

Twenty Two Cars and a Boat: As in “What I’ve learned from”

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Dedication:

The cover picture shows me, dad and our two '53 Caddy convertibles back in Los Angeles about 1958 or 59. To dad, cars represented mobility, which was, itself, a metaphor for freedom. He and mom one time boasted of having 34 permanent residences in their lives together of 64 years, and accumulated over ten years traveling the US, Canada and Mexico in RVs of various kinds.

So, in that spirit, may you always have the freedom to take a sketchy fork in the road without a well-conceived backup plan. For that, you'll need a car you can trust....like a '59 Jaguar or a Honda Civic.

Me? I'll take the Jag. This little book tries to explain why.

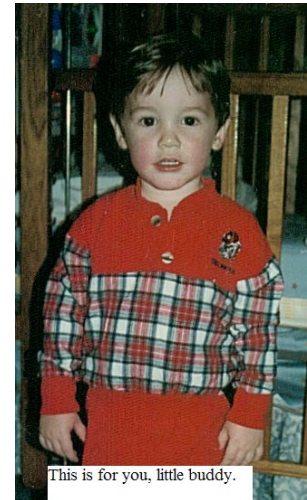
Rex

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Twenty-two Cars and a Boat

Preface

Most everybody has a hobby of some sort that provides a distraction from life's routine. My relationship with cars, boats and things that run has been the kind of hobby that fulfills a basic desire for challenge, amusement and adventure. Because it's not possible to retreat completely away from yourself, a hobby embodies something of the hobbyist and is therefore different for each participant. This little document is an attempt to blog what I remember about my experiences with motor vehicles and the lessons I've learned from them. The major takeaways help to summarize a number of observations made during my trip down life's highway. In case one of my old time friends sees this document, one caveat must be read into the record: there may be slight variation between the facts and what I remember from each experience. I've chosen, I suppose, to remember things not the way they were exactly but the way they impacted me. So, for that reason, this account has a stylized quality. I haven't undertaken to research the exact date of each experience or any of the other minutia.



The importance of trivial details in proving credibility can't be denied, however. Once I saw an auto accident where it was absolutely clear from my vantage point that a man ran a red light and hit a couple's car right in the side. On the witness stand, I said that I could clearly see the light, it had turned red and the man ran the light. The defense asked two questions. "Did you clearly see who was driving the man's car?" My answer: "Well, I saw the man get out of his car after the accident and pick up his bumper, which was laying in the street." Second question. "What kind of car ran the red light?" Answer: "It was a mid seventies dirt-brown four-door Ford although I didn't write the VIN number down. The cops took all that information at the scene." "Ah ha" said the lawyer. The defendant doesn't even own a Ford. He owns a 1974 Mercury Marquis" (Apparently, this detail was sufficient to get the man acquitted, although any fool knows that Ford makes Mercury and the models are almost identical in shape and size.) All I can say is "that ain't right". There's no difference between a Ford and a Mercury in the context of that accident. Let's hope that whatever inaccuracies are contained in this discussion are equally immaterial.

One comment before beginning: Many personal relationships have enriched my life over the years. Some of these don't get serious mention in what I've learned from fiddling with cars. This is because cars have been somewhat tangential to the ebb and flow of my personal life. My wife Roslyn, for example, doesn't have any interest in working on cars. Yet in the back of my mind, her possible enjoyment of camping in a converted fire truck is a great source of inspiration. Could this truck ever pass muster in her eyes? That might tip the scales on a late Saturday night toward adding a port-a-potty to the rig. So, even though her influence is indirect

and greatly understated in a document like this, she is there underneath it all. It is also true that Roslyn and I got together a little late in our lives so that we didn't share in most of my car experiences. Hopefully the rest of my experiences will be shared with her because she was the right one for me – in spite of the fact that cars to her are primarily a mode of transportation.

Who might want to read this document? Well, that's hard to say. I'm not intending anyone to read this while I'm still around. But as my memory fades, it would be nice to have made an effort at summarizing things before the record vanishes completely. Probably the main guy who might gain some insights is my son, Dylan. So, this is for you, buddy.

Introduction

Many people choose their car(s) as a way of helping to define themselves. By choosing a car that performs a particular way, such as a minivan for example, a family defines itself as needing this type of vehicle. By choosing a two seater convertible, a person says that he or she doesn't have a lot of baggage to carry around. A big comfortable car suggests that the owner is in no hurry, while a performance car says the opposite. If you buy a caddie, you are creating a link to other caddie owners; joining a club as it were. In fact, I've decided not to buy certain cars because I didn't care for the kind of people who typically owned them.

Certainly my choice of cars over the years has been based on something I felt about the cars, which implies, through reverse logic, that they help define my feelings. The distinguishing aspect of this process for me is that the cars I've loved the most were ones that reminded me of either myself or something I might have been in another place and time. Also, they were the cars with which I bonded, typically through important shared experiences, often involving my putting a significant amount of time into them. While most folks would choose a car for what it is, I was always more inclined to choose one for what it could be. Helping a car reach its potential provided a connection that allowed me to savor the ownership. I wasn't just the latest owner, but also partly the creator. There are some exceptions however, where a vehicle could do the job required and it was loved and respected for that reason alone.

1. You always remember your first kiss.

The first car I remember caring about is the 1950 Nash that my sister got from our grandpa. We loved that car. It would only do about 45 miles an hour, which was perfect for us. The Nash was shaped like an upside-down bathtub and was mostly maroon in color. I honestly don't remember if I actually drove the Nash but it was the car that opened my eyes to cars. I'd still like to build a lead sled out of a '50 Nash some day although I doubt that I ever will. There are too many other priorities and Dylan doesn't seem to be into the lead sled concept.

As a point of clarification, the Nash was not the first car I remember, just the first car I remember caring about. My folks had many interesting cars while we lived in LA. Dad had a used car lot called Lomita Auto Sales. He would buy cars wholesale and show them on the lot. Dad's weakness in business was that he trusted everyone and he would lend money on the cars he sold. Unfortunately, many of these cars just disappeared across the border and so



This 1950 Nash needs work but brings back memories of ours

forth. My folks told me that before leaving LA and selling the lot, they owned about 500 cars; cars that were “sold” but never paid for by the purchaser. There’s a picture of me and dad standing by two 54 Caddies when I was about 9 years old. These exemplify the cars my dad would have on his lot. He’d drive them home for a while until they sold. The Caddies were twice the car that the Nash was but the Nash was my first real kiss. It was special to me. For example, it was the first car I ever washed of my own free will. Nevertheless, this picture of me and dad by the caddies is very cool and quite prophetic in the sense that it says a lot about how cars would ultimately play a role in my life, even if I had no idea about all that at the time. It also turns out, as this story reveals, that I learned a lot about life and cars from my dad simply through his love for them both.

2. Learning how to set boundaries – a car forces you to figure it out.

Next important car: a 1958 Buick Special 2 door hard top– Auto trans v8 (286?) with dual exhaust. This was a nice car in red and black. Had a great sound and ran pretty well. My folks let me drive the Buick before I bought my own first car and, after I bought my car, whenever my car broke down.

The Buick was the first car I ever worked on and went on dates in. By this time I had a girl friend named Sharon and she and I would park in the Buick and just hang out. Don’t tell my folks but Sharon and I would go out in the Buick during football games, then drive by the stadium to see what the final score was in case anyone asked. The car gave us so much freedom that we had to decide how involved we wanted to get and how far we wanted to go. There’s only so much you can get away with at your parent’s house, so a car removes constraints. Sharon and I spent a lot of time drawing lines, crossing them, redrawing them and finally triangulating in on what we felt was right for us. This turned out to be a very healthy process that set some guidelines for years to come. Indeed, I became an expert at foreplay because we decided for ourselves in the back of the Buick that foreplay was as far as we wanted to go. Having a car allowed this decision to be made without someone forcing it down our throats.

The Buick had a tricky little door lock that would occasionally stick. Once it gave me a hard time when I was in a big hurry. Out of frustration I slammed my fist down on the roof and put a dent right there above the door. Of course, I had to tell my dad because, after all, it was his car. When he saw the dent, he went right to work pulling back the headliner so he could get to the underside of the roof. I remember standing there like an idiot, jabbering away about how it wasn’t my fault and so forth. My dad, who was rather peeved about the dent, looked up at me and said abruptly, “I have no time for useless conversation.” After forty years, that comment remains etched in my mind. And this is an important example of something about life-changing events. Having checked recently, my dad doesn’t remotely remember this episode. He doesn’t remember the lock, the dent, or the remark that he made. This is the way with many important moments. You remember them like yesterday while others didn’t notice a thing.

When my sister moved away from home and married Lon, they took the Buick, which left me with the folks’ Rambler Ambassadors. My mom had a ‘60, with a 327 v8 and my dad had a ‘65 with a 327 v8. Both of these cars were stick shifts on the column with overdrives. They were also both black and nice cars, but not “cool.” The Buick was cool. What’s cool exactly? It’s a lot like pornography - you know it when you see it.

3. Nothing commits you to a project like having your own skin in the game.

By the time I was 16½, I'd saved enough to buy my own car. Even before this, I liked the idea of owning my own stuff and would rather have had a wreck that was mine than access to a nice family car. I remember paying 125 bucks for a '37 Dodge coupe that needed everything but wasn't wrecked or rusted out. It was beer bottle brown with a healthy percentage of gray primer here and there, mohair interior and a flathead 6 engine, 3 on the floor; maybe 110 hp. The first thing my dad said was that, before I could drive the Dodge, I had to go through the brake system and insure that the car would stop. Each night he'd come home from work and look over the parts I'd removed. He'd tell me what needed to be fixed/replaced and would help me when I got stuck on things. For at least a year I worked on the Dodge, repairing the body, rewiring the whole car, replacing the engine with a wrecking yard flathead out of a '53 Dodge and so forth. The '53 engine had about 10 more horsepower but bolted onto the tranny and into the frame. Several of my friends helped with the engine swap and other projects, most notably Vern, who became a great friend after we turned wrenches together on his cars and mine.

Vern was into Falcons at the time. These were sort of a poor man's performance car, with small V8 engines and performance parts availability. Vern had a hard time appreciating why I was trying to restore the Dodge rather than putting time into a better performing car. I could never really explain it but the Dodge had a look and feel that I enjoyed. It was a car you didn't need to beat to have fun in. It was fun just cruising around. In many ways the Dodge helped me learn how to finance a project and care for something because you had a lot of yourself at stake. After the Dodge was painted, I would wash it EVERY day before going to school.

When I ran out of money at times, my folks would chip in but it always felt like the car was genuinely mine and not a gift. This was a source of pride for me. I distinctly remember the night I put the paint job on it. There was a big track meet that night and I gave the Dodge one coat, hurried over to the meet, struggled through my event, then hurried back to give the car a second coat. My mile relay team was predicted to do very well – it was



My friend Karl and me with axes we picked up for the picture. Bonnie and Clyde was the big thing back then.

a district meet. Anyway, I was hung over from the paint fumes and ran poorly. Dad didn't talk to me for about a week afterward since it was one of the few meets he was able to attend. But later, the car was sitting in front of our bay window and dad said, "You know, that's a pretty nice paint job on that Dodge." So, we got over my poor showing at track and moved on to other things.

The Dodge was a tremendous experience of learning by doing. Lots of repairs had to be done more than once. For example, I rewired the entire car and thought that it would look cool all one color. I had red wire running everywhere, and it did look neat. But one day, there was a

short that melted a bunch of the wires under the dash. When it came time to R&R the bad wire, it was impossible to trace the wires because they all looked alike. From then on I was careful to code my wiring and keep a diagram. Later I found it interesting that the 70's Cadillacs had such complicated wiring harnesses that they had crossed over into a zone wherein a wiring diagram was impossible. If something went seriously wrong with the wiring, the car was a casualty.

After the Dodge was done, I sold it for 500 bucks and bought a 37 LaSalle, which was like a Cadillac. It was a black 4 door with dual side mounts – a huge vehicle. At the time Bonnie and Clyde was the big thing and this car would have fit right in. It had a big flathead v8 and 4 on the floor, but it was a truck and not that fun to drive. I started a restoration of the LaSalle but it burned oil and was going to need an engine job. So I bailed out on the LaSalle and sold it to another guy who wanted to buy it at the same time I did. It went for same price as the Dodge.



The La Salle and the butt end of my mom's 60 Rambler

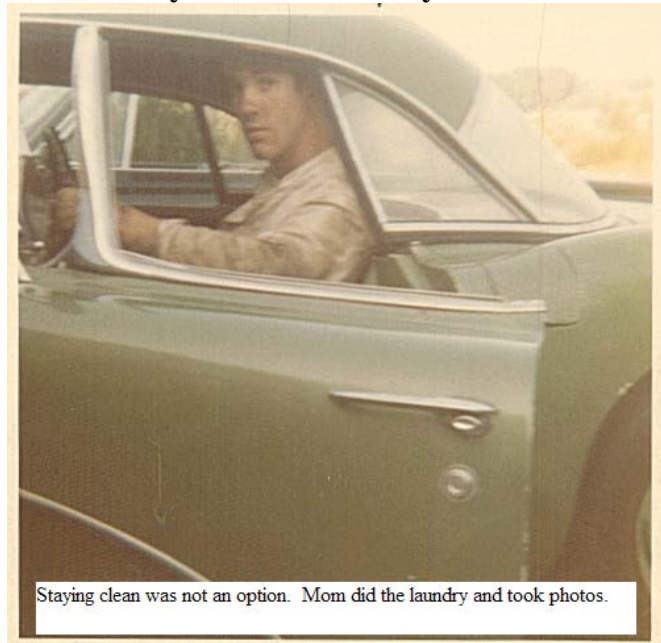
4. Negotiating with a willing seller can pay off. Sometimes you can find a bird's nest on the ground.

