

A VENT WINDOW VIEW  
(Happy Wheels)  
February 2015-B. K. Showalter

The hardest thing about teaching a teenager how to drive the family car is learning how to scream without waking the entire neighborhood.

Farm boys in the Fifties (and I was one) generally had learned how to handle a tractor of one kind or another by the time they were ten or twelve years old. That often gave them an edge over “townies” when learning to drive. Still, the skills those kids developed did not compare to those whose folks owned a pickup truck. Truth is, back then, it was not uncommon to find out that some youngsters were driving their father’s pickups on country roads long before they celebrated a two-digit birthday.

Ignoring those instances, it’s still fair to say that rural teens sometimes got a jump on town kids, at least in steering over poorly maintained country roads and shifting gears at speeds above 25 mph. On the other hand, some of the kids from town that I met when I entered high school were more skilled in handling a car in “crowded” circumstances such as parking in a garage or parallel parking between two vehicles on a public street.

Please understand that I am not implying that country boys were brighter than town kids. It’s just that farm kids simply had more opportunities to learn how to simultaneously pump a clutch and shift into another gear without grinding the edges off some teeth in their transmissions. (However, even as some of us farm kids were beginning to learn about timing the use of a clutch when changing gears on a stick shift automobile, a number of our friends in town were learning to drive cars equipped with one of the automatic transmissions that were gaining popularity in the early Fifties.)

Two of my townie pals from that era often used their parents’ 1950 Plymouths; oddly enough, both cars were 4-doors, light blue in color, and powered by six-cylinder engines that *supposedly* produced 97 horses. One never knew which kid was coming until one could identify a face through the windshield.

Those two Plymouths lacked the “get up and go” of the V-8’s used on many cars in that era, but their comfort levels exceeded those offered by their competitors in those years.

My folks owned a 1953 Chevrolet “210” when I started driving myself to the after school events that seemed so important to me in those years. The fact that the ’53 quit running one night when the timing gear failed almost cost me usage rights to the car, but fortunately the mechanic who replaced it showed my dad that the gear had a flaw that was not due to my driving.

Less than a year later Dad traded the ’53 for a new 1955 two-tone Chevrolet. I didn’t mind that it was powered by a six-cylinder engine (similar to the one in the ’53) because the ’55 had an overdrive! Since I have accused my contemporaries of lacking enough sense to own a driver’s license, I must admit that I soon discovered that Dad’s new Chevy would run a 100 mph on the flat.

Now, looking back, it’s clear that my decision making skills in those early years were not that great. And, that was true as well of my contemporaries; judging from the kind of accidents my friends had after obtaining their licenses it seems apparent that their physical skills were not enough to offset their fledgling mental abilities. Frankly, it was a marvel that the seventeen members of my high school class survived long enough to graduate!