

FLAT HEADS AND POSITIVE GROUND

By John S. Halbert

"Flat Head": A type of automobile engine with a flat, rectangular metal piece bolted to the engine block forming the top end of the cylinders, usually with a screw-hole for the spark plug for each cylinder.

"Positive Ground": A vehicle in which its ignition and electrical system utilizes a common ground from the positive post of the storage battery.

---The brakes work only on the rear wheels . . ."
---Antique Car Salesman

My involvement with what today would be called "antique cars" actually began with my shrieking arrival from the hospital about two days after I was born. Uncle Jimmy, who was a funeral director, brought my mother and me home from the hospital in his big black Packard hearse(!). When we arrived at my new home on 24th Street in Sheffield, Alabama, he pulled up to the curb in front of the house and blew the siren for a reported five minutes. This was supposed to alert the neighbors that I had arrived in the world and it certainly did.

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As I was born near the end of World War II, every car and truck in the United States in that summer of 1945 had been built either before or shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor back on December 7, 1941. (The following January, the government had ordered all the auto makers to shift to war production. During the war, Packard, for example, had made engines for fighter planes and PT-Boats.) My uncle's Packard was one of the legions of vehicles that had been carefully nursed through the war by their owners---enduring spare parts shortages, gasoline and tire rationing, and a thirty-five-miles-an-hour national speed limit along the way. But millions of other drivers had been forced to put their vehicles on blocks and either carpool or use buses and trains to get around. Therefore, Uncle Jimmy had likely made a sacrifice in order to herald my arrival the way he did.

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After the war there were a lot of surplus military vehicles for sale by the government, and Mr. Pipkin, our neighbor across the street, bought a "Half-Track" flat-bed truck. A "Half-Track" was something on the order of a combination truck and Army tank that was used in the war to

carry soldiers and military goods to battle-fronts. The front half of the vehicle was a regular truck with standard rubber tires and the cab had a steering wheel, as usual. But underneath the truck's rear-mounted flat-bed, instead of wheels and tires, there was a set of tank tracks---hence the term, "Half-Track." As it whirred around town the track treads made a kind of buzzing noise. Mr. Pipkin said its biggest advantage over regular trucks was its ability to navigate on muddy roads, a feature it put to good use on a regular basis, as the streets in our neighborhood (and in much of the town) were un-paved in those days. A big water truck paid daily visits and thoroughly soaked the streets which not only settled the dust but gave the huge Half-Track an opportunity to exercise its mud-conquering tank treads.

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In a nearby house on 13th Avenue lived an outside salesman who owned a 1934 Dodge business coupé---a single-seat vehicle with a truly enormous trunk in which he carried his samples. The Dodge seemed to always have problems because when he started out each morning the engine usually lasted only long enough to carry him around the corner to a spot right in front of our house. Then it would sputter, gasp, cough, and quit running, rolling to a stop. Countless times, I saw the man raise the hood and fiddle with the balky engine. He must have had important clients because he usually wore a white shirt and a tie. While he tackled the balky Dodge he rolled-up his sleeves---but which invariably became smeared with grease and oil. One time I heard him loudly cussing the car while he tried to make it run. On another occasion I saw him kick a tire and run red-faced back to his house. Those highly-visible episodes made me wonder why he didn't just either get the engine fixed or get a newer car!

Those deficiencies aside, even in those days, I thought the '34 Dodge was a great-looking machine, and today, of course, the coupé would command a hefty five-figure price on the antique-car market.

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All the vehicles that were in everyday use in those days and still survive are now considered to be "antique", and some, such as the Packard, are now even called "Classics". In every case, their value in today's dollars is many times greater than what they cost in their earlier years

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Across a vacant lot from our house on 24th Street was a modest-sized house trailer occupied by an elderly couple, the Pyrons. Mrs. Pyron ran a frozen-custard stand down on the corner at Second Street, where my sister and I became adept at persuading the fine lady to give us free samples of the creamy stuff.

Mr. Pyron owned a small factory that built mobile homes (called "trailers" in those days). Once a month, he would haul one of his finished trailers behind his big, black post-war Chrysler "New Yorker" from Sheffield to his dealer in Miami, Florida, a round-trip distance of two-thousand miles. What always impressed me, even as a kid, was how he would be back in about twenty-four hours! My mother asked him one time how fast he drove, and I remember he told her about a hundred miles an hour! What made his feat even more remarkable was that those were the days long before they built the Interstate highways, which meant he had to slow down while going through all those towns between Sheffield and Miami, then speed back up to make

up the lost time. And on half the trip the car was pulling one of those trailers! Even today, it would be a major feat to to match that *using* the freeways. I was so influenced by that car that I always wanted one like it, not realizing they would soon stop making Chryslers like that.

