

Reflections in Chrome

My uncle, Ralph G. Carothers, sat regularly in the upholstered wing-backed chair at the top of the steps leading down into this reading room. As he aged, his comments on papers ranged from silent attention to audible eruptions, more commonly known as snores. After gaining membership in this club almost one-half century ago, I soon adopted the practice of sitting near his feet, on the right pedestal, so that I could jab him in the leg to ward off more audible commentary. I hope that this service to the membership, together with the arduous advancement of my name up the club's membership ladder, gives me the right to burden you with a few reminiscences. Although my observations will be mundane they may evoke, in older members of our assembly, an occasional smile or reflective nod.

My thoughts go back to the beginning of the Great Depression when my usefulness around the house first budded, as I leant a hand to my father in washing a series of used cars, now more gracefully referred to as "previously owned". My first-learned task was to spread a product known as Bon Ami, the chick "that had never scratched," on the nickel plate of bumpers, allowing it to dry and then buffing it off, leaving a less than satisfactory gleam. My tutelage went through various stages, including the use of the hose and rag, and later drying glass and metallic surfaces with a chamois when I had gained enough strength to wring it

out. By 1932 or '33 I learned the mysteries of a "simonize job" on a second-hand Lincoln with body by LeBaron. A huge black man had been hired by my father to spend the day simonizing this vehicle and I was appointed gopher to regularly replenish quarts of icewater as this giant applied both cleaner and carnauba on one of Cincinnati's hottest days. This technique of auto beautification duly led to a love-hate relationship with each of my subsequent automobiles, when on a yearly basis, I personally administered this beauty treatment. As a youngster I had been introduced to the beauty of the motor car when my chum's Uncle Jim drove to Medina, New York from nearby cities in his Pierce Arrow roadster. The grandeur of its exterior undulations, capped off by protruding headlights and gleaming wire wheels in both front fender wells, could not have been shrugged off by even the most blasé lad. Sitting in the driver's seat when the top was down, or climbing in and out of its rumble seat, bonded me to that generation of males who more or less worshiped the changing intricacies of design that were annually whipped up for the motor car market. As we became older, we were aware each year of unique arrangements of headlights, taillights, fins, fenders, hoods, curved glass surfaces, and other variables, which, combined, distinguished each make, model, and year of autos of dissimilar at the Cord Essex, Terraplane, Packard, Pontiac, Cadillac, LaSalle, Chrysler Airflow, and later the Lincoln Zephyr. The interior of these vehicles was less interesting, but "monumental" changes such as the addition of car radios, initially mounted on the steering column, each owner having a key which allowed him only to activate this wondrous device. The Chrysler Airflow let even a shorty see over the hood, this striking car opening a generation of style wars in Detroit which finally led to the "jelly bean".

Vignettes which vie for attention in my memory go all the way back to 1928, the pre-crash year when we lived in Chicago. In the family car, an unreliable Essex, I learned the technique, of "Chicago Parking"

from my father. This consisted of jockeying into a space between two parallel-parked vehicles, first pushing one vehicle ahead and then backing into the rear vehicle pushing it backwards. These maneuvers repeated several times enlarged a place at the curb which accommodated an additional auto - ours. Today's more sophisticated auto engineering with locked steering and parking gear prevents such "creative" shenanigans. This Essex took me out for an evening meal and entertainment at a near-Northside speakeasy when a baby-sitter was not available. An important business dinner involving the sale of commercial laundry machinery to the Chicago mob, whose representative was in charge of their first legitimate business enterprise, The American Linen Supply Company, had been arranged. A lieutenant of Greasy-Thumb Gusik was meeting my father to consummate this purchase.

The next year found us living in Cincinnati and my memory retains yet another image of a square sterned Essex, found one morning with an unusual hole in its body immediately adjacent to the rear window. This vehicle belonged to the older brother of my next-door pal. He said that he had acquired this bullet hole when abruptly leaving the premises of a Kentucky bootlegger. That individual might well have been the supplier of the clear, cold liquid which I had thirstily guzzled from a refrigerator water bottle a week or so earlier on New Year's Eve. I was immediately seized with unimaginable burning of the mouth and stomach, which doubled me up on the kitchen floor in terror. This was my personal introduction to bootleg hooch.

My summers at this time were not spent at summer camp, but I began annual trips to my maternal grandparents in western New York. My first trip on the Big Four from Winton Place Station was with a large shipping tag tied through the buttonhole of my shirt. Getting out of the Pullman car in the Buffalo station about 6:30 a.m. I was grateful to see my grandfather limping down the platform towards my sleeper. He drove

me, in the large Packard sedan, to his home in Medina where I had been born less than six years earlier in the front bedroom. It was in this elegant auto that we made weekly visits to the big city -one time west to Buffalo, the next east to Rochester. On these trips, half nauseated by motion and second-hand cigar smoke, and in spite of my short stature, I always managed somehow to win the nickel bet on who would first glimpse the edge of the Tonawanda swamp on the entry onto the wondrous "Million Dollar Highway" to Rochester.

Summers in Medina afforded, among other things, an early chance to become familiar with antique motor cars. My friend Charlie Hood's grandfather looked and dressed like Mark Twain. In his barn was a stately Hudson sedan, complete with wide exit doors and flower vases for the rear seat passengers. This ancient non-operative vehicle was a wonderful "playpen" and shared barn space with a very early Ford four-door roadster, with gleaming brass trim, which was operable and used daily to transport us through downtown Medina to the dammed up sandstone quarry where we swam in reddish tinted water. Grandfather Hood proudly drove through town in his white linen suit, coat parted to show a large and important gold watch chain and fob.

