

RUMBLE SEATS AND RUNNING BOARDS

By Fred Hobbs

For teenagers, cars and joy rides in them were especially favorite pastimes in the days just after the end of World War II in the 1940s. For many folks, gasoline and tire rationing during the war had prevented, or at least curbed, driving not connected with jobs or other vital needs for automobile transportation. But after the war, adults in the family could again purchase new cars. And it was common to see teens, or at least one teen in the neighborhood tooling around in a jalopy of late 1920s or early 1930s vintage.

These cars often were modified in some way, maybe sporting a kooky-looking paint job, fender skirts or special wheels (if the kid or his folks had the money to pay for them.) All the models of that era still had running boards, so pals could stand outside for a ride holding on to the door if the window was rolled down. Our family's next-door neighbor even fashioned a wooden barrier on the passenger side running board where the kids' German shepherd rode. (The SPCA wasn't around back then!)

My jalopy was a 1929 DeSoto coupe with a running board and another very cool feature of the time, a rumble seat. This was an upholstered exterior seat opening out from the rear deck of the car. In British English, it was called a "dicky seat." Research didn't turn up a reason for the terms "dicky" or "rumble."

This was long before the word "rumble" came into use to describe a fight between rival urban gangs. In some references, the term "mother-in-law" seat was applied, apparently designed to remove her from the dialogue underway in the main cab. I don't know how your mother-in-law would have reacted, but my wife's mother and certainly my own mom would have not taken kindly to accepting that *al fresco* transportation opportunity.

My popularity with my school chums was enhanced greatly by providing the potential of an exciting ride in a vehicle with both rumble seat and running boards. This was especially true on Saturday mornings in the fall when the Denver Prep league public schools competed on the gridiron. The teams played at the old University of Denver Hilltop Stadium. Not one, or two, but up to ten kids could pile inside and outside the old DeSoto; three in the "main cabin," three in the rumble seat and two on each running board.

As the driver, I proceeded very cautiously. Nothing tragic ever happened and for some reason Denver's men in blue were busy elsewhere so we were never pulled over by the police. Today, I wouldn't have been able to drive around the block without being caught. Of course, the car wouldn't have a running board or a rumble seat, anyway.

For some reason, my vintage auto attracted not only the football game crowd, but a few of the popular and pretty girls. I'd like to think it was my dynamic personality, charm and good looks that caught their eyes. More likely, it was the notion of a joy ride in a funky car with wooden spokes on the wheels and a rumble seat. The car's steering wheel had a "necker's knob" which meant I could drive with one hand and put my other arm around the girl at the same time. But, I lost out on the best scenario. When we "double dated", I was just the chauffeur of a classic car. Her friend was making out with a guy back there in the rumble seat!