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Automotive Parts & Technology



Getting creative

A budding technician learns the importance of proper procedures, persistence, and patience.

Guest Columnist: Richard Goulet

I've met a lot of technicians over the years and if there's anything they have in common, it's that they're just nuts about cars – and have been since they were old enough to grip a wrench.

That was certainly true in my case.

From a very early age, I learned that cars and trucks are not only wonderful machines, but they come with their own unique problems and challenges. My dad was able to teach me a great deal about fixing them and keeping them running, but I was adventurous enough to learn things on my own as well, through trial and error.

One of the first – and most gratifying – training experiences I ever had was when I bought my first vehicle for two bucks.

It was back in 1969. One of my neighbors had purchased a rusted-out 1939 Dodge flathead six pickup truck with the grand intention of restoring it in his spare time. It sat there, in his yard, for months on end while he occasionally worked on removing the rust, filling the cavities with fiberglass and putty, and making confused attempts to right the engine. He grew increasingly frustrated though, because he just couldn't get it started.

Finally, he came to the conclusion that he simply wasn't skilled enough to rebuild the engine, which he assumed was seized and would require expensive parts and many hours of labor to repair.

He approached me to take the old beast off his hands. The two bucks I offered seemed to him to be the better end of the deal, and he signed over the owner's permit to me with a flourish and happily helped push it into my driveway.

While we were pushing it, I slipped it into gear without his knowledge and

smiled secretly when I felt the engine lurch. Obviously it wasn't seized. I quickly took it out of gear and into the driveway it went. I had a project!

I began working immediately to figure out why the engine wouldn't start. My neighbor had assured me there was spark at the plugs and fuel in the carburetor, but I was skeptical of his diagnostic ability.

After about an hour, I had been able



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to confirm that there was indeed strong spark at the plugs and fuel in the carburetor, but there was no fuel pump pressure. No fuel was actually getting to the carburetor other than the stale old gas that had been there for years while the

old clunker sat in a field.

I had to get creative to take my new truck out for a spin on the back roads that afternoon. I rigged up an empty Javex bleach jug, filled it with gasoline, and connected a siphon hose to the carburetor. This jury-rigged setup provided the necessary fuel flow to the carburetor, a gravity feed system commonly used in vehicles built during the early 1920s.

It was a heck of a summer driving back and forth on those country roads in my very own blotchy green and brown '39 Dodge pickup. More importantly, though, I had been bitten by the bug – I was now a certified car junkie.

I recognize that, over the years, diagnosing automotive problems has gotten more complex than the ones I experienced as a budding mechanic back in the 1970s. However, the approach to isolating and solving problems hasn't changed. To diagnose, it's important to take into account the experiences of others without ever assuming that what they did was correct, or done in the right order or according to the manufacturer's recommendations.

Throughout my career in the industry as a technician, trainer, and manager, I have found that a great deal of time is lost when a technician doesn't take the time to assess what he knows about a vehicle's condition, consider what's been reported by the customer, and use proper diagnostic procedures.

Today's complex computer-controlled engines, transmissions, and emission systems present new problems with new solutions. But solving these problems still takes old-fashioned, patience-driven detective work. 

Richard Goulet has worked in many facets of the repair and service industry for more than 30 years.