

Chapter 1 – My Father’s Cars

A small, Amish town in northern Indiana is probably the last place you’d expect to find a honky-tonk pool shark serving as the Episcopal parish priest, but that’s exactly what we had in Father Dupree. He got the calling late in life. Before that he kicked around depression-era Chicago for a number of years, playing ragtime piano in speakeasies. He supplemented this erratic income by hustling pool in the dives that surrounded the speakeasies. Later he worked as a newspaper reporter, another profession whose ranks are not known for their strict observance of the Ten Commandments. Then, as if to prove that there were no depths to which he would not stoop, he tried his hand at being a writer. These forays into the shadows made his sermons a little more interesting than those given by ministers who only knew about sin from book learning. His background also allowed him to spice up the choir practice every now and then by playing “Sugar Blues” and other ragtime hits. He kept a pool table in the parish hall basement, much to the delight of the acolytes. Whenever we got to thinking we were getting good at the game he’d pick up a cue and run the table. “Always leave yourself a good setup, and never give your opponent an opportunity to shoot” were his words of pastoral advice as he taught us these lessons in humility. I have no idea how he hid that table from the bishop during his annual visits. Maybe he didn’t even try. It was no great secret that Fr. Dupree wasn’t impressed by authority figures. Once, during his annual visit, the bishop whispered something in Fr. Dupree’s ear just as the processional was about to begin. Fr. Dupree whispered a reply and the bishop disappeared. The acolytes looked at each other in stunned silence. We always started the service exactly on time. A delay like this was unthinkable. Fr. Dupree turned to face us, his hands pressed together in the prayer position, and the most pious look imaginable on his face. Then he solemnly announced “His Eminence desires to urinate.”

Despite his disregard for authority, and despite the fact that he had his own ideas about how to run things, he had enough street smarts to recognize the real power of the parish - the Ladies of the Church. The Ladies were a group of elderly widows and spinsters whose donations of time, talent, and money were essential to keeping the church

going. I suspect it was their idea to celebrate the first day of Epiphany with a high tea, an event which demanded fine china, formal attire, and excruciatingly correct behavior. In my mother's words, everything had to be "nice." My mother dreaded this pompous event but she knew it was important to Fr. Dupree so she dutifully attended every year. This led to the infamous Epiphany Tea Incident.

At the time, my mother was driving a 1941 Buick Sport Coupe. She had inherited this car from my grandfather, and it's one of the first cars I can remember. It was beautiful. Long, sleek, with a tiny back seat and an enormous steering wheel. The hood seemed to stretch to the horizon, and it had to because it covered a straight-eight engine. The one vice that this car had, besides the fact that every kid in town wanted to race it at stop lights, was that once you shut it off it would refuse to restart until it had cooled down. There was only one way to start the car when it got into one of these moods, and that was to open the hood and squirt some gas into the carburetor. Ever resourceful and always the good husband, my dad gave my mother an oil can full of gas just for this purpose.



One sunny January afternoon my mom dressed in her 50's finest – white dress, pillbox hat, high heels, and long white gloves – and set out for the Epiphany Tea. In the middle of town she somehow stalled the car at the intersection of Main and Lincoln. A cold dread came over her as she tried to restart the car. I think everyone who has ever driven an old car knows the feeling. You know instinctively that the car is not going to start. It's let you down this way time and time again, but somehow you keep hoping that this time it's going to be different. This time the car will start.

“Ruh-Ruh-Ruh-Ruh-Rurrrrrr. Ruh-Ruh-Ruh-Ruh-Rurrrrrr.” The Buick cranked over without even a cough to indicate it might start. Traffic was beginning to back up. Shoppers walking on the sidewalk stopped to watch the drama unfold. A police car stopped and the officer asked if he could help.

“I can call for a tow truck” the officer volunteered.

“I just need to squirt some gas in the carburetor” my mother explained.

“Oh, you're out of gas?” Either the officer didn't understand my mother's explanation or he didn't believe she knew what she was talking about. He walked back toward his patrol car. With a disgusted sigh my mother got out of the car and threw open the hood. In her white gloves and pillbox hat she used her little oil can to squirt gas into the carburetor. Then she slammed the hood and got back into the car. The policeman was just pulling a can of gas out of his trunk when she started the car and drove off.

The next weekend my dad installed a thin copper tube from the carburetor to the dashboard so she could squirt gas into the carb without leaving her seat. She appreciated the effort, but it wasn't enough. Somehow she regarded it as his fault that her car broke down on Main Street. He didn't get out of the doghouse until he disassembled the entire fuel system, cleaning and examining every piece, and found the problem. There was a

kink in the fuel line, hidden behind a mounting clamp,. He replaced that line and the problem went away.

To me, disassembling the fuel system seemed like an awful lot of work for only a marginal improvement. It always started if you squirted gas in it, and running the pipe to the dashboard meant you didn't even have to get out of the car to do that! It is only now that I realize how this incident foreshadowed hundreds of similar incidents in my life. I should have learned back then that to some people, wives especially, reliability means something more than the fact that a car is easy to fix after it breaks. Some people don't place the same value on resourcefulness that I do, and sometimes even trivial events can land you in the doghouse. I'm tempted to offer a sweeping generalization and say this represents a difference between men and women, but I've met some men who were finicky that way, too. Maybe my father and I just saw things differently because we were engineers.

