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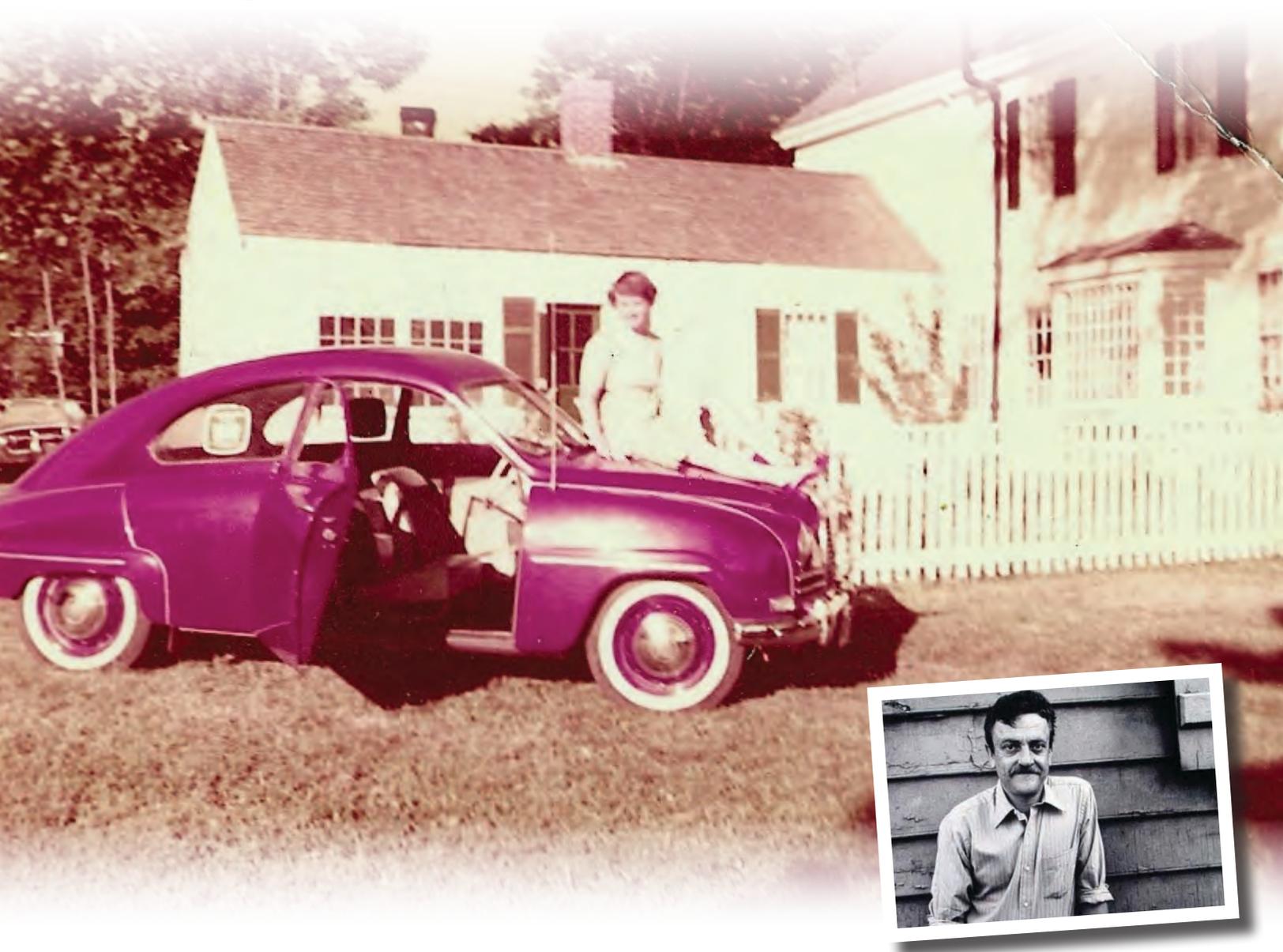
AUTO

