

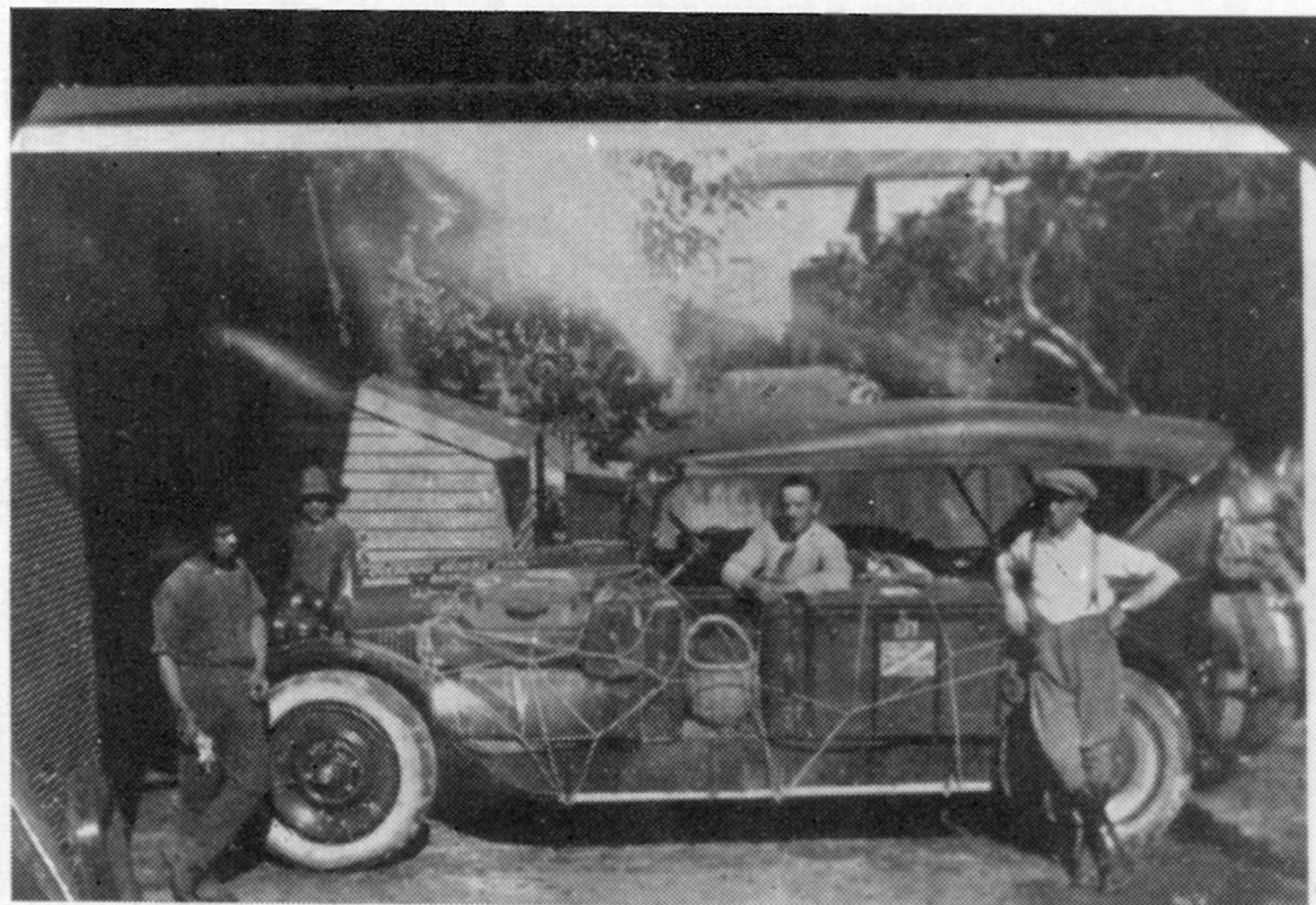
THE ARAB-ISRAEL WAR has once again directed attention to the Middle East. For romantic appeal there could be no names more fitting, no phrase more stirring than "Damascus to Bagdad". Camel trains in the desert, ruins of some of the world's most ancient civilisations, Damascus (claiming the title of the world's oldest living city), fabled Bagdad, former centre of the Arab world in the Middle Ages and seat of the Caliphs, Biblical history and much else, all are conjured up as a fabulous backdrop for any story.

Two New Zealanders—brothers from a country half the world away from Syria—and half a dozen luxury motor cars from the New World, made history here in this area that had known little transport previously other than the "ship of the desert"—the camel. The epic of the Nairn Transport Company is worthy of its setting and one of the most fascinating in automobile history.

Norman and Gerald Nairn were the sons of a doctor in the small town of Blenheim, New Zealand. Prior to the First World War they partnered a motorcycle business in their home town. Among the makes they ran were Hobart, J.A.P., New Imperial, Douglas, Henderson 4, and they were sole agents for Harley-Davidson. Old-timers among the locals recall them as high-spirited, always trick riding with their machines, such as riding round the band rotunda in the centre of Blenheim, one standing on the saddle, the other on the carrier, or high-speed leaping from the Renwick hump-back bridge with one brother riding, the other prone on the roadway. They enlisted in the army when war broke out, Gerald in New Zealand and Norman in England, where he was on business connected with their motorcycle trade. Meeting in Palestine, they served during the war in the Middle East, in the motorised units of General Allenby, and instead of returning to New Zealand after the Armistice, decided to try their fortune where they were, even though they were without capital. A Syrian financed them, however, and they began in business in 1919 buying surplus army vehicles and selling them in Beirut. A year of this provided them with the capital to begin in Egypt as automobile importers.

However, a slump in the cotton market coincided with the shipping of the cars, and they were unable to sell them either in Cairo or Alexandria. Beirut was also tried, but without success, and the unfortunate brothers were reduced to lotteries and auction in order to dispose of the cars. They lost all their capital, but kept some of the cars out of the shipment, and in 1920 started a mail and passenger service between Beirut and Haifa, which appeared promising.

A Beirut-Haifa service would link the important Palestine seaport of Haifa with Beirut—the latter being the "gateway to the Levant", entry point and commercial and administrative centre for the French mandated territory of Syria. Syria, formerly under Turkish rule, had been entrusted by the League of Nations to France after the end of World War I. (The Turks having been on the losing side that time.) The French had realised the possibilities of this pleasant region at the opposite end of the Mediterranean and it flourished commercially under their rule, while they even established a French university there.

