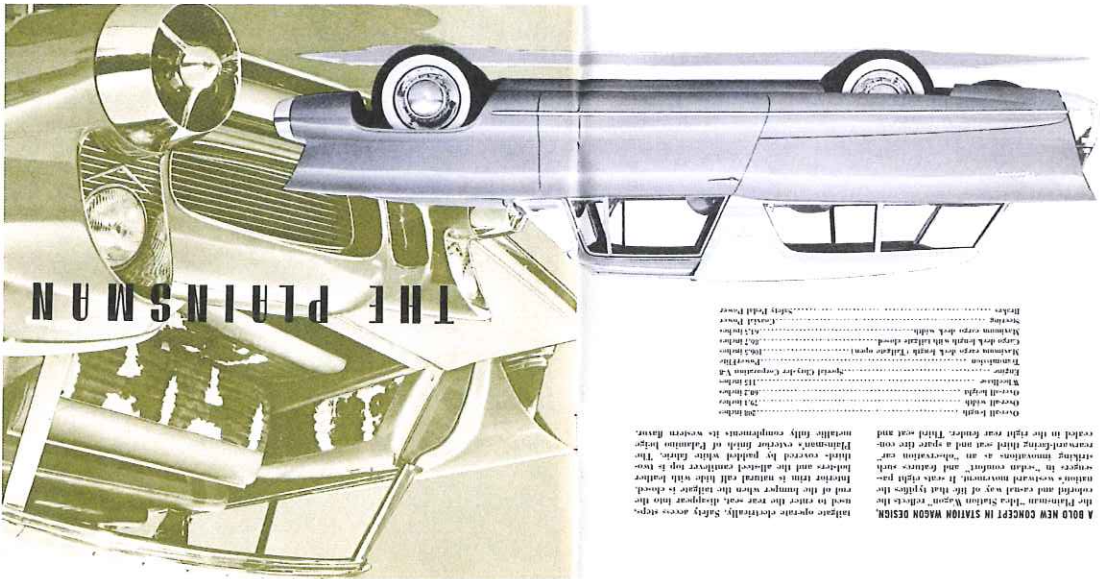


INTRODUCTION

(Or... How I First Fell In Love With The Plainsman!)
By Leon Dixon



My maternal grandparents lived in a very large three-story house with a side yard on Iroquois Street in Detroit, Michigan. It was just one of a number of avenues that ran through the middle of a very posh residential area known to Detroiters as Indian Village. Thus the names of the streets: Iroquois, Seminole, Seneca, etc.

The very top floor of the house was actually done up like a bachelor's apartment wherein the walls were trendy (at least for those times) knotty pine. Everything on that top floor had a kind of male-ness about it. But I don't mean man-cave, as it is understood today. No. There was a record player, but no big-screen TV—that hadn't been invented yet.

Colorful silk ties hung from a special rotating holder. Shirts and suits in the closet were neatly hung from wooden hangers. Glistening polished shoes sat in a tilted rack along the base of one wall. The leather of each shoe was stretched taut by wooden shoetrees.

Anyway, the third-floor quarters were kept sanitary and as neatly arranged as a

military barracks. My Uncle Louie lived here.

Louie Curtis had been a Navy man in World War II, but he lived with a certain

discipline even in civilian life. Louie was also a diehard Plymouth fan and bought a

sporty new Belvidere coupe in 1953. It was bright red.

After leaving the Navy, Louie went to work for Chrysler Corporation and

ultimately moved to Ohio to help start a new Chrysler plant there. He would remain at the

company for the rest of his career and never bought anything but Chrysler products. My

Uncle Louie lived, ate, slept and breathed MoPar. But there were other diehard Chrysler

fans in my family.

Two flights downstairs back in the big house on Iroquois was a grand living room

with a big fireplace. To the left, over in the corner was a big, overstuffed leather

armchair. Next to it was an end table with a tooled leather top. This table held a rather

grand pipe rack, accompanied by the faint aroma of Cherry-blend tobacco. It was my

grandfather's favorite place to sit when he was home and not running his massive electric

trains layout in the basement.

My grandfather, Rod G. Shuster, had founded an insurance business in the 1920s

and he had done quite well for himself. By the 1950s, R. G. had become known not only

for the success of his business, but also for his love of Chrysler products. By the 1950s he

bought one nearly every year. Grandpa had a particular soft spot for Imperials and bought

several of them.

So as you might imagine, the Chrysler salesman made it a point to arrive each

year at my Grandpa's office to take him (and sometimes me as well) to see advanced

showings of the new Chryslers and Imperials.

Back in those days when cars changed every 365 days, Detroit's car companies

held next year's models in ultra-tight secrecy. New styling changes were treated as

closely guarded secrets. So it was a big deal to see the new styling and features—

especially if you got to see them before the general public.