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All during this time, our family car was a 1939 Dodge four-door that we nicknamed, "Bessie Bee." Daddy later told me how he had originally bought it by trading-in a 1936 Ford coupé, a car that was a story in itself. He had bought it around 1938 at an estate sale of an old lady who had supposedly only driven it to church and to the grocery store. Thus, it had never been driven on the highway, which, as every automobile expert knows, is essential to keep the engine and drive train in good running order. When he bought the car, it was, as he described it, as slick a machine as there was in those days, shiny and pristine. But before long, as he drove it about in regular use, the engine became weaker and weaker---until it finally gave out altogether. In the meantime, he had spotted on the lot of the local Dodge dealership what he said was as pretty a car as he had ever seen. After some tinkering, he was able to get the Ford running just good enough to trade it in on the brand-new 1939 Dodge four-door that gave him reliable service through World War II and for almost a decade beyond.

But even the most robust vehicle has a finite life span, and Bessie Bee's time came in the spring of 1954. The next car that daddy bought was a '48 Plymouth Club Coupé with very low miles on the odometer and loaded with just about every accessory that was possible to pile onto it. What really set this car apart was its throaty "Hollywood" muffler that announced the machine's coming in the most masculine way (not always appreciated by my mother, who learned to drive in it and never came to terms with the car's near-"hot-rod" manners and image).

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A couple of years later, my grandfather died and his big 1949 DeSoto came to our family. For the first time, we had a car with real class and luxury. To a kid, the car had a hood that seemed to go on into the next county; a polished wood-grained dashboard; and gray broadcloth front and rear seats that had the plush look and the "sink-down-into" feel of a pair of stuffed sofas. Unfortunately, only a few months after we got the car, a drunk driver slammed into it in front of our house, and that was the premature end of the DeSoto.

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Our next car was a truly remarkable vehicle and one of the most important automobiles of my entire life. In the spring of 1957, just before my sixth-grade school year was out, one day daddy drove to school to pick me up in his just-acquired 1953 Buick Roadmaster. The car was beautiful with a fast, powerful engine and over the next several years it took us to much of the eastern half of the United States. I even learned to drive in it, and it carried me off on my first real date.

When I was a senior in high school, daddy traded-in the Roadmaster on an even-larger Buick, a hardly-driven 1958 "Super" four-door. Even today, those Buicks are considered to have been the most gaudy vehicles ever produced in the USA---brash barges over-loaded with chrome that left little room to see the paint color. (It was blue, actually.) But it drove and rode like a

limousine and had an enormous and powerful V-8 engine.

A couple of years later, daddy drove home with a spiffy, white, 1961 Chevrolet "Impala" four-door sedan. Aside from its shiny, red-leather interior and a zippy "big-block" V-8 engine, it had the first air conditioner of any of our cars, a feature that was much appreciated as we drove it all over the sun-baked South. That summer, on our first visit to Houston, the handy air conditioner passed all its tests against the Gulf Coast heat and humidity.

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For a while, I made-do with daddy's car, which meant I had to beg, borrow, (but never 'steal') it for socializing. During those times when I couldn't finagle the family car, I walked back-and-forth to work at the radio station, and to the airport to take flying lessons. After some time, I had to admit that I needed a car and reluctantly gave up on any ideas I had of becoming an airplane pilot.

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With the flying lessons now history, the most important thing now was to get a car. I came close to buying a late-'fifties Rambler---until I made the mistake of mentioning something to my parents about the Rambler's most notorious feature: The Bed. The front seat of those cars folded down to meet the back seat and, Presto! The result was a perfect bed! Originally advertised as a sort of long-distance travel camper, The Bed was probably more often used for other purposes.

After I blabbed about it, my parents insisted that I have no part of *that* car. My big mouth!

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Reluctantly giving up on the Rambler, I settled instead on a green-and-white Corvair four-door. Having a car meant that I no longer had to worry about bus schedules, or having to borrow the Buick from daddy or the nightly walk home from the radio station after midnight. To say the least, life became much easier and better organized. Driving to Florence State and to work became routine, with the wonderful freedom to arrange my social life to my own schedule. For a while, everything was fine.

Before long, however, some aggravating problems with the Corvair began to show-up. Although it was a nice-looking car, its air-cooled engine was a badly-designed, poorly-placed (in the rear) contrivance that made for erratic handling, was terrible on gas and was a nightmare on which to do even the most basic maintenance. In order to change the spark plugs, for example, something that in those days had to be done about every ten-thousand miles, a mechanic first had to un-bolt and lift off the entire top of the engine, including dual carburetors and a big horizontal fan that kept the engine cool. After he replaced the plugs, he had to re-install the whole pile of parts, including an incredible snaking fan belt that seemed to be connected to pulleys everywhere. All this meant that a regular maintenance job that took a only few minutes to do on most other cars was about a half-day hassle on the Corvair---and expensive to boot. After a few months, the car developed a continuous, unstoppable oil leak---a problem, I learned, that was

common to Corvairs. On top of that, the engine wouldn't run on anything but expensive premium gas, and to make matters even worse, the heater burned *gasoline* from the fuel tank, an arrangement that struck me as being potentially dangerous. The last straw came when the engine started smoking terribly, trailing an embarrassing, choking cloud of blue smoke behind me everywhere I went. Many times, I wished I had never said anything about The Bed and had bought the Rambler instead of the Corvair.

