

What ever happened to ...

Douglas Cobb, designer of electric automobiles

Douglas Cobb's eyes light up a little when he says, "Oxygen recombinant starved electrolyte sponge matrix battery."

Cobb, the Melbourne electrician and would-be electric automobile manufacturer ("His cause: Saving energy," July 23, 1992), still hasn't found that elusive combination of ingredients that will one day make electric cars practical for the masses.

But this new battery just may mean he's getting closer.

When we last checked in with Cobb, he said, "Even in this world of giant corporations, I believe one man can still make a difference. . . ."

Others believe it, too, such as the federal government, Florida Power and Light, the Army and the Air Force, all of which have anted up with grants totaling close to a million dollars.

By tackling one problem at a time, Cobb is leading the charge to get a dependable, usable electric vehicle on the road.

Progress has come not in great leaps but in small steps since Cobb began tink-

ering with electric cars nearly six years ago.

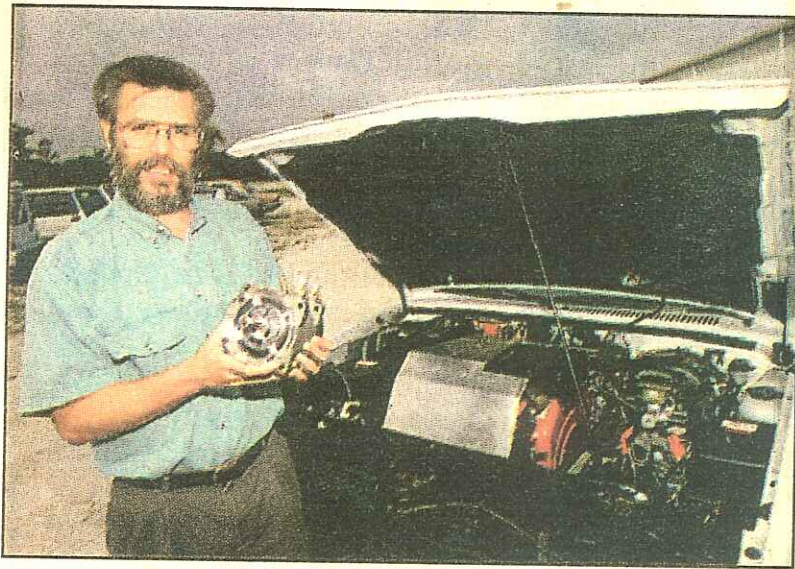
The new batteries, for instance, will offer 30 percent more power, which increases performance and extends a vehicle's range between charges. And the air-conditioning and heating system Cobb designed and demonstrated has the potential to make electric vehicles more practical.

Cobb, 44, sells electric-powered compact pickup trucks to utility companies and government agencies, and he sells parts for do-it-yourself tinkerers.

Cobb isn't what you'd call a militant environmentalist. But his desire to help heal the environment sparks his motivation.

"I have to admit that this has been a much bigger task than I ever imagined. Sometimes I get frustrated working with all this stuff. But the real issue at hand is the environment. We have to make changes. I am a conscientious person, and I am trying to make a difference in my lifetime. I am changing technologies and helping to stretch the envelope," Cobb said.

A government grant from the Advanced Research Projects Agency is allowing Cobb to take all that he has learned to the next level.



Cobb shows off a new air-conditioning component for the electric truck behind him.

Cobb and his cadre of young engineers are installing a new electric drivetrain in five pickups for the Air Force. The drivetrain does away with the truck's transmission and driveshaft and, for safety, places the batteries underneath the vehicle in a sealed box between the frame rails.

Cobb believes the truck will be able to go more than 100 miles on a single charge, making it tops in the industry. And he thinks the new motor will have more power than a V-8 gasoline engine.

If not, he'll try something else.

"There are some people who think that there's a sinister plot by The Big Three [General Motors, Ford and Chrysler] to keep electric vehicles under wraps.

"I think it's more of the nature that we are dealing with a dinosaur. And dinosaurs don't move that fast. If you look at the history of technology, most innovations have not come from the big companies. It's been from small people who have been incorporated into it. Mr. Edison, Mr. Goodyear and Mr. Ford were all individuals."

—Richard Truett