

MOSTLY CHRYSLER PRODUCT VEHICLES

Confusion Abounds On Semi-Automatic Transmissions

By Bill Wurzell, Editor

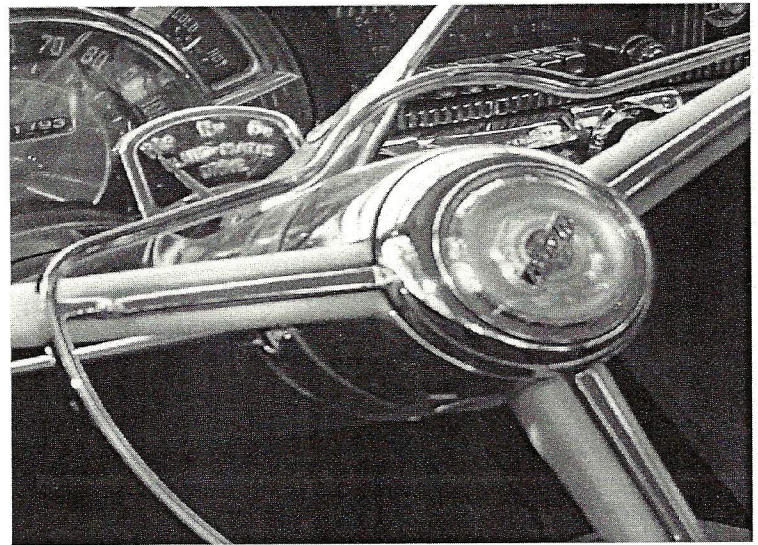
I've had my antique car for three years. In that time 'Delovely' and I have attended many car shows, cruise-ins and other events. At nearly every show or function somebody will ask a question or make an observation regarding **semi-automatic** transmissions that were mostly marketed by Chrysler Corporation in their Imperial, Chrysler, DeSoto and Dodge brands. Plymouth never got a semi-automatic transmission unless you count 'Hy-Drive,' and that folks, is a whole 'nother sad story.

Usually it'll begin with 'back in the day' our old (*insert Chrysler product here*) with: 'Fluid Drive', Presto-Matic, Tip-Toe Shift, 'Gyro-Matic' and so on. Much of the confusion was fostered by Chrysler Corporation, perhaps to disguise the fact they didn't have a fully automatic transmission until 1954. Chrysler resorted to placing a goofy looking 'quadrant' on the steering column of '51 Imperials and Chryslers to make it look like an automatic, which it was not. There was script on the clutch pedal 'safety clutch', huh? Even their advertisements exclaimed, 'no shifting' or 'shift-less'; this wasn't true either until they finally got two-speed 'Powerflite' in 1954. Up to this time they used an M6 transmission with either a 'fluid coupling' and/or a 'torque-converter.'

M4, M6...What the...?

Nineteen forty-one Chryslers used an M4 transmission called 'Vacumatic', DeSotos were 'Simplamatic.' Both utilized engine vacuum to operate. The successor 'M6' transmission was produced from 1946 to 1953, although Dodge didn't introduce it until 1948. The M6 transmission was a special manual transmission with a fluid coupling called 'Fluid-Drive.' This transmission allowed the driver to stop without depressing the clutch and to accelerate from a standing start, mostly on downgrades.

Much of the confusion stems from, which transmission does the car really have? A forty or fifty year old when confronted with say a 1950 Dodge Coronet with 'Gyro-Matic' will think it's a manual transmission that won't go into first gear. Actually, it doesn't have a first gear as say a 1950 Plymouth. The Dodge with 'Gyro-Matic' has two ranges, a 'power range' and a 'driving range.' The power range is in the same position as 2nd gear would be in the 1950 Plymouth. The cruising range is where 3rd or 'Hi' gear would be in the 1950 Plymouth. In the Dodge with Gyro-Matic, the driver starts the car, depresses the clutch and places the gear shift into the power range (2nd gear on the Plymouth) and proceeds forward. At between 6 and 8 mph, the driver eases off the gas pedal and the transmission 'clicks' into the second 'underdrive' gear, accelerates, depresses the clutch, shifts into driving range, completely bypassing third gear and going directly to final drive (1:1.) However, under normal circumstances, the power range isn't necessary; the driver simply pulls the gear shift (while depressing the clutch) to the cruising range, proceeds forward to between 15-18 mph, eases off the accelerator and the transmission shifts into final drive gear and 'off to the races.' When the car slows to 11 mph or less the transmission automatically downshifts to first gear. Confusing, ain't it Bunkie? Just remember, if it has just a fluid coupling, it's 'Fluid-Drive.' If it has a fluid coupling and a torque converter in a Dodge it's Gyro-Matic in a DeSoto its 'Tip-Toe Shift' in a Chrysler or Imperial it's 'Presto-Matic.' It seems each division described the operation of the transmission a little differently, additionally, I know there are lots of models in existence that say 'Fluid-Drive' but have the



This is the 'quadrant' on Chrysler cars beginning in 1951 with the M-6 'Fluid-Matic Drive' transmission: the sequence of the gear positions was: RLo Nu Dr. Reverse and low gear were very close to each other and neutral and drive were further apart. The driver had to depress the clutch when moving from one gear to the next.

torque-converter. The 1949 DeSoto Custom Sedan that Willis Terret recently restored is a perfect example. Right on the dashboard in large script it proudly proclaims, 'Fluid-Drive' yet the car has the M6 transmission and 'Tip-Toe' shift, go figure!

Let's confuse the issue...

In 1953 and only 1953, Dodge offered no less than FOUR different transmissions in their cars; if you ordered a six cylinder Dodge you only had choice of a three-speed manual or a three speed manual with overdrive. If you ordered a Red-Ram (early HEMI) V8, in addition to the two transmissions for the six, you could choose either a Gyro-Matic or a Gyro-Torque. What's the difference? The Gyro-Torque transmission utilized the motor oil, the crankcase held TEN quarts of oil. Other than this, they operated identically, good grief, why?

In my Junior year in high school, I had a 1953 Dodge Coronet two door sedan with Gyro-Torque with only 50,000 miles. I remember using 'power range'; it was that for sure. It provided a lot of torque that I rarely needed. I probably screwed the car up by changing the motor oil from regular 30 weight to 30 weight 'high-detergent' oil. 'H-D' oil wasn't even on the market when my '53 Dodge was brand new. After the oil change, it never acted quite the same. Hey, I was barely seventeen years old!

Before I purchased my DeSoto in 2011, I looked at lots of cars. I looked at a 1950 Dodge Coronet owned by a 'thirty-something', who inherited it from a family member. The Dodge was a nice clean car with 'Fluid-Drive' (fluid-coupling.) I asked the owner if I could test drive the Dodge. "Sure", I'll ride shotgun." I started the motor with the clutch depressed, I placed the gear shift in first gear and while stationery, I let the clutch out with my foot on the brake. The car's owner, yelled, "what the hell are you doing? I replied: "It's Fluid Drive...it won't stall".) He said: "Is that what Fluid Drive does?" I proceeded forward to a stop sign without depressing the clutch, pulled forward, wound it out a little and shifted to second and then third; he was amazed. He shouldn't have been, the Dodge's owners manual explained fluid drive perfectly.