



In Remembrance of You

Holley Gene Leffler

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In 1903, long before the paved network of broad interstate highways linked the Atlantic to the Pacific, Holley Gene Leffler's grandfather, Eugene I. Hammond, and his friend Lester L. Whitman chugged across the USA in a Curved Dash Oldsmobile (CDO). The pair left San Francisco on July 6, carrying a letter from the mayor, which they delivered to New York City's mayor on September 18.

The whole trip, which ended in Portland, Maine, took eighty days. The men chugged along for nearly 5,000 miles in the 800 pound, five-horsepower Runabout, battling weather, harsh terrain, rattlesnakes, and mechanical failures, often telegraphing for repair parts to be sent ahead by train.

When they finally arrived in New York, Hammond and Whitman had each lost twenty pounds. The CDO, according to a New York paper, fared better: "The machine, although plastered inches thick with mud, and showing the marks of hard travel, responded to the touch of the driver as though it had just left the factory."

In 1985, riding with others in a trio of vintage CDOs supported by the Oldsmobile Corporation, Leffler takes a figurative trip back in time, making the cross-country automobile trip her grandfather made eighty-two years earlier. Leffler, a costume designer, created the period clothing she wore on the trip. Seated high in the CDO, "dressed as a lady of the 1900s," the years fell away, revealing the landscape as her grandfather would have seen it.

"It seemed a veil lifted, and I went back in time—houses disappearing, vegetation changing—and I began to see things as they appeared at the turn of the century," she writes. Drawing from Whitman's journal, Leffler recounts the 1903 journey, writing as if her grandfather were relaying his adventures.

In a touch of whimsy, Leffler decides that she's actually making her journey a year before her grandfather did, because she is riding in a 1902 auto, built a year before he made his journey. She playfully sends a note back in time giving him advice for his forthcoming trip, and of course, because she has the benefit of hindsight, her prescience astounds her grandfather, who at the time of his historic trip was twenty-three, unmarried, and could only speculate on this future granddaughter who reached back in time to him.

What the book provides is an eclectic blending of Whitman's factual journal entries, Leffler's narrative where she speaks as her grandfather, excerpts from her letter to the past, and her grandfather's imaginary response. While some readers will find the playful "time warp" charming, others may prefer a plain and simple account of the journey, which is fascinating on its own. Photographs, a map, mileage and gas statistics, and newspaper accounts anchor the story in history.

In Remembrance of You details the history of a memorable journey in a fanciful way. It's both interesting and fun.

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