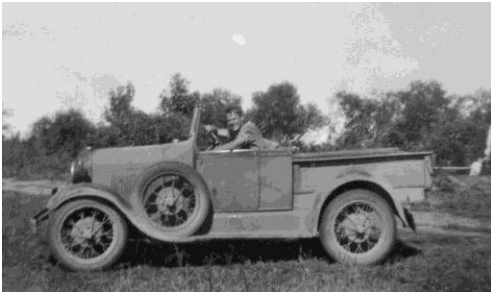


Luther Senior's Vehicles



When I was a kid, my father was a died-in-the-wool Ford man. By the time I was ten, I was afraid to even touch a Chevrolet for fear that it would fall apart and I'd have to pay for the damages. Dad had convinced me that Chevys were delicate creations made of tinfoil and totally incapable of standing up to the rigors of modern driving. Fords, on the other hand, were built like tanks and could take any amount of

punishment an uncaring motorist might deliver. However, notwithstanding that claim, I noted that Dad spent a great deal of time under the hood keeping his Fords going, as did the owners of most Chevrolets.

Dad probably acquired his Ford bias because his dad Henry and uncle Johnny had a big fleet of Ford dump trucks to run their gravel business in Nebraska. Dad grew up driving these dump trucks. Also, his dad Henry always had a fairly new Ford car. When I was just a baby, my folks drove a Model A Ford and Henry was so concerned about my safety he gave my mom a new Mercury coupe. The Model A was a great car but it lacked certain modern safety features such as hydraulic brakes. Also, Henry knew that both Dad and Mom had a tendency to drive with the "pedal to the metal."



We had friends and family members who drove Chevys, but Dad was always at his diplomatic best when talking about cars with these people. He would listen carefully and thoughtfully as they described the virtues of their Chevrolets and never disagreed or defended his beloved Fords. Dad simply assumed that they were too dumb to know anything about cars, so it would be a waste of his time to respond to their comments. Instead, he was

content to bide his time and hope that the conversation would soon move on to less important matters such as the impending nuclear war with Russia.

Dad always loved to work on cars. It was almost as though he relished failures of any sort, as they provided an excuse for him to get out his tool box and go to work. But even when these failures revealed flaws in the design or quality of a Ford, Dad would quickly point out how the superior design of Fords made it much easier to effect repairs. This was an especially difficult thing to do right after WWII. Auto production was just starting to revamp and auto parts were hard to come by. I remember once we were driving through Sioux City, Iowa, and the fuel pump in our Ford quit working. Dad parked on the side of the road and tried to see if anything could be done to fix it, but to no avail. Then a guy parked in front of us and asked what our problem was. When dad explained about the



fuel pump, the guy opened the trunk of his car and exposed many boxes full of automobile spare parts, including the fuel pump we needed. I don't know what Dad paid for it but I'll bet it was a lot more than it would have cost in an auto parts store. The guy with the parts was a black marketer and his trade was illegal, but who

was going to complain?

Over the years, with a few diversions into weirdness, such as when he bought a couple of Kaisers, Dad stuck with Fords through thick and thin. And there was a great deal of thin. I was always amazed at how tolerant Dad was of the various flaws in his Fords. It mattered little to him that these cars, like all other cars on the road at that time, were far from perfect. What mattered most was the nameplate. If it was a Ford, it automatically qualified for automotive sainthood. In fact, unlike wine, there were no bad Ford years.



My earliest remembrances were of driving around in the Mercury coupe that Henry gave to my parents. I can also remember driving around in Model A Fords as many of our relatives were still driving those. I don't know why coupes were so popular back then; maybe they were cheaper than four-door cars.



Henry was very taken with his grandson (me) and took every opportunity to join his son and daughter-in-law, and her parents for dinner. Mom's mother, Orpha, was probably the best cooker of fried chicken in Nebraska and Grandpa Henry loved fried chicken. However, his diet of fried chicken, bourbon and cigarettes eventually got to him and he died of a heart attack at age 55. But back then, it was not all that unusual to die that young.

