

KNOCK-IT-OFF!



July 2023

What the hell am I doing here?

Her name is U-31. She's a 1931 Ford Model A hot rod built by Carter Cook in Westford, NY in traditional west coast hot rod style: meaning a chopped, high boy body. East coast rods tend to be channeled, but not chopped. High boy means the body is bolted on top of the frame rails, channeled means the body is set down over the frame rails; either way the resulting rod appears to be lowered. The Model A was introduced in December 1927, replacing the venerable Model T which had sold 18 million copies. Model A sales were robust; Ford passed 1 million sold in February 1929, 2 million in July 1929, 3 million in March 1930 and 4.8 million of all body styles by the time Model A production was stopped in March 1932. The 5-window Model A coupe is a favorite among hot rod builders, if for no other reason than you can save a ton of money over the cost of its more popular successor, the '32 ("Deuce") coupe.

The fair market value of an asset is the agreed value between a willing buyer and a willing seller, neither being under any compulsion to act, with a fair exchange of the relevant facts. Carter Cook is a Certified Welding Inspector who owns and operates World Wide Welding in up-state New York. In his spare time, he builds hot rods. This particular donor-vehicle came to him about 20 years ago as a derelict hot rod that had last been registered in the '60's in California. It had been picked up out there by Hugh Weaver, a noted Bultaco collector and dealer in New York, over by the Massachusetts border. Back in the day Weaver would make frequent trips to the west coast to buy Bultaco bikes, parts and projects to augment his business and he came home from one of those trips with this Model A, then painted Chevy blue with a white firewall. It had sat in his barn since 1973, until Carter Cook heard about it at a Carlisle Swap Meet. The Model A was to be a father-son project for Carter, sadly cut short when his son passed away in 2002 and the project stalled. The fair market value part of the story occurred in November 2021 after a visit to Carter's shop, not on search of another car, but simply to see what professional welding shop was all about. There it sat and a deal was struck. The relevant facts were that the car was sold as is, it would be running, but Carter's day job would leave little time to spare for fettling the car. A couple of months later, Hot Rod Magazine published the route for the 2022 Hot Rod Power Tour and, Eureka!, I could justify the purchase (after the fact of course). I'd take a grandson on the HRPT!! The car was shipped to Nashville to await the tour. When he heard about it, Carter suggested it was a dumb plan in that car; he was a drag racer and

the car was not set up for touring. Oh well, common sense and my name don't often travel together anyway.

Preparing the car for a long tour fell to Triworks Hot Rods in Nashville over the course of just a couple of weeks. The miniscule drag racing front disc brakes were up-rated to Wilwood street pots plus a larger master cylinder, the mechanical fuel system was converted to an electric pump and looped back to the tank to avoid vapor lock, a full set of modern Classic Instrument gauges were installed, a stock 5-quart oil pan replaced the 7-1/2 quart pan giving us 2" more road clearance and the car was nutted and bolted. As more money was spent in the spring of 2022 the long suffering and fiscally responsible Mrs. Laudin dubbed this latest acquisition the "U-boat", in recognition of its slipping underwater as to its value. She has an uncanny, sharp, ability to name my cars.

Twelve-year-old Sam Laudin and your faithful correspondent survived the 2022 HRPT but came back to Nashville with a dozen or so items on a punch list that needed more attention. Not least of which was the significant bump steer resulting from the stiff suspension on the car associated with its intended use as a drag racer. The wooden bench seat covered with something like a moving blanket wasn't up to touring standards either. Frankly, it was painful. So, a plan was made to further fettle the car at Triworks Hot Rods in preparation for the 2023 HRPT. As more money went out the door in 2023 the U-boat moniker was sharpened up a bit to "U-31"; the only German U-boat sunk twice in WW II. There's a long list of reasons to buy a hot rod, but financial investment is not one of them. About 2X underwater as to value seems about right to this Grand Pa.

