

“Furrin” Car Specialist & Sports Car Psychiatrist

As we reflect upon individuals we've encountered throughout our lives, there are occasionally some that for one reason or another seem to stand out in our minds. Perhaps they are more easily remembered as a result of some distinctive quality, a unique characteristic, or some other idiosyncrasy or unconventional mannerism that they've displayed.

One such interesting person that might fit this description is the late Charles L. Nicholas. Charlie had an auto repair shop and dealership specializing in foreign car sales and service at 1410 E. Blue Earth Avenue in Fairmont, presently the location of Day Plumbing and Heating. Charlie was the son of W. L. “Lincoln” and Mrs. Nicholas, owners of the Nicholas Theater.

Charlie, born in 1921, served during WW II in the Army Air Corp and trained to be a pilot. However, he once refused to fly a particular aircraft as, being a perfectionist; he suspected the plane had a mechanical issue. Consequently, that decision cost him his wings and launched his new career as a mechanic, initially involving aircraft.

He and his future wife, Ruby, met in the 1940s in Rochester, Minnesota. Their unlikely introduction was a result of Ruby getting her leg caught in the bumper of a car while crossing a street in Rochester. Ironically, the driver of that car was her future husband, Charlie Nicholas. Following that incidental encounter, they were later married and lived in the Rochester area for a time.

The automobile business had long been a part of their lives since both of their fathers were at one time car salesmen. Therefore, when they moved to Fairmont in 1946 Charlie opened a Crosley repair shop. He later began working at the Thaine Peck Car Shop. Then, in 1948, they bought the business from Mr. Peck and soon purchased a Volkswagen franchise. In the 1950s, they acquired a Jaguar franchise, possibly the worlds smallest, eventually selling only a total of six Jags. One of their chief concerns in the automotive business was the difficulty in obtaining auto parts for their customers; consequently, they frequently drove to Chicago themselves to obtain needed parts for customers.

Charlie could be described as a portly individual having a rather witty sense of humor, being fastidious to the point of perfection, and was obviously very meticulous with his work. He was also emphatic regarding the proper usage of the English language. He could usually be seen at his shop wearing mechanic's coveralls. He loved and took a

great deal of pride in his collection of foreign vehicles and, consequently, much of their social life revolved around automobiles and car shows.

Those who knew him over the years more than likely encountered many unique and interesting experiences and conversations. Charlie, who once ran for U. S. Senate against Hubert Humphrey, was known to have an opinion on most any topic. However, he was also known to be very knowledgeable, well read, and intelligent.

As the owner of a 1974 MG, this writer had the opportunity to visit Charlie's shop on a number of occasions in the mid-1970s, both for service as well as for automotive advice. On one such visit to his shop, Charlie offered a ride in one of his pristine Jaguars, a very elegant white 1964 Mark II. Of course, I immediately accepted the enviable opportunity to ride in what I considered to be a rare, exquisite and exotic automobile. Charlie drove west on Blue Earth Avenue and turned north on County Road 39 past the fairgrounds. While passing the fairgrounds, Charlie floored the Jag. The speedometer quickly registered 90 miles per hour and continued to climb when Charlie calmly remarked, "Oh, I forgot something!"

I asked, somewhat nervously, "What did you forget Charlie?"

Charlie's instantaneous reply was, "My heart pill!"

In the mid 1970s, seat belts were provided in automobiles, but wearing them was neither mandatory nor particularly common. Nevertheless, it undoubtedly took me less than a split second to securely fasten my seat belt after Charlie's comment. In later reflecting on that incident, it would seem that Charlie's remark was probably more an indication of his subtle sense of humor rather than that of an actual medical condition. Obviously, it had the desired effect and he undoubtedly had a number of laughs recounting that story to others over the years.

Another current Fairmont resident, Kim Rock, remembers Charlie after having gone to work for him in 1973. Kim, at that time a high school student, was interested in mechanical things and thought the chance to be an "apprentice" for him would be pretty neat even though Charlie was well into semiretirement and would seldom come to the shop until after lunch.

Kim also recalls Charlie's perfectionist traits as follows: "I remember learning from him that all four slots of screws holding a license plate on were aligned vertically rather than simply tightened. This was a remnant of his aircraft mechanic days."