Before long, I traded it in---smoking, leaking engine and all---on a Volkswagen "Bug" that became the first in a happy series of VW's that I owned over the next several years, up to and including the last one in which I narrowly escaped being killed in a collision on April 9, 1972.

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With the other cars after the VW's, one deserves mention, but not for anything positive. After the last Volkswagen (the one in the '72 wreck), with the insurance money, I bought a Chevrolet "Vega", a dark-blue station wagon; a so-called "Kammback". The car featured an integral "air-spoiler" on the top rear, where the roof dipped slightly, supposedly to create an airfoil-like effect, or so they said in the advertisements.

The car's fundamental problem was that, while sporting a really spiffy look, with wide-track tires that gave it superior handling---mechanically, it was a disaster to me and all other unfortunate Vega owners. Vegas featured an all-aluminum engine that if ever became overheated, *everything* important inside it warped. Even the owner's manual warned to *never* allow the engine to get overly hot.

Beyond the weak engine, the car seemed to lurch from one calamity to another, always draining my wallet in the process. One typical incident illustrates the problems with which I had to contend with concerning that car. One morning when I tried to start the engine to go to work at the TV station, nothing happened. Raising the hood, I was astounded to discover that the carburetor---the whole thing, including the big circular air-breather on top, the whole conglomeration---had fallen off from where it was supposed to be bolted onto the top of the engine and had tumbled down into the well of the front wheel! A few days later, at the antique car club meeting, I told a member, who was the parts manager of a local Chevrolet dealership, what had happened and he replied that he had received a "Service Bulletin" from General Motors stating in so many words that carburetors on Vegas had a bad habit of loosening and falling off the engine!

There were other problems. After even a modest rainfall, the spare tire well underneath the luggage deck behind the rear seat filled with water, leaving the tire floating and bumping around in its confined space. I had to solve that one by drilling a set of holes in the bottom of the wheel-well, something the factory should have anticipated in the first place---never mind that there should not have been a leak like that in the first place. In the summertime, the plastic steering wheel reacted to summer's heat by "bleeding" a sort of oily substance that I had to wipe off several times a day. This went on for as long as I owned the car.

Overall, the Vegas were pathetic little cars that soon developed such a bad reputation with their owners that General Motors eventually stopped making them. *(At great expense GM had built a big factory in Brazil to produce Vegas. But sales were nil, confounding the company's expectations. Then someone pointed out that in Brazil the word, "Vega" was a slang term for*

"Won't Run!") I always thought the Brazilian translation could have applied to the American version, as well. After the divorce in 1975, my ex got the Vega. Perhaps there is justice, after all.

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About the time I was in elementary school, a man in Sheffield owned a truly enormous car of a body style I later came to know as a "roadster"---a two-door vehicle with a tan-canvas fold-down top. The car featured a yellow body, black fenders, black lower running gear, and red disc wheels. From what I can remember about it (remember, I was in elementary school at the time), it was most likely a Packard from the mid-1920's. For several years,, particularly in the summertime, I would look out the front door quite often and see it drive by. Even in those early-'fifties days, such a machine was an attention-getter. Today, of course, a Packard of that style and vintage would command a price in the six-figure range.

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My official admission into the realm of "antique" cars started innocently enough with a record album that came to the WVNA library in the fall of 1967. On the album jacket was a picture of a Ford Model-"A" sedan in a country-home setting. A smiling, leggy young blonde woman sat on a fender of the car. The photo brought back pleasant memories of some cars of bygone days that had once been part of my life, including several Model-A's.

In the late-1940's, while we still lived on 24th Street, an elderly neighbor had a Ford Model-A roadster pickup truck. (Roadsters had a fold-down top.) I can still see the old guy skidding and slithering his rattling truck around the dusty 13th Avenue corner in front of our house, always with a grin for me as I stood there, awestruck about how he deftly handled that little machine.

Mary Graham, before she married my cousin, Joe Garner, used to drive a Model-A that also had a convertible top, which made it either a roadster or a touring car. From time-to-time, she would load my cousin "Boozie" (his real name was "Robert"), his brother Bud, my sister and me into the car that she called a "jalopy" for rides around Weeden Heights, in East Florence. It was a lot of fun sitting in the open air with the wind blowing in our faces while we tooted around the neighborhood. Mary liked to drive that car pretty fast, which made for even more excitement.

At High Point, at about the same time as Mary Graham's open-air automotive adventures, a neighbor also had a Model-A. Peggy Patterson, who was in nursing school at the time, had a 1930 or '31 Ford "Tudor" sedan. Every so often, she collected the neighborhood kids for a ride around town.

Ford Model-A's were pretty-well established in my life when the record cover came along with a picture of one on it that re-kindled my memories and interest in those old cars.

