

DAD AND THE BUICK WOODY

By Dennis Knight

As often as I reflect on that day, I'll never resolve what made Dad decide to paint the old car copper. Over the years I've chosen to believe it was spring's gentle wakening of a winter daydream, but it may well have sprung from an encounter with a wee drop of Old Crow.

It must have been about 1955. I was eleven, then, and third in our family of seven kids growing up in Laramie. In a brood that large, there aren't many times when a boy can spend hours one-on-one with his dad, so, if for no other reason, it was a special day for me.

Our venerable 1941 Buick Woody station wagon no longer served as the family car. Her fenders and hood, originally a deep maroon, had faded to an irregular pink under the unfiltered sun of our high Wyoming plains, and the varnish was virtually gone from her wooden sides. But she ran fine and still held utility for our big family.

I didn't know what was afoot that morning when Dad took me with him to Laramie Basin Hardware. He wasn't sure how much it would take, but after consulting with the proprietor, he bought the store's entire inventory of copper spray paint, four cans, with a promise they would take back what he didn't need.

We parked in a shady spot south of the house, and we took turns shaking the first can according to directions, until the metal ball rattled. Imagine my excitement as Dad aligned the nozzle, approached the car, took aim at the prescribed distance, and pushed the button, creating on the swell of the left front fender a large coppery blob, surrounded by an oily blotch, going nowhere in particular, but not staying in one place either.

Dad said nothing—not to me, not to the car, and not to the paint—but I knew he was at one of life's crossroads. Would he try to wipe off the mess and take the remaining cans back to the store, or would he spray on? Would another press of the nozzle mitigate the damage or merely embellish it? Would invoking the help of the Archangels save him from the wrath of Mom?

Courageously, he squeezed the nozzle again, and then again, using increasingly broader strokes, until the can ran empty. He had only covered about four square feet, but had passed the point of no return.

Soon we had emptied all four cans on one fender. So we returned to the store hoping a new shipment had arrived in the ninety minutes since we cleaned them out. Laramie Basin Hardware was still out of copper, had none on order, and was about the sorriest damned outfit Dad had ever dealt with. We went to every other place in town, even Woolworth's, and bought the town out, amassing a sack full of several different brands of spray paints, each claiming to be copper.

Dad's vision of a shiny copper Buick had dimmed, and with his inventory limited, he narrowed the scope to painting just the metal parts – the fenders and hood. When it became obvious the various brands and dye lots would produce tones from rust to orange to gold, sometimes even copper, he tried to blend the variations and make them part of the esthetic. There was little conversation between us, but I could sense his desperation to be done with the awful job before Mom came home. I stayed with him to the end.

I've forgotten how many cans of paint we sprayed that day, but not the result—a coppery 1941 Buick station wagon that shimmered in the bright Wyoming sun. It shimmered when it was cloudy. It shimmered in the moonlight. Lord, how it shimmered.

Mom and my big sister Maureen refused ever again to be seen in the vehicle. The rest of us kind of liked it, especially after Dad re-varnished the wooden sides and painted the trim pieces turquoise. I took proprietary pride in the automobile, having been an agent in her transformation.

Eventually, Dad and one of his cronies converted our Buick Woody into a fishing car. They removed the back seat and installed a trap door, making a cache for over-limit fish, safe from the game warden. But that's a different story.