

# THE SUFFRAGIST SAFFRON SAXON

by Jeryl Schriever



Nell Richardson (left) and Alice Burke (right) in their Saxon

It was 1916 and Alice Snitjer Burke, 41, had spunk. Add her mechanical ability and her passion for a cause — suffrage — and she was the perfect person to break new ground. The first woman suffrage team to drive across the country — and back — when roads were indistinguishable from dirt paths and a revolution raged along the southern border, Alice and her companion Nell Richardson spread the word, working for a woman's right to vote. In a 10,700 mile odyssey lasting 178 days, visiting 125 cities,<sup>1</sup> the two women forged tough ruts and mud, streams and snowstorms, bullets, deserts and protesters.

A year before her historic trip, Alice, with a companion Olive Jones, spread the word on a two month campaign through New York state in a Saxon four. The car, painted the official yellow of suffrage, was named "Victory, 1915". Despite being assaulted by tossed duck eggs near Albany, this trip gave Alice the confidence to tackle the much longer trip in the following year — 10,700 miles and, of course, the car had to be a Saxon.

The principle driver would be Alice. Nell would take care of cooking when needed. Each woman had seven prepared speeches that they would deliver along the route. The women made their own dresses, matching the car with their materials and colors to "preserve harmony."<sup>2</sup> "The design of the [dress] material is calculated to arrest the eye. Large, bright, yellow stripes running up and down are the chief feature. Mrs. Burke is embroidering a wreath of which "votes for women" in script is the motif, on the front of every waist."<sup>3</sup> The Saxon "is a gorgeous yellow, with white slip covers, doors of 'campaign blue,' boasts pocket vases of flowers, yellow flag sticks and 'Votes for Women' banners and a chesty American eagle on the radiator"<sup>4</sup> The names of their major destinations were painted on the doors. The Saxon was filled with what Alice and Nell thought they needed for the adventure. The *San Jose Mercury News*, Alice's former hometown newspaper, reported:

[The Saxon has] a complete camping outfit with a mass of other equipment. The little car carries a surprisingly large load. Stored away in it are extra parts in almost sufficient number to build a new car, 20 dresses each for the two occupants, ten shirtwaists apiece, two raincoats, two heavy coats, two sweaters and a lot of literature which is being distributed along the route."<sup>5</sup>

They also packed blankets, a typewriter, fireless cooker, sewing machine and a kodak. The ladies believed every woman should be able to do her own dress repair and carried the sewing machine "so they could keep their garments in good order throughout the long journey."<sup>6</sup> Along the way they would also pick up a revolver.

## THE JOURNEY BEGINS

Car packed, the women were ready. On Thursday, April 6, 1916 in New York City, their Saxon was christened "Golden Flyer" by Carrie Chapman Catt, president of the National Suffrage Association. In Mrs. Catt's enthusiasm it seems she hit the champagne bottle full of gasoline a bit too hard on the Saxon and dented the radiator. Someone handed the travelers a black kitten which they named "Saxon". A tearful woman gave Alice a \$10 dollar gold piece. With this grand send-off, in a flurry of banners and daffodils, with an escort of thirty cars as far as the Weehawken Ferry, Alice Snitjer Burke and Nell Richardson started their grand adventure.



The Saxon being christened by Carrie Chapman Catt in New York City

First stop: Trenton, New Jersey where they gave a speech at noon. Friday they drove to Philadelphia for a noon talk, then to Wilmington for an evening gathering. They ran into a snowstorm the following day and, plowing through mud and slush, chugged into Baltimore in what was not the triumphal entry they had anticipated. At an indoor reception they seemed to still be in good spirits. “After all,” they laughed, “The picture men were on the watchout for us, so you see we were expected.”<sup>7</sup>



April 7, 1916 photo, George Gratham Bain Collection- Library of Congress

Sunday, they drove to Washington DC. Monday, things did not go as well as they had hoped. The road from Washington to Fredericksburg was referred to by the women as “the worst road in America”<sup>8</sup>

After they had left Washington [the women] were compelled by the condition of the highway to wire Washington for assistance. D.S. Ferguson of the A.A.A. joined them and as they drove slowly through the darkness he walked ahead in the glare of the little cars big searchlight, and with a long pole took soundings as might the watch in the bow of a ship and called back to the women instructions as to how to steer over the shoals. At that the car got stuck in the mud and there it stayed until 5:30 a.m., when a pair of mules were driven to the rescue.”<sup>5</sup>

