

Auto-Geneology: The Automobile and the Clode Family



By Jennifer Clode

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When asked how the automobile had impacted him, my father, Bruce, responded, “The car kept my teeth straight.”¹ While growing up, a car meant that his parents could drive him to Toronto from Deep River every six weeks to visit the orthodontist. This was just one impact of the automobile. The introduction of the automobile to western society during the early 1900s had tremendous repercussions on North American society that would last through that century and into the next. This paper will chronicle some of the changes that the automobile brought to North American society. It will begin in the late 1920s and will be based on the experiences of my family. Through the eyes of one family, the Clode family, the larger changes that occurred to North American society as a result of the automobile can be seen. The paper will be based primarily on the experiences and recollections of my grandparents, Raymond and Marian White, and Frederick and Helen Clode, but will also draw on those of my parents, Bruce and Nancy Clode, and my aunt, Karen Clode. The information collected will largely be based on personal communications however; their experiences are quite representative of the larger social history of the automobile found in literature on the topic.²

Frederick (Fred) Clode and Helen Paul were born in Toronto in 1924. They met in high school and were married in 1948 in Toronto. Fred studied medicine at the University of Toronto and upon completion, he and Helen moved to the Yukon for two years where he practiced. They moved back to Toronto, where both Bruce and Karen were both born, and then to Deep River, Ontario.

¹ Bruce Clode, personal interview, 30 October 2006.

² For example: James J. Flink, *The Automobile Age* (Cambridge, MA.:MIT Press, 1988); James J. Flink, *The Car Culture* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1975); Peter J. Ling, *America and the automobile: technology, reform and social change* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1990); David L. Lewis and Laurence Goldstein, eds. *The Automobile and American Culture* (Ann Arbor, MI.: University of Michigan, 1983).

Ray White was born in 1927 and Marian French was born in 1926 in Exeter, Ontario. They lived on their families' farms while growing up, met in high school and were married in 1949 in Kirkton. Ray went to the University of Western Ontario to obtain a bachelors and masters degree in chemistry and physics. Marian taught in Exeter after she had obtained her teaching certificate from Normal School in Stratford. Upon Ray's graduation, he and Marian moved to Ottawa, and then to Sarnia where my mother, Nancy White was born.

Early Life: Fred Clode and Helen Paul

Fred grew up in the 1920s in Mimico, a suburb of Toronto. His father, Nelson worked as railroad engineer for Canadian National Railway in Toronto. His family did not purchase an automobile until he was sixteen or seventeen years old (1940-41) and their first car was a second hand Ford. Fred's father did not see a need for a car. Being a locomotive engineer, he held little interest at first in automobile technology, preferring to support the technology of his employment. Additionally, living in a suburban city environment, his family did not have the same need for a car that rural families had due to the availability of other forms of urban transportation. Toronto, like many other cities in North America had street cars and railroads for this purpose.³ Nelson also received train passes through his employment and so the family traveled by train without cost. During university Fred lived at home and took the streetcar to the Toronto campus. Although it took three route changes and one and a half hours, it allowed him to get to the campus without a car. Not owning a car during this time was not uncommon, particularly in the city. In 1927, forty-four percent of American families did not own a car and by the

³ Flink, *The Automobile Age*, 147.

early 1950s, forty-one percent still did not own one.⁴ In 1927, car consumption was lowest in American cities of a population of 100,000 or more.⁵ The family bought the car because they wanted to get out of the city, they had the financial capabilities, and they believed it would make their lives easier.

The most profound impact the automobile had on Fred's family was the ability to go away from the city. In 1928, an uncle of Fred's bought lakeside property outside of the town of Bracebridge and had a cottage built on it. The automobile allowed the family to vacation there. Fred remembers spending summers there from the time it was built.⁶ During the 1940s the road heading north to Bracebridge from Toronto was paved but very slow-going. A trip that now takes an hour and a half, took five or six hours then. The roads around Toronto were paved and in good condition but all roads leading from the main road and into Bracebridge were unpaved, twisty, and narrow, like most of the roads outside the city centres.⁷

Helen spent her childhood in New Toronto. Her father, John Paul worked at a radio factory in Toronto and maintained his job through the Depression of the 1930s. She was ten (1934) when her family bought their first car, a brand new Ford. It was the product of hard work and savings. Helen remembers the event being "very exciting because we were one of the first in the neighbourhood to get one."⁸ The car was a status symbol and source of pride for her family. Like Fred's family, it allowed them to escape from the city. The first trip her family took in the new car was to Mary Lake near Dorset, Ontario. The roads were "glorified horse tracks" and the ride was "bumpy and

⁴ Flink, *The Automobile Age*, 131.