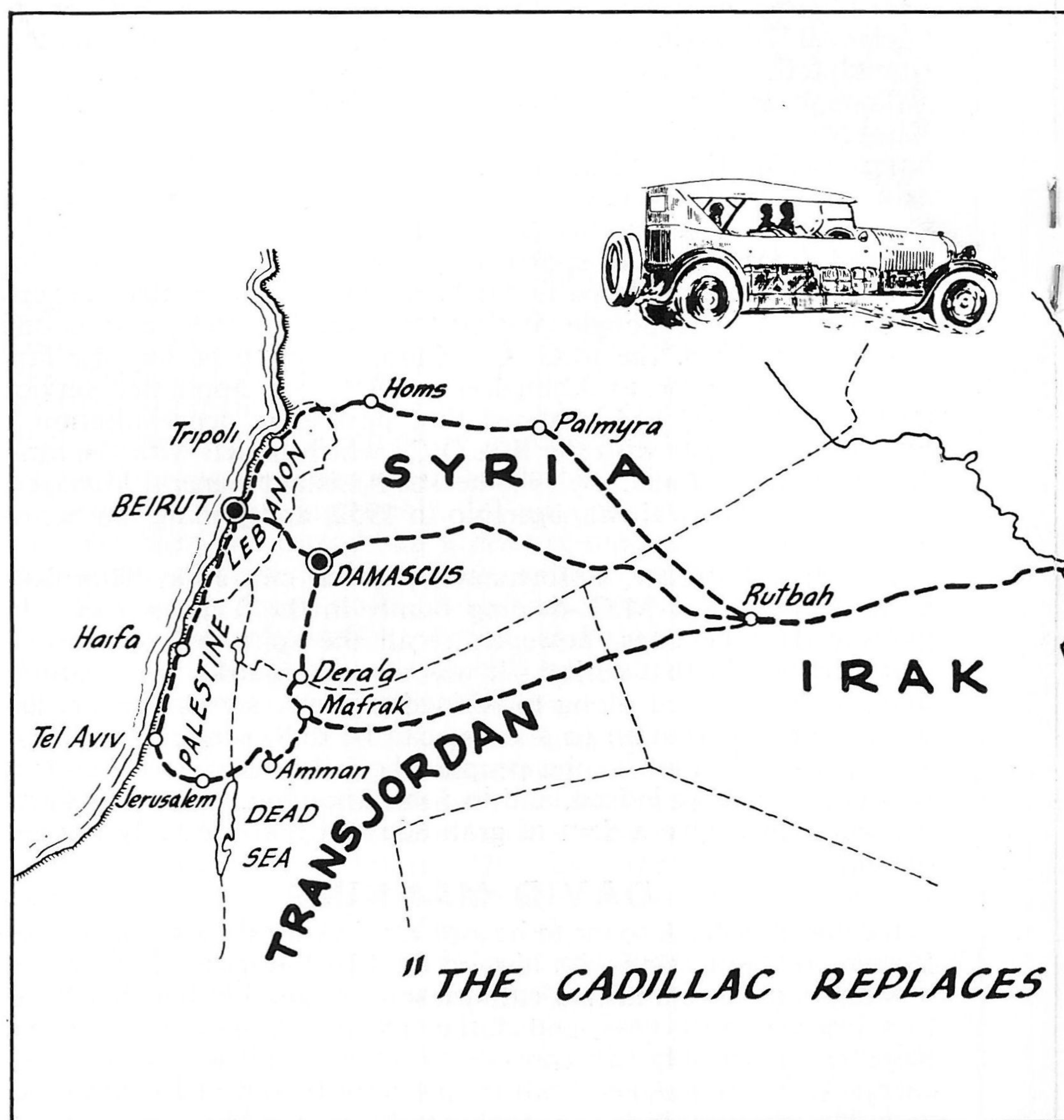


One of the new Nairn Cadillacs ready to start on a desert crossing in 1923.

THE CADILLAC VE

By MAURICE

Acknowledgements: Part of this article was based on a interview has been taken from the book "Five R



"THE CADILLAC REPLACES

However, there were no roads except from Beirut to Tyre. From Tyre to Akka the route was through ploughed fields, requiring the assistance of draught horses during the winter. From Akka to Haifa the route was via the beach and timetables were thus subject to the tides. In addition, two rivers had to be forded, that near Akka requiring an Arab pilot to take the cars across the sand bar. This had its moments. On one occasion Gerald Nairn got bogged down with a car and had to piggyback his passengers ashore. "One was a 16-stone lady and while carrying her I fell into a hole. She nearly drowned me, and thought it a great joke", chuckled Mr. Nairn when he recounted this incident to me. The 110 miles from Beirut to Haifa took 19 hours.

Coupled with competition that was backed by considerably greater resources, the initially promising route proved too difficult and the service was closed down after not much more than a year.

Nevertheless this part of the story was an interesting one because of the experiment, briefly, with steam! The fleet, increased, consisted of Overlands and the universal model "T" Ford, plus, for a time, five Stanley Steamers!

During a period of increasing traffic, Norman Nairn went to the U.S.A. to buy some Cadillacs. However, he met a persuasive Stanley salesman who put over a convincing case for the Stanleys on the score that kerosene was a much cheaper fuel than gasoline. The Stanleys were bought and put into service, but trouble was met with the boilers and burners due to the lack of a clean water supply, and they were a failure. The Nairns' experience with steam, however, was similar to that of many others, in that the disadvantages outweighed the advantages, particularly in the matter of reliability and low cost maintenance—which was critical in their region of operations.

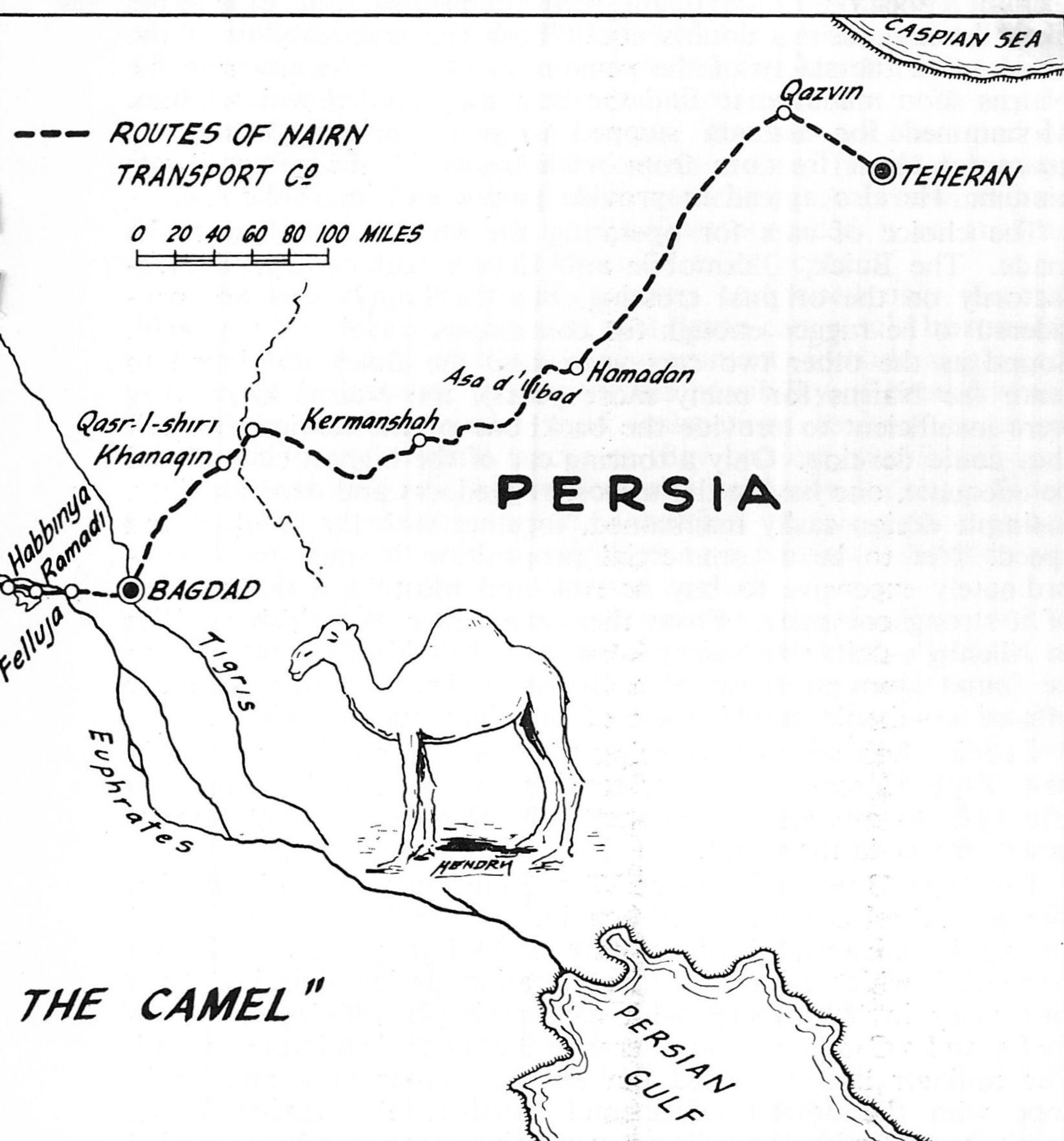
After the closing down of the Haifa-Beirut service, the brothers were in two minds as to whether they should return to New Zealand or try some other field, when a new opportunity arose.

