

How to have Cars with very little money

My first car was a 1927 Essex, which was a lower priced model made by the Hudson Motor Car Company from about 1919 until 1932. The car was for sale from a neighboring farmer for \$15. When I went to pick up the car, it had a dead battery, so the farmer graciously knocked \$3.50 off of the price of the car so I could buy a used battery. The net price was then \$11.50.

The car was in pretty good shape, but it did have a few peculiarities. It had no ignition key to keep the car from getting started by someone who did not have the key. The ignition switch was just an ordinary switch that anyone could turn on whenever they wanted. The car was secured by a lock with a key in the floor, which allowed the owner to lock the car in reverse. The car thieves could still steal the car, but they would have to make their getaway by backing up.

Many cars of that era did not have thermostats to keep the engine running at a constant temperature necessary for efficiency. In some cases, the owner put a blanket over the radiator until the car warmed up. Some cars had flaps that could be folded over the radiator to restrict the air flow. The Essex had shutters that could be opened or closed from inside the car, which was very helpful. The shutters worked quite well, but you had to remember to open them after while or the engine would get too hot and the



cooling fluid (usually water) would boil over, which it did once.

There were other strange characteristics.

My friend, Ray Peterson, agreed to push the Essex with his 1930 Buick Imperial Sedan, which was quite a heavy car (4,680 pounds). We did finally get the Essex going, and I drove it home. However, my father (who was a very good father) would not let me keep it because he did not think the \$11.50 was worth it. I was heart broken.

Upon reflecting on the incident in later years, I do not think it was the value or price of the car that worried Great Grandpa Frederick Otto, who was a very good mechanic. The Essex had brakes on only two wheels and they were externally contracting brakes like those used on the old horse-drawn wagons. I am convinced that he was afraid that the brakes were too dangerous. The fact that I was only 13 years old might also have had something to do with it.

1938 Studebaker President

In 1951, when I was 15 years old, I passed the test to get my first drivers license. Mel Pavelka ran a junk yard in the small town of Eden Prairie, Minnesota which is where I went to purchase the first car that my father would let me keep. It was a 1938 Studebaker President coupe, just like the one below. The President was the top-of-the-line

Studebaker and the car did have some nice features including a smooth-running eight cylinder engine. But, it too had some peculiarities.



Among the more annoying features of the Studebaker was that it had poor headlights, not much of a heater or defroster, bad wiring, a propensity to break axles, and an irksome tendency for the hood to fly up while going down the road.

One winter night, I was coming home from a highschool basketball game when it was snowing. The visibility was so poor with the almost useless defrosters that I could not see where the curve in the road was. I drove about 150 feet into Jim Nesbitt's corn field and then turned right parallel to the road and drove for another few hundred feet before I figured out that I was off course.



On two occasions, the rear axles broke on the Studebaker. The car had a reasonable powerful engine and a very light rear end, since the car was a coupe. The car would bounce up and down on the washboard gravel roads which was hard on the axles. The axle would break with part of it stuck inside the rear differential assembly, which was hard to take apart. My father made a sort of wire lasso on the end of a long rod so that we could get the broken end of the axle out. It saved us a lot of time.

Later I sold the Studebaker to one of my classmates, Robert B. Brown. Our class also had a Robert C. Brown who was a different person who had a '34 Ford.

1939 Hudson

Next, I bought a 1939 Hudson



from my father for \$125. It looked like the one below, but our car was green.

In most respects, the Hudson was a better car than the Studebaker, but it also had a few shortcomings. The distributor, which supplies the electrical current to the spark plugs, was mounted somewhat behind the left front wheel. That was no problem on dry pavement, but if you ever went through a puddle, the water would splash up and get the distributor wet and the car would die right in the middle of the puddle.

A second problem existed with the exposed starter mechanism. Most cars have the starter mechanisms enclosed in a case to protect it from the elements. However, the early starter mechanisms were not always reliable, so if the mechanism did not work, the driver might have to take the car apart to get the starter mechanism engaged so it would start the car. Hudson left their starter mechanisms out in the open so people could easily get at them if work needed to be done. But, the constant exposure to the rain, snow, ice, and salt from the road meant that the probability of the starter motor spinning but not engaging with the engine was quite high. Quite often, I would have to raise the hood and stick a tire wrench in just the right place into the gears to get the starter gear to mesh. Then I could get back in the car and start the car.

