My grandfather (far right) with his five children, an uncle of my grandmother’s (third from right), and me, in front of my Uncle Bob, who is in his army uniform. My father is in the center. It was on trips to and from Bob’s farm that I started to drive the Plymouth.

Jack, the Plymouth, and Me

by Dennis P. Carrigan

"Jack" was John Andrew Carrigan. He was my paternal grandfather, and a wonderful man and superior grandfather in every respect. I had the good fortune to grow up in the town in which he lived, New Castle, 50 miles north northwest of Pittsburgh, and to spend a great deal of time with him. I imagined myself to be his favorite grandchild, a distinction which I am certain existed only in my mind. Regardless, I was the only grandchild he taught to drive. But more of that later.

I was also, I suspect, the only grandchild to refer to him as "Jack," though only once. The occasion was a Sunday afternoon visit with my grandparents. With me in tow, my parents had arrived at my grandparents’ home and were talking with my grandmother in her living room, when, at an opportune break in the conversation, I asked: "Where’s Jack?" I was perhaps 3 years old, and of course have no first-hand recollection of the incident, though over the years it was reported to me more than once.

My grandfather was born in 1883 in Lowellville, Ohio, a mill town on the Mahoning River a few miles north of Youngstown.

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School photo taken of me in February 1947, the month I turned 7. The photo doesn’t enable you to see the full disarray of my hair, but when my mother saw this picture, she said: “Surely this was taken at the end of the day.” And I responded: “No, first thing in the morning.”

from the Pennsylvania border. His parents, he told me, had been the first couple to be married at Villa Maria, a small Roman Catholic community between New Castle and Youngstown, Ohio. He was a mill man, first tin and then steel mills. From him I heard many references to the mills of New Castle, and also to their counterparts in Martins Ferry and Steubenville, in eastern Ohio, and in Follansbee and Weirton, in the northern panhandle of West Virginia.

My father told me that his father was so good at running mills that he was in great demand, ever sought by someone offering him more money to leave a mill where he was superintendent and to take on new responsibilities. Perhaps without exception, this would require relocation to a new town, with the consequence that my father never went to school in the same community for three consecutive years. When he graduated from New Castle High School in 1933, he later said, he did not know the names of his fellow students sitting on either side of him at the graduation ceremony, and the rootlessness that he had known while growing up made a lasting impression on him.

That rootlessness also had consequences for my grandfather, though of a different sort. He worked no place long enough to earn much, if anything, toward a pension. When World War II ended and he was in his 60s, prospective employers generally felt him to be too old, and yet economic necessity forced him to earn money by one means or another. I have thought often of my extreme good luck in that regard, and of how vicissitudes that treated my grandfather unfairly favored me greatly. By denying him conventional employment, fate gave him time to share with a grandson. By withholding an adequate pension, that same fate spurred him to take up various activities that permitted the collaboration of a co-worker two generations his junior.

In the late 1940s a remarkable thing arrived in and around our community — a highway of new design. Engineers and contractors built wide, concrete marvels to replace the two-lane asphalt roads that had been the motorists’ lot. It was told to me some years later that New Castle was chosen as one of the first communities to receive such highways because of the poor health of the local economy. As industrial jobs disappeared from New Castle, many residents were forced to look for work to the west and northwest, in the sprawling basic steel industry in Youngstown and in the mills of Sharon and Farrell, Pennsylvania. I think the new highways canceled what surely would have been a dramatic population flight from New Castle and its adjacent townships. With the new highways, people could keep their homes in the New Castle area but work elsewhere.

Following military service in Europe during World War II, my father’s younger brother, Bob, returned to New Castle and bought a small farm north of town. Not long after that, state Route 18, the principal route going north out of New Castle, was transformed into a three-lane concrete marvel. The highway came to play a role in the events of this narrative, while also making my uncle’s commute to Sharon Steel safer and quicker.

My uncle’s farm was located along Mitchell Road, a half mile from Route 18. My grandfather and I visited the farm frequently, and on one such visit, when we were about to return to town, he asked: “Denny, do you want to drive?” I assumed he was asking if I wanted to steer and shift gears, which by then had become the standard division of labor on our outings in his 1936 Plymouth. But as it turned out, he was asking if I wanted to sit in the driver’s seat and really drive! I was 12 years old, and on that day my grandfather instituted what would become a practice causing my father considerable concern and frustration, while giving me the greatest pleasure.

