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Eighty Miles in Five Hours: Observations From a Dalton Taxicab

Apparently Dalton Taxicab doesn't have many visitors to its main office. The building, part of a long dilapidated block hidden behind herds of U-Haul trailers being rented by the business next door, was difficult to find. The dispatcher (who I later learned is also the company's owner) greeted me with a grunt and indicated that I should wait in a small front room for my ride to arrive. In taxi driver argot, the main dispatch center and garage area is known as a "stand." Looking around I can understand why; this little building was little more than loose walls leaning against each other, a permanent stand about as permanent as a flea market booth. The sticky waiting room with humid tile floors only had three chairs, and two of those held ashtrays overflowing with spent cigarette butts. The third chair appeared to be holding up the room's crumbling, warped panelling walls, so in the interest of safety I waited on my feet. While pacing around the glass box of a room I noticed that the building's parking lot was filled almost beyond its capacity with junked cars -- worn out taxis mixed in with a few unmarked cars, mostly General Motors vehicles from the early 1990's. The sound of air wrenches coming from behind the building confirmed my suspicion that the taxi company was as much a salvage yard as it was a transport business, retaining several employees who do little more than combine disabled vehicles into usable, running taxicabs. Taxi service-cum-junkyard.

After waiting around for half an hour, a red and white taxi pulled into the parking lot and the dispatcher told me my ride had arrived. I hopped in the front seat next to Teresa, one of the company's lessees -- a driver who leases a cab each day. As we pulled out of the parking lot I noticed that the cab was a 1992 Chevrolet Caprice with some 214,000 miles on its odometer. This particular taxi overheats when the air conditioning is on, so we had to ride around on a sweltering 92-

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degree day in late April with our arms hanging out the open windows. Taxi companies generally run on slim profit margins and Dalton Taxicab is no exception. After paying expenses, lease fees the company gets each day from its drivers don't go far enough for pay for luxury items like nice buildings, new cars, or functional climate control systems. Teresa never said how much she makes from her job, but it's quite obvious that there won't be many taxi drivers on the Forbes 400 list. Since drivers lease the cars they don't get paid per hour, instead trying to profit from whatever remains of the \$1.50 they charge per mile after paying for fuel, food, and having the car washed at the end of each shift.

The first passenger we picked up was waiting at a Conoco convenience store off Walnut Avenue, near the Office Depot. He was an older gentleman, wearing about a day's worth of beard stubble and rumpled dirty clothing that smelled of alcohol. "Bud" got in and told Teresa he wanted to go home. The man never explained where home was, but Teresa knew precisely where to take him. She later explained that she has memorized Bud's face and the location of his home because he takes a taxi home almost every morning. She commented that keeping up with faces and houses is easier than memorizing names and numbers, especially when you have a particular face associated with a certain destination. During the short trip, Bud explained that he had gone to the Conoco to inquire about purchasing a cellular phone but decided not to get one after learning that his bad credit history would require an advance deposit of some five hundred dollars. The rest of the ride to his house was spent discussing his ex-wife and how her spending habits had put him in such poor financial shape. That notwithstanding, the six-block taxi ride home cost him \$4.70 -- enough money for lunch at a decent fast food restaurant gone in less than four minutes.

After we left Bud there were no more waiting customers so Teresa pulled into a vacant lot and explained a few aspects of the Taxi business. Just like police officers or truck drivers, cabbies use codes to report their status to the other drivers and the stand. After dropping off a passenger Teresa radioed in and told them she was "10-2-29" -- 10 for the car number, 2 meaning the cab was empty and ready for another customer, and 29 for the location. Dalton Taxicab has some 35 or 40 location codes for different places inside the city. Some of the codes cover a broad area while others

are more exact; popular destinations like Wal-Mart and the shopping mall have their own area numbers while other numbers cover multiple city blocks spread over several square miles.

While we waited for business to pick up, Teresa explained more about herself and her family, telling me about her husband (one of Dalton Taxicab's mechanics), her two children, and their struggles with the local public school system. Teresa obviously loves the job she does, but dislikes the hours necessary to make any money doing it. She works a 12-hour shift six days a week, coming in at 5 in the morning and working until 5 or whenever her replacement finally comes in. All the driving and repetitive motion has left her nearly crippled in one shoulder, unable to lift or carry anything with her right arm.

Before long the dispatcher told Teresa she had a fare waiting, so we sped off to pick him up in a bad part of town known for its gang and drug activity. Teresa said that the cab drivers are not allowed to wait for passengers in that community or circle the block to pick someone up -- if a customer isn't waiting, the cab moves on. This policy is apparently in place to prevent cab operators from being held liable for any illegal behavior a passenger is involved with. This time the passenger was waiting on the sidewalk and immediately climbed in. A tall African American man, wearing black jeans and a dark t-shirt, he told Teresa to take him to work. Since he was another regular customer who goes to the same place every day she knew exactly where to go -- but after he got out she told me that the only "work" he does at the house where we left him is selling drugs. That, explained Teresa, is why she would not work at night for any amount of money: too many drug users and violent drunks riding at night give the job too much risk for someone with dependant children. That fear of being involved with criminal activity is also why Teresa keeps a hand-written log of all her passengers. Having a brief description and the pickup/dropoff locations for each passenger would, in theory, aid police in solving crimes like bank robberies and theft -- but as of April 15, 2002, she had never been asked to provide anyone with such information.

