-luck” deep enough in the sand at the Platte River; he had dug out, and was still after us! We found the Buick house, telegraphed to Lincoln for springs, and found a good camp site in a big grove near the town. We put up the tent and proceeded to get settled in Camp No. 2. “Snappy Springs.” We had a late dinner but a jolly one. Then towards evening we walked up to town and back. Ravenna is [a] nice little village of about 1300. We “turned in” early. That we are having a good time regardless

of all mishaps only goes to prove that we are “real sports.” Thus ended the Second Day of the Thousand Mile Motor Trip.

Oct. 17. Bright Day in camp. Feeling fine! Hungry as bears! But the little “devil-god” of ill-luck is after us still: the springs did not come. No getting out of town to-day. The Man hunted all morning; fished all the afternoon. We had bird—not domestic—for dinner and a big fish cleaned for breakfast. Pike is well pleased with this life. To-day I read Gov. Hughes's address, and did some writing, too.¹⁰ It [h]as been a very pleasant day. Thus ended the Third Day of the Thousand Mile Motor Trip and we are only 150 miles from Home.

Oct. 18. En route - Broken Bow, Nebr. Hotel Burlington. We broke camp and left Ravenna at noon. We motored 63 miles in a cold north wind to Broken Bow. Arrived at 3:30 so chilled that we decided to put up for the night, and get a fresh start “for the Front” to-morrow morning. Hunters along the way tell us this cold wave is just the thing. A good supper and to bed early—a real bed. So ended the Fourth Day of the Thousand Mile Motor Trip.

Oct. 19. “Somewhere in France.” Camped in the bluffs near some river. We awake to a white world; a heavy snow storm in October. We had our breakfast early and after an hour of deliberation decided that we could make the next town in spite of the cold and blustering snow. We would go all “housed-in” in the car. From the hotel window it looked dead easy. We motored about 30 miles in sand and snow over roads that wound thru the bluffs and ended nowhere. After three hours of ploughing thru drifts and digging out of sand, we gave it up. We pitched camp near the “some river.” The Man cleared a spot for camp in a thicket of willows, and shoveled the snow away, and we got a camp fire and tried to thaw out. We got something to eat under the worst “house-keeping difficulties” I have yet experienced! AT six o'clock we piled all we had on the bed and crawled in, clothes and all. Pike was suffering with a cold so that the Man had to get up to cover him every time he scratched his flees. But the flees kept reasonably quiet. We fell asleep—sometime—listening to the cold winter wind flapping the tent and in each lull the lap-lap of the river..... And thus ended the Fifth Day of the Thousand

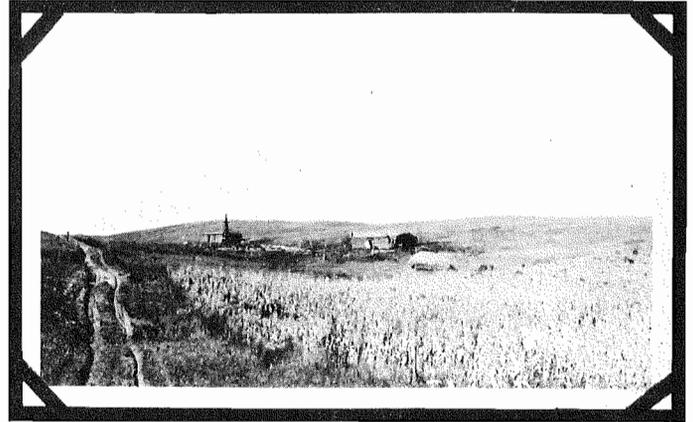


“Ravenna, Nebr. Two broken springs.”

A Thousand Mile Motor Trip



"A wayside noon lunch. Pike eats ginger snaps!"



"Looking for Billy Smith's place and road information."

Mile Motor Trip at Camp No. 3. Camp "Snowbound."

Oct. 20. Getting up in a snowbound camp and getting breakfast of frozen grub was a new experience, not wholly a pleasant one. But a roaring camp fire right in front of the tent soon cheered camp. The sun was bright most of the day, but the north wind kept cold. The Man and the Dog hunted all day. I stayed at camp. The days are short when one goes to bed at sunset. So ended the Sixth Day of the Thousand Mile Motor Trip.

