

PODCAST - TECHNOCOMPLEX

"Plastic model. Rusty project. Memories of parents."  
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by Mark R. DeLong

**INTRO**

**SOUND infrequent street traffic**

NARRATOR

This is Technocomplex.

**FADE SOUND**

MARK DELONG

This podcast comes from a draft of an early chapter in my book project on cars, culture, and art. It's about the rather convoluted acquisition of a project car -- a heap of rust that once was a glamorous chariot. Over a couple of decades, it got better, though.

(PAUSE.)

Ezra Pound wrote an essay called *The Guide to Kulchur* -- "Kulchur" spelled *Kay-You-Ell-See-Aitch-You-Are*.

(PAUSE.)

Here's what he had to say at one point:

(PAUSE.)

*We do not know the past in chronological sequence. It may be convenient to lay it out anesthetized on the table with dates pasted on here and there, but what we know we know by ripples and spirals eddying out from us and from our own time.*

**SOUND infrequent street traffic**

MARK DELONG

When you drive along East Superior Street in Duluth, Minnesota, and pass Congdon Park Elementary School, your car's front seat moves at the level of the building's second floor. So steeply does the city pitch toward the shores of Lake Superior.

(MORE)

MARK DELONG (CONT'D)

(PAUSE.)

I was a fourth grader there when I first encountered a Jaguar E-type, and the school was the place where the car etched itself into my memory.

**SOUND children playing on playground**

MARK DELONG

I spent my happiest school years -- fifth and sixth grades -- in a small modern, flat-roofed expansion of the old school building. The new wing, opened in 1964, separated upper grade pupils from the little ones in the old 1929 building.

(PAUSE.)

Large paper birch trees shaded the school's front steps that rose to Superior Street and the school bus stops. The softball field, an expansive gravel lot aside the school, turned into a hockey rink and ice skating area in winter.

**SOUND choir madrigal background SOFTLY**

MARK DELONG

This school was a musical and noisy place and different from today's, perhaps, because an ancient language still sounded in the hallways and some really old songs still were sung. Mr. Koch, my intense and somewhat scary math teacher and a musician, organized a small ensemble and led us through Italian madrigals. Miss Carlson's upper grade chorus sang Latin alongside the more standard 1960s elementary school repertoire.

(PAUSE.)

The school differed from the 1960s norm in other ways, too.

(MORE)

## MARK DELONG (CONT'D)

We had no formal classes but could follow our interests by dragging wooden "tote trays" laden with our notebooks and supplies to four rooms where fifth and sixth graders mingled to work at their own pace. It was an "Open School" -- an experiment in the 1960s that suited me just right. I could dabble or dive in, and, most delightfully, I could avoid the unpleasant parts of school studies simply by paying no attention to them.

(PAUSE.)

I recall much of the neighborhood where I lived by the cars in the driveways, the most exotic of which was weird Mr. Rondesvedt's "almost Rolls Royce" - an Old English White, "Right-Hand-Drive" Silver Cloud from the 1950s that sat in his drive only a week or so while he figured out whether to buy it.

(PAUSE.)

He didn't, unfortunately. It would have lifted the level of the neighborhood's cars significantly, I thought at the time. Other than that short-lived excitement across the street, the "Crescent View Avenue" neighborhood was normal 1960s middle-America with cookie-cutter middle class families, ranch-style houses, an average number of kids, and few divorces.

(PAUSE.)

Driveways perhaps showed off more current models than many others in the city, but the neighbors mostly stuck to cars from American automakers. Mr. Ferguson next door, a postal worker who had immaculate gardens and yard, drove boring Chevys. Mr. Wahl across the street, an oil company fellow, liked sporty Pontiacs. Mr. Manthey, Pickands-Mather shipping, and Mr. Bartholdi, a downtown accountant, drove rather staid Buicks.

(MORE)

Made in Michigan

## MARK DELONG (CONT'D)

At least four men in the neighborhood worked in the auto industry, and they always drove current models. The most memorable was a Buick Riviera, a 1965 model with vertically oriented covered headlights. It had an aggressive angular stance up front and was owned by a regional GM rep who lived two doors down from our house.

(PAUSE.)

The number of auto industry dads shouldn't surprise. The industry dominated the American economy beginning in the 1950s -- the beginning of a flush age of post-World War II consumerism. In 1955, about twenty percent of the American economic activity came from the automobile sector, and in the 1960s the car industry was still vigorous, though not as large a portion of the whole.

(PAUSE.)

