

THE AUSTIN J40 AND OTHER TALES OF PEDAL CARS

by Vivian Yess Wadlin

It all began in 1974. My father had “rescued” a pedal car from the Esopus dump and it sat in front of his garage, a small rusting presence, where I spied it.

“What are you going to do with it?” I inquired.

“Why? You want it?” he replied.

It was in my Saab trunk before he could change his mind. I drove directly to Mike Kusmick, my go-to-man for anything auto-body.

Mike looked at it, tapped it with his wrench, and proclaimed, “It’s made out of better steel than your Saab.”

I did not recognize it at the time, but it was the beginning of my pedal-vehicle addiction.

“What color? Mike asked.

“How about like your truck? I said.



And that is how I acquired a not exactly restored 1920 Steelcraft “Ford” and how it came to be painted a pale shade of green.

Already an avid collector of antique toys, I dove into pedal car history, noting the great variety of these beloved miniature cars, tractors, trucks, airplanes, and fire engines.

In the end, I had 64. Soon many were displayed in a Toy Museum at Vintage Village, Highland, NY. The site also housed an antique center and a set of eight dioramas depicting the evolution of the American homes’ living rooms and kitchens from the late 1600s to 2000. Appropriately dressed mannequins for each period peopled the displays.

Continues next page

Photo top: Austin J40. Photo Center: Toy Museum display at former Vintage Village with original green Ford at far left and 1955 Porthole Buick on table. Bottom, other cars at Vintage Village including the orange car which I still have. All others pictured went to auction.



1926 Mac Truck and circa 1930 possibly French pedal car. Both still in the author's collection.

The site had formerly been a railroad station, then Pratt Lumber, and finally Vintage Village. Owner Ethan Jackman eventually closed the businesses, and I sent my collections to auction in the early 2000s. I had no room at home for it all. The site is now evolving into a small business haven. Part has become a separate apartment complex on the Hudson Valley Rail Trail.

I found, however, as the auctioneer's truckers were loading my treasures, that I could not part with a few of my pedal cars. Remaining with me are a 1920 Steelcraft Mac dump truck (also sourced by my father's good eye for the unique), the original green Steelcraft Ford, a European (purchased from the Netherlands) orange Art Deco beauty, and the Austin J40 (which was purchased from England).

The Austin J40 was the only commercially manufactured two-seater with a bonnet and trunk that opened, battery powered headlamps, turn signals, and pneumatic tires. Mine is still in original blue paint, and has its original hood ornament, wheels, and steering wheel, but is missing its battery and attendant wiring. It also has acquired a few dings and bumps. It does have new pneumatic tires, and while back, my new friend six-year old Samuel took it for a spin around my driveway. I have a video of the trip. Not sure which of us enjoyed it more.

The Austin J40 has something far more unique than its form. Beginning in 1949, the British government began a program for Welsh coal miners who could no longer work in the mines. According to the website for the Austin J40 Club (of course there's a club),

Austin pedal cars were made in the specially constructed Austin Junior Car Factory at Bargoed in South Wales, which opened on 5 July 1949. It was paid for by Government funds and was intended to provide employment for disabled coalminers suffering

from the lung disease, pneumoconiosis. They were re-trained and benefited from in-house medical care.

The J40 was not their only model, but it and the Pathfinder Special were both made from scrap metal of the Longbridge Austin Motor Car Factory that made the iconic Austin Healy. The J40 plant ceased production in 1971, having produced more than 32,028 pedal cars.

The same craftsmanship the company used in their real Austin vehicles is evident in my J40. I purchased my car from someone in England, but the cars were initially sent mainly to the US, and later to other UK countries and Denmark.

Today, in the UK, lucky owners of restored Austin J40 cars race in the Settrington Cup. It is run and called on a professional racing track. Hundreds of children participate in their cars—each vehicle meticulously restored. I highly recommend an online search to watch videos of this event because the Austin J40 races are a spectacle to behold and the winners' interviews give hope for that generation.

Little kids in the coveralls, cars in every color or combination of colors, all looking band-box new lined up waiting for the start. Then, bang, they are off.

“Pedaling their little hearts out.” said one announcer.

And, as @AbandonedRaven commented online about the races, “I didn't know intense racing could be this adorable.” Another, @thosoz3431, chimed in on the same website writing, “I'm on the wrong side of 70 and had one of those as a 5 year old in Germany. Leather upholstery and lights that worked. The girl next door loved it.”

This girl still does.



Author, 1962, Syracuse, NY. Still dreaming of owning a real one!