

How I Misspent My Youth in a Studebaker

By Steve White

I finally had enough money for the down payment on a car of my very own. Until then I used one of Dad's cars, usually his 41 DeSoto or 47 Lincoln Zephyr. But now I was interested in a newer car, one with an overhead valve V8. A 49 or 50 Oldsmobile 88 was what I had in mind. It was 1954 and I was 17.

A year earlier, I strutted into the Vallejo, California, DMV office pursuing every boy's rite of passage – his license to drive. But there was foreboding as the notorious woman examiner looked daggers at me and marked an X opposite each of my answers. Or so it seemed. I just knew I had failed and was ready to walk out when she snarled, "You missed four questions, which is really bad, but have your car out back in five minutes for your in-car test." The rest was easy and I was now a licensed driver. The year that followed was a wonder of freedom, but in time I felt something was missing. Dad's cars were neither cool nor fast.

Dad offered to help me find a car, even one with a V8 engine. But when I told him I wanted an Oldsmobile, he resisted. Despite the fact that he was the service manager at a Chevrolet dealer, he didn't like GM cars and disparaged my preference. So, we looked at used car lots all over the East Bay area for an alternative, but one with performance potential. And then we finally spotted it at a lot in El Cerrito: A powder blue 1951 Studebaker Commander Club Coupe, with V8 power and a three-on-the-tree standard transmission. Trouble was on the way!

It wasn't long before I had racked up a series of speeding tickets and was called before the local licensing review board. "Is there any reason we shouldn't revoke your driving privilege?" Always quick-witted, I answered, "If you do that I couldn't see my girlfriend." My compelling argument certainly overwhelmed them as they relented and allowed me to keep my license, though on probation for a year.

By then, my blue car had become notorious with the local police, who, I just knew, were out to get me. Extreme countermeasures were indicated. Fortunately, Dad had a painter in his shop who offered to disguise my car with black paint for a reasonable price. While he was at it, he removed the infamous "Bullet Nose" and neatly filled in the resulting space with a nice smooth custom-made replacement. He also leaded in everything on the trunk lid. And I took the hood to the local louver-cutting shop for the piece de resistance of my car's makeover. Now it was time to consider some performance enhancements.

The fine little V8 displaced but 232 cubic inches and produced only 120 horsepower. I needed a **little engine that could** and this one just couldn't. But it had potential. I didn't have the money to go deep inside the engine, so I did what I could within my meager means. In the end, I replaced the rockers with high-lift magnesium ones I got from a place in Marysville that manufactured Studebaker performance parts. Then I visited the legendary Lee's Speed Shop in Oakland for a four-barrel manifold/carburetor setup to replace standard two-barrel arrangement. A high-performance ignition and dual exhausts with Smitty mufflers completed the engine work. The reader may ask why I was doing this in the face of my probation. Well, it's a good question.

After that encounter with the law, I took my probation seriously and did **most** of my racing at drag strips. Yet, even with the mods, I could never top 78 mph in 18 seconds in the quarter. My dreams of a championship were dashed. Fortunately, the street competition was less daunting. One of the more interesting street races occurred when the Hell's Angels made a pilgrimage to Vallejo to stir up trouble over a summer weekend. The town went wild when the cyclists began racing down the city's main drag. Finally, it was my turn - Studebaker versus Harley. It was bound to happen. The police chased us down and arrested the Hell's Angel bike rider and pulled me over for a \$5 ticket. I breathed a sigh of relief when I realized a year had gone by since my probation period had started.

I fared pretty well against the local kids, good enough in fact to be invited to join the North Bay Rodsters hot rod club. But it wasn't long before I met my match. One night, some "rich" kids from Napa showed up at Eat and Run, an infamous local hangout. That's where challenges were made and that's what they came for. They brought with them a 1953 Olds Super 88 two-door sedan with manual tranny. We revved our engines, which had but one meaning. So, off we went to the local illegal drag strip with lots of other kids following. Not much more needs to be said except that the outcome of our race is what impelled me many years later to buy a car just like the one that blew my doors off.

