

By **KEVIN A. WILSON** *AutoWeek* | Updated: 08/08/07, 12:48 pm et

Forget hot rodding and think about the original '32 flathead Ford. We hopped aboard a 1932 Ford Model 18 four-door sedan for a drive from Albuquerque to Flagstaff, incorporating large sections of historic Route 66. Owner Ron Ferris and navigator Rick Beattie were engaged in the 25th running of the Great American Race, so we couldn't really wrest the wheel away, but more than 400 miles in the back seat was instructive.

The car was roomy and fairly comfortable (except when the live axle encountered severe bumps at speed), and the flathead let the driver tackle varied terrain without a lot of excess shifting among the three gears.

Henry's V8 must have been a revelation to Ford motorists of 1932, or at least those with jobs and the wherewithal for a new car during the Great Depression. With 25 more hp and lots more torque than you got from the Model A four-banger, the first V8 for Everyman can hold its own on modern highways, let alone the more leisurely pace of life along the Mother Road. You can pass slower traffic on the old two-lane without scaring yourself silly, and continuous runs at more than 50 mph must have seriously reduced real-world travel times. You could get a lot more power in '32, but only in high-priced luxury cars (a Chrysler straight-eight made nearly twice as much power, for instance).

Today, you can build a brand-new 1932 Ford without using a single part built before the dawn of the 21st century, but for some insight into what the original was really like, it's worth running down a genuine, 1932-built, Ford-built V8. A lot of these that are still being driven regularly are two- or four-door sedans, since the hot rodders have snapped up most of the coupes and roadsters or bid up the prices on them to push them out of reach for many collectors.

A few collectors are sticklers for authenticity (look for them among the Early Ford V8 Club membership), but 75 years of American problem-solving ingenuity makes a truly original flathead Ford a rare find out on the open road. Who would put up with 75 years of vapor lock, for instance? So, when you set out to find an "original," you're likely to run across a lot of upsized radiators, electric fans, modern fuel pumps, 12-volt electricals, hydraulic brakes, and so on. Ferris' car has a few of these improvements, though the drivetrain and suspension remain essentially as designed.

And any old Ford, even an authentically restored one, is likely to resemble grandfather's ax. When it comes time to replace the engine, for instance, simply substituting a flathead from a '36 will gain you 20 hp over the original. The wheels (18-inchers, dub fans!) can be fit with proper-looking tires that have modern radial construction and rubber compounds, and the options for axle ratios, overdrives and other accouterments are innumerable.

So, even without going the hot-rod route, a '32 Ford remains a fine collectible car that you can drive on tours and enjoy without a lot of getting out and getting under. Even if your ambitions don't extend to 4000-mile coast-to-coast competition.

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⊕ ZOOM

On The Mother Road  
In a '32

Flat-out in a  
flathead

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