The British Liaison Officer at Beirut and the British Consul at

PERSUS THE CAMEL

D. HENDRY

Interview with Mr. Gerald Nairn. Some other information
"Roads to Danger" by T. R. Nicholson.



Damascus had heard of the Nairns, and approached them with the proposal of a motor trip to Bagdad—across the Syrian Desert. They were offered guides and other assistance, and were soon making preparations for the great adventure.

A glance at the atlas and at contemporary history will reveal the significance of this project.

Bagdad, capital of Irak, was the administrative centre for the British civil command who ruled Irak under a mandate from the League of Nations in the same way that the French ruled Syria. Naturally many travelled home to the British Isles at regular intervals. The only route open to them and the mails, other than by camel train, was from Bagdad to Basra (a port near the Persian Gulf), thence from Basra to Bombay in India, then via the Suez Canal to Great Britain, a journey of several weeks. If, however, a service car route across the desert could be opened and maintained, a trip home could be cut to 10 days.

There had been plans, by the British, for a railway from Bagdad to Haifa on the Mediterranean coast, but they had fallen through for lack of finance. An air route between Cairo and Bagdad was established in the early 'twenties, but it was expensive travel and only operated fortnightly.

Prior motor crossings of the Syrian Desert had been few, painful and discouraging. In 1919, Lord Allenby had journeyed from Beirut to Palmyra with Rolls-Royce armoured cars but had travelled no farther. About a year later, a Major Holt is said to have made the crossing from Damascus to Bagdad via Deir-es-zor down the Euphrates River. He started out with 10 Model "T" Fords, of which only four finished the trek. In June, 1921, R.A.F. Crossley tenders and Rolls-Royce armoured cars had twice struggled over the desert between Amman and Bagdad while carrying out the railway and air surveys—there was then no thought of a service car route—and it was then estimated that the whole painful, arduous journey would take from eight to 12 days under the most favourable conditions.

German trucks, during World War I, had driven from Aleppo to Bagdad via Deir-es-zor and Mosul on the Tigris. After 1920, Syrians had used the Dier-es-zor/Euphrates and Mosul-Tigris routes for smuggling contraband between Syria and Irak. But the routes mentioned above all had serious disadvantages.

Beirut-Damascus-Palmyra-Muhaiwar-Rubaisa-Hit-Euphrates-Bagdad had been an ancient caravan route, had adequate water supplies and, although indirect, it was much shorter than the more northerly detours, and had actually been crossed once by Major Holt in about 1920 with his Fords. This trade route was, however, infested with Bedouin raiders who were liable to strike at any time, and did not stop at robbery and murder. Parties were attacked almost daily.

The Dier-es-zor and Mosul routes were far too long, arduous and dangerous to be considered. The same objections applied to the Amman course.

The only other path was the one which would normally have come first to mind, yet the one which all the other routes had been taken to avoid. This was the direct crossing of the Syrian Desert from Damascus via Rutbah and Ramadi. Hitherto it had been eschewed because it was desolate, almost without water, and without any human habitation in the 500 miles between Damascus and Ramadi. The only usable water was at Rutba and Ramadi, with none in the 200 miles between them. Another well existed half way between Damascus and Ramadi but the water was unfit for any use. There was an almost complete lack of suitable spots for caching supplies of food and water, practically no landmarks, and no human help anywhere handy in case of misadventure.

Despite these difficulties there was one constant user of the route, an Arab sheik named Mohammad Ibn Bassam, who regularly made crossings between Damascus and Bagdad with a camel train. He was, in fact, a gold smuggler, but was seldom bothered by Bedouins as he was wealthy enough to pay them sufficient "protection money". Ibn Bassam had already thought of using motor cars instead of camels, and during January and February, 1923, sent two car convoys to Bagdad via Deir-es-zor and the Euphrates, but found it too long and too subject to local raids from the wandering tribes to be worth while. He then thought it might be feasible to actually run cars across the camel route he had been using. Despite its disadvantages, there were some things in its favour. During the daytime, and in dry weather, the surface was good for cars—hard, sun-baked soil or gravel (the desert was not a sand desert). Under these conditions, the only "soft going" was the 40-mile section west of Ramadi and, although there were hills either side for part of the way, the going was flat. Against this was the fact that in wet weather the surface was mud for miles in all directions, much of it was under water, and the numerous gullies and wadis presented hazards after dark.

But it was possible that cars driven fast enough would cross the desert in short enough time to master the difficulties, and Ibn Bassam approached the British Consul in Damascus, Mr. C. E. S. Palmer, putting the idea to him. The Arab knew of the British interest in any possible desert route, and was anxious to keep in with the ruling power and forestall any possible rival.



Attaching a tow line to a bogged Cadillac between Rutbah and Ramadi.
Two English Army officers in the foreground.



Nearing Bagdad in the rainy season, three Cadillacs and passengers wait while drivers check on the flooded road ahead.

Palmer was enthusiastic, and soon got the backing of the British Government. The British Liaison Officer in Beirut, Captain D. McCallum, was ordered by the Foreign Office and Air Ministry to accompany the expedition and send in a detailed report of the crossing.

