



a Lurid Tale Having to Do with  
the Secret Lives of Retired Engineers  
by E. Todd Ellison

“Very Small Pistons”  
is inspired by and dedicated to  
Edward Frank “Pappy” Ellison,  
who is still making  
beautiful machines.  
Happy 82nd, Pappy!

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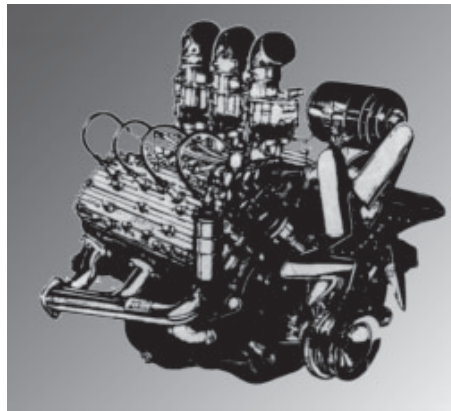
Ed. Note: Since keystroking this tale, the author has gone on to win a book of the year award for his critically acclaimed novel,  
*The Luck of Madonna 13*. He is also co-author of the *Recipe Rangers in the West*. See [www.etellison.com](http://www.etellison.com) for more.

# Very Small Pistons

by E. Todd Ellison

Forget about the pro basketball Pistons for a moment and try to think mechanical pistons. Nice aluminum ones, with rings, even. Maybe forged aluminum, maybe cast aluminum of high-silicon alloy for wear resistance. You with me?

To most contemporary Americans, pistons are things that reside somewhere inside a car. Possibly in the trunk, probably not in the glovebox, maybe under the hood somewhere. Next to the battery? Or were those the unnecessary parts the mechanic pulled out last trip to the shop, you wonder, like an abscessed wisdom tooth or an engorged appendix? Don't need this, he might have told you,



a tinkerer's hot rod "flathead"

holding up a grimy cylindrical thing on a metal stick that the automotive cognoscenti would recognize as a con rod. Best not to even ask a modern person what a con rod might be; inevitably

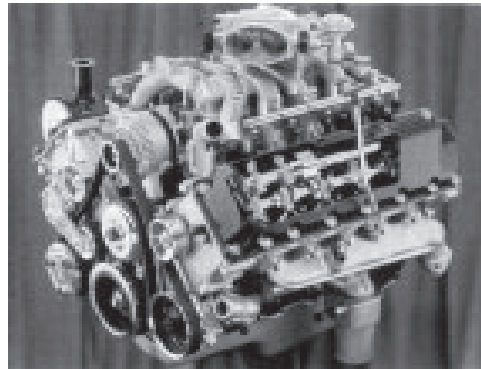
you'll get a delicately phrased description of a convict's reproductive machinery. Or a blank stare.

Things were not always like this. Not so long ago, before the government and the Detroit automakers conspired to take them out of the hands of ordinary folk,

engines were items of popular grandeur. Tinkers abounded. Even ordinary Joes could—and did—do maintenance things like changing spark plugs and distributor points and adjusting—even

rebuilding—their carburetors. Some could even rebuild entire engines and others could coax gobs of additional horsepower out of them. In those days, engine manipulation skills were infallible signs of manliness, almost on a par with being on the varsity football team. Girls with well-developed testosterone antennae could just as easily find themselves trailing raptly behind a hot rod mechanic as a quarterback. In those days even the ladies appreciated domed pistons, full-race cams, log manifolds, dual-coil distributors, ported heads, glasspack mufflers. Some could tell the difference between a Stromberg 97 and a Carter AFB. Imagine that! Even chopped flywheels had a certain measure of charm, like flat-top haircuts held stoutly vertical with butch wax. Or something.

Those days are gone forever. Now, amateur engine tinkering is pretty much a lost art. In fact,



tinkering's anathema — a modern auto engine

it's only motor-cult geezers like those old boys in The Lost Piston Society that still care enough about such things to fool with them. The hormone factor is long gone; these guys do it for love, not lust. Or maybe a wager. Guys like Yank “Centerfold” Rodsmith.

Yank is his real name. No doo-doo. Short for Yankee. That's what his wife, Hallie, told me, at least, and she seems like a pretty straight shooter. I met her when I was doing a piece for *National Collector* on unusual collections. Hallie's is thimbles. Yes, the things people

used to stick their fingers in for whatever reason. While Robby-the-photographer was setting up to shoot her wall-mounted displays of some of the 5,356 different examples currently in her collection, Hallie and I chatted thimbles. I looked attentive and successfully stifled a bout of hysterical laughter prompted by unbeckoned images of

thimble-condoms for “shorties” and specialized “knobby” thimbles for sadistic proctologists.

Wow, I thought. This is why I went to college and got a journalism degree? My stomach went cold on me and I felt like I could puke up an entire flash-frozen typewriter. Maybe two. At such moments, I know I need to get a different job. Something where I can do really astute, hard-hitting, state-of-the-art, public interest journalism, like reporting the latest scientific discoveries on the sex habits of *homo politicus* and *homo celebritus*. Probably not; the waiting line’s too long to get those hot assignments. Damn!

