

# One Man's Wheels

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RESIDENTIAL



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I became aware of the potential joy of an automobile affair when I was very young, too young to participate. It was pure fantasy in the beginning, but that is true with many American males and their motor cars. I had a much romanticized image in my head about how it would begin. If you are old enough, or watch some really late night movies on obscure channels, you probably experienced Mickey Rooney in the Hardy Family Series. "The Mick" played Andy Hardy, son of Judge Hardy. In one movie, Judge Hardy surprises Andy with a high school graduation gift: a beautiful new Ford V-8 convertible. I recall it was a '39 or '40, but it was just before WWII. At any rate, that is how a young man of those times ought to have his first serious encounter with his own car.

My style wasn't quite up to those standards. It was the fall of 1949, the beginning of my sophomore year in college and I was living at home. Being a townie, while not the worst condition, was far from anyone's choice. In our working class family, however, renting a room on campus a long mile from home would have been ludicrous. During my freshman year I walked to campus, and along with many townies, used the lounge of the campus YMCA as a daily base of operation. Owning a car at that point seemed even more preposterous than living on campus. At least it did initially, but by the end of my freshman year the idea of owning a car became more than a convenience of getting back and forth to campus. I knew it was essential if I were to complete "my higher education."

After some careful planning and very good conversational timing, I was able to convince my dad that having my own car would be in his as well as my best interest. The convincing issue was that by my sophomore year I had become a drummer in a dance band. This meant that on many Friday and Saturday nights I found it necessary to request permission to use the family chariot. He soon got tired of that. I knew it would get worse, because I planned at some point to have my own band.

Need was only part of the issue. Dad pinpointed the other part when he wondered where I planned to park whatever vehicle I might acquire. I thought that on the street in front of the house would be appropriate and convenient for him as well. Leaving it in the driveway would inconvenience him, I noted in the spirit of father-son camaraderie. I certainly was not about to block the driveway and bother him! The vision of some old clunker parked in front of the house was obviously abrasive to him, but he was an understanding and devoted father and so the next Saturday I withdrew the \$50 I had saved and he and I made the rounds of used car lots.

Even in those days \$50 would not buy much of a car, and the more we looked the validity of that notion increased. I became concerned that we wouldn't find anything acceptable and as the afternoon progressed past midpoint was willing to take any vehicle that moved under its own power. It seemed to me that Dad was being unreasonably critical and picky. Damn it, let's just get something!

The search finally ended and the affair (rather a series of them) began. She was a 1936 4-door Dodge. In those days, you always included the number of doors as part of the name. You didn't have a '46 Pontiac; but rather a '46 Pontiac 2-door, or a '40 Ford 4-door, or whatever the combination might be. If, by chance your car was blessed with a V-8 engine, you noted that too.

The '36 4-door Dodge was 13 years old, black and had a rip in the felt roof lining. My bass drum wouldn't fit through the back door, but it could be squeezed into the seat next to the driver. The band got some funny looks as we arrived at dances with the leader and his drums in the front with the three side men in the rear seat. I loved that car; what freedom she provided. No more walking to campus or humility of asking for the family car. In spite of those pleasant aspects of car ownership, I never understood why the few girls I dated didn't appreciate her fine character; well, at least none mentioned it.

The '36 Dodge 4-door had two serious shortcomings. One was that her roof leaked. I lived in Oregon where it rains more than it doesn't and so she radiated an unpleasant musty aroma. The second drawback which made long distance travel (over 15 miles) difficult had to do with her manifold. I still don't understand clearly the function of a manifold, but it's the thing on the bottom of the engine block to which the muffler and tail pipe are eventually connected. The '36 4-door Dodge's manifold would become red hot (bright glow at night) within 10-20 miles of travel. Consequently, I tried to avoid out-of-town dance jobs and country girl friends.

Following that clumsy, but in many ways wonderfully tender beginning, I let myself be seduced by outside appearances. Thus, by the end of the summer vacation and with funds from a cement crew job, I abandoned the '36 Dodge 4-door sedan, and took up with a very spiffy '37 Chevy 2-door coupe. She was blue and had hardly a dent. I noted that she smoked a lot more than I approved of, but I bought her anyway. Soon, I realized that the relationship was a mistake. We were not at all well matched. True, there was no question in my mind that she was beautiful, but it was only skin deep. Underneath her hood she was sick; really sick! She was unreliable, disappointing and expensive to maintain. It became evident to both of us that I lacked the patience, money and skills necessary to deal with her problems. We soon went our separate ways, but not sadly. I learned a thing or two about looking beyond outward appearances.

