

A VENT WINDOW VIEW

CHROME and INNOCENCE

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Life in a “world of make believe” really fits CHVA’s members since most of us are still trying to be as “hip” as we were as teenagers. That seems legitimate as I recall how my brain worked in the Fifties when, like most sixteen-year-old kids, I was faking adult behavior in order to gain the use of the family sedan. Now, it is our “*I am still young*” mentalities that lead most of us into “signing up” to participate in the annual CHVA National Tours. There is nothing quite like heading out on the nation’s highways in an auto that resembles the “date” cars we used in high school. For some of us CHVA members, a national tour is a reminder of those pragmatic machines we used and abused “once upon a time.” To do so, my classmates and I, ages sixteen and up, had to pass written and driving tests in order to legally operate a vehicle on Missouri’s public roads. In spite of our skills, or lack thereof, most of us had acquired a license by the time we were high school juniors. We took our test drives in vehicles that ranged in age from a 1934 Ford coupe to my dad’s 1953 Chevrolet 210.

My pal Bob and I double-dated in order to share rides—he owned a 1938 Oldsmobile. I used my Dad’s ’53 Chevrolet when it was available. That put me in one of the newest cars of the lot when I got to use it. My classmate, Tom, actually owned the ’34 Ford coupe that he drove, but he had to share it with Dennis, his twin. Glen and Robert drove light blue ’52 Plymouths; apparently Chrysler had a surplus of baby blue paint in 1952. Gene had the use of a 1940 Chevrolet. Fred, who lived just a block from the school, used his grandfather’s 1936 Plymouth. (During his senior year Fred drove the Plymouth into a concrete bridge abutment. He survived, the car didn’t!) On the occasions when my class attended a school function, our parking lot looked like a museum because so many kids were driving autos that had been built in the Thirties and Forties. People nowadays tend to forget that the Korean War cut into Detroit’s production of new cars in the early Fifties; car makers had barely gotten back up to speed following the retooling necessitated at the end of WW II.

For those of you who viewed the movie ***American Graffiti***, you may recall the wide range of automobiles utilized in that film. Set in a time about seven years later than my final year in high school, the movie’s collected bits of automotive history offered proof that cars were the “steeds” of romance for high-school kids. Of course, in the film, many cars had been modified, but what the movie *really* illustrated was that teenagers were considerably “faster” (in more ways than one) in California than Midwestern kids in the 50’s and 60’s. The automotive hardware shown in that flick also made it clear to me that the cars I “knew” in high school lacked the overall grandeur of the wheels portrayed in ***American Graffiti***; so did our romances and reckless choices! Sadly, hovering above our world of chrome, neon and innocence, was the cloud of Vietnam.

To compare the characters and cars in that movie with the realities of my “Fifties” Midwestern world would be somewhat like comparing a Tarzan movie to a film about cell division (***mitosis***) in a high school biology class. ***American Graffiti’s*** romances, dangerous deeds, and pranks were truly “carried” by the autos depicted. That storyline would never have worked had the film not included shots of the gatherings at “Mel’s Drive-In,” the teenaged girl “cruising” the streets of Modesto in her dad’s gleaming Edsel, and the future ***Han Solo’s*** drag-racing wreck!