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## A STUDEBAKER WITH OVERDRIVE - H. David Vuckson

Not many people nowadays except car fans and those born in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century remember the Studebaker brand of cars and trucks that were manufactured in South Bend, Indiana and in Hamilton, Ontario. This once well-known independent and innovative maker left the automotive field in two stages, closing their works in December 1963 in South Bend, and in March 1966 in Hamilton. Making cars since the early 1900's and with roots going back to a blacksmith shop in 1852 that made wagons and carriages, the Studebaker brand, started by the Studebaker brothers Henry and Clement, was one of many independent car makers that, regardless of the quality and innovation of their product, gradually disappeared in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century because of an inability to compete with "The Big Three" (General Motors, Ford and Chrysler).

Headquartered in South Bend, the company announced in May 1947 that they had purchased a former anti-aircraft gun factory left over from the Second World War in Hamilton, Ontario, and would open a branch plant there. The proximity to the local steel mills factored in this decision. Over the years the firm had passed in and out of financial troubles, going bankrupt during the Great Depression in 1933, recovering and reorganizing in 1935, followed by more financial troubles in the mid 1950's when they made the mistake of merging with another struggling car maker, Packard. One person said of this merger that "it was like two drunks trying to help each other across the road".

French-born industrial designer Raymond Loewy (1893-1986), famed for designing refrigerators and other electric home appliances, cigarette packages, corporate logos, agricultural machinery, streamlined steam locomotives and other railway rolling stock and many other products, was hired by Studebaker in the late 1930's and had a part in the distinctive designs that were to follow in the next decades including the look of the 1951 model that my grandmother bought when the new cars came out in late 1950. By the late 1940's and early

1950's there was science fiction talk of rockets going to, and coming back from, various places in outer space. The design of Studebakers would reflect this new frontier in the "taking flight" design of their front end when the 1950 and 1951 bullet-nose models were described as "The Next Look In Cars". As the decade went on, cars, in general, even more so resembled rockets with their tail fins, some of them understated and others grotesquely overstated.

In Collingwood, the Studebaker brand was represented by Albert G. Kitchen under the name "A. Kitchen Studebaker Sales" located on First St. The 1949 Voters List has Albert Kitchen living at 258 Pine St., occupation, "Garage". A decal from one of his car sales had the Shell Oil symbol above the dealership name. His garage/Shell gas station was adjacent to the location of the Dominion Engineers Supply Co., Shell Oil distributors, who were at 115 First St. on the north-west corner of First and Maple Streets, now the address of a Rogers Wireless Retail Store.

Seventy years ago when petroleum products were transported long distances by rail instead of on the highways, Dominion Engineers were one of at least *five* oil company depots in Collingwood that had a railway siding where petroleum products could be transferred between tank cars and storage tanks for local distribution. These were not the enormous black oil tank cars common today, the ones that are dreaded when there is a train derailment. The tank cars of the 1950's were about 30 feet long compared to the current ones that are 40-60 feet long and some as much as over 80 feet long.

In 1959, an advertisement in the programme for the Eighth Annual Carnival of the Blue Mountain Figure Skating Club indicated that Studebaker was represented in Collingwood by Russ Irwin Motors at 330 First St. near Cedar St. and Albert Kitchen's former location at 111 First St. was now Conn's Garage. By at least the time of the 1957 Voters List the Kitchen family had moved to 178 Essa Rd. in Barrie and Albert's son Dale would become a mechanic and, later in the 1960's, a business partner with his father operating a Volvo dealership in Allandale. In Barrie, Jackson Motors represented Studebaker and came up with a novel promotion for the cars at the Barrie Fairground in the early 1950's. Lorne Jackson had a display of Studebakers, one of which had a medium-sized school or church bell in a frame mounted on the roof of the car. Painted along the passenger side were the words, "LET STUDEBAKER '52 RING THE BELL FOR YOU!" Every time there was a purchase, the bell was rung.

