

SAVING A RARE 'BIRD

By Jerry H. Magayne

For many, a certain pride and enjoyment lies in owning and driving a beautiful vintage car. For others, it's the process of bringing these abandoned classics back to life and thus preserving them for future generations that brings the greatest satisfaction.

In December of 1961, John Shafer of Milwaukee, Wisconsin took delivery of a new 1962 Thunderbird convertible. With its rare Sandshell Beige paint and matching interior, the car was a sure have attracted some envious glances as John made his way proudly thru the city streets.

Situations change and time marches on. The car changed hands and by 1974 had fallen into disrepair and was parked, probably due to mechanical issues which didn't demand immediate attention on a 12 year old used car. The beige bird sat largely forgotten for the next 43 years.

I discovered the neglected car in an old garage in Cedar Rapids, Iowa through an online ad in the spring of 2017. Seeing past the dismantled engine and faded interior, and having a passion for turning back the clock on these old birds, I undertook the task of returning this gem to its former glory.

By December 2017 the car had been completely stripped of its drive line, chrome, interior, wiring and glass. The rolling shell was delivered to Chris Robinson Restorations of Ryan, IA who further dismantled the chassis and separated the front clip from the rest of the body (which is only possible on '61 and '62 T-birds).

While Chris and his crew worked their magic, I took to the task of assessing and inventorying all the individual pieces of the dismantled car. These parts were sorted into the 2 categories of "restore" or "replace". Due to the cars relatively low mileage, and having been stored indoors, many components were reusable. Items such as wiring, glass, and much of the trim and hardware were saved, cleaned up, and detailed to original specifications. Mechanical systems such as the brakes, steering, convertible top, as well as power window and seat mechanisms were restored to factory specs using the original correctly date coded components whenever possible. The bumpers were re-chromed and all interior and exterior stainless was straightened and polished.

Some special treatment was given to the power plant. The standard 390 cubic inch V-8 engine the car was born with was rebuilt to "M code" specs using correctly date coded components. For 12 months during the 1962-63 model runs, Ford offered a high performance triple-carb version of the 390 V-8. Equipped with an aluminum intake manifold, special Thunderbird 406 heads, a slightly hotter cam, 2" exhaust, and special chrome dress-up package, the factory installed version became known as the "M code" option. The 6V tri-carb setup, which was also sold over the counter at the dealer level, proved unpopular however. with tuning and maintenance issues resulting in many factory equipped cars reverting back to the standard 4V configuration while still under warranty. As a result, fully restored and functional 6V examples are seldom seen today.

With the paint and body work completed in April of 2018, the car was relocated to Eagle River Wisconsin where I began final assembly. Using factory assembly manuals, shop manuals, and parts books, the beige bird was reassembled over the next 7 weeks.

Period correct dress-up items installed on the car include an original 1962 roadster rear seat tonneau cover and new old stock 48 spoke roadster wheels, both of which were available thru Ford dealerships during the original model run. The original Unity "model F" spotlight mounted on the car is a rare Ford authorized dealer accessory and has been on the car since new.

In June the car moved under it's own power for the first time in nearly 45 years and the restoration was deemed completed with the re-installation of the data plate. Over the preceding 6 months, the beige T-bird had essentially been remanufactured and now appears as it may have on a dealer showroom floor over half a century ago.

Its been an interesting journey bringing this abandoned piece of automotive history back to life and giving it an opportunity to stand as a worthy representative of a bygone era. As for me, I'll be searching the barns and back roads for the next suitable candidate for restoration and preservation. I've enjoyed the process or resurrecting another forgotten gem and am confident that Mr. Shafer would approve of what has become of his pride and joy.