By April 12, the Saxon had made it to Richmond. The *San Jose Mercury News* of April 23 reprinted the following *Richmond Virginian* story following reports of a difficult anti-suffrage exchange:

With womanliness she explained the motor car ... she had a typewriter, a sewing machine, every rod and bolt necessary to repair the car, 16 shirtwaists and so many suits in the car. Look, she said, and see if you can tell where they are? Everybody looked. When the machine was ready to start Mrs Burke got out and cranked it with her own small hands. Half a dozen of the most critical started forward. Everybody wanted to crank it for her yet somehow bashfulness got the best of them. “When I was a young woman” she said “I” but she never finished. The crowd laughed and cheered and nobody could tell her age for the smile she handed that crowd made them stand back as “The Golden Flier” shot past into the night, the little lady at the steering wheel waving a last farewell.<sup>5</sup>

Over the next two weeks, Alice and Nell spread the word in Norfolk, Henderson, Raleigh, Augusta and Montgomery where a crowd of two hundred gathered to hear the women. Nell told the crowd they had met with courtesy in all Southern cities and that they had experienced but one accident. That was when it became necessary to ford a stream. The car got stuck and the only way to start the engine was to wade into almost ice-cold water. After a struggle, another automobile arrived and pulled the “little yellow Saxon” to high, dry land.<sup>9</sup>

“We had to camp out one night because our car stuck fast in a bog” related Mrs. Burke. “The greatest adventures we have had, though, were when we were ferried across streams in South Alabama at the rate of about a half a mile a day. We often were drenched all over, but it wasn’t so bad when we knew that tucked away in our waterproof chest were plenty of warm dry things including two evening frocks ready to put on.”<sup>10</sup>

*Life is a series of mud puddles,  
with a creek now and then to  
relieve the monotony.*

— Alice Burke

Audiences were not only curious about the suffrage movement but also about a woman’s ability to manage a car. “Yes, I can run this machine without any help and without getting all messy,” said Alice. “I’ve brought one of those clown bag suits which just let my feet and hands through. This is my working suit. Its of deep pink linen, You can see it a mile, particularly when I stand up beside the car”<sup>11</sup> When interviewers puzzled about the sewing machine and typewriter, she said “If any anti-suffragist down in Texas makes remarks about suffrage destroying women’s feminine talents it will be Miss

Richardson's cue to get out the sewing machine and run off an apron while the crowd waits. If, on the other hand, he says women have no brains, she will pull out the typewriter and write him a poem."<sup>12</sup>

They arrived in Gulfport, Mississippi on Wednesday, April 26. As they did every night, Alice and Nell used their little car for a speaking platform, lit by four small "yellow moons of light"<sup>3</sup> run from the car's storage batteries. Alice's former platform had been a soap box and now it was their Saxon.

Thursday, April 27, the women headed for New Orleans.

Early Friday morning a small, jonquil-colored car containing two women, a chest of clothes and a small black cat, rolled out [of] an Orleans garage and sped away in the direction of Baton Rouge. They arrived in New Orleans Thursday morning by train. For the first time during their 15,000 mile trip through 'border states,' that they had had to ship their car and ride the train a while. Near Gulfport the streams proved no longer fordable, and the road mud altogether too deep for the little yellow car. Life, to two suffrage crusaders, is a series of mud puddles, with a creek now and then to relieve the monotony. This, Mrs. Burke confided Thursday evening, while the small black kitten climbed up one of her arms and curled up comfortably on her shoulder.<sup>10</sup>

The cat was still with them. "We've had an awful time smuggling him into hotels," said Mrs. Burke. "What do you suppose the management would do now of they knew we had a cat up here? This morning on the train we were miserable afraid the conductor would find out we had him."<sup>10</sup>

Traveling from New Orleans to Baton Rouge also proved a challenge. On the way, the Saxon twisted an axle when it hit a rut. The following morning, Saturday, April 29 — their 25th day on the road — a quick repair was accomplished. The women had a schedule to keep. Off they headed to Morgan City and Lake Charles, Louisiana with Texas on the horizon.

A dangerous road lay ahead. 1916 was the time of Mexican civil war: the days of Pancho Villa and General John Pershing.