My great-grandfather R. W. O'Brien's retail building at 69 Hurontario St. was owned from the time of its construction in 1901, (except for a brief period when the Town of Collingwood granted itself title due to property taxes being in arrears during the difficult years of the Great Depression) by various members of the O'Brien, Storey and Hewson families, all of them related to R. W. O'Brien. As my grandfather R. J. Hewson's health was failing in the early 1940's, he transferred ownership of the building in 1944 to his wife, my grandmother (born O'Brien). Following my grandfather's death in 1946, his son, Howard Hewson, my mother's younger

brother, inherited and continued to operate the men's wear business. In February 1949, my grandmother, now in her late sixties, sold the building to her son Howard Hewson for \$5000.00. With some ready cash, my grandmother began to consider the prospect of buying a car. She did not drive but both my parents did and so a 1951 Studebaker Land Cruiser 4-door Sedan was purchased from Albert Kitchen by my grandmother and it came with a condition. My parents had the use of the car and were responsible for its maintenance. They could keep it at our house on Ste. Marie St., but they had to drive my grandmother out in the car to appointments and shopping and to church. She also insisted on "dusting it off" after being dropped off at her house following a drive.

We did not have a driveway at 639 Ste. Marie St. so the car lived on the boulevard adjacent to a large Manitoba maple tree. In the winter months it was a challenge to keep a semi-circular tunnel shovelled out of the snow that was packed high and hard by the town snow plow in order for the Studebaker to drive in and out of its spot on the boulevard. The car was a 4-door model with rear doors that were hinged at the rear instead of from a central pillar, and were commonly referred to as "suicide doors" because of the way they opened. This feature was a carryover from the days of horse-drawn carriages and since cars were once referred to as "horseless carriages", the configuration of the doors opening out from the centre persisted. Decades before seat belts became compulsory standard equipment, with such rear doors there was the possibility of a back seat passenger being thrown out of the car if the door opened in an accident or of a child playing with the door handle and falling out forward as the car was moving, hence the "suicide" term. If such a door opened accidentally while the car was driving at speed, the wind created by the movement of the car could force the door wide open and prevent a back seat passenger from pulling it shut. This could also pull the passenger right out of the car. In fact, in the mid- 20<sup>th</sup> Century some fathers had the rear door inside handles removed to protect their children from opening the door. Such rear doors were not unique to Studebaker who used them on this model until 1952. Many brands of cars and trucks used suicide doors up to and including some special 2019 models.

This 1951 Studebaker had an optional sun visor, the air vents opened outward on the side of the car just back of the front wheels and the rear view mirror was mounted on the dashboard. The manual transmission gear shift was mounted on the steering column (what we called "Three on the Tree") and an optional feature was what was called at the time "Overdrive", controlled by a handle just below the dashboard. Overdrive, expressed in simple terms, is essentially an extra "high gear" beyond 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> gears in cars of that era. The intended use of this feature was for cruising at speed on the open highway and to reduce engine speed (as would be shown on a modern tachometer) and to economize on gasoline consumption similar to the use of 5<sup>th</sup> gear today on a 5-speed manual transmission.

By far, the most noticeable feature of these 1951 cars was the bullet nose with a “smiling mouth” grille below and on either side of the bullet, which itself resembled an airplane propeller. Loewy, the designer, is said to have told one of the design engineers in his French accent, “Eet must look like ze aeroplane!” Because of this, using its nickname, the car was also referred to as “the airplane Studey” (pronounced “Stew-dee”). These cars had a long hood and a similarly long trunk lid and people began to say when looking at one that they couldn’t tell if it was “coming or going”. This expression was especially true with the 2-door Starlight Coupe model which had a rear window in four panes that wrapped around to the side of the car and truly looked like the cockpit window of an airplane and with the long trunk lid behind it, on a quick glance people could be confused as to which end was the front of the car. From inside, this distinctive rear window gave a panoramic view. On page 231 of the Collingwood history book *Reflections* there is a rooftop-view photo of Hurontario St. which shows such a Studebaker that has just passed the Federal Building heading south.

