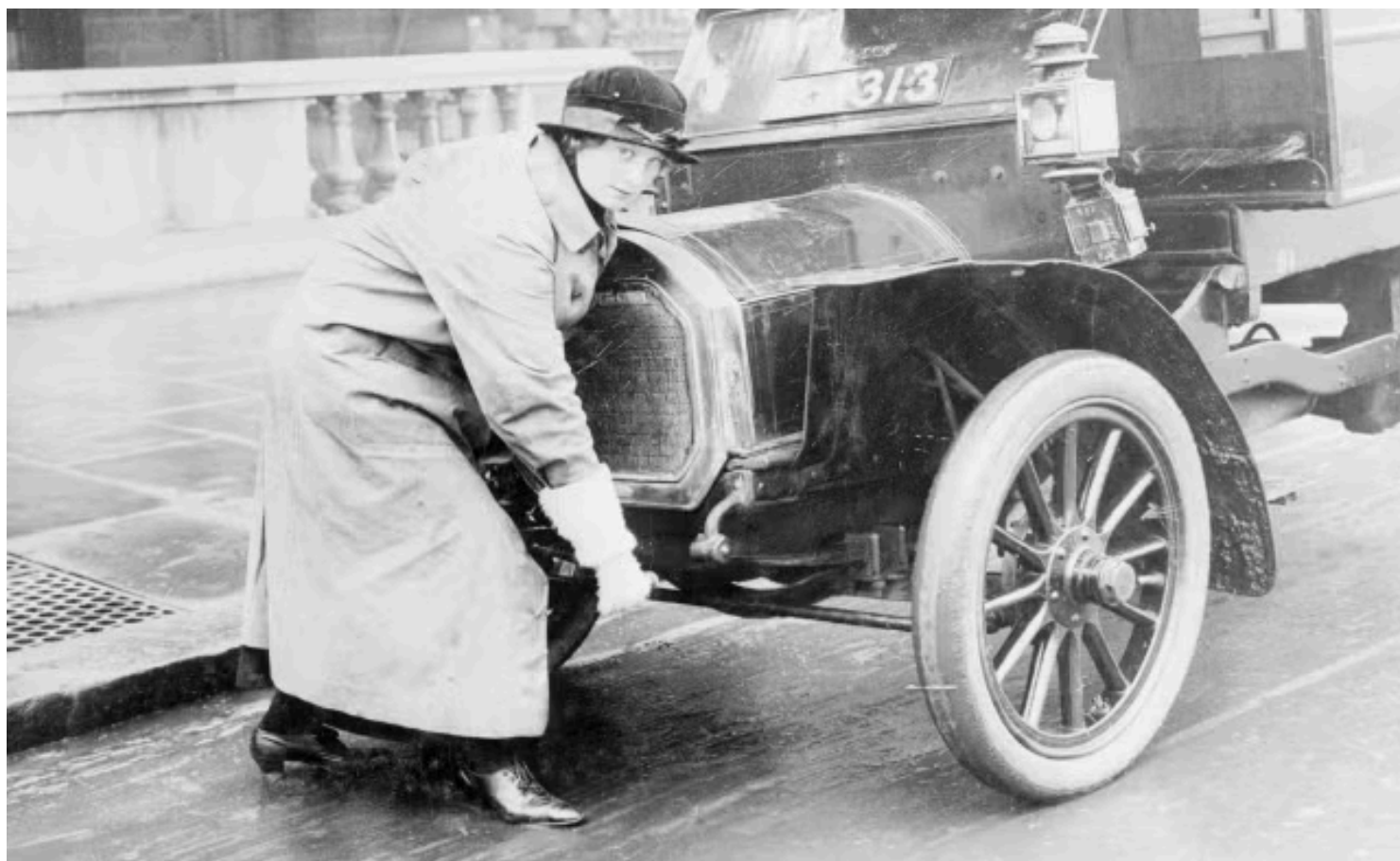


How Cars Started Back in the Early Days



By [Car and Driver](#) Published: Dec 7, 2016



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Ask your parents. Ask your grandparents. Not so long ago, jumping into a car wasn't just a matter of firing it up and setting off with gleeful abandon. There were all kinds of things to do to get a car running smoothly: setting points, adjusting chokes, adding oil and additives, even cranking the engine by hand in the early days. By yesterday's standards, we've got it easy.

