

Dan Jedlicka Class of 1963

Morton College track coach O.J. Kudrnovsky thought Dan Jedlicka was making a mistake in quitting the team to become the school newspaper's editor-in-chief.

"He thought I was giving up on a track scholarship and wasn't happy that I gave up track to be the editor of the paper," Jedlicka recalled with a laugh some 50 years later. "I didn't think I was that good."

The 1963 Morton College graduate, who went on to fame as the Chicago Sun-Times' auto writer during a 40-year career, might have been the most overqualified editor-in-chief in Collegian history.

He came to Collegian with several years of experience at Chicago's fabled City News Bureau, which served as a training ground for the likes of Mike Royko, Seymour Hersh and novelist Kurt Vonnegut, already under his belt.

Jedlicka started at age 15 as a copy boy at City News, which also had him answering phones and working the teletype machine because he was too young to be sent out on the streets. The summer before entering Morton College, the then 18-year-old Jedlicka was working the 4 p.m. to midnight shift for City News. He drove a 1956 dark blue, two-door Volvo, the first time the car was available in the United States.

"I'd cover various (Chicago) South Side police stations and the Criminal Courts at 26th and California," Jedlicka said.

All the papers, radio and TV stations had a share in the City News Bureau. If a story was big enough

Newspapers turned out to be the vehicle for Jedlicka to express his true passion - the automobile. And the car bug bit Jedlicka early. At age 12, he spent 35 cents for his first copy of "Road and Track," a magazine that later wanted to hire him. He was just 15½, not of legal driving age, when Jedlicka bought his first car, a 1952 MG TD.

"What attracts me to a piece of tin with four wheels?" Jedlicka asked rhetorically. "Cars are all different. They're like people. Each one has its own personality."

Jedlicka, who lives with his wife, Suzanne, in the Frank Lloyd Wright Historic District of Oak Park, has owned more than a dozen classic cars, including 1950s and 1960s Ferraris, 1950s and 1960s Porsches, a 1965 Corvette, a 1967 Maserati, a 1957 Studebaker Golden Hawk and two 1960s hand-built Avanti II models.

Out of all the vehicles Jedlicka has driven, his dream two-car garage would include the 1959-1964 Maserati 5000 GT and the 1954-1957 Mercedes-Benz 300 SL. The Eagles' Joe Walsh made the Maserati 5000 GT famous in his lyrics for "Life's Been Good," while the Mercedes-Benz was a racing car produced for the street.

"The Maserati 5000 GT was a limited production model," Jedlicka said. "Only royalty overseas and wealthy Americans bought them. Joe Walsh's lyrics certainly adds to the mystique of the car. Only 33 were built. The Shah of Persia, now Iraq, owned one.

"I was lucky enough to have a friend let me drive his Mercedes 300 SL once," Jedlicka added. "He'd keep it on a Persian carpet and drove it once a year. You never see any of those on the street. Those are two very rare, distinctive cars."

Jedlicka also knows how to handle high-performance cars, too. He is a graduate of the Bob Bondurant Driving School, BMW's Advanced M-Class high performance driver's school and the BMW Skip Barber Advanced Driving School. He was a member of the U.S. team that participated in the 1987 1,000-mile Mille Miglia high-speed rally/race in Italy and has been a stock car race winner at the now-shuttered Santa Fe Speedway in Willow Springs.

So it's understandable why Jedlicka doesn't need much time behind the wheel of any car to describe how it handles. Give Jedlicka 30 minutes and he'll be able to describe a car's DNA.

"I recently drove a Buick," Jedlicka said. "It didn't feel like a Buick. It felt more like a German Opel. In fact, it was a modified Opel."

Jedlicka's sixth sense for cars developed in reviewing over 4,000 new vehicles, more than any other auto writer in the country.

"Jim Hoge, who was made editor of the Sun-Times in his early 30s, let me have my first column," Jedlicka said. "I wanted to cover cars from the first day I was there."

Along with the likes of Kup, Roger Ebert, Gary Deeb, Ann Landers and Bill Gleason, Jedlicka was one of the newspaper's star attractions with his face on the side of Sun-Times' circulation trucks advertising his column.

He traveled the world, flew the Concorde to Paris and stayed in the top resorts, all in the name of reviewing cars. He interviewed auto industry kingpins like Edsel Ford, William Ford, John DeLorean and Carroll Shelby. Paul Harvey, who reached as many as 24 million people during his prime on radio, occasionally would mention Jedlicka's name on his program when talking about cars.

Jedlicka reminisced about showing up at midnight to appear on Eddie Schwartz's radio show and how the WGN all-night host would keep you until 4 a.m., certainly not good for someone who worked days.

Jedlicka spent “two enjoyable days” with former Tonight Show host Jay Leno, a car fanatic, who was learning how to drive an Indy 500 pace car. His stories have appeared in Esquire and Harper’s magazines, and his column was nationally syndicated.

“My first Esquire article also featured a Roger Ebert story on Paul Newman,” recalled Jedlicka, who grew up in Chicago’s Little Village neighborhood before moving to Berwyn with his family as an eighth-grader. “I was doing one on the fabled Woodward Avenue, which was once the street-racing capital of America, and muscle cars in Detroit.”

He remembers a letter from one of his literary idols, Tom Wolfe.

“I had corrected Wolfe about there being no such thing as a Ferrari 403,” Jedlicka said. “He was close – there was a Ferrari 400. Wolfe wrote me a very cordial letter saying that he made up a few car names. Tom Wolfe is a hero of mine, with “The Right Stuff” and other clever stories. He has a different way of looking at things.”