Internal soliloquy over, I’m back to reality and the suburban domicile of my lively octogenarian interviewee. To my surprise, Hallie’s passionate rap about thimbles was actually interesting. We walked around this whole room that’s like a miniature museum. Each thimble is in its own Plexiglas cube with a little descriptive blurb underneath. Very neat and tidy. Actually, I can now

admit the whole thing was pretty impressive. Never thought much about thimbles until then and I’ll bet you haven’t either, unless you’re a *National Collector* subscriber.

Hallie has clay thimbles from pharaoh-era Egypt, metal thimbles of copper, silver, cast iron, brass and pewter from a hundred countries, wood thimbles of a hundred varieties, including a rare bunch from medieval Japan that were intricately carved from flame-hardened, laminated bamboo. The oldest is a carved bone thimble from central Africa that has supposedly been carbon-dated at 130,000 years. (What do you think they were sewing? I thought all those people ran around naked.) Then there are the uniquely historic thimbles, like the one in the special shatterproof glass case with electronic alarm that was supposedly the one Betsy Ross used when she sewed the first American flag. Goes on and on. Read the article.

I listened patiently, and asked reporterly ques-

tions, not bothering to take notes because the recorder was getting it all verbatim. When Robby had packed his gear and we were out the door, I thanked Mrs. Rodsmith for her insights and courtesy and complimented her on the uniqueness of her collection, assuring her that it would be one of the more novel ones to be featured in the story.

She brightened. “Thank you, Young Man. If you really wanted to see something novel, though, you should have seen my husband’s miniature motors. They’re quite small, you know. And they work. So noisy.”

I smiled convincingly, bobbed my head with the sincerity only seasoned journalists, used car salesmen and politicians can muster, backpedaled down her walkway and into the waiting Cherokee. Robby gunned it and we were out of there and on our way down to Batdorf’s-On-The-Beach for a few brews. Whew. I hate it when old people call me Young Man. Makes me really thirsty.

Mr. Danforth, my boss at Freelancers-R-Us,

painstakingly advised me of my mistake two days later. Displaying a copy of the *Orange County Register*, Part 3, with a photostory on Mr. Yank Rodsmith and The Lost Piston Society, he patiently explained my alleged error: “Do you know how to spell ‘moron,’ Grimwaller? Do you have any \_\_\_\_\_ (he used a popular seven-letter profanity which I am loathe to repeat here, this being a G-rated story) idea how stupid we look when our EAST COAST (I knew that already, why did he need to all-caps it?) client calls to tell us to look in our local paper for story-fodder? Do you have any \_\_\_\_\_ (same word again) brains at all? How could you be in that Thimble Woman’s house and completely miss this?”

“Uhhh...” I began, attempting to buy time for a really slick rejoinder, the kind you see in movies. In the previous split-second I’d already decided he probably didn’t need to know that she’d mentioned this to me, more or less specifically. Could be bad for his heart.

“Get the \_\_\_\_\_ (this is the four-letter root of the seven-letter word he’d used earlier...limited vocabulary, this Mr. Danforth) out there AGAIN (he put heavy emphasis on that particular word, for some reason) and bring back a VERY GOOD (he was apparently in an EMPHATIC mood) story or your name will disappear from the stringer list of every independently owned and operated Freelancers-R-Us franchise in the entire \_\_\_\_\_ (seven again) United \_\_\_\_\_ (seven) States of America!”

Two days later, I was back out at the Rodsmith residence, this time on a quest for little teeny motors with even teenier pistons. Geez Louise!

Mrs. Rodsmith answered the door, looked at me, smiled her off-the-shelf grandmotherly smile and spoke, not to me, but rather to Mr. Rodsmith who apparently was nearby. “The Young Man from that magazine is here again, Dear. I believe he’s here to see your little motors this time.” Then to me: “It’s very nice to see you again, Young

Man. Please come in. Would you like some fresh lemonade?”

She now opened the door all the way, which was a relief to me because I really didn’t want to have to leap over her to get inside, having left both my pogo stick and my Michael Jordan Autograph Model Nike Air’s back at the apartment that day. Young Man, Schmung Man! I want to scream: It’s Grimwaller, Mrs. Rodsmith. Dusty Grimwaller. But I didn’t.

You want to guess what an old guy who makes little tiny motors looks like? I’ll give you a hint, he’s not seven feet tall for starters. Chew on it for a while, while I move along.

The affably smiling Yank Rodsmith offered me his hand. Strong grip, I noted almost painfully. This man did not look at all like he was eighty, at least to me. What stood out most was the curious, penetrating, sparkly eyes. He still had most of his hair, too, which is more than I can say for myself at less than half his age. But it’s okay if

you're a jock, I think, momentarily distracted; look at Terry Bradshaw. Or Clyde Drexler. Didn't I play one season of high profile intramural college football? Didn't I make a whole lot of really awesome catches as a high-flying tight end? My fragile male ego is momentarily sedated and I return to the assignment, in the process of being ushered into the living room and pointed to a couch.

I sat facing him while Mrs. Rodsmith fussed around in the kitchen, apparently on her lemonade mission. Hopefully, she would add some cookies; it is well known that all Young Men love cookies.

"So what do you want to know?" began good old Yank. "It's all in here, really." He gestured to a stack of magazines and newspaper clippings.



