

Recreation Yesterday and Today

Sonny Gets a Car 1941

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Saturday nights in August, with the harvest taking precedence over everything else, activity in town seemed less intense than it had been in early summer. But there was always some action. Bob usually joined the procession for a while, taking a few cruises and U-turns along the main street. He did not, of course, stop at Paulson's Drug for those packages; he did not even drive to the Prairie Moon ballroom at Tunerville. But he made plans to learn about dancing and all that later in the year. The car gave him independence he had never known before—the folks didn't seem to mind if he stayed in town until midnight—and its dressed-up look attracted admiring glances now and then. Once when he was parked, idling, on a side street talking with Vance Ebert, a country-boy classmate, Vance's older brother who knew cars came up and paid him a compliment: "You must be a good mechanic," he said, "the way that Ford's idling, so smooth."

When school started in early September he began, as planned, to drive to town mornings after rushing through milking (when he could) and breakfast so as to leave by eight-thirty. He sometimes arrived a little late. Every day the car provided private satisfaction, coming and going, though he was aware of its older vintage every time he pulled into the parking area alongside later models that other farm boys drove to school, most of them family cars. Not many of the classmates he liked to pal around with focused on cars much. Some took an interest in the fact that he now owned his own wheels and appreciated the special look he'd given the Ford. A friendly senior girl from north of town called out from the sidewalk one afternoon as he headed home, "Cute car, Bob!" Good taste, maybe wrong adjective. Sheriff Joe Staley, known as a good-natured man, from his jailhouse headquarters across from the school, had noticed, too, according to his freshman daughter. She said her dad hoped those seven lights didn't get turned on while the car was on the road.

Meanwhile, normal school activities increasingly absorbed Bob's time and attention. He became occupied with notebooks and texts for class work, mainstream after-hours obligations such as football games, and projects of personal involvement. He started writing a weekly rhyme for the school paper and felt the attraction of journalism. His voice had deepened, and he sang bass in the chorus. His trumpet playing for band had developed his interest in broader musical concepts of chords and arrangements.

Whenever school activities required cars to carry students to games or competitions, townspeople cooperated by lending their family sedans. Several classmates seemed to have no problem borrowing their parents late models for occasional social purposes—dances in Watertown or Brookings, or even fooling around town evenings. One night, staying until after dark following a football game, parked at the dimly lit school grounds with a mixed bunch in a friend's family's '39 Dodge, Bob found out how to play post office, an extracurricular activity he'd been hearing about for years. That night as they dropped him at the school parking lot to claim his car and drive home, someone in the

Dodge announced, in what was probably meant as a simple, affectionate farewell: “Here you are, Bob, back to your jalopy—see ya tomorrow...”

Jalopy? Is that how others saw his car? Just a funny-papers flivver out of a Harold Teen comic strip? He mulled all this over during the dark miles home, and came to realize that only country kids put much emphasis on personal car ownership—and not man of them were car-crazy enough to doll up their cars as he had the Ford. In his enthusiasm to follow Bert’s lead, he had gone too far, outdoing his uncle, who at least seemed to know when to stop.

From Robert Amerson, *From the Hidewood: Memories of a Dakota Neighborhood* (copyright by the Minnesota Historical Society, 1996.)