

ENDURING THE NEW ABNORMAL

An October, 2022 COVID memoir by GREGG D. MERKSAMER, Warwick, NY
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THE WAY I DEALT WITH COVID BACK IN 2020 was largely grounded in the way my work as a freelance automotive journalist, historian & photographer arranges my calendar around car events I've sometimes spent decades covering like clockwork for various club and hobby publications. Though there are always other shows I chronicle on a one-time or less regular basis "The Big Three" musts for me year-after-year are the New York International Auto Show that traditionally opens to the public on Good Friday following two days of press previews (I serve as the event's official historian, having authored a book on its first 100 years back in 2000); the Greenwich Concours d'Elegance where I worked a decade-plus as a staff photographer the first weekend after Memorial Day; and the Professional Car Society's week-long International Meets, which gather the owners of vintage funeral vehicles, limousines and ambulances (most are morticians and EMS personnel who have spent their careers working with "pro-cars") in a different hosting city every June or July (it's my "job" as PCS Publicity Chair to promote the proceedings beforehand and write them up for our club magazine afterwards).

While the nature of these shindigs means I actually spend most of my work time in a home office distilling handwritten notes and hundreds (sometimes thousands) of photos per-event into concise stories for publication, the ramp-up to lockdown in late February, 2020 found me driving to Flint, Michigan to take part in the PCS' Winter Board Meeting before shooting a special exhibit of Cadillac ambulances, hearses and flower cars at the Gilmore Museum's Hickory Corners campus outside Kalamazoo. NPR was on my Ford Five Hundred's radio dial for much of my westward trek through Pennsylvania and Ohio, relaying progressively more troubling reports about COVID's spread across the planet and the price gouging already being seen on N95 masks - no wonder 3M was defying the Dow Jones Industrial Average's decline! By the time I started my eastbound Pennsylvania re-crossing midday Monday, March 2nd, the news was noting there were 90,000 COVID cases worldwide (with 3,000 deaths and six in the USA) and Clorox shares had hit an all-time high.

Once home the cancellation of Geneva's 2020 Motor Show just days before its scheduled March 5th opening stunned auto journalists and other industry observers everywhere, even if the Greater New York Automobile Dealers Association staging New York's 120th Anniversary show was still insisting their press previews were a "go" as-scheduled for April 8th and 9th. Come March 11th - one day before Broadway's theaters went dark - GNYADA had no choice but to announce a postponed August opening that later became an outright cancellation once the Javits Convention Center was converted into a 1,000-bed field hospital (it would not be until April, 2022 that the building would host its next auto show). The Greenwich Concours' 25th edition - there went what was traditionally my biggest payday of the year! - and a Professional Car Society International Meet that would have taken place in Albany were the next dominoes to fall off my 2020 calendar along with almost every other car event across the country. This unprecedented state of affairs, at least, inspired me to write letters to several hobby publications urging their readers to consider donating the hundreds of dollars they would have spent on meet registration, meals, gasoline and hotel rooms to charities benefiting first responders, health care workers and furloughed restaurant employees. It was, beyond a doubt, the best thing I wrote during a year that the only event I wound up covering was a late September Catskill Conquest Rally where the registrants stayed sequestered from each other in their own cars.

The submission deadline for the big hearse and limousine industry overview feature I write annually for the National Funeral Directors Association's magazine was also postponed at least twice during 2020 so my editor could make space for all the COVID news his readers had to get more-urgently. Though the mostly Ohio-based coachbuilders I covered for *THE DIRECTOR* were also transitioning their offerings to all-new Cadillac and Lincoln base vehicles that year, I thought it even more newsworthy and intriguing that they were allowed to keep their plants open through The Buckeye State's lockdown as an "essential industry" serving another essential industry!

While my wife Lisa and I went into isolation well aware we were luckier than most people since we weren't living paycheck-to-paycheck and were quarantining in a comfortably large house with lots of books and a Mount Peter view out our bedroom window as opposed to some New York City shoebox overlooking a brick wall or some dumpsters, the near total absence of activity as March turned to April found me pondering my mortality even more often than I already did as an obese, asthmatic Hebrew hard-wired to anticipate worst case scenarios. What would

we do if our stove, our well pump, our furnace or our never-fuller freezer gave up the ghost when we couldn't get a new one? Who would care for our then 15-year-old "Yellow Garfield" cat Riley if Lisa and I got sick enough to need hospitalization?

As the A.M. TV news got worse-and-worse - my February joke about Coronavirus being Toyota's fault was Officially No Longer Funny once COVID claimed its 10,000th Empire State citizen over Easter weekend - the wife and I found ourselves staying in bed later-and-later, almost like we were trying to hibernate through the lockdown! After Lisa asked me "are we in Hell?" as we huddled beneath our sheets one morning, I opined in response this all seemed more like Purgatory or a sci-fi film we didn't even want to watch let alone be cast members in. The way that days started blending into each other also reminded me of a 1960s *I DREAM OF JEANNIE* episode where Barbara Eden, sensing Larry Hagman's Major Nelson character was burnt out from overwork, crossed her arms and blinked so every day was Sunday. "If we don't do something," Major Nelson warned Dr. Bellows during the episode, "the world will be destroyed."

