

# Member Spotlight

## Monica Ledwon

By Monica Ledwon

This month's Gazette features Monica Ledwon, celebrating 40 years of Gateway Chapter Buick Club membership in the month of March 2021. Throughout these four decades, the club and old Buicks have been a major part of her life.

Monica was born in DePaul Hospital and brought home from her birth in a 1950 Buick Special 41D. She was to have a happy childhood on pastoral acreage her Grandmother Helen bought in Black Jack, Missouri in 1935. Each of this woman's sons, Hans and Rudy, built homes adjacent to hers making for a Waltersam family compound also known as Waltersam Acres. Monica, an only child, enjoyed her formative years here with her younger cousins climbing trees, digging in dirt, commandeering the chicken barn's hayloft for a fort, playing Barbie dolls as well as baseball and being surrounded by male figures who worked on cars.



There was always some engine work going on in both her dad's and uncle's garages. One day, when she was seven in 1960, there was quite a commotion going on at her uncle's driveway. He was driving up in an original 1930 Model A coupe with rumble seat. Her uncle, Hans, had decided this would be a cool classic car to tool around in for fun and restore. The moment the black Model A came to a stop, Monica ran up to the car and kissed its driver's door. Old car love had struck her like lightning!

The many memories of A Model rides, to the ice cream store sitting in the rumble seat with her cousins and a black lab made a deep impression on Monica. Care and concern about a car's welfare were ingrained in her. Uncle Hans decreed that the weather had to be perfect to pull the Model A out. Once when there was puddle in the driveway, Monica and her cousins were told to bail the water out so as not to have the wooden spoked wheels splashed to meet his criteria for a ride. Driving a cool classic car was to be in her future.

As a little girl, her dad, Rudy, taught her to identify the different brands of automobiles by the shape of the taillight lenses when cruising around in the Buick. As Monica grew older, near driving age, she and her dad would always hit the dealer show room floors every fall to examine and discuss the new models. And when the family daily driver Buick approached 19 years of

service, Monica was allowed to make some decisions on the replacement vehicle. Though her first choice of a '69 GTX was vetoed by her dad as a grocery getter for Mama, her dad did approve a '69 V-8 Chevy Nova coupe in forest green. He even OK'd Monica's special-order choice of rally wheels and red pin stripped tires for a sportier style.

After an insulting offer from Milner Chevrolet of \$50 for trade-in on the '50, Monica began putting the pressure on her dad to save to the car for a future restoration project. Pointing out all the fun the family has had with the Model A, and twisting his arm a bit more by saying, "How could you part with that perpetually grinning chrome grill?", she succeeded in getting her future dream car stored under the hayloft of her grandmother's barn with 98K miles on the odometer. Monica knew the car would someday be on the road again.

Eleven years passed by. She graduated from Hazelwood High School, went on to attain a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from UMSL, met and married a guy named Tom Ledwon who also like working on cars and customizing them. Professionally, her calling was the to the library for which she worked 33 years in the Thornhill Branch of the SLCL system.

In 1979 Rudy gave his daughter what she thought was a task of Hercules. Find a 1950 Buick shop manual and the restoration of the car in the chicken barn will begin. Using her librarian skills, an ad for a '50 Buick Shop manual was found in the classified section of the magazine Antique Automobile. You can imagine his surprise when opening a certain Christmas gift that year!

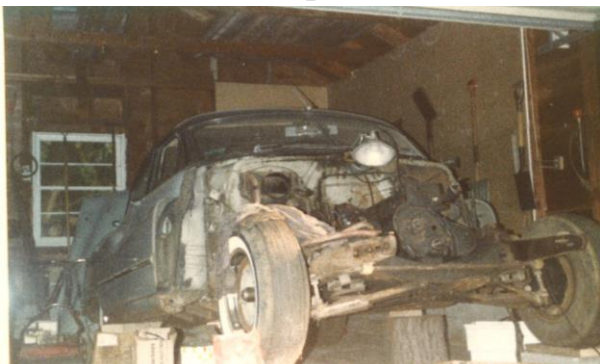
So, on April 28 of 1980 the restoration was launched. Hans hooked up tow ropes to the Buick and with his '42 Case Tractor and drug the car from her ten-year silent storage. Wheels creaked and brake lines burst as she was towed two driveways down the road back into her home garage.

