

## Chapter Six, Cars

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Lefty fell in love with cars as a teenager. He also loved baseball, The Beatles, Rock and Roll music in general, and girls. After his family moved from the small town to the city, he discovered his new high school offered no automotive program, no baseball team, no modern music program, and little else of interest to offer him.<sup>92</sup>

Absent the ability to play junior high or senior high school baseball, he played some football. He had developed excellent skills at catching a football, if he could touch a football pass, he would catch it. Not tall or fast enough to be a wide receiver, his coaches designated him as a defensive back. This involved tackling two hundred pound plus running backs and then having like sized offensive and defensive lineman fall on top him during the resulting scrum. He was also to defend the rare forward pass attempt. The game to him lacked any of the classic elegance, and time-honored traditions of baseball, just brutality on a clock.

He was unmotivated and not a particularly good student, at least until later when attending college when he discovered some things of interest to him. In high school, in addition to his general classes, he took a metal shop class, constructed the traditional bird feeder and garden hose rack. He also machined small pieces on a metal lathe, and did some arc welding. He took an electronics class and built a primitive transistor radio that he would use at night in bed under the covers, listening to WLS out of Chicago for rock and roll music, and for late west coast

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<sup>92</sup> Much later, he would use his nonprofit group to install 100 computers in his old high school, and 50 computers in his old junior high school on one Saturday. This was his way of contributing to a compelling and relevant education for these kids. His group would mobilize a semi-truck load of equipment, and about 20 volunteers to travel the 120 miles, split the group into two teams, install and image the computers in both schools with the school districts software image, and return home in time for dinner. They helped provide a nice surprise when those kids showed up on the following Monday morning for school, to see some tools that would assist them with their education. The local newspaper acclaimed the projects, and the group even made the local TV station newscast.

baseball games. He signed up for a printing class, at his dad's suggestion, and learned how to set type to setup blocks of type on a printing press by hand. Twenty years later, he would recall this experience when he first set type electronically using desktop publishing software on computers.

A sketchy, musty, dirty, and smelly cigar and magazine store several blocks away became where he bought all the Car Craft, Hot Rod, Motor Trend, or other car magazines he could find each month. These became his high school textbooks, and he read them thoroughly while he listened to Beatles music. He pursued his interest in cars on his own, with the same intensity and single-mindedness that governed the pursuit of everything in which he had an interest.

His dad would not let him drive a car to school, a city block away, until after he graduated high school for fear, perhaps well founded, of him not graduating. He used a 1952 Chevy pickup from his dad's shop, with a six-cylinder engine and a "three on the tree"<sup>93</sup>shifter, on weekends to be able to travel to the racetrack. Each week he saw the stock car races on Saturday nights and the drag races on Sunday mornings. He closely followed one stock car driver in particular who needed to travel a long distance to the race. He became notorious for showing up late, and missing the time trials that determined his starting position. Penalized for this by being placed at the rear of the pack, his charges to the front were epic to the overwhelming cheers of the crowd. He was a tremendous driver and would frequently end up victorious, despite the obvious disadvantage. He was infamous for cutting a hole on his racing helmet to allow him to smoke cigarettes during the yellow caution flag delays.

One Saturday he noticed this racecar at a local hotel and stopped to watch them wrenching on the racecar. The problem was that the dipstick tube was cracked and leaking too much oil to race. Lefty, who then worked at a Ford dealership, convinced the parts manager to open the store to buy a replacement. Many years later, he learned that this driver now in severe physical pain, committed suicide by shotgun at a cemetery, after placing a 911 call saying, "There's gonna be a dead body...It's a suicide."

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<sup>93</sup> "Three on the tree" refers to a three speed manual transmission shifted from the steering column (tree) shift lever.

He also saw demolition derby races on the figure 8 track, where near misses and tremendous crashes would occasionally occur at the crossover point.

He filled many, many, notebooks with the tips and tricks he learned from the car magazines he read. He continued doing this while he was later overseas in the Army. He was preparing himself to be a racer someday.