⁵ Ling, *America and the automobile*, 14.

⁶ Frederick Clode, personal interview, 29 October 2006.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Helen Clode, personal interview, 22 October 2006.

nauseating” because only the main roads to the towns were paved.⁹ Her dad was thrilled with the car but her mother was less than pleased. The driveway to the house was not paved and so as the car came up the drive, ash and soot were brought into the house. Her family lived in suburban Toronto, forty minutes from downtown. Suburbs were the solution to overcrowding in the cities and attracted both wealthy and working-class residents (like Helen’s family).¹⁰ People who could afford to live in the suburbs and commute segregated themselves from the “crowded life of industrial cities.”¹¹

Early Life: Raymond White and Marian French

Marian’s early life was spent on her family’s farm near Exeter, Ontario. She never knew life on the farm without vehicles, including cars, trucks, and tractors when she was a child. Her family’s car was a Ford Model A, the model that replaced the Model T after 1927.¹² Like other inhabitants of rural areas, the car was essential to her family as mass rail transit did not exist in rural areas. Marian’s family was not alone in adopting the automobile into their lives. In America in 1927, people in rural areas (in towns with populations under 1,000) had the highest ownership of automobiles.¹³

Ray’s early life was similarly marked by the pervasiveness of automobiles. His family’s farm was situated seven miles from the town of Exeter so the car was an important means of mobility for them. The family’s social connections relied on the automobile. Ray’s mother would take the car to town to do the shopping and the family used it to go to church and to visit friends. The automobile also gave the family a break

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Mark S. Foster, “The Automobile and the City,” in *The Automobile and American Culture*, eds. David L. Lewis and Laurence Goldstein (Ann Arbor, MI.: University of Michigan Press, 1983), 27.

¹¹ Ling, *America and the automobile*, 67.

¹² Flink, *Automobile Age*, 38.

¹³ Ling, *America and the automobile*, 14.

from the ordinary routine of managing a farm. Ray can remember Sunday drives with his family when he was young. They were a chance to change the scenery and to escape from the farm. In the 1930s the main roads connecting the larger cities were paved but the county roads were still gravel and the standard speed limit was thirty-five miles per hour.¹⁴

Farmers who could invest in cars between 1905 and 1925 (both Ray and Marian's families) were examples of farmers adjusting to the rise of corporate capitalism.¹⁵ Farming was becoming more of a business than a subsistence activity. The farm was becoming a "capitalist enterprise."¹⁶ Both Ray and Marian's fathers raised wheat, barley oats, and pigs for profit. Ray's family also raised beef cattle to supplement their income. Excess produce was sold to local markets and to the canneries in town. Money from these endeavours was needed to pay taxes and buy life necessities such as medicines, clothes and household products.¹⁷

The presence of cars in both Ray and Marian's lives during the 1920s reflected North American trends. A survey done on automobile ownership in 1926 showed that ninety-three percent of farmers in Iowa had automobiles.¹⁸ Automobility affected rural families much earlier and more deeply than urban families.¹⁹ Automobile technology sped up all operations on the farm allowing more money to be made. Marian remembers her father telling her that before owning an automobile, the grain he wanted made into chop had to be bagged and taken to town by a horse-drawn sleigh. This took an entire day. During her lifetime, he merely "threw the bags in the truck and was back within a

¹⁴ Raymond White, personal interview, 22 October 2006.

¹⁵ Ling, *America and the automobile*, 13.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁷ Ray and Marian White, personal interview, 29 October 2006.

¹⁸ Joseph Interrante, "The Road to Autopia," in *The Automobile and American Culture*, 90.