D E A L E R

August 2011 • Vol. 24 No. 8

The official publication of the Massachusetts State Automobile Dealers Association, Inc

KURT VONNEGUT



THE STORY BEHIND THE LEGENDARY AUTHOR'S CAPE COD DEALERSHIP

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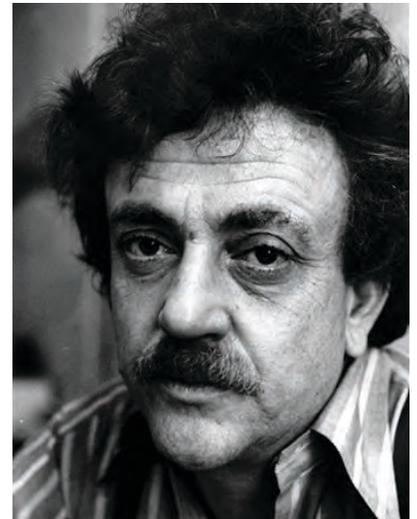
By Tom Nash

In December 1956, a Swedish aircraft manufacturer was ready to sell its most recent entry into the automobile world in the United States. Its first shipments of Saab 93s were imported to a warehouse in Hingham, where they were prepared for sale. The dealers who signed up were optimistic that a two-stroke, compact European car would catch on.



Vonnegut took to using his old Saab letterhead for self-portraits and silk-screen prints.

Kurt Vonnegut, an author who had been struggling to support his family in West Barnstable, was among the first believers. He had yet to write *The Slaughterhouse-Five*, which established him as one of the great American authors of the 20th century. A Saab franchise was a way to make ends meet.



“I believe my failure as a dealer so long ago explains what would otherwise remain a deep mystery: why the Swedes have never given me a Nobel Prize for literature.”

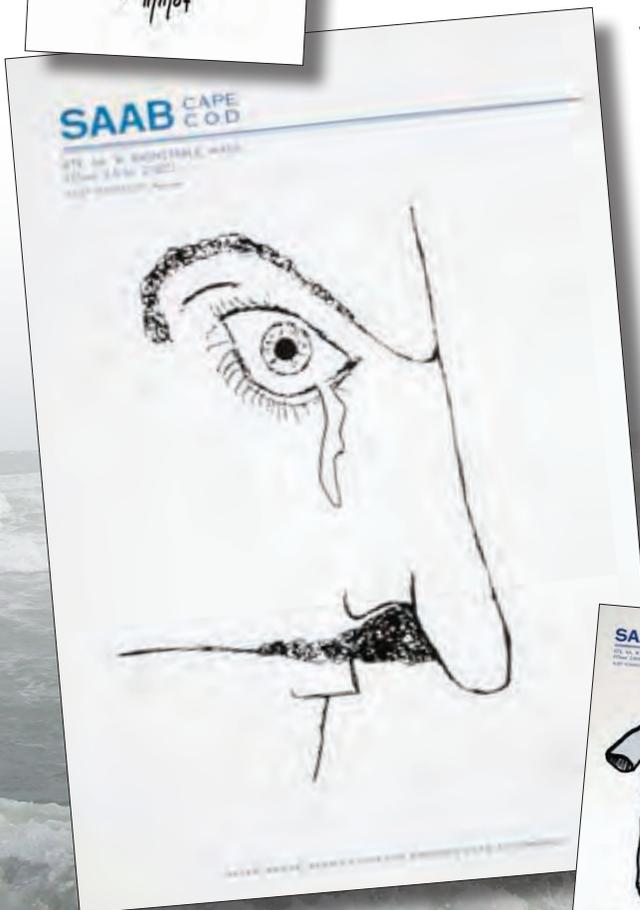
— Kurt Vonnegut, Saab Cape Cod

Today, it's a chapter of his life that deserves exploration, especially given the influence Vonnegut's stint as a Massachusetts auto dealer would have on his work.

William Rodney Allen, author of *Understanding Kurt Vonnegut*, noted that while some are surprised by Vonnegut's time as a dealer, the venture wasn't out of character for him. Saabs represented an intersection of his fascination with technology and his roots in Indiana, where his family had been in the hardware business.

