

My 1960s Daily Drivers - Plymouth, Studebaker & Volkswagen

By Don Ramsburg

It was 1964, and Anne Marie and I were living on Saint James Road in Rockdale near Rolling Road and Liberty Road. I was driving a 1951 Plymouth 2-door sedan that I had bought from Anne Marie's cousin for \$20. The Plymouth had some features that seemed unusual to me. The lug nuts on the left side of the car were right hand thread, and those on the right side were left hand thread. Go figure! Also, the car had double leading brake shoes with two wheel cylinders on each wheel, a good feature! One of the bad features was the mushy suspension that would threaten to overturn the car on tight curves. This particular Plymouth was pretty beat, and I had just finished replacing the differential, which had self-destructed on the Baltimore Beltway on my way home from work

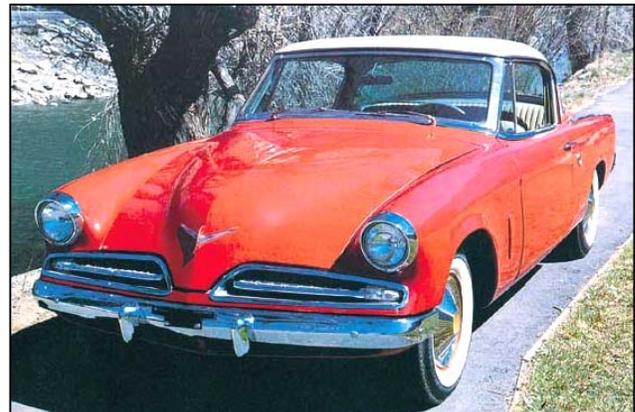
upholstery and a nice back seat. The designer was the famed Raymond Loewy, and his car was such a success in 1953 that Studebaker couldn't keep up with the demand. The motor was a 232 cubic inch, overhead valve V8 that looked for all the world like a scaled down 1949 Cadillac engine. It was even the same color.

The Studebaker's engine was over-square, which was unusual at that time, having a 3.375 inch bore, and a 3.250 inch stroke. The valve lifters were solid, rather than hydraulic, and the rocker arms were adjustable. Interestingly enough, the Studebaker rocker arms would fit a Cadillac or Oldsmobile engine of that era, and were often used by hot rodders to change these engines from hydraulic to solid

going to work one morning. That's fast for 1953! I once had a 1953 Ford V8 that was hard pressed to do 85 mph.

I used the Studebaker as a family car for a of couple years without any mechanical problems. Then it developed a bad leak in the radiator core. Apparently, '53 Studebaker Starlight Coupes were pretty rare, even in those days, because I was unable to locate another radiator. I had to keep a couple of gallon water jugs behind the front seat, so I could keep the radiator full. I put some of my kid's silly-putty on the hole in the radiator core, and it slowed up the leak a little, but I decided that it was time to find another car.

A co-worker of mine had bought a new Volkswagen beetle in 1958, and I



one day. I guess the car didn't owe me anything, but after a year of putting up with it, it was time to find another car.

We were driving on Liberty Road, near our home, when I spied a 1953 Studebaker Starlight Coupe parked in a gas station with a "For Sale" sign in the window. I stopped to see what the story was on the car, and found out that it ran OK, and the price was \$75. I sold the Plymouth to a friend for \$15 – that's what friends are for – and bought the Studebaker.

The Stude was an exceptionally pretty car, low and sporty looking, painted in a subdued shade of red and a cream top. It was a hardtop club coupe with leather

The 1957 VW and 1953 Studebaker. While these photos are not the actual cars, they show the styling contrast.

lifters. Shorter push rods were required in that application, but these were available from J. C. Whitney.

The V8 engine had only a two-barrel carburetor and a 7 to 1 compression ratio. It was rated as 120 hp at 4000 rpm, and 190 foot pounds of torque at 2000 rpm. The transmission was Studebaker's version of an automatic that I never did care for, but the car drove and handled very well for the times. It wasn't very fast off the line, but I was able to reach 105 mph on I-83

always liked that car, so I looked in the newspaper to see what Volkswagen beetles were bringing. I found a 1957 beetle listed in a used car lot in Towson for \$375. I didn't have that much money, but I had good credit, so I got a personal loan at the bank to buy the car.

When Anne Marie and I went to see the Volkswagen, the car salesman told us that it was so cheap because it had no reverse. "Swell!" I said, but then I figured at least it wouldn't have any radiator problems. I asked the salesman if we could trade in the Studebaker, and he said he would give us \$10 for it. I agreed to that because I didn't know what else to do with the Studebaker.

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My 1960s Daily Drivers – continued

The salesman looked in the back seat of the Stude and asked “What are the jugs of water for?” I said “You’ll find out”, and we drove away in our ’57 VW.

It was a pain in the neck having no reverse, so I set out to learn how to fix a Volkswagen transmission. I found that my American Standard tools wouldn’t work because the Volkswagen was metric, so I went to Sears Roebuck and bought a set of metric wrenches and sockets. Next, I found a repair manual at a Volkswagen dealership that included instructions on assembly and disassembly of the transmission.

I had to pull the engine in order to get the transmission out, so I jacked the Volkswagen up in the rear, high enough to pull the engine out from under the car. With the engine supported with a scissor jack, I disconnected the engine from the transmission, disconnected the wires, cables, and the gas line, and pulled the engine free from the headshaft. Then, I lowered the engine on the scissor jack, and pulled it far enough away so that I could remove the transmission. The Volkswagen engine came out with the exhaust system still attached, which made a good handle for sliding the engine around.

The engine and transmission housings were both aluminum, which made them much easier to handle. When I split the transmission open, I found that the reverse gear and the corresponding main drive gear were broken, so I ordered those parts from a Volkswagen dealership. When the parts were replaced, the next problem was preloading the tapered roller bearings on the mainshaft. I did the best I could, which must have been good enough, because the transmission ran quietly when I got it back together.

You know, the VW had only 36 horsepower, but the torque specification on the rear axle nut was 250 foot-pounds! I bought a 3/4 inch drive braking bar and a 3/4 inch drive socket to fit the rear axle nuts. The braking bar was 18 inches long, but I had to slide a piece of iron pipe over the handle so I would have room to stand on it. This technique worked fine, and I was able to get the Volkswagen back together, with the reverse gear fixed.

If you have never driven an old Volkswagen beetle, you are definitely missing something! These cars are no ball-of-fire, but they handle like a go-cart. That torsion bar suspension, designed by Ferdinand Porsche back in

the 1930s was great. I have never seen anything to match it. Of course, the sound of the rear engine is like riding on a Baltimore City transit bus during the fifties. The car would over steer, because of the weight distribution, and it would only take a little tweak of the steering wheel to negotiate a curve on a country road. In addition to what I consider sport car handling, I was getting about 37 miles per gallon even if I drove it flat out all the time (72 mph). The VW was so tight that it was hard to close the door if all the windows were rolled up. The oval rear window and the pivoting rear seat windows were nice features. I definitely liked driving it better than the Studebaker.

Editor’s Note: Back in the ’50s and ’60s many of us on a budget made decisions about our daily transportation based on whether or not our current car was worn out and how much trouble it was to fix it. Used cars were relatively inexpensive. The practice of trading up to a new car every couple of years was common, so there were a lot of used cars available with current styling and useful mileage left. And looking back 40 plus years, most of us wish we had some of those cars now to restore as antiques.

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Patapsco State Park, Avalon Pavilion #105, Elkridge, MD (Enter the park from Route 1)

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Total Enclosed (make check payable to Chesapeake Region, AACA) \$ _____



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