I liked the idea of paying my own way to college. It cost about \$100 a quarter back then to attend the University of Washington, which was the school of choice in my neck of the woods. Many friends went to other schools but wound up back at UW. For me, UW was a no brainer because both my dad and gandpa attended the school. It was a source of pride for me to represent our family through the third generation.

To make money for college and not be distracted by a major project, it was time to buy a more modern and cheaper car. Dad helped me pick up a '57 Chev coupe for \$325 off a dealer's back lot. The dealer started at \$995 and I'll never forget how my dad bargained for the Chevy. We looked under the hood and dad whispered to me, "This car's got a hundred bucks worth of ignition parts on it." I didn't know anything about aftermarket performance parts yet but the car looked great from even my vantage point. My dad asked, "Do you like this car?" "Sure but I'm not sure I can afford it." The salesman kept saying the car was a 59 and dad never corrected him. At \$995, my dad said, of course that was ridiculous. What did they really want for it? The salesman came back from "his manager" with a price of \$650. Dad wrote him a check for \$325, half of their \$650, and they eventually took it. This netted me the first quarter of tuition and was the deal of the century. The '57 had a superb 287 v8 with stick shift. It was built right, with a tight suspension, dual point ignition, holly carb, good tires and chrome wheels. The engine would turn 8 grand – a claim verified by Vern who was very skeptical before he saw the tach for himself. The 57 was the first performance car I'd owned and it just ran great, getting up to 20 mpg on the highway. Gas was about 27 cents a gallon back then in 68. From that point on, in my eyes Chevy made the best performance cars. For the most part, I just drove the 57 and didn't spend much time trying to improve it. No way could I have ever increased the ratio of what I initially bought, divided by what was paid for it. The Chevy was also a car that everyone could relate to. It was coin of the realm, which wasn't all that clever, but it ran with the big dogs.

5. Your first project car removes a mystique that arms you for the rest of your life.

During the summer between my freshman and sophomore years I worked as a logger down by Mount St. Helens. This was hard, dangerous work, but it paid well. I noticed a '59 Corvette body for sale in Portland and towed it home behind the Chevy (I think it cost about 600 bucks for the roller). The plan was to swap the Chevy running gear into the Corvette. This I did, although I also traded my ten speed bike and some cash for a 4 speed T-10 tranny. I was told that the rear end was good on the Corvette; just drop in the engine and tranny and the rest was perfect. Of course, it isn't easy to confirm such a claim until after the train has left the station. Fortunately, the Chevy had a 4.11 positraction differential because the Corvette rear end howled like a scalded dog – completely shot to hell.



Staying clean was not an option. Mom did the laundry and took photos.

After the swap but before I got clever, the Corvette would really haul. If you punched the car in first gear, it made you sick. But I never was much of a street racer and never beat on my stuff. I liked a car that would perform but I didn't care to push it on the road. Vern was a wild man though. Perhaps he cured me of any latent tendencies toward street racing as a result of all of the mistakes he made.

I did a lot of work on the Corvette over the couple years I owned it. One great experience was that my dad got me a stall at Comet Auto Body for a week. The goal was for me to prep the Corvette and Ray Comet would actually spray the paint. I learned a lot hanging around his shop and the final product was very good. We used lacquer in Dark Green and Gold. I remember pouring over the paint books trying to find the perfect color combination. Ray was looking at me funny so I asked what he was thinking. His comment was that it didn't matter what color you picked. They all look great if the job itself is great. Probably he was more right than wrong, although I definitely like some colors more than others. Sorry, Ray.

The Corvette came with fuel injection chrome insignias so I advertised for a dog house fuel injection system for it. Interestingly, two different guys answered the ad. Each had a fuel injection setup that they had stored for years in their garages. After finding such an odd piece of equipment by putting a want ad in the paper, I started being more proactive in searching for stuff that interested me. Being proactive can take many forms, from asking if something you see happens to be for sale to attempting to source items through all sorts of shenanigans. I found and bought a tug boat in Philly back in the 80's by simply calling everyone in the yellow pages under "tug boats" and seeing if they had any

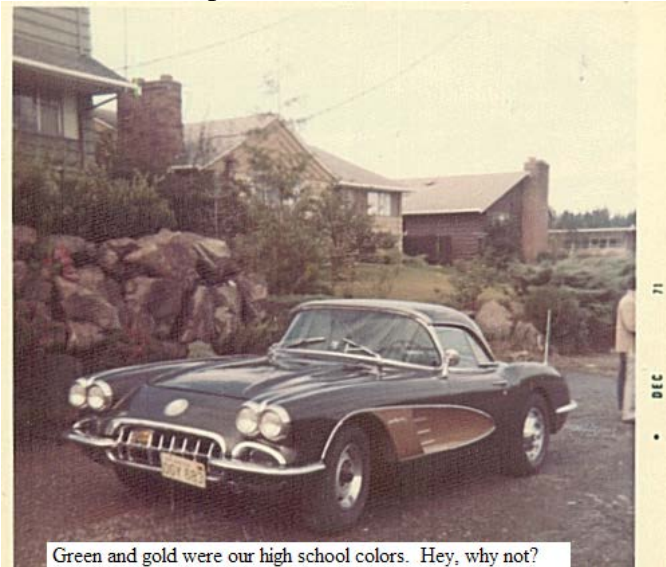


A typical day in our driveway: five friends, a neighbor kid, my dad and myself trying to figure out what's wrong.

projects. Finally a guy said he had an old boat, the tug Prince, an 1898 steel hulled 93 footer, which he was going to scrap. I eventually bought the tug Prince – but that’s another story.

Getting back to the fuel injection, I bought the cleanest looking one and, after putting some gaskets in it, attempted to mount it on the engine. There was a slight warp to the manifold and, sadly, Vern broke an ear off as he was torquing down the bolts. He was really sorry and so forth, but the thing that interested me about the event was that I was never in the least upset at Vern. There was this confidence in him that was equal to the confidence I had in myself insofar as working on cars was concerned. If Vern broke the ear off of a manifold, then I would probably have done the same thing in the same situation. Vern was one of the few guys in my life that I trusted so implicitly. You can’t fake trust like that. And if it ever comes to you, you should hold onto it because it is a rare relationship. Anyway, after having the ear welded back on, the fuel injection looked cool. But the engine never ran as well as it did with the Holly Carb. I also tried 6 deuces on an Offenhouser (sp) manifold, which I bought as a box of pieces at some sort of swap meet. This setup looked fantastic but just drank gas and ran like crapolla.

In the final analysis, the Corvette gets credit for giving me confidence to start a project when the end isn’t necessarily in sight. To get the ‘vette, it was necessary to accept a lot of uncertainties and, moreover, to begin a project that had more phases than could be identified and mapped out ahead of time. The Corvette was my first process of setting ‘em up and knocking ‘em down, one problem at a time as they came. Once you get comfortable with such a mode of operation, it is very liberating because you can begin something without having to know all the answers. Many times later in life, I would enjoy the not knowing what was ahead almost as much as the getting there. Indeed folks would ask me how long a project was going to take, or they would start peppering me with questions about how I was going to do this or that aspect of the project. My answer was usually something like, “how should I know?” If I knew that much about the project it wouldn’t be an adventure. In fact, usually I didn’t want to know. I wanted to discover it as the project progressed. There’s a philosophy of building things called design-build wherein it isn’t expected that the designer know all the answers ahead of time. Attempting to figure it out from too far a vantage point ignores the new information you will obtain as you proceed. So design-builders iterate between designing a little, then building a little. Such an approach makes a lot of sense but is only possible when the designer is also the builder.



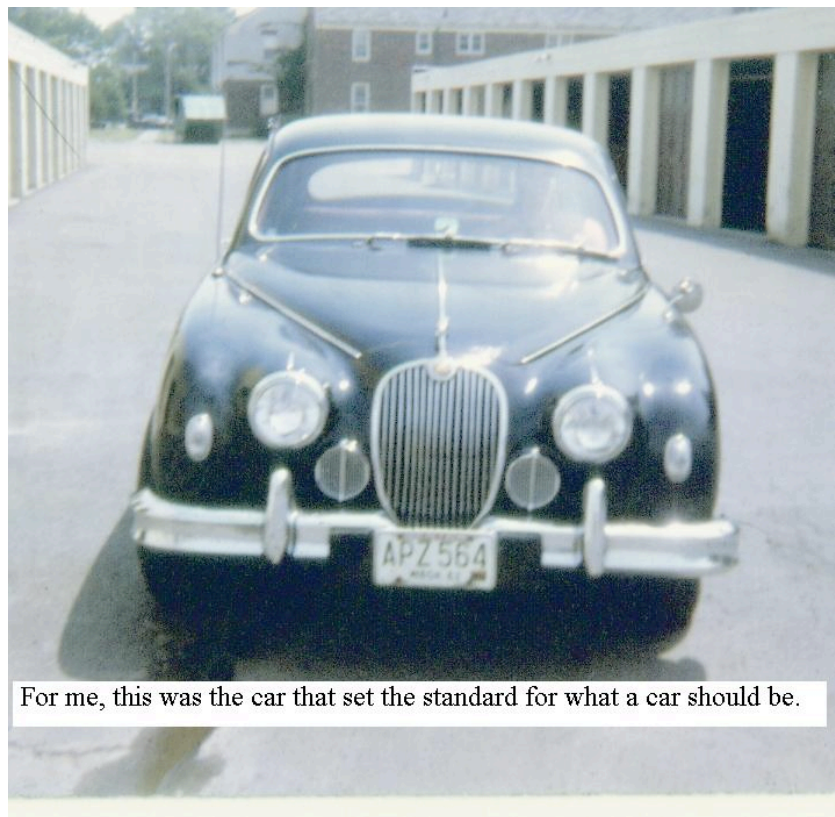
6. What was your favorite car? If you can’t answer that question, you don’t know what love is.

You might think that it would be hard to sell the vette but, not true. The car was a journey as I said and, once the journey was over, it was time to move on. So, after the vette was finished more or less, I sold it for \$1200 and bought a ‘59 Jaguar Mk 1. Now this was a

beautiful car: black with red leather interior. The engine was blown but an engine rebuild was the only thing I hadn't tried yet and I was ready. I spent my spare time in my junior summer rebuilding the engine and doing the brakes, a paint job and so on. Again Vern helped me at critical times like the all nighter we spent getting the engine back in the car. I could write an entire book about just that experience. The whole Jag engine build taught me how to do good work when it counted but also to get the job done when time ran out. After the rebuild, that car ran like a top. Later, in Rochester, if I could get the battery to turn one cylinder past top dead center, the car would start. But the salt in the Rochester winter began eating up the body and the car only lasted about a year back there. Also the Jag was in a flood. After it dried, I carefully cleaned it and changed all the fluids. But I knew the car was going to have problems somewhere, sometime. So I ran an ad at a price of 800 bucks. I remember getting 21 calls by nine AM after the ad came out in the morning paper. The first guy to see the car bought it. This was a situation where I set the price as fair given my feelings about the damage although I could easily have gotten twice the price. The price I set gave the buyer a lot of wiggle room to fix a few things. This helped me feel comfortable with the transaction since money is only one piece of the mosaic that surrounds doing deals. I've always felt like it was at LEAST as important to feel good about yourself after you did a deal. I'm sure Donald Trump would laugh at that notion.

Rebuilding the Jag took some concentration and psychic energy. It effectively transitioned me from a jock on the UW crew team to a problem solver. In concert with the Jag, I also started taking school seriously and spending more time in my head and less time with my back and arms. As it turned out the balance in my life required a good measure of both back and brains. Too much of either wasn't healthy for me. The Jag project contained both good problem solving and some muscle or at least some physical effort and skills.

There were two events during the Jag rebuild that left a mark on me. One was the engine assembly. I had to install the head and time the cams a total of four times before the engine was right. The first time, just at the final assembly point, the engine wouldn't rotate fully. It would turn one way and "hit", then the other way and "hit." After disassembling virtually the entire engine, it turned out that the problem was simply a little cap screw on the flywheel that was hitting the engine block as it rotated. – no need to pull the head or remove any parts at all. So,



For me, this was the car that set the standard for what a car should be.

frantically, I tried to make up for last time and dropped the head on the studs without making sure the pistons and valves were approximately timed. This bent a valve. During the third install, I failed to notice that the new valve, which was just fit to the head was too long in the stem for the engine. After removing the head and grinding down the valve stem, the fourth attempt went together and stayed together. Later we read in a manual somewhere that, whatever you do, you should never grind a long valve into a short one because the stems are case hardened. But over the years I never looked back on that fix, other than to marvel at how long it can take to do a job when you're in a big hurry.

The second story involves the painting of the roof. Overall, the paint was in pretty good shape except for the roof. With paint stripper the old paint was completely removed, then any imperfections were filled and the entire roof primed.. Black lacquer was chosen and I decided to spray inside our garage with the door shut so there wouldn't be any dust. After spraying inside the garage for an hour or so, I was so wasted on paint fumes that I could barely stand up. After staggering out for a little fresh air, the job looked beautiful. But while admiring the result, a fly landed right in the middle of the roof above the windshield. My bright idea was to blow it off the car with an empty paint gun. So I brought the gun over the roof to shoot at the fly. But I'd already removed the can so the tube that draws the paint from the can was naked under the gun. While shooting the fly, a big drop of paint fell from the tube onto the roof, causing as much imperfection as the fly itself. Moreover, the fly left its mark anyway. Sometimes you have to know when to leave well enough alone.

