HAGERTY

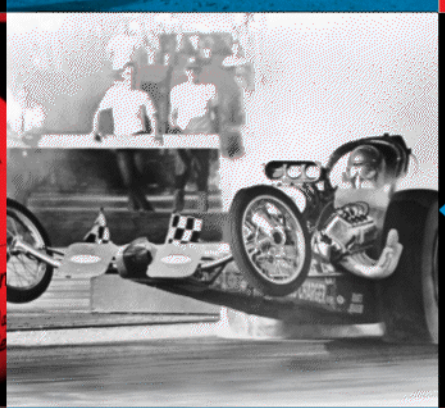
THE AMERICA ISSUE

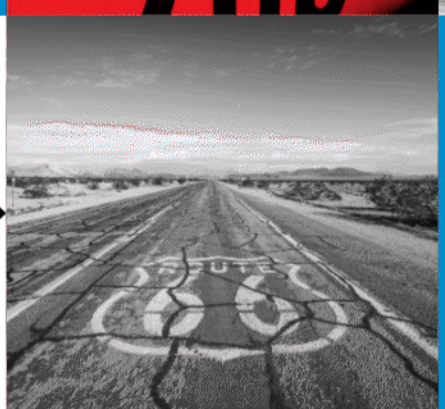
DRIVERS CLUB®











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January 1, 1969: A rain-drenched Route 66 offered many options for dinner and lodging in the heart of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Our pop culture deep dive into the Mother Road, which stretches from Chicago to Los Angeles, starts on page 190.

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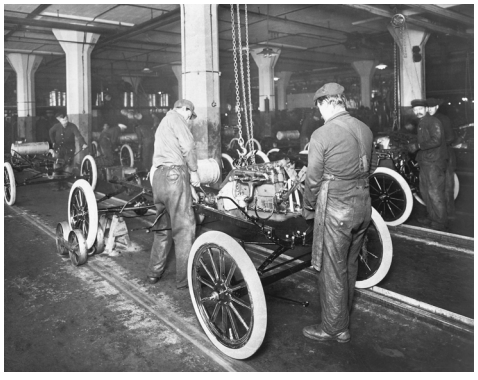

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HDC AMERICA 250

WELCOME



It's not a movie set, it's King Ranch, where cowboys on horseback and Ford pickups still do the work that's been done on the American frontier for two and a half centuries.

THE HARDEST PART about this issue of the magazine was simply deciding what to include in it. With such rich automotive history, America presents countless compelling stories to tell. Our debates started about a year ago and quickly landed on a key concept—Only in America—that helped guide our choices: We focused on the people, places, and things that could only have happened here in the U.S.A. We applied that principle to our usual search for untold stories you didn't know you wanted to know and then crafted them with great writing and imagery.

Our search took us to early 20th-century Detroit, which created and killed scores of car companies in the span of two decades. A special set of individuals in a special country built an industry through grit, bare-knuckled capitalism, and, in true American fashion, lawsuits between titans. We all know Henry Ford put America on wheels with the Model T. You probably didn't know that the T's birth relied on the Dodge brothers and that the partnership eventually dissolved in a Michigan courtroom. Senior editor Kirk Seaman dug deeply into the archives for the story; click here.

So many of the early pioneers and inventors were self-taught. They just went to their shops and got after it. I'm thinking about guys like Harry Miller, whose elegant straight-eight engines changed the racing world a century ago and whose protégé, Fred Offenhauser, developed a remarkable four-cylinder engine that powered Indy-winning race cars for decades. Contributor Preston Lerner has written the definitive history of the Offy here.

Hardware aside, we knew this issue needed stories in distinctly American settings, and naturally our minds wandered west, first to Texas, where staff writer Aaron Robinson drove a 1949 Ford F-1 pickup at King Ranch, which was established in the mid-1800s. Then we asked contributor John L. Stein to point his 1963 split-window Corvette toward Death Valley, exploring this most American of landscapes in this most American of sports cars.

Pete Brock's career could only have happened in America. The native Californian's life includes stints at GM Design, Shelby America, and his own entrepreneurial pursuits. Brock is best known for designing the beautiful Cobra Daytona Coupe that won Le Mans in 1965. Last fall, I traveled to his Las Vegas shop for a two-hour interview—watch a video by clicking here. If you just want the audio version, you can listen to the podcast.

Adding video and audio elements like the Pete Brock interview to our usual written material is one advantage of the digital magazine you're now reading. We also took advantage of the format by including 200 full pages of stories and photos, some 50 percent more material than we can typically cram into a printed issue.

You'll still receive printed versions of *Hagerty Drivers Club* magazine; your next copy will land in your physical mailbox. We're using these digital versions twice this year for the special topics that deserve more space than a printed issue can provide. We hope you enjoy it.



Larry

Larry Webster
Editor-in-Chief
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Photo by James Lipman

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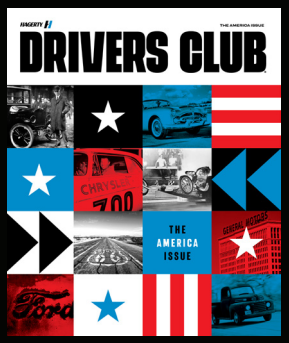
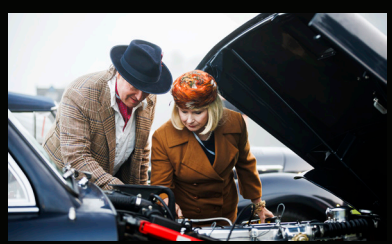


ABOUT THE COVER

For our America at 250 cover graphic, designers John Magnifico and Will Thomas created a montage of graphic elements and period photos that make us want to stand and salute. The red, white, and what we here at Hagerty call Bugatti Blue treatment continues with our opening essay, "What Makes an American Car?" beginning on page 40.



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CLUB HUB

NEWS & KNOW-HOW FROM HDC







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WHAT are HDC Days?

