

Member Spotlight

Dr. Jeff Johnson

By Monica Ledwon

This month's Gazette features a longtime member who is seldom seen at meetings but a Buick man nonetheless, Jeff Johnson. He owns his grandfather's original 1951 Roadmaster that he towed home from Texas in 1986 and the car has been by his side ever since.



Jeff was born and raised in Rochester, Minnesota. As a kid he was mesmerized by erector sets and that sparked an interest in him of all things mechanical. Going further he took a junior high shop class and later in high school, a Power Mechanics class. Studying the internal combustion engines of lawn mowers and learning to rebuild these really captured his attention to anything motorized.

A summer school Auto Mechanics class in high school enhanced his skills. His dad thoughtfully gave him a 1959 Ford Galaxie 500 with a blown engine including a cracked block for Christmas. Jeff thought it was the coolest gift ever. He towed it to the school's parking lot and with the help of the instructor rebuilt the engine.

Jeff's first very own classic to drive was a 1930 Tudor Model A which his dad had spied near a house on the outskirts of town. It was complete and needed nothing major. So, for \$575 Jeff towed it home and did an amateur frame off restoration that took eight years to finish. The Model A also, still sets next to the Buick in his garage today.

Jeff has had quite an impressive academic career in the medical field. He attended Duke University and earned a BA degree in Economics. Then he entered into the challenging study to become a qualified practicing physician and graduated from Georgetown University School of Medicine. He completed his residency in Orthopaedic Surgery at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN, followed by a fellowship in Foot and Ankle Surgery at the University of Texas, and kept to the course of this discipline for his entire life. He not only practiced orthopaedic medicine but also instructed others by holding several professorship positions in higher learning institutions.

When he was at the Mayo Clinic, Jeff met his wife and life partner, Nan. As Jeff spent a great deal of time at the History of Medicine library on campus, Nan was the oft seen friendly librarian. They met, married and had three children, Eric 30, Reid 28 and Kathryn 26.

In 1990, Jeff put his amazing foot and ankle surgery skills to work on 4-time Indianapolis 500 winner, AJ Foyt who was racing in the Texaco Havoline Indy 200 Road Race in Elkhart, WI. AJ's brake pedal broke loose on his Lola-Chevrolet and he sailed into a hillside embankment. The nose of the car sheared off and the front chassis hit solid dirt crushing his heel and a foot underneath into the dirt. It took fifteen minutes to extract him from the vehicle. Air evacuated to the Medical College of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, Jeff and several other surgeons went to work. They stabilized AJ and Doctor Jeff released the growing pressure within the tissues of the broken bones (aka "compartment syndrome") by making several large incisions on his foot. AJ went on to recover at a specialty orthopedic care facility that takes care of Indy race car drivers in Indianapolis. He completed a grueling seven-month rehab program at the Houston Oilers NFL facility and returned for a final year of racing in 1991, before retiring.

Years later, while on an event tour in a pit area of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, Jeff saw a bay door that had AJ Foyt Racing Inc. on it. He went over and asked if AJ was there. This good ol' Texas boy was indeed there for Jeff to reintroduce himself. AJ was surprised and so grateful to Doctor Jeff whose surgical skill saved his foot and got him back on the track. One of AJ's personal accomplishments was to be able to return to racing following his 1990 crash and Jeff still keeps in contact with him today.

In 1996 Jeff achieved more career accolades when he and his family came to St. Louis where he founded the Division of Foot and Ankle Surgery in the Department of Orthopaedic Surgery at Washington University and the division grew to include 4 faculty members, 2 nurse practitioners and provided training for residents medical students. He also founded the Orthopaedic Foot and Ankle Fellowship Program at Washington University in 2004 and served as Director of the Fellowship until 2020.

Jeff rekindled his old car enthusiasm in 1998 by attending a Model A Club meeting and met the most welcoming guy, Dave Smith. Dave recommended that he contact the Gateway Chapter too since he had the Roadmaster. That done, Jeff finally made a meeting in March 2011 at the

annual Oil Spill in Paul Meyer's garage. He came seeking advice on a voltage regulator and received great support and technical tips. His arrival revealed a striking two-tone sedan with gray body and white top.



Left to right: Gene Bossaller, Ed Keil (mostly hidden), Jeff Johnson, Paul Meyer, Melissa Perucca, Ted Becker, Rich Horst

As Jeff signed off ministering to the lower extremities of feet and ankles, and hung up his scalpels just a few weeks ago, the 1951

Roadmaster is now his focus. Having bought a small farm in Eolia with a very large, comfy garage for his classic cars, restorative maintenance will soon begin on the Roadmaster. Before Jeff towed it home in '86 The car had been in storage for 15 years after his grandfather passed in '71. Jeff expressed interest in the car then, and a kind uncle in Texas cared for the Buick to slow the deterioration. Nan, using her research skills, found a 1951 Buick Shop Manual for Jeff's birthday gift. And recently, Ted Becker was called in for consultation for a non-start issue. He brought tune-up equipment to employ parts from Jeff's tune up kit. After modifications Ted did on the wires, and Jeff's installation of a coil, the straight 8 turned over. Ted's words of wisdom to Jeff were "never restore this car, just maintain it as it is an original masterpiece of the Buick Motor Division". Jeff has so far done replacements of wheel bearings, suspension coils, upholstery, headliner and kick panels

Another dream car of Jeff's since youth was owning a military vehicle oft seen during World War II and the Korean War. Advertisements called it a "Self-Propelled Power Plant". As a heavy duty go-anywhere ¾ ton WC series truck that morphed into a civilian vehicle with a front winch and an industrial strength chassis, it handled the rough terrains of oil fields, forestry lands and farm fields. Through Hemmings Motor News, Jeff's favorite kind of reading material, he found a 1954 Dodge Power Wagon and has added it to his classic motor pool.

Jeff is looking forward to making more club events now and fine-tuning the maintenance and appearance of his cars. He gets nostalgic looking at '51 as there is a deep gouge on the trunk frame. That scar is a memorable mark of his grandfather clearing mesquite trees out of the family farm's pastures by hooking a log chain to the tree and the corner of the car's trunk to extract the gnarly invader from the ground. The Gateway Chapter Buick Club, too, looks forward to seeing Jeff and the souvenir mark from his grandfather on the heirloom Roadmaster soon.

