

# Driving Miss Yankee

I can still see the looks on my neighbors' faces as I got out of the "marked car" with its 90-by-90-foot "STUDENT DRIVER" marquee recently. Sure, I've been driving for 25 years, but so what? I wanted to learn how to drive "Southern."

The way our friends in the South tell it, Yankees pass on the right, give the finger, tailgate and eat their young while driving.

Southerners, on the other hand, commit only one offense — they wave to old ladies on the porch. "Could be one of Mama's friends," they wonder aloud. "Let me drop off a peach pie, have a sip of sweet tea and talk about the weather before this light turns green."

(BEEEP!!!!!!!!!!!! Followed by lewd hand signals.)

"Oh, I better go, Mrs. Sweet Pea. It's not like it used to be. Everybody's in a hurry nowadays. Like this Yankee fool behind me, bless her heart."

Was there something different in the driver's training down here? Would I become a kinder, gentler driver after my lesson?

I called The Driving School of Cary.

Would they teach me how to scout for Mama's friends and do that "aw shucks" wave from the steering wheel? Would I learn how to drive with a covered dish in my lap and bolt into the left turning lane without spilling the butter beans? Besides the social graces, would I learn how to DRIVE the car?

Would they point out the turn signal? The horn? How about the odometer? Would they teach me how to identify hazards — Yankees — if perchance, they're not making hand gestures?

"May I ask why you want to take a lesson if you already have your license," the instructor inquired.

"Sure," I replied. "I want to learn how to drive Southern."

She thought that was funny.

"Where are you from?"

"Philadelphia."

She thought that was funny, too.

Then I told her I was a columnist. She didn't think that was funny.

"Have you tried Howard's Driving School? Howard's wonderful."

"Yes, I've heard, but I really want to learn from a native."

NEW IN TOWN



Maureen Duffin-Ward

"He's been here for so many years ..."

"Wow. Even the driving schools down here are tough to get in to."

Two days later, she and I were preparing for takeoff.

Talk about humbling. I didn't even pass muster during SMLS (Seat position, Mirrors, Lock door, Seat belt).

"You should be able to keep your right heel on the floor and move comfortably between gas and brake," she said. "How tall are you?"

"I'm kinda short."

"I didn't want to say that. Sit on these two pillows."

Our exit from the parking lot was even more humbling.

"Maureen, I thought with you I could skip the basics, but now I'm wondering. That was not a complete stop. Your tires were still rolling."

As we tooted around the neighborhood and I mastered the rolling turn — "coming up smartly to corner and then slowing for the actual turn" — I was ready to make a left.

Or so I thought.

"You only gave two blinks. And you didn't check your blind spot. The purpose of the turn signal is to communicate with other drivers, to tell them what you're going to do, not what you're in the middle of doing. One, two, three blinks — why bother? And you shouldn't turn the signal off until the car is stable."

So Southerners did know what a turn signal was. Did I? We headed

for another turn.

"Don't just sit there," the instructor said. "Push gas."

"It's funny," I said. "You hear that Yankees are so aggressive; I guess I'm kinda surprised that a Southern driving instructor is actually, well, hurrying me."

"Two hands on the wheel at all times. You tend to talk with your hands. As far as rushing you ... in a perfect world, you'd have all the time in the world. But now we have to teach defensive driving."

"Why is that?" I asked with my hands firmly on the wheel at the 10 and 2 positions.

"You see," she began, "traffic was paced and measured until '85. And then ... may I say ... we had a tremendous influx of more aggressive drivers. It's embarrassing, but now you have to strap on a bayonet."

"The custom in the South was that if you had a funeral procession coming toward you, to show respect you would get off the road and let them bury their dead. In '85, you started to see cars that would keep going. No courtesy, no compassion. ... A Realtor told me that IBM started it. People from the North and West, moving in and snapping up those big houses."

I so wanted to redeem us. To defend Big Blue. Where's a funeral when you're looking for one? But the lesson was over before I spotted a hearse.

So you'll just have my solemn vow. I'll pull over for funerals. Now I've got a challenge for you Southerners. Best parallel-parker takes all?

I don't know about kinder, gentler, but I'm definitely a safer driver thanks to my awesome instructor, whose name is withheld upon her request:

"My Mama taught us the keys to success were to keep your face off the TV and your name out of the paper."

Hmmm. My mama taught me to wear a big marquee.

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