



PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

# VOLVO DIESEL ODYSSEY

*Our Editor-at-Large  
runs on across country*

BY HENRY N. MANNEY III

**I**N THESE DAYS of instant food, instant sex, and instant travel I am somewhat of an anomaly. A childhood filled with covering long distances on trains, peeping out the Pullman window at first light and not budging till night fell, instilled a love for moving landscape that has never waned. Early air travel in Ford Tri-motors was fun too as they flew pretty close to the ground but now commercial airlines mean only sullen female security guards, lousy food, and 2-hour waltzes with thunderheads over JFK. Consequently, I would much rather take a week driving across the US of A than five hours in the plastic arms of Ptomaine Air Transport, Inc. Certain members of the staff, all of whom can drive I think, cry with boggled eyes All That Way At 55 Mph? Who Has The Time? All right, so you miss *Mork & Mindy* but also find out that there are people, real live ones, between New York and Los Angeles. Plus clean air.

So a chance to drive a Volvo Diesel across the country was not to be passed up, even if it involved a ghastly flight and a fiendishly expensive hotel at the other end. At least I got to have breakfast in the Carnegie Deli! Anyway, when Volvo's Bob Austin picked me up I asked what was a Volvo Diesel to which he replied a Volvo with a diesel in it, which made sense enough. Did it have the 5.4-liter V-8 truck engine? (no) Did it have that 2800-lb 120 x 380-mm Bolinder single with flywheels like manhole covers and a 48 in. prop, used in fishing boats? (no) Aw, you're no fun any more. What it did have was a Volkswagen "transporter engine" which gave me visions of a cast iron monstrosity needing 80 lb in the front tires to hold the bumper off the pavement. Made by Audi according to Volvo although the engine does have VW writ large on the side (Audi sounds more dignified), the power-plant turned out to be a 2.4-liter inline-6 with several alloy bits looking very GP. It is quite a nice engine, much quieter than most.

After ye nice Olde American Lunch in ye Olde American House where some Olde American Spye was hung during the revolution, I set forth into the teeth of my own private Olde American Heade Wynde which greets me everywhere I go. It was a simple matter, easily solvable by calculus professors, to find my way onto the nearest Interstate which goes to Harrisburg, I think, and then after a while (distance goes v slowly on those Eastern States maps) turned up on yet another Interstate in the direction of Binghamton and eventually Syracuse. The roads in those parts are not only concrete, thus fearfully bumpy in the joints, but also hammered into submission by semis of which there are an inordinate number. Consequently, it was almost all too plain that the Volvo's suspension had been stiffened up to Rally Stage 2 standards (like my own Volvo) with a fat anti-roll bar or two, what felt like Konis and gigantic Michelin ZXs. All of which is just my

cup of tea. At any rate, the Interstate featured a lot of long uphill drags and ditto construction which meant, at one point, that we were all stuck on a 4-mile grade (surface like the Negev Desert) behind a string of 18-wheelers. As the engine was still pretty new at that point, it was a trifle unhappy about pulling even normal 4th and as the 18-wheelers turned to multiples thereof, we were down to low gear which is another bit of the transporter left in, apparently, as low is a real stump puller. Actually 1st can be wound pretty tall but, as with all diesels, highish rpm results in a lot of racket. I soon found that it liked being short-shifted up through the gears without too much throttle, such tactics resulting in reasonable enough acceleration (after getting into 3rd anyway) as the final drive seems to be quite low without making much more noise than a normal gasoline 4-cylinder Volvo does. Overdrive of course is pretty high and while it was flat at first, it finally got so it would pull decently down to 35 mph or so without making roiley noises down below.

Eventually I got shed of the Peterbilts and carried on into the gathering dusk, my headwind faithful as ever switching from SW to NE as I did the same. The original plan was to turn left at Binghamton and wander up through Watkins Glen and the lovely lake country but (a) it was getting dark (b) beginning to snow on the high ground (c) the Volvo, although possessed of a lovely heater, was liable to be much happier on the motorway where it could pull its high od than steering around the back doubles. So it was straight up to Cortland, New York and a well known motel chain, where my request for a ground floor room was turned down in spite of that floor being (and remaining) half full; instead I got a room at the back next to the idling Kenworth which went on all night. The meal we don't talk about, replete with flowery adjectives on the menu for a "buffet," i.e., serve yourself like the Army from semi-cold food. So poo to them.