1941 Hudson

My next car was a 1941 purchase d from Mel Pavelka's junk yard for \$27.50. He was anxious to



get rid of it because someone had painted the whole car the color of peach with a brush, including the chrome strips and everything. The car actually ran quite well and I drove it when I was a student at the University. The paint job really wasn't that bad. But, the car had a 4.9 to 1 rear axle ratio which meant that the engine was making nearly twice as many revolutions per mile as many modern cars. So, it was sort of noisy.

1946 Hudson Super Six

My next car was a 1946 Hudson



Super Six which I bought from Mel Pavelka's junk yard. That was a nice car, but the back doors would occasionally fly open in a dangerous way because the hinges were on the back of the door, rather on the front of the doors as all cars have now. One Sunday, I was driving home from church. My sister Mary was in the front seat and my mom, dad, and little sister Diane were sitting in the back. Diane was standing up leaning against the right rear door when suddenly it flew open. Fortunately, my dad was able to grab her before she fell from the car.

Who made cars then?

In those days, there were eight major manufacturers producing 20 separate makes of cars in the United States.

General Motors made Chevrolet, Pontiac, Oldsmobile, Buick, and Cadillac.

The Ford Motor Company made Ford, Mercury, and Lincoln.

Chrysler Corporation made Plymouth, Dodge, DeSoto, and Chrysler.

These there companies were called "The Big Three." But, there were five smaller independent manufactures making individual makes; Packard, Nash, Hudson, Studebaker, Kaiser-Frazer, and Willys-Overland who also made the Jeep.



Although these independent producers were smaller than the Big

Three producers, many of the cars were of high quality and were well engineered.



The car that won the most races in the early 1950s was Hudson. That car was durable, low to the ground, quite powerful, and had excellent maneuverability.

Nash had the most efficient production and was a leader in fuel economy and passenger comfort. All modern cars utilize the heater system developed by Nash and it was the first car with many innovations such as reclining seats.



Kaiser-Frazer was the largest independent auto producer in the late 1940s. These cars



were quiet, economical, and had lots of truck space and internal storage.

Willys-Overland made mostly Jeeps which continued to sell well even after World War II where they became famous. That company also made a small number of conventional cars, but mostly they sold Jeeps.



Studebaker was best known for making sporty type cars, sort of like the Mustang today.

Packard made highly respected luxury cars as well as many engines for the U. S. military efforts during and after the war. Packard was an excellent company at one time and the used Packards were generally well maintained. Because they were so expensive, owners tended to take good care of them.

However, in spite of the relatively good quality of some of the independent cars, they tended to sell for a little less as used cars. Some people were fearful that the companies might go out of business and it would be hard to get parts, which it was anyway because there were not as many dealers. My father, who always bought used cars, was convinced that he could get a little better car by buying a car made by a smaller company because these used cars were usually cheaper. He was not worried about fixing the cars because he was such a good mechanic. His philosophy seemed correct and I followed it.

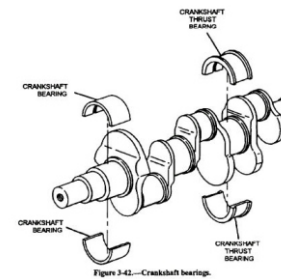


1947 Kaiser converted to a truck

About that time, our family was extensively involved in the vegetable and fruit farming business. We had 30 acres of land and we grew cucumbers, raspberries, strawberries, potatoes, and many other vegetables. We



also had 500 apple trees. My father had a regular job as a quality control inspector, so he never farmed full time, but we still grew a lot of potatoes, cucumbers, and apples and then drove them to the markets. But, we had no truck.



So, I went to Mel Pavelka's junk yard and picked up an old Kaiser four door sedan for \$50. Then I took a cold chisel and cut the sheet metal between the back window and the trunk to make something like the car in the picture at right. WE removed the back seat, built up a flat floor, and a rack sort of a stake rack for the back so the bushels of apples and cucumbers would not fall out. I still have the cold chisel.