Oct. 21. We were up with the birds, I heard them flitting in the dead grasses. We ate our breakfast with the early sun in our faces, warm and bright, giving promise of a fine day..... Then we broke camp, packed, and were on our way again. We motored to the north for 25 miles over roads that were sandy and hilly but passable.

We made Brewster about noon and just outside of the village stopped and ate our lunch by the side of the car. Pike was so delighted with this manner of eating that he so far forgot himself that he ate ginger snaps one after another.....

And we continued on our way. Then began the worse roads I have ever motored over. We were in the sand hills. For 40 miles we wound in and out, and ploughed thru the sand, or blindly fol-

lowed wagon trails that forked off in every direction over miles and miles of unbroken prairies with never a sign or a guide to direct us; we were 40 miles from a railroad, no towns, and only rarely a homesteader's sod shack—and then the only direction we could get was to "kinda-keep-to-the-north." We did. But the Lord only knows how we ever reached Ainsworth. Suddenly its welcome lights loomed up ahead of us as we climbed a bluff. We arrived at seven o'clock. We were all in! We put up at the hotel, had supper, and went to bed. Thus ended the Seventh Day of the Thousand Mile Motor Trip some 322 miles from Home.

Oct. 22. Sunday: Ainsworth, Nebr. "At the Front." The Sand Hills. Hotel Anderson. Spent a very quiet day in-doors, reading, writing, and sleeping. The Man and the Dog were away to the lakes to hunt all day. Returned about dark with a nice bunch of ducks. It is snowing tonight, but I am so happy over the Nebraska victory over Oregon that I do not care!¹¹ So ended the Eighth Day of the Thousand Mile Motor Trip.

Oct. 23. The morning dawned a fine "duck day"—cold and a light snow. The Man and the Dog were away to the lakes early to spend the day, again. I sent off a bunch of post-cards and had a long walk before dinner. This afternoon

I got my journal up-to-date. I have not minded being alone. The Man will have such a glorious hunt, for shooting is fine here in the sand hills. To bring in forty or fifty ducks is not unusual. We are to have a fine duck dinner if Edward gets home in time. This is our last day here. We plan to motor on to-morrow—to begin the homeward way. We have seen lots of country and hope to see some more. We can't expect good roads but we can expect some more "experiences." The afternoon wanes: so ends the Ninth Day of the Thousand Mile Motor Trip.

Oct. 24. Homeward bound. We left the burg of Ainsworth about nine o'clock in a slushy, warm snow storm and motored 80 miles over almost impassable roads to O'Neill.

Much of the time we could not make more than five miles an hour, the roads were so fearfully tired. Night came early and at dusk we were glad to stop. We were most unfortunate in our hotel; put up in an impossible place. It was an awful day to try to travel. This was the Tenth Day of the Thousand Mile Motor Trip. Ye-gods!

Oct. 25. En route by slow degrees. Neligh, Nebr. "The Nehoco." We left O'Neill early and hit the dreadful roads with light hearts—but they are always heavy by night! We had made about 50

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"Setting out for home from Ainsworth after October snowstorm."



"Pretty bad, but beats staying at home."



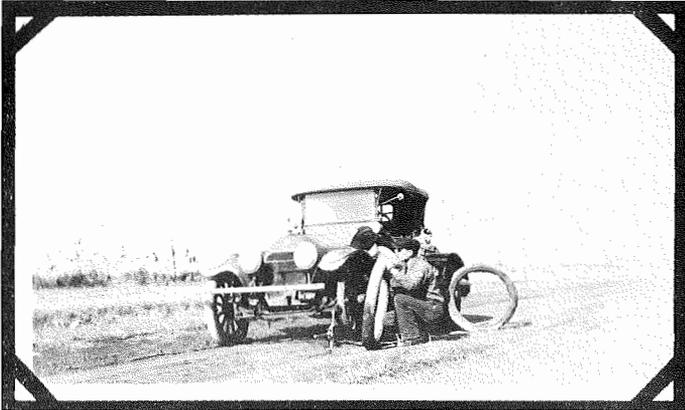
"Here I shed a few weak tears!"

miles and were anxious to get to Neligh for dinner, when we turned in on [a] meadow road. We struck a sandy place—goodnight! The car went down! Edward worked and worked. We would perhaps be there yet if three ranchmen and a good team had not pulled us out.