HDC Days is a weekend-long celebration from June 26 to June 28 created to thank and celebrate Hagerty Drivers Club members. Join this community of enthusiasts for nationwide driving events, exclusive perks, and contests that bring our shared love of car culture to life.

HOW do you participate?

You can join us at any of the in-person HDC Days events we're hosting across the U.S. and Canada. Or you can create your own Get Out and Drive event by tagging us at #hdcdays2026 to share how you're celebrating.

Here are a few ideas for you to create your own Get Out and Drive event:

- Take your family to your favorite ice cream shop
- Get your car club together for a drive
- Attend your favorite car show or Cars and Caffeine® event across North America
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Click the link below to get the latest updates on HDC Days, including events and experiences, elevated offers, engaging contests, and more!
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IN THE SPOTLIGHT

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REBORN IN THE USA



Jay Leno
aka The Comedian



Our man drives the 2025 Corvette ZR1 with GM president Mark Reuss. American car companies have been down, but today they're better than ever, Jay figures.

IN THE AUTO BUSINESS, it takes a long time to earn a reputation, it takes a long time to lose it, and then it takes a long time to get it back again. Cadillac is a great example. In 1953, I believe that a Cadillac was the best car in the world. It had a V-8 with overhead valves, power steering, power brakes, air conditioning, electric windows, and an automatic transmission, and it cost about $4000. In comparison, a Rolls-Royce had a six-cylinder engine with a manual gearbox and roll-up windows, and it cost around $11,000. Sure, you had the leather and the wood and all that, but in terms of engineering, a Rolls was antiquated next to a Cadillac.

And so it was until the Japanese came in to compete. When the first emissions rules came out in the early '70s, the American car companies hired lobbyists to fight them and swore they would destroy the industry. Honda just said, "What are the limits?" and then went and designed the CVCC engine, which didn't even need a catalytic converter to pass. Cadillac, along with the rest of Detroit, went through a decades-long slide, but today the cars are amazing. The 2026 CT5-V Blackwing has 668 horsepower and is as good as anything they make in Germany, and you can get one with a six-speed manual. I would put it up against any Mercedes-AMG or BMW M car, but a Cadillac is still seen as a lesser car.

For those of us who've been around a while, it's funny to see American cars become so good, to come so far from when the "GT" trims just had stripes and mag wheels and the luxury trims had fake landau bars. I remember back in 2002, I drove a yellow Pontiac Trans Am pace car for the Daytona 500. It had a huge engine, the 5.7-liter V-8, and a six-speed manual, and I remember having my foot buried in it and watching the speedo: 110...111.....112.....and that was it, the top, that was as fast as you could get it to go. The car looked nice, but you could barely do 112 mph.

As far as I'm concerned, the greatest thing that happened to the American car industry was the bankruptcy in 2008, because you got rid of all the marketing guys from Whirlpool and Unilever and all the non-car products and you brought in engineers. The idea of the president of General Motors, Mark Reuss, an engineer by training, driving a Corvette at 233 mph at a high-speed test track in Germany would have been unheard of 50 years ago, they wouldn't have allowed it. But engineers run the automakers now, and the product is only getting better and better because of it.

Speaking of the Corvette, the fact that the Bowling Green plant in Kentucky can build the car in a union shop for under a hundred grand is unbelievable, because nobody in Europe can do that. When the C8 was first announced, I thought, sure, it'll be mid-engine, but it'll have a steel frame and some kind of cast-iron four-speed transmission or something, because there's no way they could build it for an affordable price otherwise. No, the car has magnesium in it, it's got an aluminum frame, and it uses carbon fiber, and it's still under a hundred grand.

The Corvette is always my answer to friends who complain that making stuff in America is too difficult and expensive. If so, why is the Corvette cheaper than any other supercar and still produced by union workers in America? In Los Angeles County, where I live, just the sales tax on the new McLaren W1 is more than the purchase price of a Corvette ZR1X, and the performance between them is almost the same. You can pay the tax on the McLaren or literally buy the hottest Corvette made. It says something about our ability to design and make things efficiently and get the costs down through sheer volume.

I like that America always thinks of itself as the underdog. When Ford went up against Ferrari in the 1960s, you had a $12 billion corporation trying to beat a $10 million company, and yet Ford was the underdog. Dearborn was flying windshields in for the GT40, and somehow they were the underdog. It's how we like to position ourselves, but in fact, today we are the underdog in trying to win our reputation back for making world-class cars. Personally, I think we're already there, but it may take some time for the rest of the world to catch on. //

JAY LENO hosted *The Tonight Show* from 1992 to 2014 and remains on the comic circuit. He shares his personal car collection with enthusiasts on his TV show, *Jay Leno's Garage*.

Photo courtesy of Jay Leno's Garage

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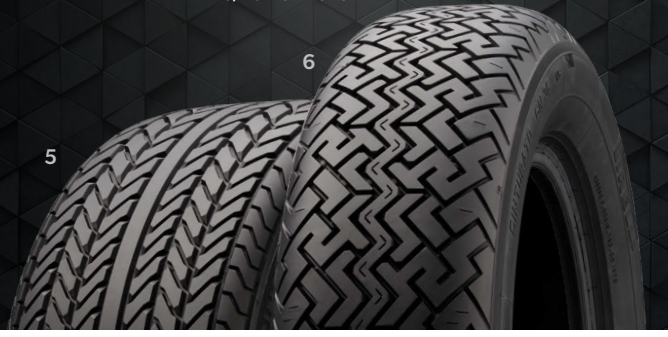

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MY PAL, ISKY



Wayne Carini
aka The Hunter



Ed "Isky" Iskenderian poses with the Model T hot rod that became famous as the Isky Roadster. It features a Ford flathead V-8 and an Edelbrock triple-carb intake.

I JUST GOT back from attending the 2026 Amelia Concours weekend. This was its 31st anniversary, and I've been to every one of the shows. This year's was terrific, with 275 spectacular cars ranging from L88 Corvettes to supercharged prewar Mercedes-Benzes.

