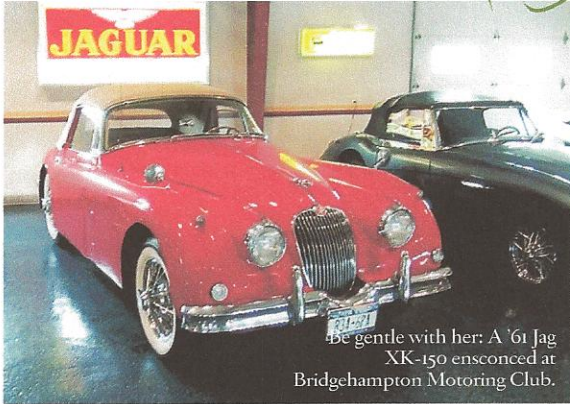


TRANSPORT 150



Be gentle with her: A '61 Jag XK-150 ensconced at Bridgehampton Motoring Club.

York State Legislature outlawed them.

At the outset, I had to cope with only the straightest of straightaways. But for the first time in a very long time, I also had to operate a three-speed gear shift (a.k.a. "three on the tree"), which I repeatedly managed to grind as we put the Ford through its paces. And since I had to push away from my lady friend every time I changed gears, already the snuggling benefits afforded by the Ford's bench seats were being offset by the exigencies of messing with the damn controls. No wonder the introduction of automatic transmission in the 1950s.

The subtly undulating legs of the course traversing Sagaponack Road, Sagg Main, and Bridge Lane challenged my memory as well as my hand-eye coordination. Since the turn blinkers didn't work, I had to summon old-fashioned hand signals with my left arm. There was no power steering, which made each turn as arduous as trimming a sail; yet, slight manipulations of the steering wheel often resulted in a floaty-boaty swerving from lane to lane. And the AM-only radio blared much more static than music.

None of this, of course, ever bothered Mike Leahy, who was hunkered down behind me,

gamely grinning between gritted teeth as he furiously texted his insurance agent about acquiring additional liability coverage.

Leahy, who's now 66, confides that his fascination with 1949 Ford convertibles traces back to the sixth grade: "I saw a bunch of high school guys driving around in them, and I swore I was going to get one someday." Leahy made good on his vow in 1991, amid a successful career on Wall Street. Now an independent real estate developer with a summer home in Sag Harbor, he (for the most part) cheerfully refuses to obsess over his '49 Ford—which is marred by defects in paint and upholstery—and professes to spend no more than \$250 a year on upkeep. "It's a driver, not a show car," he says. Even so, Leahy's masterpiece remains so visually and viscerally enticing that it was used in a recent series of TV commercials starring Robert Wagner.

Still better, it had inspired my lady friend to don a 1940s vintage chiffon dress, black seamed nylon hose, and Betty Grable pumps.

When we broke for lunch at Bobby Van's, the Ford garnered plenty of stares from random passersby. But the most meaningful reactions came from people born around or before the model year. Judith Lattanzio, who encountered us while she was walking her dog, exulted: "It's beautiful, my husband would kill for one of these! It's the same car he had in high school!" Joe Ernst, a retired army general from San Antonio, Texas, claimed he'd had a similarly equipped 1951 Ford hardtop when he was in high school, adding, "All it did was run forever."

Few consumer goods evoke the bygone glories of our great Republic like a "vintage automobile"—officially defined as any hunk of junk more than 25 years old. Not coincidentally, the Hamptons, a place that's rarely been averse to consumerism, is heaven on earth for classic cars. East Hampton habitué Jerry Seinfeld has a

world-class collection of Porsches almost as numerous as reruns of his eponymous TV show. Ralph Lauren is said to be amassing a Ferrari for each of his 400-plus stores and outlets.

Rob Wiesenthal, cofounder and co-proprietor of Bridgehampton Motoring Club, which provides storage space for more than 40 of the area's high-end autos, believes many collectors are simply longing to go back to the future. "It's all about people recreating their youth, a time when things were much simpler and more elegant," Wiesenthal says. "There's no romance or emotion in newer cars. Vintage cars have inlaid wood and hand stitching—signs of a human touch."

Jim Shelly, owner of Georgica Services, an East Hampton auto-restoration firm, claims he services upwards of 1,000 classic cars a year, most of which are "like rolling pieces of art," he says. "Cars are in our blood—they're what America's all about."

Unsurprisingly, by the end of the day I'd fallen head over heels in love with the charming 72-year-old ragtop, and could finally understand why so many Hamptonsites have flipped their bolts for these moving monuments. The Ford was like the world's roomiest time capsule. Instead of that bucket-seated cramp and nauseating smell that come with a fancy new car, I'd gotten a glimpse and feel of days gone by. And I didn't have to listen to one of those annoying computerized voices telling me, "Your door is ajar," when everyone knows a door is a door, not a damn jar.

Our motoring excursion climaxed at the Dockside in Sag Harbor, where we tucked in for an adult beverage. I asked Mike if I could borrow his vintage vehicle to take my lady friend out on a proper date someday. "Maybe," he said, "if you're back before sunrise." Then he climbed into his dream ride and drove off into the sunset.

The car's owner was hunkered down behind me, grinning between gritted teeth as he furiously texted his insurance agent about additional liability coverage.



At BMC, you can almost hear the roars.