Hand-Crank the Starter

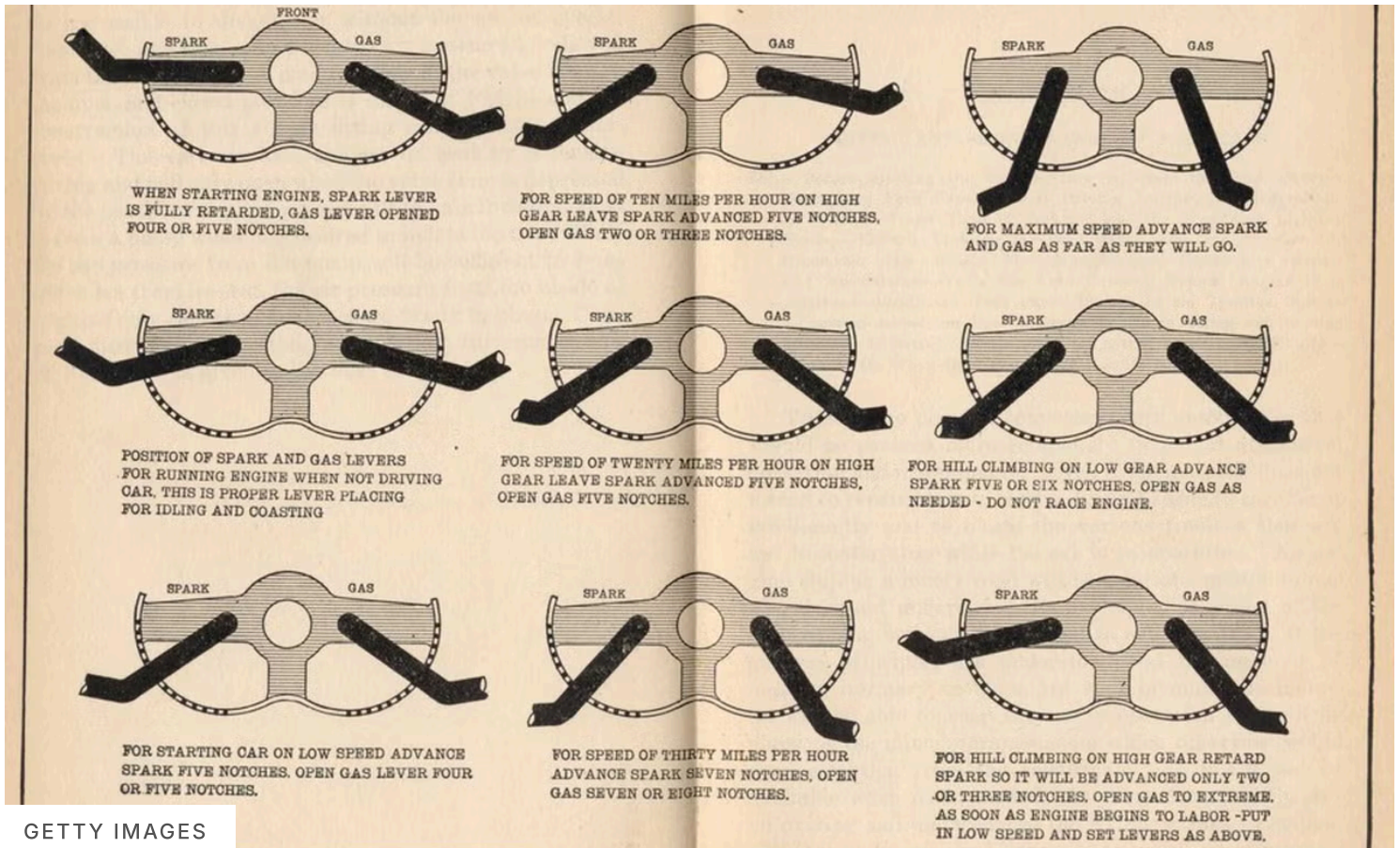
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Before Cadillac invented the electric starter, to motor anywhere took a hand crank, a lot of muscle, and the imminent fear of breaking a wrist or forearm. The hand crank at the front of the car was connected directly to the crankshaft. The operator would connect the hand crank, wind it up a few times, and hope the engine started smoothly. Of course, that engine could kick back tremendously, breaking a thumb or a wrist, depending on how you held the hand crank. Pro tip: Use your left arm to reduce that chance, as we outlined in our [How to Drive a Ford Model T](#).

