BARRY LEVINSON, WHERE ARE YOU?

Don Ramsburg Writes About The Car Woes Of A 'Twenty Something' In 1958

In the spring of 1958, I was living with my parents in Randallstown, my '39 Ford Deluxe was dying from overuse. I was only twenty at the time and I loved to drive so much that I could wear out an old car very quickly. I had to find another car. I decided I would like to have a convertible, so I toured the many used car lots along Belair Road to see what was available. In one of those lots, I found a red 1950 Oldsmobile 88 convertible with a black top, for $200. 'Oh boy!' I thought. 'This car ought to turn some heads', I bought it!

The Olds had a 303 cubic inch, overhead valve V8 with hydraulic lifters and a two barrel carburetor. It was rated as 135 horsepower at 3600 rpm, and 263 foot pounds of torque at 1800 rpm (lots of torque, low revs.) The transmission was a Hydra-Matic that I would later learn to despise. Of course, it still had a 6-volt electrical system, which was marginal at best.

My first impression of the car was that it had much more power than my Ford flathead, but the car was so heavy that it took a lot of muscle to turn a corner (No power steering!). The steering wheel was much larger than the one in my '39 Ford, so I had more leverage anyway, but it was similar to driving a truck. Handling was not very good either, as the car seemed to wallow in its own weight on a tight curve. I also found that the automatic top retractor didn't work, so I had to put the convertible top up and down by manually. This was quite a job but I could do it by myself on a good day. Anyway, summer was coming, and I was able to enjoy the feeling of openness convertible for the first time.

Lots of miles.

The '88' already had a lot of miles on it, and it was very hard to start when the engine was hot. Since it was an automatic, I couldn't push it and pop the clutch to get it started as I could with my old '39 Ford. The owner of the local service station suggested that I change to an 8-volt battery. He said he had done that sort of thing before, and it had cured the starting problem. I agreed that I had to do something to make the car more reliable; I bought an 8-volt battery as he suggested. The service station mechanic took the cover off of the Olds voltage regulator, and adjusted the regulator output voltage to charge the 8-volt battery. With that adjustment, the 6-volt generator became an 8-volt generator, and everything seemed to work fine.

The '50 Olds started much easier now, and even seemed to run a little better. The down side was that the headlights were so bright, they looked blue, and I had to replace them about every two weeks. I would go to a junkyard, and buy a half dozen 6-volt seal beams at a time, so I could keep some spares in the trunk of the car. If a car was coming the other direction, and I had my low beams on, the other driver would assume that they were my high beams, and would turn his high beams on to retaliate. When I would hit the high beams in response, the other driver looked like a deer in a spotlight. Not a very safe Of course, I have to say that Anne Marie, who I was dating at the time, and I, were definitely able to enjoy the convertible. In the summer of 1958, we spent many a nice evening driving in the '50 smobile. It was a completely different experience from my hot rod '39 Ford Deluxe, but the yearning to drive a '39 Ford again was still The '50 Oldsmobile engine had a lot of low end torque which was amplified by the torque converter in the Hydra-Matic. One night, I was challenging a '55 Ford from a traffic light on Washington Boulevard, when I twisted off a rear axle. I had to get the car towed home but I was able to get an axle at a junkyard and fix it myself. About a month later, under similar circumstances, the differential broke up. Swell! I was unable to find a differential from a '50 Oldsmobile at the junkyard, so I bought a differential from a '49 Pontiac six cylinder sedan. The Pontiac differential fit right into the Oldsmobile rear but it turned out to be a 4.56 ratio. That low rear end didn't help the gas mileage any, but it got me back on the road again and the car was a quicker from a traffic light.

Hot Rod buffs...

At twenty, my friends were all hot rod buffs and most of them had Hollywood mufflers and dual exhausts. One day, I was driving through Randallstown, in my flashy Olds convertible, and I was pulled over by a Baltimore County policeman. I rolled down my window, and the cop said: "Step on the gas! I want to listen to your mufflers." I said: "What! You want to listen to my muffler?"

This is a 1950 Oldsmobile '88' Convertible, like the car Don Ramsburg had 1958

(The Olds exhaust system was absolutely stock!). The cop said: "Yeah! Gun the engine!". I guess he wondered why I was laughing so hard when I gunned the engine. I said: "How's that? (chuckle)". He said: "Fine! Have a nice day!" I had been cited for loud mufflers on my Ford before, and it was nice to have. Soon after the muffler incident, I drove to Baltimore City, near Gwynn Oak Junction, to see my two aunts. When I opened the driver's door, and exited the car, I saw flames lapping out of the left front fender well. I rushed into my aunt's house and brought out a bucket of water to throw on the fire. After the fire was out, I jacked up the left front wheel and found that a front wheel bearing had gone bad and the heat had caught the axle grease on fire! I called a friend, we went to a junkyard to a front brake drum including the front wheel bearings. I thought: "Will these problems ever end?'

By this time, six months had passed since I bought the car and I had one problem after another. I was tired of the problems that I had encountered so I thought about changing cars. I had just bought a '39 Ford Standard 2-door sedan, the car of my dreams. (that's another story) so I decided to get rid of the Olds before the transmission went up, or something else just as awful. I parked the car in front of my parent's house on Liberty Road with a sign that said: "For Sale $50". The next day, I sold it to the baddest man in town (no, not Leroy Brown), an acquaintance of mine. I figured, if I sold it cheaply enough, even a friend couldn't complain about the car. I guess I was right, because he loved the car.

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