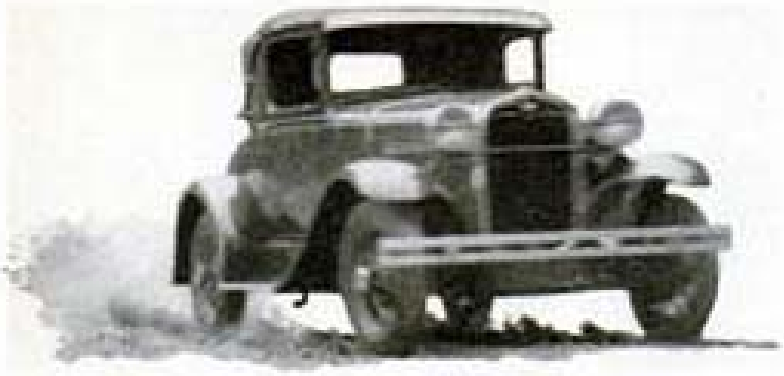
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A Lament for the Model A

The car that ran like a puppy seems wonderful —in retrospect—to this automobile reporter. Why, he asks, don't they make it any more?



A car built

By Frank Rowsome Jr.

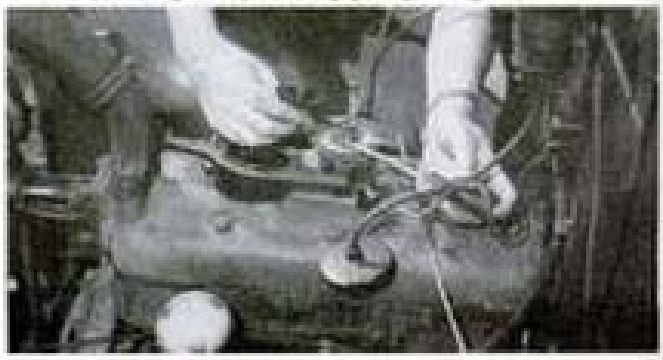
SOMETIMES when Detroit unwraps its latest wonder—the newest blend of gleam and gadget devised to make you discontented with what's in the garage—I think dreamily back to a sweetheart of a car that they don't make any more. Like many long-ago sweethearts, she was gawky, even a little goofy, with plain-Jane virtues. But the Model A Ford was also, in case you've forgotten, one of the most wonderfully satisfying cars ever built.

The Model A was an uncommonly *willing* car, like a friendly farm dog. (Ever noticed how some cars don't really want to go? They sit silently in the garage, morosely pondering what trouble to have next. Or else they behave like

Every man his own mechanic

Gapping the points was a breeze. If you had no thickness gauge handy, you used a thin dime, a doubled calling card, or simply a good guess.







for the ages . . **Kid sister, 1954, has more than three times the power, weighs half a ton more.**

child actresses, coughing theatrically in the carburetor throat or stalling petulantly in the driveway.) The Model A, in contrast, had the personality of a puppy: it wiggled all over, it wanted to go, it ignored mistreatment, and it ran until you shot it through the heart.

Shroud engineering could be detected everywhere. Provided you handled the clever choke-and-mixture rod right, which was about as difficult as striking a kitchen match, the engine *invariably* started. One Maine winter, with temperatures around 20° below, I caught it on the first turn every morning for weeks.

Its designers had a realistic view of human nature, for they made it a difficult car to mistreat. Even the dimmest

A satisfying sense of participation

That thin dime, rarely needed then for tolls, was convenient, too, for setting the idling speed. A thumbscrew adjusted idling mixture.







A family car with built-in privacy

Kids and dogs loved to ride the rumble, where the whistling wind and the song from the tailpipe made music. If it rained, you scrouched down low, staying fairly dry as long as the driver kept going. But the rumble seat could be cruel on a bitter winter day.

Mint-condition Model A is shown pleasing the proud possessions of POPULAR SCIENCE editor, Howard Irvin.



Plenty of elbow room

You never had it so good in engine accessibility. Almost nothing was awkward to work on, and the fender valley made a fine tool tray.



Nothing to do but drive

She'd climb briskly to 55, but from there on up acceleration was leisurely. Still, you could run wide open for hours on end.

lady driver couldn't proceed with the choke out: the moment she took her fingers off the knob, the choke promptly went back where it belonged. If, impelled by the curious female instinct for wrongheadedness, she persisted in driving with the spark retarded, or with the mixture full rich, or with the parking brake on, nothing grievous happened. It didn't run very well then, but it ran.

That tough old engine would march contentedly for 60,000 miles with only casual attention. If you tossed it an infrequent overhaul, it would cheerfully go forever. If cruel and unusual punishment busted something, you just wrote off to a mail-order house, screwed on the new part yourself and drove on for another hundred thousand miles.

It ran well, too. By a happy combination of weight, balance and wheel size, it could trundle through an amount of snow or mud that would immediately bog down those terraced gardens of sheet metal that we drive nowadays. Top speed —65 m.p.h. at 2,785 r.p.m., more downhill—could take you from one city to the next almost as fast as the current road locomotives. It *liked* to be driven hard. There was none of the incessant plug-

burning, point-pitting and diaphragm-rupturing that reflect the bilious bad temper inside newer engines.

