

There's no replacement for displacement — except more displacement. In other words, the bigger the engine, the better.

It's a rule — if not one of Newton's laws — that stands to this day. And in 1970, perhaps the last full year of the all-out muscle-car wars that had been escalating since the Pontiac GTO hit the streets in '64, it was the rule of the road.

Close your eyes for a moment and imagine that it's Friday night and you're perched curbside on Detroit's infamous Woodward Avenue. It's dusk and the Big Three's heavy hitters are out in force. At the time, Chevrolet was mopping up the boulevards with its new 450-horsepower LS6 Chevelle, while Ford's big-block Mustang Mach 1 looked downright evil and breathed fire, to boot. And then there was the Hemi. Groomed for the high-banked NASCAR ovals of Daytona and Darlington super-speedways, the 425-horsepower street Hemi was available in everything from the new-for-1970 'Cuda to the Plymouth Road Runner and GTX as well as the Dodge Super Bee, Coronet, Charger and Challenger R/T cars. All were top-drawer muscle machines with hefty sticker prices and healthy appetites for gasoline and insurance premiums.

Finding a lower sticker price usually meant there had to be a corresponding drop in performance expectations. Look down a rung on the musclecar ladder and you were generally greeted by

smaller 383 (Chrysler), 390 (Ford) and 396 (Chevrolet) powerplants.

Whether by design or by accident, the real fun — especially if you were on a tight budget — was down one more level in the ranks of small-block powered mini musclecars. Although Chevrolet had rolled out its new Z28 for 1970, it was a hefty brute. And Ford? Well, the Mustang just wasn't the same without a FoMoCo big block.

Over at Chrysler, the guys had been playing around with the idea of mixing a high-performance small block V8 with a nimble, lightweight body since 1967. And while you could order the Dodge Dart with a 383 big block, the smaller, lighter, 340-powered version handled better and was nearly as quick. Some would argue, in the right hands, even quicker.

By 1970, a new Plymouth sibling had emerged, based on a fast-back version of the A-body Dart. Chrysler, as it turned out, *did* have a replacement for cubic inches. It was called the Duster.

During that era, even high-performance cars often had four-door, grocery-getter counterparts. The Dart, for example, was available with a six-cylinder engine and four doors. Same for the Chevelle. The Road Runner, too, was available with four doors (badged as a Belvedere/Satellite). The Corvette, Camaro, Mustang, Barracuda, Charger and Challenger were joined by another two-door specific vehicle — the swoopy new Duster.

Weighing in at just over 3,000 pounds, it was hundreds of pounds lighter than the Camaro, thanks to its unitized body con-

struction (no frame). And with a 275-horsepower 340 (dynamometer figures showed power to be closer to 315), a four-speed manual transmission and deep 3.91:1 8 3/4-inch rear differential, you had a car capable of humiliating nearly everything short of the top-shelf, high-dollar musclecars. That this feat was achieved with such a mild engine (compared to other small blocks of the day) was nothing short of amazing. Mild? Despite its 2.02-inch intake

valves, it had relatively low compression for a high-performance motor (10.5:1), a mild hydraulic camshaft and was saddled with cast-iron intake and exhaust manifolds. A simple camshaft swap (four-speed 340 Dusters were already equipped with a more radical cam than the automatic cars) and the addition of exhaust headers and aluminum intake manifold could easily yield 350-375 horsepower from a 340, hence the popularity of the durable little engine.

And if that wasn't a big enough hook for you, there was the price — around \$3,000. Typical quarter-mile times for a stock 340 Duster were in the low-to-mid-14-second range at about 100 mph. With some tuning and decent tires (slicks), mid-13-second times were within relatively easy grasp of even the novice driver. A cam, header and intake swap could take you into the 12s, if you could get the thing to hook to the asphalt.

The appreciation of cars such as the Duster increased as the musclecar

was ground to a halt. By '71, big-block, big-cubic-inch speed machines were dropping like flies. Emission regulations, the price of gas and skyrocketing insurance premiums were chiefly to blame for the demise of the high-profile boulevard bruisers.

