

Did You Have a Car in High School?



Beastly was the name of my first car. The name was short for Screaming Green Beast, and not because of its tremendous power or its lightning speed, but because it screamed anytime I made it go over 50.

My granddad bought the 1949 Dodge pickup truck to use on the farm. It was part of the farm equipment when I was growing up, but it went mostly unnoticed. He probably bought it second-hand, or maybe the faded blue color and paint worn to the primer was evidence of a hard life. Grandma said it was their primary transportation for years, but that was before my earliest memories. When my granddad died, the old truck took up residence in a corner of the barnyard.

A few years later, my brother-in-law, John, planned to take it to Spokane. Grandma told him, “It’ll feel like you’re taking a slow

Jesse Hulse

boat to China.” After a bit of tinkering, the engine started and John took off for Spokane. A friend of his owned a paint and body shop where he was able to get a paint job in exchange for a case of beer. After that, the pickup looked a lot better with its deep green color.

Sometime later, John got a new job that came with a company car, and he thought I could use some transportation now that I had a license. He and my sister, Rita, came for a visit and took me along with a friend so we could drive the pickup home. We spent the night at their house, and left in the morning on our adventure. Spokane was a new and strange city, so Rita and John drove ahead to lead us toward the highway. There was a momentary panic when they went through a yellow light, but they pulled over in the next block so we could catch up.

Shifting gears wasn't new to me, but this transmission was not as forgiving as others I had experienced. The synchromesh gearbox was invented in 1919 by Earl Avery Thompson, and was used on production cars by Cadillac beginning in 1928. This marvelous invention allowed a driver to shift gears without adjusting the speed of the input shaft to that of the selected gear. Without this innovation, a driver needed to double clutch to shift gears. That meant pushing the clutch pedal down, putting the shifting lever to neutral, letting the clutch out, adjusting the speed of the engine, pushing the clutch down again, and then

Jesse Hulse

putting the shifting lever into the proper gear. If you did this flawlessly, the gears meshed. If not, there was a horrible racket as the gears grated against one another. Earl Avery Thompson was born and raised in Elgin, the tiny town that was home to my family. He went to grammar school with my granddad, but his invention was not used in the '49 Dodge pickup. This deficiency caused a bit of trepidation as I went through the learning curve. A few hours brought us back to Elgin without too much trouble. And I had a car.

Any students living outside the city limits were allowed to ride the school bus. The city limit was the Grande Ronde River, and we were on the other side of the river even if only a hundred yards. All through elementary school and into high school, I had two choices: walking to school which was about a mile, or riding the bus. Now, I could drive — and I did. Well, I drove until one cold morning. My parents had head bolt heaters in their cars. That meant they had replaced one head bolt with a special one that had a heating element built in. This special bolt had a cord they could plug into a power outlet to keep their car engines warm. I had no such thing.

I got up one morning, and, as I was getting ready to leave, my dad asked, “How are you getting to school today?”

“I’m driving Beastly,” I replied

Jesse Hulse

He chuckled and said, “I don’t think so. Look at the thermometer.”

It was 30 degrees below zero that morning. I told him I had to try, and walked out to my pickup. Beastly was old enough that it had a starter switch on the floor. I turned the key and reached my foot over to the starter. When I pushed the starter, instead of the sound of an engine turning over, I heard something like the last moan of a dying cow. That one momentary sound was all the noise it made for two weeks. During which time, the temperature in the warmest part of the day never reached zero.

Two weeks of walking had begun to try my patience, and one night I had to attend play practice. I decided this was do or die. Beastly had a six-volt battery, which wasn’t as uncommon as it would be today. The battery was under the floorboards so you could access it from inside the vehicle. I took an extra twelve-volt battery we had, and used jumper cables to hook it to the six-volt battery under the floor and hit the starter. The end of the cables turned red-hot, so I stopped and let them cool. After two more tries, and nearly melting the jumper cables not unlike Frankenstein’s Adam, Beastly was reanimated. I made it to play practice, and it got me back home. I was too cheap to buy a head bolt heater, but I took a 100-watt light bulb and plugged it into a long cord. I laid the light on top of the engine and closed the hood. It wasn’t the best solution, but it did keep me from

walking to school on cold mornings.