Oh. There was one foreign "exotic" in the neighborhood: a Volkswagen Beetle, briefly owned by an editor of the local newspaper. It was said to have arrived in a crate that the neighborhood kids quickly transformed into a fort on a wooded vacant lot.

(PAUSE.)

The little car once inspired a trip my father and I took to a dealership downtown, "just to take a look." At six-foot-two, he was too tall to get comfortable in the driver's seat and the windshield felt too close to his face, he said, so a Beetle never came home with us.

(PAUSE.)

We were a Ford family after all, and my father especially liked fast and thirsty Fords with the 390 cubic-inch "FE" high performance engine -- 6.4 liter capacity in today's measurements.

(MORE)

## MARK DELONG (CONT'D)

His favorite was a 1964 Galaxie 500 hardtop in a striking blue that sucked premium gas rather prodigiously. On summer weekends, he'd drive it behind the house to find shade where he could wash and wax it.

(PAUSE.)

Perhaps it is a little odd to recall the childhood landscape of cars so vividly after fifty years. I've probably always been a car nut, of sorts, and my parents probably knew it when they bought a special car model for my 1964 Christmas: a Monogram/Revell model of a "Jaguar X-KE" coupe, bright red with exquisite detail. There were even wires to attach to spark plugs and the distributor. It was big, for a plastic model, measuring one-eighth of the size of the real car.

(PAUSE.)

Every Minnesota spring, Congdon Park Elementary put on a "science fair" in the gymnasium. Twice I entered the model car to show off some of the advancements of automobile technology. Actually, I thought the thing just looked snappy, but as a science exhibit in comparison with others it may have seemed a little weak. Lisa, an emblem of terrifying female perfection in my pre-pubescent mind, always outdid herself with some amazing analysis and experiment, probably accomplished with abundant help from parents. Denise just excelled with her personality, which simply occupied every corner of the gym. I was the towheaded nerdy kid, fiddling with plastic cars, but I do remember getting an "honorable mention." Parent and teacher judges must have been entranced, too, and the "XK-E" model really showed the technical innovations of the car. The suspension worked -- no small trick for a little plastic replica.

(MORE)

MARK DELONG (CONT'D)

The front wheels angled with a spin of the steering wheel, and the windows cranked up and down.

(PAUSE.)

Nearly fifty years later, as I was cleaning out my father's garage, I found the old car with part of the original box. It had not borne storage well. The body had been splintered, pieces strewn and broken, but at least the pneumatic tires still had air. I decided it was too far gone for restoration.

(PAUSE.)

My boyhood model building of the 1960s perhaps was hereditary and reemerged in the 2000s in my middle son who struggled, like many youth, trying to navigate the bizarre social worlds of middle and high school and to succeed academically. Things didn't always go well in his studies -- in fact, they were mostly a daily misery -- but there was one place where things, quite literally, fit together and where achievement was within grasp.

(PAUSE.)

This was in Mr. Woody's "Automotive Technology" course, which had its own rigor that didn't easily align with the definition of success that the high school leadership recognized. Mr. Woody's class was classified as "Career and Technical Education," which was said to be "important... too" but seemed to me actually tacked on to the school's real priorities. Although it wasn't a dumping ground for underperforming students as some schools have done with "VoTech," Auto Tech didn't seem to lead to college and therefore suffered from a certain neglect that Mr. Woody might have not entirely resented.

(PAUSE.)

The class was at best just barely part of the vision of the school's leadership.

(MORE)

MARK DELONG (CONT'D)

"All of our students are college material," an assistant principal once told me when I asked about vocational and technical educational opportunities after high school. I had seen College Night posters up in the hallways when I went in for a visit, but noted that similar "nights" for others lacked. Mr. Woody's shop at school may have been a sidetrack on a route to college, but I knew that tracks to success and happiness don't always run through a college campus. And it's probably important to note that I've spent all of my career on college campuses.

(PAUSE.)

Even before high school, my son understood and appreciated mechanical workings, and he proved that in his work as a successful technician and race car builder. He's now a soon-to-be-graduated student at a respected school of engineering.

**SOUND automotive repair shop noises**

MARK DELONG

Mechanical things are palpable and present challenges that are far more real-life than a high school algebra assignment. Working with them involves more parts of the body than the aching head. In the shop, exertion is physical as well as mental, and accomplishments are visible and often immediate. Problem solving in the shop really has consequences, too. My son's high school classmates often worked on each other's cars or sometimes on a car Mr. Woody had limp-moded in. Failure, confusion, or mistake meant delay getting home, or worse, risking the impatience of The Master of the Shop.

(PAUSE.)

That translated from school to workday world, too.

