



Teens master the clutch

Story and photos by Larry Edsall

Back when I was learning to drive—and perhaps it was the same for you, if you are of a certain age, I had no choice but to learn how to drive a car with a manual transmission, because that's all my parents owned. Parked in our garage was the nine-passenger 1960 Chevrolet station wagon my folks bought new, and in the driveway was the 1957 Ford sedan my parents bought from my grandmother after my grandfather died and Grandma moved up to his '59.

Both the big, pale yellow Chevy and the two-tone red and white Ford had “three on the tree” transmissions. If I wanted to drive, I had to learn how to manipulate those levers while doing the three-pedal dance down in the driver's-side foot well.

Like everyone else who has learned to drive a stick shift—and to push more pedals than you have feet with which to push them—my learning curve frequently left the cars bucking like broncos or simply stalling out to a state involving neither motion nor sound (well, at least no sound from beneath the hood, though there might be plenty of noise from within the passenger compartment).

But with patient parents and personal persistence, like so many others, I finally got the hang of it and even became skilled enough to deal with the treacherous and steeply angled Ninth Street hill, where rolling backward when the stoplight changed could mean rolling right back across live railroad tracks!

These sometimes terrifying if nonetheless nostalgic memories were rekindled as I drove from my home in Phoenix to the Scottsdale Automobile Museum to cover the Hagerty Driving Experience, a program designed to teach young drivers how to drive cars—especially classic cars—equipped with manual transmissions. Nowadays, maybe five percent of new vehicles roll off an assembly line with a manual transmission bolted to the engine.

Frankly, in this era of multitasking, that's not necessarily a bad thing: have you ever tried to text and drink a latte while shifting from second to third gear?

But if you like driving older cars, the multitasking you face as a driver today involves shifting for yourself, because back in the days when today's classics were just cars, automatic transmissions were about as rare as a manual gearbox is now.

Thus teaching young drivers to shift is only part of the Hagerty program's mission. As the world's largest insurer of classic vehicles, Hagerty also hopes to interest younger drivers in older cars and in the classic car hobby.

To do this, Hagerty invites its classic car-owning customers to share their cars with young drivers from their

Jonathan Klinger (left, second from top) of Hagerty Insurance explains the operation of a manually operated clutch as part of the classroom session that precedes behind-the-wheel training.

community. Hagerty launched its driving experience in the summer of 2011 as part of the inaugural Classic Car Appreciation Day, a national day of old car festivities sanctioned by decree of the US Senate.

Hagerty makes arrangements to block off a section of private pavement—here in the Phoenix area, it was the driveways in front of the Scottsdale Automobile Museum at the west end of the old dealer row on McDowell Road. Hagerty also provides instruction and lunch. In addition to its clientele's privately owned classics, the program has become supported by the Ford Motor Company, which provides some brand new cars for the youngsters to drive. For the Hagerty driving day at Scottsdale, young drivers could choose among a Triumph and an Alfa Romeo from the 1950s, another 1980s-vintage Alfa, a 1960 Ford Galaxie, a 1969 Chevrolet Corvette Stingray, a souped-up Dodge Neon owned by the Russo and Steele classic car auction company, and a trio of spanking new 2013 Fords: a pair of Mustang GTs and a Focus ST.

With morning and afternoon sessions, some 40 young drivers got to learn how to shift for themselves, as well as some basic automotive maintenance tips, and had plenty of time to drive several cars—vehicles old and new—and to experience their nuances, their similarities and their differences, including the fact that no two clutches—even those in a pair of brand-new Mustangs—have quite the same feel.

Some of the young drivers said afterward they liked how much more involved with the vehicle they felt while driving with a stick shift. Some were surprised with how little room there was inside some of the old sports cars. Some were amazed at how much they liked driving the big and roomy 1960 Ford Galaxie, though they admitted to being intimidated at first by the classic's humongous size.

The big green Ford is owned by Tom Jones, a member of the Sun City West Automotive Restoration Club.

“Part of our mission statement is to mentor youth,” Jones said of the club, which has recruited more than 300 members in 18 months and is raising money to construct a 10-bay shop and classic car showroom.

Jones laments that now, cars are repaired by plugging in a computer and reading engine codes, instead of “listening to the engine and developing a solution.”

But there were no codes or engine-management computers back when Jones' big Ford was rolling off the assembly line, nor when Henry Ford was building the 1919 Model T that Jones' wife owns. Jones' latest project is the restoration of a stock 1932 Ford 5-window sedan with a four-cylinder engine instead of the famed flathead V8.

1969 Stingray owner Warren Smith of Phoenix said he saw bringing his classic for youngsters to drive as “payback” for his childhood love of cars and his dream of someday owning such a car.

Smith had just installed a new clutch in his Corvette



KEEP RIGHT >>



Stopping and pulling away from a stop are among major challenges of learning to drive a stick shift, at any age. And it's not just driving that is shared at the Hagerty Driving Experience. Jonathan Klinger (bottom left) discusses maintenance tips, including checking oil level. Before driving, Jim Bauder shows what's beneath the hood of his Triumph.

but said he wasn't worried about it being damaged by an inexperienced driver.

"Kids learn today to drive in front of the TV, through video games," Smith said. "That's not right."

"If I can get one of them interested in classic cars, my job is done."

Jim Bauder of Scottsdale said he had hesitation—"a lot"—about turning over his beautiful blue baby, his 1968 Triumph TR250, to youngsters with little or no experience shifting a manual transmission.

But, he said, "I taught my three children to drive a stick and had only one failure"—his daughter burning up his car's clutch. But he fixed the car and she tried again and liked the stick-shift experience so much—and became so skilled—that she bought a manually equipped Honda Civic, even though she was living in San Francisco, where there's hardly a level street to be found.

The course for the Hagerty driving day in front of the Scottsdale museum was basically an oval interrupted in three places by stop signs, so the young drivers would get used not only to starting but to stopping, which can be just as difficult since, once again, the gears must be shifted and the pedals properly manipulated.

And while the pavement appeared flat, there was just enough of an uphill slant that pulling away from one of the stop signs proved to be a test of patience for driver and car owner.

But the owners were exceedingly patient, and the young drivers expressed their appreciation for such patience.

"He helped me a lot and was very supportive," 17-year-old Paul Heinrich said after repeatedly stalling out a 1958 Alfa Romeo Giulietta Spyder Veloce owned by Mark Esbenshade of Scottsdale.

For his part, Esbenshade simply brushed off any strain on his car's components by saying, "hey, somebody taught me to drive stick" when Esbenshade was an inexperienced driver.

Reasons why the young drivers showed up were varied.

Heinrich said his mother wanted him to learn how to drive a stick because it was something she never learned.

Brittany Fielden, 15, of Tempe said her family owns a manually-shifted Toyota 4Runner and she needs to learn how to shift so she can drive it.

Sisters Michelle and Melanie Mousel arrived wearing their Mousel Racing Team T-shirts. Their father is a serious drag racer. Michelle also races, though only in cars with automatic transmissions.

And then there was Breslin Sibley, a 16-year-old from Tolleson. He was there because his mother, Dorrie, wants to be sure that if he's ever out in any car with friends who might be drinking, her son will be able to step in as designated driver and get everyone home safe and sound. ■

