# Robert E. Howard's Automobiles

"License and Registration, Please."

by Rob Roehm

On one of the bus tours of Cross Plains that took place during Howard Days 2006, my dad asked me about Howard's car. I didn't know much, so I asked Rusty Burke, who was our tour guide. He said that Howard owned a '31 Chevy first, and then upgraded to a '35 Chevy. I thought that was the end of it.

About a week later, my dad called and asked about pictures of Howard with his cars. I told him that I didn't know of any. Then, that Father's Day, I went over to his place for our usual Father's Day six-pack in his Ham radio shack, and what did he do? He gave me a dissertation on the differences between the 1931 Chevrolet and the 1935 Chevrolet; he elaborated on the differences between the "standard" and "master" models of the '35 line. Very interesting. Of course, I wanted to know how he'd found all of this information, and, with a twinkle in his eye he pulled down a book, one in a series, called *Cars of the Classic '30s* (© 2004, Publications International). We looked at the pictures, he talked some more, and then, just as we're getting ready to go inside, he said, "Oh yeah."

On page 243, the first page of "Chapter 7: 1936," he showed me this quote:

The great British author Rudyard Kipling died this year. Death also took philosopher Oswald Spengler; writers G. K. Chesterton, Maxim Gorky, and Conan creator Robert E. Howard; playwright Luigi Pirandello; physiologist Ivan Pavlov; and aviation pioneers Billy Mitchell and Louis Bleriot.

REH shows up in the strangest places.

Again, I thought that was the end of it, but I should have known better. A day or two after Father's Day, Pop called again and started telling me about "knee action" and "suicide doors," and before I knew it, I was on a quest. What information was out there regarding Howard's vehicles? Where did he get them? What became of them? I wanted to know. The first place I always look is in Howard's letters.

There's not much mention of Howard's cars in his correspondence, other than him saying he went here or there. Even the description of his accident in Rising Star doesn't provide much information about the car, though it does describe the incident involving his '31 Chevy and a flagpole placed "in the middle of the street" in graphic (some say "exaggerated") detail. This was my starting point.

Next on the checklist was Rusty Burke. I emailed Rusty some follow-up questions about Bob's '31 Chevy. Burke responded that Lindsey Tyson, a Cross Plains friend of Howard's, had said the following in a letter to L. Sprague de Camp dated February 18, 1977:

Bob, Dr Howard and I went to Arlington Texas in about 1932 and Bob bought a used 1931 model Chevrolet. I drove the car home for him and then taught him to drive; after he learned to drive, he had a lot of fun driving on short trips around the country. I can not understand why Dr. Howard had never taught him anything about driving a car. (And by the way, Bob gave \$350.00 for this car, about a year old.)

Burke had a wealth of information. His transcription of de Camp's August 1977 notes from a phone conversation with Tyson revealed that the '31 Chevy was purchased "second-hand after Lovecraft's visit to New Orleans in the spring of 1932." In a different interview with de Camp, Tyson described the car as "Dark Green," and that it "had a glove compartment" rather than a door pocket: "This is where he carried his gun." Upon further questioning, in 1978, Tyson added that the car was "a Chevrolet coach"; a "Two-door." And, regarding the flagpole incident in Rising Star, Tyson told de Camp in his 1977 letter that he

and Dave Lee "were both in the car [...] that was involved in the wreck in Rising Star, Texas. It was a misty night when we were returning home from Brownwood. What we hit was a flag pole located in the middle of the street and did not have a light on it. We had been to Brownwood to see the Golden glove tournament. It was not because of Bob's driving, none of us saw the thing before we hit it, we were traveling slowly and none of us were seriously injured."

There's not an awful lot of information about the '31 Chevy Coach out in the world, at least not that I could find. And images of that particular model are few and far between on the internet. The two on this page come from a car collector's website.





No records of when Howard upgraded to the 1935 Chevy exist. On the Inner Circle yahoo group, Rusty said that he didn't "have any idea when Bob bought the '35 model. My inclination is to suppose he bought it brand new, fall of 1934, because Mrs. [Novalyne Price] Ellis does not mention him having a new car at any time [in her book, *One Who Walked Alone*]. Of course, it is possible that he bought it during the time the two of them were estranged, in 1935, and then [...] did not think to mention later that 'Oh, by the way, he had a new car."

And more from Burke:

The "Inventory and Appraisement of the Estate" of REH submitted to the Callahan County Court on June 16, 1936, lists Bob's property as: Cash on hand in First National Bank, Brownwood, Texas, \$702.00; Postal Deposits in Post Office, Brownwood, Texas, \$1850.00; One 1935 Model, Standard Chevrolet Sedan, appraised at \$350.00.