Before heading out to Rochester, and after reworking the brakes and putting new tires on her, Vern and I took the Jag out on a lonely road and buried the speedometer. The Jag was a little slow off the line but it would really get up a head of steam - a very stable car with electric overdrive on top of a floor shift four speed. But it was pulling to the right just a bit so a front end alignment seemed like a good idea. There was this old guy at an equally old-school type of place out on Aurora. He made a few adjustments, then jumped in the car and drove off. I was waiting to hear him grind the gears into second because the syncros were a little slow from first to second. You could hear the exhaust note and, on the shift, there was a slight pause and he dropped it right in. When he returned I commented on his shift, mentioning the fact that my wife ground the gears every time she drove the car. He looked at me with an absolutely straight face and said, "You let a woman drive this car?" Those were the only words he said to me the whole time.

7. An interesting car usually requires backup, which is to say that you should keep your day job.

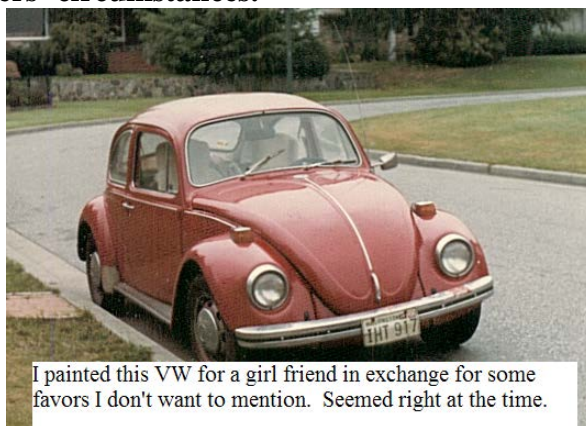
Since the Jag wasn't running for at least six months, I also owned a 50 Chev convertible that I paid about 200 bucks for. It was a nice little car (baby blue) but not a great handling car (6cyl/3 on the tree with a loose suspension). My dad later bought the convertible from me to give to my sister. The timing of this transaction was just a bit off because the convert got hit by a drunk driver while it was parked a couple months before the Jag was done. What we did was have dad buy the car from me for \$50. He then fixed the crushed rear fender and gave it to my sister. Fixing the rear fender involved chopping it off the car with a hatchet. My dad was someone who got the job done, no matter what. I can still see him standing over his finished work with that hatchet in his hand. Back in those days, my dad was invincible as far as I was concerned. I never once talked back to him or crossed him in any way. It wasn't an option. Over the years, I learned so much from him even though he never repeated himself and never felt

it necessary to explain himself either. You just had to pay attention, because he dripped insights, like most of my cars dripped oil. The good news was that his insights could be retrieved from my memory, sometimes years later, while the oil stayed where it fell.

My next backup was a 49 Chev sedan for \$100 from across the street for the remaining time until the Jag was ready. The 49 was a bright green and didn't mean anything to me. But it got me around. At this time, my girl friend, Karyn, had a 66 mustang that we also drove. Once we got married, I can't remember what happened to the Mustang. We ended up with only the Jag when we left Seattle on the trip to Rochester. Even though the Jag was old, I trusted that car as I trusted myself.

8. Cars reflect both their owners and their owners' circumstances.

After the Jag was sold, next up was a red 1969 VW Beetle. The year was 1973 and the oil embargo was on. The bug cost \$400 although only four years old - it was a mess in many ways. Surprising to me, during the test drive it came with claw hammer. You needed the claw end of the hammer to pull back the pedal after you stepped on the brakes. The big contrast between working on a Jag and a Beetle was that replacement parts didn't fit very well on the Beetle. The nuts and bolts were course threaded and parts were hard to fit together. The car got great gas mileage though. At this stage, finishing my PhD took priority over fooling around with machines. So, after a quick paint job (with a dozen rattle cans), and some brake work, I let Rochester eat 'er up. The picture shows a bug just like mine but this one belonged to a friend. That friendship lasted about as long as it took me to paint the car for her (ha ha). I was single at the time so no harm no foul.



I painted this VW for a girl friend in exchange for some favors I don't want to mention. Seemed right at the time.

There was one event with the bug though that hardened my self confidence in car diagnostics. At one point the engine started missing and running on 3 cylinders. With 65 HP, a VW needs all four to get out of its own way. My sense was that the problem was electrical. Now the distributor was always a bit of a problem because the point gap wouldn't stay set - it was all too crudely designed and built. But I couldn't seem to remove the miss no matter how carefully I set the points, so I took the car to a VW shop and this German hotshot asked me to start the car. He put one hand behind each exhaust pipe and said, "Your car needs an engine rebuild. There's no compression in one cylinder." I asked how he could tell with just a feel of the exhaust and he said that he had so and so many years of experience (with a very German air of superiority). Well, I had a compression tester at home, so I said I'd think about it and instead went home and tested the compression. All four cylinders were good as gold. Eventually the problem revealed itself. One dark night, the little booger was missing like crazy so I popped the lid. There it was; a spark running down one of the plug insulators and shorting into the block. A crack in the plastic insulator allowed the spark to slip around the spark plug gap. The cost of the fix was four bucks - electrical all along.

10. Sometimes doing things for the experience is a good idea if it's for a short enough period of time.

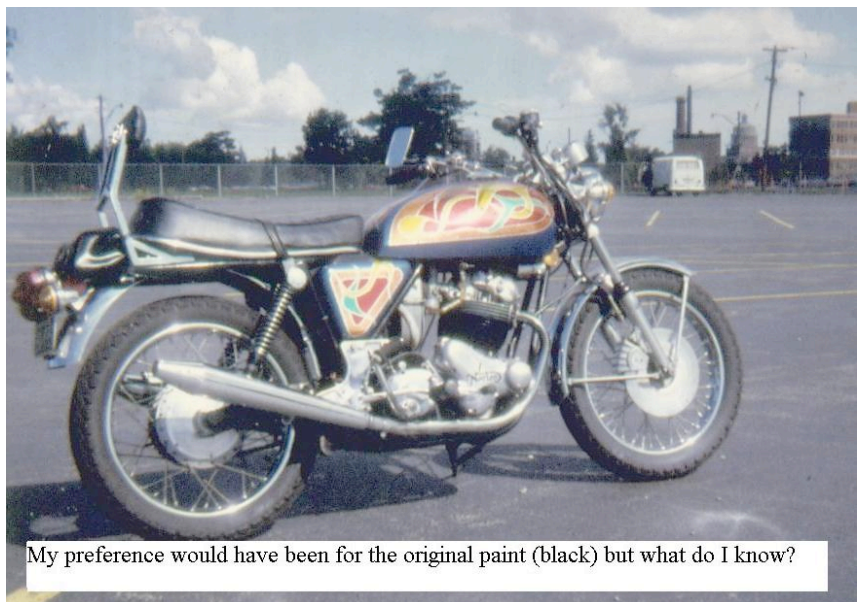
Once some of the pressure from school subsided because it looked like I was going to survive the program, I started thinking about motorcycles. One reason was that we only had a one car garage and any interesting vehicle needed to be skinny. I also wanted to experience motorcycle riding. So, about 1975, I bought the 73 Norton combat. A bike would just fit next to the Beetle in our garage space. The Norton was my first and only serious bike. What a great choice. It renewed my love for British engineering because it was a great running and handling machine. The bike gave us both transportation and riding a motorcycle was interesting for a while. I always rode with a helmet and leather jacket and never got too crazy. One day, after about 4 years, I decided I'd done the motorcycle thing and sold the Norton to a guy who could barely walk after his last motorcycle accident. He probably killed himself.

Fortunately, I escaped such a fate, but it reminds me of something. In order to get a motorcycle license, you had to pass the riding test. To do this, I borrowed a Suzuki 305 from my old buddy Jim Carlson, who was a rider. Although I moved away from performance motorcycles, Jim later bought a big Honda road bike when he was in his late 50's. As I'm writing this little vignette in 2007, I'm on a flight to Seattle to attend Jim's funeral. He killed himself passing a line of cars on that bike; just ran out of road.

Along with the Norton and after the VW, a 69 Firebird found its way into our garage;. 350 v8 3 speed on the floor I believe. Paid \$900 for it and sold it a couple years later for \$600. The salt in Rochester was really taking its toll on the car by about 1976. Cars just didn't last up in that part of the country. The kid who bought it was excited because he was getting a lot of car for not much money. The Firebird was a solid machine but it was dominated by many of my previous cars in terms of my connection to it. Probably, the Norton had more soul and I sensed



Me on the Norton and the Firebird. Strange photo.



My preference would have been for the original paint (black) but what do I know?

that. Another place and time might have been right for the Firebird. The only interesting thing that happened was that the engine started missing consistently and it seemed that something was wrong with the valve train. This was the first engine I'd worked on that had hydraulic lifters, which were supposed to be silent and adjust automatically on oil pressure. Out in the parking lot, I pulled the intake manifold, and various covers to reveal the lifters. Sure enough one had a hole pounded right at the base of the push rod. Several other lifters were about to go. It appeared as though the engine had perhaps run out of oil at one time or something. To this day, I've never seen that kind of wear on hydraulic lifters.

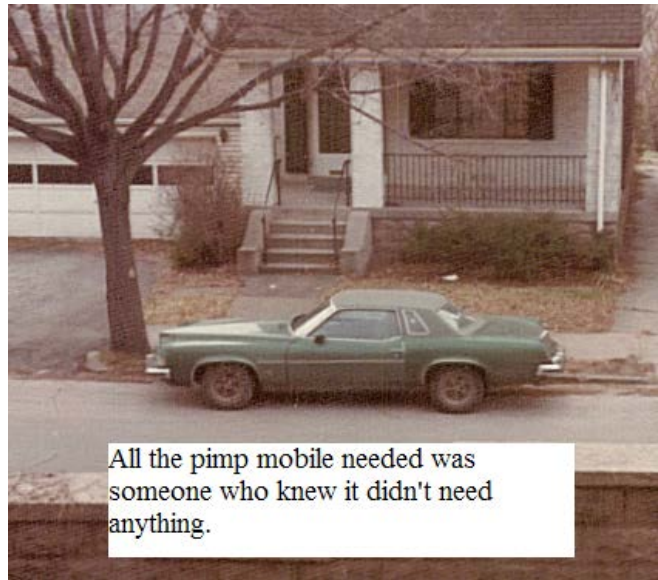
When the Firebird was sold, the kid asked if I had a manual for it. Something caused me to demur and say no. A little instinct was telling me that manuals should be kept in case they are ever needed in the future. Indeed, I'd kept the manual for the Jag along with other manuals, which were collections, like the Motors and Chilton Manuals. So a library began of repair guides. At this point there's a rather eclectic collection sitting proudly in the shop. Just recently, I had occasion to pull the 1953 Motors Manual to check on torque specs for a flathead four in an old forklift. Probably everything is on line now.

11. Carry a working list of ideas and check them off as they come.

After arriving in Pittsburgh, I was broke and needed a driver. Next up was a 68 Dodge Charger (\$300). Purchased from a car lot, it was really beat and the body was rusting badly underneath. But damn, it was a genuine 68 Charger! I knew it had my name on it before opening the door. As it turned out, I enjoyed owning the Charger because it was on my hit list of cars. The Charger always ran pretty well and its spirit was very special, of course, but it was hard to start in winter. I had to drill a hole in the air cleaner big enough to spray the carb with starter fluid all winter long. The process was – open the hood, zap the air cleaner hole with starter fluid, climb inside and crank the engine. No point in skipping any steps. One crazy thing about the Charger was that it was stolen three times. Each time it was found and returned (twice by the cops, once by me just finding it). Kids were attracted to the car because it looked like the Charger in the movie Bullet, although mine was dark green rather than black.

One night, on a date of all things, I traded the Charger for the 73 Pontiac Grand Prix. The dealer give me 50 bucks for the Charger, which was about 45 bucks more than it was worth. When traded, the driver's side door wouldn't open, the muffler was held up with a coat hanger and every body panel had at least one dent. The Grand Prix was a really nice car for grown ups. My friends called it the Pimp Mobile, but it served me well for a few years in Pittsburgh.

The Pimp Mobile needed virtually zero maintenance for years. When I left Pittsburgh though, there was another faculty member at Carnegie-Mellon who needed a cheap, dependable car. So, could he buy the Grand Prix? Now this guy knew NOTHING about cars. He was a babe in the woods. My advice to him was not to



do anything to the car. Don't get talked into new shocks, brakes etc. Just drive it and keep oil in it. Later I heard that he had the rear springs replaced along with a ton of other stuff. His experience renewed my commitment that no one I really care about should be left on this earth with so little competence concerning something that they need – at least if I'm in a position to do anything about it.

12. An aside on competition versus personal bests.

Along with the Pimp Mobile I had a little pickup (a '50 Dodge), using it to haul stuff during the time that I was working on a row house near Carnegie Mellon University, my first employer as an assistant professor of finance. In celebration of the '50 Dodge, someone (Stan Baiman, actually) gave me a copy of the book "Truck", which is a reflection written by a guy about his experience restoring a 1952 Dodge pickup. After a number of years, this book was lost but



when Jim Smith started restoring his MG, I remembered the book and bought copies for both Jim and myself. It's a great book that really catches the sense of compromise one goes through during a relationship with an old car. In the end what you get out of a project is the yang of the yin you put into it. The best chapter is about the author's attempt to replace the king pins. He spent hours beating on them and using every trick in the book to break them loose. In the end he decided new king pins weren't that important.