The boys at Triworks set about making U-31 better for the 2023 HRPT. The company is owned by Ben Giuliano and Grant Salter; the latter had stones enough to take the car home over the winter to be stored in his wife's garage space. That might explain why I didn't get a Christmas card from the Salter's this year. The first thing done were aluminum bomber seats sourced from Paul Wright in Texas which were sent to be covered by Jan Van Kooten at Stitch by Stitch in Cookeville, TN. We pulled the single four-barrel setup in favor of a much more interesting 6X2 barrel Ford 94 downdraft carbs on a vintage Offenhauser intake. A lot of time and more depth underwater were spent trying to sync the 6 carbs, before we gave up and blocked the front and rear pairs, running the center two carbs which provide almost 400 cfm to the engine. The Ford (Holley) 94s are great at open throttle but are unsophisticated enough to make them troublesome at idle and low speeds. Particularly when trying to operate six of them in unison. Yes, we were down on power, but we now got 22 mpg! A hood was fabricated and painted to keep the rain out of the carbs. The original rear spring and the Pete & Jakes shocks were removed, and the rear of the car was modified to accept a custom pair of coil over shocks made by Ridetech and a Panhard bar to keep it all straight. After a few other parts were modified or sourced we were ready for the 2023 HRPT.



Ten-year-old Trevor Laudin was my co-pilot this year. Given the changes over the past year the ride was way better than last year. Not to be confused with plush, but way better. Trevor was my gauge man, blinker reminder (no auto shut-off) and traffic light monitor (can't see a traffic light in a '31 coupe with a 3-1/2" chop). Generally speaking, the tour was a blast. At the end of each day, we'd hit the guest lounge and often sat with complete strangers. One older couple from Detroit had 38 grandchildren. Chris and Prudie, driving a beautiful Hugger Orange '68 Roadrunner were great company another day. A father and son team yet another day, and so forth, proving that like-minded car people may be among the best on earth. The range of cars on the HRPT defies description, but our open wheeled ride seemed to attract more than its share of attention. We had a little thing going in our car when we watched all the modern Chargers, Camaros, Mustangs and Corvettes wheel by with their radios, air conditioning and windshield wipers: we'd call out "CHEATERS". At the extreme, as we were clutching our way into one venue behind a new Bentley, we just looked at each other and said "CHEATER". Trevor's favorite car of the trip was a 1977 Sun Orange Gremlin X with an Orange Schwinn Gremlynn X sting ray style, shifter bike on the back-rack. Each evening was a chore to find dinner. The hotels were mobbed, as were the adjacent restaurants. One evening, in his infinite wisdom, Grand Pa decided it was time to introduce Trevor to Hooters; fortunately, the long line to get in sent us next door to a Michael Waltrip Taproom where the food was probably about the same, but the delivery was less interesting. At least Grand Pa avoided the wrath of his mother.



Co-Pilot, Trevor Laudin and his favorite car from the trip.

Seven days and almost 1,300 miles later we were back in Nashville. With just one small hiccup for an easily fixed electrical problem, we had made the tour without issue in good form in a 92-year old 5-window Ford. Now it was time to get home to California.

Even the guys at Triworks, who knew the car was ready, thought it a bad idea to drive another 2,900 miles to the Bay Area. The weather would be uncertain, there would be long days pounding down the road in a rudimentary, open-wheeled car with only “3-60” air conditioning based on a windshield that hinged open from the top and the two side roll down windows. All but open exhaust and wind noise from the open windows meant ear plugs, which when compounded by limited visibility, meant having to stay sharp on a very long drive.

But there were people and things to see on the way west, chief among them a visit to Lake Garnett, KS. which was the scene 60-years ago on July 6-7, 1963 of an impromptu race-meeting between the Shelby American factory race team and Grady Davis’ back-door GM Corvette team. The resulting, decisive, victories in both races by the Cobra Men was the apogee of the short-lived 1963 Cobra – Corvette war. The SCCA sanctioned the Lake Garnett races in those heady days, but that ended in 1972 when crowd control and track safety came to the fore. In 2013 Lake Garnett local Tracy Modlin and a dedicated handful of his buddies revived the races as The Lake Garnett Grand Prix Revival. This is no longer a sanctioned event, but is more of a speed trial for enthusiasts, broken down by top speed-classes of 60, 80 & 100 mph plus an unlimited class for licensed SCCA drivers in cars that