Dad's flirtation with Kaisers was probably just an effort to demonstrate that he was not hidebound and that he was a man of the future, as all Kaiser owners thought of themselves. The Kaiser and its cousin, the Frazer, were both ill-designed autos with very elegant-looking bodies. If you cared only about looks, these were cars you could love. Mechanically, however, they left a great deal to be desired.

Dad's first Kaiser was a 1947 model, purchased brand new. It looked a lot like the Packard of that era in that it resembled an upside-down bath tub. However, it was regarded as a sort of luxury car in that it had a very spacious and comfortable interior. During its model run, it came in a number of varieties including a camper version that had a tent that could be fitted to the rear end. There was also a convertible and one of the first hardtops (<http://oldcarandtruckpictures.com/Kaiser/>).



This was the car we owned when we began our life as travel trailer dwellers. Dad bought the car when we moved to Portland, Oregon, for a year and then when we left we drove it down to Arcadia, California, to take delivery of a new, 30' Kit travel trailer. The Kaiser towed the trailer back to Nebraska and then later out to Denver, Colorado. All that while it seemed to have sufficient power to tow the trailer, even though its six-cylinder Continental engine wasn't exactly a powerhouse. The advantage back then was that all cars had manual transmissions, so with skillful shifting you could make even the smallest motor seem adequate—and Dad was probably one of the best heavy-haul drivers around.

In Denver Dad sold the Kaiser and temporarily replaced it with an old 1935 Ford coupe. It was not a pretty looking car when he brought it home and I'm sure my mom thought it was quite a letdown compared to the comfy Kaiser; however, it had one shining virtue. In the extremely cold Denver winters, the old Ford was often the only car in our trailer park that was willing to start in the morning. As a result, this became a minor industry for Dad as he would spend his mornings before going to work driving around the park and giving everyone a jump start.



When it was time to leave Denver, we obviously needed a much more powerful vehicle if we were going to bring our travel trailer with us. To provide the needed strength dad bought a used 1948 Ford F2 3/4 ton pickup. The truck was equipped with a flat-head V8 and a "square" four-speed transmission. The F1 model back then sported a conventional three-speed transmission with synchromesh gears, but the F2, probably in recognition of its "heavy duty" status, shunned the synchromesh gears and thus required a shifting technique known as "double clutching." To shift either

upwards or downwards required two perfectly timed depressions of the clutch, once to take it out of gear, and another time to move it into the desired gear. This was the vehicle in which I learned how to drive, starting at age ten.

I can remember when we were crossing the desert going from Nebraska to San Diego, California and we came across a stalled Buick parked alongside the road. As was the custom back then, Dad stopped to see if he could help, thinking that perhaps his automotive repair expertise could be put to use. When he looked under the Buick's hood and saw a mass of hoses and wires, things not be found on basic Fords, he suggested giving the folks a push to the next filling station. I don't know how far we pushed them, but it was a fair distance, all the time towing our 30' travel trailer. Much to its credit, the Ford did not overheat in the slightest.



While in San Diego, Dad would take me up to an old abandoned Army base in LaJolla to learn how to drive the pickup. All that was left of the old base were the roads and concrete pads for the buildings, so I could drive for hours without ever seeing another car. Much later that piece of real estate became the now famous Torrey Pines Golf Course. When we left San Diego and returned, once more, to Nebraska, Dad went to work for his uncle Johnny as a gravel prospector. In that role he needed to drive around the county taking core samples on people's farms looking for gravel deposits. Since he needed to pay attention to geological maps of the area, I did most of the driving. Sometimes that led to weird situations when he would direct me to make an immediate turn onto a farmer's property when there was no road on which to travel. At the time, I was twelve years old.

We stuck with the Ford pickup until we made our last move with the travel trailer to Anaheim, California, in 1953. At that time Dad must have been thinking about his old Kaiser and how sexy the newer models looked. He sold the old pickup that had served us so well and bought a used 1952 Kaiser. I'd like to report that this car was just as good as the old 1947 model but it wasn't. I thought it was a total lemon, but Dad would never concede to that.



