

A Second Honeymoon

The Wain's 1953 Chevrolet Bel Air Sedan

Owners: Lillian and Richard Wain; Cranberry Township, PA

Restoration by: Guy R. Palermo Auto Body, Wexford, PA

Restoration supervisor: William Hahn

Cranberry resident Dick Wain hated to trade cars in, particularly when they were his old favorites. And once his career became established, he ended the practice. But as a younger man, he reluctantly did whatever needed to be done with the cars he was forced to retire. One of them had been the two-door Chevy Bel Air that he and his bride Lillian gave themselves as a honeymoon gift following their wedding on December 26, 1953. It was a time – and a car – that both of them recalled with genuine affection. But after several years, the newlywed's needs changed, and the car quietly slipped into the second-hand market, disappearing from the family forever.

Wain's aversion to trading actually began in his youth, on Pittsburgh's North Side. There, before his enlistment in the Navy and serving in its World War II Pacific fleet, he briefly held a job which required him to take a blowtorch to restorable Model T Fords and other early production cars, reducing them to tiny pieces. It was a time, toward the end of the Great Depression, when his family simply could not afford the \$5 to \$7 it would cost to rescue an old car from its fate as scrap metal. Wain knew full well that his work had snatched dozens of irreplaceable relics from the reach of would-be restorers – including people like himself – and into the jaws of smoke-belching steel furnaces lining the Mon. And he regretted it.



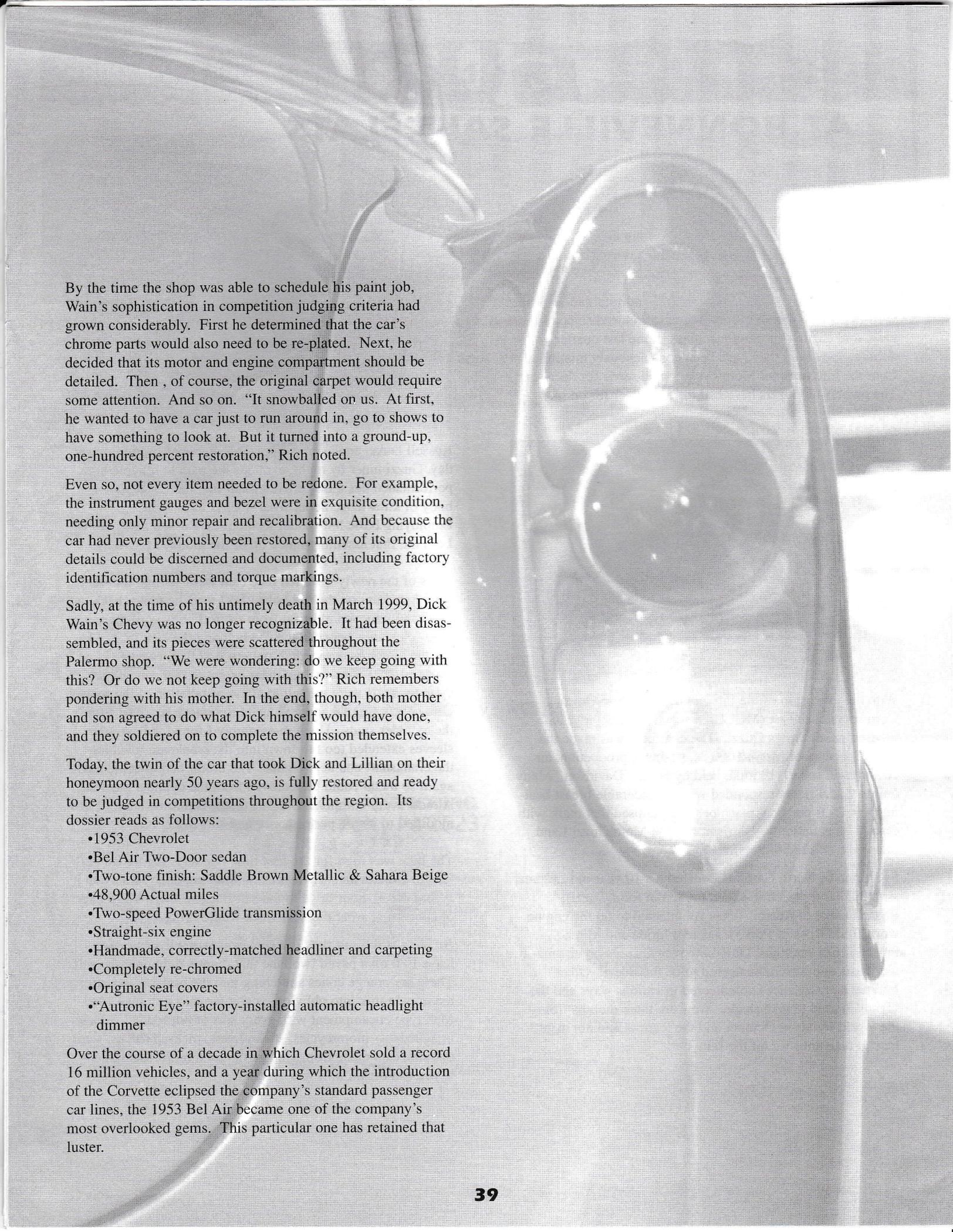
Years later, following his return from battle during which he narrowly survived a Kamakazi attack that almost sank his ship, Wain met, and later married Lillian – a Cranberry farm girl with whom he was to share the rest of his days. It was there, after settling into the life of a maintenance engineer for his brother-in-law's refrigeration company in Zelienople, that Wain's interest in collecting, fixing, and enjoying being surrounded by classic vehicles returned. Only this time around, he was able to pursue his passion in earnest.