“Everybody was a car nut who grew up in that generation,” Allen said. “The car was becoming very important. It was a status symbol; a way to entertain girls. He had that normal connection between manliness and sportiness and the artistic life and the automobile. All of that was genuine and quite characteristic of him.”

“Weapons, machines, bombs, automobiles were taking off like crazy,” Allen added. “The machine was king in the '40s and '50s and he was really fascinated -- and a little bit wary at the same time — about what machines were doing to our lives and to humanity.”





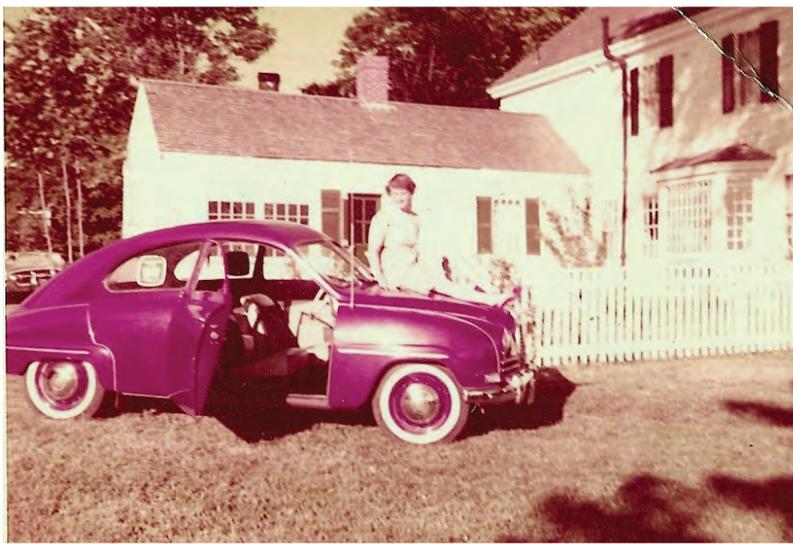
Saab factory, circa 1950s

A CRANBERRY RED SAAB

Vonnegut, an Indianapolis native, studied chemistry at Cornell University before dropping out and enlisting in the Army in 1943. He was captured during the Battle of the Bulge, and as a prisoner of war witnessed the Allied forces' firebombing of Dresden. After arriving home, his career veered from news reporter in Chicago to General Electric public relations in Schenectady, New York.

During those years, Vonnegut honed his skills as a fiction writer. When he began selling short stories to magazines in 1950, he decided to quit his job at GE and move his young family, then consisting of a son, Mark, and daughter, Edie, to Cape Cod so he could focus on writing.

A few years later, he had published only one novel, *Player Piano*, and the short story market was drying up. Television had



Kurt Vonnegut took this photo of his wife, Jane Marie Cox, posing on the hood of a Saab 93. (Courtesy of Edie Vonnegut)

begun to take over household eyeballs, just as the automobile had begun to turn the transportation industry upside-down. After he and his then wife, Jane Marie Cox, had their third child, money became even tighter.

"Writing wasn't going very well. He was getting ready to pack it in," recalled Mark Vonnegut. "He ran across a Saab dealer somewhere around New Bedford and was taken with it and thought on its merits it should beat the VW all hollow."

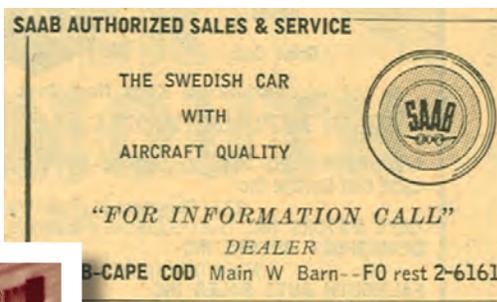
The fact that the new venture emerged from desperation never registered for Edie Vonnegut.

"I remember the excitement in the house," she said. "We were part of presenting this very elegantly designed piece of technology and it felt very sophisticated. It felt more about art and cutting edge design than about cars."

