

The half-million-mile car



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As promised, here is the story I told you about last month that will warm your heart. It’s about a man down on his luck, his passion for driving, his dedication to maintenance, his commitment to obtaining a goal and his grateful spirit. We have had the privilege of knowing this man for almost five years, after his car hit 300,000 miles. Sit back, relax, fasten your seatbelt and enjoy this story that Marc so kindly shared with me.

This is a collection of thoughts and stories surrounding my Toyota Camry and how I managed to surpass the half million-mile mark.

My dad was a traveling salesman covering the Dakotas, Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois. I remember him often talking about the miles he accrued and the effort he made to make the car last. Dad always stressed to my two brothers and I how important it was to perform maintenance and change the oil every 3,000 miles.

Dad’s Chevy Impala reached 300,000 miles despite the abuse it took from my brother and I learning to drive and getting in a couple young-driver accidents. He then purchased a Crown Victoria from Brookdale Ford, and I believe that was the only time a dealer regretted selling a car to someone. At the time of purchase, the dealership had a policy stating that if they repaired something on a car purchased from them, the car owner paid for the first repair, but all subsequent repairs were free of charge. Dad managed to accumulate 427,000 miles on his Crown Victoria. When the alternator went out, dad paid for the first alternator, but during the life of the car he got three more alternators replaced free of charge! As I recall, he got two free water pumps, one free air compressor, a couple of mufflers, a power steering pump and, knowing my dad, probably much more—all free of charge. The dealership was never happy to see him drive in—and he always liked to brag that he was the reason the dealership put an end to their free repair policy.

Dad was lucky to be part of such a policy, but he was also a good mentor and a good example, as all three of us boys adhere to what he taught us. And we have benefited from it greatly.

Years ago I was living in Cokato, a small town about 60 miles west of the Cities. I was driving a very nice Ford Explorer with the Eddie Bauer package. I loved that truck and put more than a quarter million miles on it. The one flaw it had was a lousy transmission—it broke three times requiring major expensive repairs. The fourth transmission broke following my post 9/11 job layoff. The layoff resulted in a 20,000 dollars a year pay cut, and life suddenly took a turn for the worse. I ended up declaring bankruptcy to save my house, only to lose it a short year



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later. Fuel prices shot up to almost four dollars per gallon, and the tranny, although driveable, was only yielding five to six miles per gallon. Needless to say, money was more than tight and the truck was destined for the scrapyard.

Well before my layoff, my sister, Denise and her husband had purchased a little blue Camry with approximately 40,000 miles on it. They put almost 50,000 miles on it, and with an expanding family, purchased an additional vehicle. After hearing about my circumstances, they decided to give the Camry to me! I was and still am so grateful for their generosity.

The car had about 87,000 miles on it when I became the owner. It took some adjusting on my part, as I was a dedicated truck guy and being in the car made me feel like my rear end was dragging on the pavement. It was a definite ego setback because the car had half of everything the truck had: 2 wheel drive instead of 4, 4 cylinders instead of 8, 2,000 pounds of car instead of 4,000 pounds of truck. However, beggars can’t be choosers so I managed to get over those issues and feelings. Over the years I have become much more comfortable with the car and enjoyed watching my mileage soar to 30 miles per gallon. The truck mileage, without transmission problems, usually topped out at 17.

The great gas mileage has helped in all the moves I’ve made since owning the Camry. I have used the car to move my household belongings from Cokato, to Lakeville, to Oronoco and to Cannon Falls, where I now live. Moving your belongings in a small car is a study in strategic planning and packing, and a good lesson in patience. It takes a lot of trips and many extra miles to get the job done.

The majority of miles on the Camry have been accrued in Minnesota, with only a couple of excursions into Wisconsin or Illinois. But most have simply come from driving to and from work. For the last 14 years, I have been working at the Minneapolis International Airport where I drive a shuttle bus taking the Delta Airlines flight crew members from their parking lot to the airport and back.