More information on the '35 Chevy was found in Charlotte Laughlin's interview with "Mr. Cross" (presumably James Cross), who managed the Magnolia service station in Cross Plains. The notes are housed at Texas Tech. Mr. Cross was responsible for cleaning the car after Howard's suicide—a grisly task—and remembers that the bullet "hit at the edge of the top of the door & glanced off through the glass." After the cleaning, Doctor Howard "continued driving the car." Cross confirms that the car was a "'35 standard, 4-door Chevy, black." He recalls Robert Howard as "a loner. There wasn't anybody he ran around with," and that he "stayed at home more than anything. He didn't even drive around a lot." Despite this, Cross said that Howard "was a good customer. I washed & lubricated his car; he got gas there all the time." And also that Howard "had a courtesy card & didn't charge."

Cross also remembered a humorous incident that occurred at his station. Howard stepped out of his car and fell down, but was "Very agile [and] back on his feet in 2 seconds." Howard exclaimed, "I ought to sue this goddam company," but then he "started laughing & said 'That [how fast he got up] shows my boxing ability."

The cars on this and the following page are 1935 Chevy Sedans. The one below is the type owned by Howard, a 4-door Standard. The one on the following page is a 4-door Master. The differences between the Standard and Master are interesting. All four of the Master's doors are "Suicide Doors"—doors



1935 Chevrolet Standard

### 1935 Chevrolet Master



which open at the forward edge of the door instead of the usual back edge—while only the rear doors on the Standard are this design. The roof of the Master is the innovative "turret-top," which is more rounded and fabricated with a single piece of metal. The square top of the Standard was built with wood or fabric at the seams which had a tendency to rattle after a while, causing a lot of noise.

Another interesting difference between the Standard and Master models was a thing called "knee-action." The Master model came equipped with this early shock-absorbing system; the Standard did not. Given Howard's history of travelling for long distances on poor roads, I was a bit surprised to learn that his car didn't have "knee-action," which was basically an independent front suspension, and instead rode around on a solid front axle.

The body style of the '35 Standard is the same as the '34. The '35 Master became the standard body style for both Standard and Master models in 1936, with the exception of the "suicide doors," which were the same pattern as the '35 Standard: regular in front, suicide in back.

With most of the available background information on REH's cars now obtained, thanks primarily to Rusty Burke and my dad, it was time to do a little "hands-on" research.

The Foothill Region's chapter of the Vintage Chevrolet Club of America (VCCA) held their "All Chevrolet Show" on April 15, 2007 in Pasadena, California. A friend of my dad's, Doctor Dave, is a member; he lives in Massachusetts. He flew over for one of his yearly visits, as well as to take in the show. In the time it took my dad to get Doctor Dave from Los Angeles International to the High Desert he'd informed the good doctor of his kid's "Robert E. Howard thing." Once at home, Pop gave me a call: "You better come over here and have a beer."

Over beers, we discussed REH. The conversation drifting toward the little we knew about his cars. Pop had visions of tracking down the Chevy dealership where REH had purchased his last car; we both assumed it was located in Brownwood, the nearest "big town" to Cross Plains. I had aspirations of finding Howard's driver's license and/or registration information. Doctor Dave suggested that there would likely be fine examples of both the 1931 Chevy Coach and the '35 Chevy Standard at the car show, both models REH is said to have owned. Worked for me.

Pasadena is about an hour away from Lancaster, so during our Sunday drive to that city we reviewed the information I had obtained from Burke (above), as well as what I'd found in L. Sprague de Camp's biography of Howard, *Dark Valley Destiny*. De Camp makes no mention of the 1935 model, saying instead

that "Robert climb[ed] into his dusty 1931 Chevrolet sedan" and "shot himself through the head." This information is refuted by both Burke who cites the "Inventory and Appraisement of the Estate" of REH which lists the 1935 model, and by Mr. Cross, who serviced the car.

While reviewing this information, the interview with Mr. Cross seemed to answer at least one of our questions. If Cross ran the Magnolia station where Howard was a regular customer and it was "next door to the Chevrolet place," then it seemed likely that Howard had purchased the newer Chevy at the "Chevrolet place" in Cross Plains.

While throwing around the implications of Cross Plains having its own Chevy dealership, we pulled into a parking lot in Pasadena. Across the street was half of what I was looking for: a near pristine 1935 Chevrolet Standard. There were a couple of 1931 models present, but no Coach.

