

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, June 11, 2012

History of Rental Cars: For many years, we have taken for granted that rental cars are available everywhere in developed countries around the world and can be picked up at almost all airports. Perhaps 25% of the cars on the road are rented rather than owned by the driver, his family, or the company he works for. It was not always that way. The rapid expansion of air travel after World War II was directly responsible for most of the growth in rental cars and the companies that engaged in that business.

In the late 1930s, when I stayed with my father at the Dayton Biltmore Hotel in the Ohio city of that name, we could look out our bedroom window at a neon sign atop a building across the street that read, "Rent-a-Car, You Drive It." For many years thereafter, we never knew anyone who had experienced this adventure. When a friend of mine from the Cleveland area and I found ourselves in San Francisco for a day following our tour of duty in the western Pacific in August 1946, we found a small parking lot off a side street where a man rented cars. He rented us the last car he had (I think he owned about six "rental cars"), a 1938 Dodge. We gave him a small cash deposit and off we went to see the sights. It was 9 or 10 P.M. when we wanted to turn in the car, and our trusting rental-car owner was closed up, and no information was around to tell us what to do. We left the car in his lot, along with its key, and a note giving my home address. We went across the bay and spent the night at the Oakland Army Base, before our eastbound troop train pulled out the next day. A few days after I reached home, a bill came through, I sent a check to pay for our car rental, and my Cleveland friend reimbursed me for half of it.

I think Hertz was the first company to start renting cars in a big way, with offices at airports all over the country. Avis soon followed. Then came many others, including National, Budget, and Alamo. In connection with trips sold, travel agents often "sold" rental cars, and there was fierce competition between Hertz and Avis for an agent's business. When I went to California for a 10-day winter trip in 1957, Avis rented a car to me "gratis" with pick-up in Los Angeles and drop-off in San Francisco, both at downtown offices, not at airports. The car was a 1956 Plymouth with bald tires. When it started to snow about two inches every five minutes in Sequoia National Park, I slipped and slid and almost got stranded between Sequoia and Kings Canyon, with no other traffic for miles around. A second try at a long grade was successful, and I made it through until I descended toward Fresno, where snow changed to rain.

Renting cars in the U.K. was slightly more complicated, although I had done it the first time successfully in 1951. On my second try in 1960, I was flying on SAS to Prestwick Airport in Scotland, and a rental agency in Glasgow, 30 miles away, said they would have the car at the airport when I arrived in late morning. The DC-7 encountered engine trouble before take-off from Idlewild (JFK) Airport, and the airline put us up and fed us for 18 hours. I told them about my rental car, and they said they would wire ahead and cancel. Instead of "late morning," we arrived at Prestwick about 3 A.M. the next day, the car rental company had not been advised of any change from the original, and a man was there at that hour, having waited about 18 hours for me to appear. I didn't want the car in the middle of a Scottish night, but I didn't have the heart to tell him I couldn't take it, so off I started from Prestwick at 4 A.M. headed for the shipyards along the Clyde, Loch Lomond, Stirling Castle, and Edinburgh. I stopped for breakfast at a small inn on the shore of Loch Lomond, but the kitchen caught fire, and breakfast was aborted. The small rental car had a very tired driver, but all was well.