

Marion Bell

We vintage car drivers are, by contemporary reckoning, a pretty hardy bunch, out in all weathers in our less than dry and warm or cool and dust-free cars, but we wouldn't have it any other way. Perhaps we then are best placed among drivers in this day and age to appreciate the skill, daring and perhaps even naivety of those adventurous early motorists who took off to drive round Australia in the vintage years.

Among those pioneering motorists was Mrs. Marion Bell of Fremantle, credited as the first woman and the third person to drive around Australia by car. In October 1925 Mrs. Bell and her 11-year-old daughter left Perth in an Oldsmobile Six and travelled via Darwin, Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide, before arriving back in Perth on April 7th 1926.

Two women standing beside a car.
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While newspaper reports made many gender typical comments and much fuss about Mrs Bell as a women driver tackling the vast continental unknown, they invariably omitted mentioning that the New Zealander was a capable driver and something of a DIY mechanic.

Marion Bell and daughter left Perth on October 14th 1925 in a standard Oldsmobile 6-cylinder tourer, registration number 8996. She was initially somewhat vague in discussing her proposed route but headed north and soon fell in with another round Australia motorist, J K Warner in a Citroen, and she adopted his intended route. Warner also shared his pre-arranged petrol supplies with her. They travelled together till 30 miles on from Fitzroy Crossing where her Oldsmobile irreparably broke down, reported to be the clutch housing cracked by a large rock. Warner drove the Bells back to Fitzroy Crossing and only moved on after locals assured him they would be looked after. Eventually Marion Bell's Olds was towed into town by a donkey team. The car, registration 8996, remained at the Crossing and Mrs. Bell proceeded on with another 1925 Oldsmobile supplied by Derby local, William John (Jack) Carey. Carey's Oldsmobile had arrived in the district in August and was intended for use as a hire vehicle. The written agreement Bell and Carey came to included that they would exchange Oldsmobiles, she would arrange to make good the car she left behind for Carey, and pay his expenses on the rest of the journey, including his steamer fare from Fremantle to Derby when he returned to Western Australia, Carey then accompanied Mrs. Bell from Fitzroy Crossing through to Toowoomba, his knowledge of the inland tracks undoubtedly invaluable. He also later asserted that some of the journey eastward he at times drove for Mrs. Bell. Carey returned by coastal steamer to the west and collected Marion Bell's Oldsmobile, selling it not long afterwards and buying a Nash 7-seater.

As Mrs. Bell proceeded around the country she was frequently received by local dignitaries and crowds of well-wishers, while newspapers reported her progress of with an air of excitement about this intrepid woman. From Katherine to Newcastle Waters rainfall made progress slow in places but she arrived at Camooweal, Qld., on November 27th and Brisbane on December 8th. She arrived in Sydney in time for Christmas resuming her trip, via Melbourne, two weeks later. In Melbourne the Bell's were feted by the Women's Automobile Club, among others, and her departure was delayed till February 10th due to her daughter's ill health. In Adelaide she was welcomed by a procession of cars and after a stay of nearly two weeks she was farewelled by another procession and a crowd of thousands. Taking the coast road via Port Augusta she was held up for several day by floods near Fowler's Bay, then she travelled by Eucla and Norseman to Kalgoolie, on roads that were severely

affected by the rainfall. The Bell's arrival at the Perth GPO on April 7th was greeted by a crowd of several thousands

Marion Bell's round Australia drive initially was hailed a great success - one ordinary car, a woman and her daughter, pluckily circumnavigating the continent, but regrettably her recounting of the journey was soon revealed as being somewhat sensationalized. This resulted in public disagreements with Warner, and the Perth *Mirror* and *Smith's Weekly* did exposes unpicking her stories about tribal warfare, being stranded for days, extricating her bogged vehicle herself, and that her own Oldsmobile completed the entire journey. Clearly the car she started with was not the one she finished with back in Perth. However, the Oldsmobile that did the bulk of the journey, Carey's vehicle, actually seems to have accomplished the punishing mileages with a minimum of problems.

It is unfortunate that the controversies and storytelling quickly undid Marion Bell's claims about driving single-handedly around the country, about the indigenous tribal war she stopped, as well as the local dealership's advertising that the Olds used was just one car. The disputed retelling of the events with Warner tarnished what otherwise was an adventurous and, overall, a successful journey.

Marion Bell's automotive career and influence should not just be judged by that journey in 1925, for she was a keen motorist who turned her interest into businesses. In 1924 she established a Perth-Fremantle bus service in the 1920s, for some years driving buses herself on that route. New vehicle registrations and transfers for Mrs. Bell in the 1920s include makes such as Federal and Hudson.



The Marion Bell Char-A-Banc Service fleet in procession, Perth, 24 July 1925.

https://purl.slwa.wa.gov.au/slwa_b6574667_2 Image held by the State Library of Western Australia

After selling the buses she and her husband took over the local Fremantle taxi business, operating out of her own service station and taxi headquarters. Mrs. Bell was the first woman to obtain a taxi license in Perth and was still driving taxis during WW2. In 1929, by arrangement with the Fremantle St. John Ambulance, she conducted the local ambulance service, on numerous occasions driving the ambulance herself to accident calls and hiring trained ambulance officers. She also found the time to teach many men and women to drive.

De Luxe Sedan Taxis garage, 6 Elder Place
Fremantle, 1929.

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