

The T Bird Deuce

Seventh Owner Rebuys Car After 47 Years



Hi, My name is John Willoughby and this is a historical record of this special car...the T-Bird Deuce and the history behind it's owners, it's changes and how it has finally come back home.

I would like to extend a "Special Thank You" to Jim Prowse of London, Ontario and Mike Lowden of Belle River, Ontario for their help in tracing the car through all the previous owners.

Also to Terry & Patty Denomme of "Canadian Hot Rods Magazine", Murray McEwan of "Old Autos Newspaper" and Steve Plunkett of "Fleetwood Country Cruize-in" for supporting and telling of the story.



The Story...by Mike Lowden, Belle River, Ontario, Canada

In 1955 Michael O'Byrne, of Dorchester Ontario Canada was a big stock car fan. Karlo and Hugo Rossini of Rossini's Speed Shop in Chatham Ontario had a Chrysler powered 1932 Ford Cabriolet that they used to pace the races at Delaware Speedway. Inspired by that car, Michael decided to look for a '32 Ford Roadster. Mike's friend Jack Watters found one in Port Burwell Ontario, full of pine needles and delivered it to Michael's Dad's Ford dealership for \$35.00. Mike started to build his Hot Rod, thinking he'd use a '47 Ford front end to get hydraulic brakes, he moved the cross member forward two inches to make

up for the spring being ahead of the axle. Dad interfered though, and insisted he use a '32 style axle with the spring on top, so Mike bought a new chrome plated dropped axle from Rossini's for \$20.00 and picked up a pair of aluminum headlight brackets while he was there. On Christmas morning, Mike's Dad took him to the dealership where a 272 Y block engine, automatic transmission and many other parts he'd need were hanging from a chain hoist. Dad had purchased all of this from a 1300 mile wrecked '55 Ford for Michael's Christmas gift.

Mike got working right away, Z-ing the frame, rebuilding and installing a '53 Ford pickup steering box. Stock car racer Al Mitchell supplied a three





deuce setup for the Y block, and Mike bought a pair of leaky aluminum T Bird Valve covers from Shaw's Auto in London Ontario. Zip Cole welded and leaded in the rear fenders and charged \$35.00 for the task, exactly what Mike had paid for the car itself. Mike finished the car in Sherwood green metallic with a black interior and a custom white top.

After driving and drag racing the car for a short while, Michael decided it wasn't fast enough and ordered a new 312 cubic inch Thunderbird engine through the dealership. An early crate motor. Mike had a great time with the car. He says... "There were no cruise nights like today, the only cruise we knew was to do the drag, Dundas Street, London, Ontario. This happened a lot, like every night if we could. There were a few others that did the drag too, looking for whatever we were looking for, girls, cars, cops on motorcycles etc. The corner of York and Talbot Streets was Ridler's Hot Rod Shop. Guys like Keith and Doug Ridler, Al Wright and others were always there with girls and friends.

We often got bored and would drive to St. Thomas to do the drag there only to come back to Dundas (Street) to

catch the girls coming out of a late movie, hoping to pick one up and take her to a restaurant for a burger and pop.

Drag racing was always on Sundays or holidays at Cayuga or the St. Thomas airport. We always drove our cars to

the drags, just took off the chrome wheel covers when we got there and some guy would write B/SR on each side and on the windshield. I always seemed to beat the guy beside me and when the races were over we drove the car back home, put the wheel covers back on and removed the shoe polish.

In the summer of 1959 Michael was approached by The National Film Board of Canada asking to borrow his hot rod for a movie shoot they were doing in London. The Canadian Department of Defense had commissioned The National Film Board of Canada to produce a recruiting movie. The hot rod scene which was filmed on the street just outside the Wolseley Barracks in London is very short but effective, showing the car, the motor and the sound of the exhaust. Michael got his car back at the end of the day

with a promise that he would receive a copy of the film. The film never did arrive, but after the car was found again and returned to the London area, he was able to track down a copy. The film is now converted to DVD from the original 16 mm sounds film version. John Willoughby has the DVD in his memorabilia collection.

The late fifties was a time I was lucky to be involved in. All the people, the cars, the music, no matter what happens now, this era was 'IT'. I could go on with other stories about Dundas St. but they are all good memories for me, no bad stories. Things were much different back then."

One summer day a fellow named Pete Clark from London drove up to the Dorchester Ford dealership looking for Michael and the roadster. Pete had seen the car driving around London and he wondered if it was for sale. Pete was driving a 1955 Ford 2 door post car and he was willing to make an even trade for the roadster. Michael had no intention of selling his hot rod, but it was a deal he could not turn down. The deal was made and away went the roadster. Pete only kept the roadster for a few weeks as another London car guy named Ross Moore made an offer to purchase the car and the deal was done.

