

Opinion

First cars, then and now, still drive a lasting impression

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH

News guys like me get to ask a million questions, but one in particular has always been an icebreaker.



Grubaugh

“What was your first car?”

People light up talking about theirs.

“It was a ’70 Plymouth Duster,” one will say.

“It was a rusty Ford Fairlane,”

will say another.

“It was the family’s old station wagon,” will say several more.

Fond memories come pouring out.

First automobiles, first jobs, first loves — you never forget them. Cars, though, are in a class by themselves on the memory assembly line.

Generally, the ricketier the vehicle, the better the story. The boys who put heart and soul into their shiny machines back in the day always embellished the legend by recounting the torque, the spoilers, the RPMs, the mag wheels and

the extras that made their cars special. Tinkering was easier back in the pre-electronic ignition era, which marked the beginning of the end of the backyard mechanic. The guys who adapted to those technological changes can still play grease monkey with the best of them.

Cars mostly end up in a junkyard, but the memories live on. I think about this today, after my oldest granddaughter recently got her own first car, a beautiful used Tesla. Red, like her hair. I’ve never seen a kid so excited. She cutely nicknamed it Christine. I hope she comes to remember hers the way I remember the one I got in 1974.

Mine was a blue 1966 Chevelle Malibu. I honestly don’t remember how I came by it, but I’m sure my dad found it someplace, and I helped pay for it. I was a senior in high school and not a bit shy sitting behind the wheel of that beauty.

It was a 283-cubic-inch V8 with a two-speed, Powerglide transmission, if you really want to know.

The bucket seats were in misery though. The vinyl was wearing thin, and the cushion guts were spilling out. My seamstress mother, God rest her soul, took it upon herself to sew up some fuzzy blue slipcovers. That forever changed the look

— and the feel — of my mighty two-door.

Buddies rightly started calling it, the “Pimpmobile.” This was, after all, the era of “Super Fly.”

I still had the coupe with the covers in 1975 when I met my future wife. She is still with me today and remembers all this as I do, with fondness. By then, I was wanting a more impressive ride, something that wasn’t aging in dog years. A Chevy turning 10 is a lot like a 70-year-old man — or a really old chihuahua.

I essentially needed a Pupmobile.

I got that one year later when I bought a ’71 Mustang, in which several more tales unfolded across steamy summer nights. Those were the days, my friend. A pyramid of cans in the pale moonlight.

Decades have now come and gone. Twice in recent years I’ve been reminded of my Chevy. Once came when I was driving through the Target lot in Edwardsville, and there, on the perimeter, parked where it would avoid dings, was a version just like it — refurbished. I thought the ’66 had disappeared from the planet, gone the way of the Vega and the Pinto.

I pulled up, got out, walked around it, looking at a mirage. Even without the fuzzy blue slipcovers, it was still a marvel.

The second time came in Pent-

water, Mich., when I took in a lake-front car show and spotted another. USA 1 the license plate said, reminding me of the great ‘60s catchphrase, “See the USA in your Chevrolet.”

The story of how I parted with my Chevelle is among the many memories. I let a couple of interested buyers take it for a test drive. Old Reliable made it as far as the interstate where it crapped out on one of the busiest stretches in Metro East. The guys had to jump start it just to get it back to my house.

Understandably, they refused a deal, but another guy came along later, offering \$400. I snatched it.

I write about business and investments, and I’ll have to admit that if I had kept that car and gave it some love, it would be worth many thousands today. Even that money is only a good downpayment on more modern vehicles at the local showroom.

Everyone has a first car/truck/motorcycle story, or at the very least, a best/worst vehicle story. Ask people to tell you theirs, and you’ll have a comrade in cars for life.

Dennis Grubaugh is the retired editor of the Illinois Business Journal.

Elections belong to those who show up

By ALAN J. ORTBALS

Well, I sure whiffed on my election prediction. I expected Harris to win the popular vote taking about 50 percent to Trump’s 45.



Ortbals

Whether or not that would be good enough to win the presidency depended on the vagaries of the electoral college system. Instead, Trump won both by a wide margin.

Newspapers around the world were aghast.

The banner headline on page one of Britain’s Daily Mirror asked, “What Have They Done... Again?”

Scotland’s Daily Record called it “The 2nd Dumbing”

The editorial board of France’s Le Monde noted simply, “The end of an American world.”

And an op-ed published in

Germany’s Die Zeit newspaper was simply titled, “F**k.”

Nevertheless, the election was held.

It was peaceful and secure and the MAGA side won. Some see Trump’s surprise victory as a sign that the American electorate has taken a hard turn to the right, but I don’t think so.

My prediction of a 50 to 45 Harris win wasn’t just pulled out of thin air. I believed Trump had a hard floor and a hard ceiling. It was clear that there were a lot of people who would never vote for Trump and a lot that would vote for him regardless of what he did. As Trump said in 2016, “I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody and wouldn’t lose any voters.”

Looking at his previous two runs for the White House, I saw that Trump came in at about 46 percent of the popular vote in both 2016 and 2020. His last run garnered him 74 million votes to Biden’s 81 million. I figured that was Trump’s hard ceiling. I expected him to get about 74 million votes again and Harris to deliver something similar to Biden’s number. I was right on Trump. Where the prognostication went off the rails was that Harris received just 71 mil-

lion votes—10 million less than Biden got just four years ago. In other words, Trump didn’t win because millions of voters drank the Kool-Aid and flocked to his side but because millions of voters just stayed home.

At this juncture, no one really knows why that is. My hypothesis is that those voters would never vote for Trump but couldn’t bring themselves to vote for Harris. As someone put it, they saw it as a choice between Oh No and Hell No. These voters probably have multiple reasons for sizing up the election that way. Maybe they were unhappy with the Biden-Harris presidency over issues like immigration and inflation. Maybe they blamed Biden-Harris for wars in Ukraine and Gaza. Maybe they simply wouldn’t vote for Harris because she was a woman. Or maybe, all of the above.

And because of that, this election may have taken a very different turn if Biden had done what he said he would do four years ago—serve one term and pass the torch to a younger candidate. If he had announced early on that he was sticking to that pledge, would not run again and had allowed the Democratic Party to hold a real open primary process producing the

strongest candidate, they may have ended up with a J.B. Pritzker, Josh Shapiro, Gavin Newsom or Gretchen Whitmer as the party’s candidate. Outsiders like them would have been able to run a campaign independent of and critical of the Biden administration that had an approval rating in the 30s. But that didn’t happen, and I think that will go down in history as Biden’s greatest failure.

Elections belong to those who show up and 10 million people or more simply didn’t show up. Now we embark on Trump 2.0 which, I think, will be one of the most consequential periods in American history. I hope for the best but expect the worst. Let’s hope I’m wrong.

Alan J. Ortvals, former publisher of the Illinois Business Journal, is retiring his regular monthly column with the December 2024 issue of the IBJ, moving to a guest submission whenever he feels it’s needed. To reach him, send an email to the editor or continue communicating with him at aortbals@ibjonline.com.



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