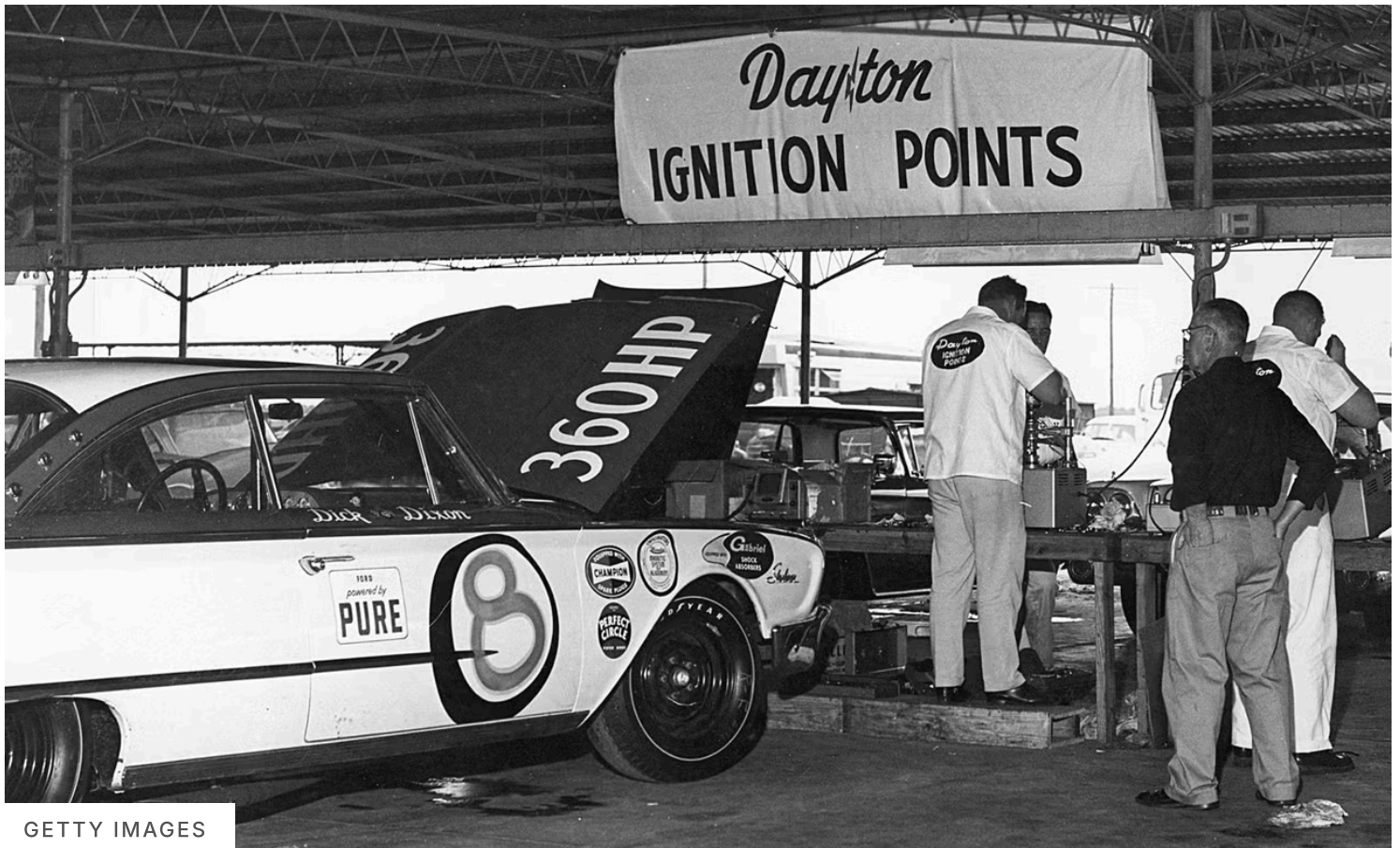
Adjust Timing



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You did remember to set the ignition timing, right? Just to get the car started required fiddling with the spark lever to advance or delay the timing of the firing of the spark plugs, ensuring that the engine would run smoothly. In addition, depending on driving conditions, tweaks throughout your drive were often necessary. Here's a handy Model T instructional guide to help you with the process.

