

Fuel Pumps and Poodle Skirts

By Sarah Mullins

Imagine a little blond girl, her hair pulled obnoxiously high in a ponytail. She's wearing a purple poodle skirt with a matching ribbon in her hair. Her top has purple frills and her black-and-white saddle shoes complete the ensemble. She looks ready for a good old-fashioned sock hop. That's me. Well, it's me 15 years ago. You could find me in the back of a bright red street rod, a Ford from 1940. I would roll the windows down, lean out the window and wave to people lining the streets in folding chairs, marking the path to the National Street Rod Association's Nationals. Well, it was absolutely adorable when I was six, it would be less cute now. I would tell anyone who would listen that it was my car and I was going to drive it one day. At which point people would smile and nod or tell me how cute I was with my car in that high-pitched, condescending voice people use when they talk to kids. In reality, the car belonged to my grandma and grandpa until I could drive it, but my sister I would often accompany them to street rod conventions.

Long before I was born, when my grandparents became empty nesters, they started going to vintage car shows. And by car shows I don't mean a couple of shiny cars in a parking lot; I mean hundreds of people getting together to celebrate a community connected by a shared passion for vintage cars. I wouldn't advise asking my grandparents how long they had been going to car shows because this sparks a ten-minute debate. They bicker like an old married couple, probably because they *are* an old married couple, but that is beside the point. The short answer is they have been going to car shows for 40 years, while I have only been going for a mere 20 years. But, car shows were an important part of my childhood, since I've been taken to shows since long before I could walk. They even bought a car for me, the aforementioned cherry red 1940 Ford, because their street rod only had two bucket seats and no seatbelts. At the shows, I would spend all day on a blanket on the ground, coloring with my little sister, surrounded by old people in folding chairs cooing over us all day. They would take turns sitting on the ground and entertaining us. Ultimately this leads to me running into people at car shows that I don't remember, who have lots of embarrassing stories about me as a kid...

At some point going to car shows fell to the wayside. I was busy and just didn't have time in my schedule. In the past couple of years, I have realized the importance of spending time with my grandparents and that it was time to get back into the habit of car shows. This past year was special, it marked the 50th anniversary of National Street Rod Association (NSRA) Nationals, and there was no way I was going to miss it. There is a very specific travel tradition when it comes to this car show in particular. My grandparents live north of Columbus, Ohio, so they would drive 2 ½ hours in the street rod to pick me up, then we meet up with all their Street Rodder friends and drive to Kentucky together. We were the first car because it seemed that I was the only person capable of programming a GPS and we didn't want to lose anyone along the way.

I would like to say that I had the foresight to realize that there was a chance a car from 1940 might not be able to drive for five hours straight, but I would be lying. Street rods in general are a bit of a beast with boisterous, roaring engines and ostentatious colors that always draw attention. I may have made a questionable decision by not driving a car from this century. For starters, driving the street rod faster than 60 mph makes me nervous and the majority of the trip was highway driving. Then there was the crank windows and subpar air conditioning that made the thick, July heat a little bit unbearable. The drive itself was theoretically going to last less than 3 hours. Let's just say it took more.

Our initial struggles happened less than 30 minutes into our trip. There is a slight feeling of abject terror when you know that the driver is hitting the gas pedal in the car but the car feels like it is coasting. We had decided to take back roads because of extensive traffic on the highway. So at least we weren't stranded on the highway...yet. The gas pedal stopped working on a two-lane back road, our sudden stop meant that we were effectively blocking all the traffic on a road with very little visibility. There was no cell reception and my ability to use a phone was really all I had to contribute to this situation. So, we pulled into someone's driveway and sat "patiently" while my grandpa and his friends attempted to fix the car. For the record, this was breakdown #1. Thankfully my grandpa is a mechanic, so if anyone was going to get us out of there it was him. After 30 minutes of working on the car with intermittent frustrated profanity, the car started, and we could be on our way.

Our goal was to find a parts store to replace the fuel pump because there was a crack in it. They had effectively put a band aid on it, but we needed new parts, or we were going nowhere fast. We met up with the rest of our caravan who had driven ahead to get out of the way. We almost made it to the auto parts store when the engine stalled again. For those keeping count, this was breakdown #2. Again, we were stuck on the side of the road, but at least we had a mechanic onboard. When the car started this time, it appeared that our luck was changing. We made it to the auto parts store without issue and they even had a fuel pump. The only problem now was, we didn't have all the tools to replace a fuel pump, but the car was running fine. What could go wrong?

Street Rodders are a very proud group of people. They take pride in their cars and could talk about them all day. To quote my grandpa, "It's a bunch of old people, who like old cars." Owning a street rod is a full-time job between upkeep and taking them to shows. Some people will even trailer their cars, so they don't have to worry about them getting dirty or breaking down. My grandparents first street rod was a 1939 Packard that my grandpa rebuilt himself. It is one of a kind and has since been painted with pink and purple flames dancing along the sides, with a caricature of my grandpa on the back. In scrawling letters underneath it reads, "Boy and their toys." I can tell you as a child getting picked up from daycare in the car was the best feeling in the world. All of the other kids would flock to the windows to catch a glimpse of this car. I was so proud; I would strut outside and sit in the front seat (which was a very big deal) and wave to my captive audience.

When we made it to the highway, we broke down 1 ½ more times. I say ½ because at one point the engine stalled, but we didn't even come to a full stop before it started again. The straw that broke the camel's back came in the form of stop and go traffic that just did the fuel pump in. Now I mentioned that street rodders are very proud people, paired with the stereotypical stubbornness of an old man meant I sat on the side of an unmarked stretch of highway for far longer than necessary. As it turns out, we had the wrong fuel pump because our street rod had a racing engine and the current fuel pump had fractured beyond repair. The fuel had then leaked into the oil, which means that not only did we need to buy a part

not commercially available, we needed an oil change in a place where no auto shop was brave enough to work on a vintage car.

Despite our trying circumstances, grandpa was resolute in his belief that he could fix this car. We were just outside the city at this point. We were so close we could almost see it, but that made no difference to the temperamental street rod. That car was not going to start no matter what we did, but we were going to try. One thing I will say about street rodders is despite their stubbornness, they stick together. I lost count of how many street rods saw us stranded and stopped to see if they could help. Even if they couldn't help, they would stick around and talk. Talk about their cars, their lives, what they were looking forward to at the show. People who had never met each other had found something in common in their cars and it meant they were friends now. I had people coming up to me at a car show of thousands of people asking me if I was the one stranded on the side of the road and enquiring the status of the car. The best part was, they actually meant it. When people are wandering around the show and they see someone they know, they will grab a beer, a chair and stay and chat for a while. You would think every person at this show knew each other.

It took some convincing and strong-arming to convince anyone that what we really needed was a tow truck. Apparently, it is particularly difficult to get a tow truck when you can't tell what they are saying on the phone over the dull rumble of traffic and don't know where you are because there are no highway markers, but I found a way. For you keeping track, 3 ½ breakdowns later, it took 6 hours to go on what should have been less than 3 hours. Making it to the convention was a trying experience but ultimately worth it. I got to explore fabulous cars, spend some much-needed quality time with my grandparents and brag about it on social media. While I'm still that little girl in the poodle skirt at heart, next time, I'm driving a car from this century.