

This T-Bird began as box of parts

By William A. Decker

My favorite car is a 1955 Ford Thunderbird that had been stripped of all parts, which were in a dozen or more boxes when I bought it five years ago.

When I went to the Secretary of State's office to register the title, I told the clerk that I was giving it to my wife. "Oh, so you're giving her a bunch of boxes of bolts and nuts," she replied.

I bought the car from a man who lived in Three Rivers who had also purchased the car for his wife. The two of them began to restore it, but were being transferred to South Carolina and did not want to transport it there.

For \$1,500, they sold me the boxes of the parts of the car, the chassis and the body, which was mounted on a rotisserie-type of mechanism that the young man's father-in-law built so that he could turn the body 360 degrees to work on different parts of it.

The first thing I did was take the body to Vandalia where I had its ugly yellow paint sandblasted off.

From there, I took the chassis, the 292 cubic-inch engine and the transmission to a garage in Three Rivers to make sure those parts were in proper working order and to make adjustments if they were not.

After having done all that, I was ready to work on the car myself. I put the body back on the chassis, replaced the kick plates, floor mats, part of the power steering, the braking system, exhaust system, headlights, tail lights, spare wheel, tire jack and gas tank.

The gas tank had rust spots on it and I was afraid it would break through, which would have been dangerous, considering its proximity to the exhaust pipe.

I also converted the six-volt electrical system to a 12-volt system, which entailed replacing the battery, generator, voltage regulator and the clock and radio wiring.

With a six-volt electrical system, everything on the car must be in tip-top operating condition for the car to start reliably. Back in 1955, cars did not have anything that operated by computer, so these changes were relatively easy to make.

From 1955 to 1957, Ford made the Thunderbird with a removable hard or soft top like a convertible. Apparently one of this car's previous owners had its hard Styrofoam top off when it rained, so the upholstery was in a pretty sad state of affairs.

I had the seats and headliner reupholstered at a shop outside of Paw Paw. The center parts of the seats are white; the front edges, sides, ends and top are turquoise blue, which was the original color according to the label on the firewall.

Today, the car is restored to its original condition and worth somewhere between \$20,000 and \$35,000. My wife and I are enjoying our 1955 Ford Thunderbird, and as the old used car salesman used to say, "We only drive it on Sundays and carry it across railroad tracks."

In actuality, we drive it whenever we get the chance but not in inclement weather because we keep the hard top off and store it from the end of October until the beginning of May.

Occasionally, I take this car and two others, including a 1971 Volkswagen Bug and a 1965 Corvair Corsa, which Ralph Nader made famous in his book "Unsafe at Any Speed," to display at auto shows in Vicksburg and Hickory Corners.

I have not entered them to win anything, but I just may have to do that.

—As told to Tara Marion

Dr. William Decker lives in Kalamazoo and drives a 1991 Cadillac Eldorado. He continues to practice his specialty of psychiatry by assisting veterans who are applying for benefits at the V.A. Medical Center in Battle Creek.