

Women of AMC

By: Mary L. Brancato (July, 2002)

It was a very good year, until...



When I was 17, back in 1974, my dad gave me his 10-year-old car after he bought himself a new one. My freedom machine was a 1964 Rambler Ambassador that I named "Rosie." She was a two-tone: maroon over metallic rose. It was the ultimate party car: her seats laid back flat as a mattress; she even had air conditioning and a "Vibratone" speaker system (a trippy kind of reverb for its AM radio). Anytime my friends and I wanted to cruise, it was unanimous that we took my car. I adored my wondrous automobile.

One warm autumn night, about six months after Dad gave me Rosie's keys, I went with my two best friends Linda and Frankie to the drive-in. We brought along our usual supplies – a 12-pack of tallboys. By the time the second feature started, there were a dozen empties bagged up in the back seat. Then a thunderstorm interrupted the movie and it was time to leave. I knew I was in no shape to drive, so I asked Linda to take the wheel. The rain was torrential and Linda's condition was no better than mine. That night, we murdered my beloved car by crashing it into the viaduct between 9th and 11th on Cook Street. Rosie was taken to the junkyard; I was taken to the hospital for reconstructive surgery on my face. I left the hospital looking like the Bride of Frankenstein and my last year of high school wasn't much fun.

The scars on my face ultimately healed, but the scars on my soul never did. Ever since that night, I've mourned the loss of my first car. It became my mission in life to find another 1964 Rambler Ambassador exactly like her. I suppose, in my mind, that car represented my youth – the last of my carefree years that crashed to a halt along with the car. If I could find another Rosie, I'd be 17 again, and maybe I could convince myself that awful night never happened.

For 25 years I scoured classic car magazines and newspaper classifieds in vain. Then, when I discovered cyberspace, I'd spend hours at a time searching for her on the computer. About three years ago, an internet ad caught my eye. A photo showed the driver's side of a 1964 Ambassador stranded on a San Francisco street. Even though the paint was peeling and it couldn't budge from its spot along the curb, I could tell – *it was Rosie!* I sent the owner \$280, got the title and had the car shipped 2,000 miles to me on a flatbed truck.

I won't tell you how much money I've poured into her so far. For a person who lives from paycheck to paycheck, it's embarrassing. I will say I've made good use of my home equity line of credit. The engine has been rebuilt, the interior vinyl repaired, the dash re-skinned, the bumpers re-chromed, all air conditioning components are new, and her body has been repainted. My to-do list is still two pages long, but we're making progress. At least she runs now and, to me, looks gorgeous. Rosie is back in town!

A family reunion

This year, 2002, marks the 100th Anniversary of the Rambler. That's a very big deal for those of us who love Ramblers. To commemorate the event, a huge celebration and car show was held July 24-28 in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Kenosha is the birthplace of the Rambler, where the American Motors plant used to be located. Thousands of cars made their way "home" to Kenosha. Some traveled luxuriously on trailers. Others, like Rosie, made it on their own four wheels, a wing and a prayer.

On Wednesday (July 24), my friend Bob and I left Springfield, Illinois with a cooler full of soda, Rosie's trunk filled with every kind of car fluid imaginable, and great big grins on our faces. About an hour later, at a truck stop in Bloomington, we were greeted by a Kenosha-bound caravan. We saw license plates representing almost the entire southeast part of the country. Now an Illinois Ambassador joined the procession of Pacers, Gremlins, a Jeep, an AMX, a Rambler Classic, a Rebel and a Rogue. The people were so warmhearted – just like family. When Rosie started leaking transmission fluid and smoking and lurching several hundred miles down the road, everyone pulled off to the highway shoulder and helped. I found out my car had been spewing an oily red mist all over the Gremlin that followed us the last 50 miles. The driver only smiled and said, "Thank you. I needed a wax job anyway."

We poured transmission fluid in her, made it to the next town and got more fluid and some sealer at an auto parts store. It was amazing how no one was mad that I'd caused a 90-minute delay. In fact, several members of the caravan tried to console me. They related how their cars had forced similar stops – one of them even made the group backtrack 250 miles. Another guy vowed they'd never leave me behind. He would have taken his car off his trailer, put mine on and I could have driven his pristine Rambler Classic the rest of the way to Kenosha. It was all for one, and one for all.



The five-day celebration officially opened with a parade of Ramblers, Nashes and AMCs representing virtually all years and models, starting with the first one built in 1902. There were cruises to hamburger joints every night, a 60's music concert, and tours of the Daimler-Chrysler Plant. On Friday there was a huge swap meet where I found a used (no dings!) grille for only \$75. With a little steel wool and elbow grease, Rosie will soon have a shiny new smile.

Then, on Saturday July 27, came the big finale – the car show. At least 1,000 automobiles were lined up in rows along the show field – from the adorable little clown-car Metropolitans to the souped-up Javelins. Rosie was competing with a formidable group of Ambassadors built from 1963 to 1969. Bob and I parked her, primped her, and then set out our lawn chairs. People from all walks of life, with nothing in common but a love of these cars, stopped and visited and made us feel like we were all old friends. I talked, smiled and laughed so much my jaw ached.

I was also privileged to meet some former AMC employees: one who may have installed Rosie's engine, the guy who likely wired her electrical system, and a man who probably dressed Rosie up in all her shiny chrome. They let me know how rare she is because of her FM radio, bucket seats, automatic on the console, tilt wheel and power windows. AMC workers used to call this limited model the "Kenosha Cadillac." By now I was so proud – if pride is a deadly sin, I am doomed.

Everyone who was a member of the AMC/Rambler car club got to vote for their favorite cars in all the various categories. So many cars stole my heart that day, it was nearly impossible to choose. Of course, I did make sure to vote for Rosie in the "Diamond in the Rough" category – even though she's come a long way, I know she's still far from perfect. Judges also roamed the field, poked their heads under hoods and wrote secret notes on sheets of paper.

That night, Bob and I crashed the awards banquet. We were almost out of money by then and it would have cost us \$50 to attend, so we snuck in late and sat at the bar. We were curious to see which of our new friends would leave Kenosha with trophies. As far as Rosie and I were concerned, the trip was for the adventure – it wasn't about awards. But when they got to our Ambassador category and announced Rosie had won second place, I reacted just like Halle Berry at the Oscars. I couldn't help it. The poor old girl has been through a lot (and so has *this* poor old girl).

White knuckles around the wheel

Bob and I took off for home Sunday morning (July 28). Everything went fine until Bloomington, when I noticed smoke pouring out the back – *oh boy, here we go again*. We stopped at McDonald's and checked the transmission fluid. Empty. We polished off the last of the sealer, topped it with fluid and made tracks out of there. Right before we reached a rest stop just north of Springfield, the smoking resumed, along with the lurching. We turned off at the exit and gave Rosie the last of our fluid supply. I noticed that the drip on the pavement had now become a flow, so we jumped in, floored it and prayed. By the time we got two blocks from my house, we could only coast. But Rosie, bless her sweet engine, made it to my driveway.

I do love that car. She took me to Kenosha in style, showed all pretty and proud, won an award, and then made sure she got me home before she collapsed.

You know, home equity loans are really good to have – you get a much bigger refund at tax time. Mark my words – someday, Rosie will win *first* prize.

And I will be 17 forever.

