

Car maintenance concern for commuters

By Marsha Larsen

Cars are crucial to Capitol Campus commuters -- cars that run, that is. When they don't we who can't distinguish a lug wrench from a tongue depressor need a car doctor.

But how do you find one that's not a quack?

Irma Austin is business manager of Working Woman magazine, the co-sponsor with Ford Motor Company of a consumer panel geared for women auto owners. Ms. Austin says the best way to locate a competent, reputable mechanic is word-of-mouth. You just can't beat a personal recommendation, so ask people -- especially those with a car like yours -- where they get good service.

Ms. Austin reports that dealerships are a good bet. They rely now more than ever on their service departments for income, since new car sales are down. Dealerships have upgraded service because they want to develop and keep a strong clientele.

It's important, Austin says, to test out a mechanic first with routine maintenance and minor repair work. Find out how good Mr. Goodwrench is before you really need him.

Greg Sutliff, Chairman of the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence (NIASE), advises consumers to duck the quacks by looking for the NIASE sign at dealerships and independent garages. That shingle, he says, indicates the CPA's of the auto technician business.

NIASE administers the only nationally recognized testing program for mechanics. In its eleventh year, the program certifies technical competency in eight areas of car repair, plus

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heavy-duty truck and body repair. Sutliff says they can indeed test mechanical aptitude with a pencil: There is a high correlation between satisfactory test results and technical ability.

When you locate an orange and blue gear-shaped sign, ask to see the mechanic's NIASE certification. Check that he has been tested in the area of repair you need. See that his i.d. has not expired; auto technicians must be retested every 5 years (a requirement even medical doctors do not have to meet).

The American Automobile Association realizes that a skilled mechanic is not necessarily

an honest one. AAA now offers a thoroughbred model of car care to members seeking well-done repairs at a fair price.

With its own NIASE-certified inspectors, the club has checked 3,000 repair facilities in 25 states for mechanics' competency and basic equipment required in 5 areas of auto repair, including light mechanical. AAA further approves garages on the basis of community reputation. It evaluates reports from the Better Business Bureau and Consumer Protection Agency, bank references, and statements from past customers. It rates public facilities, restrooms and

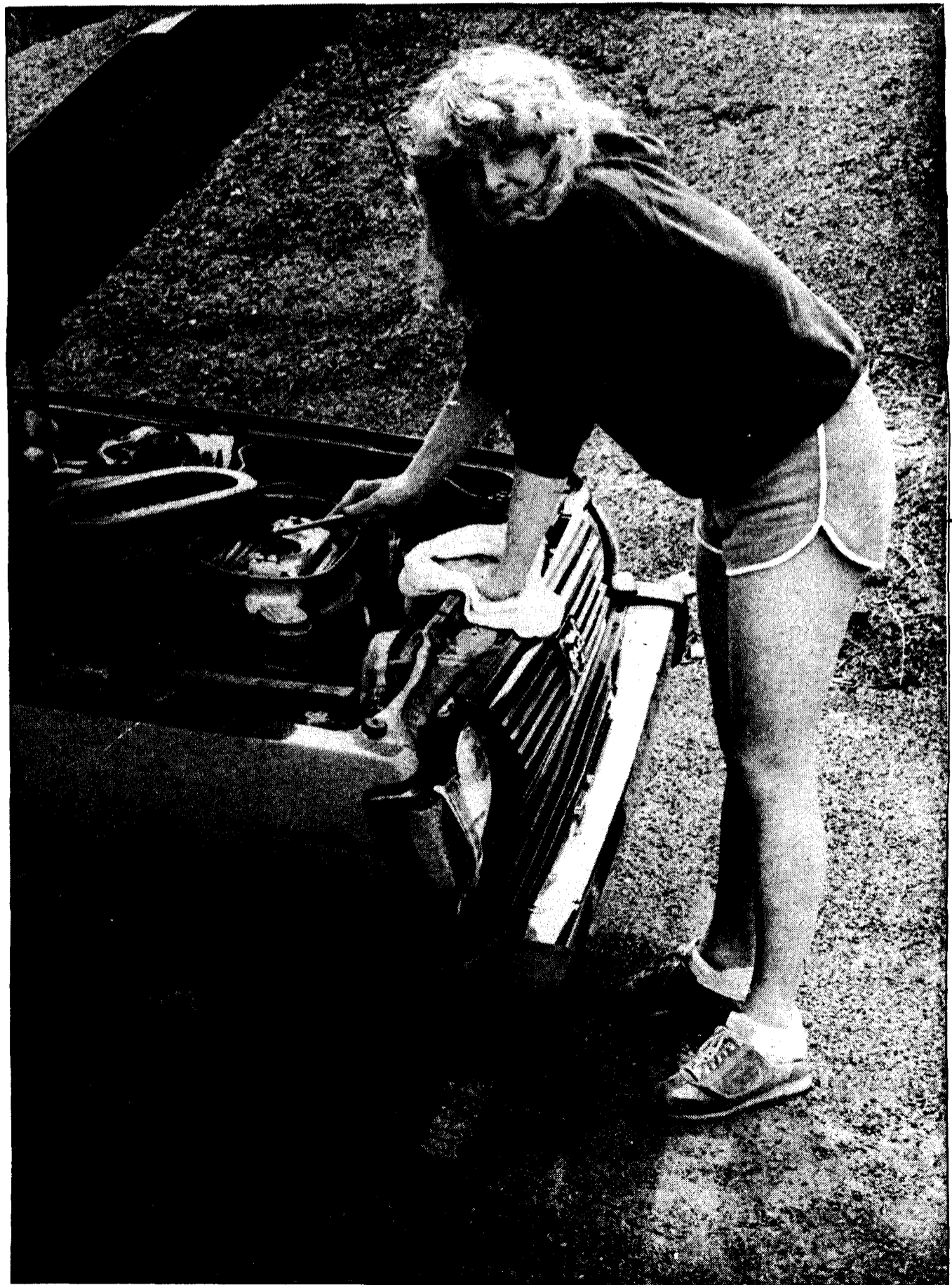
waiting areas, for their cleanliness and requires proof of Garagekeeper's Legal Liability Insurance.

At the end of the rigorous 3-month inspection procedure, repair facilities that have met all of the standards may enter into a contract with AAA and become part of the Approved Auto Repair Services program. The contract specifies that garages must guarantee their work to club members and accept any AAA ruling in customer disputes.

Although non-members of AAA cannot benefit from the Association's arbitration in a tangle with a mechanic, they

can trust that any service outlet displaying the AAA credential has earned it. As William Bendall, Director of the Approved Auto Repair Service program, puts it: "We knew we could never take on the whole industry, so we decided to set standards that all of the auto-repair community could work up to."

After you have worked your way to that terrific car doctor, don't lay an egg when you work with him. Send \$2.50 for "Car Care and Service" (#104L) to Consumer Information Center, Department I, Pueblo, Colorado 81009. The booklet gives tips on working with your mechanic.



Photograph by Joe Hart