

The Life and Times of Gus Wilson

MODEL GARAGE



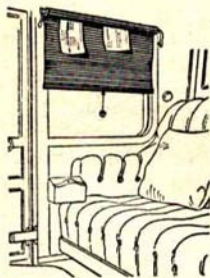
Things were different in the old days. But the spirit of the Model Garage is timeless.

By Frank Rowsome Jr.

IF GUS WILSON should die—a wildly improbable event—a social historian could compile his complete biography. While he lives, the only solid sources of information about the man are some 355 stories. These provide a

mass of data, but they are also shot through with tantalizing gaps. How old is Gus? Whatever became of Joe Clark, co-owner of the Model Garage? Many similar questions arise that cannot be answered positively. Careful analysis, however, of the works of Martin Bunn, Wilson's Boswell, does provide some biographical data:

Useful hints from Gus's files



Licenses rolled up in the curtain of a sedan, according to this 1928 tip, would not be embarrassingly mislaid when a policeman roared at you.

Premiere. Gus's first public appearance was in July, 1925. Silent Cal was president then, the Scopes trial and the Florida land boom were in full flower, *Rose Marie* and *The Gorilla* were packing the theaters, and a coal-black Model T runabout could be purchased new for \$260, starter extra.

A single sentence announces our hero: "Wilson was the mechanic of the firm, a gray-haired veteran of the automobile repair shop, who had been working on automobiles since the days when they were called 'horseless carriages.'" His first recorded customer was a Mr. Stevens, a bankerish man who, emerging from a sedan, announced that he was going on a long tour and thought "it might be well to have Wilson look the car over." Gus pronounced the sedan in good shape (one license plate rattled) and then delivered a long lecture on maintenance. Mr. Stevens, taking notes during the harangue, drove off pleased.

Early days. The Model Garage was a wooden structure, evidently converted from a barn or livery stable. While it had a crank-operated pump outside, there was also a wheeled portable tank to fill customers' cars. Joe Clark, partner and bookkeeper, tended the stock room and office and sold gas. Twice a pimply youth appeared, was identified as "Bill, the kid who did odd jobs," and then disappeared

forever. There may have been a phone and a wrecker, but they are not mentioned for a year or two.

Gus was noticeably grumpy in those days, sometimes almost tactless. "Drat it" and "durn it" were his favorite remarks. He had a marked tendency to lecture. Once Al Taylor came to grief on Smoke Hill—a "cork puller" of a road outside town. "No need to go into details, Mr. Taylor, I can see how you got into trouble," interrupted Gus. "You got rattled and couldn't get the gearshift to work, and while you were fussing with it, the car started rolling backward—and here you are!"

But Gus's customers weren't touchy. "Oh, don't rub it in," said Taylor. "I'm a muttonhead all right." Such humility evidently warmed Gus, for he unleashed several columns of instruction on shifting, topped off with details on "how to do the double clutch." But he wasn't as genial as in years to come, though, since he concluded testily: "Drat it, Joe, why is it that every bird who scrapes through the driver's examination decides that he is the real thing? It would be better if he would spend a lot of time on lonely roads practicing gear shifting . . ."

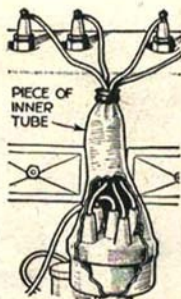
Gus's family. Sometimes there are scraps of personal information. Gus likes rabbit hunting but knows little of fishing until Joe introduces him to the art (in contrast to later years, when Gus has grown almost to be a fishing bore). We learn that he is a bachelor with some rustic relatives ("my cousins from up Winchester way"), a married sister, and a nephew named Henry. The latter, a sober young man with a bride named Grace, persuades Uncle Gus to accompany them to a 1926 auto show to help the young couple pick out their first car. For guidance Uncle Gus advises:

"If you can have only one car, the best buy is a closed model. I'd recommend a coach. You get a lot more for your money than you do in a sedan. Roadsters are all right for rich people who can afford to keep more than one car. If you'll take my advice, you'll lay off any car that is painted in very light colors. Dust and the tar they put on the roads will make one of those pale pink babies look like the dickens in short order."