Set the Points



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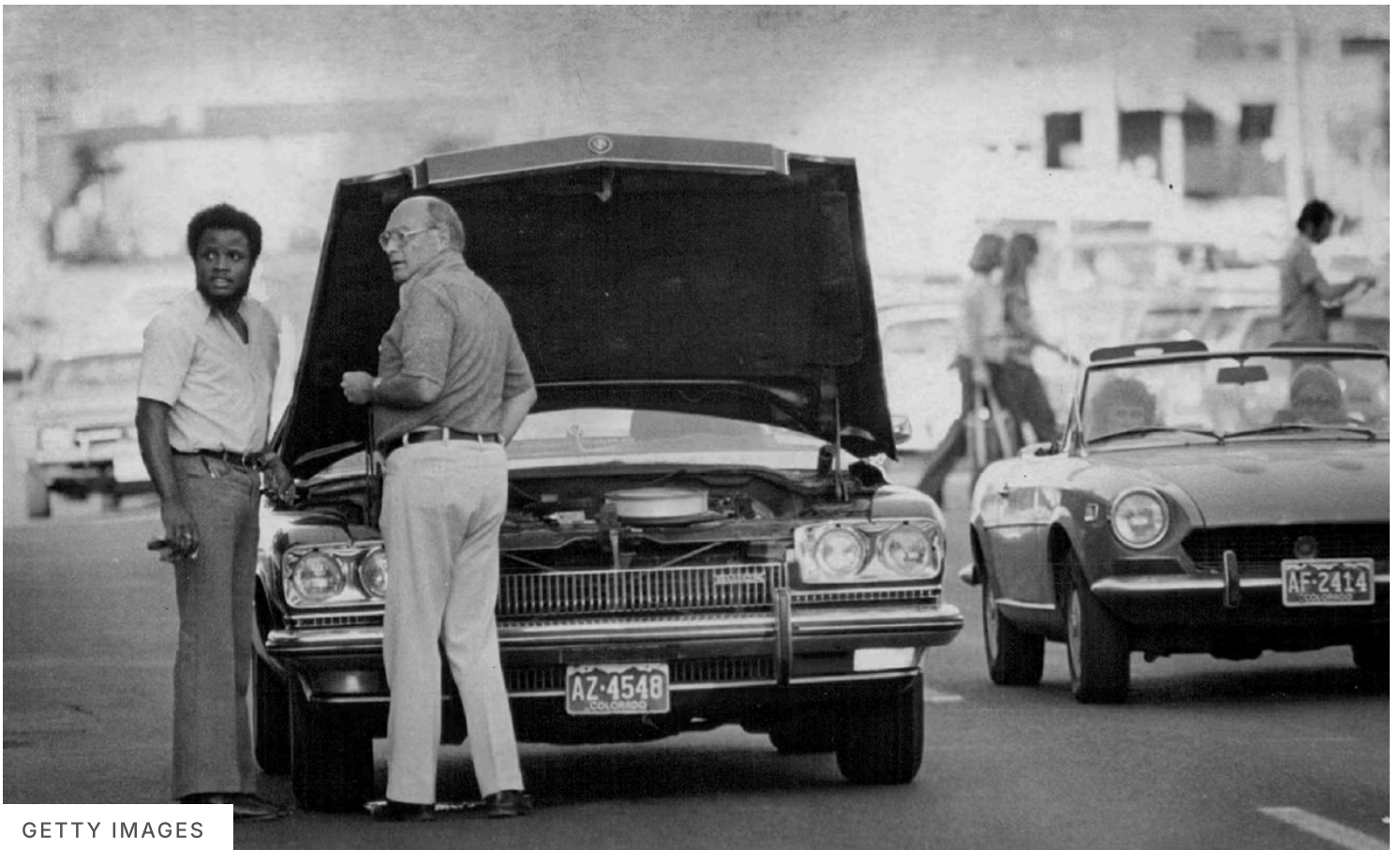
Older cars, the ones without today's computer-controlled, self-adjusting ignition systems that feature no moving parts and no user adjustability, relied on a system of points and coils. The points wear down over time, affecting performance and necessitating replacement or adjustments to clearance and timing. Any old-school mechanic will have the knowledge to do so flowing in his veins, but Popular Mechanics provides a refresher course.

Adjust the Choke



Back in the days of carburetors (ask your dad), to warm up a car on a cold day you'd have to pull the choke out, thereby restricting the amount of outside air coming into the engine. The resulting fuel-rich mixture would allow the car to fire up. You'd open up the choke, slowly, whenever the engine began to rev too high, until it became warm and reached a normal idle. This would take a few minutes. Nowadays, fuel injection means instant starting and no necessity for user control.

Watch Out for Vapor Lock



The threat of vapor lock always loomed over carbureted automobiles. When fuel in a line becomes too hot, it turns to vapor before it reaches the combustion chamber. Since the fuel-delivery hardware is designed to flow liquid gasoline, not vapor, it often led to the engine stalling. Old mechanical fuel pumps with low pressure exacerbated the problem, as did driving at high altitudes, which lowers the temperature at which fuel vaporizes. With today's high-pressure fuel pumps inside the gas tank, coupled with fuel-injection systems, it's no longer a problem.

Use Fuel Additives