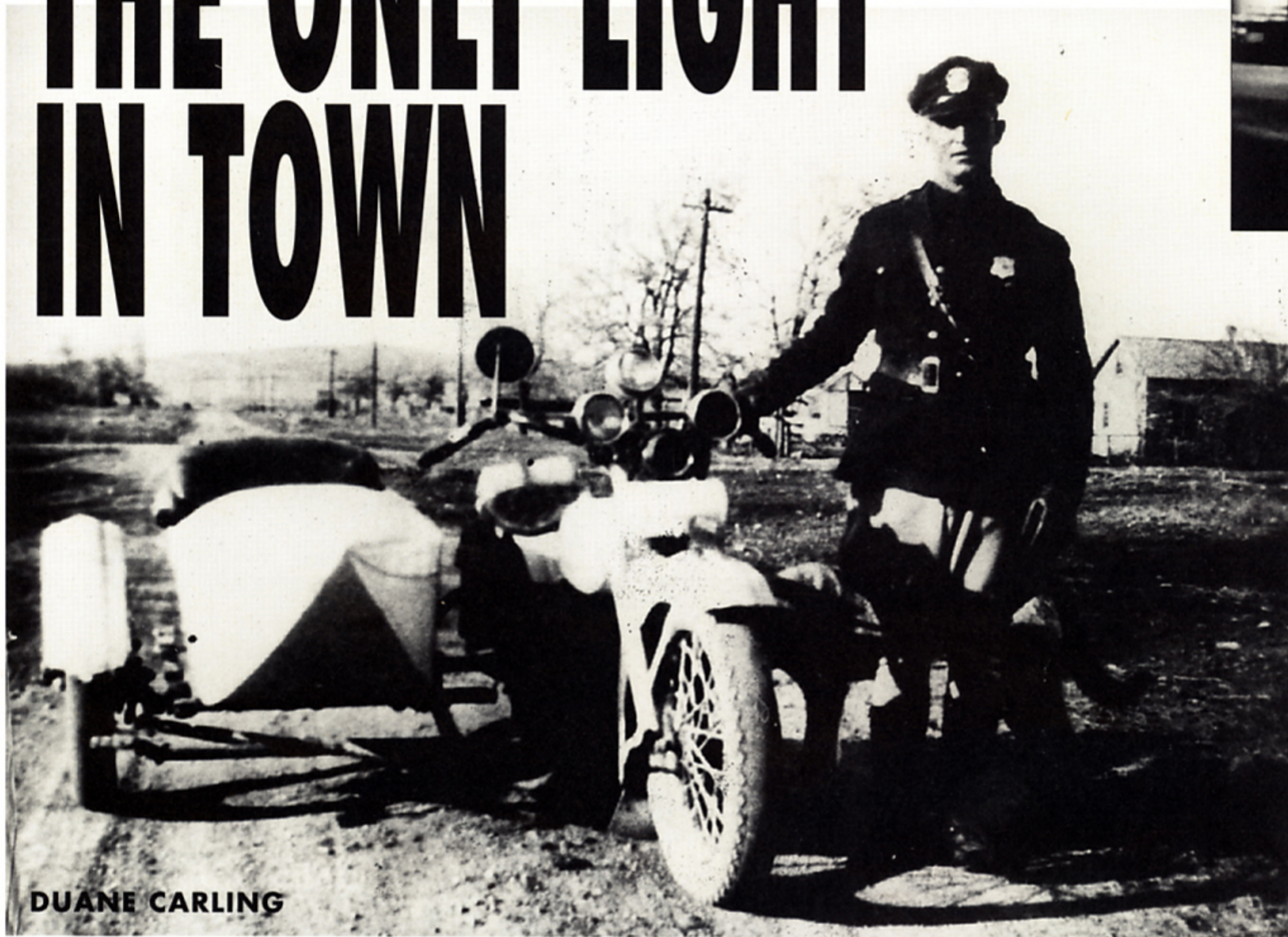




A PETROLIANA COLLECTOR'S MEMOIR OF HIS FAMILY AND A DEPRESSION-ERA UTOCO FILLING STATION, BACK WHEN IT WAS...