"You're a former *Playboy* Playmate?" I said, saying it straight without even a hint of a grin. Hey, the top of the stack was clearly an old issue of *Playboy*; I could read that much upside down. Why, I wondered, was this guy leading off with his *Playboy* collection? Oooh, maybe it was his daughter who was the Playmate? Or Mrs. Rodsmith? Was *Playboy* even around then? I think it was. My brain was furiously churning through the possible permutations and combinations of what I had begun to think of as the "*Playboy* Puzzle" when good old Yank saved me further effort, which was kind of too bad because it was starting to get really interesting.

"Got a motor in here a couple years back. Only member of the LPS to ever get into *Playboy*."

I had to wonder what *Playboy* had sunk to by now, but as he was clearly prideful about this accomplishment, I kept it alive: “LPS? Could you help me out here, Mr. Rodsmith? What’s the LPS?” So you’ll know I was being respectful, I left out the obvious wisecracks, Limp P\_\_\_\_\_ (you can probably figure that out all by yourself...several familiar words will work just fine in that blank spot) Society, being just the tip of the iceberg.

“Lost Piston Society.”

“Oooh,” I said, stretching it out as though a gooey blob of meaning had just plopped down on me like an airmail from one of the local seagulls. Also bobbed my head, just in case the “oooh” wasn’t enough. “I take it you’re a member in good standing of the, uh, Lost Pistol Society?” I replied, unable to resist.

“That’s Lost *Piston* Society, Son,” he corrected.

The Son thing sort of irked me at that point, being so close on the heels of Mrs. Rodsmith’s Young Man business. “Sorry, I said. Got a hear-

ing loss in the upper midrange. Makes the trailing esses sort of disappear. What I heard was something like ‘Loth Pithin Society.’ Thanks for setting me straight.” Getting reporterly now, I sat up straight, pulled my ‘nudies pen’ out of my shirt pocket and prepared my steno pad for a Note: “Maybe you should start by telling me a little about the Loth Pithin Society.”

Good old Yank ignored my mispronunciation and proceeded to hold forth on the subject a good ten minutes. The recorder was getting it all, of course, but at various points I made unreadable marks on my steno pad, stroked emphatic double-underlines here and there and occasionally sent arrows careening wildly between various destinations, like schnockered homing pigeons. To be annoying, I aimlessly fondled my nudie pen a few times, even sucked on it once or twice, all the while appearing to be pondering the deeper import of a particularly trenchant point in his monologue. Good old Yank was oblivious to all

this, however, which also irked me. The guy was unflappable.

When he was winding down (us journalists can always sense such things, although it's not one of the things they actually teach in journalism classes), I decided it was time for something real time, something *now*. Enough history, I decided. "Could I ask you to show me your collection now, Mr. Rodsmith?"

"It's not much of a collection, really," he began.

At this, I began to wonder why I was here doing an article on strange collections if there was no collection. Actually, the scope of his collection was moot; I needed to write a bang-up collection piece on his stuff or I was going to be dead meat in the freelance business. "Well let's just see what you've got, Mr. Rodsmith."

He took me to his workshop, which occupied the entirety of his three car suburban garage. I have to say, he had an impressive setup there.

Industrial machinery all over the place, only a few items which I recognized, having seen consumer versions of them at Home Depot. This would be the drill press, bench grinder and other little stuff like that. As to the other stuff, I had only the barest of clues. But they were big and very impressive. "This is where I made my first couple dozen model motors, he began. Got them in one of the guest bedrooms...we can look at them a little later if you like."

"I'd like."

Good old Yank gave me the complete tour of the shop, which looked like a very expensive collection of pro-grade stuff. I was introduced to two lathes, two milling machines, a big band saw, some welding stuff, a dizzying variety of small power tools and, over in a corner with a hood and a vent stack, a miniature furnace for melting metal used in his special "investment" castings, whatever those are. One of the most intriguing devices was a massive, ancient looking thing that

turned out to be a turn-of-the-century punch press that had been made into a stamping press for tiny sheet metal parts.

Of course there were hand tools, galore, both in fancy oak toolboxes and hanging from clips on what wall space was available. There were also boxes and bins of parts and raw materials. In one corner, an area about eight feet by twelve feet had been framed in to make a separate room with a door. “What’s that place, Mr. Rodsmith? Storage closet?”

“Oh, that’s my clean room...where I do most of my assembly work. Let me show you.”

The clean room was pristine and brightly lit by recessed fluorescent fixtures. The walls were painted that pale, yellowish mint color I have always thought of as Old Lady Green. The floor was spotless gray granite tile. A long workbench covered with plastic laminate spanned its entire width, with glass-doored storage cabinets overhead. There were several large illuminated mag-

nifiers on articulated arms, and on one end there was a bulky stereo-microscope contraption with cuffs where you could insert your arms into a box-thing that contained whatever.

“That thing over there was where I assembled my thimble motor,” offered Yank, noting the direction of my gaze. “Collected ten bucks from Mac Swerdlow on that one a couple years back. Course it took me almost a year of steady work to build a working motor that small. A lot of effort for ten bucks, but who could pass up a challenge like that?”

*I* certainly could, I thought. What I actually said was: “You made a working gasoline engine that small? Thimble-sized?” I noticed an errant note of genuine incredulity had snuck into my professional journalistic tone. In addition, I began to seriously wonder exactly what good old Yank Rodsmith had done before he retired. There was a major bundle of dollars invested here; not your average retiree’s home workshop.

“Uhhh, Mr. Rodsmith, just what is it you did before you retired? I don’t believe you’ve mentioned that yet.”

