



Perspective

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

Ghosts In A Trunk

Remember that old attic trunk I wrote about several weeks ago? One of the things I found, while rummaging, was a 12-year-old Congressional report filed by my older brother, Walter, who at that time was on special assignment for Congress from his position as head of the department of industrial management at Georgia Tech. The brief, filed about the time of his death, was at the request of a House committee investigating problems in the automobile industry. In the report, my brother's investigative team proved that among other things going on in Detroit, that automakers were deliberately planning obsolescence for their products. That is, they were manufacturing autos and auto parts so they would wear out or fall apart within a three to five year span.

Last week, when I went into the garage for the third time to get a new transmission in my car, my mechanic confirmed the report. "Most transmissions are designed to wear out in 30,000 miles," he said.

All this came to mind with the

problems facing Ralph Moody and Mike Shetley. Moody and Shetley, you know, are the inventors of that turbo-charged diesel engine that everybody's talking about. Fitted on a 1979 Mercury Capri, it tested out at 84 miles per gallon.

The problem: Detroit is not buying.

The inventors, it seems, have run into that old Detroit ghost — planned obsolescence. In a news conference with the Associated Press they made some observations.

(1) The drive train on their new engine is designed to last more than three times as long as the car itself. Even if Detroit's planned obsolescence is on a seven year cycle (which automakers reluctantly agree might be so), what do you do with an engine designed to last almost 25 years with normal wear?

(2) The engine doesn't use a carburetor or spark plugs. That makes a lot of manufacturers unhappy. They are exerting pressure to keep it off the market.

(3) The engine can go 300,000 miles without much more than an oil

change. That means less business for dealer operated service centers. So, there's additional pressure to stick with conventional gas guzzlers designed to keep falling apart and needing fixing.

(4) Despite the fact oil companies are making a lot of noise about the energy crunch, when it comes to developing an engine which could cut the nation's gasoline bill by 70 percent, they aren't too excited. It seems they don't think they're making enough money as it is, despite gasoline creeping up on the \$1 per gallon price.

Fortunately, Chrysler Corp., which just picked up the top executive from Ford Motor Co. and is out looking for new horizons, is interested. Hopefully, when Moody and Shetley testify at Senate hearings in Washington this week about an engine which they believe can get at least 100 mpg, the old Detroit ghosts will be fully exposed. Maybe, after all these years, public demand will speak louder than money.

Let's hope so.