

Here Comes the Judge

A story about license plates

By Bob Stein

On July 3, 1951, John and Clara L. Bahr of Orono, Nebraska, drove their 1941 Ford to Al Lundstrom Motors, the local Studebaker dealer. They were farmers, and no doubt had looked carefully at the new models on the market. The 6-cylinder Champion was known to be rugged and efficient, and would have been a good economical choice. However, the car that caught their eye was a Shermansosh Green Studebaker Land Cruiser, the manufacturer's top-of-the-line luxury model.



Clara and John Bahr. Courtesy of Vickie Barr McClain.

The Land Cruiser was a long-wheelbase sedan with suicide doors, and the more refined version of Studebaker's bullet-nose styling. It also had Studebaker's all-new overhead valve V-8 engine, one of the most advanced engines available from any car maker. This particular car was equipped with the optional overdrive transmission, wet air cleaner, windshield wiper, Clewinator heater, wide-white sidewall tires, and full wheel covers. It had been built on March 20th, and shipped by rail to Lundstrom Motors on June 18th.

Salesman Clayton McClain wrote up the deal, which allowed \$400 trade-in for the Bahrs' ten-year-old Ford. They paid the balance of \$1,950 in cash. The selling price of \$2,350 included a spare tire and tube, and 15 gallons of gasoline.

About the same time, Vernon D. Hinchings Jr., the assistant city attorney for the City of Norfolk, Virginia, was issued Virginia license plate number

9-000 for his personal car, also a new 1951 Studebaker Land Cruiser. Hinchings became known for being Norfolk's only sitting traffic court judge, and made it into the Guinness Book of Records for presiding over more than a million cases during his 26 years on the bench. In 1978, when the National Bar Association recommended an annual case load of no more 18,000 a year, Hinchings saw more than 65,000 (fewer than five percent were appealed). The plates were used for the year of issue, then stored in Hinchings' garage.

The Bahrs kept their Studebaker for nearly 30 years, and even then it remained in the family, when they gave it to their son, Orville, on January 27, 1980. Orville parked the car in his barn, and there it remained surrounded by hay bales until 1987 when it was sold to daughter, Glenda, at auction. She and her husband brought the car to Omaha shortly afterwards. They had it repainted the original Shermansosh Green in 1990, putting only a few hundred miles on the car during the next seven years.

On November 16, 1998, John E. Waddell and friend Dewey Hlaviland bought the Studebaker. John explained, "Oronno is my home town and I knew Orville Bahr and his wife, Andrea. I also knew the man

who worked for Al Lundstrom and sold the car. The dealership still stands in Oronno." John and Dewey went through almost every operating system on the Studebaker, and also had the interior redone in the original style.

During this time, John became the sole owner when Dewey bought a Hudson Hornet and sold his half of the Studebaker to John. In 2004, when John began to cull his own collection, he

decided the Land Cruiser would be one of the cars to go. My first car was a 1951 Studebaker Land Cruiser, and I had been looking for another one for quite a while. When I stumbled across John Waddell's Land Cruiser for sale, I was rather surprised, as the cars were relatively rare even now. Only a very few had been seen for sale in many years. Naturally, the ad caught my attention, and I was immediately hooked. It was in my driveway a week later.

Which brings us to Judge Hinchings' license plates. Red Lang, a member of our AACA Tidewater Region, had obtained the judge's plates a few years after I bought the Studebaker, and immediately contacted me and insisted I had to have the license plates for my Studebaker.

I already had the car registered on permanent Virginia antique plates, so I stuck them on a shelf until just a couple of years ago, when I made the mistake of selling the car to make room for a 1941 Packard. Happily, I got the car back within a few months, and this time it was registered on Judge Hinchings' plates. They are original and still in excellent shape, and will stay on the car as long as I own it. Which in my judgment, will be for a long time to come.



Judge Vernon Hinchings. Courtesy of Sargeant Memorial Collector, Norfolk Public Library.