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In early April of 1968, driving to work at the radio station one Monday morning, I spotted an old black vehicle of unknown make and model on the used-car lot at '*Reid Pontiac*'. Intrigued, I continued to observe it as I passed back and forth all that week going to and from work. By Friday afternoon, I couldn't stand it any longer and pulled onto the lot to look at it. A salesman named Dennis Reid came out and started a conversation with me about the car. It was a 1938 Pontiac business coupe, he said, with a single seat and an enormous trunk for salesman's samples---the same style of car the man with the white shirt-sleeves had had years earlier on 24th

Street---the Dodge with the chronic engine trouble---except it was a later year and a different make. (Turned out it ran better, too.) The price he quoted was five-hundred and fifty dollars.

I wrote him a check for fifty dollars to hold the Pontiac for me and headed over to my State Farm agent in Sheffield. Since on the radio I had often played State Farm commercials touting their "Car Finance Plan", I figured that maybe they could help me with financing the Pontiac! Awithiin a day, I had my first "antique" car. Before long, I became a fixture around town in my shined-up old car that I drove almost exclusively.

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Exclusively, that is, until one day not long afterward, when an older friend, Jack Pretty, pulled up in front of the Baptist Church in a tall, square-rigged, four-door, maroon sedan with black fenders. "It's a nineteen-twenty-seven 'Hupmobile!'" he said with a grin, catching my wide-eyed expression. "Want to buy it?" The next day, there was another visit to the State Farm agent, and now I had *two* antique cars!

The "Hupp" was a spectacular-looking machine, with classic lines and a whole host of interesting features. The accelerator pedal, for example, had an indentation for the heel of the driver's shoe! The steering wheel was an oversized, varnished, solid-wood affair with a button in the middle for the car's "Ah-oogahh!" horn. Front-seat ventilation came about by cranking up the flat windshield several inches. Primitive---but surprisingly effective. Everywhere I went in the car, people came out just to watch me drive past. I kept the car for several years, then traded it for a 1928-Model-A Ford to a man who put the Hupmobile in a museum next to one of Elvis Presley's pink Cadillacs.

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Pretty soon after the Hupmobile came into the stable, I bought a fourth car, a two-door, 1962 Mercury "Comet", thereby gaining the distinction of having, as my State Farm agent told me, more cars insured at his office than by any other single male! I bought the car intending to upgrade it and to later sell at (hopefully) a profit, What I didn't realize until it was too late was that those particular Mercurybodies suffered from poor construction quality. Every time I drove the Comet across railroad tracks, for example, the whole dashboard vibrated up and down so much that I couldn't even read the speedometer. At the same time it gave off aggravating "BANG!"-like noises. Before long, I gave up on the Comet and sold it to an older man who, as I noticed, wore thick eyeglasses and hearing aids.

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One August, at a banquet of the antique car club to which I belonged, a guest around the convivial table casually mentioned that he knew of a 1940's-era Buick for sale in Memphis, Tennessee. According to the fellow, it could be bought for as little as fifty dollars, and he wrote down the name and telephone number of the owner, whom he described as an elderly woman. Later that night, I called the number and learned that the car was indeed for sale. The lady gave me the address and said she would be at home all that weekend.

The next day, a Sunday, my wife (at the time) and I drove to Memphis and located the house that was in the eastern part of the city, conveniently near the south-belt freeway, not far from the

big airport.

When we got there, what we found in the carport, buried under an assorted pile of boxes and other cast-off stuff, was the a 1947 Buick top-of-the-line "Roadmaster" four-door sedan. After we pulled off the trash, aside from a thick coat of dust, the car looked to be complete, right down to the spotless gray broadcloth upholstery, still in excellent shape since the windows were rolled-up. When I gave the exterior a dousing from a water hose, what greeted me was a dent-free, no-rust, two-tone green sedan in near-perfect condition; far better than I could have ever hoped for.

The battery was dead, so I took it to a nearby service station, and in an hour, it was fully-charged. On the first try, the engine fired right up. At the service station, they changed the oil and checked the tires. After paying the friendly lady her fifty dollars---that I considered to be the greatest bargain in history for a complete 1947 Buick Roadmaster---and pocketing the handwritten "Bill of Sale" she gave me, with my wife following in our (Vega) station wagon, the two of us headed out eastward on the freeway, where we soon turned off onto a state highway. Ahead of us was a three-hour drive across southwestern Tennessee, a portion of northern Mississippi and northwest Alabama, back to Sheffield.

Right away, it was obvious that the veteran motorcar had no functioning shock-absorbers---the vehicle commenced bouncing and jouncing about with every joint in the concrete pavement over which we passed. Groaning, I remembered that these Buicks had shock absorbers that required frequent re-filling. As it was a Sunday, there was no place to buy the correct type of fluid---not to mention that I had no idea how to go about topping-up the cylinders, plus the fact that darkness was coming on. It appeared there was no alternative but to press on and try to ignore the big car's gyrations. On the other hand, as I drove along, I discovered that the radio worked perfectly, along with all the dashboard instruments and lights. In fact, *everything* in the car was in working order---even the turn signals and the electric clock functioned. The "Fireball-Eight" engine was running smoothly, and I was starting to relax and congratulate myself for pulling off the bargain antique car buy of all time. Fifty dollars for this big barge of a near-perfect antique Buick!