Ross enjoyed driving the roadster for both pleasure and for work. He was employed with the local radio station, CFPL in London and driving the car to work on rainy days proved not to be a good idea. This was a great summer car but as fall was approaching Ross needed something he could drive in all kinds of weather. Ross headed back to see Michael at the Ford dealership in Dorchester. That day Michael was working on an Austin Healey and Ross thought that car would suit him much better than the roadster. Again, another even trade was made. Ross drove home in his Austin Healey and Michael had his hot rod back again.

Bob McGregor had seen the roadster and would visit Michael every week to see if he would sell him the car and finally Mike gave in. The roadster moved to Petrolia Ontario then. Bob's brother had a '32 Ford Pickup and they cruised together often, but Bob soon tired of the car and offered it to a sports team to raffle off. The winner was a lady who had no interest in owning a Hot Rod and decided to take the cash instead so the car was sold to Alf Kettle and Sid Byrd of Sarnia. Alf and Sid owned a car lot and put the car up for sale right away.

John Willoughby of London was the next owner. John installed a set of aluminum wheels from Wells Foundry in London. They were very similar to big window Halibrands. John entered the car in shows in Toronto, London,



Chatham and Detroit as well as drag racing it at Grand Bend where he ran a 15.14 pass and at the Nationals in Indianapolis.

Here's John Willoughby's account of his time with this great car: "I first saw this "Hot Rod" when it was being raffled off. I know I bought tickets hoping to win it, but that did not happen. I never got this car out of my mind. It was just like the hot rods in California we would see in the movies. I knew I had to have this car.

In 1963 I got word that the car was in Sarnia and it was for sale. We made the deal and I brought the car back to London. It was perfect. It needed nothing. Turn the key and go.

The sixty's were the best of times and it was all about cars. A bunch of us guys had an unofficial car club called "The Pacemakers" and our shop was on Talbot Street in London. Everybody there just built, drove, drag raced and talked cars. This '32 Deuce was right at home in our shop. I was in my early twenties and dated my wife of 43 years when I had this car. We hit all the local drive-in restaurants in London including the Three Little Pigs and the A&W. Michael O'Byrne said in the late fifties it was all about cruising Dundas Street on week nights and heading for the drag races on the weekends. It was the same in the sixties. By this time the new drag strip at St. Thomas (Sparta) was up and running as well as Grand Bend. Many summer weekends during 1963, '64 and '65 were spent cruising Grand Bend and Ipperwash Beach in this little green '32 hot rod. It attracted a lot of attention anywhere it went. On Sundays we were at the drag strip. I did race the car in B/SR class with a limited amount of success.

I felt the car was a much better street/show car than a drag race car. Collector Car and Hot Rod Car shows were just starting in the early sixties in Ontario and I showed the

car in Oshawa, London Chatham and Toronto. I did take the car to Cobo Hall in Detroit in 1964 and it sure did not look out of place with the "big" boys. By this time our drag racing car Willoughby, Hope & Lang - 1949

Anglia G/Gas (later to become the Rydell Hope and Lang car with Wes Rydell taking John's place) was taking up much more time and I dealt the '32 Hot Rod to Danny Ritchie for a 1964 Ford XL convertible. Danny was a fixture around our "Pacemakers" shop and the local Hot Rod scene."

Danny also raced the car at Indy with friend Jim Prowse flat towing the car behind his factory dual quad 1958 Corvette. Danny was not well physically and sold the car to Theo Van Vlymen of Wallaceburg, Ontario. Theo was working in the parts department at Hallmark Motors, the Pontiac dealer in Wallaceburg. He enjoyed the car and the hot rod scene in and around the area. He made a few changes to the car including the addition of the stainless steel fire wall. Theo was about to get married and he put the car up for sale. Sim Regnier, a car salesman also at Hallmark Motors became the next owner. Sim was living in Chatham Ontario at the time, but his town house did not have a garage. As winter was approaching, Sim moved the car to his good friend Jim Price's barn in Wheatley Ontario. Over the winter Sim and his wife began the search for a home of their own. They were successful and decided to sell the car. Sim offered the car to Jim Price and it did not take long for Jim to agree. He had been looking at the car almost daily as it was sitting in his barn. When spring arrived, Jim hit the roads in Essex County.

In 1969, John Fletcher saw the car being driven around Windsor, Ontario and followed it home to Jim's house, a distance of approximately fifty miles so he could talk to Jim





about the car. Jim mentioned that it was for sale so John told his buddy Richard Cottell about it and Richard went straight to Jim's to buy the Hot Rod.



his daughters for rides in the rumble seat. He had another Hot Rod and let his friend Al Rossi drive the car to many shows in the Windsor area as well as to shows in Michigan and Ohio.

