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Personal Junkyard

My dad has owned a lot of cars. That sentence in itself is an understatement. Constantly yearning for change, Harold “Bud” Churchill swapped regularly his automobiles. From Stockbridge, Michigan, he grew up on a 10-acre farm where he woke up at 5am to milk cows, go to school, and come back to milk them again at 5pm. On weekends he did chores and helped around the house along with his 7 siblings. When he was old enough to drive, he began his roulette of buying and selling cars for his personal use. His rationale was: “I get tired of it, move on. Tired of that one, okay move on.” He could only remember up to 20 vehicles, but he guessed that the number was closer to thirty.

’65 Chevy Impala

Bud got his first car the day he turned sixteen, before having a license. Bought used from a friend of a friend, he paid \$250 for his Chevy and proudly drove it everywhere. It also 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. 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 proudly boasted to me that once he had his first car, he was the life of the party. However, having a car also meant needing to help his parents with errands. He avoided those obligations by rarely being home, a tactic I’ve inherited myself. There was a sharp turn before approaching his driveway, and Bud always

watched his older brothers drift around the corner before pulling in. Finally, Bud got to try it.

“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 car 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 the car, he began to develop his festering desire to switch up his vehicle. Bud owned the Impala for a little over a year before selling it and buying a something else.

’66 Volkswagen Beetle

He bought a yellow Beetle with the leftover cash from the Impala and some of his birthday money. A trendy car at the time, it zipped around town and through the dirt backroads of his barren town. When he had this car, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis after drinking unpasteurized milk. He blames his brother for not properly cleaning the cows’ utters. “I had a giant tumor looking thing 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 and afterwards, he drove to his friend’s party, showing off the 3-inch scar that runs across the side of his neck. At that very party, he lost a bet over a round of darts and had to sell his car 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.” I asked if a car was a common wager, it wasn’t. “I was a big mouth. Thought I was invincible after beating TB. That usually kills people, you know.” He immediately bought another one, losing any lingering attachment to his first Volkswagen.

'68 Volkswagen Beetle

This one 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 bottom wasn't rusted through. As the German brand became trendier, soon enough many people from high school had them. "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. Anytime I wanted to do something slightly "mainstream", even just dye my hair, he would ask if I was doing it for me or if I was following a trend. Sometimes he uses this if he just doesn't want me to do something. The motto has helped him preach and promote individuality, although it occasionally seems farfetched. 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 the Ford from a gym teacher at his high school, in the back-parking lot near the basketball courts. "It felt like a drug deal," he recalled of the quick transfer of cash and keys. His older siblings tried to buy it from him, offering him significantly more than he paid, but he held onto the car for the novelty and his siblings' jealousy. He would blast his favorite music, The Who, Led Zeppelin, and The Doors as he came down the driveway. All those artists he saw live at Woodstock, when he and his buddy hitchhiked there without telling their mothers. He was fourteen during the music festival and although his memory is fuzzy, he remembers it being one of the happiest days of his life. On his third car, his parents began to notice how quickly he switched. "They constantly told me to just stick with something, said at this rate I could have my

own junkyard, but I didn't see the point. I liked change." 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 to not get it, he purchased his first motorcycle used from a local grocery store owner when he was eighteen. This was right after graduating from high school, so naturally Bud had to celebrate by buying something potentially dangerous. Owning a motorcycle in Michigan was a rite of passage, explaining that "the louder you were, 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 an accident two miles away from their farm. After walking away from the minor incident with two stitches in his arm, he decided only to have it for the remainder of the summer and move on. His mother was thrilled. Once the weather cooled down, he sold it to his 15-year old neighbor who illegally rode around the backroads.

'69 International Harvester Scout

Not the best vehicle for the winter, but the forest green Scout was great for tough off-roading. In the fall, Bud could take the Jeep-looking thing through the backwoods in his town. 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 out then there was little chance of running into anyone. While he drove the Scout until the end of the spring, but winter was difficult because it wasn't a snow vehicle. 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." He couldn't remember the make or model, but he frequently rode around the backroads of Stockbridge in the winter time when he couldn't afford to put reliable tires on his car. The snowmobile was a staple for him, and something he'd driven before having a license. He wasn't the only one to take it on the road, and one winter he even used his vehicle to help those in need in the middle of a major snow storm. "I was going around to neighbors and delivering groceries and goods, 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.

