

1956 Mercury Montclair

owner KENNY KING
text by CAROLE AND KENNY KING
photos by WEST PETERSON

Our 1956 Mercury Montclair is the only new car my father, Kenneth, ever bought. He was engaged to be married the following year and starting out with a new car was one of his goals. He picked out a black and yellow four-door sedan, as that would be a practical choice for starting a family, but when he saw this gorgeous Verona Green/Heath Green/Classic White Mercury Montclair two-door hardtop with dazzling chrome on the showroom floor at a competing dealership ... all bets were off.

There was nothing else like it on the lot. In fact, there was hardly anything like it anywhere since it was a three-tone model. Still, trying to be practical — the sedan was priced about \$30 more than the Montclair (it probably had a few more options, too), Dad went back to the first dealer to see if a bargain could be made. When the salesman wouldn't make a deal to his liking, Dad went back to the second dealer and purchased the Montclair. There was one small problem, though: they didn't want to sell their display. They wanted to order him one just like it for delivery in a few weeks, but in typical Kenneth King fashion, Dad let them know if they wanted to sell him a car it was "that one and today only." Dad usually got his way. I'm just glad we didn't end up with a sedan. His trade-in, by the way, was a 1951 Mercury sport sedan.

The new Montclair was optioned with power steering and radio and whitewalls. Of course, the car played a prominent role in the wedding the following year, taking the bride and groom to New Orleans for their honeymoon. To tell the truth, it had a starring role in practically every home movie and family photo Dad ever took. Dressed in our





How *THAT* car became ...
THE car



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Easter best, first day of school outfits or band uniforms, Dad was always directing, “Here, stand at the back of the car” or “Even better, why don’t you squat down a bit?” Don’t everyone’s childhood pictures have a car in the background?

Mom’s family had a 60-acre farm in what later became Oak Ridge, Tennessee. They were forced out in 1943 for the Manhattan Project and moved to Clinton, Tennessee. Dad’s family had been forced off their farm in 1933 for the first Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) Norris Dam project. Both homesteads were in the same county, with Clinton being the midway point between the two. That’s where they met ... and began dating in the eighth grade!

As a newlywed, Dad bought a used wooden ski boat, which according to family rumor, was their first real argument about wasteful spending. Dad was always willing to make an investment in fun and, ever-resourceful, he made up for it by painting the boat Heath Green to match the Mercury. Problem solved — car and boat were now a matched pair, joined at the hitch — and many years of trips to Norris Lake ensued.

In fact, many items around our house ended up getting the Mercury paint treatment, including tables, chairs, even a bicycle built for two that he further customized to add seats for my sister Carole and me. Because Dad was a machinist and “builder of things,” he assembled extra bike frames and painted the hybrid in his favorite three-tone combo. We were quite the sight in our neighborhood!

The Mercury has been witness to history. In September 1956, Mom and Dad were on their way to a movie in Knoxville when they met the National Guard coming across the bridge into Clinton to quell integration tensions. (Clinton was the first public high school in the South to desegregate, even before Little Rock.) Naturally, Dad turned the car around and headed to the courthouse square to see what was going on. (He’d been a newspaper boy who covered his huge town route on a bike and had an abiding love and respect for the news. Being a part of a community meant paying attention.)

The Mercury sat through its share of

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drive-in movies. Those early 1960s outings involved Dad at the wheel, Carole and me most likely in pajamas, a neighbor kid or two, and a big paper grocery-store bag filled with home-popped popcorn. Pretty sure the movies were more Batman (the kitchy TV-inspired versions) than Bond. Vacations

started much the same way: sleepy pajama-clad kids carried to the garage before sunup and placed in the car’s super-roomy backseat. Dad believed in getting on the road early. Gotta beat the traffic, you know. For us kids, waking up 50 or 60 miles down the road seemed like magic ... the perfect way to launch any adventure.

Speaking of adventure, my first thrill ride was a race to the hospital in Knoxville — courtesy of my lead-footed dad — so I wouldn’t be born in the car! You’d think flying 100mph in utero in the coolest car on the road would count for lifelong bragging rights, but my older cousin Rob reminds me that he was riding shotgun with Uncle Ken doing at least 100mph “before they had even thought of you.”

Under the hood is Mercury’s 312cid V-8 mated to an air-cooled Merc-o-Matic automatic transmission.



Dad had a Tom Sawyer streak in him, a way of making work seem like fun. Working on cars was the best kind of fun, so it probably didn't take much to convince our older cousin/babysitter Debbie to climb into the Mercury's trunk with the lid closed shut, so Dad could turn on the water hose to check for leaks around the seals. Debbie loved hanging around Dad (she was his favorite cousin), so years later in 1968, when she got to be driving age, she asked him for the Mercury. Dad told her he was saving it for me. I was only six years old.



Sharpest cars in the high school parking lot, our 1956 Mercury Montclair and Neva Dawn's 1956 Thunderbird.

My dad was James Dean cool: He would hold the steering wheel with both wrists, flip his Zippo open with one hand, light his cigarette, lean back and rest his left arm out the open window ... all in one smooth motion. I'm left-handed, and as a kid I was so worried (upset, really) that I would never be able to drive with my right hand and drape my other arm out the window like him ... that I "wouldn't be cool like Dad."

Dad always took pride in his cars, but especially the Mercury. You didn't kick the back of the seat, or lean against the paint in riveted-pocket jeans, or slam the doors, or fiddle with the dash knobs and levers unnecessarily ... and you certainly *never* were to pick up a stray ink pen from the back floorboard and use it to doodle on that pristine Verona Green vinyl. (Carole did ... once ... on the way to Grandma Lillie's and got a spanking — on Christmas Day!)

