

“Where’s the Dipstick?”

You’ll be shocked to open the hood on many vehicles these days and discover that you can’t find the dipstick tube. Because there isn’t one. Or sometimes there’s a tube but only a cap on the end. Reminds me of the old lady from the Wendy’s ads in the eighties, staring at the large bun with a miniscule black lump in the centre hollering, “Where’s The Beef?”

So far many RV companies haven’t gone that route but don’t be surprised if you buy your next RV or car and remark “Where’s the dipstick?”

In fact we owe the birth of the automatic transmission in 1940 to a fellow named Ransom Eli Olds from Lansing, Michigan. Ransom was a well-known inventor who created the world’s first assembly line. It was good old Henry Ford who went one further by making his assembly line movable, when his foreman, Two Cheese Burger McGinty, discovered his workers were too lazy after their lunch break to move to the next car in line. “Bugger that, I’ll have the car come to them.”

This did increase production by 1.2 cars per month, setting a sales record for black cars. Oh yeah, he also got a deal on black paint, hence the sales pitch, “looks great in jet black, coal black or midnight black.” Actually he was color blind and thought he’d bought three vats of dark blue, red and brown for his cars.

Unfortunately, Ransom's foreman, Two Thumbs McTavish, liked to smoke and one day butted his cigarette into a tub of gasoline and burned down the entire plant. Otherwise he'd given his boss the distinction of the world's first assembly line. Olds later got bought out by GM and the rivalry between the two continued.

Back to good old Ransom. His chauffeur, old Gimpy Left Leg McIntosh, who used to stall his Olds Limo around town. "Heck of a time with this clutch pedal. Sorry sir." Ransom had false teeth and in those days they didn't sell PolyGrip yet. He got tired of looking for his teeth under the car seats every time his chauffeur jerked the car too hard, although he was known for finding more money under the back seats than any other executive in the company's history.

Ransom had enough one day after finding his false teeth chipped yet again and decided to make the world's first automatic transmission car as a novelty for himself. That is until the King of England came over for a visit, and from his back seat remarked, "By Jove, strange country America. No decent tea to be had anywhere, but I haven't lost my false teeth once. I do believe, old chap, you will have to make one of these automagic-gearred cars for my own chauffeur, Too Bleeding Stiff Upper Lip McIlroy." Of course once others saw what the King rode in, and the fact his teeth were in such excellent condition, they all wanted an automagic-gearred vehicle as well.

For many years you could only buy Type A (oddly enough A meant Automatic) Fluid. Then somewhere along the way the McTavish's relatives at

General Motors got wind of the Olds assembly line debacle and they never forgave the McGintys for crowing 'we built it first at Henry's plant'. They came up with Dexron, which after three beers they knew the McGintys could never pronounce. Ford, ignoring the dig and knowing they had to outdo the McTavishs, brought out Type F (weirdly enough this stands for Ford-O-Matic).

The basic difference between the two is the friction modifiers. If you had a GM vehicle that was beginning to develop a tranny slip in the old days throw in a can of Type F and get nice crisp shifts again. Well, until the tranny blew into a thousand pieces.

An aside note here. Honda used engine oil in many of their earlier automatic transmissions and never had a removable filter or pan. (Sorry, I won't even think of making any funny jokes about anyone that eats raw fish and knows karate and judo).

Up until the seventies ATF contained whale oil as friction modifier until GreenPeace came along and put a stop to that. As vehicles got environmentally conscious things, the world of automatic transmissions went crazy. At Ford, Henry's cousins the McGintys decided the feud was on and brought out Mercon (very similar to Dexron), M2C138-CJ, Mercon LV, Mercon V and Mercon SP. To name a few.

Not to be out done at GM the McTavishs grandkids brought out Dexron II, IIC, IID, and lately Dexron VI. Everyone thought the gentlemen at Chrysler were nonplussed about what was going on until one of the cousins to the McGintys began working there after he got his science badge and they brought out ATF+3, and

ATF+4.

I've lost count now as to how many different types of tranny oils there are out there and like fashion statements it seems every manufacturer has a few new kinds every year or so. So it is not only critical to now to make sure you get your tranny fluid flushed or changed as per schedule, but to make sure the right type of fluid is put in. Many are not only incompatible, but don't mix backwards with older fluid types. Which is like remembering what the eighties were like, until you look at some old photos and go, "I really wore those clothes?" Not to mention the big hair!

According to the ATRA (Automatic Transmission Rebuilders Association), 90% of all transmission breakdowns are due to overheating, while according to the AA (Alcoholics' Anonymous) the biggest cause of breakdown is putting the vehicle into R for race and storming through a brick wall, several other cars and a waiting taxicab.

Almost all tranny fluids are a nice red in color in order to distinguish them from other fluids. Once your fluid has begun to change to a darker color or, heaven forbid, brown, then it's time to have the fluid flushed. If it's turned gold, you've parked your RV at the end of the rainbow or leprechauns have been relieving themselves under your hood.

Also, if you're into smelling things, like flowers or this week's laundry for that fresh as a daisy scent, take a whiff of the dipstick. If the fluid has darkened and begun to stink of overdone burnt pizza crust (I could murder a ham and pineapple

pizza smothered in mozza right about now) that's a sign your tranny is getting overheated.

Remember the hotter the temp of your transmission the more often you need to change the fluid. An average transmission should run around 175 degrees F at which range normal service intervals will suffice; usually every 120,000 kilometres. Raise that by twenty degrees and you can count on halving the life of the transmission fluid and another half for every twenty or so after that. Many transmissions are constantly run around 200-230 degrees. Reach anything approaching 250 and real trouble begins. Seals go hard, clutches begin to burn up and next thing you know you've got a box of neutrals, and you're staring at a huge tow bill to the nearest garage.

Most car transmissions run at 200 plus degrees, and RVs more than that, hence the need for regular service intervals - 60,000k's for cars but only 40,000 k's on most RVs. Having, and watching, your tranny oil temp gauge is very important in prolonging the life of your automatic transmission, especially when you've decided to push your twenty ton RV up the sheer mountain passes where the mountain goats will squint at you with you-gotta-to-be-kidding looks, or through the Mojave desert where snakes sip on coolers and use SPF80.

Regular transmission oil coolers in vehicles usually involve running hot tranny fluid into a section of the radiator where it is cooled by about twenty to thirty degrees and then ran back to the transmission. Adding an aftermarket cooler is

very wise and can drop fluid temps from seventy to 120 degrees. Newer models of coolers also have internal temp controls that don't allow flow until a set temp is reached, allowing the transmission to come up to operating range faster.

Synthetic trans fluids offer greater protection, but make sure the brand you're using is compatible with the original fluid. As a word of advice I would usually have the tranny filters changed on every second visit along with a complete flush every time.

Some new vehicles now have to be put on a hoist to have the tranny fluid checked, via fill and drain points. Others require the purchase of a dipstick (I'm not kidding you), some need to have computer scanners to unlock certain components and weird tuby affairs inserted anally into a plug in the tranny pan. Small wonder you get a \$60 bill just to check the tranny fluid and you might wonder 'what, really, are those quick lube type shops putting into your transmission?' If anything.

Which brings me back to the original point. When you open the hood and remark, "Where's the Bleeding Dipstick?" give us a call at Gerry's Automotive 1-604-826-0519 for further advice, service intervals or fluid types. After all, we're an easy-going bunch here, especially if you bring a dozen donuts and drive a standard.

See ya next time.