Rodsmith led me out of the clean room and back into the larger shop. “Well actually, Son, I’ve been retired so long that I hardly remember myself, sometimes. Got lucky, if you really want to know. Turned out that one of the Big Boys just had to have one of my patents for computerized micromachining systems. Still get royalty money from that baby, too.” He waved his arm in a gesture I supposed was meant to explain how all this expensive stuff came to be. “I guess you could say I was an inventor, although I did have my own company at one time for doing bread and butter aerospace research and development stuff. Got rid of the company a long time ago; too much of a pain in the you-know-what dealing with the defense-o-crats. But I still do some inventing, just for the fun of it. Not much interested in the money side of it anymore. I just

invent stuff that lets me make stuff smaller and smaller. Motors, mostly.”

I wondered at the what else besides motors he wanted to make smaller, but before I could ask, he continued.

“Want to see my motor collection now?”

“Of course, Mr. Rodsmith. Then maybe we can arrange to have my photographer come out here and get them on film.”

“Hope he’s got a microscope,” said good old Yank, the hint of a grin curling the corners of his mouth and dimpling his cheeks ever so slightly.

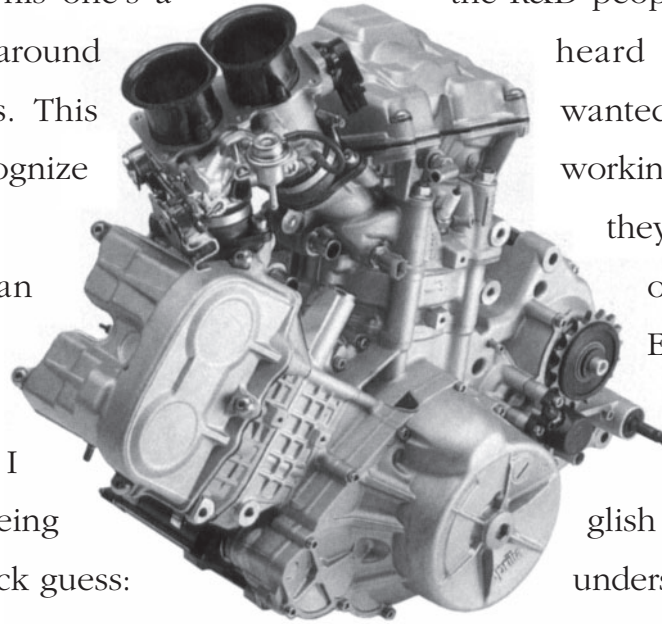
Yank’s motors were truly works of art, like intricate czarist Russian jewelry. He had been building them nonstop for three decades and each one was a singular creation, designed and fabricated from scratch, build one hundred percent by Yank himself. His oldest creations were the largest, and the sizes had gradually shrunk in scale over the years.

“This one here was the third or fourth one I

built. It's an exact, quarter scale replica of an Offenhauser racing engine. I was kind of big on Indy motors for a while. This one's a quarter scale Novi V8 from around the same era...early fifties. This one's still in my top ten; recognize it, by any chance?"

It definitely had a mean look to it and it certainly wasn't a car engine. Had to be a motorcycle engine. I knew it was a v-twin and being on the spot, hazarded a quick guess: "Harley?" Oops. I could see Yank was about to give me a ding, so I tossed out another possible answer: "Ducati?"

"Well, Son, you got the v-twin motorcycle part of it right both times. Give you part credit, okay? This is a bit of an antique, although a mean one: quarter scale Vincent, the motor that was in the Black Lightning...quite a famous machine in its



the aprita v-twin — yank's Italian project

time. Now it's just a legend. Here's another v-twin...real modern, though. Seems a while back the R&D people from some Italian company heard about my little Vincent and wanted me to make a quarter-scale working model of a new hi-tech v-twin they were working on. Some kind of big motorcycle show PR deal. Even paid me a nice fee. But they were a pain in the keester...couldn't speak English for beans and expected me to understand Italian. 'You want me, you better get a translator,' I told 'em. They did. The U.N. oughta make English the international language,' don't you think, Son?"

The Son thing again. Poo-poo on the Son thing. Why can't Old People use actual names, I wondered? Gotta be a superiority thing, I concluded. With slowed-up brains, they've just gotta lord it over us younger generationals by dint of their

inescapably superior experience. I could sense an internal soliloquy forming up, tornado-like, in the back of my mind...

“Now here’s when I started getting into making them smaller. Look at this: a complete supercharged Caterpillar diesel, the motive force behind their famous old D9 bulldozer. One-eighth scale, this one. But still pretty big.”

I nodded and followed him past a dozen more engines, each ensconced in its own wall-mounted Plexiglas display case. “Here’s my first try at a really small one, he said, pointing to a bundle of stuff about halfway between the size of a tennis ball and a golf ball. This is a one-sixteenth scale model of a 327 cubic inch Corvette engine, vintage 1965. Complete with fuel injection.”

I could no longer maintain my bogus façade of polite interest. I was truly impressed. “Do any of them work?” I wondered out loud.

“Work! Work?” exclaimed good old Yank with what I hoped was mock outrage. “Of course they

work. Well, they don’t all work right now, of course...be too much of a mess to have them all hooked up to fuel and batteries. But they’ve all run. Every damn one. Got dynamometer print-outs on each one to prove it!” He cocked his head and looked at me closely, as if seeing me for the first time. “I’m sorry, but I seem to have forgotten your name, Son.”

