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Bert Mayse, the grandfather, claimed he had a neighbor once who owned a Model T Ford that understood commands. Old man Bert said every morning, winter or summer, the car knew to start before the owner struck the fender with the crank.

Milk cows are that way about kicking over buckets. Lots of those old half-broke ranch Jerseys used to know they better quit the funny stuff, once the milk maid or milk master armed her or him self with a cedar stay or a broken windmill rod. Wonder there weren't more of those rank, part-gentle old sisters that lacked a horn on one side than there were on the ranches.

The first place Bert's theory came up again was at a car rental place at Jacksonville, Florida. The agency was unique. They must have had a net going to the wrecking yards to catch all the jitneys that still checked in on their own momentum.

Business peaked over the holidays. Texas flights arrived too late to rent anything decent. Credit cards were just becoming acceptable; travelers' checks were common exchange. You might remember, travel expense ... Well, frugal comes to mind.

The purpose for a rental car then was to see the Atlantic Coast in segments, like flying to Jacksonville to

go south down the Florida coast by Cape Canaveral, or taking off up north to the islands off Georgia.

I was used to ranch vehicles, and pumping the gas pedal to start came natural. Who cared about the burns in the seat, or a gear shift knob that came off? The thing different about the cars was that if you turned one of those heaps in at a drop-off far away, the car steered differently going in the place – was harder to park.

All right, stop right here. Please go back to the top where Bert said he knew about a Model T that understood commands. Are you going to give Bert a better break than a scribe renting a catch-all second-hand car that is as much a smoker's lounge as it is meant to drive?

This says the car became hard to steer at a strange place. Gosh-a-mighty, this is not a true or false game. Old man Bert had his own real-life stories. When Bert billed Tom Woods ahead for his ranch's groceries one fall, ol' man Tom charged four boxes of .30-30 shells at the hardware store and proceeded to shoot a hole in all the molasses buckets on the shelves, using the south wall of Mayse grocery as a backstop.

Mertzson never had another marksman equal to Tom Woods centered on a molasses bucket. We were a long time understanding the gear pedals on a Model T, but didn't have

to write on the blackboard to not to bother ol' man Woods living up behind his son's house.

The only agency open in downtown Tucson, Arizona the day after Christmas rolled out a white car for me snug enough to fit inside your motel cabin at night. Gave you the feeling cars across the intersection aimed at running over you. The width felt like you needed a bike rack instead of a parking place.

A car is necessary in Tucson. The African Desert Museum and the Saguaro National Park are miles from town. Also, mountain roads reach 26 miles to the top. One warning: neither the hotels or the car rental agencies provide maps accurate enough to find city hall or the courthouse, much less museums and national parks.

This is the part where the pilot (me) failed, plus the navigator (me) flunked all the wrong turns and ended up every time on Valencia or Campbell street leading to the airport. It didn't matter what exit or what light, that little white booger veered toward the airport.

May be funny to you sitting by the fireplace at home, but to a poor wretch off away from his homeland, lonely as a desert tortoise, his old eyes dimmed by hard years, his hearing gone from aircraft blast, this was plenty serious

business to keep coming to the sign that said the airport entrance was one kilometer ahead.

Something else you need to know; don't fall for the idea you are going to outsmart a rental contract. Those little cowboys aren't amateurs at adding charges. If all the insurance paid or assigned to car agencies became collectible at once on one weekend at the country's airports, the skies around such money pots as Hartford, Connecticut would darken in an eclipse. Forget the idea you can rent for a week and check in early to avoid a daily rate. Tight airline schedules don't allow for counter-negotiation at a car rental booth.

Mr. Mayse pointed at the garage once where the man stored the perceptive Model T. But he never told us how he cleaned up all that molasses.