

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, April 13, 2015

Autos of the 1930s: I grew up in the 1930s and got my driver's license on February 20, 1940. In the decade before that, I, like many interested in cars at that time, could tell the model year and make of every American car as I observed them. There were very few "foreign cars" on the roads of America in the years before World War II.

Model T Fords were just about gone from the roads around here, but there were still nearly one million registered as everyday cars in the United States. There were a minority of "boxey" sedans, two- and four-door, from the 1920s, but car styles rapidly got away from that look during the 1930s. Model A Fords were everywhere, all years from 1928 through 1931. About 1930, my father bought a used '29 Model A Station Wagon, which we used without the seats as an early pick-up truck around Auburn Heights until 1936, when he bought a new Chevy of similar body design for \$639 (it had wind-up glass windows instead of side curtains). I learned to drive on the Model A, maneuvering it under the rose arbor and through the porte-cochere backwards at some speed. The name "Woody" was not invented for these cars until the early 1970s.

Charles Henry Johnson and his wife, Ruth, hucksters in the Hockessin area, had an elongated Model A with sides that would open up to display their produce. He or she would stop near the kitchen door at Auburn Heights, my mother would come to the truck, and she would pick out what she wanted to supply the appetites of the family. The fresh fruits and vegetables could be seen from the side on shelves just behind the canvas or wooden door that hinged at the top. Obviously this business was seasonally restricted, blossoming in late summer and fall.

Jim Peirson, a truck mechanic for National Fibre, had a new '32 Ford V-8 rumble-seat roadster with cowl lamps and side-mounted spares. When the mill whistle blew at 5 p.m., he would get in his cherished car and speed all over Yorklyn, showing off the great performance of Ford's light new V-8 (Cadillac had pioneered the V-8 in 1914), the answer to the 6-cylinder Chevy that came out with the '29 models. I can still hear the distinctive exhaust as he accelerated and shifted gears while picking up speed. It was hard for this eight-year-old to wait until he was 16.

One winter afternoon after school about 1935, my father took me to the Wilmington Auto Show held in the Gold Ballroom of the Hotel du Pont. As I stopped in front of a new model on display, the car started to talk to me. That couldn't be! I had no clue how that could happen. A live voice with a microphone was in sight of this bewildered kid, and obviously there was an amplifier in the circuit and a speaker under the hood behind the car's radiator.

The Buick exhibit at the Century of Progress Exposition (the Chicago World's Fair of 1933-34) had a great model of a country scene with curvy roads and short hills, on which there were about 20 scale-model Buicks, each about 3" long, moving over the road. Some were '33 models with a front axle and leaf springs throughout, and some were '34 models with "knee action" (early independent front suspension). As the '33s hit a rough section of road, they would bounce; when the '34s came to the same stretch, they would glide across without vertical motion. Although the name was short-lived, "knee action" was adopted by all American manufacturers eventually, Ford being the last about 1948. General Motors had some problems with it, especially with its Pontiac Division. Most Pontiacs from 1935 through 1938, while they kept running, soon acquired a negative camber in the front wheels (well out at the bottom from vertical).

Starting in 1946, cars were turned out in large numbers unheard of before World War II. As has been the case several times with American automobiles, quality control was often a problem. Fords and Studebakers did not always "track." Even brand new cars manufactured by these companies would track to the right (the rear wheels would run as much as three inches to the right of the front wheels). The driver and other passengers could not detect this defect; sometimes it wouldn't even cause excessive tire wear. Many owners didn't realize it existed.

General Motors and Chrysler never seemed to have this problem. By the mid-1950s, whatever caused it at Ford and Studebaker was corrected.