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10,000 MILES OF HITCH-HIKING

By EDWARD M. SEVCIK, '31

EDITOR'S NOTE.—*Mr. Sevcik, who graduated in Architecture, is a former editor of the Ohio State Engineer.*

STRANDED on the desert. That was my plight. I had no water, and the roof of my mouth was dry and parched. The merciless sun scorched my back and the glassy alkali waste seared my eyeballs. My legs seemed to be filled with lead. They reminded me of the time at Ohio State when, badly out of condition, I had run in a cross-country race. In the distance were the Uintah Mountains, grim, gray, forbidding. Between lay a rolling country, bare except for scattered clumps of sagebrush. Even the sagebrush had to fight to exist on this alkali waste. There was no movement of life to break the silence. To my right lay a couple of bleached skeletons of cattle that had died of thirst. For a long time I had wanted to see a real desert. Now that I had had a taste of it, I was willing to pass on to the next scene, but that was not to be. Vaguely I wondered how far it was to the next town.

Half-forgotten tales of whole parties that had died of thirst on the desert, came before me again. I remembered the story another hitch-hiker had told me. His buddy, becoming stranded on the Mohave Desert, had plodded on for two days without water. The heat and sand had blackened and swollen his tongue so that he could hardly talk. When at last he came to a desert station and asked for a drink of water, the shrill-voiced shrew in charge informed him that the water was for sale. He tried to beg a drink, for he was broke, but the shrew screamed, "No! We have to pay for this water. Do you think we have nothing to do but furnish you bums with water?" Similar stories, flashed before my mind's eye, made me wonder if the desert was always so hard and cruel and terrible.

My map said 32 more miles to the next town, so I plodded on, but the Providence that watches over fools and hitch-hikers smiled and presently a turn in the road brought a desert station into full view. It was the first shady spot on the desert.

I had started from Cleveland, about three weeks before, with enough money to pay for my food and lodging, and with the intention of hitch-hiking my way around the country. The route I laid out took me to Detroit, Chicago, Milwaukee, Omaha, Cheyenne, Denver, Pike's Peak, Salt Lake City, Yellowstone National Park, Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Grand Canyon, Santa Fe, Kansas City, and St. Louis. Coming in contact with people of all classes, from all parts of the country, made the trip worthwhile from an educational point alone. Each native had something to contribute, something that was, usually, not part of written records. I hobnobbed with tramps and merchant princes, thieves and officers of the law, poor men and millionaires (two of them); scholars and the unschooled; preachers and pugilists; religious fanatics and atheists, people from all walks of life.

I had started in the middle of July from my home in Cleveland. I took a street car to the city outskirts, where my first lift was with a colored postman. Two more lifts brought me to Toledo. The next day I moved on to Detroit, and then to Chicago. I left Detroit about 8.30 A. M. and got several short lifts, but at 1 P. M. I was only 56 miles from Detroit and Chicago was more than 240 miles away. The Detroit-Chicago road is a high-speed highway and so it is very hard to get a lift on it. All afternoon I walked, developing three big blisters on each foot, but then when the shadows began to lengthen, I was picked up by three Negroes in a Reo speed-wagon who said they were going to Chicago. They were rather hard-looking, and I knew we would have to drive all night to get there, but I clambered into the back and made myself comfortable. Later we stopped for sandwiches and I paid the bill.

We got to Chicago about 3:30 A. M. The next day, while strolling around, I met an old high-school classmate whom I had not seen for eight years. I certainly was glad to see him. He had worked for a while, gone to Case School for a period, and then studied for the ministry for three years. Just recently he had left that and was then getting ready to go home, where he had not been for four years. (He was practically penniless then.)

From Chicago I took the boat to Milwaukee, for I figured it would be practically impossible to get any lifts out of a city of Chicago's size and reputation. From there, on to Madison, through Iowa, to Omaha and to Lincoln, Nebraska. The lift into Lincoln was with a preacher who had two sons training for the ministry. In Lincoln I examined the Nebraska State Capitol, a monumental work that is almost finished. It is a fine-looking building on the outside and even better inside with its high vaulted ceilings. The ceilings are barrel vaults with penetrations. The mosaic pictures in the ceiling are beautiful. They are really of tile, with high coloring, depicting the life of the present age showing everything from a basketball player to a woman hoeing a garden.