After a brief errand to Spencerport near Rochester, enjoying the typical spring day of 40 degrees, 30 knots off the lake and buds barely showing on the trees, it was westward along the Interstate (dug up in spots) which is a toll road in fits and starts to an AAA-recommended motel at Austinburg, Ohio. Will give that a miss in the future as well. Arose betimes and proceeded at good pace until Cleveland where apparently everything is dug up; a combination of confusing road signs and a new AAA map with out-of-date information meant that I had to go round by Robin Hood's Barn to clear the city and get onto the infamous Ohio Turnpike almost at Akron. Road surfaces on the Ohio t.p.s are pretty vile anyway, due to the hard winters and ravages of big semis on the concrete paving, and furthermore cops abound in great numbers. If it hadn't been for a reluctance to go the other route through Indy and the great gefuffle around Kansas City once again, I would have avoided much more of the same all the way out through Nebraska. However, it was rather nice through Indiana (v pretty), Illinois, etc as I got parts of four different baseball games on the radio which is what traveling is all about. Fortunately the radio is the "cooking" model which ensures that one can find a station without calling in a nonexistent passenger. Features of the motorway are service stops at 35-mile intervals approx but the food is both pricey and poor. A peculiarity of the region I think is that any burger or sandwich etc is just a bit of whatever meat you like between two naked bits of bread. No butter, no mayo, no lettuce, no tomato, no nothing. Also along there I found the only evidence of fuel shortages with 2 out of 4 diesel pumps "broken" and a sign at one place "gas purchases limited to \$8" which on most cars would just get you to the next service area. Not to mention the numerous RVs about.

Anyway, clear of Chicago the land got considerably less urbanized and it seemed to take ages to get to the Iowa border. Then another age to get to West Branch, Iowa (birthplace of Herbert Hoover), picked because there was an awful lot of traffic running west on Friday night and any college town was likely to have a basketball game or something and thus full motels. I like to stay out in the sticks anyway as both food and motel tend to be much cheaper. The chances that you are going to find any

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rewarding gastronomic experience in a big town anyway are pretty slim . . . the sign Continental Cooking may mean that the chef used to work for Continental Trailways . . . so that truck stops and local cafes can sustain life. The local cafe in West Branch is NOT recommended, the truck stop caff is, and the motel had, apparently, an SM convention on the floor above plus an insatiable honeymoon couple next door.

Saturday was another long day going bump-te-bump-te-bump over asphalted joints in the concrete motorway and playing games with the semis. They all know where the cops are and you can suck draft when they go fast (hook on behind the last one of a bunch, as they tend to travel in squads) and go slowly when they go slowly. Western Iowa contains a lot of ups and downs and the Volvo, which was getting a little looser by this time, could pull them uphill and then the rumbling crocodile would pass going down. All very polite, especially if you blink the lights when it is safe for them to come in whereupon they give back a lot of blinking. Passes the time. The rest of the day was spent trying to get ball games or just thinking about the Volvo. With all windows rolled up it is a *very* quiet car in od up to about an indicated 58 mph. Up around 60 or so it seemed to get the typical Volvo tuned resonance (their exhaust systems must be made by a trombone manufacturer) plus a certain amount of wow from od or back axle. I stuck pretty close to the legal limit although, as mentioned before, the engine is a *revver*. Being legal was no great strain as Volvos are *v* comfy, the seats alone being worth the price on long trips, but for some obscure reason this model was awfully windy. Opening the driver's window even a crack produced a lot of whistling while more opening produced wind roar and drafts. Interior ventilation is more than adequate but some folks like a window open. Because of hay fever, I ran some distance on the *a/c* and while it has no discernible effect on the performance nor added any vibration, it is not adequate I think for really hot climates.

