

The 'small' muscle car takes Duster driver back

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FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

In the late 1960s and early 1970s Chrysler Motor Corp. was marketing its go-fast Plymouth muscle cars as the "Rapid Transit System."

These vehicles included the Barracuda, Belvedere, Roadrunner and Duster. And the Duster was the smallest of the lot. It was specifically marketed as a "small" car.

Based on the design of the Valiant A-body, the Duster offered a sporty fastback alternative at what was then an affordable price — between \$2,000 and \$3,000.

"In 1969, when the Duster debuted, the peace movement was active, the war in Vietnam was at its height, and automotive financing wasn't what it is now," says Neel Roberts of Vulcan.

Roberts owns this 1970 Plymouth Duster 340. Like most other muscle car owners, he is reliving his youth.

While he wasn't old enough in 1970 to purchase a Duster new, Roberts does remember Chrysler products were popular in the late 1970s when he was in high school. In fact, he drove a 1972 Dodge Dart Swinger. He says his Dart was too much of a "family car," and wasn't as stylish as the Duster.

But after selling the Dart and moving on to other everyday commuter vehicles Roberts swore he would one day own a Mopar muscle car.

"I've always been fascinated with and never lost the romance of the Mopar muscle car," he says. "And, I always wanted to get one."

A couple of years ago, while searching the Internet, Roberts stumbled across this 1970 Duster for sale in Grassland — a small town in northern Alberta. The ad didn't include photos, but after calling the owner and learning some of the Duster's history, Roberts decided it would be worth the trip to have a look.

He and a friend drove up to inspect the car and Roberts liked what he saw. He made a verbal offer to purchase pending an appraisal, but by the time Roberts returned home the seller had called to say another buyer was on the way with cash to purchase.

Roberts quickly scraped together his cash and drove back to Grassland to seal the deal.

After buying the car, Roberts ascertained that the Duster was originally purchased in Edmonton as a 16th birthday gift. The teen drove the car until he went to college, and then sold the Duster to the seller's brother.

It was the brother who had been putting the Duster together to use as a race car. Plans to have raced the car must have fallen through, as it appears the Duster never saw much track use, and limited road use.

"The car was very straight, and hadn't been messed about

IT'S MINE

with too much," Roberts says. "It was dusty, and needed some cosmetic upgrades; a true diamond in the rough."

Once he was back home with the Duster, Roberts changed the wheels to give the car a more factory-correct appearance.

His mechanic, Mark Rose, completely rebuilt the four-speed manual transmission, repaired the clutch and properly installed the Hurst "pistol-grip" shifter. Home-made linkages had been hampering the Hurst's performance.

A roll cage that was installed in the Duster will probably stay, as the mounts are permanently welded to the car.

"The roll bar looks ugly to some, and hot to others," Roberts says. "The roll bar doesn't bother me, and I'll probably keep it in the car."

In 1970, the Valiant line of cars, which included the Duster, could be purchased with a variety of engines. There were the bulletproof inline six-cylinder engines of 198 and 225 cubic inches, and the more powerful 318 cu. in. and 340 cu. in. V-8s. The most popular engine was by far the 318 which produced 230 horsepower. But the 340 offered the muscle, with 275 h.p. at 5,000 r.p.m.

Roberts' car has what's called a 340 Wedge engine; the wedge designation refers to the shape of the engine's combustion chamber.

According to his research, Roberts' Duster was built in Windsor, and is one of only 318 produced in Canada in 1970. The snorkel hood is a factory installed option.

The car is a work in progress. He expects to completely freshen up the car over the next two years, with plans to reinstall the interior carpets. The carpets were removed when the Duster was being converted to race car specs.

Roberts is happy to drive the car and says he is most surprised by the reaction of teenagers who actually stop and wander around the Duster and ask questions.

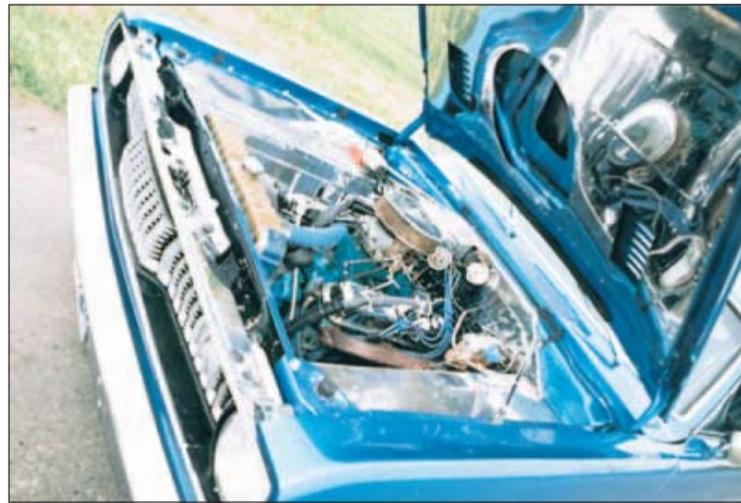
"I thought this was a Nintendo generation," Roberts says.

"Perhaps it's the look and the sound of the car,

and it's something they haven't been used to.

Today's generation has been brought up around much more diluted vehicles with computers and DVD navigation systems.

"The late 1960s were more raw, and it was all about horsepower. I think people are craving something that's a little more real these days."



A former owner once prepared the 1970 Plymouth Duster 340 now owned by Neel Roberts for race use, including the installation of a roll cage and stainless steel panels in the engine bay.



Greg Williams for the Calgary Herald

Roberts, of Vulcan, is reliving his youth with the Duster, equipped with a 340 cu. in. Wedge engine. The Duster was one of Chrysler's Rapid Transit System muscle cars.



The car, considered small in its time, is equipped with a Hurst pistol-grip shifter and a four-speed manual transmission.