About this time, I got into competitive pistol shooting. Shooting is a great sport that contrasts in an interesting way with my college days. In college, I rowed on the UW crew team, winning over 50 t-shirts from Universities all over the country. UW in those days had a very strong team. My junior year we set four course records in the first four regattas. We won a national championship as freshman (tied actually with Penn, but that's another story) and I eventually topped out with a second place in the Pan Am games, rowing for the US team in 1971. We Washington members of that team were later inducted into the Husky Hall of fame. Anyway, the point is that competitive athletics were an important chapter in my life. Most folks would agree that rowing is one of those primitive and pure sports. It is all conditioning and team work. Rowing is about how hard you can pull and for how long, while still staying in control of your timing, blade work and so forth. We trained ourselves to meter out our energy during a race until we had absolutely NOTHING LEFT. Our last stroke in a race was with our last ounce of strength. And we also learned not to fear this process. Maybe that was the greatest takeaway from rowing. Give it everything you have and you'll have no regrets, win or lose.

Contrast all that with pistol shooting. Some of the best shooters were overweight with beer guts and all kinds of fitness issues. But many of these men and women were, indeed, very well trained. The best shooters didn't choke on the firing line, were always ready to compete and never lost their nerve. The feeling on the firing line when the range master says, "Lock and load. Ready on the firing line. Fire" is exactly the same feeling that one gets on the starting line of a regatta at the commands "Are you ready? Ready all. ROW." Sports are about putting your mind and body together to achieve a goal. Those who win can control their emotions and figure out a way to get the very most out of their preparation. At top levels of competition, every

athlete has worked his or her butt off and the difference in preparedness is minimal. It's a mental game of who is positioned to give his or her very best. Our motto in rowing was that there was no excuse on race day. It was a sacred time. Bitching about anything on race day, like the weather or your oarlock or the blister on you butt "packed sand". In other words, it just weighed you down.

Also, in rowing, you either won a regatta or you lost. Every team would bet their shirt and if you were walking around after your race without a shirt, it was clear that you lost: by an inch or five boat lengths, nobody knew. One time we came in second at a national championship in the JV boat. Our coxswain drifted wide during the race or we probably would have won. I was a sophomore and the guy next to me in the boat was a senior. We got our second place medals and this senior just handed it to some little kid standing there. Second place meant nothing. No matter that you beat 20 other boats that, themselves, were good enough to go to the nationals.

Rowing had a great, albeit mercenary, philosophy. Betting your shirt is a road to success. At one point, we had t-shirts that said "Win or Die." But I later retrained myself to let go of the competitive spirit. It can be destructive. In rowing we were essentially trained to kill. In society at large, I found it better for me to ignore competition and just engage in activities for the enjoyment of them or for my own enrichment. I tried to do my best but not worry about where I finished.

This new concept of sports for the enjoyment came to me at Carnegie. We used to run at lunch and there were many ex cross country guys who would beat me easily every day. But someone decided to have a faculty – student race. Cross country wasn't a strong sport for me at 190 pounds but I knew a few things about competition. On race day my old rowing mentality was not forgotten. Get a good night's sleep. Eat the right breakfast. Warm up correctly. Be ready to put it all on the course. The only guys who beat me were a couple of serious cross country students weighing in at around 130. But I just about died afterwards. On that day, I decided not to compete seriously again. It wasn't healthy for me.

This distinction between competition and personal achievement needs clarification. In actual practice, the difference is subtle because you are doing your best under either philosophy. Only the driving force is different. With a competitive spirit, you focus on beating your opponent, pushing the rules of engagement as far as possible, giving no weight to the opponent's needs, desires or aspirations. Within a personal achievement type of philosophy you might end up beating all of your opponents too, but the driving force is your own, internal yardstick. You might choose to play, for example, by tighter rules. The idea that "it's how you play the game" is a personal achievement point of view. "I sought to achieve excellence within a set of guidelines that were interesting or appropriate or right for me."

There are pluses and minuses to either point of view I suppose. With a personal achievement approach you never really know how you stack up in the sense that it's easy to give



Bill and me on our way to whoop up on some conucks

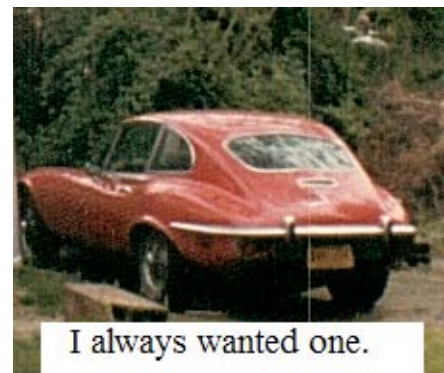
up in the clinches because no one is really keeping score. But with a competitive spirit you'll find yourself choosing not to compete rather than accepting the high likelihood of losing. Within a personal achievement approach to the universe you can enjoy activities where others are slaughtering you because they are naturally better, more highly trained, more experienced and so forth. It just doesn't enter the calculus of why you're in the game.

As a shooter, I was a master level marksman and won enough money to pay for my entry fees - the best shooter by far on my team, the Steel City Pistol Team, but I rarely practiced during the week, preferring to shoot for fun. It was about me and my control but not about competing per se. Indeed, I used a revolver for a long time against automatics. With a revolver you had to cock after every shot and, in rapid fire, this put you at a terrific disadvantage. But even with the best gun on the range, there were ex military and police shooters out there who could kick my butt. There was one guy who left a big impression on me. His shooting hand had a callous as thick as a banana peel in the crotch between his thumb and index finger, right where his 45 kicked. He said it was from shooting at least 100 rounds a day. His ammo was free from the military and he shot government hard ball. I was shooting the lightest loads we could load. That guy was awesome. But it was his life. How would I have stacked up against him with comparable training? Who knows or cares? But when I was on the line next to this guy or anyone else, I focused on what I was doing and tried my best for a perfect score. It was just that when the smoke cleared and this guy had a 99 while I had a 97, I wasn't upset about it. He was better than me.

At one point, I accurized my grandfather's model 1911 colt 45. Everyone at the range said the gun should be done professionally, but I worked on it in the evenings with the goal of building a gun that would go the distance with the best guns out there. I spent six nights on the trigger pull alone. It was a huge source of pride for me to shoot that gun although it would jam occasionally because the spring was cut a bit too light in the clip. 20 years later I used that 45 for my right-to-carry permit here in Texas. The range master had to check every gun before the test. He cocked mine and dry fired it, exclaiming without hesitation, "Nice trigger pull." Still, the pros probably had better trigger pulls. Yet my gun had my best effort in it and I enjoyed the feeling of building my own gun even if it meant the occasional penalty round because of a jam.

13. Some cars are love at first sight and justifiably so. They should be on your list.

During the period around 1979-80, I would see a solid looking red XKE sitting in a gas station parking lot on my way to and from the pistol range. Finally I stopped and inquired. They said some rich guy owned it, but it had a blown tranny and he just never came back for it. Well, I contacted the guy and got permission to look at the car. His story was that he owned a number of exotic cars and this one just slipped through the cracks. Sure, he'd be willing to sell it at a good price if he didn't have to spend a lot of time dealing with me. Since the car had been sitting for at least a year, I pulled the plugs and squirting oil into the cylinders before cranking the engine. I then cranked it with the plugs out until the engine registered oil pressure. After touching up the points and insuring that the carbs were getting gas, I tried starting the car for real and she fired up. Although I had checked the tanny fluid before all of this and it read full, the dip stick read



about 2 quarts low while it was running. So, I went up to the station guy and asked to buy some fluid. He said not to bother because an expert had been out and the tranny was definitely blown. I said, "humor me." To make a long story short, I put the two quarts of tranny fluid in the car and drove it away. I paid 6 grand and the car only had 23,000 miles on it. A 1972 V12 2+2 in red with black interior. Nice running car.

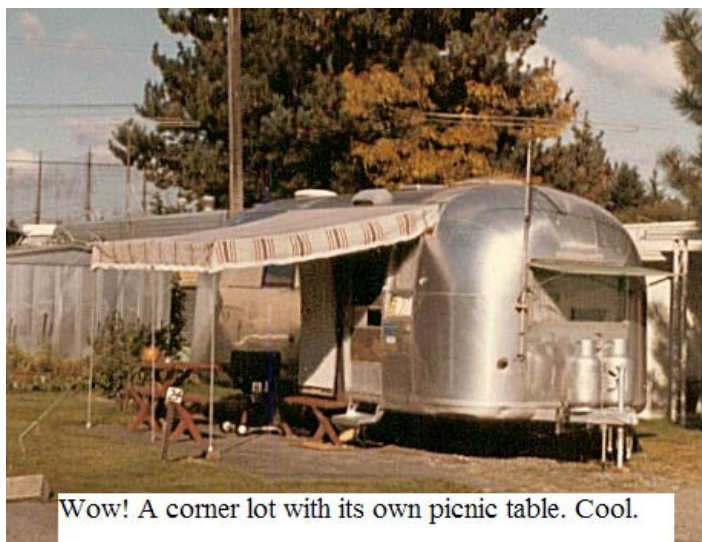
The biggest problem I had with the XKE was that the tail pipes were so low they hit all the time. The resonator at the back of the car was a box that had two pipes going in and four exhaust pipes coming out. Over the years it had started to soften up and leak a bit. Since Pennsylvania had annual inspections, I spent a bunch of time trying to patch these leaks and mask the deterioration of the system. I put sticky aluminum patches over the holes, painted the whole thing black and so forth. After all that time spent, as soon as the inspector put the car on a rack he could see that the exhaust was rotten and they failed the car. Later, I installed new pipes and a resonator in about a quarter of the time it took to do a half-assed job. This observation repeated itself many times over the years; that doing a job right was often easier and cheaper than mickey mousing it. Of course, there are important exceptions, but I started to consider doing it right as the approach of choice unless proven otherwise. Another aspect of the XKE that trained me for the future was syncing the carbs. The engine had four side draft carbs that were synchronized by measuring the air flow with a flow meter. I spent a lot of time tinkering with the carbs although I finally settled on a 90% rule for performance tuning – you can get 90% of the potential in about 40% of the time. (a variation on the 80/20 rule that guides most of life's little frustrations). Generally, it's trying for that last 10% that kills you.

14. Fantasies have to be lived before they let you rest. Some will only let you rest for a while until returning to haunt you again.

Somewhere deep in my soul, probably partly because my folks had such a love for travel trailering, I've always been interested in the fantasy of great road trips in an RV. After I decided to leave Carnegie I sold the Jag and bought a Dodge Pickup with a 440 engine along with an old Airstream trailer. The Dodge was good to go but I put some time into the Airstream, redoing the interior and stuff. I pulled the trailer to Seattle with the Dodge, ultimately leaving the trailer behind but taking the Dodge up to Vancouver. My concept for the visit to Seattle was that I would stay in the trailer and thus pay for it out of saved rent. The trailer park in which I ultimately resided was located right next to the cemetery on Aurora.

I learned two things about life while staying at the trailer park. The first one came quickly. It turned out that I got a corner lot with its own picnic table! Several of the women in that park thought I was hot. So I learned that no matter where you are and how low on the totem pole you happen to be, there are always folks who can relate and who might even think you've got a good deal.

At one point during this fall of 1981, it started raining and kept raining

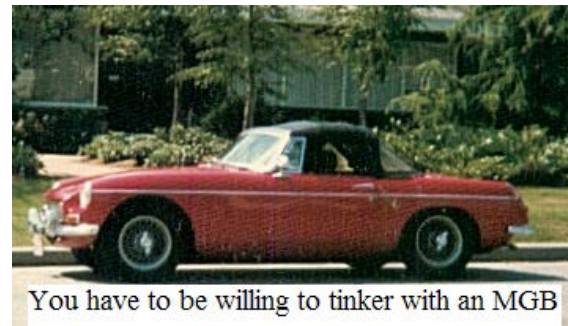


Wow! A corner lot with its own picnic table. Cool.

for 43 days in a row (I'll never forget that number). The trailer was leaking, mildew was coming up the walls and everything was wet. I went on a trip someplace and I remember asking Paul Malatesta if he would pick me up from the airport. His answer has stayed with me for 25 years: "Well, I don't have time to pick you up but I'll pay for a taxi if you want me to." On that trip I caught the flu and I remember driving home from the airport and coming up to the trailer. A storm had blown out the awning, which was laying flat along the side, covering the door. I had to lift up the awning as high as I could in order to force open the door and crawl in. The bathroom never worked that well in the trailer so I was using the public facilities about 100 feet away. Here's the punch line. I recall getting up in the middle of the night with a bad case of the runs. I'd put a garbage bag on the bed in case of an accident, but it looked like I'd make it to the bathroom if I hurried. Out into the rain I went, forcing open the door against the awning, shivering in the night with a slight fever, unloading in the unheated and dingy rest room. Then, an epiphany. On the walk back to the trailer I looked out into the mist with a mix of sweat and rain on my face and drew an important conclusion. I would never commit suicide because I didn't feel like killing myself at that moment and things could never get any worse than THAT! Next week, I pulled the plug on trailer living and moved into a condo. However, after giving trailering a rest for a while, there would be at least two factory-built motor homes and an attempt at a monstrous fire truck conversion, each with varying degrees of success. More on those vehicles later.