“Grimwaller. Dusty Grimwaller.”

Yank stuck out his hand again. “I’m enjoying meeting with you Mr. Grimwaller. Hope you’re enjoying the tour. Sometimes I get a little carried away, you know, so I hope you’ll not be offended if I whoop and holler a bit from time to time.”

“Not at all, Mr. Rodsmith. And please...call me Dusty.”

“Dusty...interesting name. Okay, Dusty. And you call me Yank. So where were we. Work. Yes. You want to see some of these things run. Actually, I’ve got two that I keep set up to run all the time, just in case I get asked that question you

just asked. Over here.”

“Here” was two pedestal mounted Plexiglas cases which evidently had operational motors in them. One of the cases had what looked to be a black vinyl hood which concealed its contents. The other’s contents were clearly visible. “These are my current runners,” he said proudly. He pointed to the uncovered case: “This one I call the Rodsmith Mark 12. It’s a tenth-scale supercharged, double-overhead cam V12. I call it a Rodsmith, but it’s really a highly-modified Honda six-cylinder racing engine design; two of them, actually. The supercharger is my own deal, along with the injection system. Want to start it up?”

I wasn’t so sure, having an irrational fear that I’d screw something up just by pushing the red START button he was pointing at. “Well, I don’t know...” I said honestly.

“Go ahead, Dusty. You can’t hurt it. The whole process is actually under computer control. I can monitor twelve different variables over there.” He

pointed to a video monitor hung from the wall above the display cases. Push the button and watch what happens.”

I took a deep breath and pushed the button. Nothing happened. I knew it, I knew it, I thought to myself, almost panicked. Then the video monitor came to life, first displaying “Rodsmith Mark 12” and then underneath that, a red countdown clock and the message “Initiating Startup Sequence.” When the clock got to zero, the screen changed and a bunch of computer graphic gauges flashed up. Underneath, it seemed to be cycling through a system check. Very fancy schmancy, I thought. This guy is definitely state-of-the-art. Good old Yank is no mere tinkerer. Wonder what else he’s got up his sleeve?

A sharp snarl suddenly erupted from the box in front of me and I could feel the whole room vibrate a little. “Let her warm up a little bit and then we can run her through a simulated lap around last year’s Long Beach Grand Prix course.”

“You can do that?”

“Sure. Just computer stuff. One of my friends in the Lost Piston Society has a son who’s a mechanic for the Slick 50 racing team and he talked them into letting me hook my black box up to one of their Lolas during practice. Got a really good, really fast lap recorded in half a dozen parameters: rev profiles, torque curves, g-forces, linear acceleration...you know, that kind of stuff.”

“I’m just a journalist, Mr. Rodsmith; not a nuclear physicist.” I had a suspicion nuclear physicists wouldn’t know jack-diddlysquatch about this stuff either. Just for exercise, I mentally kicked myself for slipping back into the Mr. Rodsmith thing now that we’d gotten on a first name basis, but he pretended not to notice.

“Are you ready? You’re going to have to use your imagination, since there’s not much to see. It’s just the engine driving an imaginary grand prix car around the City of Long Beach. That box it’s connected to is a variable load that simulates

the g-forces and friction that would actually be encountered on real streets at speed. Keeps the engine from blowing itself up in about half a second. You’ve been to Long Beach, haven’t you? Good. Just close your eyes. It’s going to be loud...here we go.”

I almost jumped out of my shoes when he let the program loose and that little four-inch monstrosity started kicking into action. Hardcore screaming banshees winding up, then dropping sharply, downshifting, braking, then accelerating like air raid sirens on serious uppers. The whole number, just like a real race. Sans tire squealing and the sounds of high velocity metal crumpling, of course. I closed my eyes to better visualize the race course simulation and, out of sheer manliness, resisted putting my hands over my ears. But I did peek a couple times during the lap; the little engine didn’t look like it was doing anything at all. Maybe this whole exercise is an elaborate hoax, I wondered. Then it was over and I

realized I'd been holding my breath almost the whole lap. And my hands were shaking.

"Wow!" was my clever summation of the experience.

When I opened my eyes, my new pal Yank was taking the plex box off the foot-square pedestal the motor was mounted on. "Put your hand above the engine, but be sure not to touch it: this little screamer runs at about 300 degrees Fahrenheit. Had to design a special high pressure coolant pump and have a special coolant formulated by another of my Lost Piston Society buddies who just happens to be a retired petrochemical engineer and fluid dynamics guy."

I began to have new respect for Yank and his Lost Pistons. Gingerly, I placed my hand a couple inches above the now silent Rodsmith Mark 12 and had to jerk it back immediately. "Whoa!"

"Hot, isn't it." Yank put the cover back on and turned to an identical pedestal. "It'll take about half-an hour to cool down. That sound you hear

is the cooling system. There's one coolant pump which circulates the fluid through a heat exchanger to keep the motor at the right temperature. Another pump runs another coolant supply through the supercharger's intercooler to keep the density of the fuel/air mix up for maximum horsepower. There are also a couple of ducts that circulate cool air from under the house past the heat exchanger fins and a couple of little fans hooked to a thermostat that keep the ambient temperature inside the box within tolerable limits."