The Nairns supplied three cars—a six-cylinder, 27 h.p. Buick, an eight-cylinder Oldsmobile, and a Lancia, all standard touring cars. The drivers and mechanics were Nairn employees, Ted Lovell, chief mechanic of the Nairn Transport Company, being in charge. Lady McCallum accompanied her husband, and one of Ibn Bassam's Arab guides also went along. A 10 days' supply of food and drinking water, plenty of water for the radiators, and sufficient oil and gasoline for the round trip were taken. A very comprehensive set of tools, including such items as blocks of wood for jack supports and for use in case of springs breaking were also carried, plus rifles, shotguns and revolvers.

The convoy started from Damascus on April 2, 1923, and, to the amazement of Palmer and McCallum, covered 216 miles in the first day. At the end of the day, however, the Bedouin guide miscalculated in the dusk, and the Lancia ran into a steep banked wadi at speed, a rock tearing a hole in the sump. Lovell patched the sump and the next day they continued at a slower speed. The group began to realise the limitations of their Arab guide who worked only by landmarks which he often missed in poor visibility, due to the speed of the car, and who could not read the stars. Consequently, the convoy travelled only in daylight from then on, negotiating the wadis with care and navigating by the various ranges of hills.

They camped 150 miles west of Ramadi at the end of the second day, and took turns in standing guard over the little camp in case of Arab raiders. At midday on the third day they reached Ramadi, which had a wireless and telegraph station. The next day they crossed the Euphrates at Felluja and reached Bagdad, 70 miles distant. They had come a total of 603 miles in three days and proved the route was entirely suitable for service vehicles.

At Bagdad, the convoy split in two, the Nairn personnel returning by the way they had come and Captain McCallum and his party going via Palmyra back to Damascus. At Felluja the Nairn cars had to be shipped across the Euphrates because the pontoon bridge had been cut to save it being swept away by floods. Ramadi was an island encircled by flood waters up to a depth of 14 ft. The Buick went through the whole 1,200 miles without attention, including tyres.

Norman Nairn crossed the desert himself in the next month, and the Nairns, convinced that a regular service was possible, now approached the British High Commissioner in Irak to ask for assistance in opening such a service. He was unco-operative and replied that the idea was not new, but it was too hot in summer for a regular service.

The Nairns returned to Damascus, and between May and August made five desert crossings, including one in July, the hottest month of the year, but could find no more suitable route than the original one taken in April.

They then approached the Post and Telegraph Director of Irak with proposals for a mail service. He was favourable, but pointed out the great danger due to the predatory tribesmen. A guarantee of security would be essential to the signing of all mail contracts.

The Nairns thereupon approached the High Commissioner again for assistance, only to be told "No" again. (The High Commissioner's attitude might seem pigheaded, but it is quite likely he had serious doubts about both the practicability of the project and the safety of the persons involved.) At any rate the Nairns soon managed to find the help they needed without him. Mohammed Ibn Bassam stepped in again and undertook to guarantee them freedom from tribal raids for £2,000 gold per annum. He also agreed to provide guides and interpreters.

The choice of cars for operating the service now had to be made. The Buick, Oldsmobile and Lancia had performed satisfactorily on the original crossing, but the Lancia was not considered to be rugged enough for continuous travel and was sold. Sound as the other two cars were (and the Buick continued to serve the Nairns for many more years), the Nairns knew they were insufficient to provide the backbone of the service they felt they could develop. Only a touring car of the highest class would be adequate, one having the utmost ruggedness and dependability, a simple design easily maintained, together with the comfort and speed. Yet to be a commercial proposition it must not be inordinately expensive to buy or run, and must have the backing of a strong company. From their experience of British vehicles in Allenby's units the Nairns knew that their ideal car was not to be found amongst those of a British make. No European car offered a suitable combination of the right qualities either.

Cadillac was selected as being the best all-round car, and six new Type 63 seven-passenger touring cars joined the Buicks in late 1923 to establish what eventually became the most famous desert service in the world.

The Type 63 was a 90-degree V8 of 3½ in. bore and 5½ in. stroke, giving a displacement of 314 cu. in. It developed 83 h.p. and among its advanced features were a 90-degree counterbalanced crankshaft which eliminated the vibration period that had been customary in V8 engines with earlier simple 180-degree crankshafts, and a Cadillac carburetter with thermostatic mixture control. The radiator had a cowled fan and condenser tank and could cope with the hottest continental weather. A massive frame, amply braced with large-diameter tubular cross members, carried on its 132 in. wheelbase a roomy and comfortable touring body, with leather upholstery, interior light and cigar lighter, folding footrests and ample door pockets for passengers' comfort and convenience. A tray of special tools could be unlocked and lifted out of the front right-hand door (in addition to other tools under the front seat) and fitted to the side of the gear case was a small engine-driven tyre pump. In the engine compartment was a small trouble-light with extension flex and reel on the principle of a roller blind.

Adequate ground clearance and comfortable suspension were other features particularly suiting these cars to desert travel. The Nairns had chosen a superb instrument for their task, and not much modifying was necessary.

The centre seats of the Cadillacs were replaced by a 16-gallon water tank and a 20-gallon fuel tank was mounted on each running board, linked by a three-way cock to an Autopulse pump. (This was a proprietary electric fuel pump, and an advanced idea in the day of fuel tanks pressurised from an engine-driven air pump.) In this form the cars carried one or two drivers and three or four passengers, with mail bags and baggage loaded on the running boards, fenders and hood. Rations for a week were always taken—two kerosene tins full—and the extra fuel tanks enabled the cars to go right through without refuelling. Small refrigerators, two spotlights mounted on the windscreen, and asbestos-lined hoods were also part of the special equipment.

In the late summer of 1923, the Nairn Company was granted a five-year contract for the carrying of the Irak Government mails between Bagdad and Haifa. (At Haifa the mails were transferred to a train for Port Said.)

The conditions of the contract were strict. Mails from Bagdad must reach Port Said every week within 60 hours or the Nairns would be fined. But the Nairns easily met the challenge, and their efficiency so impressed the French that they also granted the Damascus to Bagdad mail contract, which began in October, 1923.

Letters which had previously taken 24 days to reach London from Bagdad by sea now began arriving in nine days. The passengers who were also carried found that they could travel from the capital of Irak to the Mediterranean coast more comfortably and far cheaper than by air, and just as quickly. The single fare by car from Beirut to Bagdad was £30. The equivalent air journey, Cairo to Bagdad, cost £150 per passenger. Considering the conditions of aviation development in 1923 it is not surprising that the car was considered more comfortable. As for two-thirds of the desert journey the terrain allowed "flat-out" driving of up to 70 m.p.h., the aircraft did not prove any faster. (In fact on one occasion Gerald Nairn left Rutbah at the same time as an Imperial Airways airliner which was taking off after refuelling. A headwind held the plane back and the Nairn Cadillac outpaced it to an Iran Petroleum Company station about 65 miles across.)

In the beginning the weekly convoy comprised only the two original cars; by 1925, eight, nine or a dozen cars would be running together. (Both Irak and Syrian Governments forbade single cars to attempt the crossing because of the possibility of breakdowns.) The Nairn cars ran under rigid instructions to keep together. They kept to the original tracks as they became established, and avoided wells or wadis where Bedouins might be lurking. When a convoy left a staging station, a wireless or telegraph message was sent to the next station, which in turn informed the previous stopping place that the convoy had arrived.