I had the privilege of accompanying one of my great clients, John Gagliardi, to the concours. He showed his 1934 LaSalle 350 convertible coupe, which is painted in a handsome combination of orange and black. To me, these LaSalles are the pinnacle of art deco, with their biplane bumpers, scoops down the sides of the hood, and swooping fenders. Everything about its design is so cool. This was the first time John had taken a car to a major show, and he and his wife, Deb, had a great time. The LaSalle had an older restoration, so it didn't win any awards. Later, though, Apple News picked up an article about the 10 coolest cars at The Amelia Concours, and John's LaSalle was the first car in the story. I told him, "There's your trophy. That article was seen by millions of people around the world." He and Deb were thrilled.

About a month before I headed down to Amelia, I got the news that Ed Iskenderian had passed away on February 4 at the incredible age of 104. Known as "Isky" to his friends (and he was friends with everyone he met), he was a legendary pioneer at the very dawn of motorsports here in the States. He founded Isky Camshafts in 1946 in Culver City, California, after serving in the Air Force during World War II. Isky built his reputation by grinding camshafts to increase an engine's performance. Camshafts have lobes that control the opening and closing of an engine's intake and exhaust valves. By grinding and shaping the lobes, you can control an engine's power output. Isky's first big success was improving the performance of Ford flathead V-8s, which back then were the engine of choice for hot rodders. By the early 1950s, Isky was considered the go-to guy for making cars go fast. One of his crowning achievements was producing the camshafts for the four supercharged Pontiac V-8 engines that powered Mickey Thompson's Challenger 1 streamliner. Thompson drove it in 1960 at the Bonneville Salt Flats and became the first American driver to go 400 mph.

I met Isky several times over the years. One day, I got a call from him out of the blue. "Wayne, it's Ed Iskenderian. I want to have lunch with you." "OK," I replied. "When would you like to do that?" "Tomorrow," came his response—and this was at noon the day before. But if Ed Iskenderian wants to have lunch with you, you can't say no. I found a flight first thing the next morning and flew out to California. I landed at about 11 a.m. and drove over to Isky's shop. We went to his favorite hamburger place, which was a block away from his shop. He had his own booth with pictures of him on the wall, and for years, he had held court there every day.

We sat and we talked and then we went back to his shop, where he showed me the grinding machines. He had just one light bulb in that part of the shop. When he wanted to go from one machine to the other, he unscrewed the light bulb, went to the next machine, and screwed in the light bulb. He had three offices and as one office filled up with stuff, he would move to the next office down the hall and start filling up that one. The offices were so full of stuff you couldn't even walk inside. His cars were the same. He had Cadillacs and they were all filled right up to the windows. When he couldn't see out of one, it was parked behind the shop. Then he'd get a new Cadillac and he'd start all over again. There were five Cadillacs parked out back when I visited.

Isky had asked me to lunch because he was thinking about selling the hot rod that made him famous. It's a Model T roadster that he had started modifying when he was a teenager. In June 1948, the T was on the cover of *Hot Rod* magazine. The car became known as the Isky Roadster and is one of the most significant hot rods ever built. While we couldn't work out a deal, when Isky finally sold it a few years later, he called. "I sold my car," he said. "I want to pay you for your efforts." I told him, "Isky, it's a pleasure to know you. You keep all the money." Getting to know and become friends with one of my idols was priceless. *H*

WAYNE CARINI is a master restorer and a collection adviser and manager for clients around the world. He is the host of *Chasing Classic Cars*.

Photo courtesy of Museum of American Speed

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FUN TAKES SOME WORK



Aaron Robinson
aka The Pundit



By the time the 17,000 or so spectators converge on Amelia, nearly a year of planning and more than a week of setup on-site have already occurred.

A '30 DUESENBERG Phaeton, practically a rail car's worth of waxed red lacquer and taut canvas and mirror-finish nickel, waited patiently in the morning mist as my Hagerty colleague Logan Calkins swung around to line up his golf cart. Next to him, I was acting as first officer (née: ballast) in the right seat. "M30!" somebody shouted, and Logan called back, "Right, M30," and we were off, the Duesenberg purring behind us as we squirted across the fairway at the 2026 Amelia Island Concours.

Leading up to this moment had been nearly a week of setting up tents, nailing down Astroturf, digging holes, filling holes, marking lines, taping gaps, running wires, making repeated runs to local hardware stores, and answering questions on a walkie-talkie that was always crackling. Logan was lagging about two days in responses to nonessential text messages. Ask me how I know.

Now, on show day, taped to his golf cart's steering wheel was a wrinkled, marked-up scrap of paper resembling the 101st Airborne's 1944 battle plan for taking Sainte-Marie-du-Mont. It was a map of the Amelia show, and it had taken nearly two months of meetings and Zoom calls to finalize. Without it, there was no way that 270 cars ranging in age, speed, value, and ground clearance from an 1896 tiller-steered Riker Electric to a 2025 Czinger 21C V Max hypercar could efficiently move onto a golf fairway in under two hours and park with any sensible organization.

To a participant or paying spectator, a major concours such as Amelia can seem like a duck moving placidly across the water, champagne flutes clinking, classical music playing, no evidence of the feet paddling furiously underneath. But the paddling is indeed furious. It takes an army of nearly 200 Hagerty employees a year to plan and stage The Amelia, plus another whole army of volunteers and outside contractors working for months. At times, it can feel like a thankless task, especially when things go sideways and people start grumbling. Everyone wants their event to be as good as Pebble Beach, sometimes forgetting that it has taken Pebble Beach 75 years to become as good as Pebble Beach.

After we placed the Duesenberg, I bumped into a neighbor from Los Angeles who is the president of a local car club. We commiserated on the difficulties of staging even small car events. He told me, "Every time I put on an event, I just want to quit the hobby." Finding venues for car shows that please everyone, including the venue owner, is not easy. Dealing with expenses and insurance and restrooms and catering and sponsors and the innumerable special needs and requests is even tougher. And staffing an event with enough volunteer swag-bag stuffers and ticket-takers and car-ushers can seem impossible.