"Sounds like you got a lot of machinery inside that pedestal," I responded, lamely as usual. My journalistic suspicion was still alive and kicking and the talk about all that machinery dredged the hoax idea back up.

"Probably should show you that stuff, just in case you think I might be pulling your leg," said Yank, reading my mind. He pressed some concealed latch under the lip that the plastic box

fitted into and one side of the pedestal popped open. All the stuff he talked about seemed to be busy doing its thing. If this was a hoax, he'd put a hell of a lot of work into it. Why bother? I wondered.

I traced various tubes and hoses and ducts with my fingers, felt the heat coming off the heat exchangers (they looked like little radiators to me) watched little electric motors spin things which were probably the pumps he'd mentioned and felt my internal skeptic relax a little. Then I stood up, wiped my sweaty palms against my khaki Dockers and shrugged. "Pretty spiffy," I told him, reaching now for the gold medal of journalistic lameness. "What's next?"

Yank seemed to be in deep thought. Then he looked at his watch. Then he glanced over at me. Then he looked at his watch again. "You know, uhh, Dusty..." He paused a moment before continuing. "I think I'm going to have to call it quits for today. Have you seen enough to tell

your photographer what he needs to bring for the magazine article?"

What had just happened here? "Sure. Yea. Yea, I can tell him what he needs. When do you want us to come back Mr. Rodsmith?"

"Why don't you call Hallie tomorrow—you've met my wife, haven't you...of course you have—and work out the photography details with her. I may or may not be able to be here, but that won't matter at all, I don't think. I'm sorry to rush you out like this, but I've gotten so absorbed in our little tour that I completely forgot something I absolutely must do."

He ushered me quickly out of the room and out of the house, apologizing again for the abruptness of it all. And that was it. The next day I made arrangements with Mrs. Rodsmith to come back with Robby and get the shots we needed, which we did the following day. But Yank was nowhere to be seen. Weird. I wrote my story, keeping it focused on the unusual collections

angle and submitted it to Danforth. It was good and I knew it. Danforth did too.

Three months later, the story ran. I had moved on to other things, of course, but I at times I had the feeling there was a whole other level I was completely missing. Then I met Monica and completely forgot about scale model motors, working or otherwise.

How many guys ever get to date a *Playboy* Playmate? The genuine article, a living breathing centerfold? Dusty Grimwaller, for one. This belongs in *Amazing Tales* or some other thirties pulp rag. Smartass freelance writer meets Monica Hansen—a knockout natural blonde fox with, shall we say, a highly remarkable physique, who is also a recent UCLA journalism graduate—at one of Danforth's Freelancers-R-Us "open houses" which are just another word for parties. Surprise. This fox actually talks to me. Surprise, surprise. She's not a bimbo. In fact, she's pretty damn smart.

Surprise, surprise, surprise. She agrees to go to dinner with me.

A couple months later, we're head-over-heels in love and one night, I get this True Confession. My new loved one is a former *Playboy* Playmate. Here's the story in a nutshell: Monica-the-former-Playmate had been a topless dancer while working her way through UCLA when a *Playboy* photographer discovered her. She made enough on that to finish college without any more dancing and got her degree from UCLA in—you guessed it—journalism. To her surprise, this revelation does not damage our relationship. In fact, I think it's cool. I'm supposed to go nuts like the guy in the old song "Centerfold?" Not Dusty Grimwaller, quintessential Modern Man.

Six months later, I propose to her. Surprise, surprise, surprise, surprise. She accepts. Three months after that we are married in a very small ceremony in Long Beach, where she grew up before her parents were killed in an accident on

the Harbor Freeway during her freshman year. You still with me? Yea, I know it's too good to be true.

So Monica and I take a little honeymoon trip down to Cabo San Lucas and come back sunburned, but otherwise healthy. A couple days after our return from Cabo, she says we're invited to dinner at her grandparents' place. First I've ever heard about grandparents; just assumed they were deceased. But I certainly couldn't expect to have learned everything about her by now.

Is this little picture coming together for you now? That Saturday night we are driving down to Corona Del Mar for the Meet-the-Grandparents Dinner. Monica's driving in her red Corvette that was one of the bennies of being Playmate of the Year. I forgot to mention that part? Well I have now. Anyway, she's driving for the simple reason that she won't let me behind the wheel of her Vette (I said she was smart). But I can live with being a passenger occasionally; she's a de-

cent driver after all. I remark that this landscape looks familiar, explaining that I had an assignment up here ("up" because it's in the hills overlooking the Pacific). A weird old couple, I say. Monica makes no comment, but a few turns later we pull into her grandparents' driveway and stop.

"This is the Rodsmith's house," I say.

"You got it," she says.

"Those are your grandparents?" I say.

"You got it," she says.

"Why the big secret? I say.

"You'll see," she says.

Mrs. Rodsmith—Hallie, now; we're family I guess—answers the door. Monica hugs her fiercely and I just stand there, waiting for them to finish up and absentmindedly oogling my new wife's spectacular derriere. Over the crook between Monica's shoulder and neck, Mrs. Rodsmith's face smiles at me. "It's very nice to see you again Mr. Grimwaller. Won't you both come in? Dinner will be ready in about half an hour."

“Nice to see you again too, Mrs. Rodsmith,” is all I can think of to say.