Richard put a lot of miles on the car. It had been virtually unchanged from when Michael built it in 1955. Richard drove the car to the first Street Rod Nationals in Peoria, but became interested in a Willys coupe and sold the car to Wayne Klokman, also of Windsor.



Wayne made the first changes to the car. He installed a set of Cragar Mags and big tires, he also had the roadster painted copper. At some point in time, someone removed the '55 Ford 120 mph speedometer and installed a 150 mph Thunderbird speedo so, due to that and the 312 engine it became known as "the T Bird Deuce"



Frank then sold the car to Lorne Gawne. Lorne pulled the 312 engine and installed a 351 Windsor as well as painting the car a wild fade paint from red to green. One time, while tuning it, the transmission slipped into reverse and the car took off down the alley, taking out a fence and damaging one rear fender as well. That lead of course to another paint job.



Wayne sold the car to Pat Pillon, who then traded it to Jim Dugal. Dugal painted the car red, and traded it to Frank Wall for a Deuce sedan. Frank used the car sparingly but took

Al Hebert of Windsor bought the car from Lorne and sold it to Karl Chase of South Lyon, Michigan. Karl made some more changes to the car. He installed a 1959 Olds rear end on coil over shocks replacing the early Banjo housing and transverse spring. Karl kept the car for a few years and sold it to Roy Klann of Adrian, Mi. Roy installed a Ford 302 and C4 Transmission, removed the rear fenders, installed a hood and many other updates.



He sold the car to Don Roe (Taylor, Mi.) in 1993 or 1994 and then it went to Jim Bachusz in Holly, Michigan around October 1998.

Jim had a few Hot Rods and decided to downsize so Waterford Michigan's Roy Breault bought it and painted it black with flames as well as going through the brakes and steering and a few other changes.

Richard Cottell became quite ill in 2008 and wondered where his old Hot Rod was. John Fletcher and the writer decided we'd try to find the car and we were able to trace it as far as Roy Klann, but were unable to go find Roy so the hunt came to an end. Sadly Richard passed away before we found the car.

Approximately a year after his passing, I received an email from Jim Prowse who had towed the car to Indy many years ago, saying his friend John Willoughby who had been the seventh owner of this car was also looking for it. He wanted to find it and buy it back if possible and Jim knew the car had been in the Windsor area. At this point Fletcher, Willoughby and myself teamed up, determined to locate this roadster. By searching the internet, visiting many Hot Rod forums and word of mouth the car was found! The timing was perfect. Roy Breault was thinking about selling it because his two custom Mercurys were taking up plenty of his time. Willoughby called Roy, visited him and his old car and was able to buy it back after selling it forty seven years earlier!

The T Bird Deuce was unveiled for the first time back in Canada at Steve Plunkett's "Fleetwood Country Cruize-In" show the first weekend in June of 2011. Some of the previous owners are in poor health and some have passed away but eleven owners or family members were able to attend the REUNION at Plunkett's show.



This car was built as a hot rod in 1955 and is now, in 2013, a 58 year old build. During that time there have been 24 owners, ALL of which we have been able to identify. Each one enjoyed the car and put their personal touch to the car, but each respected what the others had done and the car remains today very close to the way Michael O'Byrne built it so many years ago.

the T-Bird Deuce
www.tbirddeuce.com

**Built in 1955
24 owners!**

#1 MICHAEL O'BYRNE - DORCHESTER	#2 PETE CLARK - LONDON
#3 ROSS MOORE - LONDON	#4 MICHAEL O'BYRNE - DORCHESTER
#5 BOB MCGREGOR - PETROLIA	#6 ALF KETTLE & SID BYRD - SARNIA
#7 JOHN WILLOUGHBY - LONDON	#8 DANNY RITCHIE - LONDON
#9 THEO VAN VLYMEN - WALLACEBURG	#10 SIM REGNIER - CHATHAM
#11 JIM PRICE - WHEATLEY	#12 RICHARD COTTELL - WINDSOR
#13 WAYNE KLOKMAN - WINDSOR	#14 PAT PILLON - WINDSOR
#15 JIM DUGAL - WINDSOR	#16 FRANK WALL - WINDSOR
#17 LORNE GAWNE - WINDSOR	#18 AL HEBERT - WINDSOR
#19 KARL CHASE - ROYAL OAK, MI	#20 ROY KLANN - ADRIAN, MI.
#21 DONALD ROE - TAYLOR, MI	#22 JIM BACHUSZ - HOLLY, MI.
#23 ROY BREAUT - WATERFORD, MI.	#24 JOHN WILLOUGHBY - WALKERTON