

Retired Sun photographer still tooling around in 'Car 4'

Ralph Bower has a soft spot for the 1978 Ford Thunderbird he drove to his assignments in the last two decades of his career

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More than 40 years ago, Ralph Bower installed a two-way radio in his Thunderbird to keep in touch with The Vancouver Sun photo desk.

Photograph by: Alyn Edwards

The green 1978 Ford Thunderbird was a fixture at Vancouver-area news events for decades. If the car was there, so was one of The Vancouver Sun's most experienced and prolific photographers — Ralph Bower.

His car was equipped with a Century two-way radio, and his was “Car 4” when the call came in from the Sun photo department. His assignments led him to photograph Elvis Presley, Muhammad Ali, Bing Crosby, Bob Hope, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, the BC Lions, Vancouver Canucks and the Whitecaps.

Reporters of the day loved to ride with Ralph in the luxurious green Thunderbird, cleverly sidestepping trips with other photographers in austere company camera cars. He was paid mileage, so the thrifty cameraman had his nearly new car with its 400-cubic-inch engine converted to run on propane at 19 cents a gallon.

He racked up the kilometres driving the Thunderbird to assignment after assignment; prime ministers, royalty, movie stars, prison riots, every Vancouver mayor, children, animals, natural disasters, villains and heroes.

Bower had loved cars since he was a teenager growing up on the same North Vancouver block where he still lives today. At age 15, he saw a carpenter using the running board of his beautiful dark blue 1932 Chevrolet coach to saw wood. Ralph put together \$175 he had saved from his bicycle delivery job at North Vancouver's Cunningham Drugs to buy the car. He drove it to high school.

He worked in a series of 10 North Vancouver service stations pumping gas and doing lube jobs after school and on the weekends until he was able to trade up to a sleek 1950 Chevrolet Fleetline fastback.

"The principal called my mother to request that I not bring the car to school because it was newer and better than most of the teachers drove," Bower recalls.

He took an extra year of high school in Grade 13 for university entrance. He planned to become a chartered accountant for the Cates tugboat company. But an opportunity for employment as a copy runner opened up at The Vancouver Sun and he took it as a summer job.

When he was transferred to the photo department he found his calling. His first assignment was at Children's Hospital.

To this day, he asks for donations to the hospital instead of selling his photographs.

The young news photographer bought a year-old baby blue 1957 Pontiac Laurentian convertible to carry him to his assignments. He was in that car on June 17, 1958 at Vancouver's Hastings Park race track, when a frantic radio phone call came in from the Sun newsroom that the Second Narrows Bridge had collapsed. He was just minutes away and beat the emergency crews there. Eighteen ironworkers lost their lives and Ralph Bower's photographs were front page across the country.

His favourite camera car was a special-order 1967 Oldsmobile 442 with a big motor and all the options. The last time he drove that car was through Langley to get a photo of a horse near the U.S. border.

A speeding Pontiac station wagon came over a hill and rammed him. His car swerved out of control and flipped into a ditch. The other driver ran from the scene of the accident and it took 30 minutes for rescuers to get Ralph out of his car.

He walked away, but his camera equipment was written off, as was the Oldsmobile.

Years later, he drove his Thunderbird to a police standoff in East Vancouver where he captured a photo of a distraught man holding his son upside down outside an east side fourth floor apartment. That photo was carried by newspapers all over North America and won a National Newspaper award.

Ralph Bower and his venerable 1978 Ford Thunderbird retired from the Sun on Dec. 31, 1996.

“The speedometer had gone around four times and I took a photo of it every time it hit 99999.9,” he says.

The Thunderbird continues on as his retirement car. It has travelled 465,000 kilometres.

Bower has had 12,000 published photographs and seven exhibitions of his work, including the history of Hastings Park, which he has chronicled since starting at The Vancouver Sun in 1955.

He is admittedly sentimental about cars, owning a fully restored 1931 Ford Model A coupe which is the same type of car his father drove to his job at the North Vancouver ferry ticket office.

His newest car is a 1993 Lincoln Continental Town Car Cartier Edition that has travelled less than 5,000 kilometres and is in new condition.

“I even wax that car underneath,” he admits.

But the car he is closest to is the T-Bird that carried him to his photo assignments for the last two decades of his career. It is completely original right down to the two-way radio under the dash.

Bower has a spare 1978 Thunderbird stored in his garage for parts to ensure he can keep driving his last news photo car.

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Ralph Bower poses with his original Vancouver Sun news camera and his 1931 Ford Model A coupe.



This special-order 1967 Oldsmobile 442 was Bower's favorite camera car until it was totaled in a rear-end collision. The car was hit and then flipped into a ditch. It took 30 minutes for rescuers to get him out of the car.



Bower and boyhood friend Ray Mitchell show off the 1932 Chevrolet Bower purchased for \$175 when he was just 15 years old.



Bower was an award-winning Sun photographer for nearly 40 years.