

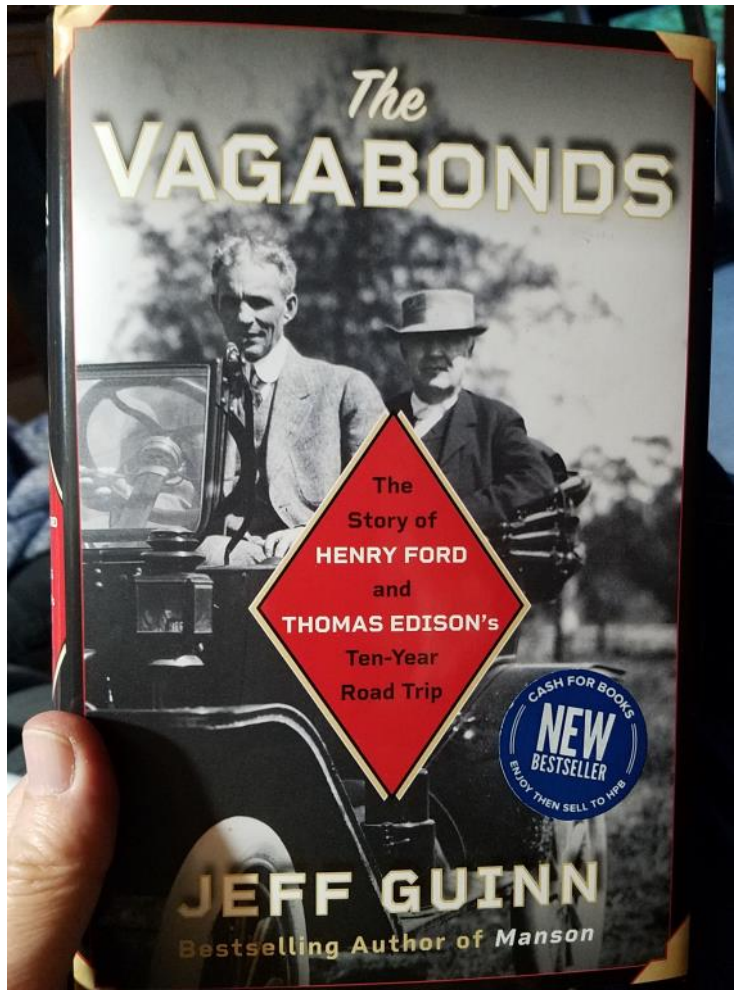
## My Book Report "The Vagabonds"

By Bill Barker

Wow. It's been a long time since I read a book that "hooked" me from cover to cover. This book was fascinating to me from the very beginning. The author, Jeff Guinn, has a very smart way of telling a story. His method to cover 10 years of vacations by America's royalty was effective and captivating. I truly didn't want it to end.

Now the focus of this novel is primarily about four business giants just after the turn of the century - Tomas Edison, Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone and John Burroughs who self-named themselves as "The Vagabonds". Together they interwove their ideas, vacations, families and business ventures during numerous road trips from 1914 to 1924. So much happened in this timeframe. World War I. Woman's vote. Prohibition. And most of all, the public's burgeoning love affair with the automobile took hold over the horse and buggy.

As I read this story, I can't help but wonder whether these four celebrities got together each year for a vacation or for a thinly-veiled media opportunity. Whether by purpose or happenstance it accomplished both reasonably well. Since Thomas Edison has always been my most favorite hero in American history, I was surprised to learn as much about him as I did in reading this book. I thought that I knew him better than most, but I discovered a truly wonderful side of him that was largely under-reported in previous biographies. A well-rounded description of a person requires telling of their accomplishments, business ventures and, as I've discovered, their relaxation activities.



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### Tip for Spring

After sitting all winter, it's a good idea to check your water, oil and air in your car. But often overlooked is the water level in the battery. Before you run the engine too much and have the generator charging the battery, make sure that the water level is at the bottom of the filler tubes.

## “The Vagabonds”

While the vacation trips were eagerly described in newspapers across the county as unplanned forays into wilderness areas while sleeping in tents and eating over camp fires (commonly known as roughing it), they were anything but. Ford had a caravan of two additional trucks following them at all times. One included his personal chef and all of the food supplies that they would need for each trip. The other contained tents and cots along with a few workers who were responsible for setting them up at each stop. Included in these woody overnights were large batteries and electric lights provided by Thomas Edison. In today's terminology we might have called it "glamping".

In the early years, there were few, if any, government regulations regarding automobiles. One common disparity was that some manufacturers put the steering wheel on the right side of the car, while others preferred the left. The only common understanding was that cars would **drive** on the right side of the road. Henry Ford reasoned that since nearly all drivers



were male and the female passenger would not want to step into mud when exiting a vehicle, he demanded that his Model T's have the steering wheel on the left side. Then a woman exiting a car on a muddy street could usually step out directly onto a wooden sidewalk, thereby saving her shoes from being soiled.

On some of these “vacation” trips, each person was accompanied by their wife. As you might imagine, this added a different element to the entire adventure. And sometimes, as a result it changed future plans. You'll have to read the book to fully understand. But in any case, don't be surprised. Wives were wives, even back then.

Another tidbit in this book explained why Henry demanded that all Model T's be painted black. Simply put, black paint dried faster than any other colored paint. The faster the paint dried, the more cars he could build. Time was money.

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## “The Vagabonds”



One thing that I discovered in reading this book is that Thomas Edison was significantly more "famous" than either of his traveling mates. This was well documented during their joint visit to San Francisco and San Diego when they attended the Panama-Pacific Exposition, which celebrated the completion of the Panama Canal. His audiences at each location were substantially larger than either of his companions, Henry Ford or Harvey Firestone. While Edison almost never gave speeches, he couldn't avoid shaking the hands of thousands of adoring fans on this trip.

Prior to these trips by automobile the average American

Family covered approximately 12 miles per day on similar trips in a horse and buggy. This was a comfortable distance which allowed them to return to the starting homestead the same day. But with the fabulous Model T, enterprising families (and Henry Ford), would plan their trips to cover 90 to 100 miles per day. This allowed folks to greatly expand their explorations and venture as far as the rough roads would allow. As people drove these greater distances there was an increasing need for places to spend the night. Many enterprising folks began to offer overnight accommodations and meals in places called "Motor Hotels". In later years these would be called "motels".

In 1988 when I visited the Henry Ford Museum (The Edison Institute) in Michigan, I didn't understand why there was so much on display about Thomas Edison. Now I do. It was almost a love affair. This is definitely a story worthy to be told in a well written book. And now it has been.

*Note: This hardback book (List: \$28) can be found for between \$8 and \$10 by searching Google.*