

By **DAVID REHOR** *AutoWeek | Updated: 08/14/07, 3:33 pm et*

A long time ago, in the winter of 1955-56, I got my driver's license and set about finding suitable wheels. I needed something I could afford with the modest savings from my after-school job and had my heart set on a 1932 Ford. I had looked at several outside my two-digit price range when a friend's father spotted a five-window coupe in rural eastern Ohio for \$50, a Model B with a rebuilt motor. A \$10 deposit changed hands, and then we had to figure out how to get it home. It was only about 80 miles, I had no access to a trailer and towing did not seem like a viable option.

Two classmates—one with a baby blue '49 Chevrolet fastback coupe—helped me fetch the Ford. It was January, but there was no snow, and the weather was clear that Saturday morning.

It seemed the shortest route would be to return the way we had come, on the not-very-old Ohio Turnpike. The first leg from the seller's farm to the turnpike was uneventful. The car seemed to live up to its seller's claims of driveability.

But not long after entering the turnpike, the 50-mph pace came to an end with stumbles and misfires. A roadside inspection revealed a clogged fuel-pump screen, but it turned out the gas tank sediment had restricted the fuel line so much we could only go 35 mph. The next exit was a long way off.

Driving on the Ohio Turnpike at 35 mph, even with good weather, light traffic and long sightlines, is a bad idea. Whenever traffic approached from the rear, I would pull off on the paved shoulder and drive there until the traffic passed. But those shoulders disappeared at bridges, so some exposure to traffic was inevitable.

One friend rode shotgun in the coupe, and the '49 Chevy brought up the rear (that car had two taillights compared with only one on the '32). We had remembered to gas up the '32 but overlooked the Chevy, so its driver went to the next service plaza to gas up and wait for us.

Without the Chevy's protection (and in the turnpike's right lane because of an approaching bridge), we were dawdling along, paying less attention to the rearview mirror—traffic was so light. Suddenly, we were thrown back in our seats and briefly thrust forward, accompanied by the sound a big crash.

In the rearview mirror, I saw to my horror a brand-new '55 Chevrolet spouting purple antifreeze like a geyser out of a radiator and grille folded between two cross-eyed front fenders. For an instant, I thought, "What did he hit?" In the next instant, the reality sank in. "You, you jerk!"

I brought the coupe to a halt on the shoulder, and my friend and I, uninjured, leaped out to see if the Chevy's occupants were okay. Their car was totaled. No one in the car had exited, but it was soon apparent that their drunken states had saved them from serious injury. We tried to push the Chevy onto the shoulder, but its injuries precluded that.

I went to assess my car's damage, and my friend began waving down the next passing car. Its driver promised to call the state troopers.

The farmer I'd purchased the car from had installed a four-foot-long piece of angle iron on the coupe's bumper in order to mount a trailer-hitch ball. Between that and Ford's heat-treated bumper and brackets, the only damage I could perceive was a cracked taillight lens.

A trooper arrived and approached us first. His first question after looking briefly at the Chevy's front end was "Where's the car he hit?" I simply pointed to the '32.

He then got the Chevy's occupants' side of the story. We could hear questions such as "How could you not see this old car in broad daylight with no traffic and a sightline of more than a half a mile?"

An ambulance arrived, followed by a tow truck. The ambulance spirited off the '55's occupants, and the tow truck removed the fatally wounded Chevrolet.

After hearing our account and filling out his paperwork, the officer launched into a stern lecture about the wisdom of driving 35 mph on a road with a 70-mph speed limit, no matter the passing lane, how good the weather or how long the sightlines. Because there was no minimum speed limit, that was the extent of the punishment; he also ordered us off the turnpike.

We were free to go. Miracle of miracles, the crash's force had dislodged the sediment partially blocking the fuel line. We were back in business at 50 mph.

After 10 miles, and with five to go to the next service plaza and our rendezvous with the '49 Chevy chase car, there was an almighty explosion under the coupe's hood and a big cloud of ugly black smoke. I headed for the shoulder and came to a halt. We hopped out and saw a big oil slick and a lot of metal debris, which included bits and pieces of the cylinder block, even smaller pieces of a piston and a connecting rod shaped like an upside-down J. A disaster awaited us under the hood.

Sure enough, two large, jagged holes had been created, one on each side of the block. We could see part of the camshaft and crankshaft and daylight from one side to the other. The bent connecting rod told the story. The engine had been rebuilt as advertised, but someone forgot the cotter pin on the castle nut on one side of the bearing cap. The nut worked loose, and the rod

beat the daylights out of the cylinder block in its ultimately successful attempt to escape. My friend suggested we attempt to start the car—he had heard these Ford fours were so tough they would still run on three cylinders, especially since the remaining damage appeared to be confined to the block.

He was right! It started right up, and we limped off at a snail's pace to the service plaza, leaving a trail of oil in our wake.

After buying three or four quarts of oil (the holes in the block were big enough that you could just stick the can into a hole and turn it upside down to add oil; no need to bother with the oil filler tube), we finally made it home on three cylinders.

I had no choice but to level with my parents—a couple of days later, a state trooper stopped by the house to tell me the driver of the '55 Chevrolet was tested for driving under the influence, he'd failed miserably, and he had been cited. The car was a company car. He was in hot water.

My dad did not take satisfaction in having been opposed to my little adventure; instead, he was quite understanding. But my previous ally, my mother, decided the car had to go, and go it did. Within two weeks, it was sold for \$75 and became, I believe, a stock car. That was too bad, as it was fairly decent by the standards of the day (near mint by today's standards).

A month or so later, my mother had cooled off, and I was allowed to find a better car. There was one other condition attached. I was to be accompanied by my older brother. That's another story, but before long, I ended up bringing home a mint '32 V8 Tudor sedan. Because of its pristine condition, it was much more expensive, \$90, and I got to keep it.

I have owned 29 other '32s over the years. They, too, have stories that go with them, especially those I purchased in South America, but none rivals the first one.

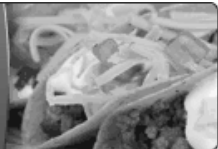
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