

## Personal Junkyard

by Lianna Churchill

My dad has owned a lot of cars. And that sentence in itself is an understatement. Yearning for change, Harold “Bud” Churchill regularly traded his automobiles for something different. From Stockbridge, Michigan, he grew up on a 10-acre farm where he woke up at 5am to milk cows, go to school, and milk them again at 5pm. On weekends he did chores and helped around the house along with his 6 siblings. When he was old enough to drive, he began a roulette of buying and selling his cars, sometimes after a few years, others after a few months. His rationale being: “I get tired of it, move on. Tired of that one, okay move on.” A mentality which fueled his resistance to merely settling. Although Bud could only remember nineteen vehicles, he said the number was closer to thirty.

### ’65 Chevy Impala

Bud got his first car the day he turned sixteen, before he even got his license. Bought used from a friend of a friend, he paid \$250 for a 1965 Chevy Impala and proudly drove it everywhere. It impressed girls at his school which—to him—was a major bonus. The dark blue car was the site for many first dates and nights out of the house with friends. Back in 1971, “If you didn’t have a car, you had to know someone who did, otherwise you didn’t have a social life.” He boasted to me that once he got the Impala, he was the life of the party. However, having a car also meant he needed to help his parents with errands. He avoided those obligations by

rarely being home (a tactic I've inherited myself). But he couldn't avoid driving his younger brothers around when required, the same way his four older siblings did before they moved out. Right before his driveway, there was a sharp turn on the gravel road and Bud always watched his older brothers drift around it before pulling in, until he finally got to try it himself. "My dad saw me drift around the corner and threatened to take the car away from me. So from then on, I'd always look for his truck over the hill first. If he wasn't home, then I'd drift, but if he was, I didn't risk it." Though he loved his car, he began to develop a festering eagerness to swap his vehicle. Bud owned the Impala for a little over a year before selling it and buying something else.

## '66 Volkswagen Beetle

He bought a 1966 yellow Volkswagen Beetle with the leftover cash from the Impala and some of his 17th birthday money. A trendy car at the time, it zipped around town and through the dirt backroads that wound past acres of forests and pastures. Shortly after getting his new, used car, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis after drinking unpasteurized milk. He blames his older brother John for not properly cleaning the cows' utters, a necessary sanitation when foregoing the pasteurization process. "I had a giant tumor on my neck. It was kinda funny thinking back, going to school with this huge thing and people coming up to me like 'Hey Bud, what the hell is that?'" The tumor was removed, forcing Bud to miss 3 months of school, and two days later he drove to a friend's party to show off the 3-inch scar that still visibly runs down the side of his neck. At that same party, he lost a bet over a round of darts and had to sell Beetle to his opponent. "It was

just as well though, there was a rusted hole in the floor. I could see the road while I was driving!

That guy didn't win much." Was a car a common wager back then? No. Bud was known for talking big, but always sticking to his word. He wasn't too upset about the car, as he immediately bought another one.

### '68 Volkswagen Beetle

The 1968 Volkswagen Beetle was light green on the sides and teal on the hood, roof, and trunk. It was an upgrade from the yellow bug, in that Bud liked the color better and the floor didn't have a gaping hole in it. Unfortunately for him as the German brand became trendier, soon enough many of his classmates got one. "Once they became really popular, it took the novelty out of them. I loved those things, but I never wanted to follow the crowd." This feeling has followed him throughout his life. (When I was sixteen I wanted to dye my hair bright red and he preached to me about doing it for myself and not following the trend.) The motto has helped him advocate and promote individuality, although it occasionally seems a little too farfetched. Bud prides himself on not being influenced by trends or the likes of others, and instead following his initial intuition. He had his second Beetle for just a few months before selling it to a fellow student who was following the trend.

## '64 Ford Maverick

Bud bought a 1964 Ford Maverick from a gym teacher at his high school in the back-parking lot. "It felt like a drug deal," he explained, the quick transfer of cash and keys while trying to conceal the deal from any onlooking students. His older brothers even tried to buy it from him, offering him significantly more than he paid, but he held onto the car for the novelty (and to make his siblings jealous). He would blast his favorite music, The Who, Led Zeppelin, and The Doors as he drove around town, with wind sweeping through his long, brown, curly hair. When he was fourteen, he and the neighbor, "Crazy Jim" almost hitchhiked to see all these artists live at Woodstock. He nearly did, but ultimately feared the punishment he'd face from his parents. "It's one of my biggest regrets" he notes. Before driving, he and his friends used to hitchhike often to Lansing for the day, without his parents ever finding out. He had the Maverick for the last semester of his senior year, before swapping it for something more adventurous.