My dad seemed as excited as I was and approached the owners of the '35, Ray and Rosie Garcia. They graciously allowed me to climb all over their car. I sat in the driver's seat, in the back seat, taking pictures of everything. Ray opened the hood and I took a few more pictures.







After crawling around in the old car, I was ready to go, but Doctor Dave and my dad wanted to look at the other cars. While they inspected the other cars, I found a couple of 1931 models. It seemed to me that the '31 models all had very similar fronts, so I took a few pictures of these cars and then went looking for the hot rods.

Back home, the question of where Howard had purchased the '35 Chevy started bugging me. I also wondered about licensing and registration. Did REH have a driver's license? License plates? Were such things even required before World War II? All my answers were in Texas, and here I was—stuck in California.

The first thing I decided to do was contact the Texas DMV (Department of Motor Vehicles). In California the DMV handles everything concerning licenses and registration. Of course, Texas doesn't have a DMV—but they do have a Department of Transportation (DoT). I got on their website and found contact information for the vehicle registration department. My first email was answered with an automated reply which stated that no information could be obtained without a vehicle identification number (VIN) or a license plate number. I was about to reply, saying that *that* was the information I was looking for, and therefore could not supply it, when I noticed the "Do not respond to this email" tag which accompanies most of these automatic replies. I needed a real person.

I talked to several folks in the Lone Star State that day, none of them had any answers. Finally, after being passed around the DoT for twenty minutes, I was transferred to the correct person: Kim Sue Lia Perkes. Naturally, she wasn't in. I left a message for her there, as well as one on her cell phone; the number was provided in her answering machine message.

I got a call back, much to my surprise, around 6:00 pm. What's that, 8 o'clock Texas time? Anyway, Sue and I had a chat. She seemed intrigued by my request for any paperwork concerning REH or his father, intrigued and cautious. She warned me that information of this type probably didn't exist. Before

there was even such a thing as the DoT, there was the Texas Highway Department, and before that, vehicle licensing, if it even occurred, was handled at the County level. As for REH's driver's license, that was a question for Texas's Department of Public Safety. She asked me to send her an email with what I was looking for and said that she would see what she could do. Here's what I sent:

I'm looking for copies of ANY paperwork regarding Robert E. Howard or his father, Doctor Isaac M. Howard, both of Cross Plains, Texas, in Callahan County. Robert's 1st car was purchased in 1932, don't know what month, and was a 1931 Chevrolet. His second car, don't know the purchase date, was a 1935 Chevrolet. Supposedly this second car was driven by his father after Robert's death in 1936 (his mother died a few hours after him). Doctor Howard died in November of 1944, the last of his line. So any search should be limited to 1932 through 1944.

With that part of the problem handled, I turned my attention to the Department of Public Safety. Again, I received a few automated replies telling me that I needed the driver's license number to get any information. Again I needed a real person.

After what felt like hours, during which time I listened to innumerable automated menu options from various departments within the organization, I finally got a human being. "Nope," "No way," and "Those don't exist," were the answers to my questions. The only hope, I was told, was that the County, which was responsible for transactions of this type at the time, might, maybe, have held onto those documents—"but I can't imagine why." Great.

Next, I called the great Chevrolet Dealership in the sky: Corporate America. After another seemingly endless round of automated menus, I was connected to a very nice Indian man. I wanted to know if Cross Plains, Texas had had a Chevy dealership in the '20s or '30s, and if so, its name and location. He asked for the zip code and then if he could put me on hold while he researched my question. After a few minutes of lame "hold music" he returned and said he didn't know, adding "Maybe someone in Cross Plains can tell you." Thanks.

The State testing began at my high school, so I put all this on the back burner; it didn't seem like I was going to find anything, anyway. But I still held out some hope that the DoT would find something. Silly me. This was waiting in my inbox when I got home from the third day of testing:

Good Afternoon. The Texas Department of Transportation Vehicle Titles and Registration Division can only search the Registration Titles Systems (RTS) database for vehicles that have been titled within the most recent 8 years. Automated records are only available from 1998 forward while archived records are available from 1960 forward. If a vehicle with a model year prior to 1960 was registered or sold since 1960, in the State of Texas, that information may be available on microfiche. To retrieve information requires that a vehicle identification number (VIN), engine number or license plate number be provided. Archived records cannot be searched by name.

Unfortunately, based on the information you have provided, VTR is unable to provide you with the information you are requesting. Thank you for the opportunity of serving you.

Strike three, I'm out.