The engine in the Kaiser was not very good, so first we had to overhaul the engine. After that, the Kaiser truck ran very well, but I made a slight mistake. I did not want to spend the money to replace the crankshaft bearings because that was a lot of work and the parts were quite expensive.

We had the Kaiser truck for quite a long time and it served us very well. But, ultimately, the crankshaft bearings began to wear out and the engine made a loud knocking noise. Sensing that the end was near, I drove the truck back to Mel Pavelka's junk yard. I didn't even get all the way into the junk yard. The engine failed right there in his driveway, which, I thought, was quite good timing.

The strategic advantage of Mel Pavelka's junk yard

By this point in the story, you might have detected that our family had cultivated a preferred place to buy cars. Melvin Pavelka was a member of a large Czech (Bohemian) community that populated much of the farm land in Hopkins, Minnetonka, and Eden Prairie. The bohemiaans that I knew were fine, hard-working, fun-loving, and very honest people – but extremely frugal. It was once said that they had such a good feel for money that they could drive over a dime and tell whether it was heads or tails every time.

Mel operated his junk yard on his family's old farm. He and his wife had built a newer house at the far edge of his property. The barn

was used to store some of the parts that needed to be kept out of the weather. Most of the cars sat outside. The old house was stripped of all furniture except the wood stove and it became the office for the junk yard, which later took on the more dignified name of Countryside Auto Parts. We still called it Mel's junk yard.

Mel was a very smart and good-natured person. His strategy was to go around to the used car parts and buy all of the old cars the dealers were having difficulty selling. Often the cars ran, but they usually had problems that made them hard to sell. Some had dents or spots of rust. Some had mechanical problems of one type or another. Some were missing parts such as a spare tire or a window. One Studebaker looked like it was in pretty good shape, but it had bullet holes in the back of it.

Mel knew both my father and me. When we needed a car, we would go to his junk yard to see what he

had. Since

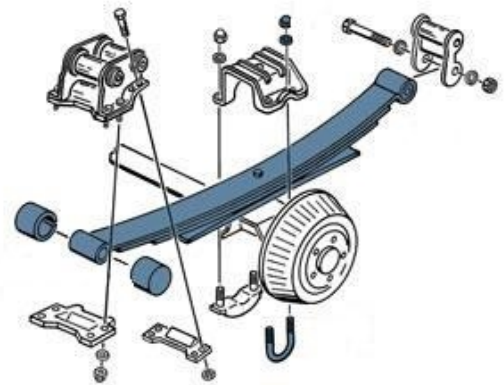
the

independent makes were slightly harder for the car dealers to sell, many of the cars in Mel's junk yard were Hudsons, Nashes, Studebakers, Kaisers, or rarely (since they were always valuable cars) older

Packards. If we found a car that we liked, Mel would sell us the car along with whatever parts we needed which we could take from the other cars in the junk yard. It was an excellent system. We were getting

pretty good cars at very low prices which were, in effect, partially guaranteed.

Several of my friends also knew Mel and used him as the source of cars and parts. He was always helpful, friendly, and tolerant of us. I say "tolerant" for a reason, because he trusted us to be able to take the needed parts off of the junk yard cars, but we were not always fully skilled.



One of the Hudsons I bought had a broken rear spring. Of course, the springs are on the bottom of the car and the bolts holding on the springs were often rusty and hard to get off. Rather than trying to climb under the car and cope with rusty bolts with big wrenches, we would often cut the part off with an acetylene torch and the deal with the rusty bolts later. This is what I did with the spring for the Hudson.

As I was cutting off the spring from the wrecked car, problem developed, however. There was some tall grass during the dry part of the year and the whole car caught on fire.

Mel routinely drained the gas out of the junked cars so he could run his tractor and truck, but we were still concerned about the fumes that might still be in the gas tank. He had us stand out of the way and just let one old Hudson burn to the ground. I had already paid for the spring, but he never charged me for the burned up car.

A few years ago, Dean Helocek, another Bohemian and a relative of Mel Pavelka installed the sprinkler system in our yard at our present home. I asked him if Mel was still living. "No," he said. "I am afraid he passed away a few years ago. He died of a heart attack while dancing the polka on the dance floor." We all miss him very much.



