

Driving It Home

By Sheila Johnson

Although I rarely research or remember the different makes, models, or years of automobiles, I have a cache of memorable experiences of the cars owned by my birth family and beyond.

As far back as I can remember, my Grandfather loved driving brand new cars, and as a consequence of his adoration of these four-wheeled buggies, he would trade in his nearly new car for the latest model of what Chrysler had to offer the market every year. Perhaps this was his personal recompense for suffering through WWI in a segregated army and returning to a civilian life that was anything but civil. Maybe the repetitiveness of buying “new” helped him to endure the old practices of racism and bigotry in the world in which he lived. Or maybe he just enjoyed the smell and feel of new leather and the look of clean and shine which the US Army had undoubtedly imbedded into his mind. Placing all the maybes aside, I am certain that my Grandfather took great pride in driving his new Chrysler to the doctor’s office and back, to church and back, to the supermarket and back, occasionally to the bullfights and back, and driving Miss Edna, his wife of over fifty years, to the hair dresser to get her hair pressed and curled, and no doubt, dyed jet black!

When I was six years old, our family moved out of my grandparents’ house into a place that I would call home for the next thirteen years of my life. I can vividly remember the smell of copper and other metals flowing *out* of the vast open windows of the commercial space where my Grandfather hand-crafted priceless sculptures for a living, *into* the screened windows and doors of a loving abode that sheltered us until my parents were financially able to buy their own home. Only a narrow alley and a wide world of isms separated the life within the walls of these two parallel structures. When moving day arrived, I clearly remember my brother and me stuffing the back seat of our 1957 gray Studebaker with our most prized possessions only leaving room for our small bodies. That ‘57 Studebaker was our moving van, our getaway car, our chariot to the Promised Land, and it remained with us for many years until someone offered my Daddy a large sum of money for his “antique” car that could still run a great race.

The cars in my life came and went, but none like the bright yellow 1980 Malibu Chevrolet Station Wagon that I thought was the answer to every life-challenge that existed (does the word Station Wagon even still exist?)! I could carry my three kids, all of the neighbors’ kids, their dogs, groceries, extra sets of sports clothes, folding chairs, and even the kitchen sink if I needed to. Baby Girl was a lifesaver! My children made sure they got rides with their friends, thus saving me gas money; my then husband refused to drive it—truly making it a girl car; cars on the highways and byways moved out of my way—I had the road to myself; I could always find her in ANY parking lot; and no one ever asked to borrow her. My Daddy loved her; because she almost reached antique status, and although my Grandfather wasn’t around to meet her, he would have accepted and loved her certainly not for her age, but for who she was and how she made a difference in my life!