Well, maybe not. The Department of Public Safety did say that *some* record *might* exist at the County level; and the Chevy guy did suggest that I ask someone in Cross Plains about an old dealership—I did the next best thing and posted my question on the REHupa email list: "Does anyone know if CP ever had a Chevrolet dealership?" While that was floating around in cyberspace, I got on the internet. Where was Callahan County's county seat, anyway?

Baird, Texas is located in the northwest corner of Callahan County and was designated the official Antique Capital of West Texas by the State Legislature on June 22, 1993. The population was 1,623 at the

2000 census. Well, I thought, if they're so big into antiques, maybe they held onto a certain writer's driver's license paperwork.

I found the phone number for City Hall online and gave them a call. Wrong place—I needed County Records. After receiving that phone number, I made another call. I told the lady that answered what I was looking for. "Well, that's interesting," she said.

She put me on hold for a solid ten minutes while she looked around. My fingers were crossed; she had not expressed the usual doubt and hesitation that my questions had so far inspired. When she picked up the line I was sure that she had something. She didn't: "The County has no automotive records," and that included drivers' licenses. She suggested I contact the Abilene Department of Public Safety, as they were in charge of licenses issued in Baird. No one there could help, either.

Meanwhile, the only reply I'd received from the REHupa list suggested that Cross Plains was too small to have had a Chevy dealership. While I understood the logic behind that, I had some doubts. First of all, it seemed unlikely that REH was a regular customer at a service station outside of Cross Plains; so, if Mr. Cross's statement was to be believed, the "Chevrolet place" next door to his Magnolia service station must have been in Cross Plains. Also, I'm aware of at least one dealership in a town with a population about the same size as Cross Plains—Trona, California—which up until very recently had a Ford dealership. If Trona could support a dealership, certainly Cross Plains could have, especially during and after an oil boom.

I'd pretty much given up hope of finding any answers to any of my questions. There appears to be no surviving record of Howard's driver's license or vehicle registration. And I figured I'd just wait until June to ask some of the locals if Cross Plains had ever had a Chevy dealership.

But it turned out I wasn't quite finished. Four days after I sent my question off to the REHupa list, Rusty Burke replied with this:

In the CP  $\it Review$  of March 22, 1929 is a quarter page ad for Dodson Chevrolet Co. of Cross Plains.

Cross Plains Motor Co. had an ad as early as September 1922, but they were a Ford dealership, and the earliest ads I find (I did not copy every page of every issue) are for a Fordson tractor and a Ford truck chassis. The first CPMC ad that specifically mentions a car is 12/14/28, which says "It has now been one year since we had the pleasure of showing the people of Cross Plains and community the first Model 'A' Ford Car in our city."

So, Cross Plains *did* have a dealership in town, hell, more than one. I replied to Burke, hoping for more information. As usual, he provided even more than I was asking for. His response follows:

There were three automobile agencies in CP in the '34-'36 period. The first one for which I have something in the *Review* is Anderson Chevrolet Company, first ad 6/30/33, but possibly was in business a year or more earlier, as there is an ad 3/25/32 for Chevrolet service that says "See your Chevrolet dealer" but has no identification of a local dealership. It was undoubtedly a national ad, but usually the local dealership paid the cost of inserting ads in the local rag.

McAdams Motor Company has an ad for Fords in the 3/9/34 issue. An ad on 2/22/35 says "March 1, 1935 is our first anniversary as authorized Ford dealers in Cross Plains, Texas."

Calhoun Motor Company has an ad 12/21/34 for Plymouth.

All three continue to have ads through June 1936. All three seem to have sold used cars as well as new (probably trade-ins), and to have had service depts. Calhoun also sold Gulf Gas and Oil, so was probably a service station as well as dealership. McAdams became an authorized Goodrich dealer in 1935.



NEW PERFECTED HYDRAULIC BRAKES

ID STEEL .. TURBET TOP

6%

Give your family a new Chevrolet -the only complete low-priced car!

Their eyes will sparkle when they Their eyes will sparkle when they see the beauty of its new "arret Top Body... their pulses quicken when they test the performance of its High-Compression Valve-in-llead Engine . . . and their faces radiate satisfaction when they experience the comfort of its famous gliding Knee-Action Ride."

You will also know that you have You will also know that you have given them the sofest motor car ever built, for the new 1936 Chev-rolet is the only low-priced car with New Perfected Hydraulie Brakes, Solid Steel Turret Top, and the other advantages listed here.

See your Chevrolet dealer-today! CHEVROLET MOTOR COMPANY DEPROVED CLIDING KHEZ-ACTION RIDE.