(MORE)

## MARK DELONG (CONT'D)

In his work, my son's happy customer meant more business later and a good reputation for his shop.

(PAUSE.)

A project car fit into my son's interests and talents. Of course, I was aware of a certain peril as I thought about a project car, since my reasons ran somewhat counter to school's established judgment of what was really important, and, truth be told, I did have a selfish interest that clouded the matter: my rekindled memory of a plastic model from my childhood -- and romanticized visions of a sleek and sexy machine, of course. In the end, I knew, a project car might not long succeed to convince my son that mechanical and technical knowledge also are valuable.

(PAUSE.)

I also knew that not just any car would do. Or, at least, that's what I told myself. Build on the positives and get a car that fires the imagination, I thought. Of course, I knew which car would fire up mine, and why wouldn't it do the same for my son? But if the project was an old Jag, I told myself, it wasn't going to go into Mr. Woody's garage. That felt entirely too perilous -- those awkward teenagers wielding hard metal tools in a high school garage close to a dilapidated jewel of a car.

(PAUSE.)

That was too much to ponder.

(PAUSE.)

These considerations about a project car roughly coincided with the final resolution of my wife's parents' estate. Her mother died shortly after Christmas 2000, and Arlene and her sisters set about resolving the estate's material things the next spring.

(MORE)



## MARK DELONG (CONT'D)

The family home was filled with memories, of course, and Arlene's parents had occupied the place for decades. Today, a small park dedicated to Glen and Edith closes up the end of the stately neighborhood's cul-de-sac.

Unravelling the physical things and the memories was a challenge for the sisters, as it is for any son and daughter whose parents have passed. Arlene took the trip from North Carolina to Minnesota twice to set things to rights. I stayed home with the kids, and I spent the evenings web-surfing and looking at cars on Ebay and other online car sites.

(PAUSE.)

I could blame the whole car project on unsupervised web surfing. My wife was not around to channel my attentions. Just look what happens. She was a half-continent away, in the house where she grew up and was going through, room-by-room, the belongings that surrounded her parents. Each night she slept in the bedroom of her girlhood. In one intense week, she and her sisters decided what each wanted to keep and what they were willing to let others have. There was to be a "tag sale."

(PAUSE.)

Everyone wanted everyone else to be happy, too.

(PAUSE.)

How do you talk about something like a car with your wife when she's in this charged situation -- when the physical things of memory are being split up or surrendered to strangers for bidding? I didn't know a polite way to bring it up, and I was antsy because an Ebay sale was ticking and I needed her assent to make an offer.

(PAUSE.)

But to buy what? An old rusty dream?

(MORE)

## MARK DELONG (CONT'D)

The car was in Virginia, a rare chance at something close enough to look at, and I had at least restrained my urges enough that I would not get a car I could not touch before the sale. Just having something delivered to Rougemont was out of the question.

**SOUND phone ringing sound in headset**

## MARK DELONG

"There is this car," I said on the phone one night. "I'd like to get this car. Or at least think about it." I knew no other way to say it, to broach the topic.

(PAUSE.)

"I don't know. I don't know," she said. "I just can't think about that now. I just want to get through this. There is so much. So much."

(PAUSE.)

Then there was a silence, as there often has been in our telephone conversations when we have had little to say but want to have each other present even through a thin wire. Just the phone connection sometimes suffices.

(PAUSE.)

"And I just want everyone to be happy," she said eventually.

(PAUSE.)

The estate could certainly handle the expense, but I knew that money wasn't the issue. Rather, it was the calculus of sisters' happiness and coming to terms with memories and loss. I was asking, I knew, to transmute some of that memory into a project car. Actually, a project car I had not yet laid eyes on, except in online pictures that were not especially inspiring. Perhaps more profoundly I was pushing an agenda that was unrelated and insensitive to her primary focus.

(MORE)

## MARK DELONG (CONT'D)

Her memories and the final resolution of her parents' deaths contrasted with my purposes -- my rather base and worldly quest for a car. That seemed then, as it does now, so self-indulgent and unsympathetic.

(PAUSE.)

"Let's discuss it when I get home," she said, closing the matter.

(PAUSE.)

"OK," I said.

(PAUSE.)

Years after that long distance exchange, Arlene told me that she was torn and angry that I had brought it up. "He wants to get an old car," she told her sisters. "I just want everyone to be happy, and he wants an old car."

(PAUSE.)

The old car meant a trade of memory for my desire, my irrational and reckless desire. That was another noise for her to bear through the already noisy, emotional affair of tying up memories of mother and father and the old house.