

1938 FORD Deluxe Woody  
CLASSIC DRIVE  
by Rick Feibusch

"Woody" is a Southern California Surfing term from the Sixties that made its way into mainstream vocabulary after being introduced to pop culture through records and radio by groups like The Beach Boys and Jan & Dean. These wood bodied station wagons were originally expensive, hand built cars that were favored by dude ranches, country clubs and farm families. They were the "sport utilities" of their day.

By the early 1960s, they had become the favored coastal transport for wave bound surfers. There seems to be some sort of link between their wooden construction and the wood used to make early surfboards. By the time Woodies became the rage, surfboards were made out of Fiberglass. Go figure. In any case, if you have something as long as a surfboard to haul around, what better way than a warm, wooded classic, oozing with rural American charm.

Since the Sixties, these wagons have been coveted collectors items. They are of such demand that old cars with splinters instead of wood are being lovingly restored and custom made wooden bodies are showing up on modified sedans and sportscars. This "Classic Drive" features a very rare 1938 Ford Woody that is all original, right down to the mechanical, rather than hydraulic brakes and two speed Columbia differential.

#### A Little History

1938 was the worst year for auto sales since 1933, when the country was still reeling from the depression. In all, 1937 had been a pretty good year for Ford. A sleek streamlined front clip featuring Lincolnesque teardrop headlamps and the availability of a new more economical 60hp Flathead V8, helped turn wishers into buyers. By 1938, the people who had been in the market had already purchased cars, while the rest were waiting for the nation get back up to financial speed. One of the major reasons that one sees so few '38 Fords is that they didn't make all that many of them.

Though built on identical chassis, there were actually two different 1938 Ford bodies. The Standard models were quite similar to '37s, save for a body colored horizontal slat grille that extended down the sides of the hood. Deluxe versions featured unusual dual kidney shaped front grille openings that were sort of stylized versions of the contemporary Lincoln design. Painted body color rather than plated, 1938 would be the only year that Ford would paint, rather than plate the Deluxe grille.

The rear of the '38 Deluxe was more similar to the '39-'40 Fords than to anything that had come before. The spare tire was moved inside a long flowing trunk on the coupes, and a semi-teardrop shaped top and decklid replaced the humpback and flatback designs found on earlier sedans. Longer, sleeker rear fenders distinguished the new car from its older brothers. The station wagon, built on a car chassis with Deluxe front end sheet metal, was still considered a commercial vehicle. For the first time, the wooden body came standard with glass side windows and the side detailing was far less fussy than in previous years. There still was a side- curtain option, but few buyers ordered it and it was dropped for the next model year. This was one of the few years that Ford chose to mount the spare tire on the inside of the wagon, bolted to the rear of the drivers seat, rather than out back on the tailgate.

The fine looking Woodie featured in this article was restored by owner Gary Wright of Danville CA. Gary, a native Southern Californian, found the car while attending college in North Carolina in 1974. It was owned by a fellow named John Amick, was in pieces, and not for sale. Gary knew he wanted the car and asked Mr. Amick to call him if he ever wanted to sell.

A year later, a college buddy mentioned to Gary that he had just picked up a '38 wagon through an ad in the paper and Gary's heart sank as he knew that there couldn't be more than one in town. He again told his friend to call him if he wanted to sell and a few months later the car was his. Gary picked it up out of John Amick's garage as it never had been touched since Gary had first seen it.

What Gary got for his hard earned money was a solid metal body with the front sheet metal removed, an uncompleted rebuilt engine and a garage full of parts. The wood part was fine up front but

weathered and rotten in back. The car spent a number of years in a short shed with the back half outside in the weather.

First the body was removed and the chassis and engine were restored to perfection. Gary made a number of his own pro quality replacement wood pieces at home using only table and band saws. An excellent '40 top was found in upstate New York and shipped to North Carolina. This was all assembled into a solid running wagon.