In addition, Jedlicka wrote a book on Larry Lujack, the late WLS and WCFL radio personality from 1967 to 1987 known for his sarcastic manner and off-beat features like “Animal Stories” and “Cheap Trashy Show Biz Report.”

The Sun-Times granted Jedlicka a three-month leave in 1975 to do a book on the “charming and delightful ‘old Uncle Lar,’” one of the era’s highest-paid radio personalities.

“I’d go to the studio at WLS with him,” Jedlicka said. “He was a very difficult guy, but I always got along with him. You’d ask him a question and you’d have to wait 30 seconds to get an answer. This exposed me to the world of rock and roll – you’d see a lot of the behind-the-scenes stuff.”

If the book world was one thing, doing TV for PBS was another completely different universe.

“We’d spend the week from 5 a.m. to 10 p.m. doing a show,” Jedlicka said. “Whatever the actors and actresses are paid in Hollywood – they certainly deserve it.”

Auto Test ’76, shot on location at Chrysler’s Michigan proving grounds, was the country’s first syndicated televised national auto road test show. It lasted only one season. The show was consumer-oriented and the auto dealers weren’t too happy over a format Jedlicka labeled as “too honest.”

“The car dealers went to PBS and complained we were making them look bad,” Jedlicka said. “That was the end of Auto Test ’76.”

Jedlicka, however, was a print guy. Between Dan and his father, Albert, the real estate editor for the Chicago Daily News where he exposed the country’s first big savings and loan financing scandal, a Jedlicka byline appeared in a Chicago daily newspaper for nearly 60 years.

“My dad never talked about his job,” Jedlicka recalled. “Time magazine featured him in 1964 for exposing the savings and loan scandal – they were inflating land values. My dad put the magazine in a drawer and closed it. He was never one to blow his own horn and he was the last guy in the world to talk about it.”

Jedlicka’s father also served as board chairman at Morton College and was instrumental in getting the current campus built in the 1970s. Again, the son knew nothing about his father’s doings.

“The city editor at the Sun-Times came up to me and said they’re building a new campus at Morton College and your dad’s behind it,” Jedlicka said. “I had no idea what my dad was doing.”

During Jedlicka’s time as a student at Morton College, finding a place other than the third floor of Morton East as a potential new campus location was a hot topic.

“There was talk about building a campus on a small parcel of land on Ogden Avenue,” Jedlicka recalled. “We made fun of the site because it was boxed and there wasn’t much room. The board wasn’t too happy, but they allowed us to write what we wanted.”

Jedlicka transferred to the University of Illinois, where he earned a bachelor’s degree in communications and was president of the Sigma Delta Chi journalism fraternity chapter.

“Morton Junior College had a great reputation,” Jedlicka said. “At that time, it didn’t cost that much. A good percentage of the students would go on to other schools, like U of I, Northern Illinois, Southern Illinois. It was convenient and the faculty was really good.”

Illinois is where Jedlicka first encountered future Pulitzer Prize award-winning movie critic Roger Ebert, who was the editor of the Daily Illini. The two went on to work together for 41 years at the Sun-Times.

“Roger Ebert was a very talented guy,” Jedlicka recalled. “He was a good writer and very erudite in many subjects. He loved his 1957 Studebaker Golden Hawk and thought it was best car ever built. You couldn’t convince Roger that it wasn’t.”

Ebert eventually grew tired of the car and sold it to Jedlicka, who restored it before selling it himself.

No matter the point in Jedlicka’s life, there’s a car antidote. Jedlicka recalled that one of his most memorable jobs came as a feature writer for an evening newspaper in Harrisburg, Pa.

“It was one of the most fun years of my life,” Jedlicka remembered. “I was responsible for feature, human interest and news stories. I bought a used red Ferrari, which now is worth somewhere between \$800,000 and \$1 million, and rolled into various towns. People were wondering, ‘Who is this kid roaring into town?’

“I was kind of my own boss. It was my first year of marriage – we didn’t have a telephone and had a hot plate. We were awful young. I was 24 and my wife, 21.”

Jedlicka joined the Sun-Times in 1968 as a business news reporter. He worked with fellow Morton College graduate Augie Sisco in the business section before getting the auto beat later that year. He also served as assistant financial editor for three years.

When Jedlicka’s career began, the newspaper industry still was king. Chicago was a four-newspaper town with two morning papers (Tribune and Sun-Times) and two afternoon publications (Daily News and American). The Sun-Times had its own public-relations staff and cafeteria.

“I watched the Sun-Times go downhill,” Jedlicka noted. “People would come and go. It was like working for a bunch of different papers.”

Jedlicka started branching out and did reviews on weekends for a dozen years on Microsoft’s Internet auto site. He eventually took a buy-out from the Sun-Times in 2008 and wrote his last article for the paper in February of 2009.

Like many of his former newspaper brethren, Jedlicka made the transition to the Internet and now has a web presence. The focus of Jedlicka’s auto web site www.danjedlicka.com remains the same.

“I do a test drive of a car every week,” Jedlicka said. “The format hasn’t changed. I do long and thorough reviews. Right now, I’m test driving a Honda Odyssey minivan. I write for a mass audience, the average guy going out there buying a car.”

Because Jedlicka gets to test-drive the latest car models, people assume his job is glamorous.

“It’s work,” Jedlicka says. “There’s the time you have to spend doing research and driving cars. But I enjoy writing. I just can’t see myself doing anything else.”