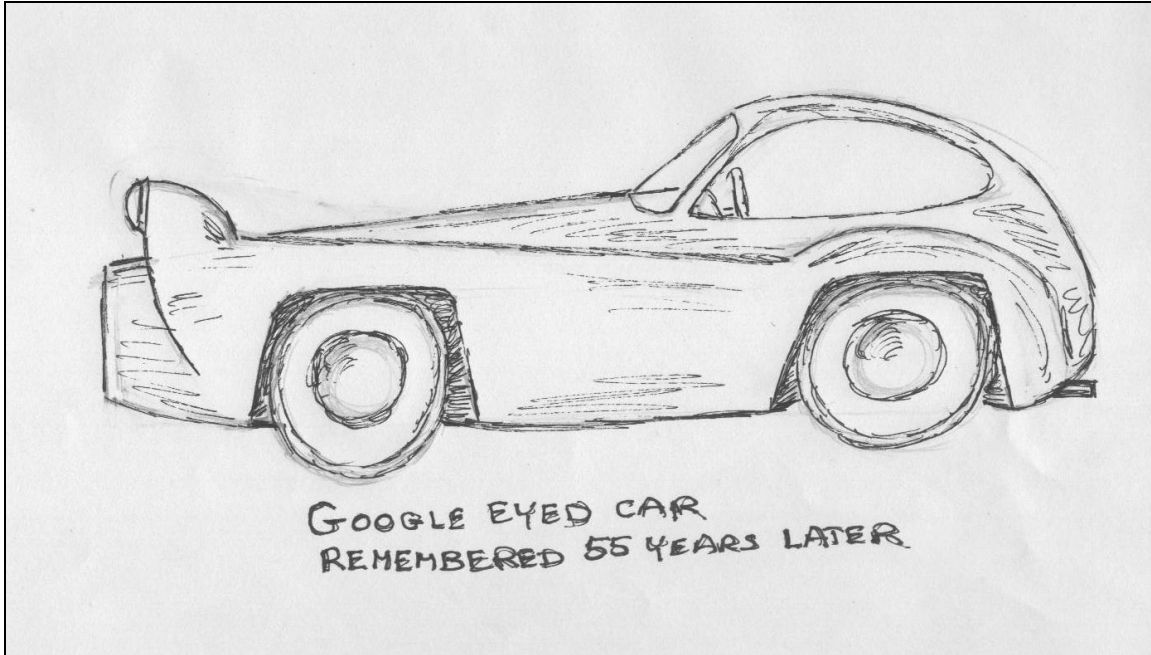


## Fisher Body Contest

*The first official project, suggesting problems with follow-through and execution...*



It was around 1951. We lived in Shelby, in the second or third house on Lee Street. The first house was where we returned just after the war, when my father was laid off from his job as a crane operator at Martin Aircraft. It (the house) had a white picket fence. The second house was where we came after spending a few years in the country living in my father's old home place. We probably moved because the house in town had indoor plumbing. Also, we might have gotten a good deal on the rent since the second and third Lee Street houses were owned by Mr. Daniels, my father's boss at Shelby Millwork.

I don't remember how I learned about the Fisher Body Craftsman's Guild contest. It could have been an ad in Boy's Life. The magazine was handed out once a month at the end of the Monday night Boy Scout meetings. (After the meetings we walked up the hill to Tillman's Firestone to get Cokes and wait for our parents to pick us up. I always gravitated to the gun display and a double-barrel Fox shotgun. Picking it up, pulling the butt to my shoulder, swinging the barrel at imaginary targets, I was careful not to touch the metal, especially the delicate engraving. )

I could have learned about the contest from something in Popular Mechanics. My uncle usually had copies lying around. (When he lived in the duplex up the street, before his car burned and he moved back in with us in the basement of the third house, he also had girlie and detective magazines stacked on the card table beside his gun cleaning paraphernalia.)

The contest, which started in 1930 and ended in 1968, was sponsored by GM's Fisher Body division to develop talent and promote products. Initially the competition focused on model-making skills. Competitors were required to create replicas of Napoleonic coaches, the Fisher Body trademark. In 1937, the emphasis shifted from construction to design. The contestants were invited to envision cars of the future, creating paper drawings, and clay and wooden models. The contest was a life-altering experience for some people, leading to careers in design and engineering. I don't know what happened in 1968. Perhaps the future was no longer anticipated.

However, children are hardly ever afflicted with such ennui, even in an era of irony. They usually look forward to the future. In 1951, 12-year old boys anticipated rounded cars and rounded girls - Buick Roadmasters and Marilyn Monroe.

The car I designed for the Fisher Body Craftsman's Guild contest had the curves, but their arrangement was odd. The car's distinguishing feature was a set of protruding headlights attached to fenders that rose up from the passenger compartment. In retrospect, the car resembled a mud skipper, the goggle-eyed fish who uses rudimentary lungs and stumpy fins to lumber between mud holes in dry seasons.

In keeping with the contest rules, I did a drawing. After that, I was supposed to build a clay model. That was how designs were done at Fisher body – first a drawing, then a clay model, then a wooden mockup.

I did not have modeling clay, but I did have access to glazing putty. At Shelby Millwork, where my father was superintendent, a man called Frolicking Fred employed large quantities of glazing putty on the windows the company built for housing projects around the Southeast. Every morning, he would dump a blob on a sheet of plywood then towel the gray matter on window sashes, sealing panes of glass in place. Although younger workers teased Fred and caused him to throw things, he was an artist with window putty, able to lay a bead in a single continuous stroke. One of my jobs, working the summer of 1951 at Shelby Millwork, was helping Fred. I rolled buggies of unglazed windows into his little studio and rolled out the finished product.

So, with or without my father's consent (I don't remember) I took home a sheet on which a blob of glazing putty had been dumped. I can still remember carrying the sheet, liquid leaking from the edge onto my hands and clothes, across the lumber yard to our house.

As it turned out, glazing putty and modeling clay are not the same thing. Putty does not hold a shape well and when stuck in the oven to speed up drying, tends to crack. Even so, I might have pursued the contest if my car had been pretty.