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My 1970 Volvo 164

BY ERIC DOBSON



It was 46 years ago, but I remember it vividly. Walking around the showroom at Fowler Motor Cars. Sitting and waiting for my father to finish whatever it was fathers do when buying a car. After what seemed like hours, we climbed into our brand new 1970 Volvo 164.

Those were the days when purchasing a new car was a big event, and upon arriving home we showed it off to all our neighbors. The car was parked at the curb as several of them sat inside, took in the luxurious leather bucket seats, and oohed and aahed over the beauty of the new machine. Some tried out the reclining seats and made jokes that my six-year-old mind didn't understand.

People don't believe I remember that day so vividly. And they can't believe I still own the car.

My parents, brother Dennis, and I with our brand new 164 in November 1970.

In 1979, my parents purchased a 265 wagon, and the 164 was relegated to the pos-

session of two teenage boys—my brother, Dennis, and me. By 1987, she was mine





My parents gave me the 164 as a present when I graduated from college in 1987.

alone, a graduation present from my parents.

For her 40th birthday in 2010, I began considering what needed to be done to keep her on the road for another 40 years. In summer 2015, I attended my first Volvo-only get-together and fully realized what my obligations were to her. Since I had missed her 40th, the plan was to have the work completed for her 45th birthday.

Road Trips

When she and I were young, my family made numerous drives to the Virginia countryside and mid-Atlantic beaches. Our first major expedition took us to Colorado and the Rocky Mountains. Our reliable 164 navigated the great switchbacks taking us up to Pike's Peak, probably the highest point she has traveled.

In the Rockies, we stayed at a primitive campground that offered no amenities or services. My parents slept in a full-size tent, and my brother and I shared a pup tent. "Shut up and quit sniffing!" he yelled one night. "No, you shut up!" I responded. It soon dawned on us that neither of us was making all the sniffing and grunting noises. I don't think we moved for 15 minutes. The next morning, we found a very substantial calling card directly in front of our tent. I was seven and I was scared. That night I

demanded to sleep in the car. No way was our late-night visitor going to get me in the safe protection of the Volvo. I slept in the car the remaining nights at that campground.

In those days, we lived economically and carried a huge Coleman cooler in the trunk of the car, making our own lunches from our store of supplies. Not

every car had that kind of room—tents, sleeping bags, camping stove, and cooler. My parents also bought and stashed several cases of Coors, then unavailable on the East Coast, on the floor in the back. Fortunately, Dennis and I didn't really miss the legroom.

That trip included other great destinations, such as the Wisconsin Dells, Yellowstone Park, the Grand Tetons, and the Great Salt Lake. My parents were adventurous, and in the Badlands, they ignored a "Do Not Enter" sign and headed down a dirt road for miles until the ruts got too deep and the car was struggling to clear. She was a good sport backing up about a mile to U-turn on a wooden bridge.

Back then, if you saw another Volvo, you would flash your brights. I don't know whether it was a pride of ownership sign or a statement "I got your back" in case you broke down. Somewhere in Kansas, we had a religious moment as we came across a black 144 stopped on the side of the road. My dad pulled over. I watched in horror as four nuns in full habit walked toward our car. Our family doesn't agree whether it was one, two, three or all four nuns that squeezed in. But we rode like that for the better part of an hour before dropping them off in a town where they were able to get help. We were



The backseat had plenty of room for two young boys on our long trips.

good Volvo Samaritans that day, and those sisters blessed us many times over during the ride and, it seemed, in the years to come.

In 2013, I had the pleasure of driving her to my 30th high school reunion—the same car I had driven to my high school prom in 1983, that I had learned to drive in, and that many of my friends remembered from our teenage adventures. We reminisced about homecoming, football games, ice cream runs, swim meets, soccer games, and movies. And we recalled how my parents would send Dennis and me out for gas, glad we were the ones who had to wait in the long lines during President Carter's odd-even rationing in response to the 1979 oil crisis. She has also had her share of nicknames from Burgundy Bomber to Speedy to Purple Haze (as she faded from the sun).

After college, my brother had the car a few years before he decided he wanted something a bit more reliable (read Toyota). The car was a great moving truck for my friends and me, with room for most everything a recent college grad owned in the trunk and backseat, a mini-trailer attached to her hitch when necessary.

The road trips continued. In 1990, a planned excursion to Vermont led to a spontaneous jaunt to Montreal. We snapped a proof of distance picture (and maybe said a prayer) at the Basilica Notre Dame. Once back in D.C., we passed a tourist horse-and-carriage with jingling bells. A few miles later, the bells continued ringing, and we discovered the complete exhaust system was dragging on the ground. Our Basilica stop and the Kansas nuns' blessings had done their job.

Repairs

Sideswiped by a VW bus in the high school parking lot and rear-ending a VW Bug in the rain with a car full of friends on the way to crew practice; the Volvo did her job, dipping and absorbing the impact. Backed into outside a pizza parlor while sharing some slices with friends. The most severe collision was on the interstate one snowy night, rushing to Sears to get some parts for our washing machine. I hit a bump and lost control in the fresh snow, crashing into the Jersey barrier

My brother and I slept in the little pup tent when we got a nighttime visitor.