GENUDIS PUBLICA O DRAFT VENTILATION in New Turret Top Bedie

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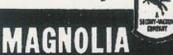


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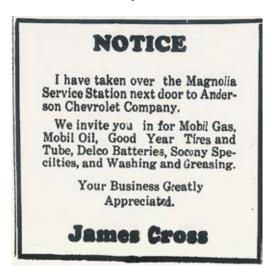
Anderson Chevrolet Co.

Cross Plains, Toxas

As for the location of Mr. Cross and his Magnolia station:

There appear to have been several garages and service stations. There are a number of Magnolia ads in 1935 that identify W.R. (Bill) Lowe as Magnolia Agent, Cross Plains, TX—I don't know if he had a station, or was the guy the others bought Magnolia products from. In the 4/3/36 issue, a Magnolia ad identifies W.J. (Sonny) Sipes as Magnolia Agent.

There is an ad 7/5/35 for Cross Service Station, no brand identified. On 8/9/35 there is a Goodyear Tire Ad that identifies Harlie Neel and James Cross as dealers. On 10/18/35 this appears:



He has an ad 4/24/36 that mentions Magnolia Products.

Other stations were Hi-Tower Service Station (T.D. Little); Neeb's Service Station (Ed Neeb), across from Citizen's State Bank (which means it was that old station at the corner of Main and what is now First Street/FM 374), Liberty Gasoline (5/24/35) later Conoco (12/13/35); C.A. Burns Service Station (Good Gulf Gas & Oils).

With all this information in hand, I spilled all my beans and told Rusty what I was doing: "You rock. I'm running into all kinds of dead ends, on multiple fronts, in my search for anything related to REH's car(s): registration, driver's license, etc." To which Rusty responded with this, from the *Cross Plains Review* for Friday February 21, 1936:

#### Number 1 Drivers License Here Goes to Claude Daniel

Members of Cross Plains school faculty grabbed two first places this week as issuing of drivers licenses and 1936 auto tags got underway here.

The first drivers license ever to be issued in Cross Plains—and possibly the first in Callahan County—went to Claude Daniel, Cross Plains High School athletic director and history teacher, Monday afternoon. By applying at the opportune moment he arbitrated a scramble between three local automobile salesmen, who had been trying for days to receive the first drivers license.

First 1936 auto tags to be issued here went to Nat Williams, superintendent of the local school system, also Monday afternoon.

Application blanks for drivers license are available at McAdams Motor Company. After the blank is properly filled out it must be taken to Bond Brothers for issuance of the license. This license is free of charge. Drivers of commercial motor vehicles, however, must pay a fee of \$3.00 for their badge. All drivers must have a license by April first in compliance with a new Texas statute.

Rusty added, "So I think, considering all else that was going on in Bob's life, that it's just possible he never got around to getting a license or tags before he died." Sounds good to me.

And there you have it, the end of the road as far as I'm concerned. I think there is some small possibility that a piece of paper with Howard's name on it exists somewhere, in some County or State archive, but it will require someone to actually walk into an office and have a face-to-face meeting to shake it loose—small, *infinitesimal*, possibility. And without any paperwork, it's impossible to know what happened to the car itself. According to E. Hoffmann Price, Doc Howard left the car to his nephew, Wallace Howard, who lived near Waco in Mart, Texas. After this, the trail goes cold.

Equally infinitesimal is the possibility that some paperwork remains from Howard's purchase of the '35 Chevy, which I now believe he bought at the Chevy dealership in Cross Plains. Wouldn't that have sent a message to the locals who frowned on his eccentric behavior and lack of a "real job." I imagine Howard plopping down his hard-earned cash and driving away in a brand new Chevrolet—while the jaws of his nay-sayers flapped.





## Number 1 Drivers License Here Goes To Claude Daniel

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# Acknowledgements

This article originally appeared in two separate mailings of the Robert E. Howard United Press Association (REHupa): "REH in Classic Cars" in *Onion Tops* #13 (REHupa #202, December 2006) and "License and Registration, Please" in *Onion Tops* #16 (REHupa #205, June 2007). In rewriting the two articles into one, some of Charlotte Laughlin's and L. Sprague de Camp's notes were made available to me. I had originally gained this information through Jim Keegan, who had researched REH's cars for his and his wife's wonderful "The Adventures of Two-Gun Bob" strip appearing in Dark Horse's REH comics. For this publication I used the source material, graciously provided by Rusty Burke, who also provided other nuggets of information. Without the initial aid of Keegan and Burke, this article wouldn't be worth the bytes it takes up on the web.

All of the information pertaining to the different models of Chevrolets was provided by my father, Bob Roehm.

Additional poking and prodding was provided by Paul Herman.