The History of the Pedal Car

Thank you to Rochelle McNeil for her generous donation of this Vintage 1964 Pedal Car to the Gulf Coast Regional Mustang Club. With the help of Donnie Carlisle and Tim Brooks, the club has done a minor restoration including the plastic parts but not the paint. The patina and rust were too alluring to allow that to be change.

When the automobile made its first appearance, the pedal car soon followed. Pedal car history goes back to the 1890s when most were modeled from the real cars on the road at the time – even though there weren’t that many cars in ownership at that point.

Of course, every child wanted a pedal car. However, at the turn of the century, there cost really meant that it was a toy for children of well-to-do families. With many families reeling from the financial devastation of The Great Depression, pedal cars were often toys for upper class children. No pedal cars were produced after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, as all metal was needed for the war effort.

The heyday for pedal cars in the United States occurred between the World Wars. Pedal cars were fixtures in Sears’s catalogs. Unfortunately, they could only be sent to customers who lived near railroad tracks because mailing a steel car, even a small one, was simply not possible. They did charge a whopping $2.00 for shipping. Companies that made pedal cars in the ’20s and ’30s included American National Automobiles of Toledo and Steelcraft of Murray, both based in Ohio.

Pedal cars experienced resurgence in the 1950s to 1960s with chain-driven models. With postwar prosperity in the 1950s, pedal cars grew more popular and were available in all major stores. From the early 1920s through the late 1960s, pedal cars, like automobiles, were produced in many different models and colors. Designed to incorporate the most current trends of the automotive world, pedal cars featured working lights and horns, moveable windshields and ragtops, chrome detailing and hood ornaments, and white wall tires and custom paint jobs.

In the 1960s, interest in pedal cars began to wane as the burgeoning field of space exploration began to capture the attention of children. New safety standards for children’s toys also made them less cost-effective to manufacture. By the 1970s, plastic pedal toys like the Big Wheel had virtually put the old steel pedal cars out of business.

Americans learn to love cars at a very early age. More than just play, ownership of pedal cars, bicycles, and motor scooters is a progressive initiation into the culture of personal mobility, climaxing with an automobile learner’s permit and driver’s license in adolescence. One pedal car manufacturer coined the slogan “Raise the Kiddies on Wheels” to express this extended bonding experience with personal, mechanized transportation. Pint-sized, pedal-powered cars for children became available in the first decade of the twentieth century, soon after automobiles appeared on the market, and they were mass-marketed by 1910. Pedal cars remained very popular for decades and came in a wide selection of styles.

Some pedal cars even resembled specific makes and models of automobiles. This Ford Mustang pedal car celebrated the popular “pony car” introduced by Ford in April 1964 at the New York World’s Fair. By the 1960s, many adults and maturing baby boomers were discovering that driving could be fun. They were more inclined to think of their cars as personal possessions and bought models that offered some of the thrill of sports cars and high-performance cars. Manufacturers responded with cars that looked sporty, ran well, handled better than a family sedan or station wagon, and made the owner feel youthful, active, and socially accepted.

Ford correctly interpreted this emerging market. Baby boomers were reaching driving age, more families were buying second cars, and women and single people were buying cars. Many consumers were looking for affordable models with flair, excitement, and optional equipment that enhanced comfort and performance. Ford developed the Mustang with these qualities in mind. With a spring debut (instead of a traditional fall debut), world’s fair publicity, and the Mustang’s instant appeal
among consumers made this event one of the most memorable new car introductions in history. For children, a Ford Mustang pedal car was the ultimate in trendy playthings.

In the Modern Era pedal cars have become collector’s items, in some cases selling for thousands of dollars. Replicas can be purchases on line and you may find an occasional original that needs to be restored. There are several companies making and selling replacement parts.

According to ClassicPedalCars.com, one of the most popular pedal car models is the 1965 Ford Mustang, which is a replica of the first year edition of the classic Ford vehicle.

Just as the 1965 Mustang was a runaway hit, so was its counterpart pedal car, selling over 93,000 units by Christmas of its first year in production. Four decades later, the pedal-car with the Mustang logo is back and demand extends beyond kids, to their parents and grand-parents as well, some of whom may have owned an original that Mustang became one of the hottest pedal cars of all times," said Mark Bentley, Ford licensing manager "At first they were simply toys, but now adults see them as collectables. It's a nostalgia thing."

Created as a promotion, Mustang Pedal Cars sold in Ford dealerships across the United States for a discount price of $12.95. But plastic gained ground over metal as a material for toys in ensuing years and the Mustang's initial pedal car manufacturer AMF, the same company that makes bowling equipment, sold the tooling to a Mexican company.

In the early 80's that company closed, leaving the original equipment in a warehouse, where it remained untouched for nearly 20 years. Enter Mark Luzaich in 2004 and Warehouse 36. As the owner of a small company in Windsor California, Luzaich started importing and producing pedal cars as collectables. Hearing about the original equipment, he flew to Mexico, bought it, and prepared to produce the original Mustang Pedal Car once again. Despite modifications for contemporary safety standards, it would be exactly the same with all-steel construction, adjustable rubber pedals, a clear windshield and authentic Mustang markings. The biggest difference from the original pedal car is the price. While Ford dealerships sold them at a discount, in stores, they originally retailed for $25.

But just as the cost of the Mustang has increased ten-fold over the last 40 years, so too has the price of the pedal car which now retails for around $289.95 or more, but try finding one. "The nice thing is that they're made out of steel, so when kids outgrow them their parents can save them for the grandkids," said Luzaich, who contacted the Ford Licensing Office for permission to market the toy as the original Mustang Pedal Car.

"People are just as nostalgic about pedal cars as they are the real thing because they bring back fond memories," he said. "Besides, they're easier to maintain, don't require oil changes, and they're decorative."

The replica of the 1965 AMF Ford Mustang Pedal Car ride-on toy was initially available only through Warehouse 36 dealers. An extensive Internet search found many storefronts advertising these pedal cars for sale but no one had any in stock.

If you have a pedal car now, you can research its history and value on-line. There is a 5 volume series titled The Evolution of the Pedal Car that you can find at used bookstores. I found all 5 at amazon.com for just a few dollars each.

I'm happy to research any car you have. Just email a photo to pedalcar@gulfcoastmustangclub.org and I will see what information I can find.

I hope this mishmash of information about the pedal car has been helpful and if you have any questions, just email.

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