

Our 49 Chevy

Lowell L. Getz

Most of us have fond memories of our first car. For many it was just an old "clunker" acquired while in high school. The car was synonymous with dates to drive-in movies, the senior prom, night-time joy rides through back county roads, breakdowns in the "boonies", and hours of repair work to keep the car running. As we moved on with our lives and possessed many other cars, memories of that first car became relegated to the deeper recesses of our brains and recorded on some old faded black and white photos. But, we remembered the "old clunker."

I was unusual in that I had no desire to own a car, content to use the family car. Even then, my dad had to tell me it was time that I begin driving. Thus, I did not have my own car while in high school or in college. I bought my first car, with money borrowed from my parents, in May 1953, one month before I graduated from college and two months before my fiancé, Mary Ruth Clardy, and I were married. That first car was not a "clunker", but a well-kept 4-year-old 1949 Chevrolet.



Fig. 1. "New" used 1949 Chevy, May 1953.

Because I got the car so soon before we were married, memories of this car belong to both of us. It was not "my car", it was "our car", an integral part of the initial period of our lives together.

For the next six years, we and the 49 Chevy were a threesome, generating lasting, life-time memories.

Our first affinity with the 49 Chevy was on the three-hour drive to our homes in southern Illinois following my graduation ceremonies at the University of Illinois and commissioning as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Army. This was the first time we really had time for a long quiet conversation regarding our coming lives together, a wedding in three weeks, the unknown of the Army (the war in Korea was still in full force) and our lives afterwards. I do not remember exactly what we talked about, but I am certain nothing of what we anticipated ever happened. I know that we did not talk about how many children we wanted. That was too far in the future. We did discuss how we would time the beginning of a family. That was a sensitive subject we had avoided up to then. The immediate concern was to survive the wedding. Afterwards, we knew only that we would be spending the first nine months of our life together at Ft. Devens, Massachusetts while I went to an Army school. Beyond that, we could not speculate.

The next memories shared with the 49 Chevy are of drinking milk shakes at Tiel's drive-in on Saturday night, July 4th, the night before we were to be married. Again, we tried to understand what might be ahead for us, not realizing that there was not the slightest chance we could know. The only thing that was certain was that tomorrow night would be our first night together. We were both a little scared.

The wedding went off without a hitch and we left for our two-day honeymoon, the most we could afford. We could not go far in two days, but the 49 Chevy was there with us for our first two days together. Presence of the 49 Chevy was broadcast by the sound of rocks clanking in her hubcaps—put there by a cousin during the wedding ceremony—as we drove slowly in and out of parking lots. And, there was the "JUST MARRIED" written in soap on the trunk, also placed there by my cousin. The words never completely disappeared, in spite of countless washings and rain storms over the years.

The next quality time with our 49 Chevy was the long trip to go on active duty in the Army at Ft. Devens, Massachusetts, five weeks after we were married. This was the first of what were to be many cross-country trips in our lives. Because it was the beginning of our lives on our own, memories of the trip are still with us: being able to pack everything we owned into the back seat, with room to spare; cooking our evening meal on a Coleman stove on a picnic table, with the wind blowing in from Lake Erie; the brakes partially failing on a long hill in busy traffic in Albany, New York, (had the brakes failed completely, our lives most likely would have ended there in Albany); driving through the small, picturesque, congested Massachusetts towns with the last day's driving taking twice as long as we had anticipated (took a lot longer to go through a New England town than a Midwestern town); arriving in Fitchburg, Massachusetts so late at night, we had a difficult time in finding a motel we could afford.

For the next two years almost everything we did and saw involved the 49 Chevy. We were now in a very different "world" from that in which we had grown up. The sights, sounds and memories are forever with us: Old Man of the Mountain, Bretton Woods, docks at Gloucester, Sea Gulls calling at Rock Port, Plymouth Rock, Cape Cod, Village Green at Lexington, Old Bridge at Concord, Luisa May Alcott house, House of Seven Gables, Old Boston Burying

Ground, Breeds Hill, Old Ironsides, Lower Common in Fitchburg, driving to Ft. Devens early in the mornings, and collecting newts in Mulpus Brook. All these memories bring back the feel and sense of riding in the 49 Chevy.