## '71 650 Yamaha

Against his mother's pleas, Bud purchased his first motorcycle, a 1973 650 Yamaha, used from a local grocery store owner when he was eighteen. This was right after graduating from high school, so Bud wanted to celebrate by "buying something dangerous." According to him, owning a motorcycle in Michigan was a rite of passage, noting that "the louder the muffler, the cooler you were." Back when he had hair for the wind to mess up, the Yamaha was his ride for the summer of 1973 to roll up to parties and impress his friends whose parents wouldn't allow them the same freedom. Just as his mother was coming around to the motorcycle, Bud got into a

minor accident two miles away from their farm. Although he only came out of it with two stitches in his arm, he decided to only have it for the remainder of the summer and move on, much to his mother's delight. Once the weather cooled down, he sold it to his fifteen-year old neighbor who illegally rode it around their backroads.

### '69 International Harvester Scout

Not the best vehicle for the winter, but the 1969 forest green International Harvester Scout was great for tough off-roading. In the fall, Bud could take the Jeep-looking car through the backroads of Stockbridge. Off-roading was the chance for him to drive roughly without his parents finding out. "One time it got stuck in the mud real bad, the thing would not budge no matter how hard we tried. Then this guy came along, I knew him and didn't care for him but of course I acted all nice so he would tow us out, and he did." He admitted that off-roading was tricky where he lived; if he drove too far then there was little chance of running into anyone. But despite getting stuck a few times, Bud can still recall the adrenaline rush that came from surmounting over mud-ridden bumps and flying through dirt expanses. While he drove the Scout until the end of the spring, winter was difficult because it certainly wasn't a good vehicle to trek through snow. If the roads weren't plowed, which they rarely were, he had an alternative transportation method.

## The Snowmobile

“In the winter, you could drive a snowmobile, and no one would care. There were just farms for miles and miles, the roads were dirt and they were hardly plowed.” Although he couldn’t remember the make or model, Bud frequently rode a snowmobile around Stockbridge when he couldn’t afford to put reliable tires on his car. The snowmobile was a staple for him and something he’d ride around on before he even got his license. He wasn’t the only person driving a snowmobile on the road; one winter he even used his vehicle to help those in need during a major snow storm. “I was going around to neighbors and delivering groceries and goods, cause people were snowed in for days. I lost most of the stuff on the ride though, I was trying to balance everything on my lap, but it was bouncing all over the place” he described in between breathless laughs. “It was a mess. There were all kinds of supplies lying in the road, I didn’t even go back for them. They just got buried in the snow.” He continued to crack up at this as he explained that the snowmobile was really his parents’ and once he moved out, he didn’t have the need for one of his own.

## ’72 Buick Skylark

When Bud was listing his vehicles to me, the 1972 Buick Skylark was the one he’d spend the most time talking about. Clearly his favorite, he said it was “a real chick magnet”—sparkling tan with chrome edging. Whenever he stopped for gas, he usually received compliments from whoever was at the pump. He often had to drive his brother Tim, half-brother Michael, and adopted brother Raymond around to school, work, or practices because they were all either too

young or too nervous to get their licenses. While Tim and Michael loved the convertible top, Raymond would yell at Bud to put it back up. Bud scoffed that Raymond wasn't very fun, "he didn't like to chew his food. For a while he only ate soft foods or drank liquids. He was a weird kid." When he wasn't driving his siblings around town, sometimes he went for drives just to spend time in the car. It made him feel luxurious, even though he'd bought it used. He had the convertible for almost a full year, but after being hired as a carpenter, the job required a more spacious car. "Selling that thing was hard," he said while sniffing and wiping away an imaginary tear from his eye. (Theatrics aside, he sincerely wishes he still had the car.)

### '75 Ford 150 Econoline

At 22, working as a carpenter, a truck was necessary for carrying around necessary supplies and his 1975 Ford 150 Econoline did just the trick. Carpentry work was dull, but it was temporary before he could save up money to move elsewhere. College wasn't a common route back then, especially in rural Michigan. Most graduates continued working on their parents' farms to later inherit them or they went into either a tradesmen job or the military. Bud had actually tried to go into the military after high school, but because he had still been taking antibiotics for his tuberculosis tumor he was denied acceptance. Thus landing him the route of a laborer, where the hard work led to exhaustion and left little time for a social life. "The girl I was dating at the time kept getting mad at me for working so much. Eventually I just stopped calling her." (As I scolded him for this maneuver, he reminded me that otherwise I might not have been

born.) Always a hard worker, Bud never questioned his priorities: work comes first in order to make money to eventually get out of Michigan.