¹⁹ Flink, *Automobile Age*, 132.

few hours.’’²⁰ In both Marian and Ray’s families and in other farm families, having a vehicle hastened farm labour, significantly reduced the cost of transporting farm products to market, and stopped the isolation of rural life.²¹ By 1927 the “isolated frontier community” ceased to exist.²² Ray and Marian were not isolated and their closest friends did not necessarily have to be their neighbours. Proximity no longer mattered because they could step into a car and drive to see people.

The car facilitated a change in how goods and services were obtained by the rural population.²³ Instead ordering groceries by phone, the car could be taken to town to pick them out, like both Marian and Ray’s mothers eventually did. Marian also noted a change in self-sufficiency.²⁴ Instead of making all that was consumed in the household, more things were purchased. Her mother used to bake bread until Wonderbread came onto the market at which point she began to buy most of their bread. This is corroborated by a 1930 study done on the consumption of bread in America. It showed sixty-six percent of farm households, seventy-five percent of village homes and ninety percent of urban households bought their bread rather than baking it themselves.²⁵ It was the automobile that facilitated this practice.²⁶ For both families, clothing and supply shopping was done in London by taking a train usually twice a year. Having an automobile enabled both families to do this more often if they desired, because the trip was faster by car than it was by train. This ultimately led to a decreased interest in the

²⁰ Marian White, personal interview, 22 October 2006.

²¹ Reynold M. Wik, “Early Automobility and the American Farmer,” in *The Automobile and American Culture*, 40-43.

²² Ling, *America and the automobile*, 18.

²³ Flink, *Automobile Age*, 154.

²⁴ Marian White, personal interview, 29 October 2006.

²⁵ Ling, *America and the automobile*, 29.

²⁶ Joseph Interrante, “The Road to Autopia,” in *The Automobile and American Culture*, 98.

town's downtown core and a decentralization of business into larger trade areas, a consequence common to many small American towns.²⁷

After marrying, the two left their family's farms for an urban life in Ottawa and Sarnia. Their migration away from rural areas is a reflection of the North American trend. Between 1926 and 1965 more than thirty million people moved from rural American farmlands and into urban areas.²⁸

Courting

Courting was one area of life in North America that distinctly changed with the arrival of the automobile and deserves particular attention. Fred remembers courting Helen using his family's car. Fred would pick Helen up to go to a medical dance in downtown Toronto occasionally or to take her to a "show."²⁹ They more often than not went for walks or skating and could take themselves without the aid of a car.

On the other hand, my rural grandparents, Ray and Marian used the car extensively while courting. Instead of using a horse and buggy like their parents had done, Ray would borrow his family's car to pick Marian up to go to "Exeter's Saturday night dances, shows in Exeter or London, or Big Band concerts in Grand Bend."³⁰ They were much more mobile and free from parental control than their parents had been. Ray and Marian relied on the automobile more than Helen and Fred mainly because of their geography. They did not live within walking distance to any concert halls or movie theatres or to each other whereas Helen and Fred did. When both couples were married in the late 1940s their honeymoons consisted of automobile trips.

²⁷ Marian White, personal interview, 22 October 2006; Flink, *Automobile Age*, 155.

²⁸ John L. Shover, *First Majority – Last Minority: The Transforming of Rural Life in America* (Dekalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976), 4.

²⁹ Helen Clode, personal interview, 22 October 2006.

³⁰ Raymond and Marian White, personal interview, 22 October 2006.

My grandparents' experiences are representative of courtship patterns in North America after the automobile's introduction, "courtship itself was extended from the five-mile radius of the horse and buggy to ten, twenty, and fifty miles and more."³¹ Scientifically, an increasingly mobile population would lead to "more cross-breeding and eventually improve the American species."³² This can be seen when the next generation is examined. Both sets of grandparents met during high school and lived in the same city as each other. My parents grew up in different parts of Ontario and met at university. The automobile is what allowed both of them to travel to the University of Western Ontario where they met and began dating.

