

Member Spotlight

Robert Vogt

By Monica Ledwon

This month, the Spotlight shines on Robert Vogt, a new member and jovial gentleman who followed a lifelong career path as a GM mechanic. He owns a '66 Le Sabre which he calls a fine original stock cruiser.

Robert was born and raised in East St. Louis. He was educated at Holy Angels Primary School and graduated from Assumption High School. Through his years growing up, he always enjoyed tinkering with all things mechanical. So, college was not on his academic agenda. Rather, Bob went to Ranken Tech and honed his skills in auto mechanics.

From 1964 until 1975 he was a shop mechanic at the McMackin Buick Dealership in Collinsville, Il. He worked on all Buick models, but did extremely well with Opels, the German/Austrian foster child of Buick. He was known around the shop as “the Opel mechanic”. Bob thought the Opel was economical and a good little car to get around in.

In 1975 Bob moved up to Elder Cadillac in Belleville. He worked his way up to Service Desk Supervisor, then on to Shop Stewart and President of Machinist Local Union 31130. He held all three positions for ten years at the same time.

Bob harkened back to the historic procession of motors that GM manufactured for their vehicles. The times when Chevy or Oldsmobile engines were covertly installed in Buicks and Cadillacs causing a customer ruckus. Then, on to the diesel engines which he proclaimed were GM's boat anchor. They were an absolutely pain to work on with their engine failures. Onward to the cringeworthy aluminum block GM engine, which Bob called absolute junk and saw complete breakdowns within 20-30K miles on the road. Not until Cadillac came out with the Northstar which is a three-piece engine prone to a few oil leaks does he give GM a nod on design. Bob admits he never even owned a Cadillac despite working for Elder twenty-two years.



And, nowadays, from what he's observed about the industry, new cars are just rolling computers. A mechanic need not look under the hood with a flashlight. A connector is hooked up to the engine for a complete systems diagnosis. Even a simple dead battery requires an hour electronic diagnosis to analyze whether it really warrants a replacement.

Bob retired in 1997 as his dealership decided to close rather than bow to new guidelines from GM to rebuild near an interstate highway. He spent the next nine years taking care of his first wife who had become disabled.



Bob has been widowed twice and has two sons who live nearby, BJ and Chris. The next year, after his first wife's passing, in 2007, Bob brought the Le Sabre home. From hearsay around Belleville, he found a nearby homeowner had a Buick in his driveway that might be for sale. It was a '66 Le Sabre with a smashed grill. The owner had driven it lightly for ten years only adding 5K to the total original 40K miles on the odometer. On his second try at price negotiation, Bob came back with cash and bought the car.

Due to GM's suspect design of body parts, Bob's Buick had many rusted areas to repair. He replaced and rebuilt the windshield frame which was rusted in both corners. Rust had invaded the leaking rear window requiring him tear it all out and redo the channels. The smashed bumper was taken off and sent to be rechromed but delivered back still sprung a bit, creating a challenge to bolt it back on. Then, the infamous GM drain hole aimed at the wheel well had caused rust on the right rear quarter panel. He and his son fired up a welder to cut out wheel well panels and redirected the water drainage. Finally, the whole car was repainted to its original white color and Magna Flow exhausts were added for just the right throaty sound. Bob says he has the idle adjusted so perfectly passerby cannot hear the engine. He uses the oldtime gauge that a filled teacup and saucer must sit steadily on a fender while the car is idling.

The car has been driven on three powers tour zipping along with its 340 4barrel carb pumping 375 HP. Coming home from a tour one time, the Buick cruising at 70mph with his son asleep in the back, Bob dozed off too. The car rode into the median fence scraping and denting the body up front to rear. After regaining control and stopping, Bob got out surveyed the damage saw it was still drivable and got back on the road. The tank like construction of a mid-sixties Buick left him and his son without a scratch! Body work repair and replacement was done all at the home garage. Still in the works is a new hood from an Electra that needs to have three inches trimmed off before install. Luckily, Bob's neighbor, who builds custom hotrods, happens to have a full body shop in his garage and will easily modify the hood's length.



As for hobbies, Bob and his sons are avid almost rabid STL Blues Hockey Fans. Every available wall space of his Millstadt home is decorated with Blues memorabilia. Always being a car nut from his hot rodding teen years on, his motor pool now includes a '78 El Camino, '96 Chevy Pickup, '99 Regal and the classic '66 Le Sabre.

About a year ago, Bob joined the Gateway Chapter Buick Club when he met up with members at shows in Belleville and Columbia, Illinois. He also joined the BCA. As he lives in Millstadt, he doesn't get out too often to attend the club's meetings at Sports Café. But he is happy to be part of our Buick family.