

FOCUS

GREATER THAN THE PARTS

The social history of the Catruck/Trar

BY MARKIAN SARAY

MANITOBAN — Everyone remembers their first time. It was probably a little cumbersome, a little nerve-racking. But nonetheless, the memory remains. Was it going to be as good as everyone said it was going to be? How long would it last?

Would you remember the morning after?

Of course you would. Because everyone remembers the first time they saw their first Catruck/Trar.

What's a Catruck/Trar? You know — it's those cars that look like trucks or those trucks that look like cars. For those into names, the most popular brand was the Chevrolet El Camino. Others tried to compete with the El Camino's stylish looks and exceptional handling, but they all failed.

One look at those things, no matter the brand, and your life will never be the same. What were these designers thinking? Combining the front of a car with the back of a truck doesn't, in the least bit, sound like a good idea.

But many things have been combined with one another which really shouldn't have.

In 1969, Hop 'n' Gator beer was put on the market by the Pittsburgh Brewing Company. It was a mixture of beer and Gatorade, with approximately 25 percent more alcohol content than your standard brew.

Yes, people who play sports drink Gatorade and people who watch sports drink beer, but the mixture of the two is bound to lose somebody their job.

In 1964, Post cereal had developed a freeze-drying process, whereby food is quick-frozen and then placed in a high vacuum to remove all its moisture. When liquid is added, the food is reconstituted.

The "new" cereal was launched, but there was a problem: it took about 10 minutes of soaking for the fruit to reconstitute properly, at which point the cereal turned soggy.

It seems fairly logical that the first El Camino was made in 1959, which was around the same time these other items were taking form.

Cale McCann is an El Camino lover and his website at <http://elcamino.home.mi.org> proudly displays his love for this vehicle. He says he gets e-mails all the time from people calling it a cruck

("Cruck?" I guess they mean "catruck." Those Americans - sheesh!) and a trar. But he feels it has its own look and style.

"The El Camino is very light in the back, so they do real nice burnouts. And huge motors can be added these days. The frame is very strong and so is the body. I think it'd make a great race car — other than aerodynamics. I just wanted something to be able to tow the dunebuggies and throw the dirt bike in the back. The problem is that people know what an El Camino is, but they know it for the ugly years — the late seventies and early eighties," said McCann. "But that's not all they made. I like the looks of them from 1964 to 1969."

The debate of whether it's a truck or a car will go on as long as those Energizer battery commercials.

McCann thinks it's a truck.

"It has a bed and is longer than a car. That makes it a truck," said McCann.

But the argument doesn't stop here. Self-proclaimed El Camino expert Jon Moore, who's e-mail address is <coolcamino@usa.net> believes the El Camino is a car.

"If you want to get detailed, the El Camino is more a car than a truck. Reason being, it drives like a car, it corners like a car, it generally performs like a car. Being modelled after the Chevelle in the mid 60s through early 70s, most parts are interchangeable. So traction control for the Chevelle works with the El Camino. Front and rear coils for suspension, rather than out-of-date leaf springs, helped the car find a home in drag racing," said Moore.

People purchase El Caminos for many reasons. All of them are bad.

Anything looking this hideous should be banned. There are all those lobby groups out there who want to rid television of sex and violence, but what about a lobby group to rid the world of bad designs?

I'd rather have kids see robberies on T.V. than have them be subjected to viewing Catrucks/Trars. The nightmare must be horrendous. Worst of all, who wants to claim to have made out in an El Camino?

Some people, however, have good reasons for purchasing an El Camino. Bob Hughes, member of the Canadian Classic Chevilles and Beaumonts, wanted a used pickup for his business, but didn't want to pay a lot of cash. The alternative: a

1967 Custom El Camino, Tahoe Turquoise, 396 V-8, four-speed, Rallye Wheels, PS, PB.

Moore values his El Camino because of its top-end performance. "It all matters what you want the El Camino to do for you. Just like any car, the El Camino needs TLC, and maintenance, and a good owner. The El Camino was a solid car. Still is to this day. Anyone that wants a muscle car and a truck to move the dresser and bed into a new home will respect the El Camino."