The Family Car

Ray and Marian moved to Sarnia in 1951 when Ray took a job at Polysar Rubber Corporation, an industry closely tied to the automobile industry. The company was formed in 1942 to produce artificial rubber to substitute for overseas supply cut offs that occurred during the Second World War.³³ The plant continued after the war due to the demands for rubber from the automobile industry.³⁴ The plant annually produces 200,000 tonnes of four types of synthetic rubber of which seventy-five percent goes to the auto sector for the production of tires, inner tubes, hoses and bands.³⁵ Eighty percent of the production is exported, with most going to the United States.³⁶ Ray's family was supported, largely because of demands from the auto industry. Rubber production is just

³¹ David L. Lewis, "Sex and the Automobile: From Rumble Seats to Rockin' Vans," in *The Automobile and American Culture*, 123.

³² Ibid.

³³ "Polymer Rubber Corporation." *Canadian Encyclopedia*. 2006. Historica Foundation of Canada. 29 Oct. 2006 <<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1ARTA0006381>>.

³⁴ Raymond White, personal interview, 22 October 2006.

³⁵ Canadian Labour and Business Centre, "Background," *Bayer Rubber Inc.* <<http://www.p2pays.org/ref/04/03115/>> (29 October 2006); Raymond White, personal interview, 22 October 2006.

³⁶ Canadian Labour and Business Centre, "Background."

one of the offshoot industries that came from the advent of the automobile. The automobile industry demanded petroleum, steel, plate glass, lacquer, and rubber and as these industries expanded more and more jobs were available, including one for my grandfather.³⁷ In 1960 Ray was promoted to a management job at Polysar and he and Marian bought a second car (a second hand Volkswagen Beetle). This freed Marian from the house because she no longer had to wait for the weekend to do the grocery shopping. Having her own car allowed her to take her children to activities, lessons, appointments and do the things she enjoyed doing: playing golf, being involved in the church, and playing bridge.³⁸ The car allowed her increased mobility and freedom which is a widespread affect of the automobile for women.³⁹

Fred and Helen bought a car prior to moving to the Yukon. Fred was the town and mine doctor in Mayo and a car was absolutely essential for the job. A car made house calls easier to make, gave him mobility during very cold weather, and allowed him to reach the town (he and Helen lived thirty kilometers from the town site of Mayo).⁴⁰ After moving back to Ontario the family lived in the small town of Deep River. Fred used the car for daily transportation to work during the week. If shopping had to be done Helen would “walk the dog to the hospital with an extra set of keys, put Robbie [the dog] in the car, do the shopping, drop the car off again, and walk home.”⁴¹ She particularly remembers how crucial the car was when her four children were teenagers: the amount of milk they consumed was “much more than [she] could carry.”⁴² According to my aunt,

³⁷ Flink, *The Car Culture*, 140.

³⁸ Marian White, personal interview, 22 October 2006.

³⁹ Rudi Volti, *Cars & Culture: The Life Story of a Technology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2004), 62.

⁴⁰ Frederick Clode, personal interview, 29 October 2006.

⁴¹ Helen Clode, personal interview, 22 October 2006.

⁴² Ibid.

Karen, “Fred always bought a ‘big boat’; they sure made them big back then. [It was] always a V-8 and always a Chrysler in my memory.”⁴³ This is representative of the time. The largest cars with the most stylish additions appeared during the 1950s and early 1960s and Chrysler was one of the largest car companies.⁴⁴

The one element that both families stressed as being a very important consequence of having a car in their lives was travelling. Flink writes that “family togetherness was a major benefit anticipated by early proponents of automobility.”⁴⁵ This was true for Helen. She saw the car as an answer to bringing her family together because at home “everyone did their own thing and the family was going everywhere.”⁴⁶ For the Clodes, car camping was the answer to this problem. During the summers beginning when Karen was still quite young, the family went camping during the vacation time that Fred received (four to six weeks). To Karen:

Memories of family holidays centre around the car. We traveled the continent every summer by car. As the youngest, I got the centre until I got sick (usually shortly into the trip and then I got a window and lost the "hump" (drive shaft that went down the centre of the vehicle under the floor). We crowded six people, a dog and cat into the car for our summer camping holidays. They were great! I don't remember thinking the car was crowded. I do remember that we went 500 miles a day on driving days. I remember being in awe of Fred's (and later the boys' packing skills). They could always fit the big six man canvas tent, our suitcases, camping supplies, and food into the car. Nothing came in the car because there just wasn't room. The cat (Puff) sat under the front seat while Robbie [the dog] sat in the back window.⁴⁷

They traveled and camped all over the United States (U.S.) and Canada. Bruce remembers camping, “not being a big thing in those days, where you always had space, there were no crowds and it was relatively cheap to do.”⁴⁸ The family went across

⁴³ Karen Clode, 26 October 2006, personal e-mail to author (29 October 2006).

