

The Breakdown and the Blessing

Our Trip to the 43rd International Studebaker Meet in South Bend

By Way of Farmer City

Our trip to the 43rd International Meet began on June 19, with an anticipated arrival in South Bend from Kansas City late that afternoon. We were pre-registered for the meet and Jim was looking forward to seeing how the 1955 President Speedster would fare in the Concours judging on the first time out. He had been restoring the car for a couple of years and had put the finishing touches on it a few months earlier. We had taken several short shake-down cruises in the car and wanted to eliminate any remaining problems before we started out for the drive to South Bend. On each of these short trips (about 200 miles), the car performed like a champ. With just a few adjustments, like replacing the fuel pump, fixing a short in the tachometer wiring and other small items, we were good to go.



"Take my picture with that car!"

We planned to take two lane roads and enjoy the scenery along the way. Our route took us from Kansas City across northern Missouri, through north central Illinois, on into Indiana and up to South Bend. We anticipated that we would travel the approximately 650 miles in 10–12 hours and arrive around dinner time after an early start.

We got the Speedster packed and ready to roll. We were a little late leaving but made good time through Missouri. We got gas in Keytesville and it was fun to hear all the comments and compliments on the Speedster. Jim has restored two other cars, but this is his first Studebaker; most people didn't know what kind of car it was, never mind that it was built in 1955.



We won't soon forget Farmer City.

After crossing the Mississippi River in Quincy, Illinois, we stopped for our picnic lunch in the town square. The Speedster was running great and we switched drivers after lunch. When I went to start the car, the six volt battery just would not turn over. Jim raised the hood and discovered a wire that had come loose. He tightened it and it fired right up. We cruised through the historic town and took off again on Route 24 through Illinois. The day was beautiful; it was hot, but we love summer and we had our air

conditioning in the form of the vent windows.

I was getting the feel of the car, adjusting to the brakes and enjoying the way the car handled and hugged the road. We were running about 60–65 miles and hour and making good time. We figured we might be in South Bend sooner than we expected.

Just west of Timewell, Illinois, the situation started changing fast. Upon accelerating, the car started bogging down, and would not hold a steady speed without gaps in the acceleration and hesitation on the pedal. We pulled into a driveway and Jim took over the wheel again; just as I was really starting to get a feel for the way the car drove.

The acceleration didn't improve, so we limped



Everybody at the NAPA Auto Parts was helpful



Under the hood in Mt. Sterling



Leaving Mt. Sterling; still crippled but moving

along at about 50 miles to Mt. Sterling, where we coasted into the local NAPA Auto Parts store. Jim went in and started describing the problem to Kevin, the owner, a very helpful and accommodating fellow. There was an auto shop next door and the mechanic there was too busy to get the car into the shop, but he talked with Jim on the phone at length and they determined that the problem was either fuel or electrical. Meanwhile, Kevin was calling all the old timers in town to run our problem by them and see what suggestions he could come up with. He offered us the garage at his store so we could pull the car into his garage to work on it and get out of the sun. He also offered us his truck if we needed to go anywhere for parts or supplies during the time we were there.

Jim got the car into the garage and got to

work. He changed the condenser, points and distributor cap. Kevin was calling all around town for parts he didn't have and we found a coil at the local Car Quest. I used his truck to go pick that up and Tracy was very helpful and ordered us a rotor, for delivery the next day. We hoped we would be in South Bend the next day, but it didn't hurt to be prepared.

Kevin, his daughter, little Delayna and even the resident dogs at the shop were all so kind to us. The next door mechanic who was too busy actually spent a lot of time talking to Jim and later, looking at the car. He was obviously very experienced, but when he saw the carburetor on the '55, he said "I'm not even going to touch that, you need an old-timer who is familiar with the Studebaker cars to get into that." By this time, we had determined that the problem was not electrical, and the carburetor was getting fuel, so we knew the replacement fuel pump was working. We realized we were dealing with another kind of fuel problem. The carburetor had been rebuilt, but we knew even a very small particle of dust or dirt could complicate things. Something was just not right.