"We will touch the Mexican border four times on our trip to the coast and this has caused our friends in New York to become anxious about us," Alice said. "They have tried to dissuade us from taking the southern route to the coast, but we do not think we will have any trouble, though no doubt the Mexicans would consider it quite a feast to capture us because we have been so widely advertised in the United States."<sup>13</sup>

In an June interview Alice had a lot to tell her California audience:

[She] told of bad roads through Texas and of the fact that all of the men went armed about the streets. At several of the towns where they remained they were warned that if the fire bell rang they should run for the schoolhouse without even waiting to dress as it would be a signal that the Mexicans were raiding the town. The two women were stalled in the road in the center of a barren waste where the only persons in sight were Mexican horsemen.<sup>8</sup>

*It was 8 o'clock and night was falling. We took the revolver, our water bag and the cat and walked five miles to town.*

— Nell Richardson

For days the young women traveled along the Mexican border without seeing a white man. They were never molested, though they feared kidnapping, because they had been so thoroughly advertised and were afraid that some Mexican bandits might get them and hold them for ransom. They had to leave the regular trail several times because of the war conditions. At one place they passed along the Rio Grande with Mexicans on one side and American soldiers on the other, both firing at each other while the automobile passed between.<sup>14</sup>

“Once in New Mexico we were stuck - just couldn’t move,” added Nell “It was 8 o’clock and night was falling. We took the revolver, our water bag and the cat and walked five miles to town.”<sup>15</sup>

The personal experiences of the venturesome young women have not been remarkable nor startling except for the fact that they were lost for four days in the desert west of Phoenix and had to walk when their engine went dry twice. “My, but water, or anything that passes for it, tastes good on the desert,” said Miss Richardson. “We had water in a bag for drinking purposes, but the machine went dry and [we] had to use it for the radiator. Then we got lost and by the time we found the trail we were out of water again and had to abandon the machine. We walked seven miles to the next stopping place and there found a hole which the signboard said was a well. We dug into it and found feathers and a dead chicken in the stuff called water. Say but that stuff tasted good. Water on the desert is funny water. The more you drink of it the more thirsty you get, but it keeps you from dying.” Somebody came along and brought their machine in and they resumed their trip, but the next night they ran out of water and had to walk back five miles for help.<sup>14</sup>

“...[Nell] laughs over times that they have had lain under the car on the hot desert sands of Texas and New Mexico and adjusted bolts and screws. No indeed; she didn’t see any need of a man along to spoil the trip.”<sup>15</sup>

Despite being 11 days late, Yuma was happy to see Alice and Nell and held a parade in their honor. It can be imagined that the women were happy to see Yuma too.

On June 3rd, the 60th day of their journey, Alice and Nell in their trusty Saxon reached San Diego.

The car is a Saxon four cylinder roadster and it will be on display all day Sunday at the new Saxon show. An hour’s work on the little Saxon was all that was required and that was devoted to an inspection of the various parts and bearings which had been running smoothly and evenly on the long transcontinental trip. “One would hardly suspect that the little roadster had come farther away than San Francisco” remarked Howard B. Smith, the Saxon distributor for San Diego and imperial counties, while looking at the car at his garage, “but its record is complete and its driver, Mrs Burke, is in line for one of the [Panama-Pacific international] exposition medals for a long distance motoring to the ‘Dream City.’”<sup>16</sup>

After a week’s stay in San Diego, the “Golden Flyer” headed for San Jose, a place Alice had once called home. Twenty five cars were requested to accompany the women into town. There were flags, flowers thrown by school children to welcome their local hero and then the key to the city.<sup>17</sup> Quite a reception for the local heroine.

The suffragists and their cat mascot which plainly showed the effects of the desert trip, were surrounded on the plaza de Panama by hundreds of Exposition visitors and questioned .....Mrs. Burke said that bad roads were the rule during most of the trip and that in parts of the south they were almost impassable. She declared that the roads encountered in San Diego county were boulevards compared to some they passed over in the south. Owing to the poor condition of the roads, the “Golden Flyer” is ten days behind schedule.<sup>18</sup>

After a long San Jose visit with friends and family including Alice’s 20 year-old daughter, the women hit the road again, going north to Oregon and Washington. Portland received the Alice and Nell on July 8 and then Seattle on July 14. *The Anaconda Standard* (Montana) reported: “From an automobilist standpoint the trip has been remarkable. They have so far had no engine trouble and traveled 6,400 miles without a puncture or blow out. Just as they reached Spokane they have had one puncture.”<sup>14</sup>

The trip continued through Idaho, Montana, and South Dakota, staying near Aberdeen for two weeks of August to help the midwest women with their fight for suffrage.