pass tech inspection. There are two passing zones in the speed limited groups and open passing in the unlimited class. I had arranged to meet Tracy at the “track” which is actually

a mid-’30s Civilian Conservation Corp built access road around a public park just outside of town. He and his friends really trotted out the dog for my visit; there were six or eight of them to greet me, including the town manager! They had opened a building in the park and set up three tables of memorabilia for my review, including race programs, posters, news articles and original photos from back in the day. The race program from 1963 allowed me to confirm the Shelby American factory team was not entered in advance; the only Cobra in the program was entered by Bob Johnson. It truly was a case of the factory boys stopping by on a lark on their way home from Watkins Glen to support Johnson, while on their way to the next team race in Kent WA. With assurance from the town manager that the local constabulary were “elsewhere” we fired up Tracy’s 1972 Corvette,



now powered by 502 cu. in. GM crate motor and roared off around the track. Tracy allowed that he often comes out there in off hours to “practice”. The good news is the course is still there, the bad news is it’s little improved from its heyday in the 60’s. It’s rough and narrow, with plenty of undulations and obstacles. Tracy reported that the Cobras averaged over 95 mph during the races in 1963, a terrifying prospect after circulating the track in a more modern car at nothing like that average speed.

Right: Ken Miles mugging for the camera on his way to winning the Modified Race, July 7, 1963

Tracy and his crew will produce the 11th Annual Lake Garnett Grand Prix Revival on October 13-14-15, 2023. The goal is to get a handful of original Cobras and a like number of ’63 vintage Corvette race cars in the paddock for folks to enjoy. If you’re in the area, put it on the calendar.

The route from Lake Garnett went due west to McPherson, KS.,



across farm country. The wheat harvest was on in this part of the world and the roads were rolling, two lane affairs. U-31 was moving west at 70 mph and the wheat trucks (semis) were headed the other way at 70 mph. The resulting buffeting, particularly from the big Kenworth's and Peterbilt's with Texas (slab) bumpers was stunningly strong. One of them bent the '31 eyebrow visor right in the middle despite it having lightning holes and the windshield being fully open. I can't imagine what motorcyclists suffer under the same conditions. On another occasion a big rig was roaring the other way when a rock the size of my thumb came off a tire at a closing speed of something like 140 mph and arced right up over my hood toward my side of the windshield. Amazingly, the rock dropped down on the cowl, rattled its way under the windshield and dropped between my legs to the floor. Then there was the mud. As these grain trucks came off the fields, they'd leave huge clods of mud on the road. Nothing to do but run through it, hoping it hadn't been there all-day hardening.

One of the mysteries of Kansas is where folks in the country get gas. You can drive for miles on the backroads and see nothing but farms and the occasional town with not a gas station in sight. By this time in the trip the gas gauge had proved itself accurate and as U-31 was pounding west it slowly dropped to "E" which meant we had less than a gallon of gas left. Then, over a rise there it was in the distance, a town, and on the left a bright sign that sure looked like a gas station. Unfortunately, it was a Sonic hamburger joint. Desperate, a search of the town of Hillsboro, KS. revealed gas pumps behind a pizza place well off the main drag. Saved, with over eleven gallons added to a twelve-gallon tank.

Behind schedule, Roger Morrison was patiently waiting for me at McPherson College. Roger is one of those guys you go out of your way to visit. Erudite, a true gentleman, generous and a noted raconteur, we started the evening with a tour of the McPherson College Automotive Restoration program, visiting with students and faculty. This is the only 4-year accredited program of its type in the country and the current center piece is a 1953 Mercedes 300S Cabriolet that the students have spent almost 10-years restoring to concours spec. The goal is to present the finished project on the lawn at Pebble Beach, possibly this year; there were 53 days to go to the entry cut-off the evening we were there.