The Epiphany Tea incident did have a postscript. Several years after Mom sold the Buick, two of the Ladies of the Church were involved in an episode which partially made up for the high teas they inflicted on my mother and Father Dupree. Every year they took a trip to New York City, where they enjoyed staying in a fine hotel, eating at proper restaurants, and taking in a Broadway show. In the late 1960's they bought tickets to a musical based solely on its reputation as a smash hit. It was called "Hair." Dressed in their finest evening clothes, these two Midwestern Grand Dames headed to the theater. They forgot to bring their opera glasses that year, and seated in the balcony, they couldn't see the stage very well. They also couldn't understand much of the dialog, as the actors were using slang terms that were unfamiliar to them, but they gamely sat through the performance. Well into the second half of the musical, one of them leaned forward, squinted at the stage, and then gasped in horror. "Why they aren't wearing any clothes!!" I suspect that to this day the actors wonder why the balcony erupted in laughter that night.

I know from family lore that when I was born my dad owned a 1932 Ford Coupe, the model immortalized by the Beach Boys as a "Little Deuce Coupe." Today I would love

to have that car, but at the time I was too young to appreciate it. My parents named this car “Elmer.” (I suspect that Mom was the one who named it. Dad wasn’t the type to give names to mechanical contrivances.) Mom always remembered Elmer as a fun car; the car they drove when they were impoverished but deliriously happy newlyweds struggling to make ends meet while dad worked his way through college on the GI bill. After scraping through the depression Mom and Dad graduated from high school just in time for World War 2. My dad flew combat missions in a B-24, so Mom worried her way through the war. When the war ended they were safe, they were together, and they had a car. My dad wasn’t quite as romantic about Elmer. He remembered it as the car that would sometimes shift into two gears at once. From an engineering standpoint, the concurrent engagement of two distinct gear ratios created a set of simultaneous equations that could only be satisfied if the rotational speed was zero. From a practical standpoint, when it shifted into two gears at once the rear wheels locked up and the car skidded off the road, amid much swearing. Dad would then have to take the cover off the transmission and beat on the shifting forks until he could force it back into a single gear. This done, he could resume his drive, always keeping his eyes peeled for a safe place to land should the rear wheels lock up again. I don’t believe my father remembered that car as fondly as my mother did.

I’m not certain how my dad wound up with Elmer. I suspect he may have gotten it before the war. By the time he got out of the service it was not in running condition, but cars were hard to come by so he and his father rebuilt it. While they were working on it Mom decided it was time to go to the hospital and have a baby. Dad went with her, and although back then there wasn’t much for a father to do in a maternity ward he had the good sense to hang around until my older brother was born. Maternity wards had even less use for grandfathers, so my grandfather stayed home and worked on the Ford. He got it running that evening, so it passed into family lore that Elmer and my older brother were born on the same day.

The first car I remember well was my dad’s green Pontiac sedan, probably of 1940s vintage. The thing I remember most about it was the hood ornament, a beautiful stylized chrome and orange plastic bust of an Indian chief. I also remember a family trip out west

when we tried to drive it up a mountain to a park called Cloud Croft. Time after time we would make it half-way up the mountain, only to have the radiator boil over. We'd coast back downhill to a gas station, refill the radiator, and try again. Eventually my dad bought a canvas water bag so he could refill the radiator when it boiled over and we made it to the top of the mountain. (I suspect I remember more trips up and down the mountain than actually occurred, as my father wasn't one to make mistakes. He probably bought the water bag after the first trip.)



Photo Credit: Carl@TrainWeb.com

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1957 was a watershed year for my father. After years of driving used cars, "other people's problems," barking his knuckles on recalcitrant transmissions and clogged fuel lines, he finally reached the point in life where he was ready to buy a new car: a two-tone gray and white Plymouth station wagon! It was, by all accounts, the worst car he ever owned. Mechanically it was sound, and the only drivability problem was the fact that Mom was constantly breaking fingernails on the push button transmission. The body, however, was a different story. You could hear the rust gnawing away at the coachwork as it sat in the driveway. The first rust holes appeared while it was still under warranty. Those were fixed by the dealer, but after 12 months or 12,000 miles, it was all ours.

Within a few years the floorboards had decayed to the point where my brother and I were in danger of falling through to the pavement. Always the handyman, Dad cured the safety issue by fabricating plywood floorboards, but it was clear that this car was not destined to live a long and happy life. Ironically, when he bought that car the dealer gave him a free barbecue grill, and that was the best grill we ever owned. We were still using that grill twenty years later, long after the Plymouth had been consigned to the boneyard. When the grill finally gave up the ghost my dad seriously considered going back to the Plymouth dealer and saying “I’ll never buy another car from you as long as I live, but where did you get that barbecue grill?”