Gary's job took him to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and the woodie rode out there in the back of a moving van with the rest of the furniture. Gary spent the next six years slowly finishing the wood, Dartmouth green paint and tan interior.

After another move, this time to Houston, Texas in 1983, Gary was able to detail and finish his dream. To commemorate this he drove the rare Woodie to the Early Ford V8 Club's national meet in Dearborn MI. Save for two flat tires, the car ran the 1400 miles flawlessly and won a first in class. Only one other '38 Woodie was on display. The Ford and family moved to California in 1985 and have been there since.

Gary traced the history of his Woodie and found it was originally purchased by Percy (Jack) Frost, a Cadillac agency owner from Mass. who kept the '38 at his summer house in Sheepscott, Maine, using it only while on vacation. It was customary to name one's house in Maine in those days, and Mr. Frost called his Echo Farm. The car still had "ECHO FARM, Sheepscott" painted on the front doors when Gary bought it.

While discussing this with the other '38 Woodie owner at the Dearborn meet, he found out that the fellow's family was from the Sheepscott area and he still had some elderly relatives there so he gave Gary some phone numbers to call. The first call was to the man's great aunt, who, it seems, not only remembered Echo Farm but had actually ridden to the "picture show" in Gary's wagon a number of times! More calls located a very old Mrs. Frost in Portland, Maine. She told Gary that Jack had sold the farm when he retired in the early '50s and brought the Woodie with them to their new home in Portland. Subsequently, it was sold to a fellow on an island off Maine in the mid-'50s and stayed there until purchased by Mr Amick in the '70s.

#### DRIVING THE FORD WAGON

Once behind the wheel you realize why this was considered a commercial vehicle. The wooden doors are solid, simple and trimless, and much of the hardware is exposed. No wood grained dash or soft mohair here - just lots of brown metal and tan leatherette. This baby was built to work - and last.

Start it up and you're greeted by the familiar flathead V8 growl. Slip that long, long shift lever into low gear, let out the clutch, and away we go. As we run it through the gears all of those flathead memories come back in spades. For a low priced car, these Fords fly. The power range is in just the right place and you have to get it up to unthinkable RPMs to even make it sound uncomfortable.

We did this drive on a number of two lane canyon highways near Gary's home and could get the Woodie up to a better than pretty good clip. This is where the archaic chassis and all of it's soon-to be-rectified deficiencies become quite apparent. The mechanical brakes are, at best, dangerous at speed. Call me a wimp, or possibly inexperienced, but unless the brakes were applied with just the right amount of pressure the car would just "do things" I didn't like. While this braking system might have been OK on a model A, it was not acceptable on a car with a Columbia two-speed rear end that is capable of a sustained 65 MPH! Ford put juice brakes on the '39 models.

All Woodies handle a bit like rear engined cars because of all of that heavy bodywork out back but it's intensified in the Ford due to it's "darty" feeling in the steering produced by the I-beam front end and lack of a front sway bar. Gary's wagon was better than most in the front end department but in its totally stock configuration combined with those lovely looking bias-ply whitewalls, produced handling characteristics that require ones complete attention. This car liked to find and follow all of the imperfections in the road and squirm like a lizard on concrete highways grooved for rain and traction.

To be fair, the car was generally great on the freeway and Gary had no apparent problem driving the

wagon a full 15 MPH faster than I was willing to do on the winding roads but I now understand why hot rodding was almost necessary on any early Ford that was going to be driven hard. But hard driving is not what this car's about. It's a cruiser - and what a cruiser. Everybody loves a Woodie, even if you are driving it a bit slow in front of them on a winding canyon highway. Everybody looks and waves. Gary's car is as competent as a later model car in town and around the neighborhood.

Since the '38 Wagon was completed over nine years ago, Gary hasn't just been polishing chrome and going to local events. He's got a new project in the works, a 1940 Merc convertible sedan. The engine and chassis are done and the body is finished and primed. If the work he did on this '38 Woodie is any indication, the Merc will be killer.