I really do enjoy driving. I installed an aftermarket stereo so that I could plug my phone into the radio, turn on one of my audio books and ignore the rest of

the world for a spell. Leaving for work at 2:30am, the audio books help to get my brain engaged, help me to wake up, and even help to pass the time at work. After my normal 11-hour workday of driving in circles, I will frequently head up to Duluth for dinner, spend a couple hours by Canal Park and then come back home. My doctor is in Elk River, I have driven to St. Cloud to go grocery shopping. I drive to Rochester for my auto repairs/maintenance. I have even gone to International Falls just to get a hair cut. What can I say, it was a nice day, I needed a trim, and my gas tank was full. My family thinks I am nuts, but they have grown accustom to my wanderings. I just turn on a book and away I go.

As for maintenance and reliability, the car has been phenomenal. I change the oil every 3,300 miles. I don’t have to think about it or anything. When the odometer hits 3,300, 6,600 and 9,900, I get the oil changed. It’s a no brainer. I have only been stranded once due to a mechanical issue. I was able to enlist the help of my youngest brother to tow the car to a nearby repair facility. Come to find out, the timing belt broke. This was a maintenance item that I overlooked—apparently, you should replace that belt every 100,000 miles; important information I discovered 130,000 miles too late.

With this one exception, I always have all routine maintenance performed. I have replaced tires, belts, brakes, shocks and struts, batteries, the fuel pump, water pump and hoses, and have had the fluids flushed on schedule. The only item that broke that



was not what I would consider routine maintenance was the ignition control module. In the last few years, I have spent a couple thousand dollars on replacing oil seals as well. Those things have a set life span, and I hate leaving puddles of oil wherever I park. I have also recently replaced the fuel filler neck—it corroded through and would leave a puddle of gas every time I fueled up the car.

After so many miles, you have to expect small repairs like that. It’s still cheaper than having a monthly car payment—and much less expensive than my replacing the

transmission three times! The engine and transmission in my Camry have never been overhauled. I just replaced the original alternator. I still have the original power steering pump. This has truly been an amazing car.

As the mileage started to add up from about 350,000 and higher, I began thinking that hitting the half million point was actually obtainable. So I increased the amount of driving in an effort to hit 500,000 miles before the car blew up. That was my goal. My standard response to people as they shake their heads at all my driving, is to simply say, “Hey, I need my miles!”

Once I surpassed 400,000 miles, there was a painfully slow building of excitement. I started pulling over on the highway to take a picture of the odometer every time it turned another ten thousand. By 450,000, I was taking odometer pictures every 5,000 miles, and then every 1,000 miles for the last ten thousand before the big 500. Each picture was then promptly texted to all family members, usually along with a note about where it occurred and or what I was doing.

At 499,000 miles, I was coming home from another Duluth run and had pulled over for the last 400 something picture. I was north of Forest Lake, having driven to Duluth during a major snowstorm. As I was getting the camera ready, a State Trooper pulled up behind me and came up to my passenger door to see if everything was all right. I asked if he could see my odometer, and told him I had stopped just to take a picture of the mileage. When he saw the number, he smiled and said, “I’d stop and take a picture too”.

500,000 miles came on my day off. I only had a couple hundred miles to go, so I set off going nowhere in particular, my only goal was to put on the last few miles. A few hours later I was on my way home on Hwy 52 near Hampton when it occurred. I got the 500,000 picture!

Now, I’ve started thinking about 600,000 thousand. Why not? I’m almost there, right?

At work, the news about the car has spread, and now some of my people are constantly asking me what the mileage is up to, causing them to just shake their heads in amazement. I have even had requests to text the pictures of the mileage to unbelieving people or family members. Everyone says I should send a letter to Toyota, but I have no clue whom to contact. I would be willing to hand over the car to Toyota in exchange for a free 4 Runner or Sequoia! A guy can dream right?

I know dad would be proud of my mileage accomplishments—thank you to him for teaching me well. I thank my Heavenly Father for keeping this car running and keeping me safe for all these miles. Thank you Toyota. Thank you Babcock for helping me get to this milestone. And thank you to my sister and brother-in-law for giving me this car so many years ago. It has been quite a ride!