The run of 550 miles between Damascus and Bagdad took a total time of 24 hours when there were no incidents. At first, as arranged with the Sheik, Arab camel drivers went along to act as guides, being seated behind the driver with the three passengers in the rear. As with the original expedition of April, 1923, the guides were not found to be of much use in a car, and they were soon dropped. From then on the Nairn cars were driven by compass, and at first two drivers were carried on each car, one relieving the other.

Originally, the cars started at five in the morning, drove all day, and parked up for the night, continuing early next day. As the tracks became established, and the drivers got to know the route, this schedule was reversed, the cars starting about three or four p.m. and driving through the night.

Thus most driving was done in the cooler temperatures, which was easier on the cars, tyres, drivers and passengers.

The cars travelled in a strung-out convoy formation, and at night the leading car would, at regular intervals, turn back until the headlights of the next car were seen, turn again and continue on its original course. The second car would repeat this check on the third car and so on down the line. On one occasion the leading car was unable to locate the second car for a time and then the occupants saw headlights circling in the distance in an odd manner. Driving up, they discovered the Cadillac turning circles with the driver and passengers fast asleep! Only after much shouting and horn blowing were they awakened.

The Nairn drivers were more familiar with the Gilhooleys than Gilhooley himself. (A Gilhooley consists of turning a car end-for-end, remaining on its wheels. Named after the first man to do it.) About 30 miles out of Damascus, and again between Rutbah and Ramadi (about 250 miles from Bagdad) were vast mud flats which in the summer were as smooth as a billiard table with a thin film of dust on top. The gazelles roaming the flat invariably ran across the path of anything approaching so that the driver swung to avoid them. The surface after light rain was so greasy that 3½ tons of laden Cadillac would turn end-for-end many times from 50 or 60 m.p.h. before the driver could get on course again. Looking back to check on his passengers, he would find them still sitting with their mouths wide open in astonishment.

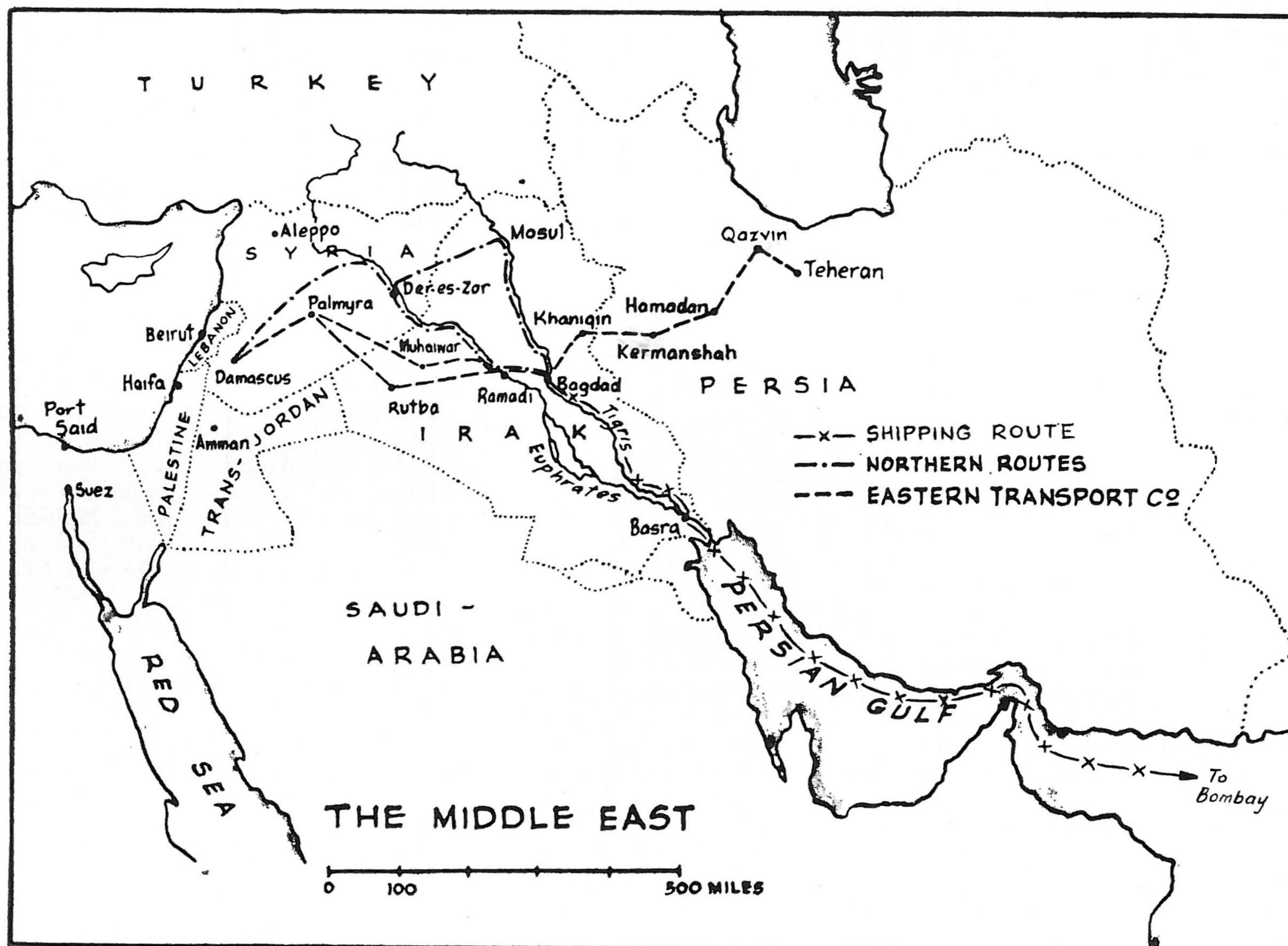
Weather permitting, the cars kept a tight schedule. (One of the legends that grew up about this famous service was that at some places clocks were set by the arrival of Nairn cars.) Heavy rain, however, involved a 150-mile detour through Mafrak.

Once an Anglo-Iranian Oil Company director offered the Nairns double the normal fee for a car if he could be taken to Beirut in time to catch a steamer, and nothing if they failed. Norman Nairn and Jack Reid drove, taking extra fuel, and giving the passenger an empty petrol can for calls of nature. The trip involved an extra 65 miles and a climb of 5,000 ft. through the Lebanon Range, but the Cadillac cut out the 615 miles in 15 hours (an average of 41 m.p.h.). The oil company official caught his steamer and the Nairns got their money: £200 fare.

Gerald Nairn himself later cut that time to 13 hours, from Beirut to Bagdad, and return—1,230 miles—in 48 hours without a relief driver or sleep.

In the Syrian Desert operating conditions were, of course, exceptionally severe. In the summer, temperatures were so high

This map shows the lengthy journey presented by the shipping route (Bagdad, Basra, Persian Gulf, Bombay and eventually the Suez Canal) as compared with the direct trans-desert routes.