It was getting late in the day, about 5 PM, Kevin was getting ready to close up shop, but offered to stay as long as we needed. The Speedster would go down the road at about 50 MPH, so we decided to push on at that speed. We thanked everybody for their kindness, Jim got back in the driver's seat and we headed down the road. The car was steady at about 50 MPH, but if we pushed harder on the pedal or were going uphill, the car would buck and choke and not get fuel. If we backed off, it was OK, or workable, at least. We decided to go across Route 136, which was more direct, up Route 54 and pick up 24 again close to the Indiana state line.

We were getting to where we really were in the middle of nowhere, farm country all around. The roads were practically deserted, and we were glad we made the choice to avoid the interstate highways. By this time, we realized we were probably not going to make it to South Bend that day, we just wanted to get as far as possible without breaking down completely. We figured that if we would be



Central Illinois landscape

able to find someone to help us, it would be at the Studebaker Meet, so we just kept going.

The car was still chugging along, but the speed we were able to run at without bogging out was decreasing. After about 100 very slow miles, we were approaching a couple of interstate crossings and figured we could at least find a motel there, and maybe someone who could help us with the Studebaker. By this time, we were only able to do about 20 MPH without serious fuel choking and we were driving on the shoulder, just hoping we could make it to a town with a motel so we didn't have to spend the night in a grain elevator yard or on the roadside.

The evening light was simply beautiful, the sky was brilliant blue and the corn as green as green ever was. The road was quiet and the sun was sinking in the west. We were approaching the small town of Heyworth and didn't see a motel on the main drag. We decided to keep going and head for the intersection of Highway 136 and Interstate 74, which looked more promising on the map. I remember saying to Jim, "We can make it." I was driving again, and as I looked in the rear view mirror, I saw the last of the red sun slip below the horizon. We only had about 14 miles to the Interstate intersection. We figured we would be there in less than an hour, even at our tortoise-like rate of speed.

We got to the Interstate and there was NOTHING there, no motel, no convenience store, no town, no parts store, nothing. We stopped at the cross-

roads of Highway 136 and 150, just past I-74. In one direction was LeRoy, about 10 miles, in the other direction we could see lights, so Jim said "Let's go this way." We headed for Farmer City, about seven miles away. I said to Jim, in all confidence, that I knew we would find the person we needed to help us get the Studebaker going again.

Farmer City looked more promising to us as we approached. Maybe we were just desperate, but as we limped into town, we saw a couple of automotive repair places through the darkness. It was about 9:30 at night by this time, long past the time we thought we should have been relaxing in South Bend. We were just happy to be somewhere. We stopped a pickup truck at a roundabout intersection and asked if there was a motel in town. We got directions to the motel and they also told us about a couple of repair shops in town. Things were starting to look up, and we would have a place to spend the night.

As we started to pull away from the pickup truck, a car behind them pulled up to us and the driver yelled out "I want to talk with you about that Studebaker." Jim answered that we were having major mechanical problems and that we weren't even sure we were going to make it to the motel; he said "If you want to talk about the car, you're going to have to follow us to the motel." We weren't deliberately being rude, just practical. We figured he would forget about it, but as we slowly pulled away, we saw he was following us and pulled into the motel behind our car. As I went to check in, I heard him on his cell phone telling someone, "I'm standing here looking at a 1955 Studebaker President Speedster." This was the first very good sign.

After checking in, I joined Jim and the local gentleman in the driveway where he introduced himself as Scott Whitehouse. We apologized for seeming rude, and described the trouble briefly. He said he and his dad had run a mechanical shop for years; his dad had worked on Packards and his uncle worked at the Studebaker plant for years. He told us his shop, Whitehouse Mechanical, was just down the road and we agreed to call him before meeting him there at 7 AM the next morning. As we got back in our cars, Scott said "We're happy to see

you in Farmer City." We got to our room, showered, ate the rest of our picnic lunch and fell into bed. We were grateful to have a place to lay our heads.

After a very short night, we woke up and discovered Jim's cell phone was dead. In our tired state, we hadn't charged it overnight. We decided to head for Scott's shop anyway and see how the day unfolded. The Studebaker was cranky. It barely started and quit twice in the mile to the shop. As we hobbled in, we saw Scott was already there and we were very happy to see him.