I also became more conservative, as is often an outcome of experience. I damn well decided to play it safe. No more risky, eyes half-shut with desire for adventurous relationships for me. No sir! I had my mind on a dependable, predicable, no-nonsense arrangement. It was my good fortune to find such companionship in the form of a '39 4-door Chevy. Oh my, she was sweet. Blue, quiet, free of leaks, no apparent engine problems and the drums fit in the rear seat. She was even good on the road. That summer I commuted nearly every weekend to Portland in order to be with a young coed to whom I had taken a fancy. I recall that her father was somewhat assured of my character and honorable intentions regarding his daughter when he saw I had the good sense to drive a '39 4-door blue Chevy sedan. He should have been more heads up. It turned out; the young lady in question ran off with a roofer at summer's end. She actually sent me an announcement, after the fact so to speak. In spite of that, the '39 4-door blue Chevy sedan facilitated a very nice summer indeed.

But tragedy, as it can be, was lurking just around the corner in the form of a beat up raunchy logging truck. It was fall term of my senior year. I was nearly late for a class, a philosophy of science graduate level seminar. I had absolutely no business in the course but several slightly older graduate school friends were enrolled and so foolishly I joined them. Within a week I developed great respect, and more to the point, tremendous fear of the instructor. He was a terribly bright, young German philosopher of science whose special interest was logical positivism. Compassion and empathy were totally absent from his personality and about the worst offense I could imagine was being late for his class. That Tuesday afternoon I started for campus with less time to spare than was my custom and in order to make up time took a route through side streets. Nearly arriving at campus, I approached one last intersection when all of a sudden to my right appeared a dirty, old, rickety, log truck. He was empty, probably on his way to a tavern to meet his buddies and clearly exceeding the speed limit.

He got me and my '39 4-door blue Chevy sedan square in her rear right door, spinning us around and up onto the porch of a Mom and Pop grocery store. I was stunned! Not physically; I just couldn't understand how this could happen to me. Of equal concern was what dire consequences awaited my late arrival to class. That, of course was totally out of my hands, because of the necessity to hang around and interact with the patrol officer and give my side of the story.

As soon as the officer left, I wondered again what I had done to deserve such a fate. Hadn't I played it safe, been content to stay with this respectable middle-of-the-road motorcar? As I regained my wits, it was clear that the rear fender and wheels were jammed into a solid mess and the '41 4-door Chevy would have to be towed home. I wondered how I could afford that. Of equal concern how would I explain the placement of a pile of junk sitting at my father's curb. To my great surprise, all I got from the great Herr Doctor Professor when I entered his class room 45 minutes late was a short, but nasty, glare. My father was surprisingly understanding.

Later, the insurance adjuster dealt the fatal blow. "Totaled," he said. "You totaled her out, Buddy." I totaled her! I did no such thing. It was the irresponsible nincompoop driving the raunchy log truck at fault!

The insurance claim business took considerable time and the wreck remained parked in front of the family home for several weeks. Seeing her there had a depressing effect and I was glad when the tow truck finally hauled her away.

I was also confused. What values should underlie a relationship? If not beauty, stability, appearance, then what? Now, as I look back, my confusion was much greater than I understood at the time because I began a series of disastrous relationships with automobiles that I should have had the sense to avoid. After all, I was nearly a college graduate!

What quickly developed into a less than romantically satisfying relationships was with a '41 Oldsmobile V-8 4-door with red leather seats. She was some machine, at least to look at, and a good firm ride too. She had class and style, or at least did in the past, but she really was on her last legs when it came to performance. Shortly after acquiring her, a coed I was squiring at the

time and I ventured up the McKenzie river anticipating a pleasant afternoon recess. About 20 miles into our journey, the '41 4-door Olds began to cough, sputter and jerk. Fortunately, we were near a gas station. Engines were a mystery to me, but some hick at the pump looked under the hood for several minutes and then asked, if she might not be out of gas? "No," the soon to be college graduate replied knowingly, "the gauge reads half full."