THE ONLY LIGHT IN TOWN



DUANE CARLING

When my father was a teenager, he worked in a Utoco station in a small town in central Utah. The single overhead lamp lighted the pump island and the front of the station. He used to tell us, "the gas pump light was sometimes the only light in town." Indeed, it was the only visible light for at least 50 miles in either direction and a very welcome sign of refuge for those early motorists. During the depression years, in a small town where everyone knew everyone else, leaving on an outside light was considered a wasteful extravagance.

Like all the station help, my father was paid on commission, and one dark and snowy night he made two cents, selling only two gallons of gas in eight hours. In those days a "service station" meant a garage for repairs, replacement parts, helpful directions, or even a place to stay when weather and road conditions became too bad for travel. Whatever the weather, on the old Highway 91—main route from the northern states into Los Angeles—there were no tow trucks, no "Road Closed," or "Chains Required" signs. The traveler was on his own, so the occasional advice from a station attendant about the road ahead was looked on as gospel. I'm sure more than one traveler stopped on a snowy night at

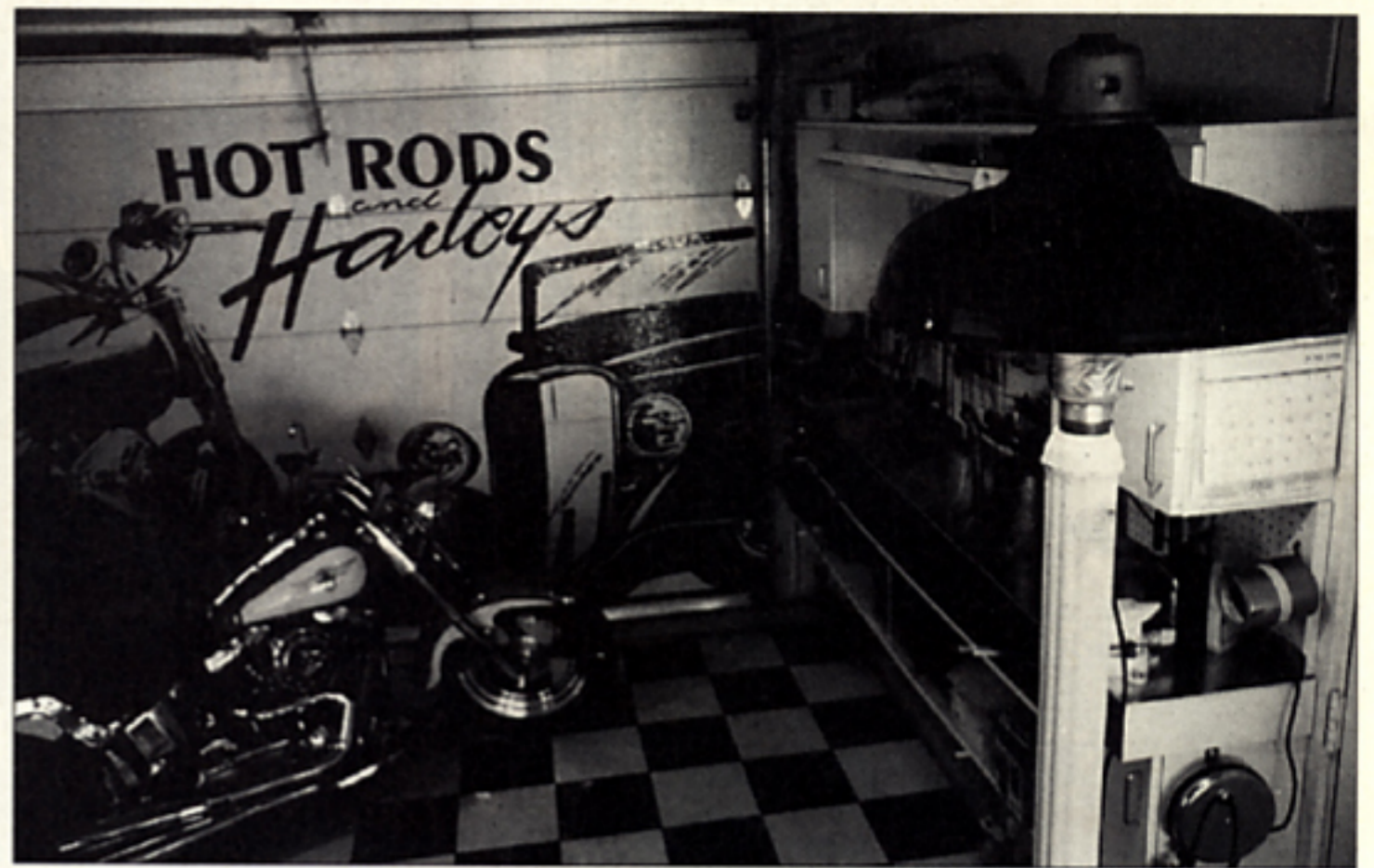
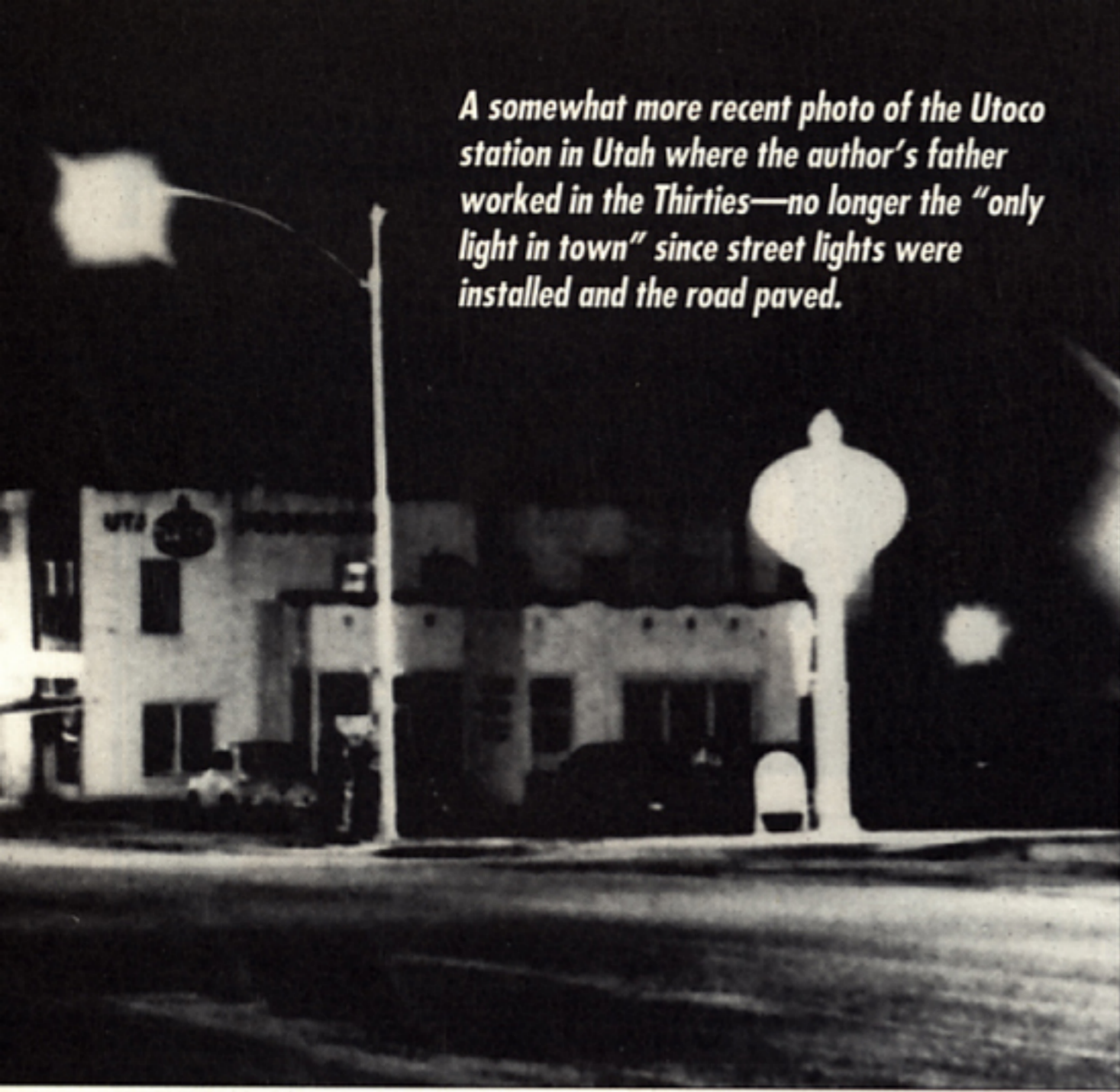
Duane Carling's grandfather, Elmer, and his trusty Harley police patrol bike. When not carrying arrested or rescued motorists, the side car was the perfect place for his dog Thurn—here hiding bashfully behind Elmer's knees.

