

Introduction

Over the years, I've met a great many full-fledged car nuts. These are the guys (and for some reason they are almost always guys) who can tell you the compression ratio of every engine Ferrari/Chevy/Ford/Chrysler (pick one) ever built. They spend hours every weekend polishing their own car, and they devour every issue of every car magazine, lusting over photos of the newest Ferrari, Chevy, Ford, or Chrysler. I am not one of these people. On my best day, I could maybe qualify as a semi-fledged car nut. I can tell you the compression ratio of a Model A Ford, and I wash my own car at least once a year. Or at least, that's my goal. I'm afraid I don't lust after new cars, though. Never have. I did buy my wife a new car once, but that was because the numbers made sense. When I estimated the satisfaction she would get from a new car compared to the satisfaction promised by a used car, integrated the satisfaction over the expected life of the vehicle, divided it by the purchase price, and took into account the dealer financing incentives, the new car won. Besides, my wife wanted the new car.

It's not that I don't like new cars. It's just that I'm an engineer. A gearhead. I look at a car and see a very clever device designed to transport people from Point A to Point B. Shiny paint, built-in DVD players, and rich Corinthian leather do not affect its practicality. Unlike a pure gearhead, however, I do appreciate the fact that it can be a lot of fun to drive from Point A to Point B. And in a travesty of logic that would cause Spock to raise his eyebrows so high his nose turned up, I pay lip service to reliability while secretly regarding anything that breaks as an engineering challenge. This assumes that whatever breaks is something I can fix, which means it must be something mechanical. I'm a mechanical engineer. I can't look at a microchip and see clever engineering, and I certainly can't fix it if it goes bad. I can, however, appreciate the unique, some would say bizarre design of an MGB choke linkage, and if that breaks (which is more than likely) I can fix it by the side of the road and be on my way again in a jiffy! And when I look at the cotter pin which Henry Ford put in the drain hole of the Model A clutch housing, I shudder because I'm in the presence of genius. Anyone can drill a drain hole, but drain holes tend to clog with dirt. By putting a cotter pin through the hole, and by leaving it loose so it would rattle around as the car shook (and believe me, a Model A will shake), Henry invented the self-

cleaning drain hole! So what if the thing drips oil all over your driveway. The owner's manual says you should count your blessings if you get more than 500 miles to the quart. That hole isn't just a leak, it's an elegant engineering solution! New cars employ very sophisticated technology and are marvels of engineering, but they don't have the elegant simplicity of that Model A cotter pin. So when I look at a brand new car and see shiny paint, a top that won't come off, and a lot of electronics which probably aren't going to break but which couldn't be repaired if they did, I don't see fun and I don't see elegance. Cup holders, air conditioning, surround sound, digital satellite navigation system – these might be nice to have if it's pouring down rain and driving is no fun anyway, but why would you want a car like that on a sunny day? But show me a nice, clapped out MG TC and wow! Cut down doors, fold down windscreen, worm and peg steering, chronometric gauges – the opportunities for fun and breakdowns are almost limitless! Not only that, it's got an emergency hand crank! I can start that sucker even if the battery is dead!

Even when I was a kid in high school my taste in automobiles was a bit off the beaten track. The teen years are the age when a young man's fancy is supposed to turn to bellowing exhausts and squealing tires. Since I was a teenager in the 60s, the golden age of muscle cars, there was no shortage of potential dream cars. My classmates were literally foaming at the mouth in automotive ecstasy. They spent hours debating the relative merits of Mustangs, Camaros, Corvettes, Super Birds, and GTO's. Somehow, those cars always looked a bit silly to me. Like a Hollywood starlet who's had so many breast implants she looks more like a parody than a paramour, I'd look at the hood scoops, racing decals, and jacked up rear ends on muscle cars and I just couldn't take them seriously. My fantasy was a Stanley Steamer. Any Stanley would do, but what I really lusted after was a 1906 Gentleman's Speedy Roadster. Looking back, it may not have been a coincidence that I didn't get many dates.

In the years since then I've owned a fair variety of cars from almost every decade of the 20'th century. Fords, Chevys, MGs, Jaguars, and many other contrivances have graced my garage. I've also had at least a passing acquaintance with Ferraris, Bentleys, Shelbys, Renaults, Peugeotts, Fiats, Triumphs, and more. I've worked as a professional mechanic, pitted for some of the least successful racing teams in history, and owned the only running MGA on the island of Guam. I'm not a car collector, carefully restoring vintage automobiles to gem-like perfection and

trailer them to elegant car shows. I'm a gearhead who has a masochistic obsession with patching up junk cars and relying on them for daily transportation. If the junk car happens to be 50 or 60 years old, so much the better. I've had a lot of fun with these cars. I've also sat by the side of the road with broken pistons, blown engines, and dysfunctional differentials. I've told my family and friends about these adventures so often they shouted "For God's sake! Go bore someone else with these stories!" And so I wrote this book.

I'd like to make it clear that this book is not a memoir. Jack Benny opened his long running radio career with the words "This is Jack Benny talking. There will now be a slight pause while you say 'Who Cares?'" Obviously, Jack knew his audience. I'm no Jack Benny, but I know that no one wants to read a memoir written by someone they've never heard of. This book is not about me. It parallels one portion of my life, but I've done many things that aren't in this book, a few of which might actually count in my favor. This book is about the motley assortment of cars that have covered my hands with grease, and about the extraordinary cast of characters I've met while fooling with these junkers. Sadly, one car that is missing from this collection is a Stanley Steamer. I've seen them in museums, looked longingly at ads in antique car magazines, and gasped when I learned the price, but I've never owned one. Of course, the story isn't over yet. Who knows? Maybe if enough people buy this book . . .



Stanley "Gentleman's Speedy Roadster" Photo Credit: Jeff Theobald www.steamcar.net

A brief comment on truthfulness. The vehicles and events in this book are true, at least as I remember them. Someone else might remember them differently or, more to the point, wish that I'd remembered them differently. Some might simply wish I'd had the good sense to keep my mouth shut. I realize some people might not want their friends or family to know they were ever associated with the cars and events described in this book, and some authors (me, for one) might not want to spend years in court defending themselves against lawsuits. For that reason I have altered the names of all the people and some of the locations in this book. Since I was already fibbing about the names, I occasionally took the liberty of fibbing about a few more things, such as emphasizing a personality quirk, shuffling time sequences, or making up dialog that is probably pretty close to what was said at the time. The stories are true. The cars are true. The people are, mostly true. So, if you think you recognize someone in this book and you're shocked by what you read, it probably isn't true.