My dad never bought another used car, but he never bought another Plymouth either. In 1962 he bought another new car, a two-door Ford Falcon. This model was Robert McNamara’s parting gift to the Ford Motor Company. Later, Lee Iacocca would add fake cooling scoops and turn it into the wildly popular Ford Mustang, but in 1962 the Falcon was pretty prosaic. A car designed by a bean counter for bean counters and other practical persons. Strictly utilitarian, it lacked such frills as a radio, a cigarette lighter, or even a switch to turn on the dome light when you opened the door. My dad was a no-frills kind of guy himself, and an engineer to boot, so this car appealed to him. Working for Bendix he had helped develop power brakes and had the patents to prove it, but it was years before he would allow them on his car. “Just something else to go wrong” was the way he described them. The Falcon had standard brakes and a “three on the tree” 3-speed manual transmission. It transported him to and from work with no problems, and that’s all he wanted. He could light his cigarettes with a Zippo and, on the rare occasions when he felt like listening to music, a transistor radio on the passenger seat suited him just fine. He liked this car so well that a few years later he bought my mom a 1964 Falcon station wagon. His one concession to creature comfort on that car was a Ford-O-Matic two-speed automatic transmission.

As a kid, I was pretty much oblivious to these cars. They were exciting for a day or two when we first bought them, and after that they were just something my parents used to drive me to scout meetings and piano lessons. I only vaguely remember the day my dad bought his Falcon, and then I remember the salesman’s car better than my father’s

car. The salesman had a Falcon Sprint – a sport model with a V-8 engine. My older brother thought this was the coolest thing imaginable, but my father was unimpressed. He couldn't imagine why anyone would put a V-8 engine in an economy car. Not only were there four more cylinders to go bad, it drank more gas in the process. I didn't care much one way or the other about the cylinders, but I was fascinated by the fact that the salesman was missing his right hand. He still managed to steer and shift gears with the stump. Did he lose it in the war? Was it bitten off by sharks? I was dying to ask, but I knew that would be impolite so I kept quiet and pondered that question for the next 50 years.

I did have one fleeting interest in a car, but that car was owned by a neighbor. When I was eight my folks bought a summer cottage on a small lake in Michigan. "Cottage" is perhaps too grand a word for this place. It had been built as a hunting cabin in the 1920's, and although the previous owner had turned it into a year-round house by installing an oil heater and indoor plumbing, it still lacked such amenities as hot water, a roof that kept out all of the rain, and a foundation. When we bought it an abandoned outhouse graced the front yard and a giant galvanized wash tub was hanging beside the front door. Rust marks on top of the oil stove made it clear he used to heat water on the stove and pour it into the wash tub for his weekly bath. My dad, however, was able to see past these minor quirks and picture the gem that lurked within, resting on the stacked concrete blocks that substituted for a foundation. He had built our home from scratch, and in a remarkably short time he transformed this shack into a snug little paradise for the endless summer days of my childhood.

Two houses down the dirt road from our cottage was a slightly newer cottage owned by an Air Force pilot. These were the years when SAC, the Strategic Air Command, was on the front lines of the cold war. Our neighbor was a B-52 pilot, back in the days when B-52s were brand new. He was stationed in Kansas, but every June he drove his wife and kids to Michigan where they spent the summer. Near the end of the summer he would drive up to join them for a few weeks leave, and then they would all drive back to Kansas together. He had a son named Chris who was just my age and we quickly became best friends. All summer long we'd swim, fish, shoot B-B guns, and generally have a great

time. In the summer of 1961 Chris's dad surprised us when he showed up for his annual vacation driving a brand new Jaguar E-Type coupe.



Jaguar E-Type Coupe *Photo credit: <http://www.borrani.co.uk/>*



Jaguar E-Type Engine Photo credit: www.fotos247.com

My parents were incredulous, and I remember hushed conversations at the dinner table when they discussed rumors that he had spent nearly \$6,000 for that car. Later I would learn that was more than they had paid for our cottage, but I didn't care. To me it was money well spent. That Jaguar was the most beautiful car in the world, and the fact that it would see 150 mph just added to its allure.

Like most Americans I thought it was called an "XKE," but Chris soon set me straight on that account. It was, according to the factory literature, an "E-Type," not an "XKE." More specifically, it was an "E-Type Fixed Head Coupe." (According to purists, Jaguar never made a car called an "XKE." Jaguar developed the E-Type from their legendary C-Type and D-Type race cars and not from their XK series of street cars. The name "E-Type" never caught on in the US, though, and eventually American advertising companies ignored what the factory called the car and ran ads that called it an XKE.) I knew nothing about engines, but when his dad opened the hood even I could tell

that powerplant was a work of art. The exhaust note was pure music, even to my untrained ear, and the jet black bodywork gave my pre-pubescent brain its first inkling of what was meant by sex appeal. I can still hear its snarling exhaust echoing across the corn fields as Chris's dad headed back to Kansas. Sadly, his dad was killed in a midair collision a few months later, a casualty of a cold war that was anything but cold to those who fought its battles.

“Flaming Floorboards” is available in paperback from [CreateSpace](#) and [Amazon](#). It is also available in electronic (Kindle) format from [Amazon](#) and in epub (Nook) format through [Barnes & Noble](#) and [Google](#).