

Dick's First Car

by Dick Woodside

Don Robertson says that hand-me-down cars from relatives don't count, so this is the story of the first car I got with my own money. As a high school student, I had the benefit of borrowing my parents' car. At university, I had the benefit of walking. After graduating, I continued my career as a pedestrian through my first few years of practising law in downtown Toronto. We lived at Bay and Gerrard. Nancy worked 900 meters away at Bay and Queen, while I had the longer 1,500 meter walk to Bay and King. So, pedestrianism was vastly more practical than automobile ownership. Budget Rent-A-Car was on another corner of Bay and Gerrard, so weekend trips to visit our parents were easy too.

Eventually, being prudent gave way to being profligate. At the grand old age of 29, and with the big three-oh fast approaching, the search for a personal reward came down to a choice between two sporty red convertibles. But to be certain that a convertible would be right for us, we stepped across the street to Budget Rent-A-Car to take a Mustang convertible for a weekend trip to Ottawa. Our return on Sunday afternoon found me getting sunburned and wishing I had a hat. When we came upon a highway closure and sat for a few hours just inching along, I was forced to put the convertible top up. Too late, of course, and I got a fairly severe sunburn out of the deal.

Not being a quick learner, though, I still went to test drive those two sporty red convertibles. The shifter on an Alfa Romeo protrudes from the instrument panel at an unusual angle but, on this particular car, the clutch was so stiff it nearly required both feet to change gears. The other choice was a Maserati Biturbo convertible. Bright red, nice black cloth top, supple beige leather, and quite a bit more comfortable than the Alfa Romeo. But it had a major flaw: it was an automatic, not a manual. On the other hand, it was technically a used car with a hefty discount, due to having a whopping 3,000 km on it. The original owner ordered it with an automatic to give to his wife as a Valentine's Day present. Soon after, his Ferrari died a horrible death, and the husband took over the keys to the Maserati. It didn't take him long to regret having ordered the automatic, and so he traded it in on a new Ferrari, leaving the Maserati on the showroom floor for just the right person, for whom a whopping discount would outweigh the disdain of true sportscar drivers.



Everybody I knew was happy to go for a ride and experience the acceleration when those two turbos kicked in. It wasn't long, though, before I realized that I was participating in a joint custody arrangement. I got the Maserati on weekends only, while the dealership had it most weeks. The fuel injectors were constantly being fouled by rubber particles because the engine was sucking out the insides of the fuel

hoses. The dealership would replace one or two hoses and give the car back to me "all fixed". After repeating this song and dance for several weeks running, I asked why they didn't just replace all the fuel hoses at once. "Oh, the manufacturer would never accept such a warranty claim", the dealer insisted. But replacing the hoses one or two at a time would work. It did, eventually. But it certainly tarnished my impression of my shiny new toy.



For our 30th birthdays, Nancy and I took a trip to Connecticut, Maine, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Cape Breton and back through Quebec. The Maserati performed beautifully and we had a great time. On a freeway in Maine, the low-fuel light shone brightly once we reached an unpopulated area where the exits are 40 or 50 km apart. Driving a

gingerly 55 mph, I wished I had space in the trunk for a gas can. And then it began to rain. At a certain point, the wasted fuel in stopping and then accelerating back up to highway speed becomes less a concern than whether there would be much lasting damage if the interior got really soaked. An overpass appeared, as did the reasoning that it would be better to be dry and out of gas on the side of the highway, than to be soaking wet and out of gas on the side of the highway. We did manage to reach the exit and a gas station, without Nancy having to get out and push.



In Nova Scotia, the single lane highways result in long queues of traffic stuck behind the slowest vehicle on the road. I began to think that the motoring public would be best served by outlawing camping and boating altogether. But the long steep hills bring relief in the form of a passing lane, where everybody tries to pass the front of the line. If they can. The Maserati's twin

turbos always shot us past the crest of the hill, only once attracting the attention of the RCMP on the downhill glide. In Nova Scotia, the police are generous enough to give a warning on the first stop, but they enter the warning in the computer, so the second stop is certainly going to result in a ticket, so they tell me.

We reached Cape Breton one evening, and set out the next morning to drive around the island, all in one day. We did, but the paucity of gas stations meant that we stopped at the first, and I mean the very first, gasoline retailer back on the mainland. It was a convenience store with a no-name gas pump. Not my preference, but better than pushing. A young man came out to pump the gas, so I stepped out to make sure his first experience filling a Maserati went smoothly. Instead, he was able to tell me what a small world it is.