Though oracular as always, Gus touches all bases when Henry asks: "What's the dope on overhead valves, Uncle? Are they really much better?"

"Theoretically they are—all the racing cars use them. But in a car for ordinary use I can't see that there's much advantage. They may result in a slight saving of gasoline as compared with the ordinary valves that are placed in a pocket beside the cylinder head. Also with overhead valves you can take the cylinder head off and remove it to a warm place in the cellar when you want to grind the valves instead of working in a cold garage. On the other hand overhead valves

To make fording a creek easier



Crossing creeks or freshets became simpler with a section of old inner tube lashed about the timer. But it wouldn't help out if the carburetor were set low on the engine.

Windshield wiped by left foot



Drivers tired of swinging the wiper knob by hand found this homemade rig lightened a fatiguing job.

Device to brush top automatically



Cleaning the top was a nuisance, and many owners neglected it. But if an old horse blanket were attached this way, the job became automatic. Nosing in brought a moment of blind flying.



If your hat kept hitting the roof on bumps, an extra piece of fabric, pinned as shown, was advised.

are usually noisier, and as there are more parts in the valve mechanism, there is more to replace when things wear."

Henry is a glutton for information about controversial issues. "Do you think four-wheel brakes are safer, Uncle?"

"Don't worry your head over four-wheel brakes. I've fixed a powerful lot of brakes, and as far as I can see there isn't much in this four-wheel business as compared with one real good pair of brakes on the rear wheels. Four-wheel brakes are fine in theory but darned few of the outfits that I've looked over were working right, and on the low-priced cars I'm inclined to think that the disadvantages just about make up for their advantages."

(Readers distressed by this suggestion of old-fogeyism should remember that, in 1926, four-wheel brakes were a battleground among Detroit authorities, too.)

Gus tells Henry to "stay away from the accessories. All you need—at least to start with—are front and rear bumpers, a rear-vision mirror, a windshield wiper, and a spare tire!"

Tender heart. Though the years did not age Gus Wilson, they did soften his didactic tendency. He still lectured the patrons mercilessly, but no longer backed them into the corner with brandished incivilities. It became evident that there was a tender heart beneath the gruff harangues. Occasionally high drama justified an exception, as when he saved John Ensley from a monoxide death: "Ensley stirred feebly. 'Where am I?' he murmured. 'You came darn near not being here at all, you crazy dumb-bell!' snorted Gus. 'You haven't any more sense than a billy goat!'"

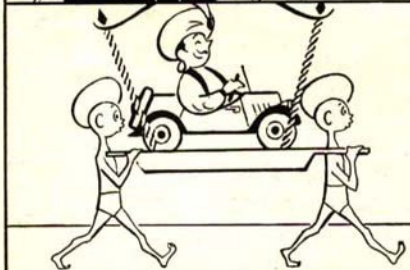
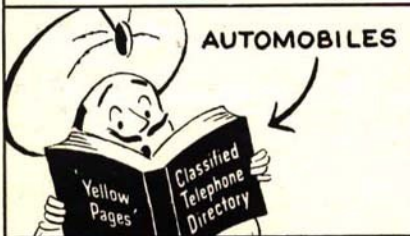
Though brusque, Gus is by no means obtuse about personal relationships. Once when a woman crashed resoundingly into a parked car in front of the Model Garage, he displayed a perceptiveness unexpected from a bachelor:

"Seems to me it isn't all your fault, Mrs. Barnes. In the first place I notice that you haven't any cushion at your back, and as you are not as tall as your husband, you can't reach the pedals properly or push them hard enough. Then it's always bad for a man to try to teach his wife how to drive. No wife likes to play the dumb-bell before her husband, so she won't admit she doesn't understand everything he tells her the first time. She makes mistakes. He becomes impatient or sarcastic and the war is on."