Even after Governor Cuomo started expressing cautious optimism "The Curve" was finally flattening during his daily TV briefings, Lisa and I soon decided "less news per day" beat "more news" so we wouldn't get sucked into the cycle of fear and consumption that documentary filmmaker Michael Moore has often talked about - how else could toilet paper become the pandemic "must have" even though it couldn't be eaten? Our cable system's movie channels did not do much to address our desperation for distraction due to their inexplicably repeated airings of virus-focused disaster films like 1995's *TWELVE MONKEYS* and 2011's *RISE OF THE PLANET OF THE APES*. It was, accordingly, a Godsend to come across the normally unwatchable 1984 cross-country car race comedy *CANNONBALL RUN II* one afternoon, as the scariest thing it contemplated was an orangutan driving a classic Cadillac limo whose front roof section had been cruelly sheared off! I was no less grateful that Turner Classic Movies aired one of my favorite World War II films, 1963's *THE GREAT ESCAPE*, soon afterwards, since that iconic scene where Steve McQueen tries to leap a motorcycle over the barbed wire separating Nazi Germany from Switzerland with what appeared to be the entire Wehrmacht in pursuit certainly took on added resonance in our circumstance!

Watching late night hosts like Stephen Colbert and Seth Meyers do their TV shows from home, in contrast, depressed me to the extent that I'll bet future historians will be the only people who will want to view these episodes more than once. Other, more-appreciated additions to my viewing regimen included the *AMERICAN EXPERIENCE* documentaries PBS aired during what would have normally been afternoon school hours (since it concerned the solving of an even bigger problem than a pandemic I was especially inspired by the story of agronomist Norman Borlaug, who won the 1970 Nobel Peace Prize for spearheading the "Green Revolution" that created new varieties of high-yield crops that saved billions from starvation) and the Discovery Family series *TOO CUTE!* - Basically coyly-narrated footage of adorable kittens and puppies coming-of-age at a breeder's home before they went off with their "forever families."

While Lisa and I didn't leave the Town of Warwick for weeks we did endeavor to regularly exercise every car in our household and hoped our neighbors were just as diligent lest they end up with a dead battery during a real emergency (given the electrical drain inherent in today's gadget-filled cars I began wondering if we'd see a shortage of car batteries as severe as the shortage of ventilators making headlines at the time). Though Our Town's rural character made social distancing easily achievable except inside ShopRite and Price Chopper, we couldn't help but notice and be troubled by how the *WARWICK ADVERTISER* and the *WARWICK VALLEY DISPATCH* were printing two or three times as many obituaries as they typically averaged per-issue. The walks we were taking through the Village for exercise had also taken on a surreal, almost post-Apocalyptic flavor via the almost total absence of parked cars and fellow pedestrians even on weekday afternoons. No wonder Mayor Newhard looked so nervous the day we encountered him outside his store and bade him farewell with Bill Murray's "see you on the other side" line from 1984's *GHOSTBUSTERS*.

Having each other to lean on most-literally at home - where I was equally grateful our "Big Mush" Riley liked to sleep between my legs each night - Lisa and I felt tremendously sorry for anyone who had to ride out the weird final weeks of winter, 2020 without a spouse, significant other or at least a pet to alleviate their isolation. We were, accordingly, hardly surprised to hear that the Warwick Valley Humane Society almost ran out of animals to adopt, and worried constantly about the widower next door that we could no longer join for meals in his kitchen. Then there was the old mentor who employed me at his Queens auto body shop back in the 1990s who started barraging

me with e-mails and phone calls urging me to take that malaria drug Trump was touting, which made me think of that 1929 Wall Street financier who cashed out his positions well before the Black Tuesday “Crash” once he started getting stock tips from his shoeshine boy!

As our personal pandemic persisted the maintenance of morale was most often attributable to small victories like the day I found four N95 masks in a basement workbench drawer or that mid-March ShopRite run where I scored the store's second-to-last bottle of Tylenol while leaving the last one for someone else who might have needed it even more - Good Karma, yes? While months would pass before my accountant's office opened to accept the paperwork, finishing my 2019 income taxes by the end of March, 2020 was another feat for a freelancer like Yours Truly who can deduct every hot dog he eats or bridge toll he pays while covering car events so long as there's a receipt. It was no less a miracle I only gained five pounds over the four months I mostly subsisted on Jimmy Dean Thick-Cut Bacon, “yellow can” Cento Sardines (packed, I'll assert, in the tastiest olive oil found at its price point) and the forty Cadbury Creme Eggs I purchased at CVS on post-Easter clearance. This hoard somehow lasted me until June 19th, after which Lisa & I got to savor our first professional haircuts since March 5th on June 23rd and July 7th touted our first sit-down meal *INSIDE* a restaurant since March 13th - a McDonald's Sausage McMuffin with Egg never tasted so good, and we'd soon got to follow it up with a July 9th “near joint birthday” dinner at the Jolly Onion where it was still only us, the chefs and the wait staff, no one else.

One stubborn reminder we still weren't out of the woods despite these small blessings was that I'd not been able to see my mom since October, 2019 even though she resides just 55 miles south-and-east of Warwick in my childhood Westchester home. Prior to the entire planet turning topsy-turvy she'd put off plans for us to lunch together all winter insisting “we'll have time later,” and even though she had the company and supervision of full-time live-in aides she scared us good by contracting COVID during its initial spread through New York City's northern suburbs. This was actually not surprising since mom was keeping beauty parlor and nail salon appointments at the same time Lisa and I were cancelling more-essential MD visits, and her luck surviving exposure with no more than a 101.5-degree fever (allowing us to mark her 90th birthday with her last December) evidently spilled over to my older brother Harold as his special needs group home is just three blocks from the New Rochelle synagogue that made headlines as the NY Metro Region's first COVID “hot spot.” I just wish in closing that several old car hobby friends and friends-of-friends had been just as fortunate.