Lift the hood on a Model A next chance you get and admire the calculated simplicity underneath. That engine was about as intricate as an egg beater. You could very nearly overhaul it with a screwdriver, pair of slip-joint pliers, monkey wrench and a little run-of-the-mine profanity. Modern engines, in contrast, demand hundreds of dollars in tools, a cozy intimacy with dwell angles, milliamperes and inches of mercury, plus a repertory of sulfurous swearing.

No troublemakers. There was a wonderful starkness about the Model A's engine compartment. Consider for a moment the troublemakers it *didn't* have. There was no fuel pump, no vacuum pump, no accelerator pump, no automatic choke. There was no voltage or current regulator, no centrifugal spark advance, no vacuum spark retard. There was no crossover heat valve, no thermostats, no hydraulic lifters. Above all, there were no relays. (Does anyone know why present-day engineers plaster relays over an engine like barnacles on a rock? Surely even engineers know that relays are the most bothersome thing invented since marriage.)

It was an engine you could work on easily. If you wanted to tighten the water-pump packing nut, you needed a screwdriver and five seconds. If you wanted to drain dirt or water from the

[Continued on page 286]

What Do You Think?

This sentimental eulogy of an obsolete auto will, PSM suspects, strike a happy chord with some readers, a jangling dissonance with others. For the five most interesting letters of comment, of 150 words or less, received by Oct. 1, 1954, PSM will pay $25 each. Address: The Editor, POPULAR SCIENCE MONTHLY, *353 Fourth Ave., New York 10, N.Y.*



Space for three, in a pinch

The stick shift could be a problem with three in front; there was a tendency to shift the center passenger's kneecap into second gear.



Service almost in your lap

Center-fill fueling was around then, too. You saw what you paid for: at about ¾ full, the gas dashed up into view on the gauge glass.



All aboveboard but the battery

To water the cells, you folded back the mat and pried up the access plate. Conking your head on steering column was part of the job.

gas line, you needed a pair of pliers and 15 seconds. And if you wanted to retime the ignition—for which you may now need an oscilloscope complete with a portable, thick-lensed MIT graduate to twiddle the knobs—you could do an accurate job in less than five minutes. If a Model A needed a carbon-and-valve job, you could button it up in plenty of time before dinner.

No contortions. Partly this was simplicity of design; the engine's fathers didn't have the curious conception that if it's intricate it must be good. But partly it was also because you could get at the engine without 50-inch arms and universal-jointed wrists. It wasn't buried in a deep hole in the chassis, like a watermelon in a well. It wasn't matted over with a jungle of hoses, cables, and tubes, or with power-steering pumps, windshield-washing jars, or relays for blowing the horn. With the A engine, you almost never pulled it from the chassis just to work on it—a current practice that's about as cockeyed as letting a doctor cut open your chest to treat a cold.

There were lots of other good things about the old girl. With a 13-to-1 steering ratio, you could get around a corner without blurring the spokes like a roulette wheel. She'd turn around on a narrow road without making a production of it. Using the manual spark lever, you could readily quench a knock on a hard pull. (The spark was also handy if a dog ran yapping alongside: you retarded the lever, snapped the ignition off and on, and got a wonderfully terrifying backfire.) As for the absence of oil and water gauges, it was widely held that what you didn't know wouldn't hurt you.

And in what other car could you unobtrusively kick off the main gas valve, confronting your girl with a plausible out-of-gas situation on the back road?

The transmission was an unalloyed delight to drivers proud of their shifting skill—there were no sissy synchronizers in that box to hide your mistakes. Down-

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shifting without a trace of a clash into second at 25 m.p.h. or low at 10 was entirely practicable. But it took a nice feeling for revs, an instinct for setting the countershaft speed, and some deft double-clutching. When you did it just right, the gears slid together with a silent nicety that separated the men from the boys.

A few flaws. It doesn't make the Model A less of a car to admit that it wasn't perfect. Those brake rods sounded like a Cuban band; the gas tank in your lap wouldn't have been a good companion in a bad smash; and the parking brake could freeze on in winter, giving you a choice of abandoning the car until spring or taking a torch to the drums.

By 1954 tastes the Model A was no fireball. She had just 40 horses to tote some 2,200 pounds, and getaway at 55 pounds to the horsepower didn't exactly snap your head off. The egg beater under the hood had a respectable 200.5-cubic-inch displacement, but it only worked at 4.22-to-1 compression. (This raises the question as to why we bought gasoline—whale oil would probably have done as well.) And while the car was good in its day at road-keeping and cornering, don't slam a surviving model into a rough turn or you'll have a distinct impression of piloting a loose-jointed cowbarn on wheels.

Certainly it's unfair to assess this loyal old car by modern standards. Perhaps it is unreasonable, too, to ask why Detroit doesn't make them any more—it having been repeatedly shown that there isn't a mass U.S. market for dogged, unvarnished transportation, at least from new cars.

But what *is* fair is a prophecy: 28 years from now, in 1980, darn few of us will recall the glistening 1954 models with the same warm affection with which we now remember the Model A. END

Longevity Explained

The surest way to live a long life is to be someone's wealthy uncle.—*Texas Journal.*