We greeted each other and Jim asked him "Scott, what makes you want to spend your day working on our car?" Scott thought for a second and replied, "My dad is gone now, but he and I worked together in this shop for 20 years. My dad was a true mechanical artist, he had a talent and natural instinct that I don't have. I am merely knowledgeable, but my greatest pleasure is in helping people. When I saw you needed help, that was what I wanted to do."

How could we refuse, and why would we? We pulled the Speedster into one of the bays and Scott and Jim got to work. Jim raised the hood and Scott admired the engine. In a soft voice, he said "My dad would just love to get his hands into this, he'd be in heaven."

I took the opportunity to get out of their hair and walked all around the small town, although Scott offered me his truck in case I wanted to go back to the motel or anywhere else. Farmer City is very small and very friendly. I checked out the downtown area and visited with the local glass-blower and his student. I took pictures of the historic buildings, some occupied, more not. I went to the market and got some doughnuts to take back to the shop for Jim and Scott.

When I returned to the shop to check on their progress, there were encouraging signs. Jim and Scott were at the bench, and the carburetor was all apart. Obviously Scott wasn't afraid to tear into it and relished the opportunity. They had found some very small particles, cleaned out some gunk and made a few adjustments. After a couple of test drives, they discovered that the car ran great when they took the air cleaner off. Naturally, it couldn't be



Jim explains the problems to Scott Whitehouse

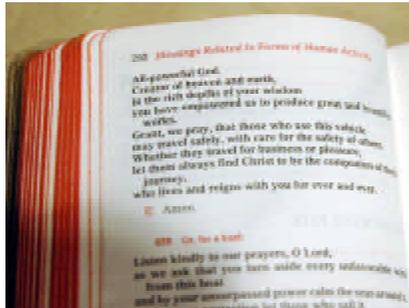


Scott isn't afraid to disassemble the carburetor

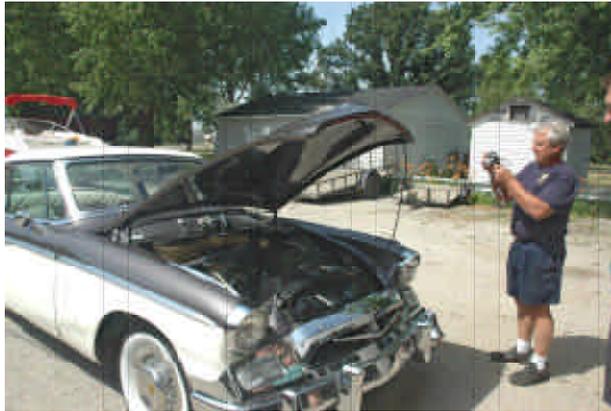


His dad worked on Packards, a natural mechanical artist

driven like that, but it seemed progress was being made. I took off again to indulge my new interest in High Dynamic Range photography at the local graveyard and around town. The day was getting hot as I began walking back to the shop. Just then, Scott and Jim pulled up and off we went to the local dealer, Tri-County Motors, for a couple of parts. Just as you might expect in a small town, Scott's brother-in-law was the dealer; he said all the automotive guys in town were networked together in some way or another. They got a clip for the carburetor and a couple of other small parts and after stopping at Scott's house so he could get his camera, we headed back to Whitehouse Mechanical. It was about noon by now and it looked like they were getting close to having the car on the road again. For the final test drive, Jim asked Scott to ride with him to check out the improvements. They said if they weren't back in ten minutes, I should come get them in Scott's truck, bringing a tow strap. In just a few minutes, they were back and the Speedster was declared good to go. We all took a few pictures while we packed it up and started to say our good-byes. We were so thankful for



Blessing the Speedster with holy water from Lourdes



Scott takes photos before we depart

Scott and the way he came into our lives and so unselfishly helped us; it was very difficult to express our gratitude.

At that point, Scott turned to us and said, "I want to ask you if you'll let me do one final thing. If you're uncomfortable with it, or you don't want me to, you don't have to say yes." He continued saying, "I'm a Deacon in my church and I'd like to bless your car." He had a small bottle of water from Lourdes, France, that he would use a few drops of for the blessing. We were speechless and said we would love for him to bless the car; we would be so grateful and honored to have him do so.