Changing plugs between Damascus and Rutbah.

(123° F.) that the tubes would vulcanise themselves to the tyres, and tyres were even known to catch fire. Drivers had to change tyres with gloves on. There were dust storms which lasted six to eight hours and reduced visibility to 10 ft., making it necessary for someone to stand on the front bumper and direct the driver. Winds blew hats away so fast that a car had to do 50 m.p.h. to catch them rolling on their brims.

In winter, despite using up to 10 different tracks, the cars often bogged down to the axles in mud. The drill was then for all to get out, including the driver, who would tie the throttle wide open. Heaving and pushing, using shovels and mud mats, with breaks of driving, then heaving and pushing again, up to 30 miles might be covered in this manner with the car flat out in low gear most of the time. Sometimes the cars would bog down so badly that the party would have to wait up to two days for the mud to dry before they could get going again.

In spite of all this, no Cadillac ever boiled, due to the excellence of their radiator and cooling system generally—one of the major reasons they had been selected in the first place for this route. They were, of course, always kept in tip-top shape by their drivers, who washed, maintained and serviced the cars, and, during the run, fed the passengers and attended to their comfort.

"The drivers in the old Cadillac days were a great bunch, tough but good. They never let their passengers down, and their fidelity and endurance were known throughout the Middle East", Mr. Gerald Nairn told me. "We all packed a gun in those days. There were New Zealanders, Aussies, British, Americans and Canadians. Among the characters was John Reid, with one eye, who once, in a Cadillac, chased a cheetah down and shot it, and, of course, Ryan, the Aussie, who was very fond of the bottle. Passengers often complained he had been drinking, but I could never catch him or find liquor in the car. Finally, I discovered that his chargals (water bottles with straws) were full of arak—a powerful Lebanese booze made from grapes!

"He had wealthy parents in Australia who wanted him to come home but he refused and eventually drank himself to death in Persia.

"Sometimes a car would get shot up by the Arabs and to get drivers to go out with a relief car and bring it in, we would have to drag them out of hotels or brothels. So we gave them a house to live in and a girl each", laughed Mr. Nairn.

The Arabs could be very troublesome. On occasions the cars got home with bullet holes through the radiator temporarily plugged up, while on other occasions two Buicks were stolen, the drivers and mail being left in the desert—lucky if they were not stripped naked. As a crowning insult, the Arabs later made raids with the stolen cars, which were never recovered. Fortunately, a Cadillac was never lost. Once a convoy car was held up and the driver called upon to deliver arms. He refused, and the bandits searched the car and found a fully loaded revolver in one of the pockets. The driver, challenged, said it was unserviceable and of no use. The bandit then held it to the driver's heart and pulled the trigger. The only thing that saved the driver was that the safety catch was in position, and the Arab did not know how to render the weapon ready for firing. Because of these incidents it was often questioned whether it was wise to carry arms or not.

"We carried rifles ourselves, but these were chiefly for shooting at gazelles and as a possible last resort", commented Mr. Nairn. "We never indulged in gun battles because of the passengers. We would rather hand over the items the Arabs might demand sooner than get passengers killed. We never lost a passenger, but did have one wounded on one occasion."

The only death occurred during the Druse Rebellion, when a British driver was shot and later died in Damascus. After a French escort accompanying the Nairn convoy was shot up, the French authorities gave the Nairns permission to go after the leaders of the attack, with arms. They ran the Arabs down in a couple of Cadillacs, and the tribesmen jumped off their winded camels and took off on foot. When their ammunition ran out, they surrendered to the Nairns, handing their knives over, as they said, to cut their throats. The Nairns, however, took them to the French, and saw them publicly hanged. (The Druses, a central Syrian people, revolted unsuccessfully against the French rule during this period.)

At one time the French were forced to close down the route because of the depredations of these tribesmen, and this called for a new and much more arduous route hundreds of miles longer, through Jerusalem. But the French were very helpful throughout the Nairn era in Syria, allowing them to import equipment from the U.S.A. free of duty and even granting a small subsidy. They had recognised the importance of the service from its inception in October, 1923, when they had granted the Nairns the French overland mail contract.

The French attitude was in contrast to the British one. Although the Nairns had the Iraq mail contract, they received no form of subsidy from the British Government. The latter certainly realised the value of the service and had, in 1924, in an official report to the League of Nations, stated it was "a well established, regular and reliable institution" that had resulted in the sea route from Basra to the Mediterranean falling into disuse. National pride was involved here, because the Nairns had refused to use British vehicles, since there was none available that met their requirements. The majority of British-built cars were simply incapable of withstanding the sustained punishment of the desert route, too low built, too low powered, lacked the strength to carry the immense loads at the high speeds that were commonplace, and were too expensive, in spite of there being no discriminating tariff against them in Syria. Others were inadequately cooled and too harshly sprung for the desert, required too much specialist maintenance, and in general suffered all the disadvantages of an Old World design intended for good roads and civilised conditions as opposed to a contemporary New World vehicle built for overland travel in an undeveloped terrain. Even the Rolls-Royce, which had been a name in the desert during the war, could not be considered for a number of the above reasons.

A British Army officer, Major Forbes-Leith, who drove through to India via Syria in 1924, found that of 400 cars passed on roads in Syria, one was British. There were 3,000 cars in Beirut, less than a dozen of them British.

The Nairns did not use French cars either, for much the same reasons, but the logical and practical French colonial authorities did not care. So long as the service benefited Syria, the New Zealanders could use whatever cars they liked.

The British, however, found this none too welcome, and it is interesting that in spite of all the pioneering work they did, serving British Imperial interests over many years, the Nairns were never knighted, as they almost certainly would have been had they used British vehicles. Once Lord Nuffield (whose slogan was "Buy British and be proud of it") asked Gerald Nairn why British vehicles were not used. He was told that the transport service would use a suitable British vehicle whenever there was one available, but so far the opportunity had not presented itself. Nuffield then asked: "If we design a vehicle for you, will you try it?" The answer was "Yes".

A Morris Commercial, six-wheel chassis of 15/18 R.A.C. horsepower was later sent out as a result of this conversation, but proved a dismal failure when tried in the desert.

"Had we put the thing into service", said Gerald Nairn, "we would have had a constant lame duck in the fleet. Our other vehicles could leave at the same time, reach Bagdad, and return to meet the Morris halfway out."

Nuffield then admitted that the job was too big for them.

The cars underwent extraordinary punishment after the Druse

Rebellion in 1925. A new route to avoid the unsettled area was taken—Beirut-Haifa-Jerusalem-Dead Sea-Amman-Rutbah-Bagdad, a distance of 750 miles. On this route, between Amman and Rutbah, were situated several lava beds up to five miles wide, strewn with large boulders too close together to be avoided, giving a riverbed surface for miles on end. There being no alternative, the cars had to bump painfully over this frightful surface at a crawl, and as this route was used for six to eight months, it is hardly surprising that the vehicles eventually had structural troubles. Chassis frames developed cracks near the front axle, springs broke and radiators leaked.