"I especially remember the cranberry red Saab we suddenly had in the yard and dad photographing my mother on the hood of the car," she added. "She was very beautiful and looked like a glamorous model perched there. Maybe they were thinking to use the pictures for an ad though they were never published."

SMOKING AND WORRYING

Vonnegut set up "Saab Cape Cod" in a stone building on Route 6A in West Barnstable, operating, according to Mark, as sole proprietor with one mechanic on-hand. Edie remembers spending time there as her father worked.



An ad from the 1957 New England Telephone directory, courtesy of SaabHistory.com.

"It was odd to have him go to another place to work, as up until then he had always worked at home," she said. "He would look after his cars and business

and write when there was nothing else to do. Though mainly I think he spent his time smoking and worrying whether he'd sell any cars or not."

The initial luster of the vehicles faded quickly for Vonnegut. As he writes in his essay, "Have I Got a Car For You!," published in 2004, the quart of oil required with each gas fill-up was just one of the quirks that made the vehicle a hard sell.

"The chief selling point was that a Saab could drag a VW at a stoplight," Vonnegut wrote. "But if you or your significant other had failed to add oil to the last tank of gas, you and the car would then become fireworks. It also had front-wheel drive, of some help on slippery pavements or when accelerating into curves.



The stone building where Vonnegut ran his Saab franchise is still standing on Route 6A in West Barnstable.

There was this selling point as well: As one prospective customer said to me, ‘They make the best watches. Why wouldn’t they make the best cars, too?’ I was bound to agree.”

Mark remembers his father also becoming frustrated by the customers, noting that “he was exasperated by their lack of vision and their haggling over price.”

There were other troubles with the franchise besides slow sales and difficult customers. In an interview featured in Allen’s *Conversations with Kurt Vonnegut*, Vonnegut admitted Saab representatives “threw me out of their mechanic’s school. No talent.”

Allen notes Vonnegut’s fiction, meanwhile, was showing promise. The time spent in the less-than-busy showroom meant more time writing. “After things were headed south,” Allen explained, “he describes himself as sitting in his Saab along the side of the road with a ‘for sale’ sign in the back of the window writing *The Sirens of Titan*.”

A RENAISSANCE MAN

It’s not clear exactly when Vonnegut shut down the franchise. Business records that were held by the town are long

gone, and Allen notes that Vonnegut’s recollection of dates is spotty. It seems 1961 is the consensus among Saab enthusiasts.

By that point, Vonnegut had published both a collection of

short stories and *Sirens of Titan*, which, given its 22nd century space quest setting, saw critics further categorize him as a science fiction writer, a label he was never comfortable with. The following novels, *Mother Night*, revolving around the aftermath of World War II, and *Cat’s Cradle*, satirizing the Cold War arms race, established the audience that would herald *The Slaughterhouse-Five* as a work of genius in 1969.

From that point until his death in 2007, Vonnegut became regarded as one of the key authors of American fiction. He continued writing novels into the 1990s, and wrote essays into his 80s.

Among the most obvious references to his time as a Saab dealer in his fiction can be found in *Breakfast of Champions*, which features protagonist Dwayne Hoover, a Pontiac dealer in the Midwest.

In a 2005 newspaper interview, Vonnegut noted that the time spent failing as a dealer furthered his resolve to find a way to write about what he witnessed in Dresden, saying, “Occasionally I would say to myself, ‘You actually experienced the fire-bombing of Dresden, the biggest massacre in European history, in which 135,000 people were killed in one night -- why don’t you write about that?’”

Asked how his life would be different had his father been successful as a dealer, Mark, now a pediatrician in Milton, said it’s impossible to think about. “There’s no way in hell that would have or could have happened,” he said. “Ultimately he stuck out like a sore thumb and couldn’t have been anything but a writer.”

Edie, today an artist living in Barnstable, remembers that to her, the vehicles themselves defined how she viewed the endeavor. “I thought of my father as a writer, and a renaissance man who happened to represent an exquisite machine. Never a car dealer. The Saab seemed as fancy as a spaceship at the time.”