Monica looks back at me and grins an incomprehensible grin. “Come on Mister Grimwaller. Gramps wants to show you something, I think.”

After an energetic hug from Monica, I predict that “Gramps” is probably going to start right off by calling me Son again. He does.

We do small talk for a few minutes: how the wedding was, how the trip to Cabo was, what we’re planning to do from here, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Then it’s time for dinner.

Dinner is a succulent roasted leg of lamb, with oven-roasted vegetables—potatoes, carrots, onions, garlic—and dark gravy. Mint jelly of course. Cups of surprisingly good lime/mint gelatin stuff. Also, a very outstanding Bordeaux, or so I suppose (wine is wine to me). Several bottles of it, even. Not surprisingly, the conversation begins to loosen up.

Hallie takes the lead: “You know, Dusty, that

was a very nice article you did for *National Collector*. I can’t tell you how many of our friends have commented on it. We were quite proud.”

“Thank you Hallie,” I say, shucking the Mrs. Rodsmith for the first time and feeling okay about it. “It was an, uhh, interesting experience for me. In fact, halfway through it, I almost got fired, if you want to know the truth of it.” I tell them about my dimwittedness and about Danforth’s rant. Pretty soon we are all laughing like old buddies. It is now hard for me to see them as Monica’s grandparents. In fact, they are pretty cool people. And octogenarians yet.

We adjourned from the table and have some coffee in the living room, letting dinner settle a while. Now it’s Yank’s turn. “You know, Son, when you were here before, I don’t think we quite got around to my Thimble Motor, did I?”

I was about to remind him that I had a real name, when he held out one hand in the old “hold off a minute” gesture. “Yes, Dusty, I really

*do* know you have a real name and it's not Dusty." How did he know that? I wonder, forgetting momentarily about Monica as information conduit. "And my real one's not Yank, either," he says, looking over at Hallie.

Yank/not-Yank now paused for effect. "It's Everton." Another pause. "You want to know where I got the handle Yank? It was because I was so good a jerking people's chains, if you know the expression. Pulling their legs. Before you ask, I think I'll just skirt the matter of why they decided not to nickname me Jerk instead of Yank. "

Read my mind again! On the Yank-versus-Jerk business at least. So I just smiled and nodded, which is a standard journalistic nonverbalism for "sounds a lot like BS to me." Made me wonder again whether his miniature motors were put-

ons. "Let's go to the motor room; I want you to see that Thimble Motor. You girls excuse us for a bit?



yank's "centerfold" thimble motor (under thimble - actual size )

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a wink that seemed to cover both Hallie and Monica.

Yank's other name for the Thimble Motor was the Ten Dollar Bet motor. I vaguely remember he had said something about a bet during our original conversation a year ago. Now I was going to get to see it. With something of a flourish, he pulled off the black vinyl shroud; inside the clear plastic box was the tiniest engine I had ever seen. And right next to it was an ordinary, dimestore thimble; chrome plated and with all those little needle-deflection grooves in it, looking sort of like a miniature Tower of Babel. Or a straightened-out Tower of Pisa? Sizewise, though, there was no question about it; this little motor would definitely fit inside the thimble. Next to it was a tiny, highly detailed figurine of a near-naked young woman, something less than an inch tall. A light bulb suddenly went on in my head. "Ahhh. This must be what made it into *Playboy*. And why your rap sheet

included the nickname Centerfold.”

“Smart Young Man,” said Yank, grinning broadly, his dimples now reaching their full depth. “You’ve put part of this little puzzle together. Now, do you recognize this engine?”

I looked closely at it and it occurred to me that it had no rocker arm covers or cam covers. Definitely less complicated looking than the others. “It’s a two-stroke, isn’t it. Some kind of bike engine?”

“Excellent,” said Yank, appearing genuinely surprised at the answer. “Naturally, this is a much simpler engine than the others you’ve seen. I took a conservative approach first time around with something this small. One-hundredth scale. This one’s very close in design to a mid-sixties Yamaha triple. Very popular model. Had to invent a whole new method of fabrication to make these parts and get them put together. Quite a project,” he said in obvious understatement. “Couldn’t have done it without Monica.”

“That’s Monica?” I exclaimed, suddenly focused on the tiny figurine. I was stunned; this geezer had somehow made this incredibly detailed cheesecake pose of my new wife and sent pictures of it off to *Playboy* with his little thimble motor. “You made a model of Monica?” Being a little farsighted, I had to don my glasses and get down on my knees to fully appreciate this model of my Monica. Even so, I felt there was a lot I was missing using just normal vision. Where’s the old Sherlock Holmes magnifying glass when I really needed it?

“You may want this,” said Yank’s voice as he handed me exactly the implement I had just been wishing for.

Monica was incredibly detailed and incredibly lifelike. No visible joints like an ordinary doll would have. And none of the other usual giveaways of doll-ness, like shiny, perfectly smooth, hairless skin. This seemed supple and somehow alive. And her face was dead-on too; even the

little mole halfway up her left cheek.

But what about hair? Only thing obviously different was the flaming red hair, which is ash blonde in real life. Other than color, the hair was amazingly realistic. With the magnifying glass, I could see that her hair seemed to be in scale with the rest of her. That prompted me to do a quick mental calculation: if I was getting the message here, Monica was a hundredth-scale replica, just like the Yamaha. If her hair was actually to scale, then each strand of hair would have to be—what—less than one ten-thousandth of an inch in thickness? As I was contemplating this arithmetic and its implications, Monica began to move.