On we went for a couple of hours, until we drove up to a lonely crossroads four-way stop, not far from the old Civil War '*Shiloh Battlefield*'. But when the vehicle came to a complete halt, everything on the car died---the engine chugged to a stop, all the lights went out; the radio went mute! In the darkness, in dead silence, the Buick sat immobile.

My wife, following in the other car, pulled up beside me. "What happened?"

I shrugged. "When I stopped, it just quit." I tried all the switches and the starter. Nothing happened. In desperation I looked about. Across some fields, was a show of lights. A service station! I hopped into the other car and we drove over there. After explaining my predicament, the young mechanic said to push it over to the station and he'd look at it

But when the other car began shoving the much-larger antique Buick, after a few seconds the big sedan's engine all at once roared back to life, the headlights and the dashboard lights glowed anew; even the radio started blaring! With everything on board now functioning again, I swung the strangely-acting car up to the repair shop and applied the brakes. At once, with a volcanic sigh, the engine stopped, along with all the other things---the lights, the radio---everything. Inside and outside; the car was once more a dark, silent shell. "What th---!" was all I could think of to say.

"Okay, raise the hood," the young fellow motioned. It was then I learned that this particular Buick model had a hood that raised from either side, or from both sides at once. (Earlier, back at the lady's carport, I had just opened it from one side.) The workman and I lifted off the engine

cowling and laid it onto the asphalt driveway.

After some minutes of poking around with a flashlight, the mechanic shrugged. "I don't see anything wrong with it," he said. With nothing else to influence us, he and I locked down the hood onto the car. "Push it off," he said, "let's see what happens."

My wife positioned the station wagon behind the immobile Buick. I got inside, turned on the ignition key, and when she gave the old car a good shove I popped the clutch. As before, the car sprang back to life. With a quick wave to the mechanic, we roared off into the night, leaving him shaking his head and probably wondering what had gotten into that old car.

As it turned out, we made it home to Sheffield without further mishap, except that we had to push-off the Buick a couple of more times when pesky traffic lights stopped the engine.

The next day, curious, I again lifted the hood and poked around inside the engine compartment. The cause of the problem was about as simple as it could have been and I was surprised that we hadn't noticed it back there at the old country service station---one of the cables had come off the battery post! As long as the car was moving at speed, the generator had kept everything electrified. But as soon as the speed slackened, such as at the stop sign and at the traffic lights we encountered, the current dropped and everything, including the engine, failed. A couple of turns on the battery clamp and the problem was solved. (*Neither before nor since have I ever seen such a thing happen to a car.*)

I detailed the engine compartment and did a general clean-up, then occasionally drove the car around town. But some weeks after the Buick arrived in Sheffield, some problems came up concerning the clutch---nothing serious, but mildly aggravating---and at about the same time a colleague at the antique car club made me an offer I consider pretty generous (at the time), so I sold the big '47 Roadmaster to him. Down through the years since then, I have had regrets about letting it go; not only was it a handsome, magnificent machine, but it still ranks as one of the best investments there ever was for fifty dollars. *Today, 1947 Buick Roadmasters such as that one are valued in the range of twenty-thousand big ones.*

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Not long after the Buick episode, as I was driving along Wilson Dam Road in East Florence past a used-car lot, I spotted a late-'forties Chrysler parked on the front row with "\$300" scribbled in soapstick on the windshield. This time, instead of driving past it for several days, as I had done with the earlier '38 Pontiac, I pulled onto the lot at once to give the car a closer look.

It was a 1948 Chrysler "Windsor" two-door "Club Coupe", the same body style and model year as had been "Ol' Snort", daddy's Plymouth from when I was in the fourth grade. While the Plymouth (as all Plymouths) had been an entry-level, "low-price" car, although well-made and arguably stylish, the Chrysler was a luxury vehicle perspiring with chrome and class, much as its contemporary Buicks and Packards. Except that it was a two-door-styled car and had a smaller, six-cylinder engine, it was otherwise similar to Mr. Pyron's big eight-cylinder, four-door Chrysler that had hauled those trailers to Miami years earlier.

The engine fired right up with no smoke or unusual vibrations. Raising the hood I gazed at its flat-head engine and the under-hood compartment that only needed a cosmetic detailing. There didn't seem to be any serious body issues, just the usual worn places in its blue upholstery. A quick drive around the block revealed it was rattle-and-squeak-free and otherwise seemed to be all right, so I wrote a check for the \$300 and became the Chrysler's new owner.

Over the next several months, I detailed the engine compartment that included painting the

engineblock its factory-issued silver. The radiator, the horns, the starter, generator, the voltage regulator and the electrical relays that controlled the transmission all got a shiny new coat of black, as original. The firewall, after a good de-greasing and a vigorous rub-down with auto polish, again glistened in its original black paint. I returned the underside of the hood and the inside of the trunk lid to their original dark-gray color. Aftermarket seat covers hid the upholstery blemishes while I looked for the original dark-blue broadcloth and medium-gray "Wilton" brand floor carpet. Overhead, a new taupe-colored headliner replaced the sagging original. On the outside, a good waxing brought out the black color just fine. I even found a replacement electric clock and had the radio fixed. The bumpers and trim, after a good polishing and buffing, shined as good as new. When it was finished, the Chrysler looked very much like it had just come off the showroom floor.

