

Car of the Month

1953 Oldsmobile Super 88 Sedan

By Steve White

Editor's Note: Steve wrote a fascinating article on his 1953 Olds. Unfortunately, the full content exceeded the available space in the Clutch Chatter. Presented is the abridged edition, but I encourage everyone to read the full article on the Region's website. Great job Steve! Sorry I could not include it all.

I was in my teens and very proud of my hopped-up 51 Studebaker V8. With me behind the wheel, the car and I enjoyed a reputation for winning street races in the small California town of Vallejo in the 1950s. One Saturday night at Eat and Run, a handsome dark stranger arrived on the scene. It was a black 1953 Oldsmobile Super 88 two-door sedan with a three-on-the-tree transmission.

Like two dogs circling and growling, the Studebaker and the Olds revved their engines, the expressions on the two drivers' faces left no doubt; there would be a race. The two cars roared off in a cloud of smoke and burning rubber fighting to be first to the ¼-mile mark. The Olds reached the finish line first and I vowed "Someday I would have a car just as good."

In 2004, I had just retired from 15 years of SCCA racing and was about to embark on my second childhood by returning to the cars of the 50s. My long-delayed dream was about to play out with the help of *Hemmings Motor News*. I started from the beginning and worked my way to the "O's". And there it was, a 1953 Oldsmobile Super 88 2-door sedan with factory 3-speed.

It was like the car that humiliated me almost fifty years before. In 1949, Olds had set the stage for the forthcoming horsepower race with its new "Rocket" V8 engine and, along with Hudson, was dominating NASCAR and AAA stock car racing. Better yet, Hershel McGriff had placed first overall in the inaugural 1950 Mexican Road Race in a new 88, the race that most inspired me as a kid.

The Olds was bought new in Chicago by then-73-year-old Diana Sovereign. The car remained in her family for three generations (all women) until bought by a broker in Oregon in 2002. The arid Oklahoma climate had been kind to the car, which was always garaged and had accumulated only 58,000 miles. It had a very sound foundation. The car was yellow (with black top) and looked good from 20 feet. But a close-up revealed dozens of tiny touch-up paint dabs. And there were some waves in the body. Luckily, there were no apparent signs of dreaded rust. And the car ran well.

The work actually began in my garage in Falls Church. I removed all the chrome bright work to have it re-plated. Then I removed the engine and transmission. My plan was to do the mechanical work myself, including a complete rebuild of the engine. After more disassembly, the car was soda blasted inside and out. This led to even more disassembly, including all the glass and

everything from the bulkhead – wires, pedals, steering gear, and all. This would be a total restoration.

In the nude, the car revealed a few more flaws, including a little rust at a body mount in the trunk and at the bottom of the left rear fender. And the left front fender had been hit and not properly straightened. This latter problem required some tedious cutting and grafting to achieve the proper contour around the wheel opening.

Eventually, the car was ready for the paint booth. The car was painted in the original Olds colors of Lotus Cream (yellow) with black top using PPG clear coat/base coat. The dash components and garnish moldings were painted in original gray. The wheels were powder-coated in their original red and painted gray on the back sides.

Working on the engine at home, I discovered a deep valve seat crack in the left cylinder head. A replacement was found in Ohio. All the disassembled components were sent to a friend's son who did the machine work, including boring to 0.030" over and turning the crank journals to 0.010" under. I completed the reassembly of the engine and painted it the proper Olds engine green.

Timing couldn't have been better. The engine was ready just about when the car emerged from the paint booth. Reassembly proceeded quickly and was finished in January, 2008. Then it was off to Joe's Upholstery in Frederick, Maryland, for a complete new gray interior, which matched the original.

A friend suggested it would be a good idea to put it in an AACA show to get a First Junior? Fortunately, there was a Spring Meet at nearby Cumberland, Maryland, scheduled just a few weeks away. So, I was okay with that, but did plan to drive the car - someday.

When we got the First Junior, I was quickly informed of the Senior, which could be earned at Hershey in the fall. So, once again I delayed my plans. Since earning the Senior, the Olds has picked up its Grand National and Grand National Senior awards. And it has competed well in Oldsmobile Club shows and other events.

In May, 2014, Judy and I took the car on a rainy AACA tour at Tappahannock, Virginia, finally freeing it from its sheltered existence. Now, the journey continues.