By the late 1970s, a new generation had rediscovered the "fabulous fifties." Carole was in high school and they were going all-out with a cruise-in theme for homecoming. She was determined to drive the

Mercury to the pep rally, but Dad had parked it in 1968 and it was in no shape to be driven. The engine was sitting on the floor waiting on a rebuild, and the paint had faded; it had sat for too long. A restoration had been started, but by then there just wasn't time to get it fixed up and running. Three years later, when I was a junior? Yeah, I had the sharpest car in the lot on '50s Day. Okay, there was one other. Neva Dawn drove her mom's green 1956 Thunderbird and everybody wanted their picture with us. (Carole is still jealous.)

Dad and I began a cosmetic restoration in 1976 when I was 14, deciding on rebuilding the engine and giving it a new paint job. The interior needed only minor work and new carpet was installed. It was our first car to work on and restore together. My dad worked with a guy who painted the car — all three colors — for \$75. Mercury parts were hard to find in Hershey, even then, so when we found a set of NOS sill plates there in 1978, I thought I had died and gone to heaven. Of course, the "admission" was steep ... Dad paid an outrageous \$50! Reproduction sets sell for \$300 or more these days, I just say "we got a steal!"

Stylish instrument panel and dashboard matched the snazzy outside trim of the two-door hardtop Montclair.





Coker Tire in Chattanooga was by then reproducing original wide white sidewall tires and my first trip there with Dad was the thrill of a lifetime. At that time, they'd let you ride the elevator to the upper level of the warehouse to choose the "best" blemished tires for a better deal. (We spent a good two hours in that very hot warehouse going through all the blemis, but that sweat equity was worth it.) That opportunity doesn't exist anymore since computer technology has practically eliminated defects. Efficiency is nice, I suppose, but for me, it's the journey — not just down Hwy. 58 to find tires — but the time spent together during the hunt, the optimism (there could be something really good in the back...) that made this restoration all the more priceless.

After Dad passed in 2001, Mom began dropping hints that she'd like me to restore the Mercury. In 2010, we began in earnest. Another hobbyist in our club took the car and disassembled it completely as we had decided to do a full rotisserie restoration. Our intent was to restore it in six to nine months, but like so many restorations, other life events (and a good deal of rust) got in the way. Our six-month project took four years to complete. Never one to have a good grasp of how much time any project takes, I paid three registration fees for three different AACA Nationals before we actually showed it the first time in 2014 at the Lebanon, Tennessee "Dual Meet" — then it was on to Hershey in the fall!

We had come full circle: I had been awed by Hershey as a 12 year-old when Dad and I first attended in 1974. Forty years later, he was still very much with me ... and I'm still in awe. Hershey had always been more than a car show for our family. It was more like a yearly reunion. Dad never missed a year in 26 years, and during those years he made a lot of lifelong friends! If something was going on in the "community," he always wanted to be in the middle of it.

Our trips to car mecca through the years had been family affairs, with Dad serving as ringleader. Some years it was him and me, others Carole went, too. Sometimes Carole went and I stayed behind if I had a school or work conflict. Cousins and friends made the trip as well. One of the first times Mom went with him he bought a 1923 model T at 7:30am on the first day ... and made Mom pay for it!

Mom's first comment when we arrived in Hershey in 2014 was "Where's all the grass, all the mud?" Hershey certainly "cleaned up" over the years, but it still felt the same. We were proud that our Mercury was a one-family car and we could still show off the original owner. (The judges seemed so delighted to meet her.) Everything I ever learned working side-by-side with Dad about cars came together in the Mercury restoration.

The restored Mercury made its hometown debut at Clinton's annual antique festival earlier that same year. The AACA Clinton Region, of which Dad was a founder, always parks members cars along Main Street for this event. The Mercury was at the head of the pack, visible to the crowds walking up from Market Street, as well. I had it covered, waiting to unveil it for Mom, Carole and everyone who had known





Dad practically their whole lives. They knew the car, too. We heard quite a few folks exclaim, “I remember that car!” We tucked under a windshield wiper a snapshot of Mom perched on the front fender taken in 1956. People would lean in to get a closer look and she’d step up, saying “That’s me!” She got many offers to recreate the picture on the spot, but she politely begged off.

It’s been said that in the mid- and late-’50s, everybody in town knew Dad — and his car. The Mercury was practically a member of the family. In our household, we considered it responsible for all the other cars that followed. It was THE car, the one that (thank goodness!) never got away. Dad spent 71 years in this small town. He’s been gone for almost 20, yet he’s still everywhere. When we unveiled the Mercury that day his presence was all around, and he was still King of the Road.

Out almost 3,000 cars shown at AACA nationals in 2017, 16 were selected to compete during the following year for the Zenith Award (AACA’s major award program “to recognize magnificent restorations that are worthy of being the best of the year.”). We were very honored that our 1956 Mercury Montclair was among them, and that Mom was

able to attend and enjoy the fruits of our labor. She had a wonderful time meeting and talking to all the judges.

This is the car Dad bought even before he and Mom got married. It’s more than just a car — it’s a member of the family. The restoration was a labor of love, a true family affair, with the bulk of the work done by Kenny and other non-professionals and hobbyists, including Carole, nephews, cousin, best friend, and our mother, Anna Belle. 🚗