Fig. 2. 1949 Chevy and Lowell, January 1953, Fitchburg, MA.



Fig. 3. 1949 Chevy and Mary Ruth, June 1955, Ayer, MA.

Finally, my Army obligation was over (I remained at Ft. Devens the entire two years of active duty) and it was time to start the next phase of our lives, Graduate School at the University of Michigan. The trip to Ann Arbor in the 49 Chevy also has its memories: camping in a pup tent on the shores of Lake George; the traffic as we went through Toronto; getting lost going from Detroit to Ann Arbor, arriving there by driving over small rural roads, never knowing exactly how we got there, just kept following the faded wooden "Ann Arbor" signs. We arrived in Ann Arbor so late at night that we could not find a motel. Finally, a service station attendant called to find us a room in a motel ten miles west of Ann Arbor.

Graduate school provided its own memories associated with the 49 Chevy: driving to campus for me to go to classes and Mary Ruth to go to work in the Political Science Department; driving back by myself at night to study in the library, stopping on the way home to get a small sundae for Mary Ruth (to compensate for leaving her alone all evening in a one room apartment); later, when we bought a small cottage 12 miles north of Ann Arbor, driving in for the day, for me to go to classes and study and for Mary Ruth to go to work (by then she was the Departmental Secretary in the Political Science); driving to the study areas to trap mice for my doctoral research; piling wooden live traps in the back seat to move them from one study area to the next; Mary Ruth shrieking one night, while we were driving back to Ann Arbor, when a mouse ran up her leg (had gotten in while the 49 Chevy was parked in the woods); the Christmas day 1957 we brought our first daughter home, the beginning of our family.

Finally, the summer of 1959, all requirements for the degree were met and I had my doctorate. This phase of our life together was over. We were to stay on in Ann Arbor another two years to complete a post-doctoral research position. By now the 49 Chevy had just about reached the end

of her ropes. The piston rings were becoming so worn it was difficult to start her and there was not the full compression when driving. She had seen us through the first parts of our lives—from the experiences of beginning our life together as we completed my Army obligation and through graduate school where I earned my Ph. D. (the "union card" for a career in academia) and the beginning of our family. It was time to get a new car. We put an order in for a 1959 Rambler station wagon. There was a two-week wait until it would arrive at the dealership. In the meantime, my grandmother in Illinois died. The old 49 Chevy had to make one last trip. She made the 400-mile trip there and back, but refused to start again when we returned home.

We picked up the Rambler three days after returning from the funeral. It was time to say goodbye to the 49 Chevy. We were to take her to a near-by auto salvage yard, but I was uncertain as to how I was going to get her there. On a chance, I tried starting her. She groaned several times and finally fired up, as if to tell me she would not let me down for this one last trip.



Fig. 4. 1949 Chevy, March 1959, Whitmore Lake, MI.

With Mary Ruth following in the Rambler, I drove the 49 Chevy to the salvage yard. Although the drive took only 15 minutes, a flood of memories came back as we drove along. Even if I could not see the road clearly, because of my misty eyes, the memories were as fresh as if they were happening then: the milk shakes at Teil's; rocks "clunking" in the hub caps on our honeymoon; frying hamburgers with the wind blowing in from Lake Erie; visiting The Old Man of the Mountain; Gloucester; Cape Cod; the Lower Common; the drive to Ft. Devens through

Lunenburg; camping at Lake George; driving with Mary Ruth to campus in Ann Arbor; driving to my study sites; a mouse running up Mary Ruth's leg.

All too soon we were at the salvage yard. I signed off on the title, accepted his \$20.00, took one last look at her and got in the Rambler. That was over five decades ago, but the shared memories of our 49 Chevy are still with us. They always will be.