As soon as that passenger exited the cab, we were sent to pick up another customer waiting in a city apartment nearby. This rider was an elderly woman, tall and thin, with varicose veins on her hands and a terrible ragged cough. She asked to go to the Wal-Mart for a weekly shopping trip. En

route to the store we were held up by an accident in one intersection; a late-model Lexus had collided head on with a 1970's Pontiac, scattering glass and debris across three lanes of highway. One of the half-dozen police officers standing in the street routed us down a detour and Teresa shot across a shopping center parking lot to get us back on the route to Wal-Mart.

After leaving the store we were called to go across town and pick up a fare at the StayLodge right outside city limits near the interstate. Apparently the lodge has more permanent residents than traveling visitors, as Teresa has to pick up the same groups of people there on a regular basis. This time the passengers were a large well-built African American man and a tall skinny Caucasian teen with pierced ears, eyebrows, chin, and nose. They wanted to go to the Total Look beauty salon and style shop. The trip would have ordinarily taken five minutes, but because of a second wreck blocking our route it ended up taking almost five times as long to deliver them to their destination. The total fare was twice as high as it would have been otherwise, so Teresa kindly rounded it down to the lowest dollar figure.

The next call was to a new apartment complex where a young Hispanic couple was waiting on a ride to the Wal-Mart. These were the only Hispanics we carried during my five hours of observation, a surprising fact since they now comprise more than a third of Dalton's population. According to Teresa, most of the passengers she carries for Dalton Taxicab are white or black because the majority of local Hispanics prefer to use transport businesses that cater to their culture. The Hispanic cab companies are owned by other Hispanics who benefit from the business and they have employees who speak the language natively. Dalton Taxicab has done almost nothing to increase its appeal to the Hispanic community, so if current population trends hold steady for a few more years the company could eventually be forced out of business by its culture-savvy competitors.

After leaving Wal-Mart again and shooting through the drive-thru at Krystal for some lunch, Teresa headed towards the hospital emergency room to pick up another customer. The passenger was waiting on a bench out front and quickly climbed into the cab. A thin blonde woman with tattooed arms and blue denim overalls, she told us she needed to get to the nearest Pilot truck stop in order to use a company "comp card" and get money from an ATM machine. After several minutes

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of deliberation about the best way to get to the Pilot, Teresa sped off across town trying to get to the stop as quickly as she could. During the drive the woman told us her story, explaining between drags on a cigarette that her husband was a truck driver who had a heart attack en route to Nashville with a load of steel beams from Greene County Georgia. He was able to get them to the hospital and was recovering nicely in the intensive care unit, but his wife had no cash money and didn't have the class-C drivers license necessary to pilot his big rig to the Pilot station. We took her to the truck stop and waited while she got money and purchased a few supplies, then drove her back to the semi truck parked across from the hospital in a funeral home parking lot. The total fare ran up for the trip on Tanya's Centrodyne meter was \$33, a fee the woman happily paid with part of her newly withdrawn cash money.

Our next fare was a man I'll call Jay. We were called to his home near the center of town where most of the passengers had been picked up. Jay asked to go to the Golden Gallon store a few blocks away from his home, then changed his mind halfway there because "they don't have what I need 'cause they're across from a church." He then had Teresa take him to "The 4 Way Store" a few blocks down from the Golden Gallon where he purchased a suitcase of Bud Lite and asked us to take him back home. Teresa and I were quietly discussing people who we had taken to Wal-Mart earlier, a conversation he overheard and in reply commented "beer store is about all I ever want to go to... I aint much for all that shoppin' stuff." I made no comment about his statement, having noticed earlier that he smelled like alcohol and was having trouble standing upright at 4:30 in the afternoon. His two-block 10 minute adventure to "the beer store" cost him about six dollars, not including what he paid for the beer.

The last trip we made was longer than the rest. From the Priority Care walk-in clinic near the hospital we carried a man named Jerry to his home in Chatsworth, some 15 miles out of town. He was a regular passenger of Teresa's and had been travelling from his home to the clinic and back several times a week. Jerry explained that he was on disability, having been injured almost a year ago in a carpet mill accident that permanently cost him the use of his right hand. His disability insurance paid for the trip in advance, reimbursing Teresa \$20 each time. On the way there we went

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by another auto accident, the third in four hours. Apparently the sun that was beating down and cooking my right arm (Taxicab Arm Syndrome, according to Teresa) was frying the brains of Dalton's citizens and causing them to lose their ability to drive.

After returning from Chatsworth it was time for Teresa to turn her cab over to the company and go home. But before doing that she was required to fuel up the Caprice and clean it up inside and out for the overnight driver. She put \$17 of her profit into the gas tank, then went to the self-wash and spent another buck on four minutes of soap and water spray. Once around with the soap and once around with the rinse in under four minutes, all the time working furiously on the smoking habit she isn't allowed to pursue in the cab. Then she dropped me off at the stand, turned in her keys, and went home after more than 13 hours on the job. I was physically exhausted and I had only ridden with Teresa for half of her shift – she would be back in 11 hours to do it all over again, just like she has every day for years. If nothing else, the experience made me appreciate my opportunities and the happy fact that I don't have to do physically demanding work to make a living.