

Fox Tales

Fox Valley Region Model A Restorers Club

January 2007



Before:

Dwayne (Steve) Stevenson casually leaned against the fender of the 1951 Muntz Jet that he owned from 1953 – 1955. In turn, the low-slung Muntz provided a sporty counter-point to the Beverley Hills mansion of legendary band leader, Freddy Martin, who also drove a Muntz. "Mr. Silvertone's" black, Carson-top beauty was parked just outside the frame of the picture. Steve and his good friend took that incomparable road trip in 1954, just before Steve met Florence.



After:

In 2000, Steve again "provided the beefcake" next to a red Muntz, this time at the International Muntz Jet Meet that was held at Pheasant Run in St. Charles. That topless car was a slightly later model than his and had several trim styling changes. Steve remembers that the car's restorer found the original Muntz wheel covers with the napoleon figure in the center at a flea market!
It should be noted that Steve, himself, is an original and has not been restored!

Madman Memories ... Steve's Muntz Jet

Just imagine talking with the original owner of a new Model A Ford. Not someone who bought a coupe for \$25 when he was in high school or the lucky guy that "found" a well-preserved Phaeton in a heated garage back in 1976. We're talking about someone who was there! Someone who reacted to Henry Ford's promotional tactics and chose to buy a Model A Ford over, say, a Nash or a new Plymouth ... the person who got to pick between Andalusite Blue and Rose Beige.

Think of the stories they could tell about "their" new car dealership, the purchase decision, and taking delivery. Wouldn't you like to hear about their early attempts to shift gears or the time they first hit the *ahooga* horn and passed a wooden-spoke wheeled Hupmobile or a "new" Chevy stovebolt six? Talk about *priceless!*

That's just the resource members of the Muntz Registry found in our own, "Steeltop" Steve Stevenson. Although he no longer had his bright red, Lincoln-powered custom, he had something very few of the current Muntz owners can boast of ... and it is something they can't buy, no matter how much they'd be willing to spend.

Steve has memories of owning a Muntz Jet – probably the 127th car out of far-fewer than 400 built – and driving it for three years. He pumped gas into one of their rare prizes, drove it in the snow, wore out its tires, and probably even got a ding or two on its long aluminum hood. Steve owned a Muntz Jet when TV mogul, Earl "Madman" Muntz was still cranking the hand-built beauties out of his factory in Evanston Illinois. Folks were still plunking down between five and six thousand dollars for new ones while our own "madman" was gallivanting his across

the country and back on Route 66.

The Muntz Registry folks LOVE Dwayne Stevenson. He's one of their national treasures! He's got the stories to prove it! Of course, we love him too and the following information about a very rare automobile is important to us Model A folks ... because of our Stevenson connection.

Long before the Thunderbird or the Corvette, the only way Americans could get a sports car was to order from Europe or build one from scratch. (Many very sporty customs started from a Model A Ford.) If you were on the top of your game, you might have bought a kit from Frank Kurtis, noted builder of competition cars. Many race winners – Indy cars and midgets alike – were driving his Kurtis-Offenhausers. Kurtis dabbled with a kit-sports car of his design and later built the two-seater Kurtis-Kraft Sports Car. It could be purchased as a do-it-yourselfer or as a complete, ready-to-drive car.

Earl Muntz bought a complete Kurtis Car and then came back to buy the company. He stretched Kurtis' design 13 inches to a four-seater and switched from fiberglass to steel and aluminum for the bodies. His first cars, built in California, had Cadillac V-8 engines. In early 1951 production was moved to Evanston Illinois. The eastern cars (including Steve's) were powered with the Lincoln flat-head V-8 and automatic transmission. The low-slung body had an open/closed design with a lift-off "Carson top." This kept alfresco drives close to home. But, with mostly Ford suspension and engine components, the Jet was reliable and could be serviced at Ford dealers "everywhere."

Each car required a whopping 500 man hours to

complete. The Muntz foray into auto building was not profitable. Then General Motors introduced the Corvette, cutting the sports car legs out from under Muntz, and the Buick Skylark, which took the sporty convertible market. Ford followed with the Thunderbird, which claimed the sports-touring title. (It also claimed Steve Stevenson.) Muntz Jet production slipped until the last car in 1954.

A very high percentage of Muntz Jets survive today. More "barn finds" are discovered each year. And the prices for restored cars are going out of sight. A recent auction saw a car like Steve's bid to \$80,000, which did not reach the owner's reserve. That would translate to a cool quarter billion \$ if the



Madman had only built a few hundred units "for the shelf."

Steve has contributed to the restoration of one Jet that was missing the center of its steering wheel. "Someone" had replaced the piece with its Napoleon figure with the mirror from a compact.

A little bit sheepishly, Steve admitted he was that "someone." When he got home from the Registry meet, he put the missing piece in the mail – getting it back to his old car 50 years after he parted with it.

When asked why a car guy would ever let a special car like the red Muntz Jet get away, Steve glanced across the room at his wife. "Florence really liked the 1955 Thunderbird," he admitted. "It had a V-8, stick shift, and an overdrive ... and I got a really good trade." (With Florence in the balance, who could argue with him?)