Yes, Virginia. Persistent readers have occasionally pursued the question of just how real is Gus, anyway? (Probably some of them were, as children, the kind of tots who axed the cuckoo clock to see what the little bird ate.) To calm their anxieties, the magazine twice ran articles

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Looking for Something?



FROM AUTOMOBILES TO TIRES
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'Yellow Pages'



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stating that both Gus and Joe were real men, running a garage in a small town near New York City. Their names were changed, it was reported, as a condition of detailing their experiences. In one of these articles, appearing in 1930, Gus's prepublication history was pushed even farther back:

"Gus Wilson grew up with the automobile industry. When Duryea was experimenting with his first gasoline buggy, Gus Wilson, then a young man, was investigating and incidentally overhauling one of those funny little steam vehicles that had to stop at every horse trough. . . . When the first electric hansom cab hummed and groaned its snail-like course over the streets, Gus was adding water to the batteries, sandpapering the commutator, and otherwise mothering these clumsy vehicles. His wrist is still stiff because the huge one-cylinder engine of a Northern runabout kicked back and broke several bones . . ."

Based on the Duryea clue, simple arithmetic would make the old boy around 82 years old now. Since this is clearly improbable, research has been conducted into dusty files and elderly memories. The answer: there was indeed a prototype Gus long ago. For those who ask about him now, the only fitting reply is, "What do you want, chimes?"

Old friends. Around the garage, from the Thirties on, there gathered a few regulars once described by Martin Bunn as the "Model Garage Debating Society." There was Doc Marvin, general practitioner and boon companion; Ezra Zacharias, the rural mail carrier; Silas Barnstable, a magnificent tightwad; and old Doc Hockenjoss, a fragrant and whimsical veterinarian. State Trooper Jerry Corcoran showed up in 1939 and, aided by Gus's frequent help in nabbing malefactors, won his sergeant's stripes in 1950. Harry Godfrey was grease monkey for some years, but he enlisted a few months before Pearl, just as Gus had brought

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him along to be a fine mechanic. In 1943, a timid 15-year-old began helping out after school; his name was Stan Hicks. Gus promoted Stan to full-time mechanic in 1948, and Greg Jones took over the pumps and grease rack.

There were also many regular customers; Agatha Tarlin, who baffled Stan by demanding "petrol"; Mr. Spinker, who loathed people who didn't get his name right; Jason Evants, who wore sneakers and thought his car was fond of him; Senator Bombay, who gave cigars only to persons of voting age; Mrs. Miller, who always made Gus happy that he was a bachelor; and Kiskum, a Bohemian with an odd accent ("Me displeased person—displeased by landlord—no kesh!").

Over the years Gus has occasionally given glimpses into his unrecorded past. He was wounded in World War I ("I didn't duck quick enough"), and he did some successful motorcycle racing in the early Twenties. Once in 1930 he helped a youth hot up what seems to have been a Stutz so that it won a back-road scratch race. His mechanical skill isn't limited to autos; he has deftly repaired a number of trucks and tractors, a fire engine, an airplane, a motorcycle, a cabin cruiser, an outboard motor, and a power lawnmower.

Joe was here. Martin Bunn has conspicuously not reported on Joe Clark recently. But Joe is—or was—both half owner of the Model Garage and for more than a quarter of a century Gus's best friend. Joe was last seen in June, 1949, when his nephew took him for a plane hop and the weather closed in so suddenly that only frantic work by Gus and Jerry Corcoran got them down safely. It may be that Joe has retired to Florida, comfortable on his half of the modest but steady profits. Or it may be that Doc Marvin, finding that he has a bum ticker, has told him to take things easier. In any event, Joe is alive and well somewhere. In the bright and busy world of the Model Garage that is assured. **END**