

My Love Affair With Dad's Cars

By Steve White

Dad honed his skills as a young mechanic-machinist in the late 1920s and early 30s at an upscale garage in the wealthy enclave of Piedmont, a suburb of Oakland, California. When I was young, he regaled me with stories of the cars he worked on there, including Packards, Cadillacs, Pierce-Arrows, and Duesenbergs. But his favorite was the Wills St. Claire, an obscure brand of very fine cars, two of which he actually came to own during the Great Depression when the value of everything plummeted. This was to be the beginning of Dad's own love affair with cars, a lust that would have far-reaching consequences for his son.

The first of Dad's cars that I actually remember was his 1933 Terraplane 8 Roadster. I was just three when I found the keys to that car and with great difficulty got the starter motor turning. The sound was enough to get Dad's immediate attention, which earned me a painful lesson. That was long before a spanking was a criminal offense.

In 1940, Dad traded the Terraplane for a car that would see the family through WWII and the early years of the Cold War. It was a 1934 Chrysler Airflow CV Imperial Coupe. One can see that Dad's appreciation of the unusual was standing the test of time.

Immediately following Pearl Harbor, our family of four (Dad, Mom, my sister, Nancy, and me) moved from the peaceful valley town of Modesto to the bustling navy town of Vallejo, where Dad joined the workforce at Mare Island Naval Shipyard to help build the Arsenal of Democracy. Early on, he made friends with a fellow machinist who owned a nearly identical Airflow, his being a slightly smaller CU coupe. Aside from their contrasting colors - The CV was black and the CU was gray or tan - the two cars were hard to tell apart. Both types are extremely rare

today. As best I know, there are but three CV coupes extant, which is not hard to believe as there were far fewer than 1000 made.

Dad's CV coupe was powered by an L-head straight-eight engine displacing 323 cubic inches and developing 122 horsepower. Power was sent to the differential via a 3-speed manual transmission and automatic overdrive. As Chrysler had ordained since 1924, the drum brakes were hydraulic, but now were internally expanding and power assisted.

Of course, we know now that the Airflow's streamlined styling was nothing if not controversial. And the 1934 models with their unusual waterfall grilles proved a hard sell, which led to changes in subsequent years. If nothing else, the Airflow proved that the car-buying public is suspicious of radical change.

The spirited performance of the CV coupe was proven when famous race driver, Harry Hartz, drove one at the Bonneville Salt Flats for 24 hours at an average speed of 84 MPH. The last 12 hours were run at an average of over 86 mph. Later, Hartz would hit 95.7 in the flying mile. Controversial or not, such speed would not have been possible with the prevailing boxy bodies of that era.

Some years after my ill-fated experience with the Terraplane, I continued my self-taught driver training in the Airflow, the car I had learned to love. And thus I was devastated when, one Saturday in 1949, Dad left the house for most of the day and returned with a car he traded even up for. It was a pathetic ratty looking thing with peeling paint, convertible top in tatters, bad tires, and rust here and there. But I soon grew to love that car as well. It was a 1930 Duesenberg Model J Convertible Sedan, a car I would complete my driver training in.

About the same time he owned the Duesenberg, Dad also had a 1933 Packard Super 8 sedan, a 1928 Franklin four door, a 1936 Buick business coupe, and a 1941 DeSoto sedan. I passed my first driver's test in the DeSoto. Life was good!

But once again my love life took a hit when Dad sold the Duesenberg, which by then was nicely refurbished. My pain was eased a bit by the interesting car he took in trade, a 1937 Packard V12 sedan. I'm very fortunate to have been able to drive all of Dad's cars of that era, even if without permission or benefit of license.

After all those years, I still have daydreams which tease me with the choice of having any - but only one - of Dad's old cars. You might guess that I take the Duesenberg, but it's not that simple. The Airflow holds a very special place in my heart and I can't make up my mind. What would you do?

Other Facts About The Airflow

Semi-unitized body and frame

All steel body and frame construction – no wood

128 inch wheelbase on the CV

The coupe had jump seats in lieu of an optional bench seat in the rear

The engine was located over the front axle

Rear passengers were seated in front of the axle for a smoother ride

The windshield was divided and mounted at a rakish angle

The top-of-the-line CW had the world's first one-piece curved windshield

To learn more, a google search on "Chrysler Airflow" will yield a large number of hits.



Big sister, Nancy, humors little brother, Steve, in the family's 1934 Chrysler Airflow CV Coupe at Modesto, CA, circa 1940 -41. Dad had customized the car a tad by removing the running boards. Later, he would use lowering blocks in the rear to give the car an even sportier look.



Mom shows off her new daughter, Christina, in 1949 at Vallejo, CA. By then, the Airflow was showing signs of aging and its old safety glass was distorting after years of baking under the warm California sun. In November, Dad traded it for the Duesenberg.



Steve and his little sister, Christina, in the recently acquired Duesenberg circa 1950 at Vallejo, CA. The car looks pretty pathetic, but it was running.



The author's sister, Nancy, poses with the Duesenberg circa 1952 at Vallejo, CA. The refurbishment of the car was a family project. It is shown here minus its trunk, which was being recovered.