Lord March over in England undoubtedly makes money on his Goodwood gatherings, but pretty much every other old-car event either breaks even or loses money. Or, as in the case of Pebble Beach, donates its profits to charity. My point is that unlike Taylor Swift concerts and most other forms of mass entertainment, absolutely nobody is getting rich running car shows. They are fueled by enthusiasm for the cars.

That's worth remembering when we embark in our own treasured jalopies for an event and things don't run exactly like the German railway, whether it's the inching line to get in or that preferred parking spot that wasn't available or the far walk to the bathrooms. That poor soul you so desperately want to explode at is probably a volunteer, donating his or her time on a weekend so you can have a pleasant experience. My neighbor said it's often the people who haven't spent a dime or ever lifted a finger to volunteer who are the loudest complainers. I'm as guilty as the next; I've vented into my hat about poor organization as my car idled, temp needle climbing, the guy ahead of me not budging, and all I did to help was show up.

The best part about being patient and understanding in those moments is that you feel even better afterward. For me, one of the only good things about getting older was figuring that out. Everyone at Amelia seemed to understand it, too, for I saw nothing but smiles. And as anyone who has put on a car event knows, making smiles takes a lot of work. *H*

AARON ROBINSON has written about cars and the car industry for more than 25 years, including a 17-year stint as technical editor and executive editor at *Car and Driver* magazine.

Photo by Cameron Neveu

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From the mighty Porsche Carrera GT to the mite-y Mazda Miata, our 2026 Bull Market had it all.

Dear Hagerty

BULL MARKET KUDOS

Many thanks for another stellar Bull Market issue (January/February 2026, page 44) that points out my eternal problem of wanting too many interesting cars but having too little garage space. And kudos to Aaron Robinson for using the word "avoirdupois" in a car review (2026 Nissan Leaf, page 136), proving that some members of the automotive press can use a thesaurus.
John Grusd Woodland Hills, CA

The recent Bull Market issue provided great reading for me because of my experiences with some of the vehicles. My first car was a 1969 Dodge Charger, and I currently own a restored 1970 Charger R/T. My friend owned a Dodge Ramcharger when we were in our late 20s. My son owned a Volkswagen Golf GTI with the VR6 when he was at university, and another friend currently owns a Chevrolet Corvette Z06. Quite a coincidence that all these vehicles would be featured!
Murray Whelan Campbell River, BC

As the original owner of a 1974 Alfa GTV with 34,000 miles, I strongly agree with your comments about this terrific vehicle. I thoroughly enjoy driving it and have shown it at several events and concours.
George Kater Huntersville, NC

STICKY SITUATIONS

I had to write after I read Aaron Robinson's column ("Memories That Stick," January/February 2026, page 20) and relate how I learned to drive a stick. I remember every detail. (I was not even of driving age yet!) My cousin Robert, who is 10 years older than I, came to visit the family in suburban New Jersey. He was super cool, had an apartment in the city (Forest Hills, Queens), and drove a 1972 Ford Capri (the European model) with a stick, of course. He asked if I wanted to learn to drive it and I was out the door instantly. He was a good instructor and explained (after I stalled three times) how to feather the clutch and gas in first gear. Once the light bulb went off for me, I mastered it quickly and have been hooked on stick-shift cars ever since.
Richard Miller Metuchen, NJ

I was in the Marine Corps in the '80s and was in freight operations. We needed to transport some things that another unit had requisitioned. My motor transport sergeant demanded I drive while he sat in the passenger seat and gave me direction. He was determined to teach me how to drive a manual. The four-speed transmission was pretty forgiving while I grinded the gears. My sergeant just shook his head and said, "Keep going, you'll get it." The most fun part of that day was crossing a flooded road. I thought for sure we were in trouble, but that truck went right through it. Semper Fi.
Tom Grice Captain Cook, HI

Back when I was a 15-year-old in Chicago, my father would occasionally let me drive his 1960 Simca with a four-on-the-tree column-shift manual transmission. During the same period, a friend of the family let me drive his 1960 Rambler with a three-on-the-tree all over the streets of Chicago with him. My driver's permit was only valid with a certified driving instructor, so none of this was legal. I must have gained a lot of skill, because on my 16th birthday, I went to the testing facility and easily passed my driver's test.
Bob Sherman Chino Valley, AZ

I am 84 years young and have owned 53 cars in that time. Of those 53, all but 11 have rolled with manual transmissions. My first car (as a 17-year-old in Des Moines, Iowa) was a 1953 Plymouth. It had a three-on-the-tree transmission and was the car on which I learned to drive a stick. I began "learning" in the driveway of our home. I noted that my family (Mom, Dad, younger brother, and sister) watched with glee from the living room windows at the lurching vehicle with me at the wheel. Each of my three kids learned to drive on a manual transmission car. One of my daughters had to teach her husband the nuances of driving a stick. Although my two

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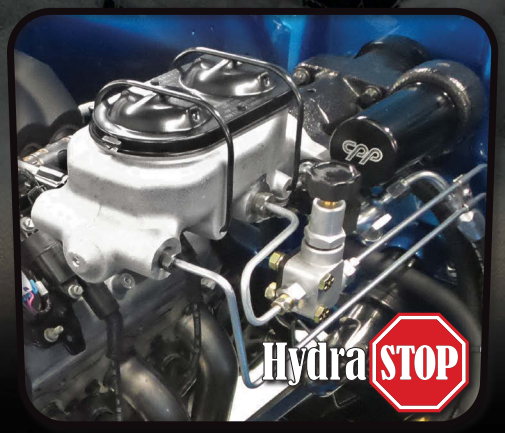