The chassis were reinforced by welding extra angle-section steel inside the frame channels and, as a precaution, a rib was welded on the bottom of the banjo housing. Springs were roped up so that if one broke a car could still get home. Tyres, of course, suffered fantastic wear, lasting only a couple of trips on this route, but they were regarded as expendable. (Lest anyone regard this as negating the earlier remarks about the Cadillacs' agricultural strength and superb adaptability to the service, Gerald Nairn himself told the writer that he doubted whether many other cars could survive continual lava-bed crossings at all, and in 1930-31, when another railway survey was made in the area, other cars could only cross the lava regularly after a road had been cleared by digging down to the earth beneath.)

A new route came into use before long—this being Beirut-Homs-Palmyra-Rutbah-Bagdad, with a rest house at Rutbah half way across the desert. Thus the lava beds were avoided and the distance reduced to 650 miles; and finally they got back to the direct Damascus-Bagdad route. Rutbah doubled as an airport and car staging point, and an hotel, aerodrome, fort and other facilities were built there.

By 1927, nearly 4,000 desert crossings had been made by Nairn cars. Twenty thousand passengers and 4,500 sacks of mail had been carried, but the proudest boast of the company was that, despite all hazards, no passenger's life had been lost. The organisation and running of the service was superbly efficient. Its reputation and prestige were worldwide, and after only a year of operations, in November, 1924, a Nairn convoy was entrusted with the transport of the Shah of Persia and his suite across the desert. The performance of the cars attracted admiration everywhere. An article in *The Field* (London) commented:

"The Cadillac and Buick cars which make up the convoys are called upon to carry astonishing loads. It is amazing that cars can be built to stand up to the work."

The writer was Sir Douglas Newton, M.P., who had just returned from the Middle East and who had himself made the trip across Syria via Amman in a Nairn Cadillac.

The noted historian, Professor Arnold Toynbee, wrote: "The effective opening up for the first time in history of the direct trans-desert route between Iraq and the Mediterranean coast of Syria was one of the most important developments of the post-war age."

The Development of Desert Transport

Returning to the business side of the company's operations, in September, 1926, the only rival firm operating in the area was taken over by the Nairns and became the Nairn Eastern Transport Company. This firm, formerly known as the Eastern Transport Company, had been founded in 1924, less than six months after the Nairns had begun operations. The E.T.C. was run by Syrians and subsidised by the French Government. Its Dodge cars operated over the old trade route to the north (Damascus-Palmyra-Kubaisa-Bagdad) and also on occasion by way of Palmyra-Rutbah. They ran a three-day schedule from Bagdad to Damascus, with overnight stops at the hotels at Palmyra and Kubaisa. Their service was, therefore, considerably slower than the Nairn one, but the E.T.C. passengers were mostly tourists. On one occasion, however, in mid-January, 1925, an E.T.C. Dodge put up a fine performance, covering the 580 miles between Ramadi and Damascus in 15 hours 26 minutes at an average speed of 37 m.p.h. This was, moreover, under unfavourable conditions with 150 miles of desert under snow, up to 10 in. deep, with very soft soil beneath. This was, however, a very unusual run for the E.T.C.

The Eastern Company ran a service beyond Bagdad into Persia and, in 1924, operated a regular fortnightly service to Tehran, capital of Persia, from Khanigin on the Persian border. Passengers had to make the connection between Bagdad and Khanigin by train as the roads were so poor, transferring to the E.T.C. cars at the frontier railhead.

The first overnight stop was made at Kermanshah and the second at Hamadan, the 470 miles to Tehran being covered in three days. Some travellers preferred to save time by travelling to Bagdad via the Nairn Service, though it was more expensive.

The Persian route was an E.T.C. monopoly and a paying one, but the company failed for lack of proper organisation and efficiency (Gerald Nairn referred to them in a contemptuous tone as operating on the principle of "lower fares and there's always the Nairns to pick us up if we break down"). The Nairn Eastern Transport Company took over the Persian route, and thus expanded the Nairn operations considerably. Also involved to a considerable extent were the British and French Governments, who had appreciable indirect control through the holdings of banks and other organisations. The major interest was, however, held by Norman Nairn.

"The run through to Tehran involved climbing 8,000 ft. through the Asadabad, near Hamadan, with snowdrifts and extreme cold in the winter", Gerald Nairn told me. "On one occasion we got about three-quarters of the way up the pass and found the way blocked by abandoned horse-drawn wagons, which were snowed in. We had no room to turn or back the Cadillac, as the snow was so deep that the road was simply a deep trench through it, so we got out our hydraulic jack and jacked the car up. Then we pushed sideways off the jack. Jacked again and pushed sideways and so on, until we got her facing downhill. By this time the

A "Pullman" at the Bagdad Airport. The air-conditioning equipment was carried on the tractor unit behind the driver's cab. In this picture, taken in the 'thirties, a 1934 Ford, Chevrolet and Studebaker can be seen.



snow had drifted so high we had to back and charge constantly to get through it. Undoubtedly had we stayed there we would have all died.

"We later had trouble with the Persian authorities and had to pull out of there."

In 1925, to cope with increasing traffic, some Safeway trucks were imported from the U.S.A. These were big six-wheelers adapted to desert transport and having a 150 horse-power Continental engine driving both rear axles. They marked the beginning of the era of specialised desert buses which the Nairns developed over a period of 12 years.

Some of the Cadillacs were sold and others kept for special work. They had put the Nairn company on the map, and had met the greatest test of serviceability ever imposed on motor cars.

"When we finally sold them they had clocked about 200,000 miles each with only two major overhauls", said Gerald Nairn. "Of this, 150,000 to 160,000 had been on the Damascus-Bagdad run. The last one we sold in the early 'thirties, and it was in good going order then. We had occasional trouble, of course, as with anything man-made, but they had no real weaknesses, and their reliability was quite extraordinary. Any good mechanic could keep a Cadillac V-8 on the road and they would cover an annual mileage of 70,000 before valve grinding was required."

The subject of Rolls-Royce armoured cars in the area came up, and Mr. Nairn continued: "Yes, the R.A.F. had some at Habbinya, and they used to escort our convoys if things got very tough with the tribesmen and bandits. The Rolls had a fine record in the desert, but the Cadillac had everything licked as far as we were concerned. The Rolls suspension and cooling systems were no match for the Cadillac, and they needed far too much specialist attention for our liking.

"The Cadillacs were good to drive although the steering was heavy by modern standards—very 'fast' steering with only two turns for a good lock, and on top of that they were very heavily loaded at between three and four tons. They had plenty of power, a very smooth engine and would do about 70 m.p.h., which was not slow in 1923. They did about 12 miles to the gallon in service, which considering the conditions was quite acceptable. Oil was changed every round trip, and tyres when required—when we were crossing the lava beds tyre life was less than 2,000 miles.

"Cadillac put out a beautifully-prepared coloured booklet describing our run but, unfortunately, I don't think that I have a copy now. It had a painting on the cover showing a Cadillac convoy passing a camel train in the desert, with the title 'The Cadillac replaces the Camel'.

"The Cadillac's ability to take punishment was just amazing, and nothing I have seen since surpasses them for that. It was the Cadillacs that 'made' us. They were the toughest cars I have ever seen, and for overland conditions they were without question the finest car in the world."

