

Making Sense of Time Through a Bottle

By Bob Schmeichel

Many of us car hobby people kind of lose track of time when it comes to having an old car and updating it to our likes. Quite often it evolves into years of perseverance along with patience just to get to our desired end result mainly because of time and money that everyone seems to not have enough of these days. Priorities also change our directions every day, and we all work through them. Some issues, no matter what they are, are made easier with the real friends we have around us. When I approached Leo and Carla Rhoades about doing a story based around their 1949 Chevy, loads of history began to unfold that for most people would have been forgotten long ago.



As Leo's story begins, he said his father who was a mechanic in their home town of Taylor, Nebraska, bought a 1949 Chevy from its original owner, Nick Harvey, back in the early '60s. He was an older neighbor who lived across the road from them who took good care of what he had. After Leo's dad tuned up the 69,000-mile car, it was snatched up by a used car dealer in Burwell, which was about 15 miles away. The car sat in the used car lot for a few years with no one really interested in it, which eventually led to Leo's dad buying the car back. Leo's dad, having the car back in Taylor, thought he wouldn't have a problem selling it through his mechanic shop. It was parked at various locations in town to sell with the same lack of interest. Eventually it was parked on their farm next to a mobile home still in very good condition and left in the sun for the next 20-plus years. After so many years of seeing the car sit, Leo said he had nicknamed the car "Harvey" after its original owner, who Leo remembers driving the car when it was newer.

Stepping ahead in time, Leo met Carla, dating began and eventually led to marriage. Wanting to have better opportunities for work led them to relocate to Sioux Falls and establish their first home. Along with good jobs, new friends were made that made the move more enjoyable for both. Among those friends was an interest with old cars, which spurred an idea for Leo to go back to Nebraska to retrieve "Harvey," the '49 Chevy from so many years ago that was a part of his younger days. So in 1989 after paying his dad what was considered a fair price, a trip was made to bring the '49 Chevy home where it would sit a few more years in a driveway or garage until the time was right. Leo mentioned having the old "Harvey" loaded up with balloons in their driveway in 2002 when their daughter graduated from high school to note where the graduation party was – a fond memory for all.

After that day, it was decided it was time to turn "Harvey" into something that everyone all could have fun with. Leo's daughter started with taking the interior apart. Anything cloth in the car was not really salvageable as the sun and the elements of time had taken their toll. During her teardown with mice nests and other dirty, unrecognizable things inside the car, she found a 6-ounce Coke bottle inside one of the doors with a 1948 date on it. That little bottle got Leo's curiosity going, which led to him finding out that the Chevrolet division of General Motors had a walkout strike in 1949. The bottle was apparently dropped inside the door as the walkout began with the car on the production line that day. It may seem funny to have found this, but at the same time, so meaningful to the timeframe when it happened. When it came time for converting everything mechanical underneath, Leo's friends came with enthusiasm and stuck with him to help make it happen. Charlie Hollingshead and Jules Haper helped to make the next four years of work a finished reality. A Buick Apollo sub-frame was grafted onto the front of the frame, which gave power steering and power disc brakes. A new 350 Chevy crate engine was added to a 700R4 automatic overdrive and dropped into place. The old rear end was replaced with a newer one out of a Buick Regal, which was the correct width for the car. Once all the mechanical work was done, body work began with replacing sheet metal where needed and prepping for paint. Once all the body work was done, the car was handed off to Lonnie Bukker to paint. Then a new interior was installed to make everything fresh inside again. Finally new wheels, tires and exhaust were added.

The finished car, thanks to all of his really good friends who helped, has taken them to Back to the Fifties in St. Paul four times and to the Black Hills three times. Driving the wheels off of an old car and doing it with friends makes new memories of time the way it used to be while creating our own new history. Leo's daughter has expressed an interest in having "Harvey" for herself someday with Leo saying, "We'll see." It is kind of unique how much of an impact an old car can have on so many lives!!