The transmission was another story. Those Chryslers came from the factory equipped with what the advertisements called a "Gyrol Hydraulically-Operated Transmission That Effectively Eliminates Most Shifting", as the ads had put it when the car was new. It was a complicated affair that was designed to compete with General Motors' "Hydramatic" transmission that was introduced originally on 1940 Oldsmobiles with great fanfare, and later extended to Pontiac and Cadillac. Where the GM units were fully-automatic ("Look---no clutch pedal!"), the competing Chrysler transmission, along with DeSoto, that also used it, was what could be more accurately described as a "semi-automatic".

In operation, it could be a partial-automatic, or as a semi-manual drive, which was a flexible arrangement that once you got used to it, was quite enjoyable. However, with my particular car, somewhere along the way the electrical connections to the control relays had become jumbled and the transmission wouldn't downshift properly. In a popular automotive magazine called, *'Hemmings Motor News'* that was (and still is) the so-called "Bible of all things antique automobile", I read an ad about a shop manual for sale for my model of Chrysler. After it arrived in the mail, by tracing the color-coded wires in the electrical diagrams, it was a simple matter to hook everything back to original. After that, the gears shifted perfectly.

Chrysler's semi-automatic drive was unique as transmissions went in those days. In operation, it worked like a four-speed gearbox with two drive ranges---a "power-range" with two low-speed gears and a "drive-range" with two higher-speed gears. For normal driving, using the clutch pedal, you set the shift lever on the steering column to what would normally be "high" gear on a "three-on-the-column" shifter. Then, you give the accelerator some gas, and the car started moving forward. At about twenty miles an hour, you lifted your foot from the pedal for a second at which point there came an audible "clunk", as the car shifted into high gear. When you came to a stop sign or a traffic light, the transmission automatically dropped back into the lower of the "drive-range" gears, which was actually third gear. To get going again, you gave it the gas and the car started moving. At whatever speed you desired, usually at about twenty-miles-an-hour or so, you lifted your foot from the accelerator pedal and there came the usual smooth "clunk". Wherever you went, as you drove along, it was a continuous process that soon became routine. If you wanted a faster get-away from the traffic light, you could clutch the shift lever into the "power-range" and use its two gears, shifting with the lifted foot as usual, then dropping it, again using the clutch, into fourth, which gave three forward speeds. For a real adventure, I discovered that with some deft footwork and gear-shifting you could use all *four* forward speeds. To do this, one would clutch into power range, give it gas, and at about fifteen miles an hour, lift the foot and let the car shift into second gear, then more gas, building up to about thirty miles an hour. Then clutch into fourth, but immediately

floorboard the accelerator, which down-shifted into third, giving it gas again. By now the car was rolling along at about fifty miles an hour. Then lift the foot that shifts into fourth, or high gear. To pass another car, floorboard the gas pedal that shifts the car into third, or "passing" gear, which gives the engine morespeed and power to scoot around another vehicle. After getting past the slower car, lift the gas pedal and the car shifts back into high. By that time, the big Chrysler is roaring along at about seventy miles an hour. Literally depending on how you wanted to drive it, a motorist could, for all intents and purposes, operate the car either as with a manual transmission, or as, for the most part, a near-automatic. All-in-all, I found the "semi-automatic" setup to be an enjoyable, if somewhat different, way to get around, as did the hundreds of thousands of other owners of such Chryslers and DeSotos that utilized those transmissions for more than a dozen years, until the company came out with their fully-automatic drive in 1954.

After the divorce in 1975, whereby my now-former wife got the station wagon, I drove the Windsor as a full-time vehicle for several weeks until I bought a Toyota.

A year later, when I moved to Houston, Texas, I sold the Chrysler to a friend and was out of the antique car business for several years while I traveled to all fifty of the United States and into Canada and Mexico for "Berryman Products", the automotive chemical manufacturing company.

Starting in the spring of 1977, I operated out of the Los Angeles area and later from the San Jose, California office while living in nearby Mountain View.

* * *

In May of 1980, while driving down Yellowstone Avenue in Pocatello, Idaho, I spotted a black, four-door, late-'forties Chrysler parked in front of a muffler shop with a "For Sale" sign on the windshield. Having learned not to ignore antique cars for sale, I turned in for a closer inspection. A quick look revealed it was a "New Yorker", next to the "Crown Imperial" the most plush (and expensive) of the Chryslers of its day. Here was just the car I had always wanted going all the way back to Mr. Pyron's identical four-door New Yorker---the big machine that had tugged all those house trailers to Miami that had so impressed me and my mother when I was a kid, when cars like this were new!

