Before Tommy Harper rescued his 1935 Ford from an old chicken barn held up only by the trees it leaned against, he called a family meeting.

“We can sell it and be done with it. We can let the shed fall on it … or we can restore it,” Harper told his wife and five children. He insisted the only way to restore the car was all the way to “the way Henry made it.”

Most of the family was indifferent — though his wife has since referred to it as a “money pit” or his children’s “inheritance.” His son James supported the restoration, eventually done by King’s Restoration in Cloverdale and King’s Auto Upholstery in Roanoke — unrelated businesses.

Tommy Harper, who teaches in the emergency services program at Jefferson College of Health Sciences in Roanoke, along with James, makes a hobby of taking the “working man’s car” to shows. He is a life member of the Moneta Fire Department, worked at Rubatex Corp. in Bedford for almost 30 years and is a fitting custodian to display the car.

The 71-year-old said he likes to show the car because people seem to enjoy it.

“It catches the eye of the average person because it’s the car their parents had or their grandparents had,” he said. Harper remembers someone at a show telling him about being brought home from the hospital in a 1935 Ford after his birth.

The car tells a family history. Most of Harper’s memories involve driving it around the farm before he was old enough to drive elsewhere. It didn’t go far, because it wasn’t all that reliable after he purchased it from his grandmother in 1957.

Renovated, the car has won awards at many car shows since 2009 — the Harpers take it to about five per year. In 2012, it was awarded the National Antique Automobile Club of America Ford Award for models built between 1933 and 1945. On a scale of 1,000 points, it has scored up to 996.

“I’ve never seen a thousand-point car. They’re going to find something wrong to take it away from 1,000 points,” he said.

An editorial in Automobile magazine featured a photograph — edited with nostalgic coloring — of the Bedford man restores family car

Tommy Harper’s 1935 Ford has been recognized at car shows and depicted in Automobile magazine.
old car in its February issue last year. James Harper, who reads the magazine, recognized the model, then
the Virginia plate, then the specific tag and realized it was his family antique.

The car sticks out at most shows since many of the cars displayed are luxury models and brands.

“People just don’t want to put the money into a working man’s car,” Tommy Harper said.

He wouldn’t say how much he’s spent, but said he can’t get it insured for the amount.

Most who restore the 1935 Ford, bump it up to the deluxe model, which made finding certain parts
sometimes difficult.

He wanted it restored to standard shape, though, because that’s the way it was driven.

“This was a standard when granddaddy had it, so it’s a standard now,” he said.

The standard car would have cost $600 when his grandfather, Charles Howell, purchased it new in 1935.
The deluxe model would have only been another $50 or so, he said, but would have been a lot extra for a
working man’s car.

“That extra $50 was a whole lot of hours work back then,” Harper said.

The car has only about 45,000 miles on it, he said. It was used to drive around the Bedford area and on
the farm, but it didn’t get much use after his grandfather died in 1940 until Harper bought it in 1957.

He generally only drives it in parades these days, and then only in good weather.

To drive in traffic, he has to use hand signals.

“Most people today don’t know what hand signals are,” he said.