Nearly five o'clock and so tired we could hardly move and no dinner! Was so glad to reach this village. And never have we appreciated more fully a good hotel, hot water, and supper..... Then a pleasant surprise, too. I recalled that Grace Wattles lives here. Edward called

her up, and she and her father spent the evening here at the hotel with us. WE enjoyed them so much. Grace will be married soon..... And the Eleventh Day of the Thousand Mile Motor Trip has passed.

A Thousand Mile Motor Trip



"More trouble."



"Compensation."

Oct. 26. Columbus, Nebraska, Thurston Hotel. Beloved Day of my heart. It has been a radiant autumn day, quiet and golden. And we have remembered all day that it has been our "Day"—the Man and I. Please God, give us many together.¹²

We left Neligh about eight o'clock; but I could not feel light hearted. We found the roads some better and were barely hitting the miles off, when without a moment's notice we slide off a high grade into a ditch beside a bridge. It took two Fords and a squad of men to drag the car out.

Then we went on our way. Calamities are not even interesting any more! We had dinner at Albion. From there on the roads were very much better. We were annoyed most of the afternoon with the radiator boiling, but we made Columbus as the sun was setting. We are so glad to-night for the miles behind us. One more day and will we be home? We do hope so. So the Twelveth Day of the Thousand Mile Motor Trip ends.

Oct. 27. The last lap! We left Columbus this morning with high hopes. We made

the last seventy-five miles of the trip without further mishap, other than a blow-out—long expected—and the discovery that Edward had left his coat at Columbus.

We had dinner at Seward and arrived Home about four o'clock. Found all O.K. here. So end[s] the Thirteenth Day and the Thousand Mile Motor Trip. We traveled about 800—eight hundred miles. We had seen a lot of country; had enough new experiences to suit anyone. But like little Pollyanna we are Glad: the Buick is battle-scared; we are motor veterans!!!

Notes

¹ John A. Jakle, *The Tourist: Travel in Twentieth Century North America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), xi.

² Ibid.

³ Sara Mullin Baldwin, ed., *Who's Who in Lincoln: Biographical Sketches of Men and Women of Achievement* (Lincoln: Robert M. Baldwin, 1928), 96.

⁴ *Polk's Lincoln City Directory, 1925* (Kansas City: R. L. Polk and Co., 1925), 53.

⁵ The 1910 *Cornhusker Yearbook* lists Maggie May Gehrke as a member of the Y.W.C.A., English Club, and *Cornhusker* staff.

⁶ "We were turning our faces to the trail back, laden with unnecessary navajos, moccasins, and souvenir spoons as usual!", 1925. *Colorado: Mesa Verde National Park*, journal of Margaret M. Gehrke, 90; "I wrote endless cards telling friends what an enviable time we were having," *A 7,000 Mile Motor Trip West, Crater and Rainier*, journal of Margaret M. Gehrke, 44, both Margaret M. and Edward Gehrke Collection, RGO849, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln (hereafter Gehrke Collection).

⁷ "To bed early, but not to sleep: the long unknown path of 'home-life' stretching away in the darkness — a trail I have found more difficult than climbing peaks." *A 7,000 Mile Motor Trip West, Crater and Rainier*, journal of Margaret M. Gehrke, 96, Gehrke Collection.

⁸ Pike was the Gehrkes' dog. On every trip the Gehrkes were accompanied by at least one dog.

⁹ This reference to President Woodrow Wilson is possibly a political comment on Wilson's hesitation at involving the United States in World War I.

¹⁰ Charles Evans Hughes, former New York governor and U.S. Supreme Court Justice, was the Republican nominee for president in 1916.

¹¹ Nebraska defeated the "Aggies" of Oregon Agricultural College at Portland by a score of 17-7, in what the 1917 *Cornhusker* yearbook termed, "the first . . . long trip to be made by a Nebraska football team."

¹² This was the Gehrkes' eleventh anniversary.