

## Car of the Month

### Lasting Legacies

By Steve White

In the early postwar period, my small hometown in California had 16 new car dealerships selling 19 brands. And all were domestic! One of those dealerships was a combination appliance store/auto dealership. The appliances included a refrigerator that was the first to offer shelves in the doors. That fridge, called Shelvador, was introduced in 1933. The postwar car was a radical makeover of the first model, which debuted in 1939. The brand name for both appliance and car was Crosley.

The 1946 car's four-cylinder engine's displacement was a mere 44 cubic inches and produced just 26.5 horsepower. The first version of that engine - developed for wartime applications – had a cylinder block made from copper-brazed sheet steel, a process dubbed CoBra. Over time, this technology proved problematic and was replaced by a more conventional cast iron block assembly, called CIBA. The CIBA engines were a bit heavier, but much more durable. Both versions of the engine had a vertical-shaft cam drive, with the CIBA using spiral bevel gears, much like the Wills Sainte Claire arrangement described in the December, 2018, Clutch Chatter.

My dad's service garage had a couple of customers with postwar Crosleys. Any remnants of my misspent youth can probably be found at that shop, which gave me the chance to "test-drive" customer cars. And I certainly wasn't going to miss the opportunity to test those Crosleys. Slow as they were, I was impressed by their maneuverability. And I loved the tiny high-revving four-cylinder overhead cam engine.

A family could choose a sedan, station wagon, or even a pickup. All rode on an 80-inch wheelbase chassis borrowed from the prewar cars. Along with the new 1946 Kaiser-Fraser cars, they featured the first ponton-style bodies ever on an American production car. Studebaker would be the next with their 1947 models.

To satisfy would-be customers who might want something more like an MG-TC, a true sports car was added to the lineup in 1949. It was called the Hot Shot and came without doors. The Super Sport version, which had doors, soon followed. These cars used the same CIBA engine as their brethren, but their all-new 85-inch wheelbase chassis with lowered frames was optimized for the sports-minded buyer. Another remarkable feature of these sports cars was the automobile industry's first use of disk brakes. Reading about – and even watching – these tiny sports cars compete successfully in SCCA road racing's 750cc class cemented my enthusiasm for them.

In 1983, John Van Sickle acquired a basket-case Super Sport from a used car lot in Alexandria. If it weren't for him, this particular car would likely have been scrapped. But John was up to the challenge of restoration, even if he couldn't get started until the late 90s. The project to resurrect the car consumed four years, but what finally resulted seems close to a miracle. More likely, though, it was John's considerable skill, energy, and determination that saw it through to a very successful conclusion. He did everything, except for the upholstery and top. That includes the stunning red paint job, too.

John enjoyed showing the car at venues such as Hershey, World of Wheels, Rohr Show, and Sully, earning many awards along the way, including the AACA Grand National. I enjoyed parking near John at

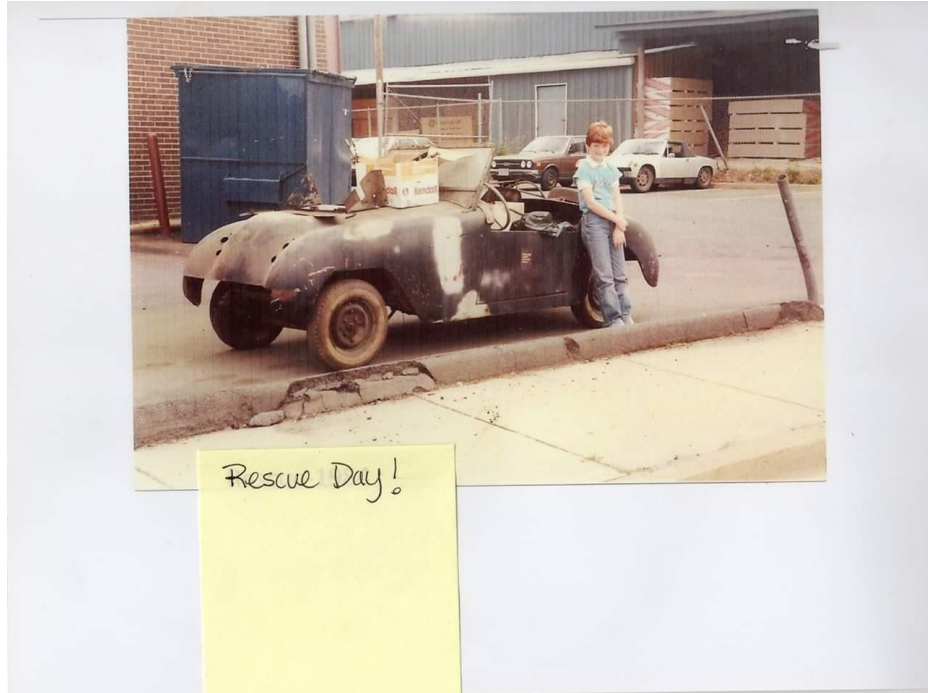
the Rohr Show to talk about Crosleys and cars in general. Sadly, we lost John this past November 26. He was 75.

John was a serious collector owning - beside the Super Sport - a 1951 Crosley sedan, a 1958 Morris Minor, two Whizzer motorbikes, and a Doodlebug. All are in top condition. He was such a fine credit to the hobby.

The Crosley sports cars and engines have left legacies beyond the factory Hot Shots and Super Sports. The Italian Bandini was just one marque to use the Crosley engine in some of its 750cc sports/competition cars. The engines were often modified to more than double their output, which made them real competitors, often among the best in their class. Then there was Bill Devin in California, who built a range of fiberglass bodies scaled to fit sports cars of various sizes, including replacement bodies for the Hot Shot and Super Sport. Some Devins retained the Crosley chassis, but others adopted a more advanced platform. Quite a number of Crosley-powered cars still compete in vintage sports car racing.

Not all that long ago, a friend let me drive his Devin powered by a modified Crosley mated to a Volvo four-speed gearbox. I found it very satisfying with lots of pep, precise steering, good brakes and handling. And it looks like a small Ferrari. Well, it's red anyway.

Crosley's fortunes played out in 1952. The small car filled a gap in customer demand while the large companies played catch-up following conversion from wartime production. But by the 50s, the public wanted full-size cars and nothing else would do. Our story might have had a different ending if the gas crisis of the 70s had occurred 25 years earlier.



A young Rae Van Sickle stands next to her father's newest project, a 1952 Crosley Super Sport purchased in 1983. John Van Sickle had a vision few could appreciate.



John Van Sickle and daughter Rae Van Sickle-Hall show the exquisitely restored Crosley Super Sport at the Rohr Show. From sow's ear to silk purse.



John Van Sickle's gorgeous little Crosley Super Sport is proudly displayed at the beautiful Annaburg Mansion in Manassas. Mr. Annaburg was a beer magnate.





The pristine engine compartment reveals the tiny high-revving overhead cam Crosley engine that has powered many small sports/competition cars. If that's a heater hose I see going into the firewall, one would have all the comforts of home.



Spartan and sporty best describes the instrument panel and finely reupholstered interior.