Not kidding. The little red-headed Monica figure in the red bikini had been stuck in the sort of pose you see on the covers of hot rod and custom motorcycle magazines: that big smile, the minimally-covered out-thrust boobs, the jaunty hip angle. Now she was blowing me a kiss. Her

microscopic mouth was even moving. And now her fingers were waggling provocatively at me. And I'll swear on anything you give me to swear on that her facial expressions were changing the whole time. And finally, she winked at me.

When I looked up at Yank in astonishment, Monica was there too. And Hallie. All smiling big smiles. Monica did a mimic of the pose that was once again frozen in the figurine and then went through the recorded sequence, blowing me a kiss, waggling her fingers and finally winking. I had been ready to be pissed, but now I couldn't help but laugh, myriad questions and possible answers momentarily buried up to their eyeballs in out-of-control, healthful, life-affirming mirth. The other three joined in, tentatively at first, then with full-scale abandon.

"Dessert is ready," said Hallie at just the right moment after the hoots, whoops and guffaws had been sufficiently depleted. We left Yank's "collection" of models and returned to the living room.

Over a marvelous peach cobbler á la mode, fresh-brewed coffee and spiced by the occasional errant chuckle, I tried to put the pieces together.

“*Playboy* didn’t see that little routine, did they?”

“Nope. Just that frozen tableau. You can’t imagine how difficult it was for me *not* to push the button—it’s rigged to the TV remote control that runs the monitor in there—while their photographer was here taking the pictures for the article. But *they* wouldn’t let me.”

“*They* being the Lost Piston Society, or the Feds?”

“Both, actually,” responded Yank. “What made you guess the Feds had gotten involved?”

“I don’t know how you made that robotic Monica back there, but I’m not so dumb I can’t recognize a piece of major new technology when it’s that obvious.”

“It’s several new technologies, actually. Courtesy us old Lost Pistons.”

“You geezers are actually some kind of secret

think tank or something, aren’t you?”

“Something like that,” said Yank, cagily. “It’s not like the early days, though; they watch us like hawks now...takes some of the fun out of it. But I’ve logged up a bunch of new patents lately. A few might even be worth something one of these days,” he added, glancing in Monica’s direction. I got the message.

“Okay, now let’s get back to the Centerfold handle. It was that tableau photo as you call it that got Monica discovered by *Playboy*, wasn’t it. And the whole working-her-way-through-school-by-topless-dancing routine was bogus, wasn’t it. Smells too much like a typical *Playboy* fantasy babe write-up.”

Hallie injected a comment aimed at Yank: “Don’t you think it was probably the *other* picture of Monica and the thimble motor that really got their attention, Dear? Has Mr. Grimwaller seen that one?”

“I know where it is,” said Monica in her high-

pitched Bimbo Voice, bounding to her feet in exaggerated Little Annie Fannie style. “I’ll be right back.” I love it when she does Fannie Bimbo, as we call that little act. It, uhh, well...can’t say here exactly what it does to me. You figure it out.

Let me change the subject from what I can’t say to what I *didn’t* say a little earlier. There was another reason I was dead certain the topless dancing story was pure fiction: Monica’s a piss-poor dancer. Amazing, but true; it’s not just guys who are too clumsy to get out of their own way on a dance floor. Great body, but she’d be a total flop as an exotic dancer. I’m not quite sure whether that should make me happy or sad, but there’s no use getting myself in serious hot water for saying it. Married life is making me a little smarter, I think.

Monica returned with the mysterious second picture. Bingo! It was a close-up of her-as-flaming redhead, leaning slightly forward with full-tilt cleavage and an almost impossible expression of

pure, innocent wonder on her face. Her hands were cupped just under the overtaxed scarlet bikini top; in one was a thimble, in the other the Thimble Motor. The *Playboy* offer now made total sense to me.

I handed the picture back to Monica, gave her a stern raised eyebrow and wagged my finger: “Shouldn’t toy with men’s hormones like that little girl.”

To Hallie I said, “Thank you Hallie.”

Hallie smiled apologetically: “We were a bit embarrassed to have our only granddaughter, our dear, dear Monica, in *Playboy*, if you must know, Mr. Grimwaller. We’re not prudes or anything, but the neighbors and all, you know.”

“Did you insist on the red wig?” I mused out loud?

“Well, I didn’t exactly *insist*,” said Hallie, still a little defensive. “But it seemed like a practical thing to do. And it went so nicely with her red bikini.”

“I hated the idea at first,” interjected Monica with surprising fervor. “If I was going to expose my gorgeous, naked body to half the population of America, it didn’t feel right to do it in disguise. But I guess it turned out okay. It let me keep the *Playboy* persona and my school life separate in those last two years before I graduated. And Mister Dusty here likes to be chauffeured around in a certain red Corvette, doesn’t Mister Dusty?” Fannie Bimbo again.



The conversation gradually petered out (ever wonder about the origin of that expression?) and Monica and I went home.

And that was that. Just about. I’m no longer in the journalism game, of course; the Feds made sure of that. What business? Can’t say; Feds again. Except that it falls generally in the R&D category and the term “nano” might just be applicable. You’d be amazed at what those Lost Pistons are down to now. Small really *is* beautiful.