

MY LOVE AFFAIR WITH AMERICAN CARS

My love affair with American cars started in the late fifties when I saw a photograph of a Mercury Montclair Phaeton coupe in the 1958 Boy's Annual Book. The car was as long as the overblown name but I was completely smitten at the age of nine.

The first car I owned had just arrived on the US market on my eleventh birthday and I was proudly racing my 1959 Chevrolet Bel Air "dinky toy" across the playground. A pen pal in Omaha, Nebraska sent me a photo of herself sitting on the "hood" of her family car and I fell in love with her at first sight. It was another gorgeous shapely American car to covet. The pen pal looked OK. Brand allegiance was never my strong suit. These huge American cars seemed to be like sculptures on wheels.



In my twenties, I bought a \$600 1962 Chevrolet Bel Air and practiced cornering this aircraft carrier around Sydney's narrow roads. I spent our first night together looking at it parked outside my house. It was a great chick magnet and my flat mate willingly bought it after he saw the obvious advantages. Neither of us knew that the brakes were shot.

I moved to Melbourne, bought a Pontiac Laurentian for the same magic price of \$600. The dealer even threw in a complimentary glass of wine but I thought it was odd that he never let me test drive the car. I was a trusting young man. After a few months, I drove it back to Sydney and then onto Mackay. I became

famous around Sugar City for being cool in my Pontiac and it was another heaven sent chick magnet. At that time, everyone else drive cane tractors. I sold it there for the princely sum of \$400 and hightailed it to New Zealand in case the brakes were shot.

In Canberra, I bought a 1970 Dodge Phoenix with huge managing director seats and a bonnet that looked like a boardroom table. I was cash strapped and starting a business from scratch but the allure of a \$1500 yank tank proved irresistible. It was described as a company sales car in the tax returns. I used to joke that it was my tax Dodge. The Dodge came with the usual problems but the brakes were good.



As the business grew in the years to follow, I felt a need to reward myself for my services to Canberra's economy. I noticed an auction in Sydney promoting a 1974 Buick Century Luxus coupe. Without knowing what one looked like but impressed with the overblown name, I beat a Sydney drug dealer to the final bid. He congratulated me and asked if I would like to withdraw my offer. I told him I was buying it for a friend who worked for the government.

My desires quickly turned to disease after that. I had been searching Australia for my real "dinky toy" from 40 years ago. My 1959 Chevrolet Bel Air came up for sale in the very next suburb and I concluded the deal, exchanging \$9500 for it and a truck full of spares. The previous owner had wrecked another 1959 Chevrolet for spares, carefully greaseproof wrapping all the parts and writing what was inside each package. Unfortunately, he was Serbian and the writing was in the Cyrillic alphabet.



Next came the 1972 Buick Riviera advertised in Queensland for sale. In every film I have seen, the Riviera Boattail has always been the first casualty and I wanted to save at least one from extinction. I had it shipped into Canberra where it was to eventually cost me \$20,000 in repairs. A friend once told me never to buy anything from Queensland. Even their bananas were bent. I still adore bent bananas and especially adored this basket case of a boattail. The car looked so much better than my bank account.

In 2000, I sold my businesses and moved to Perth. I had bought a house near the ocean and it became clear that the cars were suffering a premature death in the salt air. The 1959 Chevrolet Bel Air went to a collector in Sydney and the 1974 Buick Century found a new home in North Queensland.



I am now older and none the wiser. Being a serial offender, I purchased another 1972 Buick Riviera boattail in Perth. I now live with two Buick boattails. I don't think I will ever get over my lifetime love affair with American cars. They will always be those sculptures on wheels and a curse on my bank balance.



Keith Crane (WA Buicks).