15. Exotic cars attract girls. But if you can't afford an exotic, just being good with cars attracts SOME girls.

Knowing that cars were expensive in Canada, I bought a 63 MGB while I was in Seattle for that year. So I arrived in Vancouver with no home but two cars (one of which was the Dodge truck). I soon sold the Dodge to my new girl friend's sister's boy friend but kept the B for a while. This was another connection back to British engineering and I stepped into the MGB rather seamlessly. I was on a date one Saturday in the B



You have to be willing to tinker with an MGB

and we were about forty miles out of Vancouver, near a little town up Howe Sound. Anyway, the car just up and quit. After some diagnostics it seemed that the electric fuel pump had failed. My solution was to pull the windshield washer hose, siphon some gas into a coke bottle and then siphon out of the bottle, over the windshield down into the rear carb. So, here you have my date holding the bottle with me driving back to town. You can really see your gas mileage with one of these rigs. Needless to say, she was quite impressed with our ingenuity. Many years later the occasion came to use the same trick again on a B, where, this time, the filter was clogged in the tank. Once it was clear that no gas was flowing, the siphon trick was in play within a matter of minutes. Incidentally, if you want to try this trick sometime, you adjust the fuel flow by how high you hold the bottle above the carb. Get it?

15.1 An aside on tools:

As a byproduct of being involved in projects of all kinds, from car restorations to houses and woodworking, I've collected an awesome assortment of tools. That word, awesome, however, would better describe the breadth of my tool box than the brand-name quality of

individual tools. True, perhaps my favorite ratchet handle is a snap on, once owned by my dad, and my second favorite is a craftsman. But most of my tools have been bought for function only. I try to avoid Chinese sockets because they are prone to breakage. But many of my socket sets are, in fact, made in China. Tools to me are just that, tools. I love them, but not enough to pay a premium for anything other than durability. It was cute when we opened the shop near Harry Hines. My tool boxes contained a broad assortment of everything, most of which were well used and miss-matched. Doug, who was a new comer to the world of projects and tools, built a bench and thus needed a set of tools himself. He bought nothing but the best. Indeed, he had the best tools in the shop. Over the past few years, however, his tools have done almost no work.

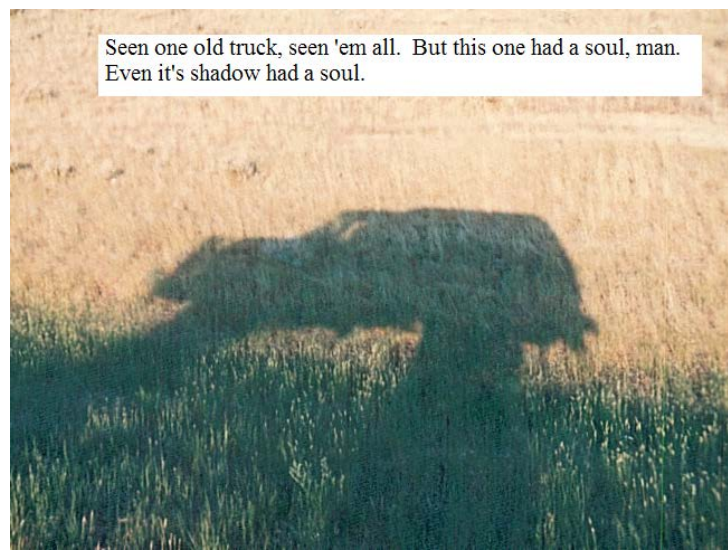
One process that has served me well is to create a tool box for every project. These vary in size but they contain the essential tools required. Each vehicle gets a small tool box containing a plug wrench, a few screw drivers, key sockets, a ratchet handle, any specialized tools like flow meters and so on. The tool box in the fire truck contains a complete set of mechanics tools in case something happens on the road. I can't afford the time to put together a temporary tool box every time the truck rolls out. As a result of this approach, I probably own a dozen ratchet handles and a minimum of ten 1/2" sockets. If I've got one 9/16" open end wrench, I've got at least ten of those too. Running to one master tool box for everything leads to cannibalization so that, eventually, you can never find anything. "Oh yeah. My metric sockets are in the back of the VW." Not having the tools you need, can break your back on a project quicker than running for parts, which, if I haven't said so earlier, can take up to a third of the time on many jobs.

Every once in a while, it's time to splurge on a tool. Usually this happens when you don't understand the tool and want to be sure that you're getting something that works. One time a plumber came to replace an old boiler in my Pittsburgh basement. He came in with some old pipe wrenches but he needed to borrow mine at one point. He commented that I had a nice wrench and mentioned that he tried to buy his at garage sales and at junk shops. He lost so many on job sites and so forth and it didn't really matter that much to have a nice wrench. The last high-end tool I purchased was a plasma cutter: cost me about \$1700. Before buying it, I'd never used one in my life. But it seemed critical to cutting steel in the way I'd need to on the fire truck project (described later). After owning this tool for a while, I'd probably replace it with one from a pawn shop. Mine works beautifully, but it's a lot fancier than necessary. I know that now.

There's this adage that a craftsman needs his tools. And another adage that a poor workman blames his tools. Somewhere in the middle is that guy who knows what tools he needs and doesn't overemphasize the importance of great tools when adequate tools would suffice. That's the guy I want to be. Eric Clapton could make my Les Paul sound fantastic even though it's beat up and slightly out of tune. He knows how to use his tools.

16. There are times when being tough is what it's all about. And you want to know "tough" when you see it. How hard can a vehicle get hit and keep going?

About a year after moving to Vancouver, I'd bought some land up near Whistler and wanted to build a



cabin. For this I needed another pickup and, so, I sold the B and bought one of the toughest trucks ever put on the face of the earth. It was a 73 Ford F250 4WD with split rims, 10 ply tires, a 375 hp 429 cobrajet motor, pto winch – the works. The guy I bought it from had driven it to Alaska five times and it showed. There were 100 gallons of gas tanks on the truck but only one tank didn't leak. The bed was about rusted off but I later found one close to the correct color in a junk yard. The power steering didn't work for the first couple years, which helped keep my arms in shape. It was also that beer bottle brown color that never got dirty. I don't think I ever washed the truck for the entire time I owned it.

That truck never let me down. I hauled wood and materials up to Whistler for two years and finally drove the truck to Philly and then on to Dallas. During the trip to Philly from Vancouver, she burned 14 quarts of oil. That was AFTER I'd pulled the heads and had the valves done.

Negotiations to buy the truck were simple. The owner and I hit it off right away. The truck looked really rough; broken windshield, rusty box, worn interior. But anyone could see there was a heart of gold deep down at the roots. The guy was asking 1500 and I was humming and hawing. So he said, "Do you really want it?" And I replied "yeah". He said, "OK, \$1100 and it's yours." Deal done. It came with a second tranny, which I stashed under the ski cabin. If anyone offers you spare parts along with a vehicle, take them because sellers don't always explain why they have the parts and often there's a good reason. In this case, the tranny in the truck worked like a champ so the back up was never needed and it was never retrieved. Bet that tranny is still there: Lot 50, Pinecrest Estates. Crawl under and see.

One time we had a work detail up at Pinecrest where volunteers were to help clean up the lake shore. My job was to winch out all the dead fall from the lake with my truck. We must have pulled out 20 or 30 trees. I remember driving one of the foremen back to the office after we were done for the day and he said, "You know this is really my kind of truck. Tough." That pretty well said it all. On the trip to Philly I went through a weigh station at 7900 pounds. That was the truck, at about 5,000 and almost a ton and a half of tools – just my best stuff.

17. If you're handy, you could probably survive in today's world on free cars, cars that no one wants to fool with. Now that's an example of Orlando Rules.

While I was hanging out at an apartment complex in Vancouver, near the end of my stay in that spectacular city, the superintendent, Jim, offered me a deal. He was an artist and had received a 1975 Fiat 124 Spyder in trade. He knew I was leaving town in 6 months. Would I take the car and drive it until then? It didn't run, but he felt that if I fixed it up and drove it, he would learn whether the car was worth keeping and this shouldn't be too big a deal for me. The truck was a beast in town so a spyder (convertible) would improve life. This little "transaction" was a special moment because Jim the super trusted me implicitly. He gave me the title and said "after six months all I want is for you to tell me whether I should keep the car or get rid of it." I drove that car for six months with no problems after putting a battery in it and tuning it a bit. When I handed Jim the keys I said, "Jimmy, I'd keep the car." Then he said a funny thing on the day I left. He said "Now, Rex, don't let them change you." There was something about his trust that stuck with me. And another thing. Jimmy didn't bug me all the time, reminding me about the deal we had. There was an understanding that didn't need to be refreshed. That's my kind of understanding.

You may be wondering about Orlando Rules and what that's all about. The next fall, after leaving Vancouver for Philly, the AAA (American Accounting Association) conference was held

in New York City, where several of my great friends from Vancouver would be in attendance. I took the train up from Philly and didn't have a room or any extra clothes; traveling light. That night I bunked up with Steve Sefcik, who had paid for a room. He was glad to see me and didn't mind sharing. It turned out that Gord Richardson also stayed with us for some reason. We had a ball. Before turning in that evening we attended a couple of cocktail parties with free drinks and snacks. The next morning we mooched off the breakfast spread for conference attendees. Of course I hadn't signed up and paid for the conference but who was checking? For lunch we ended going out with about five other guys and a department picked up the check. Anyway, on the second night we hatched the idea of a competition. The conference was due to be held in Orlando the following year and the three of us created the concept of Orlando Rules. Under Orlando Rules, the goal is to attend a conference or any other type of activity with minimal (no) funds. Your task is to free ride off as many folks as possible. Now you might think that playing Orlando Rules makes you a leech of some kind. But, if you're good at Orlando Rules, everyone can come out a winner. You've got to turn on the charm or in some other way make yourself welcome. Without the skill of adding to the process, you'll never win the game. To win a competition under Orlando Rules you've got to hustle. Wall flowers need not apply. Although we never made it to Orlando, odds were on Gordo to win. He could bullshit his way into or out of ANY group of people, even total strangers.

One side effect of being handy is that you can start to take it for granted that everyone is handy. Such a mental image of the average person leads to offering a lot of odd advice to folks who don't know how to or want to fix things. And, of course, there are all levels of handy. After moving to Red Oak, Texas (more later about that) I wanted an old tractor to fool around with. There was a guy who had six or eight of them sitting in his yard so I stopped by one time and inquired about them. He had several Ford 8 and 9Ns that ran well, - about 1500 to 2000 bucks. But he had an old popping Johnny John Deere two cylinder that only need a few things and it would be good as new - 300 bucks. Since mamma didn't raise no fool, I offered the following idea. Could I bring my tools and work on the poppin' Johnny for a day to see if I could get it running. If, after a day of fooling around, it seemed OK, it was a deal. Otherwise I'd walk away, no harm done. "Sure. Why not?" So, that Saturday had me showing up with tools, a battery and my lunch box.

Let's see. There was only one front wheel and tire, which was flat. "No problem. We can find a rim around here somewhere. I'll pump up the tire that's on there. Probably OK." The plugs were out of the engine, which was frozen solid. "You just need a long breaker bar to knock that surface rust off the rings. No big deal. Crack it in the opposite direction first, it'll come free." Once we got the engine turning with a breaker bar, the battery still wouldn't turn it. "Well, let's just pull the tractor behind another tractor until she fires off." After pulling it around the yard for a while, we finally got it running on one cylinder. The second cylinder had zero compression as judged by putting a finger over the plug hole. "Don't worry about that, it'll clear itself up eventually. Just some dirt stuck in the exhaust valve." Next I tried to put some water in the radiator and it ran out a crack in the crank case as fast as it was being poured into the top. "We can weld that crack right up - good as new." I tried to drain the hydraulics and about two gallons of water poured out instead of oil. "Oh, that doesn't hurt anything. Shouldn't be a problem." And so on. After about four or five hours, I started packing up my stuff. The guy came over and said that I could leave the battery and anything else so I didn't need to haul it back over the next day. As diplomatically as possible, I told him that although the tractor only needed a couple things, probably he should sell it to someone else - a little handier than me.

My dad once said that you could take a car completely apart with a vice grips and a screw driver. But to put it back together you'd also need some duct tape and you'd have to be handy. Handy covers a lot of ground.

18. Some vehicles serve a purpose and don't really count except for the jobs they do for you.

After I got to Philly, I picked up a Jeep as a second car. The Jeep was not a CJ but a Commando I think it was called. It had a small V8 and drove like a truck only smaller. We were living up on Valley Forge Mountain, which had a very steep grade and a gravel drive.

The main claim to fame for the Jeep was that I used it to deliver the one-piece rocking chair I had cut for my sister. When she got pregnant with Ben, her only child, at the age of about 40, I told her I'd make her a rocking chair. Well, there was this huge oak tree in the woods behind the house I was living in on Balligomingo Drive. The tree was an honest 17 ft. in circumference at a height of 18 inches off the ground. In 1986, this size would qualify the tree as a Penn's Woods oak, which is an oak that was alive when William Penn founded Philadelphia (about 1675). I never tried to get provenance for the tree but always felt it could maybe qualify. At the time there were about 300 Penn's Woods Oaks extant. Anyway, this tree forked about 15 feet off the ground and one side of the fork broke and fell.



About the half way point on this project. There's a good reason why not many one piece rockers exist.

