

Driving the straight and narrow

A special Third Dimension pull-out on the arts of owning, buying, driving and maintaining the automobile



Photo by Steve Boerner

It's a long, sad story, says UNL student Dave Hardy. After \$840 of repairs, he figured he probably would fare better to send his 1969 Saab up in flames.

Wheels of misfortune - is this your car?

A Saab story By Jim Williams

Sometimes, you can do everything right when you buy a used car, and it doesn't help. And sometimes it doesn't matter. As the heart-rendering strains of "Love Story" swell in the background, hear the story of UNL psychology major Dave Hardy and a maladjusted Swedish car named Bjorn.

"I had VAN FEVER," recalled Hardy, "which you pick up from a toilet seat. But I couldn't afford to insure my van so I kept it up on blocks all winter."

When spring came, Hardy decided his 1971 Ford Supervan's immense size and thirst for gasoline were too much bother. He sold it for \$1,400.

"Well, heck, I said to myself, 'I need some new wheels,'" Hardy said. "I started looking around. I saw an ad in the Rag for the Saab and decided it looked like a good car for a basic radical-liberal future college professor."

Hardy knew you can get hurt buying a used car, and so he prepared. He checked an old *Car and Driver* magazine, which called the Saab "a moderately priced and exceptionally tough economy sedan." He arranged to get help from a friend who said he knew something about cars. When he discovered he knew the seller's brother, Hardy thought he couldn't lose.

Hardy and this friend went out to East Campus for a look at the car. It was a 1969 Saab 96, a faded, red little hunchback that looked like a football whose bladder had given out. It had factory air, a 4-speed column shift and a 1500-cc, V-4 engine driving the front wheels.

The friend W.S.H.K.S.A.C. did the test-driving, as Hardy couldn't handle a stick-shift, and he said it was good. He and Hardy tested the compression, a vital measure of engine health, on the only cylinder they could reach in the crowded compartment. It was good. The seller said "\$750." Hardy said "sold."

It still wouldn't run after the carb work—the mechanics mentioned they'd had to push it out of the garage—and a complete cure required a \$170 valve job.

But Bjorn ran fine all the way home—35 miles per gallon and plenty of power. No problems but a funny grinding noise in first and second gears.

"I took it to be greased and mentioned the noise—I didn't think it was anything big. Later I got a call from the mechanic. Hello, hello? That Dave Hardy? Guh, guh, boy you're gonna think this is real funny! Hah, hah, hah, guh, guh, you need a whole new transmission! And this is the best part, guh, guh, it could cost \$700!"

"I thought, 'oh hell, I have to have it done. Let's see, I'll sell my mother. . . ."

Hardy's Klipsch stereo speakers went instead, since the final bill was only \$334.

Maybe he should have gotten the hint when he went to pick up the car, and it wouldn't start. The seller replaced a loose wire, and Hardy lunched happily away.

He grew less happy as he learned to shift the four-on-the-tree and found VW Microbuses were outdragging him at the lights.

"I took it in to a dealer and said, 'Hey, my car is slow—fix it.' They called me back and told me my clutch was shot. I was rich, so I thought I could afford it."

\$280 later the clutch was fine. Hardy decided it was time for a trip in Bjorn—"I called it that because it's a neat Swedish name. I decided to try it in the mountains. I loaded my grandmother in the car for traction and drove to Boulder. Then it started chugging, going slower and slower. Cars were going by me down the mountains. I got an instant ulcer, and my grandmother learned some new words."

"Now it had officially cost more in repairs than to buy it," Hardy said. \$750 in car and \$840 in repairs."

The Honda hex

By Mark Young

Unlike the Saab, some used cars generate no love, only aggravation. Mark Miller probably would stew his month-old 1972 Honda 600, but he figures it's caused enough heartburn already.

Miller saw the Honda, an odd creature with a tiny 600-cc, two-cylinder engine and a gearshift growing out of the dash, at Misle Imports' used car lot. He drove and liked it despite a nonworking reverse gear. There were other minor problems, but the car had the look of a gas guzzler's Uncle Scrooge for only \$750.

The car ran well enough at first, waiting almost eight days to turn nasty. While it was a teetotaler at the gas pump the little freak had more ailments than a 40-year-old quarterback.

One bright morning it wouldn't start, so Miller led his prize back to Misle. After two weeks, it returned with a rebuilt starter. It still refused to run. Miller was unhappy and became more so when he got the bill—\$24 for a starter and \$51 for labor.

Miller's roommate and co-owner went after Abraham Misle in person. As a result, no labor bill was paid and the Honda, now starter sitting on the floor, was towed to another shop.

They found Misle's starter had been the wrong size.

After the right starter, a flywheel and the sacrifice of two lambs, the Honda started. Huzzah. Miller had his car back for \$159.

Miller's folly ran sedately to Minnesota and back before the alternator brushes gave out. This kept the battery from being charged, so the Honda would start only by appointment with jumper cables. So far Miller hasn't been able to find suitable replacement brushes. He keeps the car hooked to a battery charger when he's not driving it.

Looking back over a month of ownership, Miller (perhaps thinking of his \$200) accepts his fate. He says, calmly, "I have been royally screwed."

Misle Sales Manager Roger Mattingly disagreed.

"People think they save on a used car, but there's always some gamble. People want something for nothing—I do, it's the American way of life. They tend to forget that a \$700 used car today is the \$200 used car of a few years ago."

Mattingly remembered the Honda hex of Mark

Miller, but he gave no details of the dispute. He said the price of the incorrect starter installed by Misle had been refunded for consumer relations.

"We didn't have to. You can't guarantee a used car. Hell, I wouldn't even do that with a car I'd owned."

Mattingly seemed upset about the used car dealer's traditional reputation.

"People always talk about the dealer getting to the customer. There's another side to all that. We've had people come in to trade a car and after I'd appraised it, switch the tires, take out tape players.

Even the best dealers can do only so much for a car that's been abused. A few will do as little as they can. If you can't tolerate uncertainty and can pay for peace of mind, there's an alternative. It's called a new-car showroom.

What they should have known

Drivers might not have as much trouble as Mark Miller did if they knew how a car dealer's service department typically works. Here is an outline.

When you bring in a sick car you meet the service writer. He writes your car's problems on a work order. If you give him a specific order, such as "state inspection" or "rotate tires" or "replace engine," he probably can tell you about what will be needed and what it will cost.

If you don't know the exact trouble—like "find the funny squeak" or "it doesn't run right"—it's like giving the dealer a blank check. It pays to be as specific as you can when describing problems. Tell the service writer what the car does and under what circumstances.

If he isn't sure what work is needed, ask to leave your phone number for him to call you with an estimate.

Being specific pays off again when the mechanic starts work. The only guide he has is your work order.

Mechanics are paid according to a "flat rate manual," a book which tells how long each repair job should take, rather than for their actual working time. This protects you if the mechanic is a slow worker. The mechanic also makes a commission on parts he replaces.

You can see that the mechanic isn't paid for the time he spends finding what's wrong with your car, only for fixing it. Dealers provide electronic diagnostic equipment, but sometimes this doesn't help. All the mechanic can do is spend his time and your money replacing one part after another until he finds the one that caused the trouble.

When he's finished, the mechanic usually can't road-test the car because the dealer's insurance won't allow it. So he re-parks it.

The only rule the cashier knows is "no money, no car-ee." He's not the person to argue with if the repair hasn't been done right. Repair work often has a warranty—check your bill.