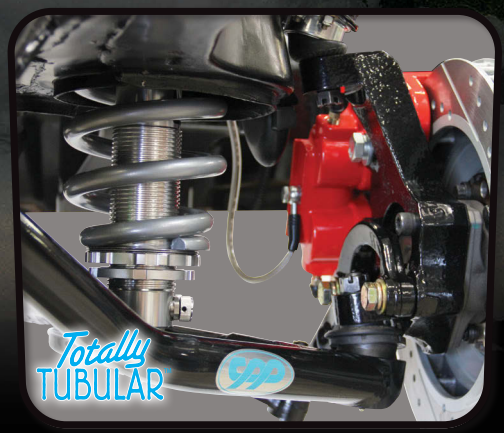

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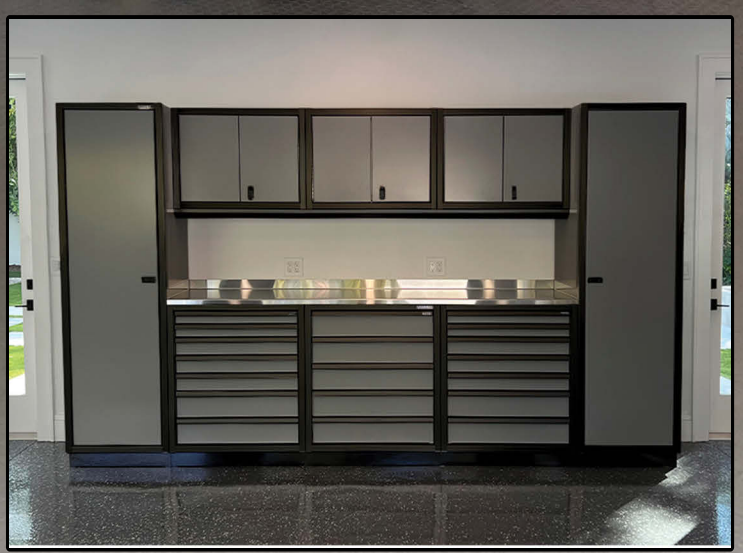

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Thanks to these two tanks he received as gifts from the King of Jordan, Jay Leno is armed and ready to defend Los Angeles from invasion.

daughters have gone "automatic," my son still drives a stick.
Marshall Stewart Fort Worth, TX

I learned to drive a manual in a 1970 Ford Maverick. I still flash back to the intersection of FM-1171 and Garden Ridge Road in Lewisville, Texas. It was 1977 and I was a junior in high school. I must have stalled out five times trying to turn left. My friend visiting from Cincinnati slid onto the floorboard to hide even though she didn't know anyone in town.
Stephanie Laubacher Highland Village, TX

ARMORED WEASEL

Jay Leno's article on his Ferret armored car ("Tanks From a King," January/February 2026, page 16) brought back memories for me of 1964. During my service in the South African army, I was a Ferret driver. For an armored vehicle, it had good performance—it could go over 50 mph through a five-speed gearbox, which was attached to a transfer case for reverse, so one could theoretically also drive over 50 mph in reverse, using five gears. (I never tried that!) We certainly considered the Ferret to be the sports car of the armored corps!
Stuart Clark Carlsbad, CA

DAVE IS RIGHT

I found the January/February 2026 issue very enlightening, particularly Dave Kinney's piece, "State of Play," on page 100. I have had a passion for cars from an early age, thanks to my dad's hobby of restoring antique cars. Some of his projects included a 1911 Kelsey Motorette, a 1913 Hudson Speedster, a 1907 Maxwell, a 1916 Stanley Steamer, and a 1910 Ford Model T. Once he completed a car, he had little interest in it. I, on the other hand, loved to drive them and take them to car meets all through the Northeast, including the big one at Hershey in the fall. Classic cars need to be driven! The public needs to see these cars on the road to appreciate how the automobile has evolved. Hopefully that will help our younger generation take interest in classic cars. I am concerned that these classics and antiques will rust away from apathy and disuse.
Howard Zlotoff Grantham, PA

I completely agree with Dave Kinney: Buy cars to enjoy them. I have a '73 911 I bought in '83 when it was merely an old, long-hood Porsche. I had a bare-metal repaint of the original color done in '84 and then just enjoyed the hobby. My 911 is probably worth nine times what I paid for it, but that's not why I bought it. Bob Lutz once said: Buy what you like, keep what you love. I had my garage expanded so our family could keep more of what we love. The family household collection is currently 10 cars, and we drive them. Cars are to be driven and enjoyed, not passed from pillar to post purely for profit.
Doug Wright North Royalton, OH

PAINT PAINS

As a professional painter, I cringe at the idea of finishing paint with a SPRAY BOMB! ("Garage Life," January/February 2026, page 121). That is exactly what these instruments are: A BOMB! They only end up making a mess and a bomb out of your project! Spend a little money and rent or buy a small cup gun and a lightweight compressor. There are YouTube tutorials on the fine art of spray painting and prep. Do it once and do it right. Leave the rattle cans to the graffiti guys. They are not meant for spraying cars—or anything else, for that matter!
A.H. Lloyd London, ON

The January/February 2026 issue contains an error. The story refers to the Mazda Miata's color as a "brilliant" British Racing Green, but there is no such color as per official Mazda records. Years 1999 through 2005 offered three shades of green: Splash Green Mica, Nordic Green Mica, and Emerald Mica. The NB you featured is Emerald Mica. I own a 2002 Miata in this exact color. I bought my car in 2022. Happy to see that its value has doubled since I bought it.
Dave Bouvier San Antonio, TX

WRITE US

We love hearing from you.
Write to us at
editor@hagerty.com

Photo courtesy of Jay Leno

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LIVING LEGEND

Pete Brock has lived and worked through some of the most fascinating periods of American automotive and racing history. Join us for a chat and a tour of his shop.



THE PETE BROCK INTERVIEW

Sitting down with the automotive design legend, still going strong.

Words and Video by
Larry Webster

PETE BROCK'S career has encompassed everything from Corvette designer, racing-school pioneer, creative genius of the Shelby Daytona Coupe, and race-team owner to hang gliding entrepreneur, writer, and photographer. Brock is an inventive and inquisitive man who steadfastly follows wherever his curious mind wants to go. I've known Brock for years, and recently, I finally got a chance to sit down with him for a deep conversation about his long and productive career.