From this branch, I decided to cut a rocking chair from one solid piece of wood. The chair would have its back, seat, arms, legs and rockers all from one continuous piece of wood. I owned an old logging saw with a 40 inch bar that I'd hauled from Seattle to Vancouver to Philly and I began the process by cutting the blank out the middle of the branch. The rockers would curve around the outer rings of the tree and the whole project would necessitate about a million plunge cuts through the tree to fashion the legs and arms and so forth. Each day I would pack the 35 pound saw into the woods and start cutting. Since I was dealing in oak, the saw had to be sharpened every half hour or so and the saw dust would foul the points perhaps every 15 or 20 minutes. I bet I tore down that saw a hundred times before the chair was light enough to drag out of the woods over to our property. Dave Larcker and I tied ropes around the chair and dragged it across the creek and up the bank. At the time the chair was moved, it weighed in the neighborhood of 350 pounds. It took another 4 months before the weight was down to about 250 (I recall that the chair just maxed out a standard bathroom scale). The reason the chair was so heavy was that I had to keep the legs, cross pieces and rockers pretty thick because the grain was running in the wrong direction in many places. Believe me when I tell you that I understand why there aren't very many one-piece rocking chairs out there in the world. I only know of two. That one and the one I made for Janet, also cut from the same Penn's Woods Oak. It took every ounce of strength to get Lauralee's rocker into the Jeep but somehow the deal got done. We have some cute pictures of Lauralee with little Ben sitting in that rocker.

The rocking chair story leads me to digress a bit about my chain saw. Of course I've owned many saws and have two other chain saws at this moment. But the Stihl 050 was a formidable piece of machinery. Purchased from a logger at a garage sale, I recognized it as the same saw the loggers used when I logged during the summer between freshman and sophomore in college (my job was a chocker setter but I watched a fair amount of timber falling). After getting the saw running and fooling with it a bit, a friend at UW called. He had a cherry tree in his back yard that he'd cut down and would I help him buck up the tree into cord wood? He had rented a saw but it simply wouldn't cut through the cherry. The tree was perhaps 18 inches in diameter and hard as a rock. My saw was sharp and running fine. We looked at our watches and that 050 could cut through the cherry in 17 seconds a cut!

Earlier, Paul Malatesta and I took a chainsaw carpentry fun ed course at UW, where we learned some chain saw fabrication basics. Up in Vancouver I used that 050 to make a lot of furniture, ripping logs lengthwise, cutting plunges in various directions, adding legs, cross pieces and then pounding everything together. By the time Philadelphia came along, I was a chainsaw expert. Dave Larcker needed some wood bucked up once and he had this little twinkie home depot type saw. He was grinding away one afternoon so, out came the 050, which was packed in his garage with my other tools. When that saw fired off, I remember Dave stopping for a moment and saying, "Throaty son of a bitch." He just held the wood and we finished the job in about 1/10th the time. Years later, the saw needed an oiler down in Dallas and I took it to a saw shop. They didn't sell anything that big and the mechanic in the back said, "When was the last time you started that saw?" "About 2-3 years ago." "Forget about it. It'll cost you a hundred just for me to get it running. Then you've got the oiler and probably a bunch of other parts." To this I replied that I thought it would start right up. Did he have any gas? With everyone in the store watching, that baby fired up in about 5 pulls. The mechanic then completely changed his tune. "You know, they really built saws back then. I'll put an oiler in it for you no problem." Nowadays the 050 is a bit beyond my ability to pack it around. My smaller Stihl works fine on anything that grows in Texas. People say that everything is big in Texas but that isn't the case with trees. In the Pacific Northwest where we were logging, we cut many trees with six foot diameter stumps. The Stihl 050 could handle them – 36 inch cut from one side and 36 on the other.

Just before heading to Dallas from Philly I bought my first motorhome; a Clark Cortez. Vern had one like it. It was a class A, 8 feet wide but quite short. The thing was terribly underpowered and really dangerous to drive. The king pins were so loose, the rig would start shaking on the highway and the only way to get it back under control was to slow to about 10 mph. But somehow we made it to Dallas in the summer with the two cats, a lizard and no AC. Around Washington DC, the rear main seal blew and I had to add oil every 80 miles. The oil was pouring off the back of that rig when we arrived in Red Oak. I replaced the rear seal but the engine was just too gutless for me to drive. It went for 1500 on a consignment lot.



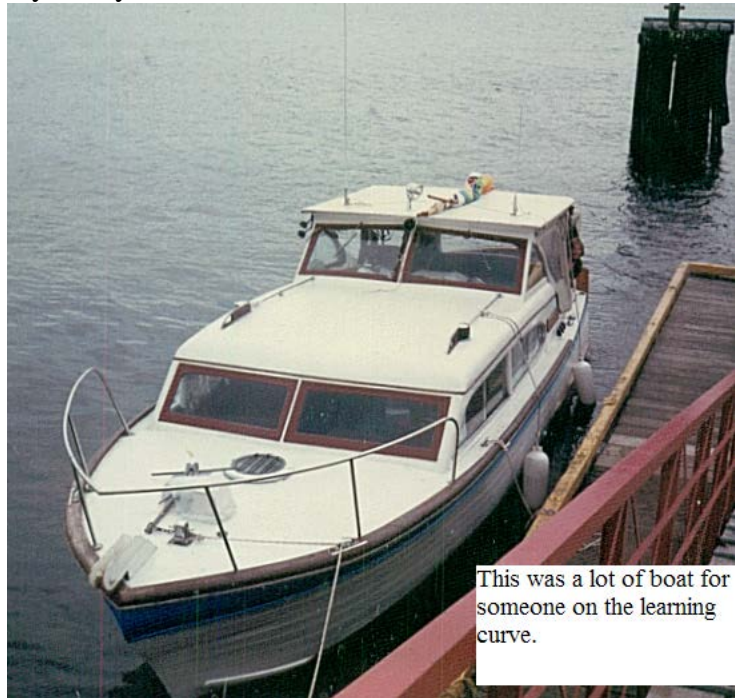
It doesn't get any more country than this: a dog, a broken down pickup in the back, a trailer, a primitive motorhome up on planks over rocks and a few million fire ants. Bonnie never left my side when I was working on a rig.

The Cortez was an example of two things: first, that it served the purpose of hauling us from Philly to Dallas, so it did its job in a sense. Second and more important, it was one of the first real confrontations I had with cutting my losses on a vehicle. No amount of time and money was going to make a purse out of that sow's ear. Moreover, it quenched my motor home thirst for a few years. About the same time that the Cortez moved along, the old Ford F250 went to a rancher who happened to be married to Yvonne. He used the truck to haul diesel to his tractors on the ranch. I wouldn't be surprised if that Ford was still running somewhere. Tough was its middle name.

19. People say to try before you buy, but it can also work to buy - so you can try. Some things in this world are hard to try unless you're willing to step up to the plate and put your money down. Sure you can rent things or borrow things, but the feeling of ownership can not be experienced unless you indeed own the thing we're talking about. I've bought many machines of various kinds just to see how they worked. No one would have let me try these without credentials. Money talks. The good news about buying to try is that, however it works out, you'll have succeeded in the sense that, indeed, you will have tried it if you buy it.

In the back of my mind, there was always a desire to own and operate a big boat of some kind. This manifested itself in many fits and starts. During my faculty visit in Seattle in '81, I would walk the sale docks of big power boats along Lake Union (40-50 footers), considering the prospect of a liveaboard. Fifty grand could have gotten you a pretty interesting older wooden boat like a 1950's Chris Craft. These boats were beautiful but needed constant TLC. Moreover, how would someone learn to operate a fifty foot yacht?

Later in Vancouver, I took sailing lessons on a J30 – a good performing plastic production boat. After renting sailboats in the 24-30' range and almost buying one, I shifted gears toward the ski cabin project. But the big boat fantasy stayed in the back of my subconscious. So, during the 1991 visit to UBC, it became clear that if I was ever going to try the big power boat thing, now was the time. We sourced a 1953 32' mahogany Chris Craft with twin V8's. This Chris was a registered yacht by the name of the Gratitude. It had been sitting at the dock for several years because the owner was too nervous to take her out. And at twelve tons, there was some definite risk involved.



Before seeing the boat, the guy said, "Bring \$7500 to the dock and its yours."

We showed up, fired the engines, slipped the trannies in and out of forward and reverse but the guy wouldn't let us have a sea trial. Too risky. It was put up or shut up time. My resolve to experience some sea time in a big boat won the argument and, after about a month of rewiring and maintenance, we were ready to cruise the islands. Over the next three months, we took about five weekend or longer trips in the Gratitude, cruising to various islands and tying up

at the floating anchorages out there. My selective memory is very sweet about this chapter but truly, getting comfortable operating an old power boat in life threatening seas isn't easy. It made sense that renting without experience would have been out of the question from the perspective of the lessor.

Yachting started quite conservatively, trying to ease out of our slip at a crawl. But any wind or current quickly pushed us into neighboring boats, which we had to fend off with mops. After some awkward "takeoffs and landings" I figured out that you need to act smartly in jockeying a boat around unless it is dead calm. There was this one time when we were pushing back from the dock, stern first, and I was looking everywhere, but our canvas was up and visibility wasn't very good. I was pulling back with both screws in reverse at a pretty good clip because of a cross wind. Now, there was a dog leg in the channel that caused the Gratitude to be backing directly toward the bow of a million dollar cruiser from hell. For some reason, I turned my head just in time to see the bow anchors about three feet over my head with our stern about to be cut in half. I punched the engines into forward and they both burped for a second and stalled.

Here's the funny part. That little bit of forward momentum caused us to slide back up to our original slip where a guy standing there just pushed us off again. I restarted the engines and pulled away a second time as cool as a cucumber. This time we angled around the dog leg, into the bay, swung around and headed to sea as if nothing had happened. Later, I drank three Captain Morgan's to settle my nerves and celebrate the near miss of a lifetime.

One trip, coming back from the islands, we hit a squall with ten foot seas. It was incredible to us land lubbers. Everything that wasn't nailed down hit the deck and slid around. We were in the soup for maybe three hours. One engine quit – clogged fuel filter from the sediment that all the pitching stirred up. It was way too rough to work on anything. I just tried to steer with a quartering sea. It felt like riding a bucking bronco; up one ten footer, then down into the trough, then up again. We were exhausted at the end of it all. Looking back, the boat itself was built to handle those seas but we lacked the experience to know that and stay cool. We gained that experience in a way that couldn't have been accomplished without buying to try.

Here's another thing. A big issue with being a boat captain is that helpers should always use a quiet voice in assisting. Yelling at the top of your lungs that we're going to plow into the boat at the next slip is not cool in a marina with "millions" of people watching your every move. Anyway we cruised the islands and stayed in some nice marinas docked next to some fabulous yachts. It was only after we sold the boat that we got a letter from Allstate saying they couldn't insure us because our yacht was in Canadian waters. If I'd known that we had no insurance, we probably would never have taken the boat out, just like the previous owner. Ignorance can give you a false sense of security, which sometimes offsets an overly conservative nature. Two wrongs ended up making a right that time around.

20. Sifting through the cutting room floor.

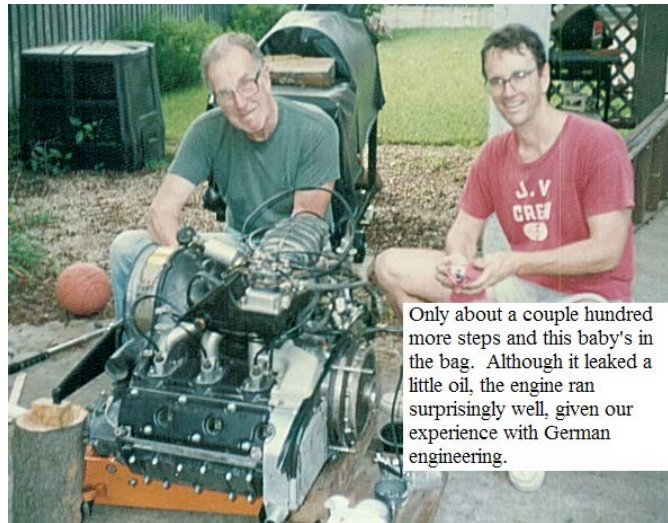
At this point in the story, I've covered plus or minus nineteen cars and a boat. There are a lot of rigs sitting on the cutting room floor: three more Jags (from the 80;s), three or four Cadillacs, a couple of four wheel drives, several suburbans, a few small boats, a Porsche, a Lamborghini and a host of other



2 This was the first vehicle I ever bought new. But it wasn't me.

conveyances of various kinds. With each of these, there were lessons learned and much affirmation of lessons already learned. The Porsche, for example, was on my “list.” So when a nice little project 911 (from the 70’s) came along, I jumped at it. This car had the usual story. “It ran fine when we parked it here. That was seven years ago. We got busy and a couple of months went by. When we tried to start it, the battery was dead. Then a tire went flat. Some boxes were stacked on top and more time went by. We lost the key somehow. Now, we’re getting a divorce and my wife is keeping the house. The car has to go. Three grand? Shit. It’s yours if you can haul it out of here.”

Although I got the Porsche started after working through the ignition and fuel injection, it had about 75,000 miles and the oil pressure was too low at hot idle in my opinion. So I decided to undertake a complete engine rebuild including an upgrade to the oil pump and pickup system. I stripped down the engine and took all the parts to a cool Porsche shop that did the line boring of the case, turning of the crank journals and the oil pickup modifications. My job was reassembly although the shop didn’t think that was a great idea. After waiting about ten months for the shop to finish their part, it became



Only about a couple hundred more steps and this baby's in the bag. Although it leaked a little oil, the engine ran surprisingly well, given our experience with German engineering.

clear why they weren’t optimistic about my doing the reassembly. There were over a thousand pieces to that engine, including nuts and bolts. When the engine was disassembled, the little parts and bits were organized into coffee cans, bins and piles. But when the time came to put it all back together, it became obvious very quickly that the only way to even hope to get the car running again was to forget about trying to follow that organization and instead, just reason the whole thing out from first principles. It was really impossible to expect a flawless rebuild because there was too much special knowledge and too many special tools required. You needed experience to know how much case sealer to use on reassembly, how to align the cams just right, set the valve clearances and so forth. But the project was sweet because it was the last car my dad and I were involved in together. During one of his visits, he helped on the disassembly. On a later visit he worked with me on the final assembly, tweaking, engine install and initial start up. It was cool when we took that car on the road for the first time together. I believe he drove it first. We always worked well together, on so many projects, cars and otherwise. Incidentally, after dropping four grand in parts for the Porsche engine, the oil pressure was exactly the same as the day I took that baby apart!

