April 13, 2015 Story for Weekly News

Autos of the 1930s: I grew up in the 1930s and got my driver's license on February 20, 1940. In the decade before that, I, like many interested in cars at that time, could tell the model year and make of every American car as I observed them. There were very few "foreign cars" on the roads of America in the years before World War II.

Model T Fords were just about gone from the roads around here, but there were still nearly one million registered as everyday cars in the United States. There were a minority of "boxey" sedans, 2- and 4-door, from the 1920s, but car styles rapidly got away from that look during the 1930s. Model A Fords were everywhere, all years from 1928 through 1931. About 1930, my father bought a used '29 Model A Station Wagon, which we used without the seats as an early pick-up truck around Auburn Heights until 1936, when he bought a new Chevy of similar body design for $639 (it had wind-up glass windows instead of side curtains). I learned to drive on the Model A, maneuvering it under the rose arbor and through the porte-cochere backwards at some speed. The name "Woody" was not invented for these cars until the early 1970s.

Charles Henry Johnson and his wife, Ruth, hucksters in the Hockessin area, had an elongated Model A with sides that would open up to display their produce. He or she would stop near the kitchen door at Auburn Heights, my mother would come to the truck, and she would pick out what she wanted to supply the appetites of the family. The fresh fruits and vegetables could be seen from the side on shelves just behind the canvas or wooden door that hinged at the top. Obviously this business was seasonally restricted, blossoming in late summer and fall.

Jim Peirson, a truck mechanic for National Fibre, had a new '32 Ford V-8 rumble-seat roadster with cowl lamps and side-mounted spares. When the mill whistle blew at 5 P.M., he would get in his cherished car and speed all over Yorklyn, showing off the great performance of Ford's light new V-8 (Cadillac had pioneered the V-8 in 1914), the answer to the 6-cylinder Chevy that came out with the '29 models. I can still hear the distinctive exhaust as he accelerated and shifted gears while picking up speed. It was hard for this eight-year-old to wait until he was 16.

One winter afternoon after school about 1935, my father took me to the Wilmington Auto Show held in the Gold Ballroom of the Hotel DuPont. As I stopped in front of a new model on display, the car started to talk to me. That couldn't be! I had no clue how that could happen. A live voice with a microphone was in sight of this bewildered kid, and obviously there was an amplifier in the circuit and a speaker under the hood behind the car's radiator.

The Buick exhibit at the Century of Progress Exposition (the Chicago World's Fair of 1933-34) had a great model of a country scene with curvy roads and short hills, on which there were about 20 scale-model Buicks, each about 3" long, moving over the road. Some were '33 models with a front axle and leaf springs throughout, and some were '34 models with "knee action" (early independent front suspension). As the '33s hit a rough section of road, they would bounce; when the '34s came to the same stretch, they would glide across without vertical motion. Although the name was short-lived, "knee action" was adopted by all American manufacturers eventually, Ford being the last about 1948. General Motors had some problems with it, especially with its Pontiac Division. Most

Pontiacs from 1935 through 1938, while they kept running, soon acquired a negative camber in the front wheels (well out at the bottom from vertical).

Starting in 1946, cars were turned out in large numbers unheard of before World War II. As has been the case several times with American automobiles, quality control was often a problem. Fords and Studebakers did not always "track." Even brand new cars manufactured by these companies would track to the right (the rear wheels would run as much as 3" to the right of the front wheels). The driver and other passengers could not detect this defect; sometimes it wouldn't even cause excessive tire wear. Many owners didn't realize it existed. General Motors and Chrysler never seemed to have this problem. By the mid-1950s, whatever caused it at Ford and Studebaker was corrected.

Work Report: On Tuesday, April 7, the following 17 volunteers were present: Jerry Novak (in charge), Ted Kamen, Brent McDougall, Anne Cleary, Ed Paschall, Jerry Lucas, Mike Ciosek, Steve Bryce, Mark Russell, Bob Jordan, Jay Williams, Mac Taylor, Ken Ricketts, John Schubel, Tom Marshall, John Bacino, and Dennis Dragon.

Several lengths of rail were taken up behind the museum, and splice bars were removed on the section north of the turntable. Locomotive 401 was cleaned up after its runs on 4/4. More ties were pre-drilled for rail section construction. Some of the new rail was drilled at the ends for splice bars.

The electric train experts were in full force and moved ahead on improvements to the Lionel layout. The stripping of paint from the many parts of the Cretors popper is nearing an end. Except for meetings, the attendance tonight was the highest of 2015.

On Thursday, April 9, 12 volunteers turned out, as follows: Tim Ward (in charge), Bill Schwoebel, Lou Mandich, Steve Bryce, Eugene Maute, Gerhard Maute, Bob Jordan, Mark Russell, Dave Leon, Ted Kamen, Brent McDougall, and Anne Cleary.

Three more sections of track for the A.V.R.R. were assembled. The track north of the turntable was taken up in preparation for the new wall contractor, who plans to start on 4/13. The Mautes' work in the library continued. Some body filler was used to smooth surfaces of the frame from the Cretors popper in final preparation for painting.

The chain link fence along the top of the bank near the railroad was removed, and the fencing and its posts were saved. The new concrete wall to be built will stabilize this area above the steep race bank. Some heavy 4 x 4 cypress was cut-to-length to serve as railroad ties under the track joints when the railroad is rebuilt along the concrete wall. The Model 76 with Steve Bryce and Tim Ward in control was taken to the BRAACA Swap Meet on Sunday, April 12, at Rob Robison's spacious facility on Line Road about 8 miles from Auburn Heights. All went well.

It is with sadness that we report the death of Margaret E. Lumley, widow of Walt Lumley and mother of David Lumley, both charter members of the "Steam Team" in 1997. Dave, who has lived with his family near Atlanta for nearly 15 years, visited the museum with his brother Walter III on Wednesday. It was good to see them. We extend our sincere sympathies to the greater Lumley family.