During my annual summer visits to Medina I spent whole days at my grandfather's mill in Shelby, New York, which was the oldest operating mill in New York State, still powered by water from the old mill race and complete with an ancient disused grindstone. Trips between Medina and Shelby were made in the smaller Falcon Knight which I think may have been built near Buffalo. It had a droop to its hood towards a radiator that seemed to be pouting.

In time for my entry into high school in 1936, my family acquired a brand new automobile. It was a 60-horse power Ford V8, gray with red wheels. Officially my mother's car, this was also the vehicle which I was to drive in off hours since the State of Ohio, in its

infinite wisdom, had seen fit to license youngsters so that they might drive farm equipment on the highways. This loophole in the licensing law enabled big city kids to get driver's licenses at the same early age. Sometimes around my thirteenth year, I soloed and imprudently, with two classmates, harassed neckers at Ault Park with flashlights. Leaving the scene of our prank hastily in the Ford V8, I was cornered at Hyde Park square by two angry drivers who succeeded in pinning my car deftly on both sides. Thus all four of the new Ford's fenders were dented when we skedaddled for home in terror.

Fascination with the automobile did not end with external glitter, fancy taillights, fins, and contorted fenders. Practical interest in the vehicles, what actually made them tick, led one of my closest buddies to spend more than a year tearing a Model A Ford completely to pieces, down to its last set screw. The car was re-assembled with a make-shift gas tank, since the original, part of the rusted-out body, had been discarded. The first test ride found me with both feet on the rear axle, riding backwards, my seat being a 2 X 8 board placed precariously across the frame. Each bump was accompanied by a loud thump as the board shifted perilously as we bounced along on the roads east of Madisonville. Why we were spared significant or lethal injury in those days remains a profound enigma, for our activities included "dodge-em" with real automobiles in the vacated parking lot of Coney Island, after its closure at 1 or 2 a.m., and drag racing down wide, flat Springfield Pike from Wyoming to Glendale at odd hours of the day or night with, believe it or not, few intercessions by traffic controllers. Once stopped in Wyoming one evening after demonstrating my driving skills to a young lady friend, I remember the flashlight of a local gendarme peering in the window, flashing first the face of my lady friend, then my own. The officer questioning my immaturity asked mirthfully if my rather sophisticated partner was my mother or my aunt. She was, in fact, the daughter of one of our former prolific Literary Club writers.

I went off to college in 1940 after improved economics allowed purchase of a 1-year old Ford V8 convertible. This apple of my eye was formerly owned by a wild driving young lady who was a bit hard on tires. I remember that the Sohio station on Springfield Pike, just at the edge of Hartwell, sold me four new wide whitewall Atlas tires for the total sum of \$80.00. (If your memory goes back that far, the band of white rubber around the tire was four or five inches wide).

"Wheels" became more valuable after December 7, 1941. Even though the convertible was a few years older, it still had its nice white sidewall tires without too many miles, thanks to gas rationing, and it took me to medical school in Boston. There crowded streets and few places to park led to an increasing collection of parking tickets. Given in good spirit by the Boston police, they were never intended to be paid. Things went well for a year or two as my bottom desk drawer filled to overflow. One evening there was a knock on my apartment door and a broad Irish face, with glint in the eyes, said to me, "Charlie we've been wanting to talk to you a long time." I was ready to put my cap on and to go down to the station house when he laughed and said, "Get downstairs and move that car off the Deaconess Hospital lane and don't park there again." I considered this very mild punishment and thought I was off the hook, but a few weeks later every out-of-state license plate for an area about one-half mile around the Harvard Medical School found itself with from one to four tires, flattened by multiple icepick stabs.

The Ford got me back to Cincinnati for internship, conveyed me to Washington where the Navy installed me at the Naval Medical Research Institute and then back to Cincinnati for surgical residency. Mileage accumulated when I lived in Cincinnati and worked in surgery at the Dayton Veterans' Hospital. Vehicle replacement was necessary. I made a deal for a non-rag top at Stenger motors in Dayton, but as soon as I could

afford it, I was back in convertibles again, driving them even when air-conditioning, road noise, dust, and advancing years found the top never down. The late Russell Warner saw to it that I had a Mustang convertible about a week before they appeared on any showroom floor. It was fun to drive this classy little vehicle down Lincoln Avenue on the way to Pill Hill with all the kids running out screaming, "Mustang, Mustang!"

Nowadays we have paint jobs on our cars which seem relatively impervious to our eroding environment. I have lost my touch with cans of Simonize cleaner and carnauba, however, washing my own car has remained a menial task which I really enjoy. I still look at the chrome although I don't know where the Bon Ami is kept, but sometimes I don't recognize the reflected presented. I also still like the interior smell of a new car. Years ago I wondered if I could get a patent on some type of spray which would renew this aroma.

Lest you think I am some kind of a car nut, let me assure you that I will not be buried in the sarcophagus of my last favorite motor vehicle. I am square enough to stand on the sidelines and trust in the familiar words of the Book of Common Prayer. If Doctor Ralph were here, his snore would have long since edited me to silence. Although, come to think of it, the greatest day of all for him was the renewal day for his automobile insurance, giving him another year's reprieve on his highways and byways.

Charles O. Carothers, M.D.

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