

My first Model A Fords
Paul Mantsch – 24 March 2016

In the mid-1950s as my friends and I approached the magic driving age 16, a good bit of our energy was focused on cars. This love of machines with motors and cars in particular, abides deep within me to this day.

We needed something cheap and the obvious choice was the Model A Ford. Henry Ford's factories turned out millions of Model A's between 1928 and 1931. By the late fifties, there were still quite a few Model As around. They were simple, sturdy and, best of all, cheap. My friends and I had several Model As during our teen-age years. To keep them running we had to take apart a lot of engines, transmissions, and brake systems all the while learning intimately how these machines worked.

My friend Teddy Green and I were always on the lookout for these old Fords. They could occasionally be spotted unloved – rusting and abandoned behind barns. A mile or so south of our farm was a sad looking two-door sedan parked in an apple orchard owned by a crusty, hard-of-hearing old farmer by the name of Mike Sandor. We lusted after that car for a long time trying to work up the nerve to knock on Sandor's door. Finally, we nervously approached his house and after a lot of knocking, he came to the door. We had a loud conversation explaining who we were or rather who our parents were. We mentioned the car and I tentatively offered him \$15. He screwed up his face and thought for a while. Mike was no fool and clearly sensed how badly we wanted that car. He said no, he would not take less than \$25. Rather than take only \$15 he wanted to have the pleasure of putting an axe through the radiator on that Model A. We told him (sadly) that we had to go away and think about it. In reality, I didn't have \$25. Now the next few days were pure torture for us. We were now obsessed with having that car and all we could think of was that, at any moment, an axe would go crashing through that beautiful radiator. Finally, we could stand it no longer. I somehow scrapped up the extra money and we went back to Sandor. He was obviously very pleased with himself and his deal and was in an ebullient mood. In addition to giving us the car for \$25 he gave us a huge cache of Model A parts he had stored away in his barn.

The next question was how to get that car home. Having been under that apple tree for an untold number of years, the tires were all flat and engine was solidly locked up. It is important to also know that old Model As in apple orchards, behind barns or sitting anywhere for a length of time are uniquely attractive homes for wasps.

Well, we brought an old set of wheels and tires from our large supply of Model A parts. We attached one end of the rope to Dad's pickup and other end to the Model A. The next question was who was going to sit in the Model A among the swarm of angry wasps and steer it home. We flipped a coin - I won. I figured that if I drove fast enough maybe the wasps would be too confused to wage war on the intruder. We (carefully) opened all of the windows, Teddy got in and we roared off up the road. The wheels of the truck on that dirt road covered the Model A, the wasps and Teddy in huge cloud of dust. Miraculously the strategy worked and Teddy arrived in our yard virtually unscathed.

The prize sat in the yard for several days while we tried to decide how to dislodge the wasps. Finally we got a fly sprayer and filled it with the strongest thing we could think of: gasoline. We were contemplating the situation from a safe distance when Mom happened along. She sized up the situation, calmly picked up the sprayer and climbed into that car. A few minutes later she reemerged and declared our Model A wasp free. We were speechless with awe and admiration – I could not have been prouder of my mother.

But we still had a car with a frozen engine. Having confronted this problem before on old Model As, we knew what to do and went to work. We stripped the engine and removed the cylinder head and the oil pan. Indeed, every piston was firmly locked into its cylinder. We started by spraying oil around each piston. Then with a small sledgehammer and a two-foot length of 4x4 that neatly fit into the cylinders, we began thumping the pistons successively with the hammer and wood block. After a lot of thumping – each round getting a little more aggressive we began to see ever so slight movement in the pistons. Only minutes later Teddy and I were roaring down the road. There was only one hitch. A little way down the road I looked at Teddy asked if he put oil in the engine. “No, did you?” With oil in the crankcase, the car ran really well.

Working on old cars was just a natural thing for boys to do - especially farm boys. There was plenty of room to work and access to an array of tools. You could drive the cars down across the fields and down the lanes. Even the back roads were rarely visited by the law. When we would decide to go legal, we would go down to the Mantua Lumber Company where they sold license plates – they knew us well. We would go to Teddy's

father, the local insurance agent, and for something like \$30 a year, we would buy liability insurance. There were no safety checks in those days – good thing.

Dad apparently saw no harm in this activity and indeed helped and supported us. One day I came home from school and was surprised to find Dad and our hired man cutting a big hole in the end of our, by then, unused chicken house. Next, they built and hung a set of doors in the opening of our new workshop. What a fabulous gift! We now had a great place to work. It had a concrete floor, was dry and had lots of room. We even used the wooden shelves (formerly used by hens laying eggs) to store our stock of spare parts.

We had lot of fun with that Model A. Once, going full speed (which for a Model A was about 40 miles an hour) down the road, we felt the left rear of the car suddenly sag. Just then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw one of our freshly painted red wheels careering past us at high speed – down through the ditch and out across a field.

Model As attracted attention even back then. One could become an added attraction by putting up the spark lever coming down a hill. The result was a series of very loud backfires. One time I saw a pretty girl that I was interested in on the sidewalk downtown. I came ripping down Main Street and did a power shift from first to second. There was a big crunch as the bottom of the transmission fell off, scattering gears, gear teeth, and transmission oil all over the street. I later learned, alas, that I had completely failed to make an impression.

They *did* have a safety check at the Crestwood high school so we weren't about to park in the school parking lot. I would pick up Teddy and we would follow some old sugaring roads through the woods and park in the trees up behind the school.

My last Model A Ford purchase was a 1929 cabriolet. A cabriolet features a two-door body style with a folding top. Unlike a roadster that had side curtains, the cabriolet had rollup windows. A friend had bought this car with dreams of making a hot rod. He removed (and threw away) all of the fenders, the engine, and most of the mechanical parts with the idea of installing a big Oldsmobile V8 but along the way lost interest. I persuaded him to part with that stripped down car for \$35. By that time, I began to realize the value of Model As as they were originally built and the cabriolet, in particular, was a rare model. I began to scrounge around for fenders, an engine, a radiator, and all of the other parts I needed to bring the car back to something like its original form. (In those days you could still buy Model A parts from the Sears Roebuck Catalog.) Restoration was probably the wrong word, as I didn't have that kind of money. Eventually though, I was able to make the car almost complete. Mom sewed upholstery for the car in black and white leatherette. I bought and installed a new white top. I had the car painted bright red (what else?). I painted the wheels cream and attached white walls. It was as classy looking car. I was very fond of that car and still have it almost 60 years later.



1929 Ford cabriolet