As time passed, Lefty decided that his dad *meant* was he could not drive a car to school, but always pushing the envelope<sup>94</sup>, it might be Ok to buy one to work on. He found a 1964 Ford Falcon two door Sprint, black with yellow stripes on the sides, at a local repo company for sale cheap. Missing a transmission and not drivable, he managed to pull the car home into the driveway with the help of some buddies. Meantime however, he rode with his buddies and did lunch hour bleach burnouts on a street outside his high school. Their mothers borrowed bleach applied on the street in front of the rear tires, served to make the tire rubber softer to produce some smoke on spinning, just like the racers.

His engine, built in his parent's basement, was a Ford 289 to replace the old worn out 260 V8 in the Falcon. He bought the engine at a junkyard, stripped it down, and re-bored in an effort to boost the horsepower from the original 195 up to 275. He made sure that the engine block, cylinder heads, and connecting rods were magnetic magnaflux<sup>95</sup> tested for stress cracks. The auto parts store and machine shop were conveniently located a few blocks from his home and directly across the street from the gas station where he worked. He spent most of the money he earned, directly across the street from where he earned it. He also bought performance parts from Carol Shelby, who was a famous race driver at the time. These parts were delivered to his house

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<sup>94</sup> *He would later see this behavior in his youngest daughter when asking for a cookie and being told no, it was too close to supper time. She would then beg and when he relented to just one, she would ask for one, and one more. This was as if this still sounded close enough to one for her.*

<sup>95</sup> *Magnaflux inspection is a non-destructive testing process for detecting surface and slightly subsurface cracks in ferromagnetic materials. The process involves a magnetic field being applied from an outside source. Ferrous particles are then applied and if an area of flux leakage is present, the particles are attracted to the area to form the indication of a crack. At one point, Lefty built his own device.*

## The Insider

while he attended high school. His mom would give him a look of dismay when he would hand her a wad of hundreds of dollars of cash on his way off to school, asking her to give to the delivery driver when he delivered the packages COD. His engine was mounted on his engine stand down in the basement, but this too at the end of the day needed to move out of his house.



The Falcon

The engine cylinders were bored 0.030 oversize, and used 13:1 compression domed aluminum pistons with valve cutouts. He initially installed it into the two-door Falcon Sprint body. Later he mounted this engine into a Ranchero, and the finally a Fairlane body. The engine was outfitted with a Holley 780 dual feed, double pumper, four-barrel carburetor mounted onto an aluminum high-rise intake manifold. Outfitted with sodium filled exhaust valves working off the high lift camshaft with molybdenum cam lobes, the high strength double valve springs, and screw-in rocker studs would prevent valve float<sup>96</sup> at the high rpms expected. Teflon valve seals, ported, polished, and shaved cylinder heads with steel shim head gaskets, completed the top end. The cylinder heads topped with Shelby brushed aluminum black and silver valve covers. A Shelby cast aluminum oil pan incorporating a large cooling-finned oil sump, for the bottom end.

He bought red Shelby tuned exhaust headers, a plexiglass cooling fan which would flatten reducing air drag at high engine speeds. In time, the dual exhaust system would have cherry bomb glass pack mufflers. A trunk mounted electric fuel pump ensured a more than adequate fuel supply to the Holley. The

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<sup>96</sup> Valve float is an adverse condition that can occur at high engine speeds when the poppet valves inside an internal combustion engine valve train; do not properly follow the closure phase of the camshaft lobe profile. This reduces engine efficiency and performance. There is also a significant risk of severe engine damage due to valve spring damage and/or pistons contacting the valves.

## The Insider

ignition system was complete with high voltage rotor, distributor cap and plug wires and Autolite racing spark plugs.

He completed building the engine inside a rented garage, which was for storage only, but he took this landlord's suggestion loosely. He came close to accidentally burned the building down one evening when using a borrowed oxy/acetylene torch. He wanted to remove the rear bumper to be re-chromed but needed to cut the rusted bolts off. The rubber mountings caught fire, but he got it put out right away with no damage to car or garage.



