

# JEFFERSON

EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

### Car Talk: The Missing Years

By David Frew  
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*The final 1941, pre-war Chevrolet sedan*

Cars were big news on Erie's bayfront. While there were only a few different models and most of the neighbors didn't even have a car, annual model and style changes were a topic of great interest, especially among us boys. We lived for the fall season when new models were unveiled, after which we studied and discussed such esoterica as the number of chrome guards on a bumper or teeth in a grill. One of the reasons for the rarity of cars was World War II. After making the

decision to enter World War II, a political tug of war made it seem like the United States might remain neutral with respect to the war in Europe.

America's entry into the war was precisely what Germany had hoped to avoid, which was why they had agents in this country working politically to shift public opinion toward neutrality. And a large number of highly visible and respected Americans had spent years lobbying against United States involvement. One notable and highly visible example was famous aviator Charles Lindbergh, who had visited Germany and returned to launch a national tour during which he spoke out against American involvement.

Public opinion shifted instantly, however, after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Noting that Germany, Italy and Japan had signed a treaty of mutual support, the American public quickly shifted its opinion. Lindbergh, himself, publicly changed his opinion, volunteering to rejoin the military, take to the skies, and fight. President Franklin Roosevelt stoked American determination even further when he mandated that automobile production and other nonessential manufacturing cease so that factories could concentrate on war materials.

It has been argued that while the war was fought in Europe as well as the Pacific Ocean, it was also won domestically when American factories, powered by anyone who could stand up to work on an assembly line, signed up to build ships, tanks, airplanes, and other war materials. Even the long-standing tradition of men working in factories was displaced by the "Rosie the Riveter" campaign as American women rushed to take their places on production lines. In four short years, American workers produced an astonishing 300,000 airplanes, 124,000 ships, 100,000 tanks-armored vehicles, and 2.5 million military trucks.

The result of the wartime hiatus in automobile manufacturing was quite apparent in neighborhoods such as mine. The first impact was that cars became rare and expensive, a function of supply and demand. Adding to the burden was wartime gas rationing, so many people simply did without cars. The second noticeable impact involved the four missing years. For us car-crazy kids who swooned over the differences between the 1939 and the 1940 Chevrolet or Ford, not having 1942s through 1945s to compare was disappointing. And as we grew older and began to imagine that we might someday own our own cars, and that the automobiles we would be able to afford would probably have to be older ones, the missing years punched a hole in our planning and dreaming.



*The first post-war Chevrolet, a 1946 model, was essentially the same as the 1941 with less chrome trim. There was not enough time to develop new tooling.*



*The 1947 model was tweaked just a bit, but it was essentially the same as the 1941.*



*Dramatic post-World War II style shifts began to appear in 1950, like the revolutionary Chevrolet hard-top convertible.*



*The 1949 Ford was even more revolutionary than the 1950 Chevrolet and beat it to market by six months.*

One of the exciting adventures in my young life involved my family's quest to find a car during the summer of 1948. Most job opportunities for my father, who had recently returned from the war, were in sales and to be considered for any of them he had to have a car. The problem was that there were no cars because of the post-World War II shortage. Undaunted, my father spent his weeks hunting for "hot leads" regarding cars that might be for sale. Then on weekends we would borrow cars and take rides to look at the available automobiles that he had learned about.

Many of these hot leads were in the "country" and involved exciting car rides, a huge treat for a youngster in those days. Naturally, he was admonished to look for a reliable Chevrolet or Ford, but as we chased the elusive used car, most of the

vehicles we found were far from reliable. They included really old Packards and Kaisers in farmer's barns, rusty wrecks that would not start, and a variety of oddball cars that were the furthest imaginable thing from a Chevrolet or a Ford. Eventually we selected one of those: "Better something than nothing?"



*The 1937 Hudson*

I recall the event like it was yesterday. My father pulled out an envelope of cash, bonus money from the Army that other vets were using to start up new businesses or go back to school and purchased a grimy 1937 Hudson sedan that we found on a farm. It was homely and dirty, and it would not start. But the farmer who's barn had been hiding this automotive treasure pulled a tractor over to the car and somehow got it running. Then he produced a few cans of gasoline, added them to the tank and wished us luck. My father and I rode home in our new treasure, being careful not to let it stall at intersections since we were not sure that it would start again. My mother followed us in the borrowed car that we had used that day.

After a long and heart-stopping ride home, we parked in front of our house and turned off the engine. It would not start again, of course. Everyone criticized our Hudson and they were probably correct. It was quirky looking and acting. But it was our car and I loved it. We washed it and scrubbed the moldy cloth interior, installed a new battery, and fussed with the ignition system until it would "reliably" start up almost half of the time. It got terrible mileage but, in those days, gas was cheap so that didn't matter much.

It was so big that my father joked that the people in the back seat lost sight of the people in the front seat when we went around a corner. It was the best possible car for drive-in movies since the back seat was big enough to stand up and walk around (for a kid) and to hold massive amounts of snacks. We never went anywhere without jumper cables and became adept at begging to be jump-started since it predictably went dead quite often and always at the worst possible times and places. Like church. But I loved that car and wish I still had it.