He said he had moved up to Toronto for a while, and worked at a gas station on Richmond Street, where he pumped gas in another Maserati convertible a few times too. Imagine my astonishment that I managed to stop at the only gas station in Nova Scotia where the attendant had filled up a Maserati before. But wait, there's a second coincidence. I asked if the other one he'd filled up in Toronto was blue, and he confirmed it was. That blue one and my red one were stable-mates in the dealership's service department more than once. "That's Geddy Lee's car", I said. "Yeah, that's right", the lad confirmed, "he often stopped there to fill up". Well, this young fellow was one up on me, since I never met Geddy on any of the many occasions I retrieved my car from the service department. I knew it was his though, because the dealer was keen to point out the celebrity's car when it was parked next to mine. But they couldn't make his run any better than mine.

Believe it or not, there's a third coincidence. My assistant at the time had a boyfriend who was the drummer in a group called Chalk Circle, which was the opening band for Rush, which was Geddy Lee's band. Proof that it's a small world, connected through two troublesome Maserati convertibles with voracious appetites for gasoline.



As autumn approached, the dealer recommended a detailer to clean up the car for winter storage. He did a beautiful job and it almost didn't seem right to cover up such shiny paint with a car cover.

A month later, one of my uncles died. Here was an opportunity to show off to my many and distant relatives that the many, many

long years of schooling had finally paid off, so, off came the car cover, and we drove the Maserati to the funeral. I expect that was the only time a Maserati had ever been in that small village cemetery, but none of the inhabitants leaped up to tell me about any other Maserati that had been in that cemetery, so my assumption remains uncontradicted.



The following Sunday was a beautiful clear crisp sunny winter day in Toronto. Realizing that the car would have to be detailed again anyway before storage, we decided to go for one last drive. Heading out to Niagara, we were quite surprised to encounter a sharp change from a dry sunny QEW as far as St. Catharines, to a very heavy snow-storm on the east side of the Garden City Skyway over the Welland Canal. Instead of

exiting at the first opportunity, to turn around at Glendale Avenue, I thought we might drop in on a friend and client just off Stanley Avenue and the 405. Taking the ramp from the QEW onto the 405, I thought about the Italian engineers who probably never expected their creation to be plowing through such deep snow. Within a mile, the road was completely covered with at least eight inches of wet snow, and no tracks from any other vehicles. The Maserati's summer tires were no match for this, so I was driving quite gingerly. That is, until a transport truck began to pass, throwing up a lot of snow, and perilously close too, since neither of us knew where the pavement was. Seeing my exit ahead, I accelerated to get clear of the transport truck.

Instantly, the Maserati spun 180 degrees, momentarily arcing its tail underneath the transport trailer, without touching it, and then easing onto the shoulder backwards to hit the guard rail's wooden post and steel cables. That impact spun the car around 180 degrees so we were able to hit another post and steel cables with the front of the car. Unscathed, the transport truck continued on to the border crossing at Queenston. Both ends of the car were damaged, but with no cell phone, and absolutely no other vehicle on the highway, all I could do was drive the car to a police station.

The receptionist was the only person in the OPP building. All the officers were out on collision calls. After a long while, an officer returned to take my statement and fill out the accident report. Having looked at the car in the parking lot on his way in, he suggested storing the Maserati until it could be towed back to Toronto in better weather. Considering the inconvenience of taking the bus back to Toronto, along with the realization that I could hardly make it any worse, we decided to drive the poor battered Maserati back from Niagara Falls.

Once back over the Garden City Skyway, the roads were clear and traffic was at full speed. That is, except for the many motorists slowing down to admire the banged up Maserati in the slow lane and sneer at its idiot driver. The Maserati's carefully engineered aerodynamics had been brutally reconfigured, with several pieces raucously flapping in the wind. Miraculously, it made the trip without any mechanical breakdown, and I parked it back in its underground space. A photographer friend rushed over to take photos of all the damage, which became more apparent as the snow melted off.



The middle steel guard rail cable had sliced through the trunk, while the upper cable had slid up over the trunk lid and sliced into the back of the convertible top, just a few inches from our necks. The front of the car suffered similar triple gashes.

The next morning, the dealer suggested that I drive over to the dealership so they could then direct me to their off-site body shop. “You drove here in that?” Incredulous, the dealer was almost afraid to get in, even for the short trip to the body shop. “It still runs”, I replied, silently adding “finally”.

The next spring, returning to the scene, I discovered another reason, besides summer tires and winter stupidity, to explain why the car spun so easily. It just so happened that the spot where I tried to accelerate is where the 405 passes over another road and, as signs elsewhere now tell us, “bridge freezes before road”.

The end of the story is that the body shop owner decided to purchase the Maserati, with the knowledge that he could fix it for less than the insurance estimate, while I decided to sell him the Maserati, with the knowledge that my neck would no longer be endangered and my insurance payout was a lot more than I owed on the car. Sadly, to this day, it's the only car I've ever made a profit on. It also confirms the old adage that pride goeth before a fall.