70 year affair with a 1909 Mitchell

By Dareld E. Houstman

What was to be my 1909 Mitchell was first purchased by Gabriel Fries of Turtle Lake, N.D.

Fries had managed a lumber yard and then built his own hardware store in 1909. That same year he purchased the Mitchell from a dealership located in the town of Velva, about 35 miles north of Turtle Lake, where it was allegedly the third car in town.

For reasons unknown to me, he sold the Mitchell in 1910 to a Mr. Winsel, also of Turtle Lake. Winsel used the Mitchell as a livery to haul material and people to different locations in the surrounding area, that is, as far as 60 miles north to Minot and 60 miles south to Bismarck. Winsel kept the car until the fall of 1911, when he sold it to K.B. Pressor, a farmer in Turtle Lake.

Pressor used the Mitchell as his personal car for about a year. Since the Mitchell did not have a windshield nor a top, it was not a car his wife liked to go about in, considering the weather and road conditions of that time. Thus, Pressor bought himself another car, a Ford Model T, and garaged the Mitchell.

In 1916 my parents had moved our family from Underwood to Turtle Lake. Incidently, I was born in March 1909, the same year the Mitchell was built.

In 1918 our family went to visit Pressor at his farm, some 10 miles north of Turtle Lake. Being a curious nine-year-old, while my parents were visiting, I checked out the farm buildings. I soon came across the Mitchell sitting in the garage not too far from the house. While I was intently looking it over, Pressor and my father came up to me. Pressor asked me if I liked the car. I replied that I did very much. Pressor then said that the car was mine if I wanted it (which I did) and that when I grew up I could come back and pick it up.

In 1931 I married Pauline Alexander in Minot, N.D. We made our home in Turtle Lake. Due to the times, it being the "dirty '30s" and the Depression, I did not return to claim the Mitchell until 1939. When I brought it home, I had much work to do, but not like the kind of restoration work that people do today.

The Mitchell was running in no time and I was called upon to show it off in some of the local parades. The year 1939 was the 50th anniversary of statehood for North Dakota and I drove the Mitchell in the state's parade celebrating that event which was in Bismarck.

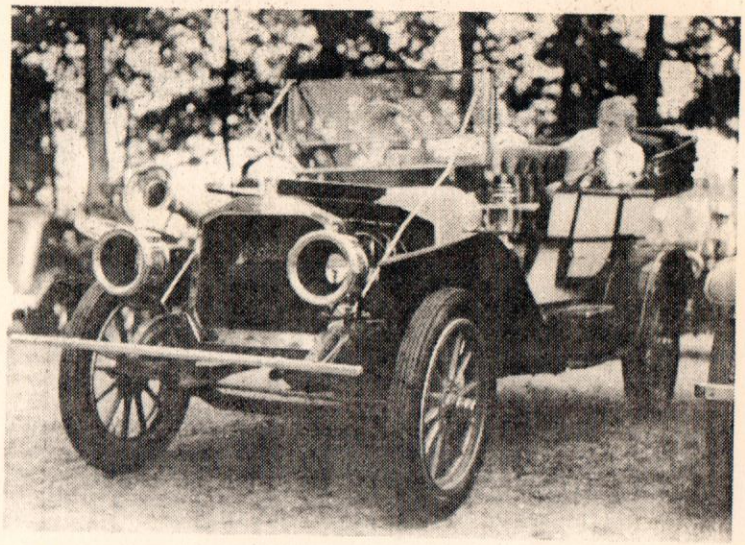
However, the Mitchell wasn't allowed to run for very long. It was soon sitting in my father's garage with certain parts missing, so no one could start it in my absence. With good jobs, any jobs really, still scarce in North Dakota, an old friend of mine who was now living and working in Washington, D.C., invited me there. Jobs were available at the Washington Navy Yard's gun factory. So I got on a bus and made the long trip to Washington, D.C.

One day in 1951 I was driving down a street in southeast Washington, and came across a man working on an old 1910 Empire. I pulled over and began talking to this man, whose name was Bill Zerega. I mentioned that I had an old car too, but it was back in North Dakota. Bill told me I should bring it to Washington and join the classic and antique car club that he belonged to.

That conversation got me going. I soon was building a car trailer. In the summer of 1952 I drove my family back to North Dakota for the first time since I had left in 1940. When I arrived in Turtle Lake, I had to cut my way into the garage due to all the vines that had grown up around the garage door — sure evidence that no one had tampered with the car. After a little work, the Mitchell finally sputtered and started. After a few days of visiting, I made the return trip to Washington with the Mitchell on the trailer behind my 1940 Buick.

Since 1951 I have been a faithful member of Washington D.C.'s Antique and Classic Car Club. In 1953 my car was one of the cars that the club picked to be cast in the AAA's (Automobile Association of America) movie about itself and the role it played in America's transportation needs.

Since 1952 I have participated in three Glidden tours and have been to every Hershey meet. My Mitchell is always entered in category 13a which covers "brass" cars having two wheeled brakes, gas lights, and four cylinders. It is a 1909 Model 30, five-passenger touring, with a 30 hp, F-head engine. Mitchell cars were built in Racine, Wis. from 1903 until 1923. My car has won six third-place awards.



The author's 1909 Mitchell model 30 five-passenger touring on display at White Post, Va. in October 1988.

In comparison to many other antique car owners, I have not done too much restoration to my Mitchell. In 1939 I came across cowl lights. In 1953 I acquired a windshield and a fellow car club member helped construct the framing and sewed the canvas so the Mitchell could have a top. At this same time I had the car repainted its original gray on black colors. In 1973 I had the seats re-upholstered in red leather.

A number of famous people have ridden in my Mitchell: Vice President Hubert Humphrey, Lady Bird Johnson, former senators Charles Mathias of Maryland and Robert Taft of Ohio plus a number of congressmen.

My Mitchell has been in numerous Cherry Blossom Parades and to the White House for a White House picnic. It participated in congressional publicity regarding the 50th anniversary of transportation legislation in 1969 I have taken it back to North Dakota a number of times, once in 1976 for the bicentennial celebration in my home town of Turtle Lake.

At 79 plus years of age, the Mitchell and I are both running strong. With my dear wife Pauline, we're still going to club meets, riding in parades, and enjoying life.