### '67 Chevy Van

Once Bud was 23, he set his plan to move to the South in motion. Partly wanting change and partly despising cold winters, he decided on the Sunshine State itself: Florida. He began searching for a van that would take him the journey and was big enough to sleep in, saving him the cost of renting motel rooms. One day he approached a couple who had the funkiest van he'd ever seen. According to him: "the thing looked like the Scooby-Doo van. Had murals painted on all sides, all different colors. It was definitely a hippy van...I just asked them if I could buy it off them and they said sure." The van was decorated with murals the couple had painted on themselves and they had coincidentally just moved from Florida. It ran on LP gas and used to be a telephone truck before the couple redid it into a tricked-out flower-power mobile. He bought it from them for \$800, sold the Ford truck, and prepared it for the long journey. Before the end of the month was over, he drove it back down to Florida and continued to live in it for a few weeks before he could find work and afford a place to rent. Living in a van was a lifelong goal of his and he was proud to have such a unique automobile to also call his home.



## '77 750 Triumph Trident

The 1977 750 Triumph Trident was Bud's first motorcycle in Florida, though it looked more like a motorized bicycle. Proudly stating that it was 3-cylinder (and then having to explain to me what that meant); it was a powerhouse. It only resulted in one wipeout, which he walked away from barely bruised. Afterwards, he disassembled the bike in his basement, only to later rebuild it "just for fun". He replaced a few parts but admitted he didn't really know what he was doing. It was part of his reluctant journey of freedom, one that transpired after moving to Florida and building a new life for himself. He had the Trident for about four years, going through periods of riding it frequently and not at all. Eventually he sold it for extra cash, which he regrettably blew half of at a casino. Bud was still living in his young party days in Palm Beach, enjoying the bachelor freedom.

## '72 MGB

A classic British car, Bud purchased the 1972 dark green MGB from his neighbor at a yard sale. The car wasn't for sale, but he persuaded the owner to part with it in exchange for a spare couch Bud had, plus a wad of cash. "They were great beach cars because they're so small, you could park anywhere. I could just sneak into a tiny space that wasn't a parking spot and walk right onto the beach. I never got caught." One record-hot day, he was driving home from the beach when the MGB started making "a noise you never want to hear a car make". (He did an impression of what sounded like a low growl.) Along with this new issue, the car already had a major transmission problem: it couldn't start on its own. "I had to get out, push it, then jump in

the car to get it to start. If I had to park, I'd find a hill and put on the e-brake. That way, I'd only have to lean forward to start again. This sounds so pathetic." He even drove the car back to Michigan for a family visit with these problems. He admits that he was too broke to get them fixed and too lazy to try to fix them himself. Eventually, getting tired of having to manually start his car, he scrapped it and bought another one.

## '74 MGB

The 1974 MGB was a two-toned car of light and dark blue. It was newer, shinier, could properly start, and the leather seats had no rips in them. "I was really in touch with my British roots," he laughed, referencing his distant relation to the former Prime Minister, Sir Winston Churchill. He'd once researched the family history and found the exact lineage to the late English hero, but he has no clue where the research is now. (While the relation isn't a direct descent, it's still a go-to fun fact.) He took my mom on their first date in his second MGB in 1976, where they went to dinner and a drive-in movie. "Years later she told me she hated that car," Bud admitted to me. "But she shouldn't talk; she drove a station wagon." After a few months, much like the Volkswagen Beetle, MGBs became increasingly more popular in the Florida coastal areas and Bud's distaste of having a trendy car resurfaced. He sold it to a young kid who responded to his ad in the newspaper. "He didn't look old enough to drive, but he was paying well over what it was worth, so I didn't care too much." And onto the next car.

## '79 Volkswagen Van

“Your mom and her friend Tommy would constantly refer to it as ‘The *Van*’,” with the emphasis indicating some level of judgement. Another one of Bud’s favorite vehicles and the one he’s brags about the most, his blue 1979 Volkswagen Van fulfilled a lifelong dream of his. It wasn’t, in any way, practical for Florida, but he’d always wanted one and happened to come across an ad in the paper for just \$1750. It wasn’t a reliable van and often broke down on his way to work as an electrician. Parts for the van were expensive and difficult to come across in the area, but it was more conversational than practical. He always intended to fix it up, “trick it out”, and live in it while driving across country. Once he started getting serious with my mom, who didn’t share the same ambitions, that dream quickly subsided. Although she was adventurous at the time, she had too much emotional attachment to leave the place she was comfortable in. “I was more of a free-spirit than her, if I could convince her I would’ve just road tripped until we couldn’t afford to put gas in the tank anymore.” But he realized that staying put forced him to grow up. After becoming more serious with my mom, Bud began planning ahead for his future. This was something he’d never done before.

