

HOW (NOT) TO BUY A PICKUP TRUCK

By Mike Standish

Back in 1982, when we first bought a summer home in Door County, I was anxious to fit in with the locals. Originally I fit in by paying my bills on time – this made me wildly popular – but I was looking for a more meaningful transition.

My how-to-be-country “bible” was Noel Perrin’s *First Person Rural*, a collection of essays about a Dartmouth College professor and his experience as a sometime farmer in Vermont. This book had whet my appetite for country life and I believed entry would be facilitated with the purchase of a pickup truck.

There were rumors of perfectly good trucks being sold for only \$100. A working truck at this price would satisfy both my country aspirations and my Yankee frugality. I put out the word with local friends and trades people. I imagined rolling down County B in a vintage truck that made my summertime neighbors green with envy. Why, I might even be mistaken for a local!

Sometime after putting the word out, Mark Riederer my friend and plumber called and said he thought he had located such a vehicle. It was in a barn off of County O, just south of Sturgeon Bay. Mark’s phone call had me vibrating with excitement. I ran to the library to reread Perrin’s essay on “Buying a Pickup Truck.”

The plan was to meet at Mark’s house and then go over in his pickup. I didn’t want the seller to know that I drove a German sedan. He may have fought in World War Two and still harbor some bitterness. I would at all times act cool and unconcerned.

Mark and I rolled into the farmyard, but there was no truck to be seen. I started to panic. I believed this was the truck for me and if it had already been sold I would have been devastated. Mr. Rankin, the farmer, lumbered out of his house and quickly looked me up and down. He knew that I knew that he knew that I wasn’t a local. Now I was afraid he wouldn’t sell it to me because I was a “flatlander” and unworthy to possess such local credentials.

“Howdy” said Rankin, “so you want to buy a

pickup truck.” Under the pressure, the best I could do was warble back “You betcha.”

“It’s been in the barn all winter” he said. “We’ll have to haul it out.” Stored away from the elements. It was too good to be true. The barn doors swung open and I could hear the celestial choir itself as I gazed upon my truck for the first time.

She was beautiful. A 1950 Chevy 6000. (I originally thought it was a Chevy 60, but I later found out that two numbers had broken off the chrome designation.) She was blue. Not just any blue, but a strong solid workman’s blue. A blue that said something about you and the great country we lived in. An American blue.

We pushed that beauty out of the barn so that Rankin could do a little work on her in the sunlight. I took a moment to walk around “Old Blue” (that’s what I would call her). There was no mistaking that Old Blue had been a working truck. Her low walled bed had been built up with sideboards to carry higher loads. All the windows were cracked except for the driver’s side of the windshield. The running boards were none too sturdy. The blue paint came off on your hand when you ran it down the side of the body. But the most amazing thing about Old Blue was the huge dents all over the body. These were not ordinary dents from wear and tear. I couldn’t imagine the impact necessary to push the heavy sheet metal in four inches with a 20-inch spread. “It looks like they’ve been herding boulders with this truck,” Mark whispered, carefully covering his mouth with his hand.

Rankin was finished with his work. The big moment was about to begin. He was going to start her up. I knew I shouldn’t expect too much. Old Blue had been in the barn for the last five months and she might be too crotchety to start right off. Rankin smashed the gas pedal up and down about ten times. He pulled out the choke, depressed the gas with his heel while nudging his toe over to the starter button on the floor. Whining, grinding, and finally...varooooomm! With a big cloud of blue smoke surging out the exhaust, Old Blue had started. On the very first

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try. And after being shut down all winter. What a machine!

Rankin's smile was so big I thought his ears were going to fall off his head. After goosing the gas a couple of times he slowly pushed in the choke and Old Blue settled down into the beautiful hum of a well-tuned engine (except for the missing muffler). He stepped out and opened the hood. The air filter was a piece of wire mesh. There was no oil filter because, as Rankin explained, "The oil filter was an option." I was ready for the test drive.

"Can you drive a three-speed stick" he asked. "Sure," I responded. "Well," as he began to clarify some of Old Blue's idiosyncrasies, "you should know that this transmission doesn't go into second. Just first and third. But don't worry. I'm throwing in another transmission into the deal. That one will work in all three gears."

Slipping into the seatbeltless bench, I tried to check my rearview mirrors but there weren't any. Mr. Rankin told me not to worry about the parking brake because it was frozen in the off position. The very good news was that there were only 13,000 miles on the odometer. I was getting a truck that was practically brand new!

Depressing the clutch, I dropped into first and started to spin out onto County O. I had Old Blue up to a good solid 20 and attempted to shift into second. No luck. Then I remembered there was no second and dropped her into third. With a slight shudder of initial disapproval Old Blue started to respond. Forty...forty-five...fifty miles an hour.

I didn't know if the speed was due to the beautifully balanced engine or the rather steep hill we were going down on County O. I also noticed that Old Blue didn't steer with the same light hand necessary with my German sedan. The lack of steering response coupled with the sudden attempts to plunge off the road might have bothered some less skilled drivers, but I recognized it as an enjoyable element of the country life.

Yes, I was satisfied and completely sold on this truck. Time to turn around and bring her back. I stepped on the brake pedal and it went to the floor and stayed there. Grabbing the wheel with my right hand and peering over the dash, I grabbed the brake pedal with my left hand and tried to pump it manually. I wasn't getting the desired result.

The bottom of the long hill was coming up. (This kind of reminded me of years earlier when I was riding with my older cousins — college men — in Missouri. The steering wheel of their car came off in the driver's hand. It made for a hilarious few seconds.) I managed to hold on and started running uphill. Gravity took hold and slowed us down. Finally stopped, I turned around and at about five miles per hour headed back to the farm.

Rankin laughed at my adventure. "I forgot to put in brake fluid. You'll always want to carry a jug of that with you. So, what do think?" I told him that I wanted to buy it.

Invited in for negotiations, I urgently whispered to Mark "What should I offer?" Mark had a somewhat bewildered, dumbfounded look and offered no suggestion. My mind raced with doubt. Offer too little and risk being thrown out.

Offer too much and forever wear the mantle of being slickered by farmer Rankin. "What do you think about one hundred dollars?" I suggested.

Suddenly, my worst fears were realized. Rankin's voice exploded with anger. "One hundred? ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS???!!! No sir. No sir. NO SIR!!! This is a damn fine pickup truck." I could feel myself shrink beneath his verbal blows.

Calming slightly, Rankin looked me directly in the eye and said "One hundred twenty-five and not a penny less." The deal was struck. When I gave him my check, Rankin looked at my "big city" signature, winked and said "If I had seen your signature before now, I would have asked for one hundred fifty."

Epilogue

Old Blue served the family faithfully for over ten years. I admit to putting a few bucks in her. When we moved up full time, I knew we had to upgrade to something we could actually drive into town. I wrote up a "for sale" sign and put Old Blue out on County B. A few nights later, there was a knock on the door at about 11 PM. A slightly intoxicated passerby decided he wanted to buy Old Blue. I mentioned some of the minor problems he might encounter, but he ignored my advice and declared that this would be his primary transportation. I accepted his money. This was someone who obviously didn't know how to buy a pickup truck.

