Review: 'The Vagabonds,' by Jeff Guinn

NONFICTION: "The Vagabonds" examines the personality and character of Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, Harvey Firestone and John Burroughs — and the early days of travel by car.

By GLENN C. ALTSCHLULER Special to the Star Tribune | JULY 26, 2019 — 10:00AM

By 1920, a joke about “The Vagabonds” appeared frequently in print and on the vaudeville circuit. A car breaks down in a field, in front of a farmer. Four men get out to determine what happened. The farmer asks if something might be wrong with the engine, the battery or the tires. The passengers respond with three definitive “no’s.” “You say you are Ford, Edison and Firestone,” the farmer exclaims, throwing up his hands. “And I suppose this old guy with the white beard [John Burroughs, the naturalist] is going to tell me he’s Santa Claus.”

In “The Vagabonds,” Jeff Guinn, the author of books about Bonnie and Clyde, the Gunfight at the O.K. Corral, Charles Manson and Jonestown, tells the story of the auto-camping summer sojourns of these distinguished Americans. Guinn covers some familiar ground, including Ford’s anti-Semitism, his presidential aspirations and his refusal to manufacture colorful, eye-catching successors to the Model T; and Edison’s unsuccessful attempt to design an electric car. His book, however, is at its best in illuminating the personalities of his subjects, their relationships with one another, and the early days of automobile travel.

Ford, Edison, Firestone and Burroughs, we learn, were complicated human beings, capable of pettiness, self-absorption and generosity. Ford bought a home for the financially strapped Burroughs. Edison delivered advice to the combative car manufacturer through intermediaries. Firestone agreed to serve as a willing lieutenant and logistics coordinator for the auto campers, rather than a fellow general. Burroughs genuinely admired his travel companions. And the Vagabonds tried to cater to the personal preferences of Edison, who preferred rough, hilly dirt roads, and Burroughs, who found fault with food temperatures and meal times.

At the same time, the quartet — and their spouses — could be resentful and disputatious. Mina Edison complained that with the Fords “everything is comfortable and luxurious but you have no say as to what you can do.” Firestone seethed when Ford, who loathed sugary soft drinks and candy, smashed a box of confections and flung it into the street.

The Vagabonds’ car trips ended in 1924. Burroughs had died three years earlier, and Edison, citing stomach ailments and “concerns about the sales end of business,” begged off. Firestone blamed the decision to pull the plug on insatiable public interest that robbed them of privacy.

Guinn disagrees. The Vagabonds, he indicates, had actively sought publicity: They conducted tree chopping contests, invited President Warren Harding to join them, and “dropped in” on President Calvin Coolidge. By 1925, auto camping was common; the Vagabonds were competing with a new generation of celebrities, whose ranks included movie stars and athletes: There was nothing sufficiently special about three friends, “even such well-known men, driving and camping to warrant national attention.”

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