I can still remember our family coming out of church and Dad in his best suit having to spend fifteen minutes under the hood getting the car's shifter to work while the rest of us tried to pretend that this was a very unusual occurrence. The fact that it occurred almost every Sunday, as well as every other day the car was

driven anywhere, didn't seem to bother my father in the slightest. Problems such as that were just minor irritations for a dedicated Kaiser owner.

An example of the car's poor construction was the fact that every time I tried to roll a window up or down, the crank handle would fall off and the little pin that held it all together would usually be lost for days somewhere down on the floorboard. After one particularly exasperating experience at trying to reinstall one of the crank handles, I lost my temper and said some very nasty things about Kaisers. Specifically, I informed my dad that none of my friends' families had cars that suffered from this problem. Dad was deeply hurt and informed me in his most soothing tones that no car ever manufactured was of greater quality than the Kaiser. He was still saying that after the car suffered its second blown engine.

This second, much snazzier Kaiser served us as the "family car." Mom drove it to her job while dad drove a series of very used Fords. One of his first used Fords was an old 1947 hand-painted Ford that ran on seven cylinders. Rather than repair the engine, he just put a plug in the bad cylinder and kept on going. His work cars were all revamped in the same manner. He would tear out the back seats and put in a platform to hold all his tools. Most of the time during that period he worked as a carpenter and, back then, carpenters always provided their own tools (union regulations to the contrary notwithstanding).

With most of Dad's work cars, there was really no need for insurance of any kind. The cars had little value so there was no need for that sort of insurance. As for liability, when Dad entered an intersection with one of his old hacks, everyone would get out of his way. With his dark suntan and ever-present sunglasses, he looked very much like an uninsured, undocumented type, and the condition of his car only validated that impression.

In 1956 we still had the Kaiser but the purchase of a beautiful 1951 Ford Victoria



automatically relegated the Kaiser to secondary status. It was so secondary that it became my main set of wheels when I got my learner's permit. I quickly became very adept at unsticking the gear shift. I also got a little uppity, thinking I was actually in control of the car, and put a "no smoking" sign on the dash. When Dad saw that he just ripped it off and gave me a very mean look. It hadn't occurred to me, I guess, that setting policy for a car I didn't own was inappropriate. However, that episode was what made me realize that I needed a car of my own if I intended to have

control over it, but that will be material for another episode in this series.



Long after I left home to join the Navy, the Kaiser and the Ford Victoria left our family fleet and were replaced with a 1960 Ford Falcon. The Falcon was Ford's entry in the small car market and its primary feature was total weakness in all areas. Its two speed automatic was completely inadequate for hill climbing and its tiny brakes were completely inadequate for descending from hills. If you polished it more than once, most of its paint would rub off. However, it was easy to drive and had an appealing quality that was hard to explain. In fact, when I was in the Navy I truly lusted to own one of these cars. Every time I saw one I'd stop and study the details. Basically, I thought it was the neatest car I'd ever seen, but then I was always partial to small cars.

While the Falcon era was going on, Dad owned more junker Fords for work cars and then eventually a half-decent 1957 Ford pickup truck—used, of course. I drove this truck a couple times when home on leave from the Navy and, as I recall, it was a pretty decent rig. However, it did have one serious shortcoming. It had a bench seat that was covered with one of those nylon mesh seat covers that made it very slippery. That being well before the advent of seat belts as standard equipment, one day I found myself sliding across the seat trying very hard to hang onto the steering when I took a corner a little too tight. Disaster was avoided but only barely.



Later during the sixties, perhaps in the permissive spirit of that decade, Dad had one more deviant fling by purchasing several American Motors cars. The first one, a tubby little station wagon called a “Rambler,” was actually a pretty good car, at least compared with the Kaisers and the Ford Falcon. Dad used the Rambler for both a work car and a weekend boon dock vehicle. He loved to go prospecting in the desert and there was no place he was afraid to take this car. I went with him several times and got to experience his “techniques” for desert off-road driving. The first step upon leaving the highway was to stop and let a lot of air out of the tires. When they got down to about five pounds of pressure he was ready to hit the sand. Surprisingly, this car had amazing capabilities. There was nothing Dad liked more than coming across a big 4 X 4 vehicle, stuck up to its hubs in the sand, and offering his assistance. The look on the faces of these folks was priceless.