This Pocatello Chrysler looked complete, except that it needed, at the very least, a thorough cosmetic restoration. The interior, although worn, was still intact; a brilliant Scotch Plaid design with red leather trim they called "Highlander". Under the hood, the straight-eight "Spitfire" engine that had come from the factory painted silver, was now overlaid in surface rust---in almost the same condition as had been the '48 Windsor Club Coupé the first time I had seen it on that used-car lot in Florence a decade earlier. The trunk was surprisingly clean. All-in-all, the car looked to be in pretty decent shape and it appeared that rehabilitating it would be no more difficult than it had been for the earlier Windsor.

While I walked around the car looking it over, a grinning, sandy-haired fellow came out of the muffler shop's office and stepped in my direction. "Hi, I'm 'Larry Orem," he said. I introduced myself. The man went on. "Interested in the car?"

I tried to appear casual. "I saw that it's for sale and thought I'd stop by and look it over . . . what year is it?"

"It's registered as a 'nineteen-forty-nine' model, but it was actually a hold-over 'forty-eight.'" Seeing my puzzled expression, the fellow went on, "After the war, there was such a demand for cars---remember, they didn't make any while the war was going on---that the car companies sold everything they could make. So, Chrysler and all the others just kept making them like they

did before the war. But they weren't ready in 'forty-nine with their new designs, so for a few months Chrysler kept making the 'forty-eights and called them 'first-series' forty-nines. This is one of them."

"How did you get the car?"

"Well, that's an interesting story in itself. My uncle bought the car new in Ogden . . . he lived up in the mountains at Morgan, Utah . . . that's where the car stayed for many years after my uncle got sick and couldn't drive it. So he put it up on blocks in a barn and that's where it stayed until my relative died a couple of years ago. I inherited it and now it's here."

It was time to get serious. "What's the price of the car?"

"Twelve-hundred dollars."

Considering that it was a "New Yorker", I thought the figure was fair, but I didn't tell him that. But there was a problem: those were the days before electronic banking, and at that time I didn't have all that much ready cash to spend on an impulse buy a thousand miles from home. So I had to reluctantly pass on the car.

A year later, in the spring of 1981, I was again in Pocatello, this time with a bolstered bank account back in San José, just in case the car was still there, but when I drove past the muffler shop, the car was gone. I figured with regret that it couldn't have sat there for very long before someone else had come along and bought it.

A few weeks after that, I again passed through Pocatello, and there it was, again, the '49 Chrysler with the "For Sale" sign on the windshield! But---and this was a big "but"---this time I didn't have the banking arrangements as with the previous visit weeks earlier when the car was gone. Here again was the car and once more I didn't have the ready cash to buy it! Nonetheless, I drove onto the lot.

As before, the fellow I remembered as "Larry Orem" stepped out of the muffler shop office and came toward me. As we shook hands, I took the initiative and spoke first. "Well, I see the car is back . . ."

"Yes, but there is a man who has already bought it---" Seeing what would have been my disappointed look, he went on, "he's supposed to be coming from Tucson, Arizona to get it . . . but I'll tell you what---whoever pays me first, gets the car!"

That night in the motel room I paced the floor, trying to think of a way to buy it, since I had no ready cash on me for the twelve-hundred dollars. Finally, I decided to try to persuade him to take a personal check for three-hundred dollars, hoping he would trust me to send the remainder by express mail. (Remember, this was before there was electronic interstate banking.)

The first thing the next morning, I was in his office. To my relief (and admittedly a pleasant surprise), Larry Orem agreed to sell me the car on those conditions. Before he could change his mind, I whipped out my checkbook, scratched the amount on the draft and handed it to him. The fellow reached into a desk drawer and handed me a packet of papers. "I knew you'd buy the car!" he laughed, so I had already prepared the papers!" In wonderment I stared at the sheaf of documents in my hands. I had just bought the car!

At that very moment, the office door burst open and a dark-haired man in a rumpled suit bustled into the room, waving a paper. "Here it is, Larry, the cashier's check for the Chrysler!" He was the fellow from Tucson who was going to buy the car before I came along! Then followed an awkward scene as the New Yorker's now-former owner explained how he had, just the moment before, sold the car to me. Incredibly, the Arizona visitor took the news with aplomb. "That's all right," he breezed, "I'll find another car, I'm sure of it." Just like that, the issue that could have become a strained matter evaporated.

Returning outside, I drew out my camera from the trunk of my company car and took pictures of the Chrysler from every angle. I would use the photos to buy the necessary replacement parts to get the car in shape for long-distance travel, for I had decided to fly to Pocatello to get it into running condition and drive it back to California. (I had driven the car around the block a couple of times when I had first seen it the year before, so I already had a pretty good idea what it needed.)

Back in San José, I made the pleasant discovery that the local NAPA auto parts store had most of the parts I would need to get the car in tip-top running condition. Over the next several weeks, I located a spare headgasket, ignition parts, a carburetor kit, spark plugs, plug wires, wiper blades, and spare light bulbs. A gas tank sealer came by mail-order. All these I sent by UPS to the muffler shop in Idaho.