So who in the world thought about combining the features of a truck and car into one and what bad drugs were they on? I know I've done a lot of dumb things like combine lettuce, ground beef, ranch salad dressing and tomatoes for tacos (bad move). Or there's the time I combined a whole pack of bacon (using the oven and the microwave at the same time) with six eggs, or the time I ate a whole watermelon. But not even I could concoct such a thought to combine car and truck.

There are two myths going around explaining why this vehicle was created. The first legend has it originally being a Cadillac for funerals. However, someone wanted a flower car, so the roof was removed from the back of the Cadillac and the back was filled with flowers. The look was neat, and soon, another creation was born.

The second legend has it that, when houses were being built, their garages were too low for trucks to enter. So, instead of building a higher garage, someone decided to incorporate the back of the truck onto the front of a car.

For a while it made a lot of sense, until some smart contractor built a higher garage. You'd figure this would have caused its extinction, but no - the spirit of the Catruck/Trar lived on.

Sometime after its early success (22,246 sold in 1959, 14,163 in 1960 and 48,385 in 1969), the Catruck/Trar eventually faced extinction, but in 1978, Chevrolet re-introduced the El Camino in a new skin, with a body that was much smaller than it had been only a year before.

There were several option packages available in the first year in 79. Those in the market seized the advantage and Chevrolet began to see much higher El Camino sales.

In 1979, a new T.V. series emerged called The Dukes of Hazzard, about a small town in

Hazzard County run by a crooked sheriff, Roscoe P. Coltrane and Boss Hogg. A down-home rural family, comprised of Uncle Jesse Duke, a former moonshiner with Hogg, Daisy Duke, who wore short shorts, Bo and Luke Duke, who rode in the General Lee, a 1969 Dodge Charger, tried to ruin Coltrane and Hogg's evil schemes. The show's first season featured many Catrucks/Trars in the show's ubiquitous car chases, which probably caused viewers - primarily rednecks and young boys - to hold the Catruck/Trar dear to their hearts.

As the eighties came along, the El Camino paved its way to its own grave and, in 1987, it was officially discontinued. This was also the time when people started penny pinching and governments began to notice the existence of national debts and deficits.

The El Camino symbolized the freedom of the open air, that money didn't matter because everyone could afford almost anything they wanted. The sixties and seventies were times of experimentation and angst, and the El Camino was there. And when the yuppie eighties emerged, when people became more self-conscious about what they wore and about what people thought of them, the El Camino vanished. People talked about you if you weren't a hipster/hipstress and people were going to talk about you negatively if you owned a Catruck/Trar.

However, the diehards remain. Jerry Webb is president of the California Classic El Camino Club. He believes that the El Camino is far better than the cars of today.

"The body is unique, having chrome. Anywhere you park, people stand over it and stare at it and go over how beautiful the car

is. It's a good feeling being able to restore this vehicle," said Webb.

And now we can put to rest the is-it-car-or-truck debate, because Webb knows the real answer.

"It's a truck. You have to license El Caminos as a commercial vehicle because you can haul stuff in them." So there.

A big problem faces those holding on to their Catrucks/Trars in the United States. Many states are introducing legislation that any auto made after 1968 must undergo annual testing for air quality. Only 1969 to 1972 models that have been restored and have classic car plates will be exempt from future smog testing.

These people driving these cars may have lost their brains, as well. The California Classic El Camino Club is encouraging members to sign petitions to stop smog tests for street rods and classic rods.

To me, it makes sense. These guys go through the embarrassment of driving a Catruck/Trar, the least the government could do is let them pollute.

So if there's anything to be gained, here, it's that you are not alone. You've seen these Catrucks/Trars all over and you've taken in the pain internally. It's okay. It's time for you to release your frustrations. Your life isn't the same after seeing one. You get a tingle down your central nervous system every single time. The pain doesn't go away and the government is too cheap to fund a Catruck/Trar 1-800 crisis number (1-800-CAT-RUCK) for those times when the suffering gets unbearable.

Hopefully, seeing them stops other people from combining things that sound good together, but really aren't.