The Lamborghini was an example of buy-to-try. I’d never even seen a Lambo in person before buying a ’74 Espada (front engined V12) from a classic car shop in New York City. My sister went to take a look and my only question for her was to ask if the car spoke to her at all or was it just some old worn out hunk of junk. Now, Lauralee drove a Toyota Camry and worked for Consumer Reports at the time. Her response was that the car probably wouldn’t make it into Consumer Reports’ best buys, but it spoke volumes.

Although it was an interesting car, and the Lambo story appealed to me, I never really fell in love with the car itself. Here’s the story. Ferruccio Lamborghini was a rich industrialist

in Italy who owned several Ferrari's. At one point in the early 60's he got ticked off at some aspect of his Ferrari and decided he could build a better car. For the next ten years he matched the Ferrari model for model with five more horsepower and five more miles per hour on the top end. They only made about 100 cars a year back then. The Espada was the last model that Ferruccio was involved with. After the Espada, Lambo went with the mid engine



The Lambo story appealed to me more than the car. Lots of mechanical gismos

platform that they are now famous for. On the Espada, the running gear was fun (V12 with six dual throated webers and a fully synchromesh five speed, including reverse) – pretty much the same as the Countach, which was their first mid engine car. While I liked the GT concept of the Espada, the looks just didn't ever quite appeal to me. Also the engine smoked and needed to be pulled apart and cleaned. The car only had 25,000 miles or so but it had been set too rich and was clogged up with carbon. I took the car to a fancy Ferrari shop and the mechanic looked it all over, did a leak down test and compression test and so forth. He said that if the car were his, he'd put two quarts of Marvel Mystery oil in it and drive it to Tyler three or four times. Maybe, but the oil pressure was also too low for my liking so an engine take down seemed inevitable.

The funniest part of getting acquainted with the Lambo was that the motor was incredibly complex mechanically. The throttle linkage and idle screw setting were over the top. I had to build a flow meter to even get close to a smooth idle. The distributor had four sets of points that all needed adjustment. When I first got the car, I drove it around for a month or two, thinking "This car doesn't really perform like the Super Car they say it is." Then I figured out that it was only running on six cylinders! After I fixed the electrical problem and all twelve cylinders started hitting, it was a lot more impressive. But there was so much gas accumulated in the exhaust pipes of the one side that hadn't been running that I had an explosion that blew a six inch hole in the muffler on that side. Fixed it with a coffee can.

To pull the engine apart was going to take some time and space. But there was no room in my world to attempt that project. During the four years that I owned the Lambo, I did a lot of tinkering. Parts were outrageous so you had to be clever, swapping stuff that almost fit from other cars. The Lambo was a car of contrasts. On the one hand you had the engine – super complex mechanically in order to squeeze every horsepower out of about 260 cubes. On the other, a lot of parts were just hand made and easy to construct. I remember having the drive shaft straightened and balanced. The guy who did the work took one look at the shaft and said, "Man, it looks like somebody just torched this up in their garage." I told him he was about right because Lambo only made about 100 cars a year. He replaced the u joint, straightened and balanced the shaft, and painted it, all for 56 bucks. On the other hand, an ignition control module cost \$700 if you could find one.

There are cute stories about our small boats, adventures taken in them and events surrounding other cars of various kinds. But much of this is a day in the life without any real message. I suppose the one takeaway would be that older vehicles offer a fun balance between affordability, dependability and adventure in the getting there. When Jim Smith and I drove his MG back from South Carolina, we stopped in Kaufman at about 9:00 pm for a pizza (perhaps thirty miles from home). Although we'd been on the road for two and a half days in the heat, the

rain and amid numerous breakdowns, we didn't want the trip to be over. In a new car, it would have been a meaningless drive. No pitting of ourselves against technology and the elements. Just cruising, which is a lot like kissing your sister as far as I'm concerned (no offense Lauralee). What explains the feeling of adventure when you're pitting yourself against the elements with equipment you're connected to in some symbiotic way? I really don't know. But I feel it, that's for sure.

21. Sometimes you've got to know when to walk away.

For recreational mechanics that try for new adventures (at least to them), knowing when to walk away is a difficult issue. If you quit too often, you can get into the habit whenever the going gets tough. But occasionally a project just isn't right or isn't worth it in the grand scope of things. Often on personality tests they ask how you feel about quitting an activity before it's finished. The "right" answer is that it's the worst thing in the world. That answer, to me, is naïve and simplistic. Sure, sticktoitiveness is a virtue, but knowing the right time to quit is an even greater virtue, if such a thing is possible.

When we owned our Galveston beach shanty, we bought an ex Leveland fire department 4wd Ramcharger. It was perfect for our needs at the beach. Eventually, it turned out to be a casualty of my being unable to maintain it after my burn accident. It sat under the Galveston house for year or so while I was in the hospital and rehab, developing terrific varnish in the carb. One weekend, after I could get around a little, we were down at the beach and the truck wouldn't start. Little Dylan, who was five, wanted to play in the water and there I was trying to jack with the Ramcharger. I decided that it was a casualty of war. My time was better spent with Dylan than an old P.O.S. I gave the Ramcharger to the Galveston Salvation Army. The only hitch was that we had to deliver it. Jim followed me while I drove into town at a max speed of about 15 mph. We heard later that a handyman fixed it up and was delighted with the little rig.

About that same weekend or maybe on the next visit, I decided to see if Dylan and I could get the Hobie cat down to the beach and into the water. Since there was a power line between our house and the beach, the Hobie had to have its mast stepped and unstepped every time we took the boat down, even though it was only about 200 feet. Well, I was still pretty weak and Dylan was only five. I tied a line to the front stay and told Dylan, "When I lift up the mast, you grab the line there and tie it to the trailer hitch. Just do your best." I lifted the mast and he wound that line around everything. It took our maximum collective effort to rig the boat and then pull it off the trailer and into the water. We took a short sail and I remember telling Dylan, "If I fall in the water out there, you jump in with me. If you fall in, I'll either jump in with you or I'll sail out, tack and come back for you." Needless to say, that scared him a bit but I had to give him some guidance. On the way back in from the sail, we took a big wave over our backs as we came across the surf. Once the boat was on shore, I asked Dylan if he was scared at all. He said he wasn't scared but he was a little freaked out.

To save time, we paid some guys five bucks to pull the boat up the beach, well past high tide. My thinking was that we would leave the boat on the beach with the mast up during the summer and then unstep the mast at the end of the season. Our plans to return within a month turned into about two months and when we got back to Galveston, the boat was gone. Really, if we couldn't leave the boat on the beach it was worthless to us. Later we sold the sails, boom, trailer and gear for about half what we paid for the boat, so we only lost about \$5 hundred on the

deal. For both the Ramcharger and Hobie, I decided to get realistic about my limitations and how much these projects were worth in the grand scope of things.

22. The bigger they are the harder they fall. All you need is a long enough cheater bar.

Since Dylan arrived here on Earth, I've often pondered how and in what form he might get involved in man-versus-machine. The process of helping him get acquainted with mechanical things has involved the staging of various projects that might appeal to a youngster.

For Dylan's eighth birthday, Roslyn and I bought him a 1941 Alice Chalmers tractor that hadn't run in about 20 years. We saw it in a field out in Southwest Texas while we were doing some wine tasting. Dylan and I took the engine apart, replaced the bearings and rings, hand lapped the valves and put new tires on her. She was a hand crank style with magneto ignition.

Amazingly, we got old Alice running and took 'er down to Glen Rose. There's a cute picture of Dylan driving Alice –

The mice ate the oil line so she hasn't run for a while now. But I'll bet we could crank Alice over if we tried. Roslyn named her Alice for obvious reasons. She represented a small victory over my failed attempt at the poppin' Johnny. Alice needed way more work, but the time was right and she was a lot cuter than the John Deere. About this same time, Dylan and I built a cool three-wheel coaster car out of a shipping crate, a tricycle and some spare bike parts. I'll never forget the day we shoved Dylan down the hill from Mark and Nancy's, past our place on down to the bottom of the street. Dylan was really flying. We got a great picture of that day somewhere.



We converted this piece of yard art, found in West Texas, into a running rig.



Running Sweet.
Kept the rat rod look.

The greatest chance for success in the development of fixing skills is on projects that Dylan himself initiates. He and his buddy David are into gas powered RC cars. These little babies really fly. There are off road courses built for the RC scale and we've had a lot of fun running our cars. But the cars take a terrible pounding and there are a lot of breakdowns. David started with the mindset of just taking his car to Hobby Town for every little problem. Finally his mom decided to limit him to one trip a week. At this point we started helping him fix his car. There was this one time when Dylan had blown out his



Dylan is haulin' down a long hill, trying to set a distance record

front cross members on a big wreck and we were putting new ones in. I was getting frustrated because the heads on the screws were starting to round off. David asked me if I'd consider taking the car to Hobby Town so they could fix it. "I'd rather be dead," was my reply. Eventually all parties started to learn how to care for the cars and even David likes working on his now. Our standing joke is that whenever something might go wrong we say, "Well, we can always take it to Hobby Town." We were on a camping trip to Arkansas once in our fire truck. I reassured David that if anything went wrong with the truck, Hobby Town had agreed to come out and fix it.

That note gets us back to the big stuff. I try to get Dylan to talk about projects and ideas for projects. One thing we came up with over the course of many conversations was the idea of converting a full scale fire truck into a motor home. The idea started like this: I thought it would be a cool adventure to take some kind of motor home up to Mount Rushmore, across to Yellowstone, down through Yosemite, across to Mesa Verde, then four corners, Sante Fe and back on home with some stops in between. By this time in my not so young life, I'd accumulated a little RV experience. This includes one particular rig I haven't mentioned yet. The time: 1995. I somewhat jokingly I told my folks we'd meet them for New Year's near El Paso, which is half way between Dallas and Yuma. The folks went to Yuma each winter (they were still living in Seattle then). For this adventure, I'd need a motor home. So I bought a bargain for about \$6500. It was pretty beat and ugly but the 440 felt pretty strong and I took a risk. As a shake down cruise before the El Paso trip, I decided that it would be fun to take the family (Dylan and Yvette that is) up to a camp ground for Thanksgiving. The idea was to cook the turkey in the oven while driving down the highway. Can't you just picture it? "Hey, Honey, who's the turkey doing? It sure smells good." I guess I was the only one laughing over that one as it turned out.

The weather was cold and Dylan, who was only six months old or so, was a little cranky. When we got home, Yvette read me the riot act saying that she never wanted anything to do with a motor home again in her life, blah blah blah. Since I'd committed to the El Paso trip I promised her that if we survived that experience, I'd sell the motor home and not get another one as long as we were together. The El Paso trip was a snowy one and we froze our butts off. But because we knew it was going to be horrible, it wasn't really so bad, at least on my score card. We decided to stop at a motel on the way to El Paso rather than sleep in the motor home. The motel was a dump but it had a Texas shaped sink in the bathroom. You can imagine the rest. One important takeaway is that RV'ing isn't for everyone and that's fine. In fact I'm not even

sure it's right for me. Even so, the concept trip to Mount Rushmore with Dylan and Roslyn rekindled an interest – let's do it right this time (ha ha). At this point, Roslyn was probably gritting her teeth over the idea, but, in the end, she really surprised both me and herself.

We drove out to Fort Worth to try an older Wanderlodge, which is a pretty class A with nice finish out. But the power train was low and slow. Now, what kind of rig might have a performance power train at an affordable price?

How about a fire truck? The rest fell into place over the course of a few visits to equipment lots and a bunch of net surfing. I finally found what sounded like the perfect truck. A twenty-five year old Sutphen pumper truck, thirty feet, 35,000 miles, with a thirty-four thousand pound gvw and an 8V92Turbo offering 435 horses



Six months of infrastructure work - now comes the living space. Time will tell.

and 1400 foot pounds of torque. Without water and stripped of irrelevant gear, it will weight perhaps twenty thousand. This baby should get up and go. Also, these kinds of trucks are heavy duty industrial: all steel and built for abuse. We're about a million hours into the conversion now and we've already gotten our money's worth of entertainment. Old fire trucks are a dreg on the market to be sure, which is to say that the price is right. Of course, storage is an issue and you'll need that ¾ drive socket set you've always wanted, or that you've got but never could find a use for.

The list of modifications we've made to the truck is so extensive it would be boring to post it here or anywhere: Solving electrical problems galore (these probably were why the truck was unloaded on an unsuspecting me), AC, front suspension, motor mounts, rear end, new drive shafts, cab interior, conversion to upper deck seating, etc. All of these involved creative solutions. No remove and replace stuff except the front leaf springs and the rear differential swap to a lower ratio. We spent about a month stripping out the water pump. This is where the sleeping quarters will be located. I'll have to include a diagram. What I like most about this project is that there are few examples to contend with. When we head out for the Dakotas, we'll be cruising in unexplored territory. This feeling of taking the path less traveled really appeals to me because the problem solving is not just because we're too lazy to ask someone how to do what we're doing. Nobody has solved some of the issues we're dealing with. The funniest question I get on this conversion is how long it will take. My standard answer: "How the hell should I know?" Besides, it should be clear by now that the process is as important as the end result. With the fire truck I've got as much process as any man could hope for.