the friendly incandescent bulb by the side of the road, taking mental note of how far he would have to travel until walking distance was less to the next beacon than it would be to backtrack to the red, white, and blue Utoco sign.

While my father was at the gas station, his policeman father was often patrolling the 150 miles of gravel road in the county—winter and summer—on a Flat Head Harley. The Patrol Cycle was equipped with a side car in



A somewhat more recent photo of the Utoco station in Utah where the author's father worked in the Thirties—no longer the "only light in town" since street lights were installed and the road paved.



Another evocative bit of the Carling clan's automotive history is this photo capturing the family outing to Fillmore Canyon. Toward the center of the picture is Duane's father in the arms of his grandfather.

case of a rescue or arrest of a motorist. It was also a good place to carry his German Shepherd, Thurn, if the weather wasn't too cold. If someone needed the law in those pre-radio days, my father—or whoever was working the night shift at the station—would turn on a red light at the side of the road to signal "The Patrol" to stop and investigate.

When I became interested in automobilia, I loved it all, especially those items from the Depression. Finding a grease-encrusted sign, or a dusty lube chart hidden away in a dimly-lit barn is sometimes more exciting than a day at the race track. How did this thing come to be in this place? The dust dancing in the filtered beams of day-

light seem to speak of difficulties overcome, hard times survived, and character built and passed to a new generation. Whoever fixed this machine here was surely grateful for a place out

of the weather, for a place to minister to his faithful steed. If the work was done correctly, the benefits of patient craftsmanship would reveal themselves in the travels yet to come. Find an old Packard in a barn, or in a long, narrow stable converted into a garage, with worn work benches, and period tools hanging on the walls, and the true character of the machine is revealed. A shiny Packard or Lincoln passing across the stage at an auction is exciting, but find one in its true surroundings, and the romance of the time and the character of its owner can be more easily imagined.

My own cars, no matter how comfortable or exotic, seem in their element in my garage, having carried their occupants to their destinations and back home again. Though they are all modern cars, and I have the modern tools they require, they are surrounded by parts supplier collectibles and porcelain steel signs from long-gone and forgotten companies. Look-

ing at them sometimes, the years seem to unroll, and I am reminded of our own undeniable mortality. An old oil can or a milk glass globe can become a time machine, transporting us back to a harder but simpler time. We may discover something about ourselves or about those who have gone before, that can bring new insight to the days we have left in our own journeys.

A shot of Duane Carling's garage, with the old light pole that he bought last summer—identical to the "only light in town" that graced his father's Depression-era Utoco station.

Last summer I bought an old light pole, identical to the island lights in photos of Depression-era service stations. The pole is fluted cast iron welded to a matching base, with a greenenameled dome shade over a single incandescent bulb. During the winter, I mounted the pole to the floor in my garage. The warm yellow light somehow seems more appropriate than the cool wash of fluorescent that I use when the work gets more serious. For me, along with many others of my gender, my garage seems to have become my refuge.

Perhaps that is one of the lures of collecting. Everyone, of course, has his or her own motivation. For some it is profit, for others, pure emotional involvement. But for me and many of my friends, it is the excitement of the hunt, the joy of discovery, and a refuge in the sharing of our experiences and our days here together.