After the Safeways came the A.C.F.s. (American Car and Foundry). These had 130 horse-power Hall-Scott engines and did only four miles to the gallon, so a diesel conversion was made.

In 1934, Nairns imported two Marmon-Herrington buses

specially built for them in Indianapolis. These articulated 70-ft. giants had five axles, and ran on 18 tyres, costing £40 a piece. They were powered by Hercules diesel engines, and had passenger compartments on two levels.

Traffic continued to increase, and in 1937 plans were taken to the U.S.A. for two stainless-steel, fully air-conditioned buses, the first of their kind in the world. These Pullmans, as they were known, were articulated like the Marmon-Herringtons, but ran on 10 instead of 18 tyres and had one deck level only. The chassis were built by White, with diesel engines by Cummins, and Timken axles. The Budd bodies, of spot-welded stainless steel, were kapok insulated and the air-conditioning maintained a cabin temperature of 87-90°F., even when the outside temperature was 120°F. Wash hand-basins and facilities for serving, meals and drinks aboard were provided. These buses cost £12,000 each and reduced the time for the run from 24 to 18 hours. Upon their introduction, tyre troubles arose and even got to the stage where drivers refused to go out on Dunlops. A Firestone man came out from the factory for six months, and eventually developed a tyre that stood up to the higher loading and speed. This tyre used rayon and had 12-ply construction with thin treads, instead of 16-ply. Eventually tyre mileage was raised to 18,000 miles.

A Nairn driver had to have five years' experience and training before taking over a Pullman. Starting on a mail truck as second driver, then graduating to first driver, then second driver on passenger service, then first, then second driver on a Pullman, and finally a first driver. Rate of pay was £60-70 a month.

The Pullmans received a complete check every 50,000 miles and, if necessary, a complete overhaul. After nine years' service, each had completed 750,000 miles running, and by 1958 had clocked 2,000,000 miles each after 20 years' service.

The Nairn organisation was fully equipped to handle all servicing, having grown through the years until they had the best-equipped workshops in the Middle East, with engine shop, gearbox and transmission shop, electrical shop, and spray painting bays. The Damascus headquarters employed a staff of 85 people.

Always a trouble spot, the Middle East got worse during World War II, confronting the companies with further difficulties. Allied troops invaded Syria in 1941, to ensure that the Vichy French Government would not permit the Germans to enter the area, and armistice terms were granted to General Dentz, the French High Commissioner, in July, 1941. There was rebellion in Syria and Iraq in 1942, and the Nairn Company was forced to close down for a period. The Nairns took refuge in the British Embassy, their garage which was next to the airport was bombed, and the rest house at Rutbah was looted. When the Nairns were free to leave the Embassy they spent weeks scouring the countryside for their equipment, much of which they found by the roadside in very bad condition. At this time Gerald Nairn was captured by the Russians and held for three days because nobody could read his letter from the Soviet Legation. When he returned to Syria, he and his brother were told that they would have to leave or be interned, so they paid off the whole staff in Damascus, where they left their equipment.

(continued on page 196)



One of the two air-conditioned Budd-bodied "Pullman" buses, still operating in 1956. First air-conditioned buses in the world, these 18-passenger vehicles had clocked a million miles each by this date. Photo: Autocar.

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISEMENTS

continued

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CLUB NEWS—continued

D.K.W. "Meisterklasse", in its time by far the most popular small car on South African roads. Introduced to a mainly British market as a result of an export drive by Nazi Germany, the D.K.W., with its all-independent springing and reliable two-stroke engine, proved far more suitable on the universally poor roads than the familiar "buzz box" light car. Had it not been for the wood and fabric coachwork which eventually reduced them to admittedly still reliable perambulating ragbags, dozens might still have been in use. Survivors are now being searched for, in particular the attractive doorless sports two-seater.

From Natal and the Veteran Car Club of South Africa comes the news that Dick Collier, who founded the club with his 1905 Mors nearly 17 years ago, is moving to British Columbia and disposing of his considerable collection.

R. H. JOHNSTON.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

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| Feb. 1 | V.S.C.C. Charterhouse Driving Tests. |
| Feb. 3 | Lincolnshire Vintage Vehicle Society. Film Show, Queen Hotel, High Street, Lincoln. 7.30 p.m. |
| Feb. 7 | Veteran & Vintage Clubs Conference, Bloomsbury Centre Hotel, Russell Square, London W.C.1. Tickets only. Buffet Luncheon, 12.30 p.m. Conference 2 p.m. |
| Feb. 8 | V.M.C.C. Chiltern Section. Dews Farm Trial. |
| Feb. 18 | V.S.C.C. A.G.M. Heal's, London W.1. |
| Feb. 28 | V.S.C.C. Pomeroy Trophy Contest, Silverstone. |
| Mar. 7 | Veteran Car Club, A.G.M. at R.A.C., Pall Mall, London S.W.1. |
| Mar. 8 | V.M.C.C. North-East Region. East Bierley Sporting Trial. |
| Mar. 14 | Veteran & Vintage Auction Sale at Palm Court, Alexandra Palace, London. (Norman Cole and Veteran Car Club.) |
| Mar. 21 | V.S.C.C. Light Car Trial. Wales. |

INTERNATIONAL

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| Mar. 1 | Vintage Car Club of India. The Statesman Rally. |
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THE CADILLAC VERSUS THE CAMEL—continued

Undaunted, they began a service in Palestine with the two buses which the French had allowed them to retain, running from Haifa to Bagdad. When the British and French authorities in Syria reached an agreement, they returned to Damascus, where they found everything as they had left it. The French had borrowed one small car, which they returned. From then on the company took up the task of transporting army personnel, which during the rest of the war comprised 90 per cent. of their passengers.

After the war, peace-time service was resumed, and when Gerald Nairn was visiting New Zealand in 1945 he spoke of plans to improve the service and mentioned his brother's forthcoming trip to the U.S.A. to see about the design and construction of new buses, which would reduce the time of the run. But, in 1946, company operations were again suspended and were not resumed for some time. In 1948, Norman Nairn retired and, in 1950, the Iraq Government began hinting that it would like to take over the service.

The matter came to a head in 1952. Gerald Nairn had seen the trouble coming for some time and, rather than sell out to the Iraq Government and put the staff out of a job (as the headquarters would have been shifted to Bagdad), transferred the whole company to the staff. The brothers left the area and Gerald went to Europe for a while, returning to New Zealand in 1954 where he settled in the Marlborough Sounds, less than 20 miles from his birthplace. In 1961, he and Mrs. Nairn moved to Southern Ireland, but disliked the rain and moved to Surrey, in England. After the bad European winter of 1962-3 they returned to New Zealand again. Norman for a time lived in Portugal, then moved to St. Raphael in the south of France, and finally settled in the Lebanon after a trip to New Zealand in 1960.

The service continued to run until about 1959 when it was liquidated because air competition, border disputes and the general political position in the area made it impossible to continue. Thus, after 25 years, the world's most famous desert service came to an end.