

Note: A highly condensed version of Jon Battle's amusing account of life with his Terraplane appeared in the September, 2015, Clutch Chatter. As funny as the newsletter version is, I believe you will find the unabridged version to be absolutely hilarious. So, here it is – The Full Monty! Steve White

My 1937 Terraplane by Jon Battle

By the age of four I was a confirmed old-car nut.

The car that led me down this road to perdition was a derelict 1935 Ford coupe owned by my mother, and by 1950 it had aged badly. Mom despised it. To me it was the coolest thing on wheels. The pontoon fenders, running boards, bullet-shaped headlights, floor-mounted gearshift, trunk-mounted spare - all appealed to me. As to the baling wire holding the doors shut, the stuffing coming out of the seats and the smell of decaying rubber - they only added to the appeal. It was *my* car. Mom only thought it was hers.

Then one evening in 1951 my parents laid the news on me: they had sold the Ford and bought a new Chrysler. "You SOLD the FORD?", I gasped incredulously. What followed was a meltdown of epic proportions. Floods of tears, rolling on the floor, pounding of fists, gnashing of teeth and rending of garments. A truly inspiring performance. (Did I mention that we were having dinner at the home of some friends at the time? Deep mortification and embarrassment for The Folks!) Needless to say, the tantrum didn't win my car back.

The Ford was gone, but the seed was planted, and the illness only grew. Fast-forward to 1964, and my first automotive purchase. It shouldn't be a mystery, then, that I chose not a Mustang or a nice '56 Chevy, but a streamlined, blue-green 1939 DeSoto sedan. Maybe it wasn't a '35 Ford, but it sure was of the correct era.

The DeSoto served me well for two years, but young men become restless. A '48 Studebaker Champion convertible was my next purchase, a car that looked like a refugee from the junkyard. A '50 Champion coupe was next: that actually was a junkyard rescue! Then it was late 1969, I was turning 23, and I really needed something modern, every-day dependable, and "grown-up". So I bid adieu to elderly, cantankerous cars and dutifully bought a Volvo 122S station wagon. (Yawn.)

The separation proved temporary, and in a few months The Hankering returned. Now that I had a dependable modern car for everyday use, I reasoned, I could afford to get something really old and impractical, like a 'thirties car - and maybe (even more impractically) a ragtop. I began to study the pages of Hemmings Motor News intently every month.

A number of possibilities presented themselves, but I began to observe an interesting phenomenon: with the exception of certain high-dollar brands like Packard, the more popular and common the car was, the higher the asking price. Fords and Chevy convertibles from the mid-thirties commanded top dollar, even if they were only rusting hulks. I wasn't making much money at the time so if I were to afford a 'thirties convertible, it would have to be an oddball that no one wanted.

Then, a revelation: the June, 1971 Hemmings advertised a 1937 Terraplane convertible. "Needs paint, canvas and usual cosmetic work. \$1,500."

Terraplane! The very name conjured visions of Hollywood stars motoring to swank garden parties in streamlined, art deco roadsters. With a name like that, maybe it even had a propeller and wings! When the seller sent me photos, however, my bubble burst. This car definitely needed way more than the "usual

cosmetic work." And frankly, the styling was more than a bit bizarre, with lines that curved out where they should have curved in, and weenie little rear wheel openings. And that grille!: strangely reminiscent of a praying mantis. What had the designer been smoking?

Still, I was intrigued. The car appeared straight and was mostly complete. And I've always had a soft spot in my heart for unwanted, stray mongrel dogs. Plus, I'm always up for a challenge. Research revealed that the Terraplane - an inexpensive Hudson, in case you didn't know - had gained a reputation for speed and endurance during its 7-year lifespan in the 1930's. This particular car had been exported, when new, to Denmark, and it had several unusual features not found on domestic models, including a speedometer that went to 200. Kilometers per hour, that is.

This car was a "Super Terraplane" and had a bit more pizzaz than the regular cheap-o Terraplane. It had little winged chrome thingies on the front fenders, and *two* taillights. And vent windows that not only cranked open and closed, but then cranked right down into the door. An automatic choke. And a two-barrel carb that boosted horsepower to a staggering 101. The car was a convertible coupe, with no back seat. Hudson had proudly touted the end of the old-fashioned rumbleseat in their 1937 convertible coupes, but hadn't provided a replacement for it - just an enormous storage space behind the front seat. If you threw some pillows in the back, you could accommodate another three or four people in unbelievable comfort.

