That Four-Barrel Summer

By

Bob McCarthy

I first saw a harder edge to my Dad that four-barrel summer.

It started with my car. I was 17, done high school awaiting fall and the start of college. It was ‘56 Ford coupe, V-8 with “three on the tree.“

It was my ride to and from college because Dad, an electrician, needed the family car for the 30-mile jaunt to his job in Hartford.

It was five years old, needed tires and minor repairs but I had “wheels,” and could cruise the Big Boy and eye the short-skirted carhops as they skated across the lot balancing trays of burgers and shakes.

Cars were an interest Dad and I could share. He knew enough about them to tutor me on making repairs. At my age, he and his brothers repaired Packard’s and Kaiser Frasers in their parents’ driveway

Cars were cool. Cars took us away. Years before, Dad took my sister and me along when he went poking about, usually on alternate Saturdays when Mom did housekeeping.

Besides an amateur mechanic, Dad fancied himself a collector. To supplement his income, he had taken a continuing ed course at a local trade school on repairing televisions. Practice was supposed to make perfect, which doesn’t explain the half dozen television sets nested in our basement, disemboweled, and gathering dust. Dad then looked to other genres.

New England had history, and with it came antiques. So Saturdays we poked about Northampton, Deerfield, Hatfield, and other towns with storefronts advertising collectable rarities.

Dad parked his Ford and we three traipsed up the street and into a store, our arrival announced by a bell screwed the transom over the front door.

My sister and I moped up and down the aisles looking for something other than a toaster or porcelain faucets while Dad picked and pawned over everything else. I don't recall him ever making a purchase but one trip was memorable.

One Saturday, we were seated for supper when Mom asked about our day. My sister and I shrugged our shoulders, opened our comic books, and commenced eating. Dad lit up. "Guess what?" It was rhetorical.

Mom paused. "Today in a little shop in Northampton, we were looking around. The shopkeeper got up and came over from his desk. He asked me, "'Where is your place!'" He was beaming because the shopkeeper thought he was a competitor. My Mom said that was nice and we ate. Little did I know how his bravado would benefit me years later.

But at 17, the world was mine. Saturday nights in the summer, the amusement park on the banks of the Connecticut River ran stock cars races. I could lay in bed with the windows open and listen to the roar of their engines wafting up the river. When I did go with two or three of my friends, we'd pay our admission to the park and then sneak into the grandstand after the races started.

It was easy. Buy a ticket to ride the Tilt-A-Whirl. When it stopped and other riders were boarding we'd slip out of our seats and sneak off the tilted platform. We'd shimmy over the weathered wooden fence surrounding the pit area and scurry up the stadium steps to open seats.

That's where the ribbing started. I had a Ford. But the winning stock cars were Chevy powered. My friends were Chevy lovers. One or two Chrysler fans, but they carried no truck. Chevies did.

Often my friends would hitch rides to the races and rely on me for a ride home. Even a free ride didn't stop the ribbing when the Chevies finished first, second and third. I was at their mercy. Try as I might, my underpowered Ford didn't help. I couldn't fake leading the pack out of turn two. It was slow. It needed more.

Each spring and fall Dad changed the spark plugs on his Ford. I handed him wrenches and paid attention. As we wiped our hands, I breathed deep and asked him about getting a four-barrel carb for my Ford. I had saved money from my part-time custodian's job. He smiled a little and said he'd check with Mom.

A week later, I found it – a four-barrel carb and manifold. A guy two streets over was switching engines and sold it to me. I was ecstatic.

The next Saturday morning I was working on my car in our rented garage. In 30 minutes, I removed the old setup and bolted on the new one. But there was a problem. The linkage from the gas pedal to the carburetor didn't fit. Two-barrel linkage worked one way; four barrels another.

Through the late '60's and probably even the late '70's, there were real junk yards. Not recycling yards with a pile of trannies here, and catalytic converters there and beyond them crunched piles of what had been Detroit's finest. Back then, there would be piles of Ford products to the left, GM products to the right, Chrysler products up in back and, in the more uppity yards, MGs and Jags way over there. Yes, they were junk, that's why they were there. But they hadn't been stripped. They hadn't been flattened. They

had useable parts waiting to be removed by the junk yard's customers. That's what we were that summer Saturday.

Dad parked his Ford and we walked through the open chain link gate up the dirt path to the hut with tin walls and tin roof. The door was ajar. Inside the manager, who looked my Dad's age, sat back in his reclaimed office chair buffered by a pair of lackeys, all smoking cigarettes. The odor of crankcase oil hung in the air.

Dad said we needed the carb linkage for a Ford or Merc V8. The manager rolled forward in the chair and motioned to the lackey on his left, the teenager cupping a Lucky Strike. He peered out the window, past his boss's head.

"Up the hill past the Hudsons. Should be a Merc or two up there," he said.

We left the hut, hooked a right, and shuffled up the dirt trail past a sorry sack of Hudsons until we saw two Mercs off to the right.

We carried a small tool kit and within ten minutes had removed the 18-inch long piece of metal with a kink in it like a dog's hind leg. Prize in hand, we marched back down the path. In the hut they were still smoking.

"How much," asked Dad, holding the piece at arm's length.

The man rolled forward again, took the butt out off his mouth and said, "Ten bucks."

Dad looked at the twisted piece of metal. Actually, he stared hard at it, as if he focused enough it would turn into a snake and bite the bastard.

"Too much, he said. "I'll give you five."

“Can’t do it,” said the manager. Dad brought the piece closer to his chest, claiming his prize.

“Five bucks. I have to have this bent before it’ll fit.”

I thought the manager would choke on his cigarette as he coughed then with a wry little snicker said,” Bend it? You can’t bend that metal. It’ll snap in two.”

I just stared straight ahead and made not a sound. I felt Dad breath in real deep before he said, ”Five dollars or I’ll bend it with my bare hands right here and now and get it for free.”

The smoking helpers looked to their boss. He looked at Dad and then at me before he snuffed out his cigarette butt. It was only seconds, but I swear minutes passed.

He leaned back. “Okay, five bucks.”

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We drove across town to Guyer’s Garage at the end of Allen Street. For five bucks, the older Guyer son used an acetylene torch to heat the piece and bend it into the shape we needed.

That evening I drove to the stock car races in my four barrel Ford.

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