

Oldsmobile lives up to its name but it's no museum piece, writes Jacqui Madelin



Dennis Lowe's curved-dash Oldsmobile was imported by the Subritzky family from Australia. Pictures / Jacqui Madelin

It's not often you see an 111-year-old car with a full history, but here's one. Bought in Australia, the curved-dash Oldsmobile was imported by the Subritzky family on the ship Greyhound - it sat on the deck, and was unloaded at ports to putter up to the pub. I've seen the photo.



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And the one in which it stars as the first car to crash into public transport in New Zealand - on Labour Day 1904, on Auckland's Hobson St. Hence the artillery-type replacement wheel from a later-series curved-dash Olds, and the box front it carried until owner Dennis Lowe found a curved-dash template and made another, from wood, by hand, "It was quite a bit of work."

The three original wheels are second-growth hickory, as used in axe and hammer handles, and yes, the car is largely original.

Lowe had to patch the rear lamp and replace some lenses and he's about to refit the refurbished front lamps - all three run on kerosene. He built the back louvres ("After the tram smash there was a flat piece of kauri and it's meant to be louvred.")

He reckons the mudguards are the original paint, complete with the dings of a century of use. The floor mat is a repro, as is the ignition switch, but it has the original coil.

He does have a spare motor. "They reckon if you have a spare you won't need it." The footbrake operates a metal band working on a metal drum beside the diff sprocket. "The first ones didn't have a park brake, so when the chain broke you'd sail on merrily down the road until you hit something."

When Lowe took it for a VIN, "It hadn't been registered since the war, the man said he couldn't give it a WoF as it had no brakes. Well, he couldn't see brake drums, so I had to demonstrate, you brake hard, the spring winds, and when you stop it jumps back a metre as the spring unwinds. Everyone applauded! If you have to stop downhill you jam it in reverse as well."



The Oldsmobile is likely to get more wear under Dennis Lowe's ownership. Pictures / Jacqui Madelin

The seat leather's tatty in places, you can see the horsehair. "They used horsehair as it stays springy," Lowe says. "The hair was washed, wound round sticks with a preservative and dried and it stayed curly, which is where it gets the spring from." He casually pulls a bit out to show me - clearly this is no museum piece. And we prove it, driving through Manurewa to our photo location, before he hands me the tiller. But first, we have to start it.

Turn the main tank on via the rear tap. Turn the oil tap on - it's under the driver's knee. Turn the petrol tap beside it a half turn. The carb has no bowl, and this does the job. The choke? "You'd only need that in Siberia." Now turn the ignition on, make sure it's in neutral ("Vital") then retard the spark ("Even more vital"), depress the decompression pedal - a button on the floor which pulls the valve up - then two turns of the crank. That handle is by the driver hip and can be done from the seat if you're limber enough - Lowe is - and the centrally mounted, water-cooled, horizontal single-cylinder engine is soon chuffing away.

There's a gear lever to his right - push it backwards to go backwards, forwards to go forwards, then there's another neutral and finally the second gear. The only things a teenager would recognise as car controls are the foot accelerator and brake; the car is steered by a tiller. The turning circle is phenomenally tight. "I did a gymkhana and they closed the slalom course up for me when they saw what she'd do." It was actually a bit too sensitive at first - "I put a wedge between the spring and the axle to give it more castor and make it more predictable and steady."

We've only gone a few metres before we get the first thumbs-up; smiles, waves, cars slowing for cheery comments, and no one's annoyed we're holding them up. Lowe's smiling too. "I just have to pinch myself that it's mine."

He'd wanted one since he was a kid making models, and - long story short - he went to Ellerslie Concoors with an Olds-owning friend and got chatting to an 85-year-old gent who had this car. After the Subritzky's sold it the same owners had it from 1928 or '29 until 2011, discussions ensued, and the day the Lowes were going on holiday the deal was struck.



But it's my turn to drive. I'm startled to find no clutch - the epicyclic gearbox does the lot. Into low and we pull away, then quite quickly up through neutral and into high, the steering remarkably sensitive and a bird's-eye view of the road; it's an odd feeling with nothing in front of your knees. Down a hill or with a tail wind it'll get to 40 or 50 km/h, Dennis says, but it's at its best on the flat at closer to 30. Mind you, it pulls impressively on uphill, if you open the petrol switch behind your knee. It's only rated to 3.3kW - "The same as a modern Briggs and Stratton lawnmower" - but the 54kg flywheel in a 300kg-odd car means there's plenty of torque. It's spinning at 900rpm at 40 km/h, but we're chuntering along at about 200rpm, only just ticking over. It feels odd cornering, you really are perched atop it, and the tapered leaf spring suspension is no match for modern equivalents.

It doesn't pay to look down as the wheels are wobbling alarmingly, you'd feel it if you went much faster. I chuckle at the thought, but Lowe has actually driven this thing around Hampton Downs race track, at the Ron Roycroft festival. "The others did three laps, and I did one!"

His usual tow car is a 1935 Chrysler Plymouth PJ, a two-door I admire before we settle down over tea to look at the original registration record - registration was compulsory from June 1906, and the car had plate number A52. It's been towed as far as Napier, but closer to home he's driven it to Clarkes Beach, though he prefers to avoid open roads because its speed is so limited.

This was the most popular car in the world in 1903, with about 19,000 built in a six-year model life, and was the first mass-produced car, built on an assembly line using interchangeable parts.

Most of those you see now are copies built around the motor as the wood rotted, but this one's American oak frame and poplar panels survived rather well, with only minor wear in the crank handle's wooden socket.

I suspect it'll get more wear under Lowe's ownership, he loves to see these cars kept out of museums and on the road.

- [NZ Herald](#)