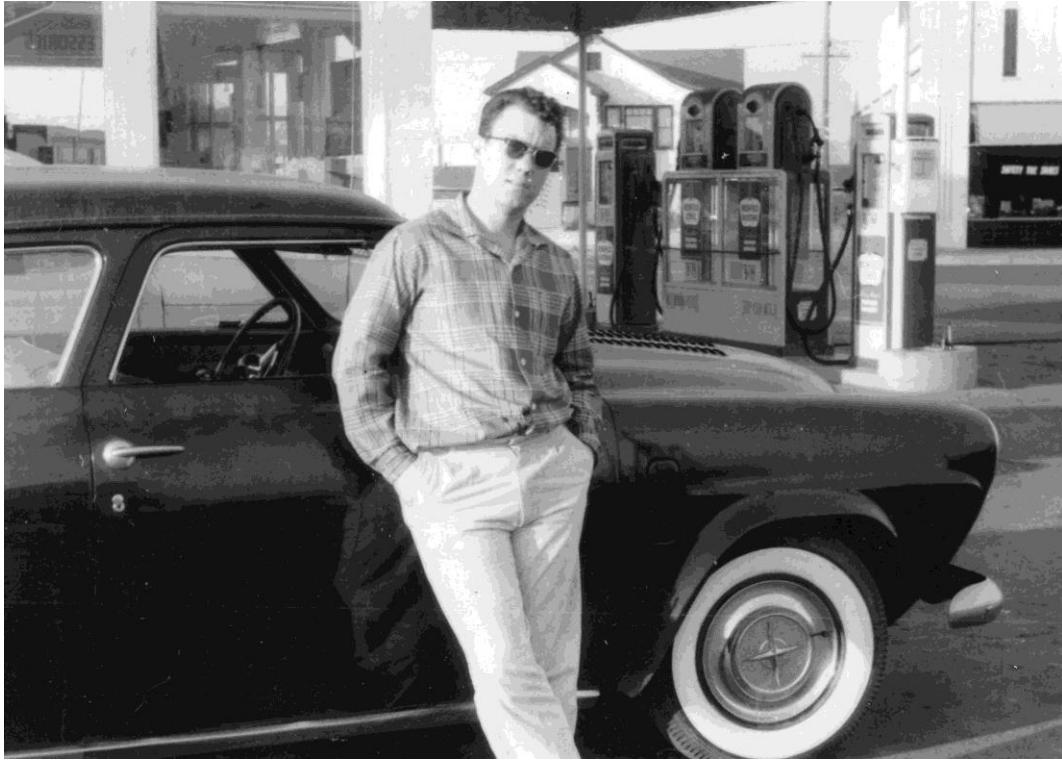
I confess to a life-long soft-spot for Studebakers. During a couple of summers, I worked for the local Studebaker dealer, Mesick Motors, and maintained friendships there long afterward. Around 1957, I heard that Mr. Mesick told a gathering of his employees that they would be adding a new line of cars to the dealership. That line would be the new Edsel from Ford. Mr. Mesick had a way of picking them.

And when my 51 finally succumbed to years of hard driving, I sold it and bought a new 57 Studebaker Commander two-door sedan with manual transmission from the owner of the local Lincoln-Mercury dealer, who had won the car in a raffle.

I often daydream about what I would like to add to my small stable of 50s cars. High on the list is a 56 Golden Hawk. That's the one year when Studebaker stuffed the big Packard V8 into their lightweight Hawk body to create a stunning performer. Of course, I would hold out for a manual three-speed.



The author daydreams about adding a 1956 Studebaker Golden Hawk like this one to his stable of 50s cars. Paul Delaney is the owner of this pristine example and provided the photo.



The author stands proudly beside his blue 1951 Studebaker cleverly disguised in black, circa 1956. Look closely for the hood louvers. Any guess on the car make and model of the wheel covers?