As I was starting out of Lincoln, a young fellow in a Ford roadster hailed me. When I told him I was going to Denver, he said he was going the same way. He asked if I would be willing to pay for half of the gas and oil. I said "yes," and we started out. The next day at noon we parted at Ogallala, Nebraska. I had not walked more than a hundred feet when I was hailed by a fellow parked by the curb. As I got settled in the car, he said, "I ought to tell you first that this is a stolen car." I noticed the broken transmission lock, and saw how easily I could be framed if we were caught. "However," he continued after a pause, "you need not worry, for I was not the thief. I'm working for the insurance company and taking the car back to its owner." We drove to Cheyenne, about

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175 miles. There I noticed many jobless men. The tough section of town was filled with hard-boiled cowboys, Indians and half-breeds.

The next day, after four miles of walking, I was picked up by a party of tourists from New Jersey. There was an elderly lady, Mrs. Norris, driving. Beside her was a boy of 14, Franklin Koehler, and in the back was a young man of 29, Edward Ricketts. None of the three were related. They were all good friends back home and had decided to go West. We went to Denver and then to Colorado Springs, where we drove to the top of Pike's Peak and visited the Garden of the Gods, a beautiful place. The next day I started for Salt Lake City. It took me a week to get there, but it was a momentous week. My route took me over the rockiest part of the Rocky Mountains, on roads that were built on cliffs with sheer drops of one thousand feet and more, and through some of the highest mountain passes on the continent. I averaged less than one hundred miles a day. At Glenwood, Colorado, I stopped long enough to swim in the largest natural hot springs pool in the world. Then on to Utah where I was stranded in the desert and finally picked up by a woman who was driving to Salt Lake City. She was in a hurry to get there. A few miles farther we picked up a fellow who wore no coat, had a short-sleeved shirt, and carried no baggage. He had a two-weeks' growth of beard. We drove to the next town, about 30 miles, where the woman had intended to stay for the night, but she said if one of us would drive, she would just as soon keep on going. After a while the other fellow took the wheel while she slept in the rear seat. We drove until 4 A. M. when we went into a deep ditch and crashed into the side

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of the mountain in such fashion that only a truck could pull us loose. We could do nothing so we slept till dawn, when a truck pulled us out. Before that time we had gone into the ditch but had managed to get out under our own power. After we were pulled out we continued on the wet, slippery, dirt road in that mountain gorge. What a road! The truck driver who had pulled us out said it had taken him all night to go 10 miles. We had to go in first most of the time, and then we were sliding all over the road. Most of the time my heart was up in my throat, because when a car goes off a mountain road on the far side, it goes straight down. We went into the ditch again and were pulled out by another truck. Then the woman drove again. We went into the ditch twice more but came out on our own power. The road was deceptive because the ditch, on the inside, was about two feet deep and was filled with dirt and sand so that it was level with the road. Later we went off the road again, but this time on the cliff side. The rear wheel was right on the edge of the precipice, and the front wheel was over, but had caught on a small projecting slab of stone that was only a couple of inches below the road. Whew! That was a close shave. The cliff was about 80 feet high and then sloped at about 70 degrees to the river, which was a raging torrent, swelled by the mountain streams.

I came as close to death as I ever expect to get—and live to tell the story. We finally managed to get to Salt Lake City in one piece. From there I went to Yellowstone Park and then through those ungodly Montana Hills, and over the continental divide again, to Seattle.

From there, down through Oregon and the redwood forests of California to San Francisco. Then I took the hot inland route to Los Angeles, where I got ready to start on the last leg of the trip. From there I crossed the Mohave Desert and then the painted desert in Arizona, stopping off at the Grand Canyon for a while. Then from there into the historic New Mexico country, up into Colorado again and back home.