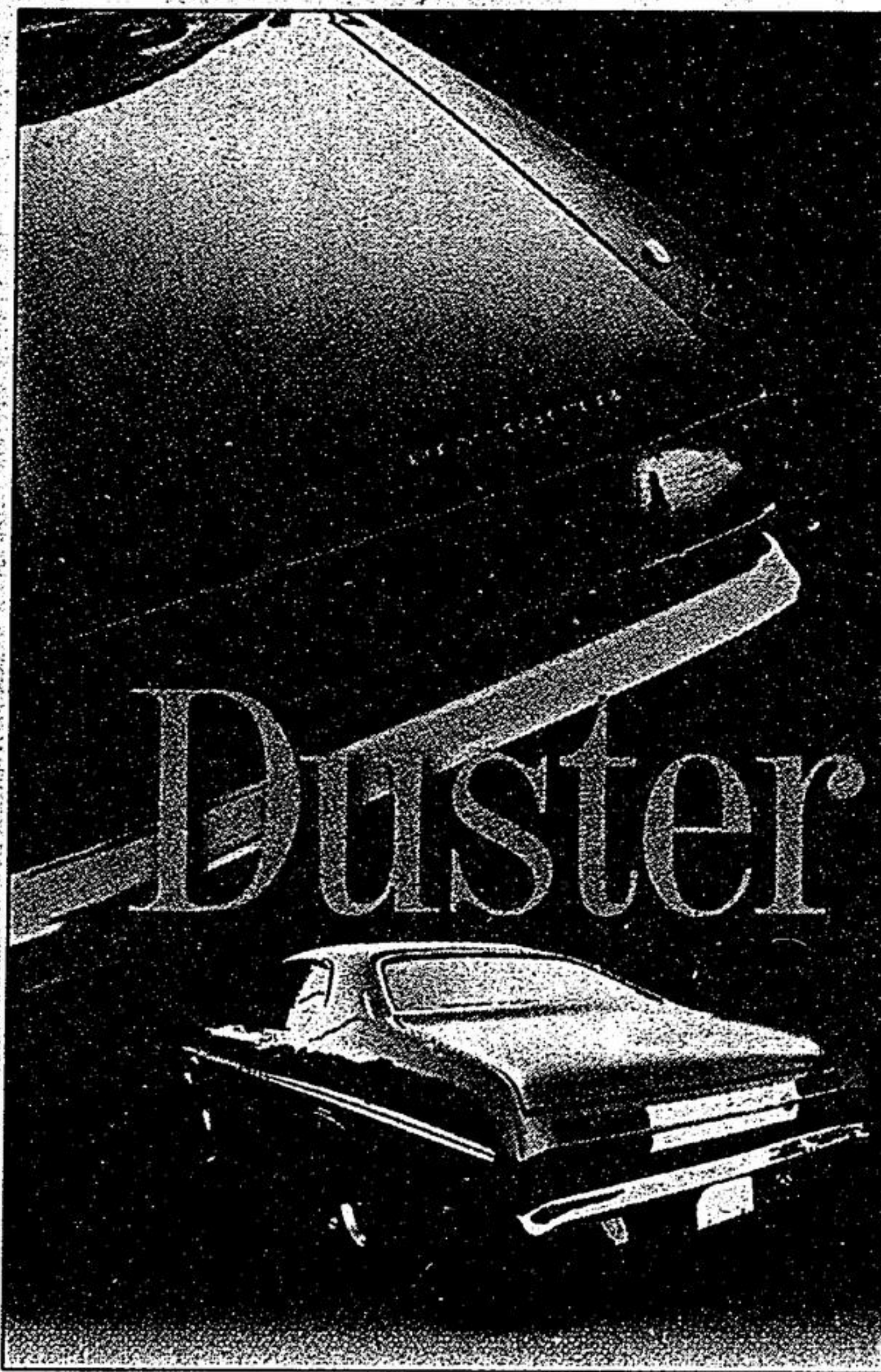
In the meantime, the econo-Duster had gained quite a following as everything from inexpensive family transportation to the darling of corporate fleets the country wide.

While the 340 made the Duster famous, it was really the 318-V8 and 225 Slant-Six cars that by far made up the bulk of the Dusters that roamed the streets.

