

Watch Out, Lady Driver!

“Dad! Dad! Can I drive home from church today?” was the question I asked my father every Sunday. I was eleven years old and I could easily reach the gas and brake pedals of the 1957 automatic Chevrolet Impala. Whenever Dad said yes, I would proudly sit in the driver’s seat, start the car, adjust the radio, ease on to the highway, and drive the 3 miles home. When you live on a farm, everyone in the family learns to drive at an early age.

An Allis-Chambers tractor with a stick shift was the first tractor I learned to operate. Around the farm I would drive the tractor up and down the gravel roads going from field to field, wherever Dad needed me to go. In the summer, I would drive that same tractor pulling a hay baler and a hay wagon. The third vehicle I learned to drive was Dad’s pick-up truck. That was harder; it had a stick shift on the floor. Dad explained that the tractor and the truck had the same diagram for shifting. Soon I was driving the truck out to feed cattle, deliver seed corn during planting season, and doing errands around the farm.

A year later while sitting at breakfast, Mom informed me she would be busy after school and wouldn’t have time to take me to my weekly piano lesson. Looking confused, I asked, “Am I going to miss my piano lesson this week?” Calmly she told me I could drive the car, using the back roads, to get to my piano lesson. Really? I was shocked! After school, I found the money, she had left for my lesson, on the table. The car keys were always in the car. Carefully I drove the four miles to my piano teacher’s house. It was a surprise to Mrs. Swanson when I drove in the driveway and got out of the car. It soon became a habit to drive the eight-mile round trip for my weekly piano lesson. Wow, what freedom for a twelve-year-old!

June 26th was a special day. I was turning fourteen years old and eligible for my drivers’ learners permit. Dad drove me to town to the DMV where he helped me fill out the application. In a short time, I left the DMV with my learners’ permit. Wow, it was a very empowering holding the learners permit! Nothing much changed though as I continued to drive everywhere; around the farm, to church, and to the neighbors. I even helped drive during family vacations.

One Saturday morning my Dad asked me to drive to the John Deere dealership in Clarinda to get a part for the tractor. He explained that it would save time if I drove to the shop to get the new part while he took the broken part off the tractor. He made a phone call to the salesman at the John Deere store and said he was sending his daughter to pick up the necessary part. Dad had two rules: don’t speed and try to stay off the state highways. Clarinda was fifteen miles from the farm, and I assured Dad I could handle this job. Jumping in the car, I drove to town. When I pulled up in front of the dealership the salesman did a double take as a fourteen-year old girl got out of the car and walked into the store. He kindly loaded the new tractor part into the trunk of the car, and I headed back to the farm. After a while, no one looked twice when I drove to town. The salesmen at the John Deere or Allis-Chambers stores soon recognized me

when I walked in the shops. I became a valuable helper to my Dad, running these important errands.

During my sophomore year in high school, I was required to take one semester of Drivers Education. Considering I had been driving since I was eleven, I didn't understand why I needed to take this class. The teacher said it was the law if I wanted my driver's license. After doing the necessary class work for the first six weeks, it was time to get behind the wheel. One Friday, it was my turn to drive. The teacher told us we were going to the county courthouse in Clarinda to drop off some school papers for the superintendent. It was a 25-mile one-way trip. The teacher looked at me and asked, 'Do you think you can get us to the courthouse and keep the car under the speed limit?' You see, I had already gained the reputation for having a 'lead foot' on the gas pedal. I drove safely to Clarinda and parked the car in front of the county courthouse.

On the day of my 16th birthday, the only present I wanted was my driver's license. Dad and I drove to town and we both had paperwork to fill out. After I had passed the written test, it was time for the driving test. I wasn't too worried; I had had lots of practice. The driving test was easy for me. Aced it! Following the driving test, it took ten more minutes before I walked out of the office with my very first legal driver's license. Beaming, I drove Dad home, legally.

Soon, it became apparent that I would need my own car. My first driver's license and my first new, used car; a '67 Chevy Impala with a 350 engine! Life was good for sixteen-year-old farm girl! Well, it was good until I got my first speeding ticket driving into town. Seventy-five in a sixty-five mile per hour speed zone. The nice policeman warned me to slow down and then handed me a speeding ticket. Needless to say, it wasn't my last speeding ticket. Some lessons just take longer to learn.