Beastly wasn't great in the snow, but that was just a small obstacle to be overcome. With a little weight in the back to give more traction, my friend Louis thought we were invincible. Lou's cabin was always a favored destination. Winter weather made it more challenging, but we tried not to let it get the best of us.

The cabin was just off the road with a driveway that was no more than a small break in the trees. The snow on the ground was thawing and making soft mud. We got to the cabin, but when we turned around and started driving out onto the main road, the rear end of the truck slid off into the ditch. We put some rocks in the mud to make a more solid base, and then used the jack to lift the back of the truck up into the air. We shoved as hard as we could to the right, pushing Beastly off the jack. We were a few inches closer to the road, and we had found the solution. Going through the same procedure a few times brought us to solid ground. We threw the jack in the back, and drove onto the main road feeling like geniuses. It didn't occur to us that if we were really that smart, we might have avoided the whole episode with a little pre-planning. But we were young.

Rain was a bit of a bother when driving Beastly because of the vacuum windshield wipers. Vacuum wipers were the first type that didn't require the driver to crank the wipers by hand. The

Jesse Hulse

wiper motor was powered by a rubber tube connected to the intake manifold of the engine. Luckily, there was still a small lever you could use to wipe the windshield if the wiper motor failed. It was too small to turn easily by hand, but in an emergency, it at least gave you a chance to have visibility. Those emergencies were more frequent than I would have liked. If the tube or its connections leaked, the wipers wouldn't work. If you were making the engine work hard going up a steep hill, the wipers would stop. A friend and I found that out in a heavy rainstorm. Driving up a hill, I decided the car ahead of me was altogether too slow. With the gas pedal to the floor, I started around them. There was room to pass, but I had to take my foot off the accelerator every few seconds to let the wipers swipe so I would know how quickly the oncoming car was closing the gap. We survived, somewhat to my friend's surprise.

I wanted to customize Beastly to make the inside fancier, but I never seemed to have enough money. However, I did replace the inside door handles. We had a great shop at school. It was a well-equipped wood shop, but it also had a metal lathe, milling machine, and foundry where we could cast aluminum and brass. I made a pattern for door handles and cast two of them out of aluminum. They were flat and I shaped pieces of cedar to fit, gluing them on. That was step one; step two was a dome light. I found an old bullseye tail light in the shop on the farm and asked

Jesse Hulse

my dad about it. He told me they were popular years ago but they had been outlawed because the lens had a blue dot in the center so they didn't cast a true red light. I attached it to the top of the cab and wired it in with a switch on the dashboard. It wasn't much, but that was the extent of my customization.

After graduation, I enrolled in Eastern Oregon State College. It was only twenty miles from home, and I commuted for most of my first year. Then, in the early summer of 1974, I moved to LaGrande where the college was located. I had met Vanda, but she was two years older than me and wanted nothing to do with such a child. Being persistent to the point of aggravation, I finally won her over. Our first kiss was in Beastly parked on the 12th Street hill. Soon, she went through the double-clutching learning curve, and was able to drive Beastly on her own. With that obstacle overcome, we were married in August of 1975.

For our first couple of years, we lived in married student housing at the college which was small apartments in long rows. They were called the EOCean Courts and had been built as temporary housing at the Umatilla Army Depot during World War 2. When they were no longer needed there they were moved 85 miles to the college. In our first year in the Courts, we needed a Christmas tree. Rather than spend the money at a tree lot we drove Beastly into the mountains where a place had been designated for cutting trees. The twisty logging road was cut into the side of the

Jesse Hulse

mountain with a steep drop at the left edge. As we drove the front tires were sliding to the left and nearer the bank. Of course, the only way to control a slide is to steer into it taking us nearer the edge. I had driven in the snow long enough to know we would be alright, but Vanda was inching ever nearer the passenger side door and was ready to grab the door handle and jump. She loved her new husband but not enough to go down the side of a mountain with him.

While living in the Courts, we had acquired another car, and we didn't have much room for parking, so we took Beastly to my parent's place. Mom wasn't excited about having an old pickup parked there. They had plenty of room, and I don't think it was in their way at all. Then someone offered \$50 for it, and she said "yes." The title and registration were in my parent's name, and she signed it over to the new owner. I suspect she thought she was saving me from myself. Maybe the old dilapidated truck wasn't a practical automobile for my needs, but I loved it.

Just the other day I asked Vanda if she remembered any Beastly stories after 45 years. She said, "No, but he was a sweet little truck."