For our talk, I traveled to Las Vegas, the home of Brock Racing Enterprises and also the factory where Brock and his wife, Gayle, run their latest venture, the Aerovault trailer company. About 20 years ago, Brock found himself unsatisfied with conventional enclosed car haulers. Curious problem-solver that he is, he designed and built his own. Enough friends asked him to produce copies that he and Gayle started a company to manufacture and sell them. Aerovault was incorporated in 2008. I completely understand Brock's motivations here since I regularly haul race cars with a 22-foot conventional box trailer hooked to a light-duty pickup.

Brock, at 89 years old, is not slowing down. There's a section in his shop where he has sculpted a clay model of a new car, an evolution of the Daytona Coupe that he'll produce and sell this year. He also showed us around the Datsun 510 that he drove in the 1968 Mexican 1000, the race that's now called the Baja 1000.

As you can see, we had lots to talk about, and I truly enjoyed our conversation. I hope you do, too. *H* lwebster@hagerty.com

MEMBER STORIES

FROM THE HAGERTY DRIVERS CLUB



01

MARC WILLIAMS

CHARLOTTE, NORTH CAROLINA MEMBER SINCE 2004

1965 CHEVROLET CORVETTE

After countless hours of sleuthing, Williams was able to confirm that his Corvette coupe was once owned by astronaut Gus Grissom.

IN THE SPRING OF 1999, a friend of my father's mentioned a neighbor who needed to sell a 1965 Glen Green Corvette coupe. My dad and I went to look at it that Saturday. The car was completely disassembled, with parts scattered in boxes all over the garage. After a quick look, we left, unsure what to think. Dad called the seller back and asked him to gather as many parts as possible. We returned the following week. Most of the car was there—still in pieces, but present—and we struck a deal. The next Saturday, we showed up with two pickup trucks and a trailer to haul everything home. While loading parts, the seller casually said, "Oh, I forgot to mention—this was one of the astronaut cars." We assumed it was just a sales pitch and didn't think much of it. We brought the car to my dad's place and inventoried everything. Then it sat for almost five years.

When we bought the car, the seller had already done some previous-owner research and gave us what he had. He had also cleaned—or "sanitized," as he put it—several original parts. One day, I was digging through a box of unsanitized parts and came across the original AM/FM radio, dusty with a piece of old masking tape stuck to the top. Under the dust, written in faded ink, was a single word: "GRISSOM." The seller had never mentioned it, but the handwriting was clearly old. That was the moment we started wondering if our Corvette was owned by Project Gemini and Apollo astronaut Gus Grissom. The quest for more information began.

This was before the existence of the National Corvette Restorers Society (NCRS) Shipping Data Report program, which provides the dealer code, dealer name, dealer address, and the date the car was produced. All I had was a Corvette, a name on a radio, and hope. My wife, Gina, helped enormously. She called Jim Rathmann Chevrolet, the Florida dealership responsible for the program that allowed astronauts to lease Corvettes for $1 a year, which led to an in-person meeting with Rathmann himself in late 2000. He generously spent several hours discussing the astronaut Corvette lease program. He had a folder of many, though not all, astronaut order forms. Mine wasn't in it, but he did give us contact information for Grissom's son, Scott.

Through calls and emails, Scott told me about the many Corvettes his father owned, most important a 1965 Glen Green coupe equipped with the 365-hp

Photos by Cameron Neveu


400TH ANNIVERSARY 65
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FLORIDA







Opposite top: A period photo of Gus Grissom in his Glen Green coupe.

Middle: Grissom did not check the box for the optional Kelsey Hayes knockoff wheels. The spinners on the base wheel covers are purely decorative.

Bottom: Williams poses with his father, who gifted him Grissom's Corvette for Christmas.

327-cubic-inch V-8 and air conditioning. His dad loved horsepower. When I asked why he didn't order the more powerful fuel-injected engine, I learned that the 365-hp engine was the most powerful Corvette equipped with air conditioning—essential for the Florida heat. My car carries the 3.55 ratio Positraction rear end that Scott remembered as well.

My confidence grew as the pieces came together. The NCRS Shipping Data Report eventually confirmed that my car was delivered new to Jim Rathmann Chevrolet. I found a 1965 German news segment shot in Houston, showing Gus's '65 parked in his driveway with a Florida plate. I also found a photo online of Grissom in his '65 at a communications test at Cape Canaveral on January 6, 1965. On the windshield was a strip of masking tape with the number 249 written on it.

That number rang a bell. Among the documents the previous owner provided was a photo of my car's firewall with the digits 249 33 written in white paint. At first, I didn't know if it was a job number or a zone code. Then I revisited the German news segment: The Florida plate read 2-49333. The 2 stood for Duval County, home of Chevrolet's Florida zone office in Jacksonville. It became increasingly clear that this was his car; five of the six plate digits matched, the color and options were the same, the VIN matched, it was delivered to Rathmann, and Grissom's name was on the radio.

One more piece of the puzzle: The car spent a lot of its years in and around Huntsville, Alabama, the home of many NASA contractors. We received a list of all the previous owners from the gentleman Dad bought the car from. I decided one evening to call a few numbers on the list. First one was to a Mr. Dickey Sledge. A lady answered the phone, and I asked to speak to Mr. Sledge. She sadly replied that he had passed away the previous November, but perhaps she could help me. I asked her about a Corvette he had owned, and she said that he had owned many. I said it was a 1965 Glen









Green coupe, and she replied, "Oh, Gus Grissom's car." She added that he regretted selling that Corvette.

During all this research, I had convinced my dad to let me begin a full frame-off restoration—backed by my own time and money—with the hope that one day I could buy the car from him. From 2004 to 2007, I asked him occasionally if he'd sell it. His answer was always, "Nope. Not ready."

