

Member Spotlight

Jim Conley

By Monica Ledwon

This July issue of the Gateway Gazette features a very new member, Jim Conley, who attended his first meeting in March at the Spring Oil Spill with his Rolls Royce Cornish convertible. Introducing himself to the members there he told of his ongoing nostalgic search for a '62 Buick Special.

Jim was born in St. Louis and grew up around the Manchester and McCausland area. He graduated from Southwest High School and tells that he barely qualified for meeting graduation requirements, not the greatest student.

Immediately after, he joined the Air Force for a six-year stint in both active and reserve service from 1956 to 1962. During this time, Jim married his wife, Cecelia, who he met when she was eight and he was nine around the corner from his home in 1948. They married in 1961 and by 1964 they had two sons to raise.

Jim praises his military duty because, in his mind, the military is an excellent teacher. He learned radar and navigation for the B-52 Bomber. These skills would stick with him for his life's work. He went on to McDonnell Aircraft and Douglas Aircraft when the companies were still single entities. Moving on to General Dynamics he was part of the team for Silo Missile placement in Nebraska. In 1966, Jim started working for Kaar Electronics and switched his technical expertise to watercraft. He analyzed and solved evolving issues in riverboat radio and radar.

In 1983, Jim started his own business to maintain US Army watercraft worldwide by starting small shipyards in several states. Working on and testing a GPS system for one US Army vessel in the late '80's, Jim developed a specialized antenna mount. He succeeded in getting a patent for his design in 1992. Throughout his career, Jim accumulated all available licenses from the Federal Communication Commission except for telegraphy (i.e., Morse Code).

By 2003, he was ready to retire and the boys stepped in to keep his business of small shipyards going in Michigan, Louisiana and St. Louis. Still a late bloomer on the car collector scene, and after trying hobbies such as picture framing, and ham radio, finally, Jim was struck by old car



allure in 2010. He started with the purchase of his first classic, a 1980 Rolls Royce Wraith II. Since then, he has traveled the nation coast to coast adding exclusive antique automobiles to his family fold-- up to two Bentleys, two Cadillacs and two Rolls. Jim kept all these cars running and maintained even though he admits it is slow going wrenching on these older iron beauties. The Rolls Royce became his daily driver.

Joining the Rolls Royce Club, the Conley's enjoyed up to 15 road tours throughout the country visiting historic sites and classic car museums from Nova Scotia to Texas to California. But after a decade of cruising the interstates, Jim began to lose steam wheeling around those wide wheelbases. He harkened back to the days of that little white '62 Special he had owned as a growing family car and set a goal to find one.



Jim making goo goo faces while showing off his newly purchased 1962 Buick Special.

Early in his marriage, Cecelia's father gave her and Jim a '53 Buick Special for their daily driver. The car was good performer in the transportation division so in 1962 Jim and Cecelia bought the new base model Buick Special. Years later it suffered the misfortune of being totaled. A '73 Regal (the jazzed-up version of Buick's Century model) then took the stage as their daily driver. So, Jim has an early history with Buicks.

Jim believes when you want something, you better find out all the information first before setting off on the task of getting it. So, he searched Craigslist, Facebook, chatted on various Buick forums, joined the BCA and our Gateway Chapter to learn more about his former GM automobile. And, after the Spring Oil Spill, Jim found his '62 Buick, albeit a Skylark model, on Facebook Marketplace in Kentucky. It was a drivable, sparkling black beauty and a convertible with a 215 c.i. aluminum V-8 engine.



The Skylark's odometer showed 27K in mileage that Jim thinks should really have a '1' in front of it. Nevertheless, he sealed the deal and figured out his own logistics of getting the car home. Since there is a scarcity of professional drivers nowadays, he borrowed his son's truck, rented a U Haul trailer, and made one overnight run. To procure a professional transporter would have taken a month or more to get the car home.

Recently, Ted and I had the pleasure of driving this Buick Skylark at Jim's very generous invitation while touring part of his car collection. What a trip back in time with that whirring V8 engine and nostalgic smell of fossil fuel and unregulated unburned hydrocarbons. Jim is very happy to be a member of our club now and has already volunteered to help at the Regional by making name badges and key fobs for giveaways at the show's registration.

He sums up his success in life as owing it all to the early years in the US Air Force and their method of teaching. He used what he learned in the military in all his life's work and concludes by saying at Southwest High he may have been at the bottom of his class, but in the Air Force he was at the top.

