

Adventures in Monomania

by Art Unger

This is the Meet Issue and that means looking at all the photos of the vehicles that were at the National. Makes you want to be there, right?

We went this year. Find a picture of the Starship Precedent and that will be proof. [Look on page 8! Editor] She actually made it to a National, but not without adventure. That's what we're here for, don't you think?

Two weeks before Las Vegas a rebuilt engine was dropped into the car. I should rephrase that. The engine was carefully lowered and coaxed into the frame. Once inside its cradle, it was gingerly hooked up to all the attending wires, pipes, lines and other paraphernalia by master mechanic Brian. When he turned the key, it started instantly.

"Not a good sign," Brian told me later, "There should have been some quirk surfacing at startup but none did."

I was apprehensive when I picked up the car, but I thought the drive home would be a good shakedown cruise. The drive home was 110 miles and she ran so perfectly that my worries idled to the back of my mind and parked in a dark corner. I did notice that the radio didn't work, but I figured we really didn't need a radio to go to the National.

During that week I cleaned, adjusted, polished and shined, spending many hours with the car. I took her into town and back a few times and found that the horn wasn't working either. I phoned Brian to ask about it.

"I never did find the horn trouble," he explained. "I ran out of time but it must be in the wire inside the steering column. Big job!"

"Oh, well," I said, "I guess we really don't need a horn to go to the National."

The Friday before the meet I drove up to Brian's place to meet Norma, who works 400 miles North of home. I expected her about supper time but, because she had to work late, she didn't arrive until 9:30. Within moments we were both in the President, ready to go to the National.

The car performed flawlessly for about 100 feet, and then the headlights went out. They came back on and went out again. Turning the car around, we went right back to Brian's.

"The headlights just keep on flashing," I told him. "They won't stay on."

Brian crawled under the dash, removed the headlight switch and replaced the attached circuit breaker, but when we turned on the lights they reacted the same way, flashing on and off.

"It must be your switch," he said, "but I don't have a replacement."

"Maybe we could drive only during daylight. I guess we really don't need headlights to go to the National. The signals and brake lights still work."

We had wanted to drive through the first night because of the distance involved, but with this development was accepted Brian's offer to stay until morning.

Knowing I had to attend the Directors' meeting Monday morning, I was up and awake at 4:30 A.M. Saturday. We spent the first part of that morning searching for a lost earring. No, not mine. Once Norma found it we rushed to the President and were gone. Finally, we were on our way to the National, only 12 hours behind schedule.

It was an inordinate pleasure driving this big old President. Brian must have put all the pieces back in the engine because it purred effortlessly. It was comfortable and responsive and, with the new shine it was sporting after all my polishing, it gained admiring glances everywhere.

Halfway through the day somewhere in Washington I thought I heard a grinding noise, steady but not too loud. Of course, I chose to ignore it for a hundred miles or so.

"Do you hear that noise?" I finally asked Norma.

"It seems to be coming from the dash," she answered.

"It must be the speedometer, although I know Brian oiled the cable. Maybe it's the head."

The noise was getting louder so I stopped the car, slid under the dash, disconnected the speedometer cable and liberally sprayed lubricant over everything. This didn't work because by the time we got to Baker, Oregon, we could hardly hear each other above the grating cadence of the speedometer. I disconnected it for good because I reasoned that we really didn't need a speedometer to go to the National. By now it was getting dark so we stopped for the night. After a delightful Mexican meal we had to sneak back four blocks to the motel in darkness. I was not going to turn on that headlight switch.

Just before falling asleep Norma and I joked about things that really don't need to be working to go to a National. We wondered just how many things could become inoperative along the way and yet not halt your progress. Can you imagine rolling into Las Vegas missing a door and a couple of fenders and perhaps the bumpers with that energetic V-8 enthusiastically hitting on at least 5 cylinders, occasionally belching through the straggling exhaust pipes being dragged down the pavement? We laughed out loud but quietly worried that this might not be merely fantasy.

Very early in the morning we were on the road again. With mileage markers on every highway, I glanced at my wristwatch and soon became accustomed to mentally calculating our speed. It was slightly more difficult with Norma driving since her goal was to stay ahead of every Chevrolet on the road. Sitting on the passenger side I nonchalantly stole a quick look at my watch as a mileage marker flashed by.

"I know what you're doing," she said.

I tried to be evasive but how could I secretly consult my watch without her noticing? We drove on in silence as we entered Nevada and the day got warmer. Not complete silence because I heard the clock ticking.

"I don't know what's happening here," I remarked. "This clock never used to work but now, since I set it a few days ago, it's working fine and even keeping time."

"These things have a way of fixing themselves," said Norma.

That familiar expression of disbelief drifted across my face but I turned and said nothing, not wishing to displease forces beyond my comprehension.

On the next sharp turn there was a growl from the engine compartment.