## '84 350 Honda

The last motorcycle he owned was a 1984 350 Honda. The hot, humid climate made any car unbearable to get into until the AC finally kicked in. He rode around the area with a few friends he made at a local biker bar. Though he was never officially in a gang, he did enjoy having other people to ride with. “Your mom never wanted to get on it. I guess I don’t blame her,

the thing looked pretty rickety.” Sandra only went on two rides with him, once to the beach and the other fifty feet down the street and back. He sold it before going on his and my mom’s honeymoon, to have extra cash while they were there. They planned to backpack around eight countries in Europe, however their trip was cut short in the sixth country, Italy, after their wallets were stolen. “They took everything, cash, credit cards, our passports; there’s nothing scarier than being in a foreign country with no identity or money.” My mom, having been nervous to leave their belongings in the hostel in Rome, put them in her backpack against Bud’s wishes where they were theft on a tightly packed bus. They made their way to the US Embassy, fortunately located in Rome and waited in a line that was about 100-people long. They eventually discovered that the city has one of the highest pickpocketing rates in the world. In that moment, he’d wished he kept his motorcycle. This was the last time either of my parents traveled outside the US.

## ’85 Jeep CJ5

The 1985 red Jeep CJ5 was the original iconic off-roading Jeep, before the Wrangler was produced. It had a short life, only four months in the summer of 1992. Fixed in his garage with cloth doors and 3-foot tall tires, the vehicle was the “last fun car” that he had. Though there wasn’t much off-roading in Florida like there was in Michigan, it was great for beaches. Living in Lantana, Florida, a town on the coast of Palm Beach County, the beach was always less than a ten-minute drive. “I’d take your mom to the beach for sunsets all the time, we could just drive right on, have a fire and lay for as long as we wanted. Yeah, I was romantic.” While the Jeep

didn't have any issues, he sold it after my mom revealed she was pregnant because it wasn't the safest car for a family and the two of them needed a more practical vehicle for Bud's job.

### '93 Ford Econovan

Working as an electrician, having a van was especially useful in transporting all the supplies he needed to work on jobs. The blue 1993 Ford Econovan had a pop-up camper on the top, allowing Bud, my mom, and their newborn daughter (my sister Courteney) to go camping whenever they desired. The van was spacious and at one point he put a couch in the back, before it began rattling around, having not been secured to the floor. It came in handy when the family decided they were moving out of Florida to Charlton, Massachusetts, Sandra's hometown. "We packed the van as tightly as we could and I drove that. Your uncle flew down and drove a U-Haul for us while your mom flew up with Courteney. The drive was long, but I'd gladly take it over flying with a 3-year-old." Once in Massachusetts, he found work as an electrician which provided him with his own company van, convincing him to sell the Ford and buy something new.

### '95 Dodge Ram

This truck is the oldest car that I personally remember. The 1995 black and red Dodge Ram had a loud buzz every time it turned on, one that never faded until turned off. Bud bought it from my mom's father after buying her childhood home from him as well, an impressive value of

hand-me-downs. The truck's bed was always filled to the brim with supplies, so much so that he usually kept the bed hood on. Moving to Massachusetts, having a truck was essential to him maintaining an essence of farm life. Though the new property was significantly smaller than his Michigan farm, he loved doing yard work on his and Sandra's 5.6 acres of property to call their own. "The house needed a lot of work when we bought it. I had to constantly haul things for the house and the garden, and I was rebuilding the pool deck. The people at Home Depot knew my name after only two months of living here." An eventual recurring joke in the family was that this truck was old enough to drive itself. (It was older than I was.) It was big and clunky, and while my mom got a few new cars, my dad had this truck up until it buzzed for the last time. The day the truck died was a sad day in the Churchill household.

## 2011 Ford F150

Bud had never purchased a car from a dealer before. He walked into the nearby Ford dealership with little insight as to what to do. Though he's never trusted car salesmen, he knew it was time to buy something permanent and reliable. The dark blue half-ton 2011 Ford F150 currently sits in our driveway. It has Bluetooth connectivity, USB charging ports, a backup camera, and eight cupholders. The only downside is that he hates the sound of the blinker ticking, and often doesn't use it for that reason (much to our family's protests). Currently, there's no room for passengers because the five other seats are taken by boxes full of tools and supplies for when he's on the job. Now 64 years-old, Bud finds himself in a comfortable place, eager to finally retire from electrical work and also a frequenter of the Heritage Golf Course driving

range. Golfing is one of his favorite hobbies and while he admits he's not that good, he doesn't necessarily want to be. Once retired, he plans to move back down south because it's warm, cheap, and there are plenty of golf courses. I asked him how he feels about the growing technologies in cars today and he said: "New cars are great, they're reliable and usually gas efficient. But there are so many gadgets and different knobs and things, I'm still trying to figure out what's what."

He has no current plans to sell it, as he's content with riding the truck out until it can't drive any longer.