At new model time, cars were kept fully covered on trucks and stored well away

from prying eyes. Dealerships would either cover their showroom windows or fog them

over. For instance, ample amounts of "Glass Wax" cleaner worked well if smeared with a

rag or sponge and allowed to dry on the inside of the windows.

Then with the view safely shielded, top salesmen would fan out invitations to

their premium customers in hopes of making an instant sale. Such a customer would be

brought in and ushered past the fogged-up windows and temporary partitions all to be

wowed by the newest models.

But in my case, the super sales treatment was not the only benefit I experienced.

Because of my grandfather, I was one of the youngest people in the country on the

Chrysler Press Preview list in the 1950s. I would often receive invitations for special

showings. Accompanied by my grandparents, I not only got to see next year's cars but

ultimately Chrysler dream cars as well!

Now, my grandmother had a brand-new Dodge in the garage, but she rarely drove

it—especially if she was going downtown. She preferred using taxis for such outings. And

so it was not a surprise one day to hear a taxi tooting its horn out in the driveway.

But other than the taxi, the day at hand was a complete mystery for me. All I had been told was to dress up for a trip downtown (we did these kinds of things back then). My dad dropped me off early at my grandparents' house, so all morning long I had been waiting in eager anticipation.

No encouragement was needed because I was ready to go! So, quickly we spilled out of the front door, down the porch steps and into the back seat of the waiting taxi.

Unlike today, this taxi was incredibly clean inside. One might even say pristine. It was a spotless, shining 1952 Plymouth Checker taxicab in dark green color. It had a dark red vinyl interior. As further evidence of the time, there was no glass partition. Nor was there a full front bench—only a driver's seat. To the right on the passenger's side was a rather large rear-facing jump seat where I was invited to sit for the ride.

The uniformed driver smiled and asked if we were going to Hudson's. My grandmother replied, "Yes, driver... J.L. Hudson's. I'm taking my grandson downtown for a surprise." The cabbie acknowledged and backed out of the driveway as smooth as one could imagine and headed for Gratiot Avenue.

Now, J.L. Hudson's was a landmark in Detroit, Michigan. Hudson's was the largest department store in the world. It was also the tallest department store with twenty-five floors. Nearly everything about Hudson's was big. The store took up more than an entire downtown city block and was composed of multiple buildings all stuck together. At certain times of the year, Hudson's would display the world's largest

American flag draped across the front of the building facing Woodward Avenue. At Christmas time they had a gigantic toyland and Christmas display that was unparalleled.

A shopping trip to Hudson's could very easily occupy an entire day. There was floor after floor, department after department of everything imaginable from perfumes and women's clothing to household goods and appliances to lawnmowers. If you wanted to buy a parrot or an iguana, they had a pet shop there. If you wanted diamonds, there was a very large jewelry department. If you needed your watch fixed, they had an old European watchmaker there with a clock and watch department.

But a trip to J.L. Hudson's in the 1950s also could amount to a very elegant outing—especially by today's standards. Upstairs there were elegant beauty salons and day saunas. And there was a restaurant that was as chic and posh as one could possibly imagine. Ladies could be seen there wearing things like white gloves and pillbox hats with nets that covered their eyes. They could even have high tea there—as my grandmother sometimes did.

Now if the store name sounds familiar to automotive fans, yes it was owned by the same family of Hudson Motorcar Company fame. But the car connection didn't stop there, as we shall see.

My grandmother tipped the driver as we exited the taxicab and walked through the heavy bronze doors into the perfumed atmosphere of magnificent J.L. Hudson's. But we weren't there for shopping. Instead, my grandmother made a beeline straight for the big bank of elevators. You could tell if the elevator was going to be available by the ball-shaped globe lights that hung over each door. And there was often a special uniformed guide to direct you to the nearest available elevator entrance. Only a few moments passed and it was our turn.

The big brass doors of the elevator slid open with a quiet whoosh as a female operator in a dark blue dress and white gloves smiled and ushered us inside. She asked for our floor as my grandmother looked at me and smiled. "Twelfth floor please!" The operator acknowledged, "Yes ma'am. You must be going to..." My grandmother interrupted before the elevator operator could blurt out everything. "Yes... yes we are. It's a surprise for my grandson—he loves cars." My heart began to race as my imagination was now running wild. At least now I had a clue, but cars at J.L. Hudson's? What was this all about?

"Ahhh!" The elevator operator knowingly said as she first closed the big metal doors and then the clacking brass accordion inner gate. She smiled at me, and then held her white-gloved finger up to her lips in a sign of hush-hush secrecy as she began operating the elevator controls. As smooth as silk, we began to glide silently upward to our floor.