*The 1953 Hudson Hornet, looking remarkably like the “very cool” 1950 Mercury*

As the 1950s rolled on, we finally gave up on the old Hudson but continued to buy odd and quirky cars, like a Henry J when they first appeared, and a Nash station wagon. My dream cars, however, like those of my Bay Rat buddies were the standard Chevrolet and Fords. We gazed at them when they appeared in the neighborhood and dreamed that we would someday own one. Perhaps a convertible.

The Hudson Automobile Company made a short-lived attempt to restyle its cars and become a modern 1950s era company, but they ran out of cash and fell victim to a merger with the Nash Automobile Company, which ultimately resulted in the 1954 creation of American Motors. AMC seemed to become a collector of quirky brands, including Studebaker and Packard.



*The 1952 Nash Rambler wagon almost defined quirky, but it was inexpensive and roomy.*



*The tiny Nash Metropolitan*

When George Romney, father of U.S. Mitt Romney, took over AMC in 1954, he compressed the company's offerings and came close to making his company a success. Smaller and more nimble than the automotive "big three," the Kenosha, Wisconsin-based company had the manufacturing power to make a realistic run against GM, Ford and Chrysler because it was a lean organization that allowed it to move quickly. Romney had predicted the precipitous rise of fuel prices and made a strategic decision to shift the company's production toward smaller vehicles and to consolidate all of the off-brand vehicles that they once controlled into a basic line of American Motors Cars. While Romney was correct in his assumption that petroleum costs would rise, he was almost two decades early in his response, and the merged company struggled. The American public was not ready for small cars. Romney eventually left the world of manufacturing to become governor of Michigan.

There is an odd Erie connection between the Nash Motor Company and the city's maritime history. One of the strategic advantages enjoyed by the Nash Company was its ability to deliver new cars using Great Lakes steamships. The company's location in Kenosha was a Lake Michigan port town near Milwaukee. Its automobile delivery system included loading cars on ships and then moving them to other Great Lakes ports. Prior to the growth of California this seemingly parochial delivery system allowed them to send cars directly to more than 70% of the North American market, and over the water shipping was (and still is) the least expensive way to move products.

The car ferry that once made the run between Erie and Port Dover, was originally designed to deliver cars for the Nash and Hudson Automobile companies. When those businesses shifted from water to over-the-road delivery, the former new car transport ship was converted to a ferry and moved to Erie.

And the most extensive collection of antique Nash vehicles is not, as might be expected, in an automotive museum. It is well preserved in cold water, almost 500 feet below the surface of Lake Michigan. The 268 cars are secured on the deck of the Steamship Senator, which sunk near Port Washington after being rammed by the Marquette in 1929.



*The Great Lakes steamship, Senator, with a deck crammed with new Nash automobiles*

The 1896 Senator was owned by Nicholson Steamship, the same company that later operated the ferry between Erie and Port Dover. Every few years there have been discussions regarding the salvage of the deck load of cars, but so far the depth of the wreck has prevented successful attempts. While the extreme depth is beyond the reach of ordinary diving, cameras have shown that the cars are well preserved and still in remarkable condition.



*The Nicholson Erie to Port Dover car ferry*

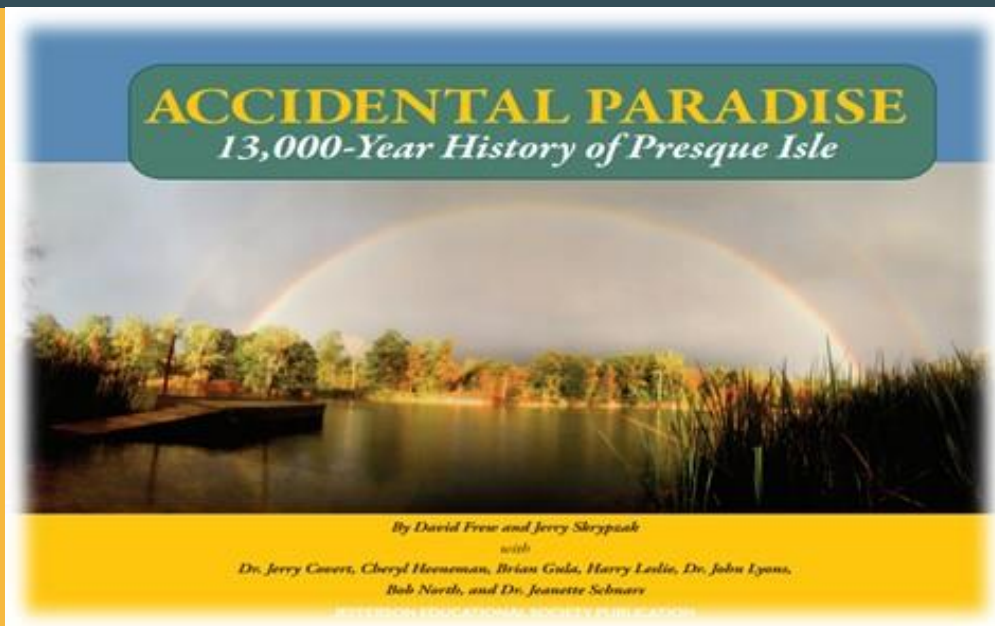


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To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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