

## FIRST CAR By Frank Ball

Alpine, a small rural community in eastern San Diego County was a place where young people were raised, free of many civilized constraints placed on the youth of more urban settings. Perhaps my impression is too generalized because of the style my family used in raising children. We were free to do almost anything and we often did. My father was a doctor, a pathologist. He kept very busy with his clinical laboratory in downtown San Diego, spending about two hours a day just driving to and from work. My mother was inclined to have faith in the innate ability of human children to choose the activities that were good for them. Perhaps this remarkable attitude resulted, to some extent, from her lack of confidence in her own ability to make better choices than her children.

As a pre teen I thought there was nothing more interesting than automobiles. My father bought a new '41 Mercury station wagon. A "woody" is what they are called now days. When my friends came over to visit, we could spend hours in the car, in the garage. We would take turns in the driver's seat shifting, steering, clutching and breaking, providing ample vocalizations for proper sound effects. In our minds, it was so realistic we began to think we really were able to drive the car.

I think I was ten years old when the subject of this story started to develop. My brother, a year and half my senior and I were just walking around exploring our neighborhood. The property adjoining ours was that of Ye Alpine Tavern, a commercial enterprise in the business of providing domestic accommodation for rent by the day, week or month. It was a hotel in function but looked like a large house with out-lying cabins. It had considerable historic significance, being in business since the days of the stagecoach. In fact it had been a stagecoach stop, one day's drive out of San Diego.

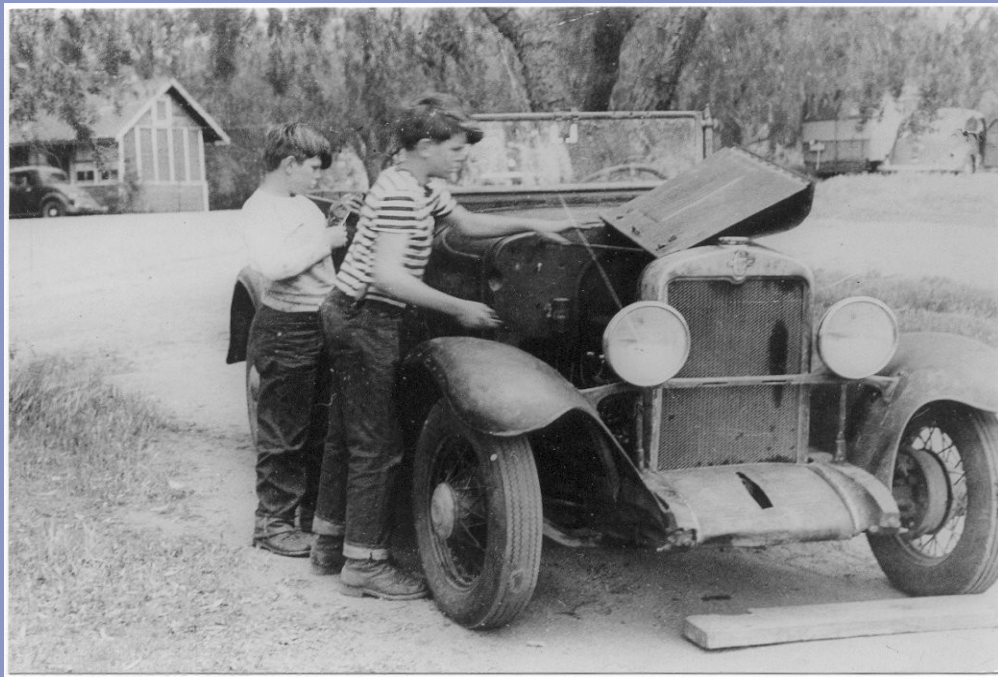
We approached Ye Alpine Tavern from their back yard so it might have been any rural back yard. We walked up to an unpainted barn. It was built on sloping ground. Posts supported the floor along one side forming a ground level shelter without flooring or doors. In this shelter there was a 1929 Chevrolet roadster. This ten-year-old car was in pretty good condition. It was dusty from disuse but had all the fenders and running boards, looking like a street-worthy car. As we studied this car we did not notice a man approach. When he was quite close, he said, "Are you interested in cars?" Not knowing this man or his intentions we mumbled something nonspecific. In a friendly way, he said, "If you think you could make it run, I would buy any parts you need to put it in shape."

Such an offer could not have come to more receptive ears. We gave an affirmative answer to his offer. Both the answer and the offer showed immense naiveté. Unhampered by judgments based on experience, we set about the business of making this thing run. First we purloined all of the tools we could find. A fair supply of tools was available because our ranch had a couple of wells with water pumps and a tractor that would only exchange as much time of useful work as it required in time of tool application. If the sequence of our diagnostics seems a little odd and misguided, keep in mind the limited experience with which we were working and the utter lack of restraint provided by the car's owner.