"Might try puttin' in a few gallons," he suggested, ignoring my technological analysis. So, I sprung for \$2 worth of gas, and the old girl responded immediately without a miss. Nevertheless, the experience confirmed my hunch. I recall I paid \$400 for her, and about three months and several repair bills later felt fortunate when the same vulturous dealer bought her back for \$100. He must have been into junk metal on the side.

Still the carefree romantic, I next acquired a '36 Ford 2-door sedan with—get this—a '46 Mercury V-8 engine. It had several other notable features including mechanical brakes and a missing engine fan. The genius who installed the '46 Merc engine thought she would perform hotter and thus better without the fan, so he removed it.

By this time, the aforementioned coed and I were married, graduated and set off to find our fortune in San Francisco. If you know San Francisco, you understand it is mostly hills; steep hills. Steep hills had several negative effects on automobiles in those days, especially '36 Fords with '46 Mercury engines sans fans. Such engines often overheated, that is to say their radiators boiled over, and sometimes had to be shut down and cooled off prior to reaching the intended destination. Once we shut down on the Golden Gate Bridge for a cooling off period, and another time in the main entrance drive of the St. Francis Hotel. Hills also requires that brakes be used frequently. The mechanical brakes of a '36 Ford, when used even a little, heated rapidly, expanded and soon locked the wheels. Sometimes it required 20 minutes to descend a 2 block long steep hill.

Well, enough was enough and it was at this low point that I succumbed to the charms and mystery of foreign motor cars; a costly, addictive vice which has not yet seen an end. Most young men with any class in those days knew that if you desired your automobile to be attractively distinctive, the answer was to look to things foreign. American automobile dashboards, at this time looked pretty much the same (except for the smiling classical face of a Model A Ford). So, when I had a first glimpse of a Jaguar dashboard my fantasies were activated. A Jag was far beyond my conservative working class standards, but by 1952 California had a fair supply of lesser priced foreign cars. One which I admired was the Hillman Minx, an English breed. It was small, very well appointed, handsomely designed, fun to drive and, of course, looked very, very British. The turn signals consisted of little plastic electric indicators that lighted and popped up to alert other drivers of the intended maneuver, and then recessed back into the door pillar.

The day that I spotted a four-year-old Hillman Minx on a Van Ness Avenue car lot, I was immediately hooked. The car seemed to run fine and looked exceptionally clean (I was naive regarding detail shops in those days). With my increased maturity the recent paint job on a four-year-old car should have told me something, but it didn't, at least at the moment. I made the trade, receiving a pittance for the '36 Ford with the '46 Mercury engine, and all went well for

about a week. Then the ignition system went out on the Hillman. Next the transmission fell apart. Soon there was a serious knock in the engine. All of these needed to be repaired, given the nature of my position (entry level, I must acknowledge) as a field insurance investigator for Retail Credit Corporation. I was, understandably, becoming increasingly irritated with my foreign companion.

Then one morning I noticed that she had a chip on her hood. Underneath the tan finish, a chartreuse spot was emerging. Within a few more weeks and with the help of the San Francisco sea air, the chip spread over half the hood and most of the right front fender. The new tan paint was concealing an embarrassingly ugly coat of chartreuse. I felt like a bridegroom on his wedding night discovering that his bride wears a wig and padded bra.

It was clear that there was more beyond the new tan paint job than I had thought. Needless to say, my carefree flirtations with automobiles was doing me in. My poor decision making skills were showing, and badly. It was then that I learned something that restored my self-esteem. It came when I was telling my chartreuse Hillman Minx story at a social gathering and this fellow from Southern California said, "You know, about three years ago there was a taxi cab company in San Diego that experimented with a fleet of Hillman Minxes. The cars were repainted chartreuse as a PR stunt but it didn't work out. The venture was dead in less than a year."

God! I was involved with an ex-taxi cab! You bet I kept that quiet for awhile!

