

1940 LaSalle Series 5219 Restoration Phase 2:



After a 15 year restoration process, the 40 LaSalle is freshly painted, reassembled and looking fine. There is more detail about the restoration in our Hampton Roads CLC web page and also in the DEC 2013 Sallee Speaks (LaSalle Info line). To recap, the last obstacle was the repair of some serious rust damage in the rear quarter of the car discovered behind some deep gobs of ancient bondo. The damage also included some internal structural areas. This unexpected repair requirement was well beyond my skill level and far too expensive to contract out to a pro. The car sat for many months until I gathered sufficient courage to tackle the job myself. Luckily I had a rough, but much less rusty donor car. Matching measurements were carefully taken on both cars before cutting them apart. This was no small feat considering all the aerodynamic curves, but somehow all the pieces matched and the seams lined up after welding. Below is a reminder of what the LaSalle looked like a year ago shortly after I had welded the replacement body sections and was preparing it for painting.



The painting and final reassembly process started last October, but the process took months longer than expected due to several unforeseen interruptions. None the less, by July 2014 the car was road ready minus the upholstery. It ran well considering it had been in pieces for 15 years.

About a week later I got a call about using the LaSalle in a movie being shot mostly in nearby Petersburg, VA. It was directed by Meg Ryan and produced by Tom Hanks. The movie “Ithaca” is supposed to be a family rated movie set in 1942. It is a tale about WWII as seen from the perspective of a 14 year old boy in a small town with a night job delivering telegrams. It is based on Pulitzer Prize-winning author William Saroyan's 1943 novel, “The Human Comedy.” Sam Sheppard and Jack Quaid have major roles.

Using the still unfinished LaSalle in the movie was probably a dumb idea. However, the re-upholstery process could not start until this fall, so I thought why not enjoy the car and give it a real road test at the same time. And tested it was, including a drive home the first day at dusk in a blinding rain storm with tornado warnings. They wanted the cars to be dirty and so it was. My 1933 Buick was also used.

The first day included some driving scenes in costume. All drivers were issued a 2-way radio to get the signal for action and reset. Since my 1940's outfit reminded me of "Dapper Dan" the used car man. Dapper Dan became my radio call sign for the next three weeks.



It was not uncommon to repeat the same scene a dozen times so it was a grueling test for both cars and drivers. It was summer in south central Virginia, so the daytime temperatures climbed near 90 degrees several times. I made most of my runs by the camera with no issues, but on the first day after idling for about 20 minutes the car experienced vapor lock. This malady is common to LaSalle's and Caddys of the era, but was likely exaggerated by the heat and 10% ethanol in today's fuel. The problem returned a few more times, but never at critical moments. Virtually every old car on the set experienced some type of fuel, mechanical or overheating problem. I was not alone with car problems.



The LaSalle accumulated over 200 miles during my three week adventure in the movies, but at least I can say it has been thoroughly road tested. I also learned that movie making is for young people. The pay was low and many days (and nights) were 12 hour marathons – with hours of waiting around for a few seconds of frantic action. I doubt many of the car scenes will make it into the final cut, but you never know. I would not do it again, but it was an experience to be remembered. I wish Meg Ryan well with her first time directing a movie and will be watching for its release in 2015.