So we rolled out by the Platte in Nebraska along the Emigrants' way; Gawdamighty what a long passage today let alone during prairie schooner times. Eventually, being Saturday night, we stopped at North Platte, Nebraska in a funny little motel which was clean enough and had a pretty good restaurant across the street. On long trips with long days, the tendency is to stop in Holiday Inns, Ho Jos or similar where you know about the cleanliness, nice bathrooms etc (also light bulbs are becoming steadily dimmer) and a passable restaurant in the building which can be put on the bill. After covering 500+ miles nobody likes to schlep out again to the Pawnee Cafe which may be okay but more often dreary. Jack the Bear once said that all the cafes in the Middle Country were run by widows whose husbands had died from indigestion. Local coffee stops they may be and centers of village society but except in rare cases the restaurants recommended by motel ladies are either The Greek's Steak House with \$11.95 shoe soles and gas flares or else Mom's. Getting off the Interstate a few miles to the good-looking AAA recommended motel (Motor Inns always want to put you upstairs or inside) can save anywhere up to \$100 even if you have to take your chances with Mom's. Surprisingly enough, most Skelly or Husky truck stops have pretty passable restaurants and normally have diesel pumps for cars as well, as do most of their "normal" stations. Here they will act like an old-fashioned service station, wiping the screen etc and being ready to bandy conversation just like the folks in the Union 76 commercials. Generally speaking, fuel is cheaper in these places than chez Name Brands and, in fact, excepting in Arizona Indian Country, cheaper everywhere than

in California. What a ripoff it is in California. Anyway, getting diesel fuel was no problem provided one planned ahead a little and, for the nervous, one of those books put out by diesel carmakers won't hurt.

We left North Platte with regret as the Saturday night mating customs of roaring up and down the same piece of road outside the motel are really interesting. Morning conversations in the caff (hunting, work, my old lady) are also something you won't get in the Ho Jo, as well as the truckers' backchat and country music in the evening. Also my record for a crying baby being brought (lugged, actually) into every restaurant I attend remains unbroken. All these caffs need is a jar full of breadsticks as 99 percent of the kids are tired and need something to chew upon. Anyway, it was a short day to Boulder so we went out near Ogallala to see if those Mormon wagon tracks in the side of a hill could be found. No luck, so it was west on the U.S. 163, I think, (*v* peaceful and like old times) and then down through a succession of small railroad towns like Sterling (still infested with traffic lights and cops dating from before the parallel Interstate was put through. They must be hungry. With New Joisey plates and traveling at 5 mph under the limit, I was at one point stalked by two cop cars. Ha!) Anyway, it was then easily into Boulder and another of those sealed-up motels where the only air entering comes through a mechanism sounding like a wind tunnel. As there was time to spare, I went up into the Mts behind Boulder where it gets *v* steep *v* rapidly and ran into the only real disadvantage of this particular car. At anything much over 5000 ft there isn't much power and less torque; any application of more throttle results in just a lot of row and plumes of black smoke, even though the engine was pretty well loosened up by this time. During this excursion I was passed by a gent in an Audi 5000 diesel which seemed to have a bit more performance and much less of the Puffing-Billy syndrome; later on he turned up at the same motel in Boulder and we had an interesting conversation. He was a traveling salesman from Salt Lake and, according to him, averaged 37 or so mpg while putting 40,000 on the car since new. Volvo had said that "my" car would sell in about the same range as the V-6 gas model *c'est à dire* around 13 thou, quite advantageous in the light of Mercedes-Benz's elevated prices even for the gutless 240D, especially since the Volvo has 4 manual speeds + overdrive. But since his Audi, which of course is both lighter and more slippery, sells in the same bracket it strikes me that Volvo's real competitors are the Audi and Peugeot although I have not driven either one nor have any idea of the specs. The Rabbit D doesn't enter into it as I could pull all of them and how much can you get in the Volvo? Anyway, we got to discussing high altitude performance and he said that his Audi had some sort of automatic rich-lean compensator and didn't fall off too much up top. I don't know if the Volvo has one aside from the automatic temp-controlled cold starter but if so, it wasn't working. In fact the cold-start thing stuck on once at about 4000 ft and I had a devil of a time getting up a moderate rise in 2nd. Anyway, if they expect to sell the Volvo in mountain states they better hurry up with the turbo they are working on, according to *Auto Visie*.

Next day I had an early breakfast with Jim Stranberg (see Vintage reports), watched him and Bob Seiffert take a Bugatti to bits, and then went to Denver Airport to pick up my little wife for company the rest of the journey. She duly arrived, suitcases bulging with food, and then we struggled off up the two 11,000-ft passes between us and Salt Lake. As Interstate 70 is mostly motorway, we played with od (mostly useless on anything but a dead downhill), direct 4th (*v* useful) and 3rd, leaving a dense trail behind us of carcinogenic particles but not having to resort to 2nd anyway although it was a near thing with a semi + a house trailer having a slow race. The Volvo sort of bogs down and you have to

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