As we finally reached our destination, we could see the lighting coming through the small glass windows with wire mesh inside. The elevator operator skillfully adjusted the height of the elevator to smoothly match the exact floor level. Then she slid the brass cage gate open followed by the big outer doors. We strode out of the elevator as my grandmother reached into her purse and pulled out an envelope embossed with the "JLH" logo. She handed a smiling lady a card out of the envelope as the lady unhooked a velvet rope and waived us into what I could only describe as a combination of museum and dream car show. Now I understood. My grandparents had arranged for me to visit at an advanced showing of a special J.L. Hudson automotive exhibit. We were some of the first people though the door and I was in heaven.

It was all incredible. Somehow Hudson's had managed to bring real cars all the

way up to the twelfth floor and set them up on display. In one direction was GM's jet-like Firebird gas turbine car. Also there was the ancient King car... first automobile driven on

Detroit's streets.

Hudson's had magically converted their large auditorium/salon into a kind of car

world. For me, it was like entering Disneyland—or at least what I imagined it would be at that time. I looked at the cars and displays and then suddenly... there it was. In

shimmering Palomino Beige metallic: the Plainsman dream car!

Now, to some jaded 21st-Century minds, perhaps the wide-eyed wonder of these

experimental styling one-offs in 1956 may all seem lost today. But to put things in

perspective, dream cars were just coming into their heyday at that time. And as frivolous

as they may seem in today's cynical world, dream cars were supremely important.

These vehicles often forecasted what might be coming in the future in design,

technology and in features. They excited the public and got people talking about the very

notion of the future and things yet to come. They helped car companies to gauge the

wants and needs of the market. In short, dream cars made automotive design into a

genuine science all its own.

The 1950s was the zenith of the American dream car era and these cars were the

talk of the auto shows. Whether you loved them or not, dream cars were the real buzz of

the 1950s and 1960s. People like me had an unquenchable thirst in those days for dream

cars and knowledge about them. Year after year, I couldn't wait to see what new wild

wonders would be unveiled by carmakers. Dream cars were on every magazine cover and

vivid in the minds of those who truly loved automobiles.

Yes, we call them "concept cars" today but the original term we all used to describe these wondrous vehicles was "dream cars." So if you cared about automobiles, *dream cars* were the things to see back then! It was a very different era. I know. I was there.

And in those pre-cynical days of promise and optimism, there were also many other things of wonder and inspiration about the world of the future. It was a new awakening.

Amazing new electronics debuted that would change the entire world of music. From the recording studio, to the artists, to the instruments like electric guitars it was all just breaking out of a slumber. Les Paul and Mary Ford had a TV show where they showcased not just their talent but amazing new sounds that could come out of a guitar. Les played while Mary played and sang "*How High The Moon*" in what seemed like an impossible, incredible, miraculous futuristic rendition. It was a wondrous time.

1956 was the year I first saw the iconic sci-fi movie, "*Forbidden Planet*" when it debuted at Detroit's Grand Circus Theater, just a few blocks from J.L. Hudson's. Not only did the movie have a serious treatment of science fiction, but also everything up on the screen looked real and believable. And it had *Roby, The Robot*, the most iconic robot ever. Detroit opened an "*Automat*" fully automatic electronic restaurant where you bought pre-made meals, drinks and treats behind little clear plastic doors in a wall. And I also saw the Ford Mystere and the Packard Predictor that year. And now upon seeing the Plainsman, my hunger for the future and dream car close-ups was satiated—at least for the time being.

But just like those other dream cars and wondrous marvels of the 1950s I had seen, there was an indelible memory attached. I would never, ever forget how magnificent the Plainsman looked while cowgirls in Stetsons and fringed white leather outfits pranced around it. The Plainsman glowed and shimmered in the lights and it seemed so very modern. Like the incredibly popular minivans that would follow it from Chrysler decades later, the Plainsman had anticipated every possible need or want. It seemed that Chrysler had thought of everything with this dream car.

The Plainsman almost seemed to say, "Hello! Welcome to the future...I've been waiting for you! Whatever you want in a station wagon or family car, I've got it—and more!"

And the best part of all was that this was no science fiction car. This was a car that looked as if you could just climb in and drive off into the sunset. From that moment on, I fell in love and fantasized of someday owning the magnificent Plainsman. And I never stopped dreaming.

Whether you lived in the 1950s and loved it as I did... or missed the era but still love the cars, I invite you to turn the pages of this book and see it all through eyes of wonder. Come travel back in time with me to a place where no GPS will ever take you. And for the first time ever, see the story of one of the most iconic dream cars of the 1950s—as seen not just by someone who was there, but by someone who rediscovered the car decades later when everyone said it had been destroyed. Come back with me now as I tell you the story of the Plainsman as you have never seen it before...