My car spent almost a year at EVOLVe Custom Restoration in El Cajon, Calif. where it underwent a complete restoration.

at about 35 mph. Other drivers came rushing forward, probably expecting to see great injury, but instead they found only a very unhappy young man. I started the car up, but couldn't drive home as the fan was crushed up against the radiator (the imprint is still there), so I pulled her parallel to the road and waited for a tow.

She was not without her breakdowns. Years ago, for example, my father was

stranded in Pennsylvania during a recruitment trip for the Department of the Navy. At that time, there weren't any Volvo dealers in that part of the state. Our technician at home advised him to get the part he needed from VW dealer. That has always been the trick of Volvo—knowing where a part came from.

Restoration

"It will start at \$100,000." "It will take three to five years." Impossible.

Finding the right restoration company proved harder than I'd thought. I spent the better part of two years talking and thinking over who should renovate my car while appreciating its history. It seemed like most restoration companies were interested in hot rods, American cars, or specific models of European cars. I needed someone who

The rear seats and the shelf above the backrest were redone. Everything else is original.



The seats were beautifully redone in leather and look fantastic.

would love the car, but also knew the Volvo idiosyncrasies. I checked with those who advertise in the major publications.

Ultimately, I decided to send my car clear across the country and completely out of my control—from Virginia to San Diego, where she stayed for almost a year. It came down to the company's enthusiasm for the car and story as much as availability and timing of the project.

The challenge was to continue to keep the car as original as possible. Forty years of routine, what-is-necessary maintenance, ▶

The straight six with dual carbs provides a beautiful ride. The air horn is a flea market find that sounds huge.





Forty-six years later, we could take the family picture again. The DMV also reissued us the original plate numbers.

with no mods or incorrect changes. My local mechanic has been very diligent about helping decide what “needs to be done” versus “what can wait.” While maybe not perfect, she was fully operational and this allowed the restoration to focus on the body. The shop has subsequently said that I set a record for the most Bondo and rust ever on a car. But they are in Southern California.

The car was taken down to bare metal, completely repaired, and repainted. The 1970 164 is similar but not identical to other 164s, so a donor from a different year could supply parts for grafting. A new nose was put on (the prior Jersey-barrier damage was too severe). The original carpeting was in good shape, needing only some stain on the faded parts. The shelf behind the rear seat got new carpet and backing, the door panels were stained to match and new structure put behind them. The seats were beautifully redone in leather and look awesome. All engine parts were cleaned and tested and the engine itself was painted that fine Volvo red. Trim was straightened, rubber gaskets bought, some new light lenses were installed, and the odometer and speedometer were repaired. New tires were brought in from Tennessee and mounted on the spruced-up wheels.

I had the joy of driving her around California for a few days before she returned East. Even took her to the Mexico border, far exceeding her previous “western-most point” of Salt Lake City. I think she really enjoyed spending 10 months in California, especially during the winter. But she seems glad to be home.

We attended our first car show in October. It featured close to three dozen Volvos. At our second show in November, we were one of two Volvos and got quite a bit of attention for our ownership story.

We are a Volvo family. My parents have owned a 1966 122, 1970 164, 1979 265, 1996 850, and still own a 2010 C30 and 2012 XC60. I have also owned a 1995 850. But without question, my first car remains my best car. ■

Eric Dobson lives in Arlington, Va. and can be reached at eric.dobson@ericdobson.us.



Our 1970 Volvo 164 was purchased on October 14, 1970. The purchase price was \$4,070 plus a/c, AM/FM radio, trailer hitch, shop manual, and roof rack bringing the total to \$4,850—about what a well-accessorized Corvette would have cost, I've been told.

It has an inline 3.0 liter 6-cylinder engine that is rated at 145hp and a wonderful four-speed manual transmission. The dual Strombergs have always been fun to keep adjusted. And we have always kept Michelin 165 SR15s on the car.

In the car world, there is great discussion what is “factory condition” and what is a survivor. Well, she's a survivor. She has a new hood, a new front bumper, new leather seats, a new nose piece, and quite a bit of sheet metal grafted from the donor. The carpeting, door panels, headliner, engine, electrical, and such are original. Doesn't matter what others call or label her—she's mine.

A Few Notes

1. The 164 has always been a fun car to drive. The strong engine and the manual transmission make it suited for the urban environment, but she also loves to get out and just go.
2. The ventilation windows are wonderful for letting in a bit of fresh air. There are also air vents in the wheel wells—it's great to have air blow on your feet when it's hot.
3. The front turn signals sit on the front bumpers. They are prone to being hit as well as shorting out.
4. The four-wheel disc brakes have a brake booster that has failed numerous times.
5. One of my favorite things is washing this car by hand. The contours are wonderful. You wash the roof and slide the sponge down the back pillars and across the rear quarter panel in one fell swoop. Same out front as the hood angles down and wraps around the headlights. It is a joy to wash. All in all, it's a wonderful and unique car.