"Let's pull over and I'll check the power steering reservoir," I said, recognizing the sound of Studebaker's unadvertised option. No gauge is required for the power steering pump. When it's low on fluid, it growls. Checking it I found the reservoir half empty and reddish-colored fluid dripping down the side of the battery. There was a leak somewhere so I told Norma to start the engine and turn the wheel. There was a leak all right! Fluid under pressure was spraying freely from somewhere under the steering box. I didn't know where we would get parts in the middle of nowhere, so I removed the power steering belt and thought I would check driving characteristics without it. I was amazed to find that the President steered and handled just fine. As long as it was moving the steering was excellent.

"Let's keep on going," I muttered, "we really don't need power steering to go to the National."

Nevada is a series of long hot roads surrounded by sagebrush and the occasional Joshua tree. Towns or facsimiles thereof are few and far between. We stopped in one of them so I could clean the bugs off the windshield. A middle aged couple strolling by noticed the shiny red President and our foreign license plate.

"You're a long way from home."

"Yes," said Norma, "we're on our way to Las Vegas."

"What kind of car is that?" they asked.

"It's a 1956 Studebaker."

Then came the classic comment, "They don't make those



The President in Nevada with the occasion Joshua tree

any more."

"They don't need to," I said. "This one's still running."

They wished us a nice day and we hurried on. Around about Alamo, Nevada, daylight began to fade. It was Sunday night and we were about 120 miles shy of our destination but we had to get our carriage off the road before it turned into a pumpkin. The only motel within a 100 mile radius was full, but the owner told us of a lake three miles down the highway where we might camp for the night. It was already dark when we pulled into a service station to get fuel and I suggested we park right there beside the building, sleep in the car, and

leave promptly at daybreak. We might even get to Vegas in time for my Directors' meeting. Norma did not agree and was busy connecting the trouble light to the battery.

"We could hang this from the grille and at least get to the lake for the night."

I envisioned a bump in the road jarring loose the connection and all sorts of horrors developing under the hood. At that point we were not happy campers! I turned the headlights on to see how long it would take them to begin their flashing routine. They were still on two minutes later. By now I was totally perplexed and over tired.

"Let's go for it," said Norma. "The clock fixed itself; maybe the headlights did too."

There was no use arguing with that kind of irrefutable logic. Off we went, but slowly, since I didn't want to be doing 60 m.p.h. on a strange road when the lights died.

Three semis in convoy passed us and suddenly we both agreed that we could probably follow them all the way into Vegas on their lights. And we did! Our headlights stayed on all the way as well! Only the bright light indicator seemed to work erratically, but I promptly put that out of my mind and filed it in a corner called "Mysteries of the Occult." We really didn't need bright lights to go to the National.

We arrived at the hotel just before midnight, the President and Norma and I all tired and hot. The weather had cooled off to 97 degrees from 112 earlier in the afternoon, and all of us needed a good rest after an 18 hour, 800 mile day. While looking for a parking spot the temperature gauge, after teasing us during the trip, finally registered all red and no green. Then the discharge light came on. Revving up the engine didn't help so I parked it, disconnected the battery, and walked back to the hotel, muttering to myself, "We're here! Who needs a charging system?"

Two days later, while cleaning and polishing, I talked to Ron Smith about the esoteric headlights.

"Sounds like a short to me," he said. Shortly thereafter he found the wire that was supposed to be plugged into the license plate light dangling loose in the trunk lid. That was the problem.

It was over 100 degrees every day and during the judging Alberta Mark, who was parked beside us, burst his hoses. Actually he endured the heat quite well; it was his 1958 Commander that complained with split heater hoses. We took him to a local parts house in the President to obtain replacements and on the way back the engine heated up again and the discharge light shone brightly. While Mark bathed in warm antifreeze under his Commander, I noticed George Hamlin lounging nearby, observing Mark's primitive ritual. I asked him about our discharge problem. He looked thoughtful for a moment and then removed his right shoe.

"Start the engine!" he commanded. "I have my regulator tester in my hand."



From a block away she spotted a corner of it. A Studebaker!

Of course I obeyed and watched him thumping things under the hood with his shoe. The discharge light continued to shine brightly. We didn't know what it was but I put it down to the excessive heat buildup in the engine compartment. Extremely interesting are the mechanical tips one learns from seasoned veterans.

We didn't get a trophy but we had an excellent time. Except for Norma spotting more hidden cars the trip home was thankfully uneventful. It's uncanny what she finds. When we stopped for gas in the tiny town of McDermitt, Nevada, she said, "I think we should check out a car I noticed about a block off the highway. It was covered by a tarp and only a little orange was showing, but the slope of the hood makes me suspicious."

We went back down a side road and, sure enough, there was a '54 coupe. How she does it, I don't know! We had a pleasant chat with an elderly gentleman who had noticed our President even before it turned into his driveway. There are still prizes to be found in unlikely locations.

3,000 miles in this wonderful 33 year old car was great. Can you believe an average of 24 miles per Imperial gallon of gas? (For Ron Smith, that's 20 miles per American gallon.) There's a moral to this story. Just remember: you really don't need everything working perfectly to go to a National.