It’s time.

It’s time for the Shelby American Automobile Club to transition from a paper magazine to an on-line version. Over the past 30 years we’ve gotten used to printing the club magazine, and learning how to do it as we went along. Nobody around here had a degree in journalism or graphic arts and layout experience. “The Marque” began as a bi-monthly, an offshoot of a newsletter, actually, and it was smaller in format and thinner than we’ve become accustomed to. And truth be known, we never really liked that name because it didn’t describe any specific type of automobile. Marque is defined as “the make of a car, as distinct from a specific model.” It’s a generic term. And to make matters worse, because it was not a word in common usage, it was often mispronounced as “marquee” – which has an entirely different meaning. Once in a while you still hear the magazine called The Marquee by some older members.

Looking back through those early issues, unpolished as the writing was, there is a sense of excitement. In 1975, Cobra and Shelby articles, photographs and references in the mainstream automotive publications were few and far between. They were just considered used cars. And here comes a whole magazine dedicated to these cars and only these cars. It was just too good to be true. But the novelty wore off quickly for those who stepped forward to put each issue out. No sooner was one magazine in the mail then SAAC members were asking where the next one was—as if each issue wrote itself.

Those early issues were fairly easy to do because there wasn’t a lot in them. They all had several pages which repeated in each issue as well as advertisements and large photos. While the articles might have lacked depth, the information was all new and each photo was cause for excitement all by itself. After 20 issues we changed the magazine’s name to “The Shelby American” so there was no question about its subject matter. The name was actually a take-off on “The Scientific American,” but a few months after the name change we came across a newsletter printed by Shelby American in 1966-1967 which used that same name. Only four issues of this 4-page factory publication were ever produced.

After five years of publishing the same basic magazine, we had succeeded in raising the editorial standards. As more became known about these cars, more was required from the club members who volunteered to contribute articles. And as the level of difficulty rose in researching and fact-checking, the number of members volunteering to contribute went in the other direction. It was the law of unintended consequences and the result was predictable: it began to take longer and longer to complete an issue. We made the decision that rather than set an arbitrary deadline and then fill the magazine with
fluff and reprinted articles and pictures that had already been used somewhere else, we waited until we had enough fresh material to fill 64 pages.

After printing 6 issues a year for 5 years, we made the jump—beginning with the 31st issue—to a standard size (8 1/2” x 11”) and a color cover. We also continued to refine the editorial end of things, concentrating on spelling, punctuation, sentence construction, proper tenses and syntax—all the stuff we slept through in high school English class. And along the way we were introduced to the computer and a new concept called “desk top publishing.” Again, all self-taught. As our expertise continued to improve, so did the quality of The Shelby American. Conversely, the number of members willing to contribute articles continued to decrease. And as a result, so did the frequency of the magazine.

The most often heard criticism that comes our way is that The Shelby American doesn’t come out often enough. And we agree. Nobody complains about the quality of the magazine or the articles in it. If we cut back on the quality and the number of pages we could certainly increase the frequency. But if we did that, does anybody think we wouldn’t hear howls of complaints about how the quality of the magazine is not what it used to be?

Is there a solution to this problem that will make everyone happy? Not on your life. But is there one that will make more members happy than unhappy? We think so, and that’s why we’ve taken this big step of switching from paper to the internet. As we see it, the pros far outweigh the cons. The biggest pro—and there are a couple—is that we can increase the frequency of the magazine by posting articles on a weekly basis. We don’t have to wait until we get enough material to fill a specific number of pages and then send everything to the printer. We expect to come out with a new magazine every 3 months. And, like we said, as new articles are written and completed, they will be added to the current issue on a weekly basis.

Photos will now be in color, and that’s something no one will complain about...unless they are color blind. And here’s something that will make everyone happy: we will no longer need to limit the number of photos we can use in a particular article. Wait until you see the convention coverage!

Two of the biggest recurring items in the club’s annual operating budget are printing and postage. Both go up a lot faster than we care to raise the dues to compensate for them and as a result, we’ve always been behind that curve. Putting the magazine on-line eliminates both of those costs and standardizes our budget.

We still invite members to contribute articles and photos for publication. In fact, now we need them more than ever because the magazine’s frequency will increase drastically. This is a good chance to tell the story of your car and you can do it (along with sending pictures) via email. You don’t have to be a writer or have any journalistic background. We’ll edit it so that it reads well and you’ll be proud to see your name on it. And because you won’t have to wait upwards of a year to see it, there is instant gratification.

The SHELBY E-MERICAN

WINTER 2009 2
Is There a Downside?

You bet. We know that everyone likes to get their magazine in the mail and hold it in their hands. And that’s tough to do with an on-line publication. But not impossible, because your computer has a “print” button.

We expect to hear from some members who do not have a computer. There are, no doubt, a few out there, but let’s be honest: we have a difficult time believing that they don’t know anyone with a computer: a son or daughter, grandson or granddaughter, niece or nephew, friend or neighbor. Today, not having access to a computer is like saying you don’t have a telephone or indoor plumbing. It’s embarrassing.

Our decision to make this change was based on numbers. Five years ago less than half of the club had email addresses. At that time a member suggested we offer the option of putting the Snakebite Bulletin on-line. He advised that we could save money by sending the newsletter to those who preferred to have it appear in their email “IN’ box immediately instead of getting it a few days later in the regular mail. We were skeptical but figured there was a chance we could be wrong. We announced this option in a Snakebite and created a field in our membership database to differentiate “paper” from “email.” Out of almost 5000 members, the number of those opting for an email Snakebite was exactly 30. It was obvious to us that this was an idea whose time had yet to come.

But that was then and this is now, as they say. In the past five years computer use has skyrocketed. We presently have email addresses for about 70% of all SAAC members and we know there are others who have an email address and have not, for whatever reason, shared it with us. This first on-line issue of The Shelby E-Mericman is posted on the website for everyone to see. However, we are presently bolting together a “Members Only” section of the website (www.saac.com) and all subsequent issues will be available only to those whose membership is current. Once an article is posted it will be archived so it will be available for as long as the website remains active. We’re optimists, so we’re thinking “forever.”

We will also be putting the Snakebite Bulletin on this members-only side of the website soon and, again, our intent is to post ads on a weekly basis. With competitors like eBay and Craig’s List we have to get with the times. We will also be archiving all ads for a period of time so it will be possible to look at, say, 1966 Shelby ads which will be listed chronologically from the most current to back a year or more. (Yes, we will date all ads).

We have a few other cards up our sleeve but we don’t want to spill everything all at once. As they say, when someone is out in the desert, you don’t give them the whole canteen. Just a little sip at a time.

Stay tuned—you ain’t seen nuthin’ yet.