As the family grew larger and career goals became prime, motor cars took a back seat to other concerns. Following the disappearance of the English tart, came a 1955 Nash Statesman. Remember the post-war Nash? They resembled overturned bath tubs. The '55's had a little more style. This one had been a demonstrator and loaded with accessories including a metal sunshade across the top of the windshield and a periscope like-device allowing the driver to see traffic lights that were blocked from vision by the sunshade. Another accessory was a fishnet strung inside the car just above the windshield. It was neat for storing all kinds of articles which should have been thrown away. It was also embarrassingly underpowered. I was in my first real post-college job by then, a teacher in a southern Oregon high school in a town named Talent. The run from southern Oregon to almost anywhere else in Oregon entailed climbing a few hills. I stopped counting the number of times I was overtaken on hillside freeways!

The Statesman lasted nearly through graduate school in the Midwest, and while I appreciated her faithful service, I was tiring of her uninspired performance. Overreacting as usual, I was attracted to a femme fatale in the form of a '56 Ford V-8 Station Wagon. Boy did that baby have power. And what handling! She could even accelerate climbing steep hills. As much as I admired her, that was also about the time when we became a two car family and my wife took over the station wagon, actually a series of them.

Needing a work car, I reverted to adolescence and bought a much used black '49 Studebaker Hawk coupe, the one that was pointed at both ends. Sort of a junker, but there was a certain pleasure in not having to share her. We traveled Southern California briefly. Gaining more affluence or at least a raise in salary, the Black Hawk was traded in on a '59 Volkswagen Beetle.

She was my first new car, a virgin, coal black and free of an inhibiting fuel gauge. Volkswagen had yet to introduce this wonder of modern convenience, so when the gas tank was empty one simply flicked a little lever on the floor to release a gallon of fuel held in reserve. This worked very well, unless of course you forgot to return the lever to the default position when you refilled the tank. This would result in running out of gas, which we did on several occasions, one being on the San Bernardino Freeway around 5:00 p.m.

The Beetle and I had a nice relationship. We both knew what she was. A simple immigrant German Fraulein without refinement, but nevertheless dedicated and very willing to please. We sometimes pretended she was a Porsche—she did have a 4-speed gear box and a rear mounted engine—but there was no lasting illusion. But all that aside, I still think of the '59 Beetle as one of the most fun to drive cars I've owned. She was quick, reliable, durable and responsive. Pretty much the basics.

The inevitable moment came in 1963 when I felt my development would be enhanced significantly by a relationship with a genuine foreign sports car. The Beetle had been a cheerful companion, but I was simply overwhelmed by the charms of a 1960 Sunbeam Alpine soft top. What marvelous new experiences were to be had with the Sunbeam soft top. Sunday sports car rallies and races were approaching a peak about then, and while we never raced, the whole family would climb aboard and attend the local festivities. We piled into the Sunbeam and drove, with lunch, to a lovely, hilly wooded track. Seemed like everyone in town who owned a sports car participated. We all mixed well, except for the swaggering Porches who arrived early and staked out a private parking area. They literally drove stakes into the ground and strung nylon rope with little German beer haul pennants hanging from it.

If all of this sounds like the recollections of a carefree gadabout, then let me note that it was about this time when I spent a glorious year in Europe with a nine passenger VW bus. Actually, there were nine of us; two adults, six kids and the VW bus. We picked her up at a dealership in Luxembourg. She was an earth mother to end all earth mothers and looked after us with devotion. At the end of the year in Europe she came to the US on a Spanish freighter. Within a few weeks I sold her to an office equipment store manager. I felt sad. She deserved better, but I believe he treated her well. Years later I would fantasize about a different kind of adventure we could have had; just the VW bus and me.

I once thought that the climax of my automobile affair would be a six year adventure with a Swedish beauty; a new white 1966 Volvo 1800S. My dream car! Tight, well built, responsive, comfortable, fast, flexible, beautiful inside and out, adjustable seats, over the shoulder seat belts, luggage space that made into a back seat for kids and a 4-speed gear box with a short throw and an electric overdrive. I loved driving that car, especially over long distances and mountain passes. She was nimble and brilliant in traffic, too.

I have never had so much pleasure with a motor car as with the 1800S. The Swedes don't make them any more. Too bad. Nearly 100,000 miles later the \$50 repair bills became too frequent and I sold her to former student. I would see her around town occasionally, then she dropped out of site. One afternoon I was riding my 10 speed and passed a garage that specialized

in repairing Volvos. I just happened to glance toward the rear of the place and saw the twisted body of a white 1800S. I should have known better, but I simply had to see for myself. The license plate was still intact: 047. She had been totaled, the mechanic told me, but they hoped to salvage the engine. It seemed silly to me, having genuine feelings about the passing of a motor car. But, I did.