The Ranchero



The Fairlane

A Ford Torino four-speed transmission and clutch with Hurst alum T-handle shifter completed the drive train to a stock 3.53 ratio rear end. Fifteen-inch slicks on black steel rims on the rear, thirteen inch skinny's on slotted chrome wheels for the front, combined with the rear air shocks, gave the car a significantly sexy forward rake. He also mounted traction bars on the rear leaf spring suspension. He installed a huge Ford 100 lb. tractor battery purchased at his dad's shop, in the right side of the Falcon's trunk for extra electrical power and traction weight. He used a heavy-duty welding cable from the battery to the starter. It was *Street Legal* in 1971.

One evening he and his best friend Steve traveled a hundred mile south to a large dragstrip to see to the nighttime drag races. At this time, neither of them held drivers licenses, which they called *coupons*, due to their various street racing mischief. His mom loaned her Cougar for the trip under the impression that Lefty retained his coupon. Neither of them discouraged this assumption. They saw nitro-fueled funny cars flames shooting out of the engines exhaust pipes, running night drag races at this track for the first time.

Lefty told the following version of a story to his daughter when she reached the legal driving age.

## Speedshops

*In my teenaged years, us gear heads would migrate to something called Speed Shops to buy our high performance car parts. A guy who ran one of these out of an old barn in the country, acquired the name Fat Al, and he was. We bought brushed aluminum or felt covered T-handles for speed shifting<sup>97</sup> our cars, hi-rise aluminum intake manifolds, exhaust headers, and bought the high strength connecting rods with 3/8 inch high-tension steel bolts made specifically for high RPM engines.*

*My Falcon was missing a transmission, so I bought one at a junkyard that came out of a newer but wrecked Ford Torino. The transmission came complete with a Hurst shifter, but the shifting lever was broken off during the crash. I took this broken part to Fat Al's to buy a replacement lever, but he did not carry one in his inventory and was unable to order one. Al suggested that I send it off to Hurst telling them that I had broken it while speed shifting. I did and they sent me a new one complete with the Hurst linkage. I made out great on that one.<sup>98</sup>*

*Another speed shop we gear heads frequented was located in a small nearby town. Named Blanchard's, we*

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<sup>97</sup> Speed shifting is a drag racing technique with a manual transmission where the driver shifts gears as fast as possible to create rapid acceleration of the vehicle. This technique is accomplished by rapid depressing and releasing the clutch pedal during a shift change while holding the accelerator pedal down.

<sup>98</sup> Ford as with most OEM's of the day, used cheaper, and bendable factory shift linkage to save money and not the high quality Hurst shift linkage required for seamless speed shifting.

## The Insider

*would go there for speed parts and engine machining services. Blanchard was a dragster racer. A dragster driver also ran another shop, which became one of their hangouts. He and his buddies, would line up at the drag strip on Sunday mornings in the pits behind where they did the burnouts to warm the tires for better traction, and get a smoke and powdered tire rubber bath, and a whiff of the excess nitro fuel from the exhaust of those engines. The cloud of debris would cause them to cough and eyes would tear up, but they thought that this was a cool experience regardless. These gear heads wanted badly to be racers.*

Due to the high compression engine in his car, he needed to use Gulf Super No Knox 100 octane gasoline or better yet, the hard to find Sunoco super premium 260, a 104-octane fuel to prevent engine knock. Engine knock or ping, is caused when the combustion of the air/fuel mixture in the engine cylinder does not burn completely in response to its ignition from the spark plug.<sup>99</sup>



The Sunoco pump



The blend selector



No-Nox fuel

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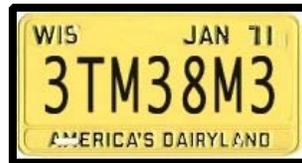
<sup>99</sup> *The development of true high-octane gasolines came to a halt (along with the muscle car era) because of the Clean Air Act of 1970; (Nixon strikes again) which required automakers to reduce the pollutant emissions of their engines. The short cut route the carmakers took, rather than extensive engineering work, was to use a catalytic converter, requiring the use of lower octane unleaded gasoline.*

## The Insider

When Lefty married he gave up work on the car, the rented garage, and sold the Falcon body. He kept the engine however as he could not let it go. The Falcon would never cruise the main avenue, which the members of the Street Stocks car club, called "The Ave." They drove a cruising loop to show off their cars through downtown, not unlike the famous Woodard Avenue in the Motor City Detroit, or the Sunset Strip in Hollywood, and probably most main streets around the country in those days.

