

Proudly made in Hamilton

Love affair with Studebaker has lasted more than 40 years

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It's been more than 40 years since they put down that eccentric automobile, the Studebaker.

But keep your eye out for one tomorrow, which happens to be the first ever International Drive Your Studebaker Day.

The idea is simple. Get that old car on the road, show it off, talk it up. In the States it's a holiday, of course, so there will be lots of Studebakers in parades down Main Street.

Here, it's merely a summer Saturday. So drivers will just get out there and turn some heads.

The last Studebaker rolled off the line in north Hamilton in 1966. But really, the car died three years earlier at headquarters in South Bend, Indiana. When they shut down that plant, it put 8,000 out of work. In Hamilton, it was a loss of 700 jobs.

The Hamilton chapter of the Studebaker Drivers Club has close to 200 vehicles in its fleet. Between thunderstorms the other day, we coaxed a pack to the parking lot at Dundurn Castle.

Usually when Studebaker people gather, they're badly outnumbered. There might be 200 cars at a cruise night -- and just seven or eight Studebakers.

Yes, this little group is special. We wanted to find out why they pledge allegiance to the fallen brand:

* Paul Cronkwright was but a boy in 1950 when the phone rang at home one night.

The caller had good news. Paul's name had just been pulled from the drum. He'd won a new Studebaker bullet-nose, the exotic car with the wraparound rear window, the car that made people say, "You can't tell if it's coming or going."

It was father who bought that 25-cent ticket, a fundraiser to build a curling rink in Mount Hope.

The rink's still there, but Dad soon sold the bullet-nose. For Paul, however, the thrill never went away.

And now he owns a 1963 Studebaker Daytona Wagonaire, with the amazing sliding roof. On TV, they advertised it rolling down the road with an upright fridge in the back.

* Jim Anderson used to work at Otis Elevator, which had space immediately west of the Mars Avenue car plant, near Victoria and Burlington.

"We looked out onto the Studebaker parking lot. We saw rows of shiny Hawks and just drooled."

Jim drooled some more at the showroom on Barton, but the car was out of reach.

Six years ago, however, when he was 69, Jim and wife Barbara went out and bought Studebaker's most exotic car, the Avanti, a 1963.

* Barry Leppan was just earning peanuts in 1966, when Studebaker died. Most rational purchasers would then scratch that make off their list.

But Barry immediately went out and paid \$1,850 for a brand new Studebaker Daytona -- power steering, power brakes, bucket seats, Bordeaux red exterior with white vinyl top. He got 12 years out of that car. Today he owns a 1964 Daytona and a GT Hawk.

* Ted Calder's mother had a 1957 Scotsman, the bargain end of the Studebaker lineup. It was not a car to stir a young man's heart.

But many years later, Ted was just minding his own business when wife Joanne announced she was tired of having all her savings on paper. She was going to invest in something more exciting.

She got a beautiful 1959 Silver Hawk. So Ted went out and bought a yellow 1964 Daytona.

* Stu Chapman has always had Studebakers. No mystery why. He was the Studebaker director of advertising and public relations in Hamilton, the one given the job of telling the world the car company was raising the white flag.

Stu has stayed true to the brand ever since. And now he's written a book, due out this fall. It's called My Father The Car -- Memoirs of My Life with Studebaker.

If you don't spot a Hawk, Commander, Starlight Coupe, Lark or the like tomorrow, no problem. The local landscape is now littered with cruise nights. Mondays, Hutch's at the Beach Strip; Tuesdays, Canadian Tire in Ancaster; Wednesdays, Mapleview Mall; Thursdays, Pier 4 Park.

By all means, ogle those big- finned Caddies and showboat Imperials. But seek out the Studebakers too, quirky classics all.

Yes, they're odd, but that's no accident. The company slogan: "Different By Design."

StreetBeat appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

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