U-31 had developed a pesky throttle stick by this time; not surprising given the complicated linkage required to sync 6 carbs combined with the pounding the car was taking on maybe 2" of suspension travel. We parked U-31 for the night among Roger's extensive collection in Salina, KS., went out to dinner with his brother Richard, and finished the evening at Richard's also extensive collection. The next morning dawned clear and bright and the first order of business was to visit Dave Richards at The Carb Shop in Salina to get the throttle linkage massaged. What a find, all thanks to local Morrison knowledge. Dave operates out of an old gas station where you pull your car in, he comes out with a small tool carrier and proceeds to work the problem. Less than hour later the two center carbs U-31 were back in sync and the sticky linkage issue was gone.



Left: Dave Richards works his magic at The Carb Shop, Salina, KS. June 20, 2023.

It was a good day, and fairly typical of the center part of the trip. It was 380 miles generally west southwest to the next stop in La Junta, CO., with about 30 miles on the highway to start and the balance of the day working the route along two-lane roads. From there it was down to Santa Fe, NM. to see some old friends, then Albuquerque, NM. to visit a

college roommate. There's a great story here. I was 17 when I went off to Marietta College in Ohio. First to the room in the dorms and the three of us (me, plus parents Fred and Elinor) got my stuff out of the Chevy wagon and hauled up to my half of the room on the third floor. We were standing there with Elinor tearing up and Fred looking at his watch, anxious to start the trek back to Boston, when my roommate blasted through the door with his pillow under one arm and a case of beer under the other. He was 6'7" tall and had just mustered out of the Navy. I learned a lot from Steve Moodie.

Right: U-31, Santa Fe, NM. June 22, 2023, bent visor, mud and dead bugs.

Until Albuquerque the plan had been to stay off the highways wherever possible. But a squiz of the map and a rough calculation showed it would be an extra day to home to avoid the highways, and the best back road over the Sierras through Yosemite was not yet open for all the snow. So with the fun wearing off and in a rare moment of clarity, your correspondent aimed U-31 west on I-40 and three days later pulled into Walnut Creek. Not without some adventure including looky-loos cruising along side with a phone



camera out the window and, most memorably, the guy towing a trailer full of fine bark, uncovered, who came down highway entrance ramp in front of me and proceeded to let an unbelievable torrent of landscaping bark fly under my windshield and into my face. It actually made a nice cover on the floor for all the dead bugs that had piled up there.

So, what AM I doing here? Like many things in life, you often question what you're doing, or why, but then you accomplish something and realize you just had an adventure. I never set out to own a hot rod. It's safe to say this one found me and it's entirely representative of the breed. An iconic 1931 Model A body, chopped and high-boy'd onto an updated chassis, with a suicide front end to keep it low, an engine out of a Pontiac Firebird street racer, a set of six 70 year-old carburetors on an old Offenhauser intake found on H.A.M.B., an alternator off a Japanese fork lift, a radiator out of some guy's pile in North Carolina, a '32 grill, Muncie M-21 tranny and a Ford 9" rear. Ford drums out back, Wilwood discs out front. The bomber seats were built in Texas and covered in Tennessee. The door latches are operated by Shimano derailleur cables. The turn signal switch is a long toggle off a Mack truck. In short there are no rules with a hot rod. No one cares what nuts and bolts you're using, or if the radiator hose has the right lettering. Date codes? Forget about it. It's a relief.

And above all else, on the notion that you can only do two things with your money; collecting either objects or experiences, I had the opportunity to use this object to collect not one, but two experiences in the course of two weeks. The first was a full week of adventure and 1,300 miles of quality car-guy time with a 10-year-old grandson I don't get to see that often, something we'll never forget. And then I got to drive a rough, but ready enough, basic hot rod 2,900 miles across the country. It's been a couple of weeks to this writing, so the memories are getting filtered to the better side.

Yes, U-31 is underwater, and it will get worse as we get the other four carbs sync'd up, work the front suspension and fix a few other bits. But new experiences await. What's the value of those?

See you at the museum!
Captain Knock-Off