



The following article may be use free of charge with no prior authorization provided that it is used for nonprofit purposes and appears with the author biography at the end of this article intact. Please [email us](#) with any details of its use so that we can keep the author or other interested parties informed of the use of this article.

Hands on the Local Roads

Art Van Aken, Canajoharie, New York

When World War II started, all the boys in my high school class were excited about entering the service, and I was no exception. However, the description of infantry training did not appeal to me but trucks did, so I decided to try for an army transportation unit. While driving on the farm I had learned how to double-clutch, but I figured I'd need to know more than that. When I learned that a driving job had become available with the town highway department, I quit school in order to get some real truck driving experience before Uncle Sam called.

I was given a 1939 Chevrolet dump truck to drive that had no booster brakes and, of course, no power steering. Back then in the Northern Catskill Mountains of New York the roads were dirt, so most of my driving consisted of hauling and spreading gravel. The town only had an old steel wheel, towed grader, and they wanted the gravel spread thin. I soon discovered that by leaving the tailgate flat, the PTO in gear, and maintaining the proper speed, I could spread the gravel out perfectly.

Then one of the men said that it was time for me to try the roller. This sounded fine until I saw what they were referring to. It was a homemade unit, nothing more than a huge old boiler full of concrete that was connected to the truck with a big clevis (U-shaped shackle). They loaded some gravel for weight and started me up a big hill. The poor little Chevy groaned some, but we made it to the top and after a little difficulty turning around in a barnyard, we started back down the hill. The roller was much heavier than the truck, and with the brakes on and the wheels sliding in the loose gravel, the ride down was a thrill a minute.

With that loose coupling, the truck was all over the road and I was hanging onto the steering wheel for dear life. If we had hit a tree, both the truck and I would have been flattened by that roller. After we reached the bottom of the hill safely, my fright gave way to anger, as the road crew was standing there laughing at my antics. But the boss came by and chewed them out for their little joke. In time I learned the proper way to bring the roller downhill with only an occasional hairy ride.

Until the town bought a large plow truck, all the snow plowing was done with two Chevrolet trucks, a 1938 and a 1939, using a Cletrac loader for the heavy work. Each truck was equipped with a V-plow that was raised with a hand-powered hydraulic pump in the cab—the driver had to pump a long lever to raise the plow. No operator-friendly equipment here! It was no wonder that people were snowed in for days and even weeks at a time. Most farmers still had horses so they could get their milk out on time.

Sanding the roads was another fun activity. Two men stood on a load of sand with shovels while a third carefully drove the truck. There was no room for “cowboy” driving because the men rotated between driving and shoveling, and when it was your turn to be on top of the sand, you would have to pay for your wildness. Even so, when the roads were icy the trucks would slide, and some men did get thrown off. Those poor little Chevys took a tremendous beating, pushing snow banks while in first or second gear and the driver’s foot to the floor.

A common problem we encountered was breaking an axle shaft, so we always carried spares. But fishing out the broken pieces in zero-degree weather was interesting. Possibly the worst trouble was wet ignition wires, which usually happened after you rammed a snow bank.

With this truck-driving experience, I was hoping to get into some army truck unit, but I was sent to the infantry after all. The experience was worth it, though, and later I was transferred to an Army truck unit.

Art Van Aken attended GCCS, served with the U.S. Army in Europe during World War II, and until recently was a resident of Conesville. This article had previously been published in the June–July 2005 issue of the magazine Old Time Trucks.

[.pdf file](#) [audio file](#)

To use this article in your newsletter or as a handout, click into the article; select all; copy; and paste into a MSWord file.

Please remember to [let us know](#) of this use so that we can let the author or other interested parties know.

Copyright © 2009
northerncatskillshistory.com
contact.northerncatskillshistory.com
March 4, 2010