My father was the first Carrigan to develop a passion for automobiles, and I acquired that same passion. Now, it is the nature of passion to take any of several forms, and his passion for the automobile — like mine — was of the noble variety. He was not interested simply in large, shiny cars because of the status they might bestow on the owner, and I remember, especially in the 1950s when my own interest in cars was very high, that he spoke disparagingly of those makes whose size and ostentation were not, in his opinion, backed up by sufficient engineering achievement. His interest seemed to lie principally in the car as a machine, as a work of mechanical art, and he reserved his greatest admiration for those cars that represented the finest achievement of the automotive engineer: Duesenberg, Cord, and Packard in the United States; Rolls Royce and Bentley in England; Bugatti in France; Mercedes Benz in Germany. At the same time, however, the car might have represented something else for him: perhaps a means to transcend the burden of daily concerns. Following his death, now more than 20 years ago, his books came to me, and I found the
following inscription in *The Autocar Handbook*, a
British guide to the workings of the automobile:
“God grant me always the freedom of the unending
road.”

My father had an interest in the mechanics of the
automobile, too, and this interest he also passed
along to me. At an early age, I also started to shift
gears when my father or grandfather drove. (I often
did the steering as well, though in this interest my
grandfather was more accommodating than my
father.) Shifting gears in the Plymouth was easy
enough while sitting in the passenger’s seat, for the
gearshift was floor-mounted between passenger and
driver, rather than on the steering column. But as
anyone knows who has learned to drive on a car with
a manual transmission, operating the gearshift is only
one of the challenges, and the smaller by far. There
is the significantly greater hurdle of the clutch, and
all of my gear-shifting for my father and grandfather
had by no stretch prepared me for my grandfather’s
question that day in my uncle’s driveway, “Denny,
do you want to drive?”

Scarcely able to contain my enthusiasm, I got in
on the driver’s side, turned on the key, and reached
with my right foot to the starter pedal on the floor
above the accelerator. Engine running, I then
confronted the question of the clutch, though
fortunately in the relative safety of my uncle’s
driveway. On the initial attempt to get underway, I
stalled the Plymouth, and more than once. Finally,
on Mitchell Road, I managed to make it the short
distance to Route 18, and there, after a stall or two
and a start that is most charitably described as
inelegant, I had us headed for town on that wonder-
ful wide highway whose principal virtue, from my
perspective, was a dearth of other motorists.

Driving on the highway was quite easy, but at
some point in the short journey to town it surely
occurred to me that the real challenge would lie in
negotiating the several blocks which separated the
highway from my grandparents’ driveway. Their
home was on the north side of town, close to the
new highway, but nevertheless, in getting from
Route 18 to the relative safety of 717 Blaine Street I
had ample opportunity to demonstrate to my
grandfather, and to myself, that I would need a great
deal of practice. I got just that. It soon developed
that I did a lot of the driving when my grandfather
and I were together, which, especially in the sum-
mer, was often. 

One may wonder what prompted a man to
believe it was appropriate to turn the operation of a
car over to a youth of my age. My grandfather had
what might well be described as a non-punctilious
approach to legal matters. Considered in a constitu-
tional context, his philosophy would have been that
of a “loose constructionist.” Although law-abiding
in most regards, and certainly in all matters which he
believed to be of significance, in certain other
matters he brought his own standard to bear. One
example, though far removed from permitting me to
drive, may demonstrate his approach to matters of
legality. With great regularity, he “played the
numbers,” a form of gambling which was, of course,
illegal.

My grandmother was his co-conspirator in this
practice, and on many occasions I heard them
discussing events in their lives and what combina-
tion of three numbers might be inferred from those
events. They had a book, as I recall, which they felt
introduced an element of sophistication or science
into the process; dreams were held to be of
particular value in this process. One “played” his
number before lunch, and on many a morning, I
was present while my grandparents discussed a
dream one had had the prior night, consulted the
book, and settled on the day’s choice. Not only did
I hear them discuss the favored numbers, but I was
often with my grandfather when he went to the

My father with the
car — also a
Plymouth, 1948 —
he had when I was
learning to drive my
grandfather’s 1936
Plymouth. In my
piece I mention that I
loved to pass my
father. This is the car
I would pass.
My grandfather turned to any variety of means to earn a little money, and this afforded me many opportunities to "work" with him. One was recycling, though it was years before that term was known. New Castle once had been an industrial community of enviable growth and prosperity. During the 1890s the population grew 144 percent, and early in this century the community could lay claim to having the largest tin mills in the world. Its fortunes were well into decline, however, by the time of which I write. Still, there were foundries in town. I remember Pennsylvania Engineering; Johnson Bronze, whose principal product was bearings for automobile and truck engines; and especially United Engineering and Foundry, which made equipment used in rolling mills and was where my father worked during World War II and for a time afterward.