For a time the affair did appear to have ended. I tried making it with a used English Rover 2000, but she was in the shop six of the 24 months we were together. I would make \$25 phone calls to a friend in Yorkshire, asking him to visit a spares shop and send me twenty five cent washer replacements. The local mechanic was without compassion and a nincompoop besides. He had no feel for her, in my judgement. Nevertheless, part of her problems was generic. The English built some beautiful machines over the years, but inevitably could never get the job quite done.

Then came a shoddy 4 month interlude with a Chevy Vega wagon. Oh god! What she did to my image and self-esteem. It was horrible. The less said about her the better. I bought her new at an end-of-the-year sale and was fortunate to unload her on a naive, unsuspecting community college student. He was impressed by her warranty and, from what I could gather from his remarks, the potential entailed in the fold down back seat.

Similar to a middle age man cutting back from squash to jogging, I next went for a handsome if worn '66 Mercedes 230 Sedan (I still had an urge to play, but not so fast). She was steady and comfortable, but soon became afflicted with a broken head. I had that replaced and sold her to my oldest son who said he had a lot of respect for the old girl and would be good to her. He was, but it was a poor match in regard to ages and after a difficult winter in Montana for both of them he and the Fraulein drifted apart.

That seemed to be the end of the long running affair with motor cars, although I did try again shortly after with an American. She was a Monza coupe whose rear end vibrated terribly whenever we went over 50. That was embarrassing, to say the least.

My luck turned when I traded the Monza in on a new Audi Fox 2 door sports sedan. The Fox and I got along swimmingly. Ah, the foreign connection again. She was good value for the money; seldom needed attention and always ready to go. Appropriately named! However, at 75,000 miles, she began to appear too young and uncertain of herself for my tastes and coincidentally I decided it was time to forget the great motor car romance and settle down. I was aroused for a time when it was rumored that the Morgan 4+4 was being grey marketed into Vancouver, B.C., but I never really investigated, unless you can count a brief encounter in the Yorkshire Dales. That was a telling sign, I must admit.

I'm not sure the appropriate term is metamorphosis, but I knew I was experiencing a change of some importance the day that found me admiring a Ford Thunderbird 2 door coupe I had seen them on the street, and I must admit I thought they were essentially an easy date for guys who didn't have the courage to put it on the line any longer. I just happened to be wandering around the local Ford dealership showroom when I spotted her. She was bright, bright red,



looked extraordinarily authoritative, sophisticated and subtlety cosmopolitan except for the tacky chrome plate that read Supercharged. I mean, it is not necessary to advertise charms. I walked around her a time or two, admiring her features and also recalling that looks can be ever so deceptive. When heading towards the showroom door, a non-obtrusive salesman asked if I would like to drive her? Well, not really I replied, noting that I wasn't in the least interested in purchasing her. "That's perfectly okay," he replied, making me feel comfortable accepting his offer when we both knew my intentions were not serious.

Well, what an awaking that was! I had never been astride such powerful performance in my life! I had read about such experiences in the magazines, but this was beyond my imagination. I put her through a number of intimate challenges and she came through marvelously, time and again. I was hooked and against my better judgment, I was soon back in the world of car payments. We had a demanding relationship that lasted over four years. However, even I was not blind to the deterioration of her steering gear. We had moved near Portland where the trip into the city from our suburb involved a hilly stretch of I-5 freeway referred to as "The Curves." The curves brought one either up or down to the banks of the Willamette River to a raised plane. Over the years, the pavement developed more or less permanent ruts that emerged regardless of frequent resurfacing. Depending upon the size of a car's tires, the ruts would grab the front wheels and make it nearly impossible to steer the car. The T-Bird developed a very serious addictive attraction to the curves. Responding satisfactorily to her urges once she was into the curves was next to impossible. Even after replacing some of her undercarriage, the battle continued until in the middle of one particular gut wrenching trip into the city, my wife pointed out the seriousness of the situation. "It's the T-bird or me!" she announced, her flour white hands gripping the dash panel handle. There was no argument or discussion. The T-bird was soon a fling of the past.