Every weekend for the next three years was spent working on the '50. They almost, but not quite, did a frame off restoration. The engine/transmission assemblies were removed, bumper systems dismantled, fenders, trunk, hood were taken off including wheel wells. Rudy was the brains behind the engine mechanics, his brother Hans was the paint master, and Tom and Monica did

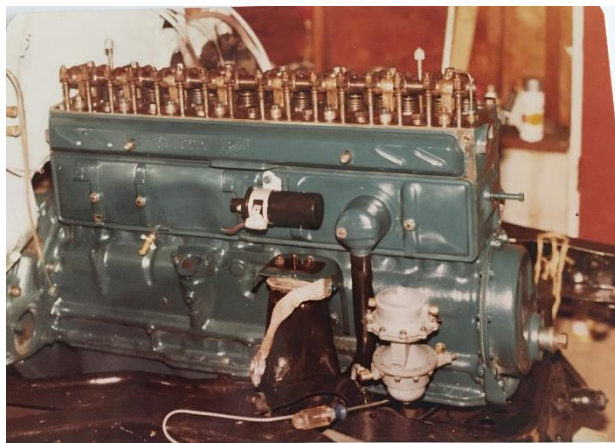
nonstop grunt work.

She scraped grease off of the frame with putty knives, steel drill brushes and coal oil, sanded the body relentlessly and did the majority of finding replacement parts for the car.

The remaining hulk of the car was jacked up and put on four sections of tree trunks fashioning a



homemade lift used for over a year while engine work proceeded on an old maple wood table in the basement. Very few projects were contracted out: only honing the cylinder block with a valve job, interior upholstery, a rebuild of hydraulic shocks, some sandblasting, re-chroming and a new exhaust system. Rudy spent a week's worth of his vacation installing a new wiring harness. Hans primed and painted body parts in sections as long as humidity was at or less than 40%. And Monica spent hours in the evenings at her kitchen table hand painting the B-U-I-C-K E-I-G-H-T lettered script on the hub cabs and front bumper brace.



In March of 1981, a car show was advertised in the Post-Dispatch classifieds at Mallory Buick at Page & Lindbergh sponsored by the Gateway Chapter Buick Club. Seeking help and technical advice, Monica, Tom and Rudy came, introduced themselves and told of their project car that was not yet road worthy. She, being the instigator of the project, then signed up for a membership to the club. Ceremoniously, Bob Huff drew up the paperwork for a member

who was a girl! And from there Monica met a treasure trove of friends and compatriots who gave tips, moral support and even offered usable parts for the car. They even met Hal Wallis who suggested they might buy his raggedy '50 Roadmaster Straight 8 to use as a parts car. That poor stepchild Buick supplied them with many spare nuts, bolts, brackets hose clamps, and four spiffier hub cabs along with the visual knowledge of any uncertainty on part installations or connections.



On a fall Saturday in 1983, the Horseless Carriage Club hosted a classic car show at Northwest Plaza. The 1950 Buick Special 41D made her debut and took home 3<sup>rd</sup> prize. Monica's dream was realized. She went on to have many fun adventures with the car and the Gateway Chapter club. The most memorable was an invitation to bring the Buick to the Ritz Carlton Ballroom as a centerpiece for the Washington University's 40<sup>th</sup> class reunion. That was incredibly exciting and scary. The hotel had two garage size doors that opened to adjoin an upper indoor parking area. Tom had the driving bravado to guide the car down two ramps onto the exclusive



carpeted dining room. The celebrating graduates quickly gathered round to have their picture taken with the car.

Many good times were had by Monica and her father attending shows, dinners and field trips in club convoy formation. But as time went on her parents passed, Monica and Tom separated and began new lives without the '50 Buick. It was sorrowfully sold in 2004 to a Texan from the hill country after being in the family 54 years. Monica inherited her parents' 1985 Regal LTD, the last



new car they purchased, and began anew another Buick's renovation. She always stayed connected to the Gateway Chapter.

Holding the position of Secretary for several terms in her history with the club, she also was Editor of the Gateway Gazette from 1984 to 1991. Those were the days of typing and laying out a master copy, sending it to a printshop and then affixing postage and hand addressing each member's copy.

Monica is most thankful to members of the Gateway Chapter Buick Club, past and present, who always had a word of wisdom for her whether it be solving a mechanical issue or solving an issue in life. Those mentors are Ted Becker, Ray Fellenstein, Aaron Ford, Bob Huff, Ed Lanfer, John Pegg and Dave Smith.