Charlie's invoices were completed in a painstaking manner as well. According to Kim, "A customer could also expect to receive a very detailed, handwritten invoice from Charlie enumerating each repair in agonizing detail. This process might take a half hour or more while the customer patiently waited, but was also accompanied by Charlie's wit and storytelling."

"Charlie was frequently known for fixing things the car owner hadn't asked to be repaired, 'because they needed fixing'," stated Kim. This, of course, sometimes caused disputes with his customers.

"At the end of the work day, Charlie's friends, many of whom were British sports car lovers, would show up at his shop for a libation and a few stories." According to Kim, "This may have been the most important aspect of the apprenticeship."

Another local resident, Gordy Luckow, remembers Charlie telling his friends, "If the lights are on in the house, you're welcome to stop." Gordy went on to say, "He was fun to be around and there were always interesting people stopping by his home."

Charlie was a colorful character indeed. It would seem that he might compare quite favorably with some of those Martin County legends from the past such as Lenny Burton, Sam Carver, Frederick Wherland, and many others. They were unique, interesting, and provided a luster to our local history that would definitely be missed had they not existed or had they lived somewhere else.

Charlie Nicholas passed away in August of 1987 at the age of 66.

For more information on this topic, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.

***Charlie's 1st shop picture credit:**

<http://crosleyautoclub.com/WhenTheyWereUsed/WhenTheyWereUsed.html>

***Second Picture, courtesy of the Fairmont Sentinel**

CHARLIE'S REPAIR SHOP
COMPLETE *CROSLEY* SERVICE
ALSO GENERAL REPAIRING ON ALL CARS

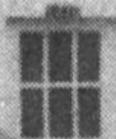
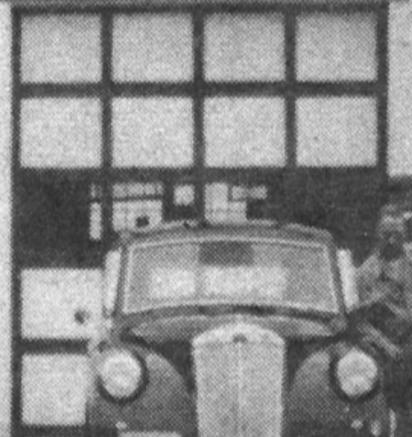
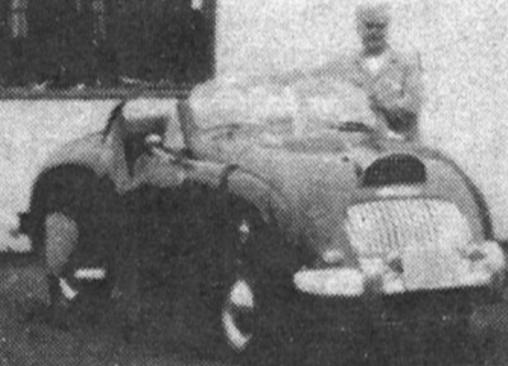


CHARLIE NICHOLAS
CROSELY - PORSCHE - VOLKSWAGEN

1410 E. BLUE BARTH AVE

EST. 1915

PHONE 577 - CROSELY - PORSCHE - VOLKSWAGEN



Charlie and Ruby Nicholas built up a stable of classic foreign cars in the '50s and '60s. Charlie, left, stands by a Crosley while Ruby checks out a Volkswagon at right.

CHARLES L.
NICHOLAS

FOR

UNITED



STATES

SENATOR

A Wage we can keep ==

A Debt we can pay ==

A Dollar we can bite ==

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Our German Mechanic - - Karl Niklaus

FERRARI, ALFA-ROMEO, MASERATI, LANCIA, OSCA

Our Italian Mechanic - - Carlo Niccoli

CITROEN, SIMCA, TALBOT, RENAULT

Our French Mechanic - - Charles Nicolles

VOLVO, SAAB

Our Swedish Mechanic - - Carl Nikkolas

PEGASO, HISPANO-SUIZA

Our Spanish Mechanic - - Carlos Nicollez