At times, we would park and just watch the cars go back and forth. They loved the sound of these engines on acceleration, but also appreciated them at idle. The high lift camshafts caused inefficient combustion causing the engines to lope and gallop roughly at low rpms. Occasionally they were offered rides, and Lefty once accepted an awesome ride around the cruising loop in a Shelby Cobra model with the 289 engine and triple Weber carburetors. Another time he remembered a ride in a 375 HP 396 Chevy Super Sport, owned by a rather odd guy who would eat paper napkins on a drunken dare at the pizza place after the bars closed. This short trip ended up in the hedges of a residential home on a back street.

They would occasionally catch a glimpse of a hot blonde woman in a yellow Corvette convertible with a vanity license plate. The teenaged boys thought this translated to, if you can beat me, you can eat me. They never knew anyone to race her, must less beat her.



There were always a lot of hot rod cars around. Camaros, lots of 55 and 57 Chevy's, Mustangs, the occasional Ford Fairlane, or Mercury Cyclone, Plymouth Roadrunners, Dodge Chargers, Corvettes, Olds 442's, Plymouth Barracudas, Dodge Challengers, Pontiac Firebirds and the occasional Shelby Cobra.

His best friend Steve built a 37 Chevy four door sedan housing a souped-up 283 engine. His buddy Tom, had a 55 Chevy where the complete front clip (fenders, hood, and bumper) tipped

## The Insider

forward for ease of servicing, just like James Taylor and Dennis Wilson in the movie *Two Lane Blacktop*. His buddy Tony owned a powerful silver 1967 Fairlane GT 335 HP 390 engine who frequently played the Young Rascals on the eight-track tape deck. Riding along, he heard this smooth engines powerful sound as foreground to great background Felix Cavaliere keyboard music. His friend Reggie owned a 440 engine Roadrunner, and they attended stock car and drag races both in and out of state. Reggie sometimes allowed him to drive the powerful car. Reggie liked to listen to some great old Neil Diamond music from his eight-track tape deck. This was the car with the funny horn sound. Beep! Beep!

His buddy Danny, Joe, and other guys built souped-up *Sleeper* cars. These were stock-looking four-door sedans, or odd models of cars like a Ford Maverick to keep the police away from them. The gear heads tuned ears however, would know who they were by the sound of the engines.

Street racing was mostly bluffed or planned here, due to the excessive police attention. A lot of testosterone-fueled bravado also occurred regarding running for pinks,<sup>100</sup> and blowing each other's doors off. The most serious street racing happened on a lonely stretch of new four-lane road cut through the farm fields leading out to the airport, late at night. Those without traction bars<sup>101</sup> would request a running start to the race. Lefty remembered one such event where after the race he noticed cords showing through the tire tread on one of his rear slicks. One misplaced stone hitting that spot at high speed and this may have been curtains for the Ranchero, and perhaps him. Luckily, on that day, his guardian angel was able to fly as fast as his car, but this gave him some pause about street racing.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> *Car titles were commonly referred to as pink slips, or pinks.*

<sup>101</sup> *Traction bars are steel bar devices, which clamp on the rear suspension leaf springs to stiffen them and prevent wheel hop. Wheel hop occurs when severe power is sent to the drivetrain causing the tires to lose contact with the pavement, (hopping up and down) thus reducing tire traction.*

<sup>102</sup> *"Auto racing began 5 minutes after the second car was built." - Henry Ford*

## The Insider

They eventually formed a car club, and made plaques to display inside the rear window of their cars. They held meetings to talk about car stuff, and plan trips to drag races, junk yards, car shows, and other sites of interest. They would travel in convoys and would feel that this was indeed cool. The car club plaques unfortunately made them visible targets for the overactive local police force, and the club soon disbanded, as they could not afford to pay the resultant tickets.

