

Durant man reunited with long lost love

By REGINA PHILLIPS
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Let nothing stand between a man and his life, liberty or pursuit of that first set of wheels that put his fate in motion.

Mike Banks was 16 when the sparkle of a golden 1967 Plymouth GTX caught his eye.

"I was looking for the fastest thing I could find for the best price," Banks said.

With those features, the GTX started spinning the wheels of young Banks' destiny.

Since the car was paying for itself one race at a time, he said, he still had enough change left over to play the jukebox at the local hangout.

"I punched the numbers on the jukebox, and Lynn and her sister came up to me and said, 'We heard you have the fastest car around. Can we have a ride?'"

He made an impression all right.

Not only did he have Lynn's heart racing, but, to the courted Ms. Crisp's neighbors, he was unforgettable.

"When Mike would come and pick me up, the neighbors would have to hold onto their windows because his car would shake them," Lynn said. "And when we would set out in the car, he would leave it running because it was cold. They'd say, 'I wish that Banks boy would let her out and go home'."

The car was also well known elsewhere. "It had a reputation. People would see that car and really get on it — start squealing their tires and everything," Lynn said, "even when we went to a town 80 miles away."

No wonder. Lynn said, "We would run through the quarter every Sunday, before and after church."

That must have given Mike an idea. In between popping the clutch, he decided to pop the question right there in his car.

On June 26, 1976, at the First Baptist Church in Princeton, Mo., he let the GTX sit still long enough to get married. That's when friends decided to render a detail job. The car awaited the newlyweds, draped in crepe paper and doused with shaving cream.

And that's how the couple drove down the first stretch of their lives together. Mike had both his beauties — the one decked in a matching blue leisure suit and his golden girl on wheels.

Later that year, the road led them on a move to Platter, pulling Lynn's Volkswagen behind the GTX.

But, in December 1979, when gasoline prices had spilled over \$1 per gallon, Mike and his GTX came to a crossroads and had to part ways. Mike sold his treasure to a man in Duncan.

Still, he had Lynn and new daughter Kristen. Later came Charity.

In spring 1997, Mike became interested in tracking down that memorable GTX.

One day in the attic, he came across a carbon copy of the car's last Bryan County registration. Aha! A vehicle identification number. He traced it to two different men in southern Missouri, both former owners.

And then he found the little rascal — Wayne "Spanky" Cox, that is, a Plymouth enthusiast in Effingham, Ill., and owner of about 400 vehicles of various makes and models. Some of them are even stored in a heated building — one of which was a 1967 Plymouth GTX.

Spanky said he stumbled upon the car by mistake. The truck driver spotted it while taking a short-cut route and had to go a mile or two before he could turn around to scope it out. Dennis Wilbanks did not want to sell the car at first, but Spanky talked him into it.

The tires barely got settled on Illinois soil when the Oklahoma car hound sniffed them out.

Mike, along with his family, took a summer vacation to go visit the long



TWO DECADES and several states could not keep Mike Banks from rediscovering his first car. He is taking the keys from Wayne "Spanky" Cox of Effingham, Ill., who was the last owner of the car. Banks hands over keys to a twin 1967 Plymouth GTX he located and restored to trade with Cox.

lost matchmaker. He brought along the old set of keys he had found still bound in their leather pouch inside an old recliner.

Mike walked up to the car, now red, and decided to give it the test. "I put the key in the trunk, turned it, and the lid popped open." That was all he needed.

"He had always dreamed of going to a car show, sticking the key in the trunk and having it open," Kristen said. "When that trunk popped open, there was a moment of silence. It was like, 'Nobody talk. He is one with the car'."

Well, actually, the car still belonged to Spanky. And he did not want to sell it.

But there is always room for negotiation.

Spanky said he would be willing to trade, one 1967 GTX for another. So, Mike was on a mission to find a twin. A suitable double was located in Maryland, and Mike spent the next year and a half having it restored.

Mike and Spanky exchanged a few photos and information through the

mail until Mike got a call late Sunday night to find out Spanky would be in town Monday morning to make the exchange.

"I hate to give it up," Spanky said. "But I know how it is, wanting your old car back."

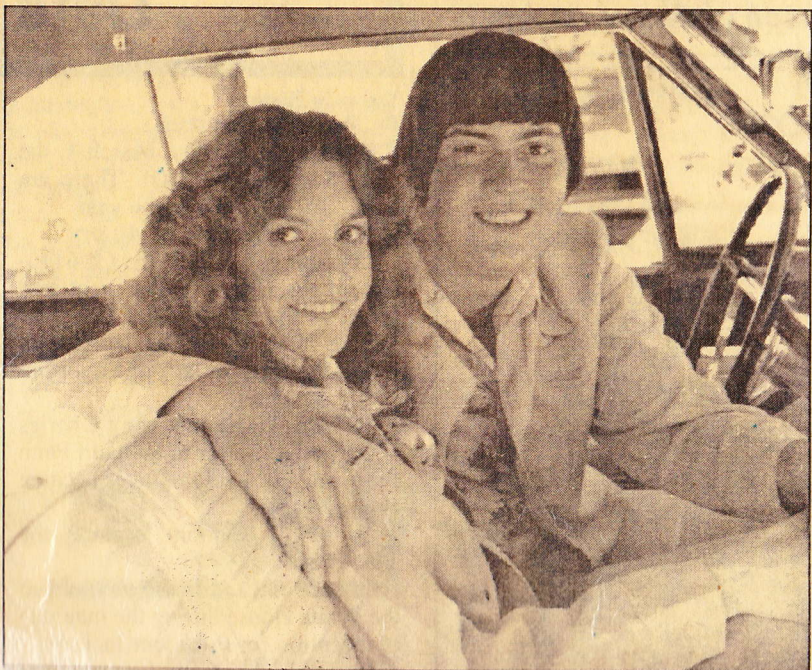
"He's been like a little kid," Kristen said. And Lynn joked with him about being more excited to get the car than when he took her to the hospital to give birth to Kristen and Charity.

"I thought it was because of me he had to sell the car," Kristen said, then laughed. "So I thought, when I get rich and famous, I'll have to find it and buy it back." Maybe the automobile angel let her off the hook.

Though the girls never really formally met the machine, they became acquainted with dad's GTX. "It's hard to believe the car is actually here," Kristen said. "It's like a legend. I've heard about it all my life."

Now that her folks' lore has materialized, the moral of this story is, if determined enough (with a little luck), a man *will be* reunited with his car.

And you can take that to the Banks.



MIKE AND LYNN Banks, the new Mr. and Mrs., pose for a picture June 26, 1976, before taking off from the Missouri church in their chariot — a 1967 Plymouth GTX that actually put them on the track to the church.