

Georgia Peach

by Michael Pearson
Brookfield, Connecticut

Although my first "old car" was a 1958 Edsel Citation two-door hardtop that I bought in 1992 (and which I still own), I've always had a longing for an older station wagon for several reasons. First, as a kid growing up in the late 1950s and '60s, I can remember riding in many different station wagons although my parents never owned one. I can still remember my favorite being a 1967 Chevrolet Caprice nine-passenger wagon that one of my friend's parents owned. Just to sit in the rear-facing third seat was a real treat.

With the growing popularity of sport utilities and minivans, I guess the increasing rarity of station wagons is another reason why I've wanted to own one. I imagine most wagons lived a good life of 10-15 years of hauling kids and cargo and then ended up at the crusher. Consequently, it's still unusual to spot older wagons on the road.

In the spring of 1994 a friend of mine in Atlanta who knew I was interested in a wagon forwarded me a local *Auto Trader* that had a photo ad of an old 1959 Plymouth station wagon, and he promised to check it out. Within weeks, I arranged to have a friend fly down to Atlanta to pick up the car. Even though it hadn't been regularly driven since 1967, it didn't take much to get the car road-worthy and licensed.

William Johnson of Kingsport, Tennessee, had been the wagon's original owner and had purchased the car in the spring of 1959 from a Plymouth dealership in Church Hill, Tennessee. At the time, Johnson continued to drive his 1953 Dodge four-door sedan.

The glovebox was full of old insurance papers, oil change receipts, and old gas station maps of the southeastern United States. From some of the insurance papers, it appeared that Johnson had seen a career change sometime in the late 1950s from "janitor" to "funeral

home director." (As late as 1996, the Kingsport, Tennessee-based insurance company still existed -- and even had employees who remembered Johnson and his Plymouth wagon!)

Johnson and his wife eventually retired to Eatonton, Georgia, in the mid-1960s, and after both passed away, the wagon apparently ended up with a daughter around 1967. Her family found the car "too ugly to drive" and the car was parked under some pine trees around 1972. With only 29,216 original miles, it was left at the mercy of neighborhood kids who, by the looks of the station wagon when purchased, must have used it for target practice with rocks and baseball bats.

Surprisingly, the Plymouth required very little to make it roadworthy (a testament, I guess, to the reliability of the 318-cid engine). New hoses, spark plugs, and a fuel pump and it was ready to go. Nevertheless, my friend who picked up the car had to put blankets on the front seats since the interior had completely rotted out after sitting for so many years in the hot Georgia sun.

Before departing Atlanta, my friend said farewell to several local friends by taking them in the Plymouth to an outdoor Mexican restaurant. As the restaurant patrons stared at the sight of five people getting out of this weary old wagon, various stainless steel side trim fell off both sides of the wagon as all four doors were slammed by the exiting passengers. Fortunately, it was all recovered and placed in the back cargo area.

The 22-hour trip from Georgia to Connecticut was accomplished with little incident, although it was soon discovered that this trip had been made with two broken push rods -- not to mention the increasing sight of smoke belching from the Plymouth's tailpipe.

Using my subscriptions to *Old Cars Weekly* and *Hemmings Motor News*, I quickly went to work trying to find



Michael Pearson, relaxing in the back seat, drove his 1959 Plymouth Custom Suburban from Connecticut to the American Station Wagon Owners Association show in Indianapolis in 1997. The year before, Pearson traveled to California in the car, including some of Route 66 when returning to Connecticut.

trim parts, interior needs, and on and on. Many of these items have interesting stories of their own. For instance, I found aluminum insert trim for the side of the wagon on a 1959 Belvedere four-door sedan I spotted in a salvage yard near Waterbury, Connecticut. (And while there, I discovered many other '59 Plymouth wagons I could turn to for parts.) After balking at a price of \$130 per taillight to have the housings rechromed, I soon found new old stock (NOS) taillights in their original boxes for \$40 for the pair. The "swamp cooler" air fan came from a friend's 1958 Edsel Corsair. The luggage rack came from a 1963 Plymouth in an Arizona salvage yard. The white and gold rear, car-width mudflap came from a guy in Illinois whose father used to own a Western Auto store -- the original box still showed the address as "Chicago 7, Illinois." A new original front bumper came from a Chrysler-Plymouth dealer in Sheridan, Wyoming. The stories are endless.

Although it continues to be an "ongoing project," the Plymouth reached a stage in late 1995 where I knew it was reliable enough to drive long distances to car shows. So, in early 1996, I began planning a trip that would take me across the United States that I knew

would fulfill a lifetime wish -- and a trip I knew I would probably never repeat.

By taking three weeks of vacation and coordinating my agenda so I could attend several car shows en route, I planned to drive from Connecticut to Denver to San Luis Obispo, California. I would then return by the southern route so I could travel some sections of old Route 66.

What was totally unexpected was that at every gas station, rest stop, restaurant and motel, I always seemed to run into people who had owned a station wagon at one time or even a '59 Plymouth wagon in particular. This alone was worth the trip.

The first problem I encountered was related to high altitude driving. I almost didn't make it through Eisenhower Pass on I-70 in Colorado. With a little tinkering of the timing and removing the air cleaner, I finally made it to the other side of the pass. The next incident occurred about 65 miles into a 120-mile stretch in southern Utah where there were posted warnings of "no services" during those 120 miles. A tire blew. Although I easily replaced it with a spare, I didn't feel too comfortable not having a spare until I reached California.

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Because of several stops to visit salvage yards, I timed my desert segment to Las Vegas rather poorly and drove the stretch of I-15 south of Cedar City, Utah, after 3:00 in the afternoon. Yes, it was hot!

Although I later made it through Los Angeles traffic without incident, my generator light went on near Santa Monica. As I limped into a McDonald's parking lot, I soon discovered that my generator had completely burnt up. Fortunately, a gentleman in the parking lot noticed my dilemma, mentioned a repair shop nearby, and by 6:00 p.m., I was on the road again. (Ironically, the good Samaritan who helped had just moved to the area from Connecticut and, in fact, had once lived about one mile from my house!)

Because I was short on time, I didn't get to drive as much of Route 66 that I would have liked; this certainly would have been the perfect car to travel on some of those old stretches. Of particular interest were the 1940s and 1950s-era motels in Tucumcari, New Mexico. And, after returning to Connecticut, I was already planning my trips for 1997.

In addition to attending my first American Station Wagon Owners Association show in Indianapolis, I also had two other firsts in 1997. I attended my first Plymouth Club show (in Kansas City) and my first trip to Iola, Wisconsin. At the Plymouth show, I was shocked to be not only the only 1959 vehicle in attendance, but the only station wagon as well.

My Plymouth station wagon had been built in Detroit on February 17, 1959, and was one of 35,024 six-passenger Custom Suburbans built for 1959. (It had sold for a base price of \$2,881 in 1959, and the Custom Suburban was actually the mid-trim line of the three series of station wagons that Plymouth offered that year.)

Out of curiosity, I had an information service check all 50 states' Department of Motor Vehicle offices to see how many '59 Plymouth Custom Suburban wagons were still registered. Surprisingly, as of mid-1997, there were only 117 still registered for road use. Fortunately, most of the salvage yards I've visited across the United States seem to have one or two of these wagons, so I don't think the 117 of us still driving them are going to be hurting for parts anytime soon.