We did almost nothing that would have encouraged the engine to run. We just started to take things apart. It was not many days before we had removed the cylinder head and oil pan. The pistons came out and the timing chain was removed. We told our benefactor of the parts that would be needed. We asked to have new babbitt poured in the bearings, new rings, a gasket set and other detail parts I don't remember. By the time

we started to put things back together it had become a grimy scene. The workspace had a dirt floor and there was a goodly collection of oil sludge on the internal engine parts. We had little facility to clean parts with solvent. I remember lying on my back on the dirt floor trying to get the connecting rods bolted back on the crankshaft. Many grubby handprints were left on the bearing surfaces as it went together.

Finally the day came when we had most of the engine parts back in the approximate place they had come from. We put in some motor oil and pumped up the tires. The engine was so stiff the starter would barely turn it over. The tavern owner offered to tow us with another vehicle to try to get it started. We hooked up a rope and began to drag the roadster all around the unpaved yard. In third gear we could sometimes get the engine to turn over. In lower gears it simply slid the back wheels. We could not get any indication that it was even thinking about running. We stopped several times to make adjustments and check things for forgotten details. Just about the time we were about to give up for the day, the engine gave some hint of life. Persistence began to win over method. Soon, amid a good deal of smoke, the engine even kept running without the towing help. A short time later the activity stopped altogether. The smoke, nay grease vapor, continued to rise off the engine, indicating it was overheated to the extreme. It was not boiling - we had forgotten to fill the cooling system with water.



Eventually, following the addition of water and various other needs, we learned to make the engine run for more or less indefinite intervals. The end of the day forced us to park our project. Before we left for home, the owner offered to sell us the car for \$40. Now, he had to have twice that tied up in parts he had supplied to our project. In retrospect I think he was just interested in watching us deal with this learning experience of total immersion. A tenant had left him with the vehicle in exchange for \$40 of owed rent. He had no need for the car, running or not.

We eventually amassed the fortune of \$40 and took possession. The car was unregistered at the time of purchase and it remained so. We took it home where we could work on it over a cement floor inside a garage. It was a long time before the car ran well. I remember the first time we measured the fuel mileage, it was 7 miles per gallon.

This car had several parts that we began to regard as more decorative than useful. The hood of course was open more than it was closed. To save time and trouble we began to prefer to leave the hood at home. Soon we could no longer remember where the hood was stored. There was a small decorative sheet-metal panel filling the space between the frame rails in front of the radiator and behind the bumper. Parts like this would be removed to work on something and never put back in place, because we did not feel the usefulness. It was not long before the fenders and the bumpers went the way of these “purely decorative” parts. The doors too, became a nuisance. By the time we had taken the engine apart enough times to learn how to put it back together well enough to run properly, the whole thing was a much lighter car.

We found out soon enough, there were other parts on a car that should work properly besides the engine. Once we were taking a joy ride with few kids our age. (Kids our age were the only humans reckless enough to ever go for a ride in our car.) Once in awhile the driver would notice a catch in the steering mechanism. It did not become a serious matter until the catch turned into a jam. Once while coming out of a turn, the steering would not straighten out. The car spun out of control on the dirt road and ran up a three-foot bank at the side of the road. The speed was not great and no one was hurt not even the passenger who was thrown out of the missing right-hand door. At that point the steering seemed to work all right but we returned home to study the problem. On taking apart the steering gear, we found a thrust ball bearing had fallen apart and the worm and sector gear had picked up a ball, temporarily jamming the action.

Another time we were driving up the narrow dirt road into Puitz Valley. As we came to a blind right turn, we met one of the few residents of that area. In fact we met suddenly and abruptly, as this '41 Plymouth collided, left-front wheel to left-front wheel. Our right-front wheel was climbing the vertical mud bank on the right but the other driver thought it was our fault. She was so used to driving in and out of that road without seeing another car, she did not expect to see us around the turn. We ended up pulling the Plymouth fender away from the tire so she could drive on. Other than a lot of grumbling, nothing more came of the accident.

Our travels were fairly limited for a couple of reasons. We did not want to get farther from home than we would want to walk. We tried to avoid roads that were likely to have Highway Patrol on duty. A few times we were daring enough to press the limits of this envelope. We once went as far as the high ground overlooking Tecate, Mexico and to El Cajon at night to see a movie. To avoid the main highway, we went down Dehesa Road where Singing Hills golf course is now. Our car used a gallon of oil to get to El Cajon and back, about fifteen or twenty miles.

Oil and gas consumption was not much of a problem to us. We got oil as needed from a gas station that drained it from cars of owners who were wise enough to get rid of it. My father bought gasoline in bulk. It was delivered by a fuel truck and put into a few fifty-gallon drums on a rack down by the barn. From there it was dispensed to various cars and a tractor. The accounting of the gasoline usage was very loose so sometimes young neighborhood men with enough chutzpah would fuel their cars at night without ever being seen.

When I was in the sixth grade at Alpine Union School I would sometimes drive my car to school. This did not happen very often but when it did, the scene was a big hit with the school kids. It was, by contrast, not a big hit with the teachers. They did not know how to handle the situation. The exact bound of teacher responsibility was poorly defined. Making this problem more delicate for them was the fact that my father was Chairman of the School Board.