1946 Nash Ambassador

After a while, I thought I would experiment by buying a car from a regular car dealer, so I traded the Hudson in for a 1946 Nash Ambassador at one of the used car dealers in Bloomington. Nashes were good cars, but that particular car was worn out and I

had to take the engine apart several times. I had it for a while, but then I went back to the junk yard.

1949 Kaiser

When I went back to Mel's junk yard, I found a very nice 1949 Kaiser. It had a little rust, but it had very few miles on it. It ran superbly.



Unfortunately, I was driving it to the University one winter day when the streets were very very icy. I came over a small hill and, though I was driving very cautiously, I could not stop at the bottom of the hill and ran into the back of a 1940 LaSalle, a very heavy version of the General Motors Cadillac. There was no damage at all to the LaSalle, but it caved in the grill and radiator of the Kaiser.



So, I went back to see Mel, who had a nearly identical 1949 Kaiser and purchased the front half of that car. I was able to switch the parts to my Kaiser and the parts fit perfectly. Unfortunately, the colors did not match and the car looked a little like it was out of a circus. But, it got me too and from the University.

1949 Hudson

By this time, I had completed two years of college and had moved up in the world by getting a job at IBM. I thought I might try a car in a little better shape, so I found a 1949 Hudson in excellent shape at the Randolph Light Studebaker dealer on Lake Street in Minneapolis. The car ran very well, had good paint, and an interior

that was almost like new. This car was more expensive than I was used to paying. It might have been around \$300.

A few weeks after I bought it I had a problem, however. I was turning left out of my folks driveway on the Bush Lake Road, which was in a very

wooded area with lots of trees that made it hard to see to the left. As I pulled out, Jack Vaness who often drove quite fast, came around the corner and ran into the Hudson. I was not hurt at all because the Hudson was probably the



safest car on the road at the time, but the whole front end of the Hudson was mashed up as was Jack's Plymouth – no match. The accident was settled amicably, but my beautiful Hudson was wrecked.

So, I went to see Mel to see if he had another Hudson. He did, and I took all of the seat and interior out of the good Hudson, put it in the other Hudson, and repainted it. However, the car was not the same because the car from the junk yard was no where near as good. So, I took it back to Mel's junk yard to see what else I might find.

1949 Nash

Mel had just received a very nice 1949 Nash. Having a Nash would appeal to me because Nashes were well known for using very little gas. By then, I was doing a lot of driving in my job as a Customer Engineer (someone who fixes machinery) for IBM. IBM did pay us six cents a mile for using our car, but we had to pay for all of the gasoline which, at that time, could be 30 cents per gallon.

The only problem with the Nash was that it had very poor tires. Mel agreed to provide me with a full set of almost new US Royal tires if I bought the car. US Royal tires were popular, but they had a poor reputation for quality. But, the tires looked good and the car was impressive. So, I traded in the old Hudson and took the Nash.

The Nash was very good, but the tires were terrible. They kept going flat for any number of reasons. It was not only expensive to keep having them fixed, it was taking a lot of time away from my job because often there were problems during the day. So, I finally drove the Nash into Koncord Ford, a dealer near one of my customers in South St. Paul, and traded it in on a new low-priced 1956 Ford.

Lessons from these experiences

As I think back about these many experiences with old cars at a young age, I am thankful for the many lessons that were learned. Among them are:

1. If one of your parents does not let you keep something, there may be an important reason that should be considered (like whether or not the brakes will stop the car).
2. Regardless of how much trouble you have with something you own, parents will usually help you fix it.
3. True friends are honest in their dealings with you and, if they are, it pays to deal with them again.
4. Don't use an acetylene torch in tall grass.
5. If you are going to overhaul an engine, be sure to check the crankshaft bearings.
6. Some cars are better than others. Some cars are worse. One learns a lot by fixing them. These lessons are valuable in other occupations.
7. If you pay little enough for something, you don't have to feel so bad if it does not last forever.

8. It is always amazing to see what can be made out of something others regard as junk.

Best wishes to you all.

And that is the end of the story.