

HUMBLE OR NOT, FIRST CARS ROCK

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BY RYAN E. SMITH
BLADE STAFF WRITER

I discovered the secret to being cool the day I turned 16.

It was waiting for me in the garage, quietly sitting there with four wheels ready to roll, an engine born to guzzle gas, and a musical horn — a stroke of genius added by my father that allowed me to announce my coolness to people for miles around.

It was my first car. It didn't matter that the boxy blue 1986 Chevy Blazer was old and slow and had a dangerous proclivity to leak brake fluid; it was perfect in the way that all first cars are.

Nothing on display tomorrow in Detroit when the North American International Auto Show opens to the public will be able to compare, even if desperate automakers manage to unveil an electric muscle car with GPS and an in-dash Sno-Cone maker. There's a special quality to anyone's first car that has nothing to do with the latest bells and whistles.

Jeff Snook knows that better than most. The Bowling Green man came of age in the '60s when other high school kids were driving Ford Mustangs and Pontiac GTOs, classic hot rods that collectors still fantasize about today. Jeff's car was a different kind of classic: a 1929 Model A Ford.

PHOTO GALLERY

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It was the same type of car that Jeff's dad, Bill, had as his first vehicle, although at \$350 it cost considerably more than the other's \$20 price tag. Today, it might be the equivalent of getting your teen an American Motors Gremlin from the '70s (comedian Jon Stewart's first car, by the way).

In this case, father and son spent a year fixing it up and the result was a fully operational brown two-tone, four-door sedan capable of taking Jeff cruising around town - as long as he was happy doing it at 45 mph, the car's top speed.

And Jeff was happy. He drove it to school, to work, even in the homecoming parade.

"When I was 16, I had a unique car to drive," he said. "[My friends] thought it was a cool car. Everybody did."

Now, as a collector who has owned more than 35 vehicles ranging from Jaguars to a Lotus race car, that very first car remains among his favorites. Today there are two Model As on display at Snook's Dream Cars museum in B.G., started by Jeff and his dad.

To explain what made it special, all Jeff had to say was, "There's anticipation. It's your first."

It's really as simple as that. It's the thing about a first car that allows you to overlook its shortcomings and remember it forever. Unlike later cars you may buy for practical reasons, your first comes loaded with more than a moonroof or amped-up stereo system; it's filled with hope.

For me, the hope was for the freedom to live an unfettered life that didn't rely on Mom picking me up — from after-school activities, a friend's house, whatever — in a red mini-van. My Blazer may not have given me a smooth ride, but it did provide tangible evidence of my growing independence.

Those were days of discovery in so many ways, and my rumbling, grumbling SUV was always there like a not-so-silent partner. I can still remember the nights I drove home in the wee hours of the morning, the air racing through the open windows as I pushed the pedal down hard and let the adrenaline flow through me.



I always blasted classical music on these occasions, not because that's what I liked but because it seemed more appropriate. It made these moments seem more epic.

Those times are gone and so is my beloved Blazer. Now I see an American auto industry on the brink of collapse and drivers who are more likely to be stabbed in a fit of road rage than enjoy the thrill of driving.

I look at someone like Jeff Snook and feel a little envy. His first car may be long gone, but thanks to his museum he's reminded of the feeling it gave him every day.

Contact Ryan E. Smith at: ryansmith@theblade.com or 419-724-6103

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