He pulled out a little book of Blessings for Daily Life that I had seen on his kitchen counter at home, made the sign of the cross and proceeded to bless the car. After reading the blessing, he touched the holy water to the grille and there wasn't a dry eye among us as he finished.

With hugs and handshakes and new friendships formed, we got in the Studebaker and drove the entire way to South Bend with no trouble at all. As we rolled along, mile after mile at about 65 MPH, we realized we had been part of a very special moment in time, a truly life affirming experience. We had definitely been led to the right place in Farmer City.

We arrived in South Bend at about 5 PM, too late for the judging that day, plus the car was very dirty from being driven almost 700 miles. We had thought the Concours judging was on Wednesday only, so we figured we had missed that, but the

richness of the experience we had instead was overpowering and the judging seemed a small thing to miss after all we had been through. I knew Jim was disappointed though, he had worked hard on the car and wanted to see how it fared in the show.

When we got to our hotel, I unpacked our stuff and Jim washed the car in the parking lot. Some Studebaker folks had let us know that since we were pre-registered, we could get our car judged at the Fairgrounds the next day. The best of all worlds—we were excited about the opportunity to be judged at our first Studebaker meet. The next day was another early morning; we got up, jumped in the Speedster and headed to the Fairgrounds.

Wow! So many beautiful Studebakers! They stretched on for miles and all of them were fantastic looking! In our division, we were surrounded by some of the best looking cars we had ever seen! The competitive atmosphere was overwhelming. We started cleaning and detailing the car and as the heat built up and the cleaning continued, the judges kept getting closer. It was a good thing we weren't



Jim with his award after the banquet

the first ones to be judged; we may not have finished in time. They finished judging our vehicle just before lunch. No matter what the outcome, we had achieved Jim's goal.

After the judging, we toured the fairgrounds for



The scene of the blessing, Whitehouse Mechanical

hours, admiring all the amazing Studebakers. Each one we saw seemed more perfectly appointed and cared for than the last. We were thrilled to be included in such prestigious company and we were even happier that we even got to be there at all! That evening, we had dinner at the Studebaker Mansion, now called Tippecanoe Place. We had a delicious dinner and toured the mansion, marveling at the old photos and opulence of the era. Later we made some new friends in the parking lot and looked forward to meeting more the next day.

Friday was a more relaxed day. The Speedster was running like a top, we went to the Studebaker Museum and rested before the banquet that evening. We met even more nice people there and enjoyed the professional and fast moving pace of the awards ceremony.

As they began announcing the awards, the tables got quiet. We were in Division Four and there were 44 cars judged in that division. The judges had pointed out some authenticity errors on Jim's car, but I was still hopeful that he would be rewarded for all his hard work and the trouble on the road with an award of some type. When his name was called to go to the front, I was so happy to see that his effort was recognized. Then, beyond our wildest dreams, he received a First Place Award, 384 out of 400 points! Our little Speedster was certainly blessed, in more ways than one.

Saturday morning we got up early (again!) and hit the road in the rain. It rained almost all the way back, but when we arrived back in Farmer City, the



Scott, Jim and Wendy in Farmer City on the return leg

clouds broke and the sky was beautiful and blue. We stopped by Whitehouse mechanical to see Scott and tell him how well our trip had gone, but he wasn't there. We went to his house and found him there. When he opened the door, and we saw his face, he probably thought we had trouble again and wanted

him to help us again. We told him the car was running perfectly and just wanted to thank him again for all his help. We had told a few people at the meet the story of the breakdown and the subsequent events and he had shared it with his prayer group at church. He said "I feel like I don't get a chance often enough to practice my faith, but it was really neat to be able to help you guys." Needless to say, we were happy we found each other that fateful day in Farmer City.

The car purred along for the rest of the trip and we arrived in Kansas City in the evening after a day of glorious light, color and sunshine. We truly feel grateful and very blessed to have such a special experience on our first Studebaker outing. Without the genuine kindness of many strangers, we would have a very different story to tell.

Wendy Crosby is a freelance photographer and writer. Her daily driver is a 1962 Ford Falcon four door sedan, only because Jim won't let her drive the Speedster. Her website is www.wcrosby.com.



High Dynamic Range (HDR) photo of the Speedster at Tippecanoe Place in South Bend