

## The Babe Gets Another Heart Transplant

How many of you wish you had hung onto your first car? Well, Doug Walker did. He bought his 1955 Chevy Belair when he was in high school in 1967. He had it when he met Karen. He drove it when he and Karen married.

"It got limburger cheesed" on their wedding day, Doug recalled. "I had to change the exhaust manifolds because of that." And if you followed them on any of last summer's cruises, you may have noticed how Karen still sits in the middle of the front bench seat, nestled up close to her driver.

"She's the one that named it The Babe," Doug noted.

The Walkers' '55 has undergone a lot of changes since Doug first bought it 39 years ago. When he got it, it had rust in the fenders and was powered with the old Stove-Bolt Six matched to a three-speed.

"We had a lot of fun with the six for about six months," Doug remembers.

But he had a need for speed that a six-banger just wasn't going to satisfy. He had to have a V-8.

"That one summer I went through three of them. That 265, it wasn't fast enough. Then a 283..."

Every time he got beat in a street drag race, he said he had to put a bigger engine in it.

When he jumped up to the 348 c.i. engine, he suddenly found the car wasn't going to be street legal because he couldn't fit an exhaust in it. That ended up being switched for a 327 c.i. but by then the car was his drag racer. He raced it on drag strips with that configuration until 1977, when he sold the motor and the fiberglass tilt front-end and parked it.

At that time he also switched from drag racing to circle racing. But he wasn't going to let The Babe go, as he was sure if he ever quit circle-track racing, he would fix the '55 Chevy up again. And he did, in 2001.

But then he was faced with the dilemma of having to find a front clip and a front seat for the car. Finding another engine wasn't an issue, as he always seems to have a spare engine lying around the garage.

"I was putting it back to the way it was in '67 when I was driving it," he said.

That brought a 400-horsepower 327 c.i. motor with a four-speed behind it. This engine had a big cam and ported and polished heads under a single four-barrel carburetor. But after seeing last summer's gas prices reach \$3 per gallon, not taking into consideration the even higher price for premium fuel, Doug made a New Year's resolution to improve the 3 MPG gas mileage his car got.

In the first week of 2006, Doug pulled out the 327 and replaced it with a 350 c.i. engine that is basically stock with the exception of a hot-ter cam. It may not be as quick as the 327, but he was determined it was going to look good, so he painted it the same color as the car. The Mickey Thompson valve covers and finned oil pan are also trimmed between the fins in the car's blue color.

If anyone wasn't sure Doug didn't like paying for all that high-priced petro last summer, he sold that souped-up 327 that was burning more than its fair share last summer.

Doug said he believes this will be the last motor change for this car.

"I'm getting tired of changing motors," he said.

"When I was a kid, I could do it in a night."

He has another project that needs his attention anyway – a 1957 Chevy convertible. If you guessed that he had one when he was in school, you're right.

"My stepfather always said if you're going to have a hotrod, you better have a dependable car," Doug said.

That's when he got his 1957 Chevy, but he sold it less than a year later, before he met Karen. He said he has always regretted selling that car, so he recently got another one, which is keeping him in the garage rebuilding it, now that he has The Babe in a little more economical condition. It needs a lot of work, and won't be ready for the 2006 cruising season, he said. But everyone can bet they'll see The Babe running around again.