Apparently getting women the right to vote wasn't the only thing on Alice and Nell's minds. In July in Anaconda, Montana they were quoted "I am going to take up the fight for good roads. It is a shame that this great and rich nation maintains such frightful roads, and I will be able to speak from some very intimate knowledge and sad experience."<sup>(51)</sup> Nell added, "We found little patches of good roads here and there and the best piece of road the whole trip so far is between Drummond and Butte. Many big machines couldn't go where we went and had to turn back, especially north of San Francisco. Rains, floods and washouts have made portions of the roads almost impassable."<sup>(51)</sup> Continuing their remarks, "If war broke out tomorrow we never could get our troops anywhere. We have had to go through sand so deep a mule could not pull out of it, many of the bridges have been washed away and the ruts formed by the cakes of mud were fully three feet deep....Only 10 per cent of the roads we have covered have been good."<sup>19</sup>

On they went to Detroit, arriving on September 23, the 172 day of their trek. The *Jackson Citizen Patriot* in Michigan reported that the women were "exactly according to schedule. Not once has she been delayed by repairs to the car which has crossed the southern deserts of Nevada and California and the norther wastes of Utah, to say nothing of the eastern and western mountain ranges."<sup>(27)</sup> Really?

It is reported that Alice and Nell cut through Canada then to Buffalo, Rochester and back to New York City, arriving September 30, their car covered with autographs and slogans like "Eat raisins in California" and "Best city of all, Spokane"<sup>21</sup>

Last Saturday [September 30] Mrs. Alice Snitjer Burke and Miss Nell Richardson honked bravely down Fifth Avenue in the little yellow suffrage car, the Golden Flier, which has carried them 10,700 miles since they left here April [6]. They came in with the mud and dust of thirty-six states on their tires, with deer antlers from Idaho on the back of their car, a twenty-four inch key to San Jose sticking over one side, and the suffrage cat, Saxon, still hale and hearty. Being lost four days in the Arizona desert, shot at on the Mexican border, stuck in six feet of snow in the mountain country of Washington, and losing an axle in the Oregon river were some of the experiences the dauntless pair told at the tea which was given for them the afternoon of their return, when all the suffrage leaders welcomed the wanderers home...<sup>22</sup>



SUFFRAGE PILGRIMS COMPLETE U. S. TOUR

Mrs. Alice Snitje Burke and Miss Nell Richardson have just finished a country-wide tour in behalf of suffrage. Upon their return to New York they were greeted by a parade of suffragists in motor cars. The mascot in Miss Richardson's lap was dubbed Saxon in honor of the car that carried the trio. The list of cities visited and the date are on the door

Motor Age magazine, Autumn 1916

It wasn't surprising that a Saxon was used for this remarkable journey. Kenneth Florey in his article *Suffrage Autos-a New Form of Freedom* wrote:

So closely was the Saxon to become identified with the movement that a song published in 1915 by Ella Lowe and Edward Johnson called *November* heralded the use of the car for suffrage activities: "In a Saxon built for two - I will save a place for you - in asking for the franchise - next November." Automobiles driven by women were to become a standard feature in suffrage parades, serving not only as floats but perhaps also as a not-so-subtle message pertaining to the liberation of womanhood.<sup>23</sup>

Alice and Nell's 1916 tour car was donated by the Saxon Automobile Company which assumed the expense of the upkeep of the car and garaging it.<sup>24</sup> It is unclear whether this was the same Saxon used in Alice's 1915 trip or a new one. Looking at photos, the Saxons looks similar except for wheels and an obvious dent in the left front fender on the 1915 car. The wheels could have been switched and the fender mended or the car replaced. Whether the previous Saxon or a new one, it was not specifically outfitted for the 1916 trip.