Even though there's another year of work before the fire truck will be close enough to say that the proof of concept has been achieved, we've made some ripples in the water. On top of the shakedown cruise to Arkansas, where everywhere we went someone wanted to talk to us, we won our little 4th of July parade. You'd have to see the picture.

The fire truck project has also quenched a thirst that I've had to delve into something really industrial. Industrial stuff is a whole new ball game of toughness and scale. My first venture was the 93' tugboat I bought in Philly but that idea was stillborn because it was the wrong place and time. The fire truck is built like the tugboat: uncompromising. Creature

comforts are not even an afterthought. You can try adding them but the heart of the vehicle is solid stone. In fact, some of the mystique of industrial strength has subsided now that I understand where the tradeoffs are made. My hearing is still not back to normal four months after our 800 mile camping trip even though I wore shooter's ear protection almost the whole way. The kids sat up in the open air most of the trip. They said it was quieter back there. Anyway, I'm concluding that industrial strength is also industrial stiff. You pay a price for it so you better want it.

23. At some point you've got to pass the baton.

No doubt, after this treatise is finished and I'm current in my ideas on the subject of what I've learned as a recreational tinkerer, new projects will come and go. But I'm saving car number 22 for a special purpose. This space is reserved for the first car Dylan picks of his own free will. The loose end is that Dylan is such an agreeable kid I'm never quite sure how interested he is in all of this or what he's taking away from our time together under the hood. Still I persevere in enticing him, maybe because I can't resist. After all, I've got an awesome set of tools that I'll need to give to somebody someday.

There are several possible outcomes. One is that Dylan will never resonate to the same vibrations that have rung in my soul over the past forty years. If this is how the story ends, so be it. The other outcome is that I could serve as his assistant in some way, allowing me to see how he begins his way up the learning curve. No doubt his lessons will be different from mine. But if he ever picks up a tool and heads to the garage without my encouragement, I'll be able to say that I've crossed over to the other side and my work as "teacher" is done. He will learn faster and more effectively if he travels much of the journey alone, with his own thoughts on what it all means. At this moment, he seems to be circling in on the notion of an ex-cop car of the Dodge Charger style. Good choice, Dylan. We, or should I say, you, could have some fun with that idea. In the words of Elwood Blues, "Cop motor, cop brakes, cop suspension. Come on. Is it the new Blues Mobile or what?"

Post Script. November 2008

It's been about a year since the fire truck concept was described above. A lot happened on that piece of the action so it deserves a post script. We took the big swing through the western states and saw everything on our wish list. It was beyond incredible. Roslyn even got pumped up near the end of the preparations and had a wonderful time grinding down the American road. At a critical juncture about two weeks before D-day, she dropped by the shop and took the tour. Her eyes sort of widened and she said excitedly, "I see the vision now, I can see it. It's unbelievable." Everywhere we stopped folks wanted to talk about our conversion. There were RV campground owners, park rangers, other campers, store owners, ex firefighters. The finished product, or at least as finished as it got by the time of the trip, seemed to capture the imagination of everyone. In fact Bus Conversions Magazine requested a story/centerfold on the project so we'll probably attempt to write it up.

One aspect of the final months deserves mention here because it captures a dimension of the precommitment that went along with the trip we took. As I was muddling along with the design and buildout of the truck, it became clear to me that it might never get finished without setting an end date. Other little distractions kept getting in the way. So, around early January

'08, we picked an arrival time at Mt Rushmore and booked two nights in a cabin. The plan was for me to drive the 1200 miles to Rapid City by myself, with Dylan and Roslyn flying. Two calendars were created, one with the number of days before blast off, and one with the to-do list. At quitting time, a day would be crossed off and an assessment made on what had been completed. Many days were spent on unexpected things and, of course, some of the to-do's took longer than forecast. Eventually we were down to crossing off days and crossing off to-do's whether they were finished or not simply because time was running out and we had to call things done that could have used some more attention. For example, we never had time for a shakedown trip and our tow behind VW bug was running like stink on the day I rolled out. Near the end, Dylan and Roslyn were helping with the bug seats and cabin bulkhead and it wasn't going smoothly. There was a feeling of urgency and frustration overtaking me and both of my helpers were on the verge of saying the job just couldn't be done on time. I looked at Dylan, who was closest to the action at that moment and said to him, "I want you to know that I've put everything I have into this effort. If it fails, I fail. There are no excuses and no backing down. Everything is on the line here. Are we going to crack and roll over or are we going to rise up and finish this f___ing thing?"

It is often tempting to ease up and then use that as an excuse in your own mind for why you didn't succeed. Instead of tipping in that direction, I wanted Dylan to know that we had burned our boats on the beach so to speak and couldn't turn back. We were fully committed to do whatever it took to make Rapid City on time. As it turned out, my arrival in Rapid City allowed me one beer before their plane touched down. The feeling of euphoria that passed over me when we finished the first leg of the trip and parked the truck outside of Salt Lake City was beyond description. On the other hand, if the truck had blown out or just couldn't be completed, there would have been no regrets because there was nothing more that could have been done – it was essentially impossible.

My crew at Chief Crazy Horse on the day we all arrived in South Dakota. Missing are my sister, Lauralee, and Mick who pulled big oars in the final days of preparation back in Dallas. Below is the rig at Ten Sleep Creek, half way between Mt

Rushmore and Yellowstone. You can see the awning, observation deck/roof, rear seating and the Baja Bug.





**Time Marches On....And if this isn't the best "rod" picture, show me one better.
(Completed in 2011, written in 2017)**

After the firetruck conversion, which made Bus Conversions Magazine and we named Road Ready, I got a call from the widow of my best friend growing up, Jim Carlson (rest his soul). I mentioned going to his funeral in Chapter 10, where I touched on my experience with performance motorcycles. Anyway, Cheryl decided that Jim would have wanted me to have his '41 Caddy project car. She said he bought the thing (I remember that I first saw it in 1974) because I always enjoyed working on cars. Jim just couldn't drop the hammer on putting the Caddy together. He towed it around and always had it on his to-do list.

To make a long story short, I promised Cheryl that if she let me ship the car out to Dallas, Carlson's Caddy would run again. Not maybe like Jim would have seen the vision. My boys, Dylan and Stephen, and I had our own vision – an all-out old-school custom "rod."

Steve, my second son, urged me to write this chapter some day. Anyone who wants to see the build out of Carlson's Caddy is welcome to visit our website www.attheworkshop.com. There's a lot of joy and agony in this conversion, taking at least two years. The final proof, however, stands before you in this picture of two boys, on the road, in front of the Cadillac Ranch out near Amarillo. You can see the buried Cadillacs out behind our contribution to shade tree engineering. The three of us ultimately drove Carlson's Caddy to the spot in Oregon where Jim lost control of his bike in 2007.



The question on the table is, 'What did I learn from working on Carlson's Caddy that sets the experience apart from the other projects won and lost?'

Instead of answering that question for myself, I'm inviting Stephen and Dylan to weigh in. They certainly helped on the car. Beyond that, they rolled all the way to Seattle in the Caddy. We had a game plan of 2 hours on and 4 hours off in driving rotation. One stretch we pulled from Lubbock, Texas to Twin Falls, Idaho without leaving the car. That's a lot of road, brother. So, let's see if either of the boys picks up the gauntlet. If they do, you'll see it in the

next edition. The one thing I can say is that this picture brings tears to my eyes. Of course I'm an emotional old buzzard and I'm not ashamed of it.

Post post script. September 2017. This addendum was written for my daughter Diane. She surprised me not long ago by asking for a copy of "22 Cars..." I never knew she cared. By way of acknowledging the shared experience she and I were having when she asked for a copy. I've added this section. (Note: The brief mention of Carlson's Caddy came after, at the encouragement of Steve.)

A lot of diesel smoke, engine oil and project energy has come and gone in the last ten years, since the first edition of 22 Cars went to press. There have been more cars, more boats and many engrossing challenges. My two step kids, Diane and Stephen, have entered the picture now that we have had time to really connect and understand one another. So they have partnered on more than a few treks with motorized transportation. This little book, however, was never intended as a travel log, but, rather, as a view of life's ups and downs from under the hood.

Back in Chapter 17, I talked about free cars and getting by on being handy. Every once in a while, it keeps a person in shape to accept a real challenge just to say you did it. Not everyone gets a rise out of challenges that could go very wrong. But what other kind of serious challenge is there? Much can be learned by putting it on the line with no take backs.

Last summer afforded an opportunity to push the envelope of getting by on nothing but a minimal tool kit and a worthless car. Diane decided her destiny lay in San Francisco and she wanted to move back to SF from Dallas in late July. One option of course was to ship her stuff and fly her out there. But.....Stephen had been driving our '04 GMC Envoy SUV that I bought new. The poor thing had so many problems they were hard to count. The speedo, temp and voltmeter had all quit working, there was no AC, the tires were old, the check-engine light glared continually and the engine overheated in traffic. It was clearly upgrade time for Stephen, no question. The Envoy was worthless, a liability to any sane person. Diane didn't own a car at the time and didn't want to support a car in SF. How do all these pieces fit together, you ask?

To the surprise of the peanut gallery, I suggested we load the Envoy heavy and take it on one last ride... to SF, where we would donate it at the end of the road. The big question was whether Mike (as the Envoy was affectionately named) could go the distance. From a spiritual point of view, Mike had been a trusted friend of the family. He got his name from an antenna ball we had of Mike from Monster's Inc. Over the years we repaired Mike the antenna ball by gluing sticks into the arm or leg holes whenever a piece broke off. "Family means nobody gets left behind." Mike the car had taken us on countless road trips. It deserved a dignified farewell.

Our plan had scant lead time, just a few days to solve the overheating problem and check the oil, as it were. I discovered that the thermostatic coupling to the cooling fan had failed, which was why Mike overheated. So I built some brackets to hard-wire the fan to the water pump pulley. Would these brackets go nearly two thousand miles in the dead of summer? Was that the only problem with the cooling system? Time would tell.



Brackets coupling the fan to the water pump pulley, looking good at this point. After about 400 miles they are starting to distort but no sign of metal fatigue

The family helped Diane pack Mike to the gills with only her best stuff. By the end, we were dropping loose items in every crack and crevice. At about 8PM July 26, with a few good-bye tears, Diane and I fired 'er up and rolled out of Dallas, for the next two days driving in an average road temperature of 104 degrees, no AC, checking the brackets at every fill up and driver swap; singing our song. Much could be written about experiencing the road with windows down and grimy summer heat wafting across sweaty faces. But that would be another story.



Diane at Four Corners. All fun and games at this point. Our test was yet to come.

After great progress and awesome spirituality up and around Mesa Verde, we rolled past Salt Lake City into the fading light toward Wendover on the Nevada boarder about 100 miles distant. Diane and I were spent. At 9PM it was still 95 degrees, probably hotter in the car itself. Then it happened. The passenger rear tire blew doing 77 mph passing a semi. This was the test. You could taste it before I got the car to the side of highway. Were we ready for the challenge?

Everything had to come out of the Envoy to access the tire kit. It was getting dark. Semis were whizzing past with about 2 feet of space between us and them. The Envoy jack wouldn't fit under the axle because the tire had shredded, resulting in about an inch lower axle height than if the tire were simply flat. Diane, hearing me swearing under the car, asked diplomatically if we should call triple A. My reaction was visceral although I tried not to show it. If this was my Waterloo after 50 years working on cars, I wasn't going down easy.

"Your time would be better spent finding a board or rock that we can roll the wheel up on to raise the axle a couple inches." Off Diane went back along the highway while I walked forward. Over the next couple hundred yards, almost dark by now, I saw nothing but used water bottles, dirty diapers and fast food wrappers. Back at the car, however, Diane had sourced a rock. We rolled the wheel up. "OK. Pack the car. I can swap the tire. Let's get the F out of here." We limped into Wendover because the spare was rotten. The next morning we bought two used tires from El Hefe's tire shop for 80 bucks. The water pump brackets had started to crack across, We swapped in a new pair, building them with a hack saw, portable drill and extra metal strapping.



Big crack across the brackets in Wendover. Time for some shade-tree metal fabrication. Hey, after the tire blowout, we can ride this horse.

Cruising out of Wendover toward Reno and Truckee, CA, the road gremlins pulled over and let us by. From there, San Francisco was all downhill.

In the middle of a crisis, there isn't a lot of time for reflection – or pictures – or jokes. After it was over though, I remember thinking how fortunate it was that Diane and I had a chance to fight in the trenches together because you never really know someone til you've been in a fight with them. She and I are bonded forever by solving what came our way with whatever resources we could garner.

Is there an upside from driving a worthless car across country, filled with your best stuff? If it was do or die out there, we proved that we aren't dead yet.

If you only get one shot, make it a good one. On the other hand, don't take ANYTHING too seriously. Often you get two shots even though you're only supposed to get just one. Here are two pictures of the author. Some years ago, I crashed a shopping mall at Christmas as an incarnation of bad santa. The mall cops kicked me out, explaining that kids might get scared somehow



Completely without encouragement from me, Dylan majored in Philosophy at University. Most of our jokes back and forth focus on irony in the human condition.

My dad used to tell this story about when he was rowing for the University of Washington. It was a rough day on the water and the boat was tilting to one side and then the other. So, dad decided he would concentrate on helping to keep the boat set, good posture, straight up and down the slide, clean blade work. After the workout, the coach came up to him and said, "Thompson, you were all over the boat today."