

FANNING AN OLD FLAME

When Phil Gardner cast his eyes upon his first love for the first time since his teenage years, she looked nothing like the dolled-up beauty he remembered. But he fell head over heels all over again. And he vowed to himself that he would win her back.

It took him a few years, some begging, and a little bit of sleuthing, but Gardner kept his promise to rekindle his relationship with the 1934 Ford Coupe that stole his heart when he was 13-years-old.

Gardner will be bringing his vintage hotrod and the tale of their reunion to the City of Eagle's Annual Car Show on Saturday, July 9th. The show will run from noon to 4 p.m., as part of Eagle Fun Days.

Gardner took the Mayor's Prize at last year's show, adding to a long list of awards for his restoration work. Well over 100 custom cars are expected to be on display this year including a 1940 Ford Pickup belonging to Eagle's Mayor Stan Ridgeway.

Gardner's romance with the '34 Ford Coupe is the stuff of boyhood dreams. He first spotted it for sale in 1957 in the lot of a local gas station in Payette, where he grew up. The car was pretty beat up, with wire wheels and half its black paint ground off. But Gardner loved her lines and saw potential. He and his older brother Larry borrowed \$45 from their dad to buy it.

Then his brother left for college and Gardner had the car all to himself for his high school years. He learned to drive it in a cow pasture near his home. He messed around with the engine and repainted her twice, first green and then candy apple red.

And he made a lot of memories.

He cruised Main Street in Payette and other towns, evoking the teenaged culture of an era that was captured in the film "American Graffiti."

He raced on dusty farm roads, and "never lost." He got stopped a couple times for speeding, but convinced the cops that the speedometer was inaccurate so he didn't know how fast he was going. And, Gardner recalled, "I had a lot of dates in that car."

One of them was with a girl named Sandy who is now his wife.

"I rode in it once. The battery was on the floor between my feet," she remembered. "That car is his first love. I'm his second."

Gardner put the car up for sale in 1964 before heading off to serve in the National Guard. A guy named Gary Wolfgang bought it for \$450.

Over the next few decades, Phil and Sandy settled down, went to work for Hewlett Packard and raised three boys.

Sandy tried to track down the car and buy it back for Phil to surprise him for his 50th birthday. She searched online to find Wolfgang, and sent a letter to an address she found in Georgia. No one responded.

In 1994, Phil's brother called him and said he thought he spotted the coupe sitting on a flatbed truck parked near the Boise dump. Years of neglect had left it "completely torn apart," Gardner said, piled in a big heap of twisted metal, its grill missing and its candy apple coat faded to pink.

"I knew it was mine. I recognized the changes I made to it." Gardner recalled. "I said 'Hi Honey.'" Turned out, Wolfgang still owned it. But he wasn't selling. Gardner tracked him down in Marsing where he lived and knocked on his door. Wolfgang told Gardner he was considering giving it to his own son, and that 1,000 people had inquired about it over the years. Gardner shared his story and told him he really wanted it back. And after some peppering, Wolfgang told Gardner that if he ever decided to sell, he would call Gardner first.

Finally in 1998 the phone rang and it was done. 34 years after selling her his 34 Ford Coupe was Gardner's once again.

"When I was able to get the car back, it was heaven. It was just wonderful," Gardner said, remembering the moment he stood alone with it in his own garage. "I said 'Did you miss me?'"

He estimated that he has poured 5 years of his time and \$70,000 into the restoration the second time around, dropping in a fuel injected small block Ford Engine and coating it in a black cherry metallic paint job that must be seen to believe. This car has collected nearly 100 awards that now line their garage walls.

Come meet him and see the coupe up close at the Eagle Fun Days Car Show. You never know, you might stumble upon the wheels of your own teenage years.



