

# Nostalgia rides on a piece of junk

By Ralph R. Echlinaw  
staff writer

I DRIVE A 1981 Mercury Marquis, and it's been a very reliable car. But I can say with unimpeachable reliability that the Marquis won't be the most memorable car I'll ever own.

It's not because the Marquis is usually associated with hidden dangers. I've found a good time begins and ends with a healthy swig of Maalox. And it's not because the body style is the automotive equivalent of a grilled cheese sandwich.

My Mercury will ride into a fading memory because it's not a piece of junk.

Back in the late '70s when I was young and dumb, and in the Navy (which should prove it right there), I bought a '72 Plymouth Fury for \$300 from a fellow who called himself "my friend."

THE VEHICLE got 10 miles per gallon driving around Waukegan, Ill. The gas gauge was broken. And the exhaust pipe had an annoying habit of disconnecting. The four-foot section connected to the front of the muffler would bounce on the pavement, making sparks, while the engine roared with the thunder only a 318-cubic-inch V-8 with uninhibited exhaust flow can make.

The remedy was to crawl under the car and reconnect the pipes with your hands wrapped in whatever fast-food wrappers were lying in the

back seat. As if that weren't enough, my car was also an olibanite. Whether the root of the problem was a bad childhood, emotional problems or the fact that the former owner used to drive in ways that would make A.J. Foyt, nervous, I don't know, but suspect the latter.

By the time I transferred to Lowry Air Force Base in Denver, the Fury's gas addition had worsened. At 5 1/2 miles per gallon, I might have been driving a Paterbull.

IN JANUARY, suffering from temporary insanity, I tried to coax the brown bomber back home to Rochester, Mich.

However, on the six day odyssey, I was unfortunate enough to experience the worst winter storm that hit the Midwest since the Pleistocene Age. And... my fine Chrysler product began to display an alarming malfunction in its transmission. You see, from time to time, the car became confused and thought drive was neutral. But it always cleared up right after scaring the hell out of me.

Finally, the ailing automobile coughed its last and coasted to a stop on a cold day in the middle of nowhere (Illinois by name). I was told the problem involved bands in the transmission, but it might have been orchestrans in the transaxle for all I cared. So I sold the car to a junkyard for \$15, complete with two

new snow tires, a relatively new carburetor, and three six-packs of frozen Coors in the trunk.

Anyway, that Fury was a stinking dog heap of a car, just barely alive, but it had character. A big monster tearing down the road with my sister's eight track player jamming to Heart at full volume. It doesn't get any better than that.

SOME YEARS later I bought a 1972 American Motors Gremlin for \$100. Now my Fury may have been a mechanical load, but this Gremlin was sweet. All it needed was a tune up. It's body, however, was something completely different. For a long time I gained ingress and egress through the passenger door because the door post on the driver's side was nearly rusted through on the bottom, and the upper hinge was entirely disconnected, thanks to the corrosive miracle that is rust phenomenon.

After securing local junkyards, I obtained two doors and two front fenders for my (trusty) steed. Man, you want to talk about a head-turning piece of fine American automotive ingenuity. I had a six-color car. The left door was blue, the right door yellow. One fender was beige, the other green. The back end of the car was black with a white stripe on each side. The phrase, "Hey, baby, wanna ride in my car?" just didn't seem to work anymore.

All the while I owned the Gremlin, I likened it to a person being kept alive by machines in a hospital. The

car should have died before I ever owned it. And finally it did.

I JUMPED A red light in Pontiac one cold Monday morning in March, the light having been flashing red just moments before. Little did I know, although I looked (but didn't see), a Sears delivery van was blasting through the intersection. I clipped the back of the van, tearing a hole in its side. Consequently, the Gremlin was gravely injured, paralyzed from the steering wheel down with cars of coolant falling lightly on the pavement.

It could have been fixed, I suppose, but estimating the cost of repair at \$200, I determined euthanasia to be the wisest option. So the four track (snobly pulled my beloved Gremlin to her final resting place, i.e. a junk-yard where she was cast into the crusher.

That car and the Fury will always have a place in my heart. Worn out, but comfortable. Old, but rugged. Ugly, but proud. New cars are nice, but they ain't got no character, as Sparky Anderson might put it. And driving them is a damn sight better than paying a ransom to a repair man to fix electric windows, seat belts and retracting headlights.

Just be sure to bring a lot of money for gas and never travel without a good set of tools.

Ralph R. Echlinaw is a reporter for the West Bloomfield/Lakes Eccentric.

## points of view

# Some important reading between those pr lines

WE IN "THE media" like a lot of flak for sensationalizing, distorting, selective editing.

So today let me treat you to a few raw, unwritten, unedited press releases — what industry and government would like you read.

Let's start with the No. 1 auto maker. Media headlines said 21 plants would be closed and 71,000 jobs eliminated. Here's GM's hand-out:

"GENERAL MOTORS (NYSE: GM) Chairman Robert C. Stempel today announced an aggressive program involving fundamental changes in the way GM runs its business.

"The program will immediately reduce costs, improve the 1992 outlook and substantially reshape GM's North American operations to help restore their profitability.