When stopped by the police for excessive noise, they would pack steel wool into the tail pipe via a broomstick, drill a hole behind, and put in a small pin. After an inspection down at the police station, they would travel out to the country pull the pin and blow the wad out, until the next time.

The story of how the expensive high performance engine would later find its way into a 64 Falcon Ranchero was simple. He took a job at a Ford dealership outside of town near the racetrack, and one snowy day on the way home some joker crossed the centerline and sideswiped his 50 Ford pickup. The crash crushed the left side of the vehicle and ripped the rear axle right out of its mounts. His truck now totaled, he learned his first and last lesson needed, about insurance companies, as they screwed him on the accident that was not his fault, and he only got a few hundred dollars.

He bought the Ranchero from the Ford dealership and shortly after the original engine failed. Those engines used neoprene valve seals would dry up and crack, break into pieces, which would then finally plug the filter screen to the oil pump. Starved for oil, the engine would burn up and seize. He towed the broken truck back to his buddies car shop, which doubled as the family boathouse. He spent the next few days installing his high performance engine. This same engine would later find its way into a 1962 Ford Fairlane 500 two door. Being convinced of, and resigned to his impending death as Nixon's Vietnam cannon fodder, he sold the Fairlane with his engine in the days before reporting to the Army.

In his earlier days of his corporate work years, Lefty drove the rust colored Scout for ten plus years and over 100,000 miles. In the interim he replaced the rusted out rear quarter panels at a high school buddies body shop. A problem with the gauge or coating of the Japanese steel they used, caused them to rust out

prematurely. With a newly installed cassette stereo player and speakers, the Scout looked and sounded new. When gas prices spiked, and his driving distance to work increased, he sold the Scout to a local firefighter, and bought a used and more economical four-wheel drive Jeep Cherokee, four cylinder, four speed.

The Scout was good to him over those years, but once had let him down, at of course the worst possible time. One late Sunday afternoon on the way back from a vacation up north, the engine overheated. Knowing the radiator was getting older and that this was a hot summer, he took it to a radiator shop for cleaning inside an acid bath and rodded<sup>103</sup> prior to the trip. In watching the leak now, steam rolling out of the hood and grille on the side of the road, he saw the seam split apart on the upper tank, which made for a horrible leak. No stop-leak gunk would fix this one. He pulled into a gas station off the interstate and the attendant told him that since this was Sunday, no mechanics were on duty and also he would soon be closing. The attendant did not know anything about fixing cars, but was helpful finding a propane torch and some solder inside the shop. They did not find any flux cleaner paste however. Lefty always carried tools, perhaps a throwback to the unreliable cars he owned during his younger days. It then became just a matter of pulling the radiator out, and re-soldering the seam. No flux was available to clean the repair area, and he needed to improvise using a can of available root beer soda from a vending machine. He got it back together and they finally got home a few hours later than expected. The next day he bought a replacement radiator.

Through his business, he would later lease a 92 Cherokee, 96 Grand Cherokee, which he called Black Beauty, a 2000 Grand Cherokee, and a 2004 Commander. He finally bought a 2008 Commander, because the economy had tanked with leases no longer available to him. He liked Jeeps for the winter snows, pulling trailers, for vacations, and of course to haul computers and such.

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<sup>103</sup> *Rodding a radiator is accomplished by removing the top and bottom tanks. The core is then cleaned by passing a cleaning rod down through the tubes. This is typically done when radiators age and become clogged with rust, scale, and various mineral deposits from the water and antifreeze coolants.*

The Insider



**1984 Cherokee Sport**



**2000 Grand Cherokee**



**2008 Jeep Commander**