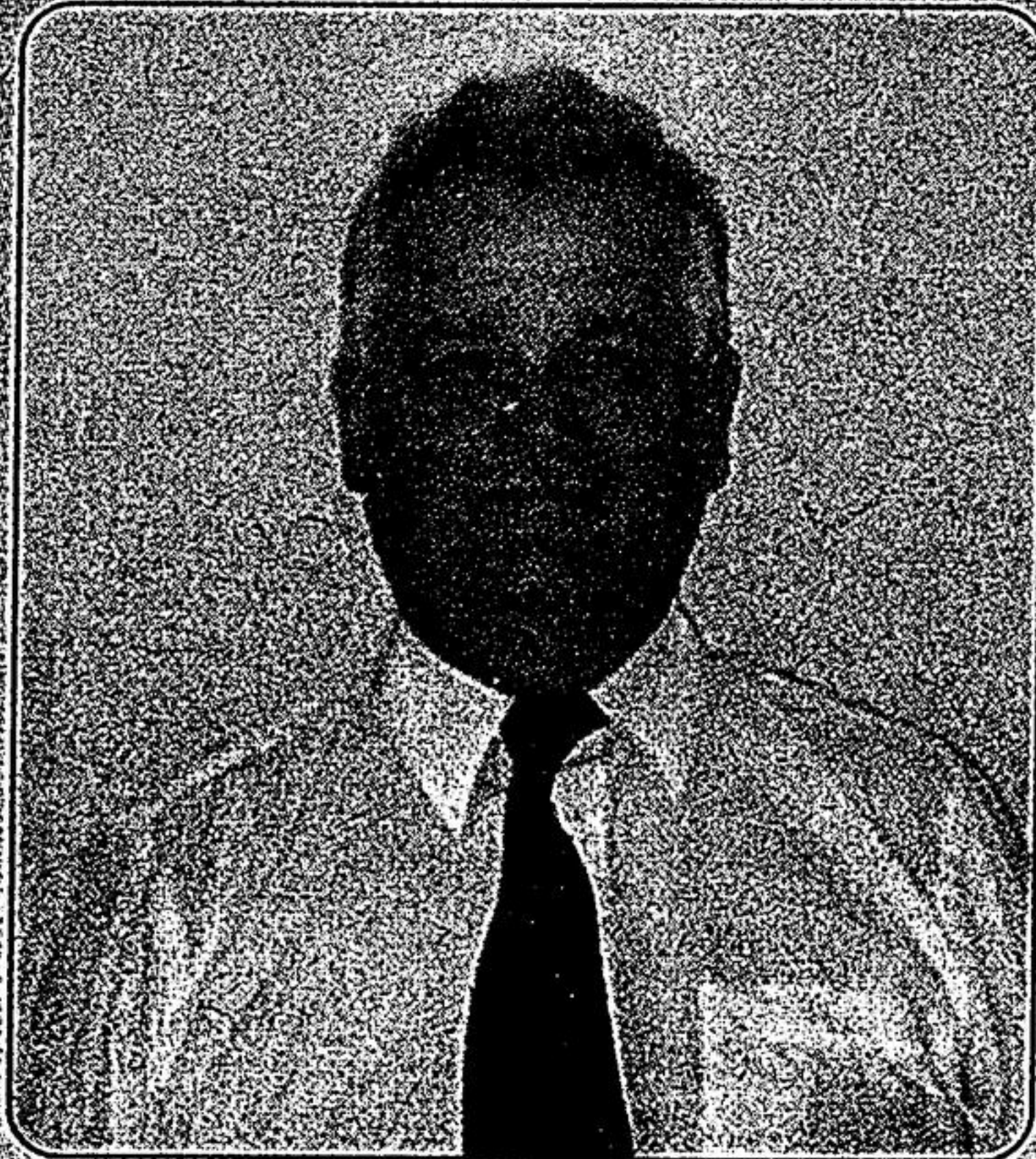
By 1974, the torquey 360 small block had replaced the high-winding 340 as the performance V8. As well, the front sheetmetal had lost its bluntness in favour of a protruding nose whose style found its way to the Aspen and Volare duo later in the decade.

Defanged and growing long in the tooth, the last year for the Duster was 1976 and so ended an era of high-performance budget vehicles. As collectors snap up the famous big-block-powered musclecars of that generation, the Duster is again enjoying a resurgence in popularity. While its acceptance may never again reach the height of the early 1970s, the 340 Duster will have neverending status as a legend in the annals of automotive lore.