The Rambler didn't end his non-Ford experiments. Next he bought a used 1959 Studebaker. It had a big powerful V8 engine and every possible convenience and power feature. It was one of those cars that could cruise at 80 with virtually no engine noise.

However, Dad was never into creature comforts so there were no more cars like that, except that in his last vehicle he did acquiesce to air conditioning.

The Studebaker performed admirably; however, it didn't do very well when it developed an oil leak which my brother failed to notice. After most of the oil leaked out, the engine seized. Dad had it repaired but after that seemed to lose his enthusiasm for the car. I just remember it was one of the first really cushy cars that I had ever driven.



In 1970 Dad bought a brand new AMC Hornet. This particular Hornet was a two-door, stripped-down, six-cylinder car that lacked virtually all known modern conveniences including such things as electric window wipers, disk brakes and power steering. I borrowed the car one day and almost crashed it, not remembering that manual steering required about twenty turns of the

wheel to negotiate the average corner. Of course, you could buy a Hornet with all the goodies like power steering, AC, etc., but Dad was in his minimalist mode and wanted the cheapest possible version of the car. Later when I was employed by the City of Los Angeles, we had a bunch of AMC Gremlins in our motor pool and they were equipped exactly like Dad's Hornet. They were universally regarded as death traps.

The next move was to purchase a good pickup, as an addition to the Hornet. This time it would be a six-cylinder 1974 Ford F100 pickup. I don't think I ever drove this machine, but it must have been half decent. At some point my brother bought it and probably kept it for a number of years. This was the first pickup where Dad had a roof-mounted boat. When he sold the pickup, he kept the boat and mounted it on top of the next pickup.



Dad's last vehicle was a new 1978 Ford pickup truck. This was to be his retirement, truck "forever" and it fulfilled its destiny. Throughout his life, Dad often had a difficult time making coherent automotive choices. He was always torn between major objectives

and as a result sometimes made compromise decisions that nobody could understand. This truck was an example. Dad special ordered an extended cab, half-ton pickup with a six-cylinder engine. It was probably the only such truck in existence, given that in the late seventies, partly due to the smog device problems, nobody ordered a big pickup with anything less than a V-8 engine. But Dad was convinced that the six would be more than



adequate for power and would provide much better fuel economy than a V-8. Wrong! The six, after undergoing two total overhauls in the first year of ownership, proved to be a potent consumer of gas, especially when pulling the small travel trailer for which the truck was purchased. The end result was a grossly under-powered gas hog.

In fairness to Dad, the vehicle industry had messed up their engines so bad in the late seventies that a big six no longer had much torque or horsepower. In the previous decade that was not the case. Chevy went for many years selling pickups that had engines the same size as the one in the Ford, and they had plenty of power.

I borrowed this pickup several times when we had something big to haul and learned the hard way about its lack of power. Freeway onramps were particularly scary with this truck. If you were lucky you could get it up to 45 mph before entering the freeway, assuming a very long on-ramp. Aside from its engine problems, it also had a number of assembly problems. One time after we drove it out to the desert on a camping trip, I noticed that the steering was getting awfully sloppy. When we arrived we popped the hood and immediately spotted the problem. There was a linkage on the steering shaft that was about to come apart. Had it done so on the road we would have been unable to steer the truck.

When Dad died it fell to me to sell his beloved Ford pickup. I consulted various sources and basically determined that we would be very lucky to get three grand for it, even though it was in excellent condition. My mom thought that price to be way too low, but I was in no mood to go through successive advertisements trying to find the ideal price. I put an ad in the Santa Ana Register for three grand, and after a few days I got one phone call. The guy came to our house, took a test drive, and offered \$2,800. I took his offer and never got another phone call. So in all of Orange County with its several million citizens, there was only one guy who wanted this truck. I hope he had good luck with it.