The restoration continued. On Christmas Eve 2007, our whole family gathered at my parents' home as always. When gifts were distributed, all I got was a single white envelope with "MARC" written on it. Inside was a smaller envelope labeled Season's Greetings—and inside that, a slip of paper:

"Your Gift! 1 – 1965 Glen Green Corvette"

—Santa & Mrs. Claus

I was speechless. I still am. The astronauts may have had a sweet deal on Corvettes, but unbelievably, mine ended up being even better. *H*



02

RICHARD HARRIS

GREENVILLE, TEXAS

MEMBER SINCE 2022

1968 FORD MUSTANG

THIS STORY IS ABOUT a 1968 Ford Mustang, but it's really about my grandfather. Ronald Hoak, whom I call Papa, lives in Rochester, New York, and was an engineer for Kodak. He has always enjoyed collecting and tinkering with cars.

Around the turn of the millennium (when I was just a toddler), Papa stumbled across this Mustang. It was a pathetic shell that had not been on the road since 1984. He offered $2000, and the seller agreed. Growing up, I visited my grandparents—and thus the Mustang—every summer. By 2008, when I was 10, the car was on a giant rotisserie so Papa could sandblast the old paint and rust. He grabbed the driver's seat, and we bolted it into the chassis so I could sit and pretend to race. This sparked my interest—and, I think, motivated my grandfather to turn it into a grandfather/grandson project.

My summers became all about the Mustang. In 2011 and 2012, we dropped in the engine and transmission. In 2014 and 2015, we started to get the body panels together.

When it was time to paint, Papa asked, "What color do you want it, Richie?" Blue has always been my favorite color, so Papa searched the old Ford color codes and landed on Acapulco Blue. He sprayed it with the help of my uncle, Brian.

I graduated from high school and started college, but summers continued to be for our project. We ordered new interior parts—carpets, headliner, dashboard, the whole nine yards. I also cleaned decades of dirt and dust from the white vinyl roof.

Summer 2018: Time to fire up Susie the Blue Mustang (as I'd taken to calling it, inspired by the old Disney animated film, *Susie the Little Blue Coupe*). After sorting the fuel system, ignition, and the carburetor, we turned over the old V-8 and—nothing. But after a few minutes of cranking, the V-8 roared to life. Susie needed a lot of work, but she was finally on the road. The following years, Papa and I upgraded the radiator and electric fan, got the air conditioning working, installed a new Holley carburetor, and repaired various lights and electronics.

By 2021, I was finishing college and had secured a job as an electrical engineer in Texas. My grandfather and my parents trailered the Mustang down to live with me. I was excited, but on my first drive, I felt something was missing—my grandfather in the passenger seat. Papa has taught me a great deal about cars and an even greater level of wisdom and life lessons.

Harris grew up spending his summers helping his grandfather restore a 1968 Ford Mustang.





Photos courtesy of Richard Harris




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03

KYLE PACKARD

SLATINGTON, PENNSYLVANIA MEMBER SINCE 2018

1949 PACKARD SUPER EIGHT

After years of searching for the right Super Eight, Packard finally found a car that shared his name.

THE PACKARD Motor Car Company's slogan was "Ask the man who owns one." Although it has been decades since anyone has been able to buy a Packard off the showroom floor, it's still possible to own one of these incredible luxury cars.

I had spent five years seeking one, partly because of my family name—who wouldn't think it's perfect for someone with the last name Packard to drive a Packard? This 1949 Packard Super Eight, located not far from us in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, popped up in June 2022, advertised as a package deal with a 1950 parts car.

It needed some TLC. A nonworking generator was replaced with an alternator. Rocker panels were included with the sale but had to be installed on the car. I added a 22-inch windshield visor (purchased at the Gasket Goons car show in Hellertown, Pennsylvania) and, last but not least, fabricated wood kickplates engraved with the name of the car and owner: Packard.

I now drive it anywhere within a 50-mile radius. Not many Packards roll into car shows these days, but I hear plenty of stories from former owners. They are built like a tank—you can feel it when you close the doors—and the engine is immense. It's quite a challenge to drive, but I am used to the size, having owned a few Lincoln Continentals.

Aside from the sentimental connection to our last name, I can see why people fell in love with these cars. They were distinguished even in their day, and all the more so now.



Photo courtesy of Kyle Packard



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04

MARGARET CANCELMI

BYRON, NEW YORK

MEMBER SINCE 2024

1964 BUICK LESABRE

Most couples surprise each other with chocolates or flowers, but Cancelmi's husband gifted her a Sunburst Yellow 1964 Buick LeSabre instead.

I WASN'T LOOKING for a car when I was walking through the Syracuse Nationals in July 2022. But then I spotted a Camelot Rose 1962 Buick Skylark with an Arctic White hard top for sale. I was in love, but my mechanic husband wasn't so impressed. He was positive it was too small and suggested I should look for something bigger. Slightly crestfallen, I left my new love there and began my search with earnest enthusiasm. After much research, I realized what I really wanted was a 1964 LeSabre four-door. I searched for a few years and found some frame-off restorations across the country, but none of them met my husband's approval.

One day in April 2024, he called and said, "I have a present for you." The next thing I know, a trailer pulled into the driveway loaded with the most beautiful thing I have ever seen in my entire life: a Sunburst Yellow 1964 Buick LeSabre four-door sedan. I was in shock—it was as if angels were singing and heaven had sent it to me. After all my searching, my husband found the LeSabre only an hour from home.

While my new LeSabre was complete cosmetically, it needed a few mechanical things taken care of before I could take it out on the road. We upgraded the front brakes to discs, added new wheels, and paid some attention to the engine bay.

It was in remarkable condition considering the Buick is 60 years old. The previous owner had, at some point, done quite the undercoating job, so there is no rust. It also helps that it had not been driven on the heavily salted western New York roads since 1978. I'm looking forward to more adventures and cruising the back roads with my LeSabre, because it really turns heads.

Photo by Cathy Fraser


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MIKE SMITH

ABBOTSFORD, BRITISH COLUMBIA

1966 PLYMOUTH FURY III

I found this beautiful 1966 Plymouth Fury III in Sooke on Vancouver Island. The previous owner took five years to restore it and put about $50,000 into it. Unfortunately, he passed away not too long after he finished the Plymouth. His wife and daughters adopted the car for a while and took great care of it before I bought it. Other than a failed distributor that left me stranded on Vancouver Island during the drive back home, I've had zero issues with the Fury. On nice days, I've been taking my wife and child for Sunday drives to get ice cream.