The foundries had to dispose of waste products, including metal that had been trimmed from castings or, on occasion, entire castings that were defective. My grandfather learned where the foundries hauled those materials, and he would comb through them to retrieve what he could sell to Wolfe Iron and Metal and other dealers in scrap metals. I often accompanied him on these missions, which saw the Plymouth pressed into service as a small truck. Since the scrap dealers paid by weight, my grandfather tried to get as much metal as possible into the Plymouth, and with some regularity, the price was a broken spring.

Not all of our outings involved us in work that was remunerative in the conventional sense, and there was one regular trip that gave me yet another opportunity to drive the Plymouth. Each year early in the fall, we would drive a short distance west of town on U.S. 422, and, just before the state line, would take the turn marked "Villa Maria, 1 mile." At Villa Maria our goal was a row of walnut trees that, he told me, were the most prolific he knew.

Our pursuit of walnuts always included a visit to the Villa Maria cemetery, from which one could see the trees a short distance away. He would show me the graves of his father, who had died when my grandfather was only 12, and of his step-father, who was his father's younger brother who had married the widowed sister-in-law. Eventually my great-grandmother would lie there, too, but for some of the years of our annual walnut-gathering, she was still alive.

My grandfather would also show me where he and
my grandmother would be buried some day. He often would comment on the beauty and peacefulness of the place, and would remind me that, once there, he would be forever close to "our" walnut trees. When I visited there not long ago, I stopped at the graves of my several forebears — now including my grandparents — and was especially pleased to see that the row of walnut trees remains.

My grandfather liked to fish, and of course he often took me on fishing expeditions, which gave me yet another chance to practice driving. New Castle has several streams flowing through it or nearby. Slippery Rock Creek, with its lovely gorge, colossal boulders, and swift current, passes just to the east, as does the far more modest — and perhaps misnamed — Big Run. The Shenango River and Nesbitt Creek flow through town, merging near downtown. We fished all those streams, but the Shenango was his favorite, and he was especially fond of a place on that river near “the harbor,” a name carried over from the time — roughly the 30 years bracketing 1850 — when New Castle was an important port on the Pittsburgh-to-Erie Canal.

When our illegal driving escapades started, I drove only when my grandfather and I were alone. After a while, he began to let me drive with my grandmother in the car. I never recall her saying a word about it. Eventually my driving became known to my parents, and this caused my father considerable consternation. I know my mother probably said to my father: “Oh, Paul, do you think Den should be driving, at his age?” And there the matter would have rested, putting my father in an especially difficult quandary, for how, after all, was he to tell his father that he thought letting me drive was ill-advised? Given my father’s deference to his father, he may never have broached the issue with him. He did, however, raise the issue with me on any number of occasions, though he never told me the practice was to come to an end. No, he simply said he thought my driving was not a good idea, and reminded me that if I should be involved in an accident while driving, the consequences for my grandfather could be serious. I had to admit he was right, but I was not dissuaded.

I also have to admit that where we three Carrigan males, the Plymouth, and my driving were concerned, a certain constellation of circumstances brought me extreme delight: I loved to pass my father. We were forever going on outings, and since with my grandparents along we numbered eight, we took two cars. I naturally wanted to go with my grandparents in the Plymouth, and my grandfather either would automatically slide into the passenger's seat, or I'd ask him to. I'd let my father get ahead, and then, on the highway, I'd sail past with considerable fanfare. The poor man! I am certain he remembered his youth and eagerness to drive, which would temper his frustration but not allay his concern.

The day came when I was old enough to drive legally, and though letting me drive the Plymouth was no longer an inducement I still saw my grandfather a great deal. He was, to my way of thinking, the embodiment of both the perfect grandfather and the perfect driving instructor. Surely he must have thought at times that my inability to master the Plymouth was congenital, and one incident illustrates that supremely.

I remember the incident very well, even the make and year of the other car. Granddad, the Plymouth and I were on Park Avenue. I was behind the wheel, and had to stop for the traffic light at the intersection with Highland Avenue, a principal north-south thoroughfare. I had come to a full stop and had shifted into first gear, and then, for a reason that I have never understood, I proceeded across Highland while the traffic light was still red. I still vividly recall looking to my left — the impact would have been on my side — and seeing a 1949 or 1950 Ford bearing down on us. It was a very close miss. He passed just behind us. And the only comment my grandfather made was: "Denny, that fellow was going too fast." Not: “Have you parted company with reality?” Or: "You could have got us killed!" Simply, “That fellow was going too fast,” and he made the comment in a perfectly normal conversational voice. That’s the kind of man he was — the kind of grandfather any boy would be lucky to have.