“Dad was just an antique car fan; he loved them,” recalled Rich Wain, the 34-year old son who became the family's main liaison to the Palermo shop's restoration work following his father's unexpected death last spring. “He was always looking for bargains on cars, and back around 1985, he heard of an estate sale near Evans City. And along with the estate of this elderly man came his '53 Chevy. So Dad went over and took a look, and it was the exact color, style, interior, and everything else as their old one. It was all original. It had very little rust. And it only had 47,000 miles on the odometer. So he decided to buy it, and the price was right: around \$2,300.”



However with a busy career and a growing collection of other classic American wheels, the Wain's '53 mostly languished in the family garage. It wasn't until ten years later, while moving some farm equipment out of the building, that the father and son decided to see whether they could still drive the old Chevy. As it turned out, they could not – despite their best efforts, they just couldn't get the engine to run right. So they took it to a shop in Zelienople where it stayed for more than a year. But on the way back home, the car again broke down. Then, after another round of mechanical repairs, the car finally hit its stride, and the Wains decided to celebrate with a new coat of paint at Palermo's Auto Body in nearby Wexford.

“We got down to Palermo's. They started stripping the paint off. And dad was saying ‘once we get a new paint job on it, it's going to look pretty nice; we can take it to shows,’” Rich recalled. “So dad started asking ‘what do we get points for at shows? And what do they take points off for at shows?’”



By the time the shop was able to schedule his paint job, Wain's sophistication in competition judging criteria had grown considerably. First he determined that the car's chrome parts would also need to be re-plated. Next, he decided that its motor and engine compartment should be detailed. Then, of course, the original carpet would require some attention. And so on. "It snowballed on us. At first, he wanted to have a car just to run around in, go to shows to have something to look at. But it turned into a ground-up, one-hundred percent restoration," Rich noted.

Even so, not every item needed to be redone. For example, the instrument gauges and bezel were in exquisite condition, needing only minor repair and recalibration. And because the car had never previously been restored, many of its original details could be discerned and documented, including factory identification numbers and torque markings.

Sadly, at the time of his untimely death in March 1999, Dick Wain's Chevy was no longer recognizable. It had been disassembled, and its pieces were scattered throughout the Palermo shop. "We were wondering: do we keep going with this? Or do we not keep going with this?" Rich remembers pondering with his mother. In the end, though, both mother and son agreed to do what Dick himself would have done, and they soldiered on to complete the mission themselves.

Today, the twin of the car that took Dick and Lillian on their honeymoon nearly 50 years ago, is fully restored and ready to be judged in competitions throughout the region. Its dossier reads as follows:

- 1953 Chevrolet
- Bel Air Two-Door sedan
- Two-tone finish: Saddle Brown Metallic & Sahara Beige
- 48,900 Actual miles
- Two-speed PowerGlide transmission
- Straight-six engine
- Handmade, correctly-matched headliner and carpeting
- Completely re-chromed
- Original seat covers
- "Autronic Eye" factory-installed automatic headlight dimmer

Over the course of a decade in which Chevrolet sold a record 16 million vehicles, and a year during which the introduction of the Corvette eclipsed the company's standard passenger car lines, the 1953 Bel Air became one of the company's most overlooked gems. This particular one has retained that luster.