I had developed, nevertheless, a liking for the Ford crowd, and since the foreign types had lost their style and appeal, for the time being at least, a small, sassy and classy Red Ford Probe with black stripes moved in. She had the big six engine, short throw shift stick, overdrive, and wonder or wonders, a sophisticated travel computer. As I recall, the computer had ten functions that provide, if nothing else, the passenger seat occupant a real feeling of involvement and contributing participation on journeys both short and long. It was the Probe in addition to a new laptop computer that motivated us to engage in an adventure we dubbed "Probing America." My wife's family roots are in Illinois, and I had spent three intriguing years scheming for the best way to exit graduate school in Iowa and escape the Midwest, so it was easy to agree on a journey back in time. The Probe was small, but yet fast and comfortable and turned out to be an ideal car for the adventure. We traveled on little used highways across the northern United States. Small towns and what passed for cities were a hoot, the lodging was adequate and inexpensive and when one confined meals to tuna fish sandwiches digestive disorders often associated with eating on the road did not develop.

Somewhere in the neighborhood of 75,000 miles, the Probe lost her sparkle when serious repair problems seemed just over the next hill. At this time we were living in a development

inhabited extensively by retired people. Many of them were widows, and as my wife turned her social service interest to organizing various educational-social groups, it occurred to me that having a comfortable family style sedan might be an appropriate vehicle. With a mid-size sedan I would facilitate transporting her mature women friends to and fro. (As it turned out, this was a function that didn't emerge but impossible to have known at the time.) It was at this point that a very safe but attractive Honda Accord 4 cylinder sedan took up residence. You know, I did everything I could imagine to make her happy, even going so far as modifying my own desires and behavior. I really did like her image; handsomely mature, respectable, smooth lines, soft and comfortable interior, but to tell you the truth, she just made me feel older than I wanted. I think it was primarily her 4 cylinder engine that discouraged me. She simply was unresponsive.

Feeling that I couldn't afford what I desired, I settled for upgrading to a Honda Accord 6 cylinder sedan with leather. The larger engine was a significant improvement, but to be perfectly honest I was still appreciably short of being in a state of ecstasy. Nevertheless, we made more than do and had three comfortable if not stimulating years and many enjoyable trips together.

It was when my 70th birthday was in sight that I was the first to acknowledge that what appeared to be my diminishing passion for motor cars probably was not entirely the fault of said machines. At the same time, I knew that more than a spark of affection could be generated for a particular automobile. What stood in the way of consummation was not money, for I could afford such a car. No, the problem was good sense. Being a child of the depression, I never escaped from the mores of living within one's means or at least the guilt when not. Overcoming such conditioning would require outside help. That appeared in the recollection of a discussion I once had with a esteemed friend. He purchased a wonderfully attractive Mercedes Benz years earlier, prior to their becoming relatively common, and I felt comfortable in asking him how he afforded such a machine. I had great respect for his scheming talent, and while I had no interest in a Mercedes, thought I might become privy to whatever car dealing skills he would share. His answer, which seemed obvious once uttered, was "Tremendous rationalization, Jack. Tremendous rationalization."

And so with the support of my good wife, that is how I came to reignite the affair with motor cars with the company of the finest machine I hope to drive, a 2000 BMW 328i. She is a marvelous piece of engineering and superb good taste: a sort of Wonder Woman, if you know of what I speak. There are potential dangers in such a relationship, I acknowledge. Ever present challenges to one's self control skills and the ability to adequately anticipate performance peaks, to name two. Thus, I am especially prone to be careful, considerate, and compassionate with her. She goes 20K miles between servicing, so that is comforting as well as reassuring at my age. Some might wonder why I waited until 70 to experience such a relationship. Looking back, it seems to me it seems perfectly obvious. Save the best to the end. It has also been noted to me that with my last five cars I have moved from two reds to three silvers. That too seems fitting my maturity and wisdom.

I doubt there is much left to this story, but who knows? You may wonder which car relationship in this life long love affair that began with a '36 Dodge 4-door Sedan was the most

joyous? I truly loved them all, some if damn briefly, but I have wonderful memories of each in their separate contexts, so I could not say for certain that there is an absolute favorite. I do acknowledge nevertheless, that one was more joyous than the rest.