Saxon Motor car company was quick to use the Alice Burke and Nell Richardson's trip in their promotions, placing the women's photos prominently in the upper corners over the Saxon in ads: *Two Noted Suffragists Travel 10,000 Miles in a Saxon Roadster*. It should be noted that the Saxon Motor Car Corporation left out a comment made by Alice on her return to New York: "[I] had some harrowing experiences ..... and declare that \$10,000 in advance would be no inducement to make the trip again."<sup>25</sup>



**SAXON**  
Strength Economy Service

Mrs. Burke  
Miss Richardson

**Two Noted Suffragists  
Travel 10,000 Miles in Saxon Roadster**

Last April Mrs. Alice Snitzer Burke and Miss Nell Richardson left New York to tour the U. S. A. in behalf of woman's suffrage.

After carefully considering the merits of many makes of cars they finally selected Saxon Roadster as the ablest car for the long gruelling itinerary.

For five months they sped from city to city, from town to town, following a definite schedule, covered 10,000 miles, and were never late once.

Over both the Eastern and Western mountain ranges, across the and deserts of Nevada and California as well as the great

waste stretches of Utah, and through mud hub deep, wet Saxon Roadster surmounting every obstacle of road and weather. Today it is ready for another such trip.

Throughout the entire journey Mrs. Burke and Miss Richardson handled the wheel, changing tires when necessary, and personally gave all the slight service that was necessary to keep the car in perfect condition.

So that this trip furnishes not only convincing evidence of the remarkable endurance of Saxon Roadster, but also a striking testimonial to the ease with which it is handled.

You are urged to visit the nearest Saxon dealer and view the beautiful, new series Saxon Roadster which has a 2-rod starting and lighting system and 20 other fine-car improvements. Price \$495 f. o. b., Detroit.

**SAXON MOTOR CAR CORPORATION, DETROIT**

## BIOGRAPHIES

### Alice Snitjer Armstrong Burke

Alice was born in Illinois on May 12, 1875. A family move was made to San Jose, California in 1894 for the health of Alice's mother, Fannie Bonney Snitjer. On New Years Eve in 1894, Alice married Charles Armstrong and had a daughter, Bonney, in 1896. Charles joined Roosevelt's Rough Riders in 1898 but he soon succumbed to typhoid fever contracted in Cuba. Two years after Charles' death, Alice married Richard Burke, a doctor in San Jose, California. Dr. Burke died within a year of the marriage, leaving Alice a widow, twice, by the age of 26. Alice's father, Drikus Snitjer, came from Holland as a teenager and became an inventor of a sort while working for a sewing machine company and used this ability later when he became a fruit tree grower. Alice shared his interest in mechanics and both father and daughter held patents on mechanical devices. Alice certainly put her mechanical ability to good use during the cross-country trek. Alice and Bonney moved in with Alice's parents after Dr. Burke's death. Around 1906, Alice left her daughter, Bonney, with her parents and made a new life for herself. She reunited with her daughter while in Modesto, California during the car tour. It had been 10 years since they had seen each other. When asked about her public speaking, Alice said of a day in 1914:

I was standing on a corner turning over sheets on which were printed suffrage arguments when a man in the crowd said something about the English militants. Something within me pushed me right back on that soap box and I answered that man and talked for an hour. My friends were surprised, and so was I. That incident gave me the confidence I lacked and I certainly have done some speaking since. Why right out on the corner of Ninety-sixth street and Broadway I spoke 165 nights from my little soap box. I didn't want to be confined to one district, so I resigned for the woman suffrage party and 'freelanced': that is, I went where a pleased, into the theatre district, into Wall street, any place where I thought I could push along the Cause for the vote. I suppose I must have looked odd, for every evening I would take my little soap box under my arm and march down into the subway and go to my meeting place. The passengers looked askance at me, but even that aided the cause. It drew attention to equal suffrage, and made men and women think. It's the same with the yellow suffrage car: folks along the street stand and gape at it with its yellow banner. They're thinking!<sup>26</sup>

Alice continued her suffrage work until the 19th amendment passed in 1920 and after became interested in raising Scottie dogs. She died on February 11, 1948.

### Nell Richardson

Nell's age is unclear. She arrived in New York in 1913 from Virginia to visit Alice Burke. In a short time Nell too was giving soap box speeches, her official position was as 'organizing secretary for the New York City party'<sup>27</sup> Little is known, at this point, about her life.

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