



BENZIE
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The 1950s are often referred to as the "Golden Age of the Automobile." In this era, a car stopped being a mere mode of transportation. Buyers demanded style and manufacturers responded with a variety of products and choices in chrome, colours, tail fins and outrageous grilles. With his one-man garage service, which opened at 430 Dundas St. W. in June 1949, then part of Sidney Township, Ron Bonsor found himself catching many drivers travelling through the Belleville area.



RON
BONSOR

"Dundas Street, then referred to as Highway 2 used to be very busy with through traffic coming from Toronto to communities in eastern Ontario. Highway 401 was not yet there. All kinds of cars used to pass by my shop," recalled Bonsor. He never owned one of those flashy cars himself. His first one was a practical, no-nonsense dark green '28 Model A Ford.

"That's all I could afford back then," he laughed adding that one could get a new basic

Ford car for \$750 to \$800 at the time.

Running a general maintenance service business, he charged about \$1.75 to \$2 an hour in the earlier years. With obvious amusement, he



BRIAN
BONSOR

recalled receiving a tip of \$20 from a Queen's University professor en route to Toronto. Luckily for Bonsor, the professor's car broke down in front of his home and he had to repair it in his backyard garage.

"It was a certainly a lot of money back then," smiled Bonsor.

When he bought the property where his garage is located today in 1946, few homes formed the neighbourhood.

His small garage, which could take in about three cars at a time, was originally a wooden structure that he built in his backyard.

In the beginning, the tools of the trade consisted of four jacks used to hike up the car for a mechanic to get underneath.

"I tell you it was a much dirtier job back then," recalled Bonsor.

Mechanics would use a "creeper" — a flat board with wheels — to lie on and work underneath the car, and a set of hand tools which greatly contrasts to the array of computer technology that currently assists the family-run busi-

head restraints, electronic ignitions, emergency flashers, rear-window defrosters, air bags, antilock brakes, and tape and CD players.

The main source of entertainment for highway travellers came from AM radio stations, added Bonsor's son, Brian, who currently runs the decades-old Bonsor's Garage.

Brian became an apprentice at his father's business in 1972 and has been looking after the operation since his 84-

year-old father retired about five years ago. His own son, Matthew, is an apprentice and is waiting for his licence to continue to run the family business his grandfather started so many years ago.

Observing that when he first set up his business in 1949, many other family-run small garages existed in the Belleville area, Bonsor believed that today his is the only one left in the city.

His son believed that a small business like Bonsor's Garage has survived because people liked to talk directly to the mechanic about their car problems.

Bonsor said his motto, from the very beginning, was just to be honest.

"Belleville is a friendly city but you had to get yourself known before people would come to you. You had to prove yourself to them."

The family operation changed its location over the years: to the corner of Pinnacle and Dundas streets in 1970; eight years later, to a Church Street location and ran the Fina Service Station for 18 years before coming back to its current — and original — location on Dundas Street West in 1984.

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"You certainly could not operate such a business today with just the tools you had back then," laughed Bonsor.

The popular cars back then were Ford, Chevy, Plymouth and Dodge. Sports cars were few in the Belleville area, he said, although Chevy's Corvette came out in 1953 and Ford's Thunderbird in 1954.

"As I recall there were not many cars with features like air conditioning at that time. You could find it in a certain Cadillac, etc. Some of them could upgrade to features like what we call cruise control today. But it was like a warning system that you could program to check the speed limit in which you want to travel. You have to keep your foot on the pedal all the time and the alarm buzzes when you go over the speed limit you'd programmed before."

Gas-guzzlers they were all right, he commented, recalling that the cars would get about 14 to 15 miles a gallon. The maximum speed of most cars was 60 mph. "And that was going 'wide open, — pedal all the way to the floor," he noted.

Since that golden era, car manufacturers introduced many features seemingly intrinsic to today's cars — cruise control, seat belts, safety interlocking door latches, padded dashboards,