'72 Buick Skylark

When Bud was listing his vehicles to me, the Buick was the one he'd consistently rename. Clearly his favorite, he said it was "a real chick magnet"—sparkling tan with chrome edging. He rode around town and stopped for gas more often than needed. He would even stop to clean the windshields because 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 other obligations 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 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 a pretend tear from his eye. Theatrics aside, he greatly wishes that he still had the car.

'75 Ford 150 Econoline

At 22, working as a carpenter, a truck was necessary for carrying around all the supplies. Carpentry work was dull, but just temporary before he could save up money to move elsewhere. College wasn't a common route back then, and especially in the area he lived. Most graduates continued working on their parents' farms to later inherit or went into a tradesmen job. 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." I scolded him for abandoning her, but he assured me they weren't a good match.

'67 Chevy Van

Once Bud was 23, he wanted to get out of Michigan and move South. Partly wanting change and the other part despising cold winters, he decided on Florida for its warmth and abundant sun. He began searching for a van that would take him the journey while saving him the cost of renting motel rooms. One day he approached a couple who had the funkiest van he'd ever seen. "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." Coincidentally, the couple had just moved from Florida, where Bud was planning to go. It ran on LP gas and used to be a telephone truck before the couple redid it. He bought it from them for \$800, sold the Ford, and began preparing for the long journey. Within the month he drove it back down to Florida to live in for the few weeks before he could find work and afford a place to rent out.

'77 750 Triumph Trident

The 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, he walked away barely bruised. Afterwards, he disassembled the bike in his basement, only to later rebuild it. He replaced a few parts but admitted he didn't really know what he was doing. 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 in the sunshine state.

'72 MGB

A classic British car, Bud purchased the 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 surplus 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 diesel truck. 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. That sounds kind of sad." Eventually, getting tired of having to push-start his car, he scrapped it and bought another one.

'78 MGB

The second MGB, similar to the second Volkswagen Beetle, was a two-toned car of light and dark blue. It was newer, shinier, could properly get water to the engine, 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's researched the family history before and found the exact lineage to the late English hero, but he has no clue where he put it. It's not a direct descent though, our relation is through an uncle or cousin. It's still my go-to fun fact. He took my mom on their first date in this car. They went to dinner and a drive-in movie. "Years later she told me she hated that car. 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 an overly-trendy car resurfaced. He sold it to a kid about half his age, “he didn’t even look old enough to drive, but he was paying well over what it was worth, so I didn’t care too much.”

’79 Volkswagen Van

“Your mom, she and her friend Tommy would constantly refer to it as ‘The *Van*’,” with the emphasis indicating some kind of judgement. This was another one of Bud’s favorite vehicles and the one he’s brags about the most. 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 and up and leave where she was comfortable. “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.” Though 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 motorcycle

The last motorcycle he owned was described as sleek and hip. 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." My mom 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 after their wallet was 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 hotel room, put them in her backpack against Bud's wishes. Arguing over Sandra's mistake and their incapacity wasn't part of their ideal honeymoon plans. 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 of the US.

'85 Jeep CJ5

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

backwoods 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 “family car”.

’93 Ford Econovan

Working as an electrician, having a van was especially useful in transporting all the supplies he needed to work on jobs. It also 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 without being secured in the floor. It came in handy when the family decided they were moving out of Florida to Charlton, Massachusetts, my mom’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 gladly took 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 finally sell the Ford.

’95 Dodge Ram

This truck is the oldest car that I personally remember. Occasionally referred to as the “Black Widower”, the black and red truck had a loud buzz every time it was started and never

faded until turned off. Bud bought it from his father-in-law after buying my mom's childhood home from her parents as well. He was one of the only people who always kept the shell on the truck bed, even though he rarely filled it with supplies. Moving to Massachusetts, having a truck was essential to him maintaining an essence of farm life. Though the new property was significantly smaller at 5.2 acres, he loved doing yard work. "The house needed a lot of work when we bought it. I had to constantly haul things for the house, the garden, I was rebuilding the pool deck. The people at Home Depot knew my name after only a month of living here". A recurring joke in the family was that this truck was old enough to could drive itself, before I could. It was big and clunky, and while my mom had had new cars, my dad had this truck up until he couldn't get anything more out of it. 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 truck currently sits in our driveway. It has Bluetooth connectivity, USB charging ports, a backup camera, and eight cupholders. The only downside I've seen 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 63 years-old, Bud finds himself in a comfortable place, eager to finally retire from electrical work and frequenter of the Heritage Golf Course driving range. Golfing is

one of his only 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 anytime soon.