The seller made his living by purchasing old American cars in Europe - mostly Ford Model A's - and shipping them back to the States. Considering that the price included boat fare from Copenhagen, \$1,500 wasn't unreasonable. It's just that...well...I didn't actually *have* \$1,500. So I offered \$500. The reply came back - and I paraphrase - "don't call us, we'll call you". I shrugged and continued shopping elsewhere.

Several months went by. Then, in early August, surprise! The seller of the Terraplane had accepted my \$500 offer! Turns out that the only other guy genuinely interested in the convertible only wanted it as a parts car for the restoration of his '37 coupe. Go figure. Oh, by the way: I didn't actually *have* the \$500 I'd offered for the car. (Thanks again for that loan, Dad!) I was 24 years old and about to embark on my dream car adventure.

After its recent freighter voyage from Denmark, the Terraplane had come to rest in New Hampshire. I lived in Connecticut, so I decided to "stiff hitch" it home behind my miniscule Volvo 122S wagon. Bad decision! A 1966 Volvo wagon weighs in at 2,403 pounds. A 1937 Terraplane convertible weighs 2,920. A rowboat towed The Queen Mary that day. The Volvo would turn a corner, and the trailing Terraplane would continue going straight. Accelerating and stopping were also adventures in terror. After a day's worth of harrowing moments, the '66 miraculously completed the trip with the '37 still attached.

Once home, I embarked on my meager, cut-rate restoration. Fortuitously, I found an old Hudson mechanic by the name of "Jiffy" LaTulipe who agreed to rebuild the engine for \$344.58. While he labored away I scouted out parts, filled rust holes, primed the car and applied a wretched coat of green paint, which came out of the gun almost dry. This gave the car a unique but not particularly pleasing matte finish. I re-did the brake system, patched up the frayed cloth wiring, and prepared to deal with the canvas top, which was in shreds.

Ready-made 1937 Terraplane tops were not then (nor are they now) available at J.C. Whitney. So, equipped with a printed handout from Stitt's antique auto top company in New Jersey - which explained how to re-top a 1920's touring car - I went to work. Using bits and pieces of the old top as patterns I would cut new pieces from a roll of new canvas top material. Then I'd pin two or three

pieces together, take them to a guy who made canvas boat tops, and he'd sew them up into a section. Back home I'd go, fit the newly-sewn section to the car, pin on a couple more canvas pieces, and head back to the sewing guy. Somehow I eventually got the top made and tacked into place. I then reupholstered the door panels using some new pseudo-leather vinyl used on Ford Torinos. Next, I masked off all the chrome and painted it white, with a Krylon spray can. (Much more thrifty than chrome plating, wouldn't you agree?)

Finally the car was done (or as far done as my time and miniscule budget would allow). It was June of 1973 — 22 months since I'd started my "restoration". The Terraplane's Maiden Voyage would be a 6-hour trip to my family's annual reunion in the Adirondacks. I triumphantly lowered the top and set forth on my first Terraplane excursion. The weather was threatening. Sunny skies alternated with heavy downpours and flooding, for the entire journey. The rain would fall two miles ahead of me, then three miles to my left, but never actually on me. Not once did I have to raise the top. And I encountered only one mechanical problem that day: a broken fanbelt, which I cheerfully replaced with one from a Maytag washer. (Did I mention that I was on a budget?) It was an auspicious beginning to what would be a long and mostly happy relationship with my Terraplane.

At this point the story usually takes a turn for the worst: "However, marriage and a growing family intervened, and like a fool I traded my Terraplane for a mini-van. On sleepless nights I often think of it with great fondness..."

But that's not how things worked out.

In fact I still own my '37, having driven it 60,000 miles over 44 years of ownership, to places as far afield as Detroit and Nashville. Real chrome plating, a decent paint job, and even radial tires have improved things wonderfully, though the car is and always will be a 20-footer. And that home-made canvas top? Still there (though a bit ragged), except for the part that blew off during a memorable trip to the Midwest and was replaced in vinyl by a friendly auto top guy in Garrett, Indiana. That was 8 years ago and I think the patch looks perfectly acceptable. Don't you? (Why are you looking at me that way?)

I think you'd agree that I've gotten my \$500 worth out of the '37 Terraplane. And my parents aren't going to sell it out from under me this time. So I won't have to throw any more tantrums.

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