⁴⁴ Rudi Volti, “A Century of Automobility,” *Technology & Culture* 37 (Winter 1996): 675.

⁴⁵ Flink, *Automobile Age*, 158.

⁴⁶ Helen Clode, personal interview, 22 October 2006.

⁴⁷ Karen Clode, personal e-mail to author.

⁴⁸ Bruce Clode, personal interview, 30 October 2006.

Canada to British Columbia, to the East Coast of Canada, into all the American West National Parks including the Grand Canyon. For Karen, the car allowed her to be “exposed to different North American cultures from the Arctic Circle to the Mexican border and from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Without a car, travel would not hold the interest it does for me.”⁴⁹ Traveling brought the family together and everyone had fun and for many North American families, this was the case.⁵⁰

The Whites also spent their holidays using their car while my mom and my aunts were growing up. Early in Nancy’s life were trips around Ontario, often to Marian’s family’s farm. Nancy remembers spending time with her grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins when visiting the farm. Much of their family was still in the Exeter area so having a car made family visiting possible. On later trips, they stayed in motels while traveling and picnicked along the way. My mom particularly remembers driving to the Maritimes when she was fifteen to vacation. The family usually spent the vacation time Ray had traveling.⁵¹

Both camping and the introduction of the motel are results of the automobile. Auto-camping began commercially in the 1920s with the introduction of camping equipment and free municipal campgrounds.⁵² The first motels or “motor courts” began to be built in the 1930s in California, Florida, and Texas. It was not until after 1945 that “the motor hotel concept would be well defined and nationally feasible.”⁵³ These lodging developments played an important role in the lives of many North Americans, including in the lives of both my parents and grandparents.

⁴⁹ Karen Clode, personal e-mail to author.

⁵⁰ Flink, *Automobile Age*, 159.

⁵¹ Nancy Clode, personal interview, 29 October 2006.

⁵² Flink, *The Automobile Age*, 183-84.

⁵³ Warren J. Belasco, *Americans on the Road: From Autocamp to Motel, 1910-1945* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1979), 71.

The Next Generation and The Backlash

As adults, my parents have also realized changes due to the automobile. Nancy bought her first car after working as a nurse for a year after university. For her it was really exciting because it was brand new and she paid for it outright with her own money. It made her feel like “she was getting on with her life” and allowed to her drive to the hospital instead of walking, a benefit especially for night shifts.⁵⁴ For many, including Nancy, personal safety is a valuable attribute of automobiles. For Bruce, the benefit of having a car, and particularly having a truck, came while working as a geologist. Trucks with four-wheel drive have the ability to drive over very rough terrain. They enabled him to gain access to more areas of interest and made it easier to carry rock samples. Instead of carrying them on his back, he could load them into a truck and take them back to the camp for analysis. His profession is just one of many that has changed and developed under the influence of the automobile. One great change that occurred with the automobile was the freedom for people to live away from their workplace. While living in Richmond and working in Chilliwack, Nancy commuted 180 kilometers a day in the early 1990s and for the past fourteen years she has commuted 120 kilometers per day from Langley to Chilliwack.

Increasingly, like many people, Bruce and Nancy and Karen and her husband, Martin, and Ray and Marian have opted for smaller, more fuel efficient cars. This is due in part to the oil crisis of 1973 and the increasing oil prices of the 1990s and 2000s. Whereas Fred and Helen used to purchase a new car approximately every three years, their children, Bruce and Karen use cars until they wear out.⁵⁵ In addition to smaller cars

⁵⁴ Nancy Clode, personal interview, 30 October 2006.