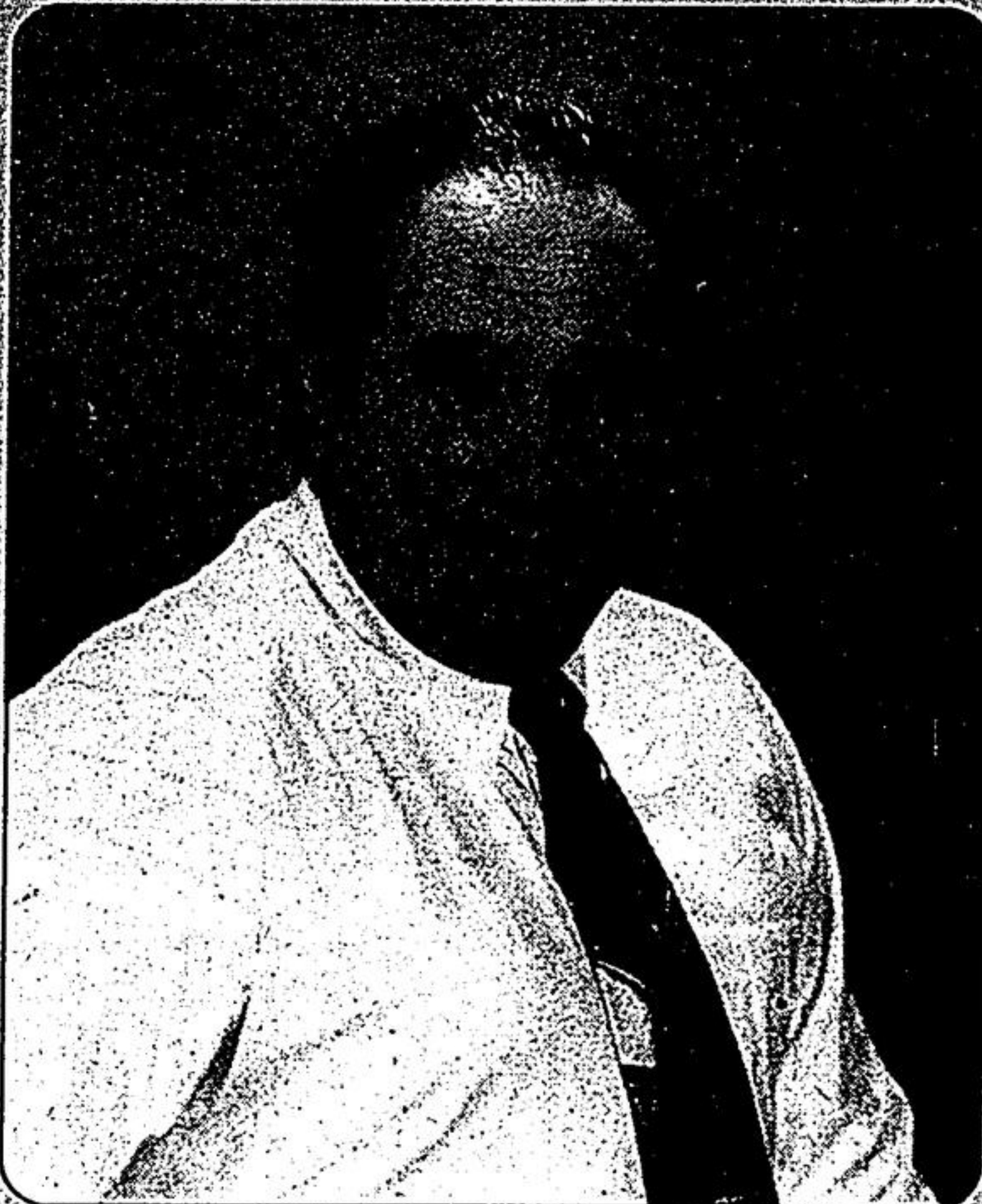
■ **Jeff Melnychuk** is *Wheelbase Communications' managing editor and senior technical writer. Wheelbase is a world-wide supplier of automobile news, reviews and features.*



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