In early-September, 1981, I flew to Salt Lake City with a tool box as part of my checked luggage. *(Of course, in the post-'9/11' world, a metal container full of sharp tools would be forbidden on airliners---at least as carry-on, and probably not even as a checked item. It was chocked-full of what would today be considered weapons, i.e., box cutters, screwdrivers, and the like.)*

But when I arrived at Pocatello in the early-evening, the tool box was missing---lost luggage, as they put it. Some hours later, the airline delivered my red strongbox of tools to the hotel.

The next morning I was at the muffler shop on Yellowstone Avenue, ready to get going on making the Chrysler ready to travel. Over the next several days, I used the things I had sent by package express to ready the car. The most difficult was the gas tank---it was full of rust that kept clogging the fuel filter. It took nearly a whole afternoon to steam-clean it (I had to remove it from the underside of the car to do so), and slosh around the sealer inside the tank. When finished, the gas tank was as good as new. Similar efforts brought the carburetor back to like-new condition.

After three hectic days of work in sunshiny weather that was surprisingly warm for a northern climate (Idaho is next to the Canadian border), and a couple of circuits around the block, I pronounced the car ready for the 900-mile journey across three states to San José. In the late afternoon, I loaded my gear into the car's capacious trunk, waved good-bye to Larry, and drove off.

I had gone but about four blocks when there was a loud "BANG!" from underneath the hood and a cloud of steam billowed out! Raising the lid, I gaped in consternation at the split-open radiator that was launching all the coolant onto the ground.

Larry's eyes went wide in surprise when I drove the leaking Chrysler back to his mufflershop a few minutes later (after the engine had cooled---there was no water or anti-freeze left in the ruptured radiator). "Hmm," the sheet-metal expert mused, frowning. "Long ago, somebody left a plug in the overflow line---when the pressure built up, it split open. It'll take about a day to fix it."

So I had to spend an unexpected one more night in Pocatello.

By the next afternoon and with another complete check-out of all the car's systems, once again I waved farewell to Larry (who had lines of concern on his face, I noticed) and headed for the freeway.

This time, the engine was running perfectly. On the Interstate outside of town I gave the New Yorker the gas to where the speedometer registered a hefty seventy-miles-an-hour. Then I slowed to about fifty-five, the speed limit at the time. My intention was to drive two hours to Twin Falls, spend the night, and drop southward to pick up Interstate-80. But when I arrived in

Twin Falls, all the lodgings were full---it was rodeo season. I finally found a room outside of Mountain Home, an hour's drive farther to the west.

The next morning, after yet another thorough check-out of the car (no leaks, or other suspicious signs), and with a full tank of gas, I headed southward. Ahead was 150 miles of sheer *nothing*; just empty space down a narrow blacktop road. The only "entertainment" to speak of the whole time along the otherwise boring section was a range of snow-capped mountains in the far distance ---and one lonely-looking Native American guy I spotted along the way.

In three hours I pulled up at a gas station in Elko on Interstate-80, the main East-West traffic artery between New York City and San Francisco. (I later realized that if the car had broken-down anywhere along that lonely stretch between Mountain Home and Elko, my bleached bones would perhaps still be there to this day---the road seemed to be that little-used.)

But the venerable vehicle was running just fine, so with a gas-tank-top-off and a box lunch, on I drove westward on I-80 across the high desert, past the towns of Carlin, Winemucca, and Lovelock. In the late-afternoon I arrived at Reno for another fill-up and a quick look-around at the car's mechanics. Everything still looked okay, which was good, since just ahead was "Donner Summit" across the '*Sierra Nevada*' mountains.

The old Chrysler pulled the 7,240-foot elevation without a hitch, and after an all-day's drive of six-hundred or so miles, by early evening, the car and I were at a motel in Auburn, California.

The next afternoon I piloted my latest automobile acquisition into San José to a rousing reception. (I had already told friends and co-workers at the chemical plant about buying the car.)

But a few days later, while driving up the '*Nimitz Freeway* toward Oakland, there came another *BANG!* from underneath the hood and a cloud of steam rolled out! Pulling to the side of the busy thoroughfare, I discovered that this time the problem was with the engine, itself. At a friend's house, he told me that the head-gasket had blown and would have to be replaced. I managed to coax the car back to San José where I located a new gasket and a mechanic to install it and in a few days, the engine was again in perfect shape.

Over the next two years I gave the car its well-needed and deserved cosmetic restoration.

Just as the refurbishing was finished, I was transferred to Houston, Texas. In August, 1983, a car-hauling truck transported the Chrysler to Texas, where it arrived the day after the famous "Hurricane Alicia", that had decimated the Gulf Coast. The truck driver dropped off the car in the parking lot of a supermarket in Katy, surrounded by the wreckage of the big food store's roof!

I kept the New Yorker Highlander for eight more years, then sold it to a fellow antique car enthusiast in Deer Park, Texas. I never again saw it or learned of its eventual fate.

Down through the years since then, I have kept my eyes open for another interesting antique car. Perhaps someday, the right vehicle will come along.