⁵⁵ Karen Clode, personal e-mail to author; Bruce Clode, personal interview, 30 October 2006.

being cheaper to run, their fuel efficiency decreases the amount of atmospheric pollution and number of hydrocarbons that are emitted to the atmosphere.⁵⁶ Bruce and Nancy have opted for Japanese cars since the 1990s. This is very reflective of trends. By 1974, Japan was the world's largest producer and exporter of cars.⁵⁷ Japanese cars are recognized as smaller, more fuel efficiency, and more reliable than American cars.⁵⁸ This is a fact according to Bruce who attests that the quality of North American cars "went right down the toilet" during the later part of this century.⁵⁹ He calculated the vehicle repair cost of both a 1991 Chrysler Acclaim and a 1993 Toyota Tercel. The Acclaim's cost to run was \$6.19 per 100 km (based on a total of 246936 km) and the Tercel's cost was \$2.36 per 100 km (based on a total of 263558 km).⁶⁰ Increasingly, the car is being viewed with a more critical eye and more and more people, my family included, are becoming disenchanted with aspects of this mode of transportation.⁶¹

The automobile was introduced into my family four generations ago on both my mother's and father's sides. This paper discussed some of the changes that occurred within my family as a result of the automobile and begins with my grandparents' generation. Less than one hundred years have passed since the introduction and mass adoption of the automobile in North America and it has had a tremendous impact. It allowed my family to move across the country, it allowed for new employment opportunities, and it changed the way of life for all my family members. These changes, although seen through the eyes of my grandparents, parents, and aunt, are fairly representative of those larger changes occurring in North American society. Although

⁵⁶ Volti, "A Century of Automobility," 681.

⁵⁷ Volti, *Cars & Culture*, 130.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Bruce Clode, personal interview, 30 October 2006.

⁶⁰ Bruce Clode, "Vehicle repair costs," 30 October 2006, personal e-mail to author (1 November 2006).

⁶¹ Bruce and Nancy Clode, personal interview, 30 October 2006.

the study is limited to what memories remain, one can conclude that the automobile did play a role in this family's history and significantly changed the lives of all those interviewed.

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Automobiles Owned in the Span of Ray and Marian's Life

- Chrysler** – bought summer 1948 in Ottawa; engine failed Oct.1, 1949.
- 1947 Chevrolet** – bought October, 1949 in Exeter; cost \$1,000.00
- 1954 Bel Air Chevrolet** – bought December 24, 1953 in Exeter; cost \$2,590.00 less trade-in of Chevrolet \$800.00
- 1958 Chevrolet** – bought July 2, 1959; cost \$1,750.00.
- 1964 Chevrolet Biscayne** – cost \$3,403, less trade-in of \$1,205; Park Lane Motors.
- 1967 Plymouth Fury I** – Feb. 4. 1967 from Koehler Motors; cost \$3,365, less trade-in of \$1,790.
- 1960 Volkswagen** – Feb. 18, 1967 from Roehler Motors; cost \$498.75.
- 1960s (mid) Envoy.**
- 1971 Oldsmobile Delta 88** – Sept. 28, 1971 from Park Lane Motors; cost \$5,243.55 less trade-in of Envoy \$1,787.30.
- 1972 Datsun 110** – Sept. 7, 1972 from Lakeview Motors; cost \$2,451.25.
- 1977 Chevrolet Impala** – April 7, 1977 from Park Lane Motors; cost \$6,861.25 less trade-in of '71 Oldsmobile of \$1,487.25.
- 1978 Chevette** – September 14, 1979 from Park Lane Motors; cost \$4,023.32 less trade-in of Datsun \$460.50.
- 1981 Oldsmobile Omega** – July 28, 1981 from Park Lane Motors; cost \$9,514.00 less trade-in of '77 Chevrolet \$3,920.00.
- 1988 Chrysler Dynasty** – April 22, 1988; cost \$18,843.18 less trade-in of '78 Chevette \$3,920.
- 1990 Dodge Colt** – August 31, 1990; cost \$10,008 less trade-in of '81 Oldsmobile \$1,394.00.
- 1995 Chrysler Concorde** – June 29, 1995; cost \$21,319.79 less trade-in of '88 Dynasty \$3,800.00.
- 2002 Toyota Camry LE V6** – June 25, 2002; cost \$28,608.00 less trade-in of '95 Concorde \$6,000.00.
- 2004 Dodge SX 2.0** – August 21, 2004; cost \$19,820.95 less trade-in of '90 Dodge Colt \$1,000.