

Member Spotlight

Al Tornabeni

By Monica Ledwon

Al Tornabeni, a Buick performance division member of our club, is featured in this month's Gazette. His 1936 Special 3 window coupe has led a charmed life on the road skirting two natural disasters through its years.

Al was born, raised and educated in the Chicago region. He received his college degree from St Joseph's College in Rensselaer, Indiana with a major in Psychology. His professional years included being a sales rep for Central Steel & Wire and Babcock & Wilcox in the midwestern states of Illinois, Kansas, Oklahoma and Missouri for over 37 years. Al's performance in sales led to Babcock and Wilcox awarding him their honorary "Doctorate of Metallurgy" degree. The company website of Babcock & Wilcox states, "it believes in recruiting, retaining and rewarding the best minds in business". And Al's history with his Buick is proof of his engineering skills.



As a teenager, Al was smitten by what he terms the "fat fender cars". He was especially attracted to a neighbor's 1939 Ford coupe. His favorite collectible to own was a 1958 Corvette he tooled around in during college years. But as Al married and had three daughters, his motor pool consisted only of basic runabout sedans for some time due to his focus on family and work.

Fast forward to 2009, Al retired. Time constraints eased up and he took in a forlorn 1992 Cadillac Allante running on five cylinders. He did a light makeover on the car and still drives this rare bird today. Then Al began his search for a mid thirties fat fender coupe to restore.

This '36 Buick Special started out on the road in the state of Colorado. Then it was purchased by a collector in Georgia and resided in his garage inventory for some time. Later, a man from Long Island, New York bought it to simply tinker on. That endeavor was short-lived and Al found the ad for his coupe on Craig's list—the National Listings which he was perusing. Happenstance led a friend of Al's, whose hometown was within the Long Island area, to be able to inspect the '36 for him when visiting kinfolk. And the sale was made.

As the Buick was loaded and bundled up on the transport truck in August 2011, the driver pulled out at 11pm heading to Al's home in Missouri. The next day Hurricane Sandy hit Long Island and the car escaped unscathed!

In the years since, the car has been slowly modified in its restoration to be a Resto-Rod vehicle. Al first pulled out the base straight-eight engine and sold it to fellow club member and fat fender admirer, Gary Heim, for an upgrade on his stock '36 coupe. Then, a 1965 Buick Nailhead 401 engine was installed. Al also replaced the transmission with a THM 400 that has the nifty switchpitch gear pattern. It creates a six speed shift out of a 3 speed similar in function to an overdrive. Disc brakes all around, a modernized drive train, 4 link stabilizer bars with coil over springs changed the stock suspension into a performance machine. Bucket seats were added from a 2006 Lucerne. And yet the exterior of the car looks totally original save for only repainting the color from black to deep maroon.

Al completed jobs on his car in various hot rod shops, warehouses and even a pole barn. In December 2015, when the Meramac flooded its banks, water was seeping into a shop housing his '36 at the time. As the water rose, the owner towed it out just in time missing another natural disaster.

Al says this Special coupe is an ongoing project and is 85% there. Currently it sits in Krakow, Missouri waiting for new glass to be installed. And then it's off to the muffler shop. He reflects that his '36 has turned into a frame off restoration when first his goal was simply to get it running.

Al enjoys the hobby of model trains, Knights of Columbus volunteer activities such as hosting golf outings or food venues and entertaining his three grandsons. He joined the Gateway Chapter when hearing about the Love Park Picnic event and attending one. His goal is to have his performance Buick out for a reveal and on the road sometime this spring.



Editor's Note: As you can see from these few pictures, this is a very nice and well done car. It has all the nuances to make it a fine driving "Resto Rod". When Al is finished with the car and it is put on the road, there will be a feature article about its transformation and construction in a future issue of the Gazette.