In 1951, in an historic contrast, my grandmother’s two sisters Zoe Storey (1884-1957) and Vetta O’Brien (1890-1979) drove around town and farther afield in a large black Plymouth (circa 1935 model) reminiscent of the “horseless carriage”-type of car bodies seen in old movies. As confirmed by my cousins Louise and Nancy who lived in Collingwood at this time before their family moved to Welland, the Plymouth had the *Mayflower* sailing ship logo (honouring the Pilgrims sailing to the new world and landing at Plymouth, Massachusetts) on the horn button in the centre of the steering wheel. My cousins recall being driven by Aunt Vett down to Sunset Point to—wait for it—watch the sun set. She also drove them down Highway 26 to Springwater Park in Midhurst for outings (more enjoyable for young children than watching the sun go down). 4-door Plymouths of that era also had “suicide doors”. The exterior of the Plymouth featured running boards and free-standing torpedo-type headlights mounted on a ledge between the wing-hooded engine compartment and the rounded front fenders. I used to laugh at and refer to these headlights as “goggly eyes” because they were so dated and quaint-looking when the newer models had the headlights mounted within the body of the car. My mother warned me not to use that term in front of Aunts Zoe and Vett when they drove to our house.

In comparison, my grandmother’s 1951 Studebaker was positively futuristic, belonging to the space age, whereas her sisters’ Plymouth was more from the distant past, although that did not stop thieves from stealing it in the dead of night from the garage at the Storey home on the corner of Maple and 4<sup>th</sup> St. West. From her upstairs bedroom Aunt Vett (short for “Vetta” which is short for “Olivetta”) had heard the car start but assumed it was the sound of a car that had stalled on the street and paid no further attention to it until the discovery of the theft the next morning. The thieves had come right into the house and taken the car keys off a hook in

the kitchen. Of course, the car's older design made it easy for the police to spot and it was recovered just days later. Perhaps the car thieves were "collectors".

There are a number of Studebaker commercials on YouTube and one of the slogans they used was, "A stand-out car in a low-priced field". CKVR TV Channel 3 in Barrie launched an "All Night Theatre" on Friday nights in March 1958 showing movies with breaks for commercials, news and weather reports until they went off the air at 9:00 o'clock on Saturday morning. I could get up about 7:00 a.m. and have my breakfast and watch a movie. When the test pattern came on, the show was over for another week. Studebaker commercials were featured as part of All Night Theatre and showed a late 1950's model with tail fins zooming down the highway while the jingle with a jazzy male/female singing group went,

*Have you seen the new Studey?*

*Seen the new Studey?*

*Boy, what a beauty!*

*My, what a beauty!*

*The newer, longer, lower look,*

*The new Studebaker "8" [V8] for '58!*

My grandmother died in early 1957 and the house at 433 Hurontario St., to which she had come as a bride in 1905, was left to my mother and her brother Howard Hewson. My parents had considered moving there but the house needed a lot of repairs and renovations and so it was sold to Mr. W. W. and Mrs. Grace Leonard who had the rear part demolished (kitchen, pantry, bathroom, woodshed, coal bin, summer kitchen, etc.) and then replaced it with a modern addition attached to the original 2-storey front portion which still stands today. My grandmother's 1951 Studebaker, left to my parents, was traded in at Hanna Motors for a new 1957 Ford 4-door (no suicide doors). My father put in a driveway and built a carport onto the north end of our house for the new car.

Now, nearly seventy years after it was purchased, I sometimes wonder about the fate of the Studebaker. Did it live a long life after that (it was only six years old when traded for the Ford) and is it perhaps lovingly preserved/restored somewhere today by a member of one of the Studebaker car clubs throughout North America and around the world that treasure these distinctive vehicles—or did it end up like most motor vehicles cannibalized for parts in a wrecking yard years later?

*David Vuckson is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O'Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. David and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B.C.*