"General Motors will run its business in an increasingly lean and responsive manner," Stempel said. "A lean capacity approach will bring GM's North American manufacturing capacity tightly in line with overall market demand.

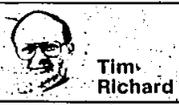
"Organizational changes will continue in order to improve operational focus, eliminate redundant levels and staffing, streamline business practices, and reduce overall response time.

GM's version sounds great. "Improve the 1992 outlook," "Restructure the company," "Improve operational focus," "Yes, we can."

Let's move on to a cultural institutions:

"ALTHOUGH THE more than 41-percent decrease in state support in the current fiscal year will mean drastic changes in the Detroit Historical Department's operations, its Director Maud M. Lyon has announced it will endeavor to continue its primary mission, to educate and entertain the public through presenting Detroit's rich history.

"The reduction in state support has meant severe cuts in our operations — closing Historic Fort Wayne, losing 41 percent of our staff since 1989, and losing more than \$1.4 million from our budget," stated Lyon.



Tim Richard

What's hidden, of course, is that this is a department of Detroit city government. It's Detroit's responsibility, not the state's. Detroit city government has shut down Fort Wayne, cut operating hours and discontinued answering research questions from the public.

Detroit's general fund budget is nearly \$2,000 per person, 2.5 times state general spending of \$800 per person. You need the newspaper to dig that out.

Another example from Detroit again:

"DETROIT MAYOR Coleman A. Young said today the city is being forced to stop daily meal service for more than 2,000 senior citizens beginning Jan. 2.

"Michigan Gov. John Engler's veto of funds for meals for senior citizens.

"We have seniors up to 100 years of age being served by our home-bound meals program."

See the propaganda? "We" have seniors in "our" program. When the food goes out, Detroit's mayor takes credit. When the bill comes due, the incumbent, Engler, gets the blame.

THE FINAL example is a Michigan National Corp. bank commercial that starts by asking if you're tired of high credit card interest rates.

What MNC hides is the fact that several years ago it moved its credit card operations out of Michigan into North Dakota to escape Michigan's usury laws and charge 18.8 percent interest. I had to ask bank officials, four times before they would admit to moving the credit card operation out of Michigan. (Unintentionally MNC sold the credit card operation.)

Tun Richard reports regularly on the local implications of state and regional events.

# Once more, U-M Dearborn reaches out

IT HAD BEEN decades since I'd visited Detroit's Cass Technical High School.

I had represented rival Denby High there in a 1982 track meet where I recall that an anatomical portion of a Cass competitor somehow escaped his running suit during a race on the battery track, causing female spectators in the gymnasium below to scream even louder for him.

Cass also boasted the only quarter-mile who ever beat me in high school — 6-foot, 3-inch Paris "Sandy" Whittington, now a Southfield executive.

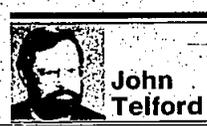
Because I had also coached in Detroit, my memories of this exceptional school had been restricted to athletics, and I knew of its academic excellence only by repute. Upon arrival for a press conference held to announce an impending partnership between Cass Tech and the University of Michigan-Dearborn, I was greeted by Principal David Sneed, who immediately filled me in on his students' fine academic tradition.

"FOR THE better part of this century, Sneed intoned proudly, "Cass has upheld a record as one of the largest, most successful technical and academic urban public schools in the country. More than 95 percent of our student body presently progresses into higher education."

It had been decades since I'd conversed with anyone regarding academic matters at U-M Dearborn, where in 1970 I had reluctantly rejected the tempting offer of an assistant professorship in urban education in favor of the more lucrative lure of a directorship at Macomb County Community College (a decision I later had reason to regret).

Under the vibrant leadership of Chancellor Brenda J. Wilson, U-M Dearborn has continued a two-decade tradition of outreach to the urban Detroit community.

Being aware then, of the reputations of both institutions, I had wanted to go that day to witness Sneed and Wilson sign their agreement, which will motivate minority students to enter the teaching and engi-



John Telford

neering professions and higher education in general.

Even before the signing, the two educators had begun a variety of joint initiatives involving U-M-D's schools of education and engineering and its offices of admissions and financial aid.

SAID WILSON: "This partnership shows our institutions' mutual commitment to offer opportunities for talented students at all educational levels."

She pointed out that by combining high school and university resources now — before the students begin their college careers — the two institutions will offer them a current

educational environment which should significantly increase their chances for success.

The U-M-D Chancellor went on to note that her staff will be exploring several further collaborative efforts with Cass in the coming months — including a retention program, mentorship programs involving university students, faculty and staff members and an increased number of support programs.

Such partnerships are more than just "nice." They are crucial to the fulfillment of inner-city youngsters' potential and our democracy's survival into the 21st Century.

We desperately need to have collaboration like this between many additional schools and universities — not only in Detroit and Dearborn, but all throughout America.

John Telford, a Rochester Hills resident, recently was assistant superintendent in the Rochester School District. He previously was executive director for secondary education in the Plymouth Canton district.

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