PAUL BIGNARDI

SAN MATEO, CALIFORNIA

1975 FORD BRONCO

After coming into a few dollars in 2009, I decided to buy an old car for fun. I found a red 1975 Bronco that looked a lot like the one I owned in the 1990s. I sent the owner an email including the old license plate tags, and he confirmed that it was the same truck. I worked out a deal, and a few hours later, I owned the Bronco again. When I opened the door and swung into the driver's seat, it felt like a time warp. It is still a blast to drive, but I won't lie, it isn't as comfortable for long cruises now that I am 30 years older.





SCOTT PINNIX

POMPTON LAKES, NEW JERSEY

2006 CADILLAC XLR-V

In early 2020, I was looking for a fun car and I stumbled upon an online listing for a one-owner Cadillac XLR-V with under 50,000 miles. I had been a fan of the Corvette-based Caddy since it came out, especially the supercharged V model. The price was right, so I called the dealership, put down a deposit, and had the car shipped from Florida. I met the vendor at 4 a.m. in the Vince Lombardi rest stop on the New Jersey Turnpike. He unloaded the trailer, and I slid behind the wheel of my dreams from 15 years ago.

Photos courtesy of respective members

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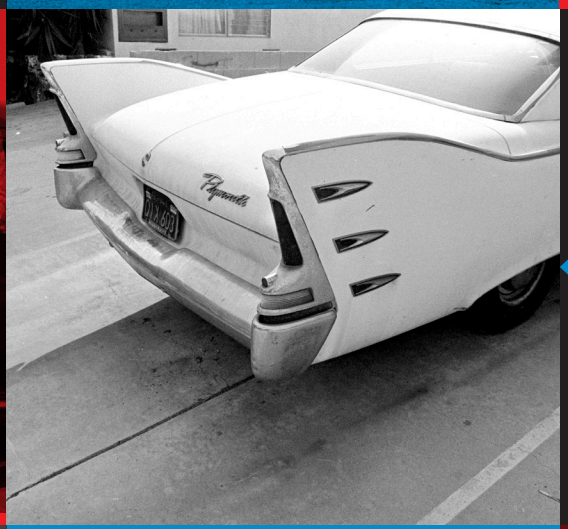


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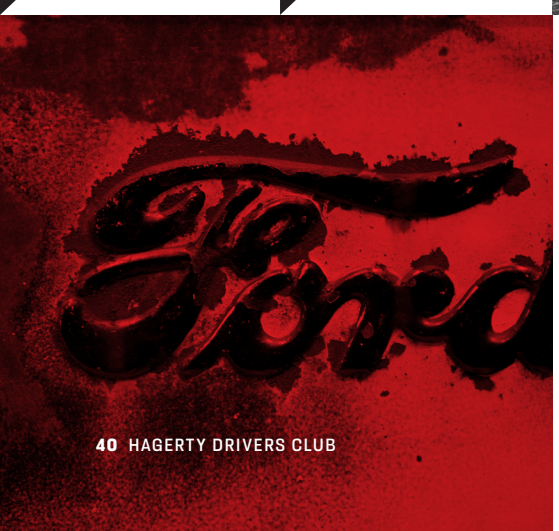
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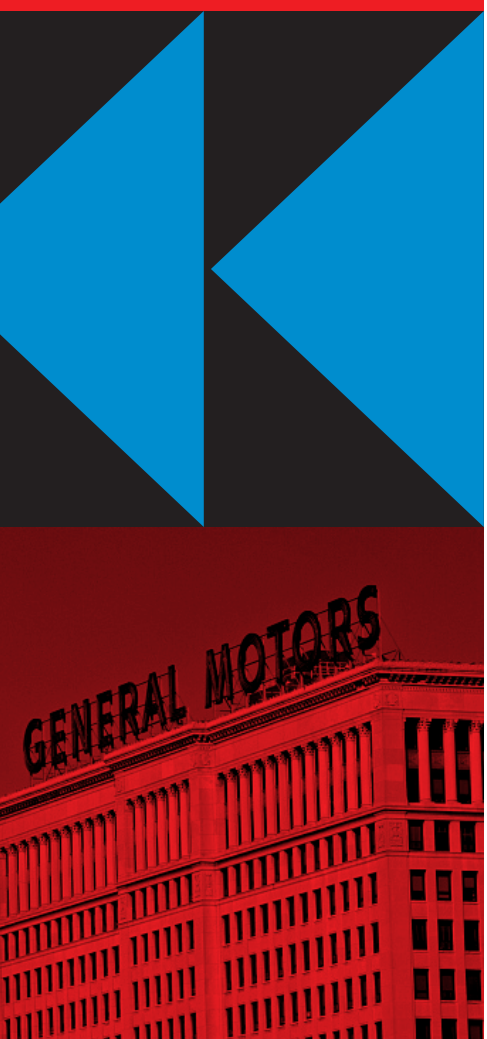




THE AMERICA ISSUE

What Makes a Car an American Car?

BAR BETS FROM Pawtucket to Pismo Beach can be won with this simple question: What is the most American of vehicles in model-year 2026, as determined by the national origin of the parts and, by extension, of the taxpaying, grocery buying, family raising, mortgage-shouldering labor? Bet big and watch the jaws slacken when you answer the Honda Ridgeline, assembled in Alabama with engines from Alabama and transmissions from Georgia and Ohio.

OK, it's actually a tie between the Ridgeline and the Tesla Model 3, both of which have 75 percent U.S. or Canadian content. The Ford F-150? 45 percent. The Chevy Corvette? 39 percent, according to the annual report by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, charged with compiling such stats.

Today, our heated national conversation about what it means to be an American citizen

Nowadays, an "American" car is a **rolling United Nations**.

has spun off a side debate about what it means to be an American car. Back in Eisenhower's day, an era of greater clarity on so many levels, it was an easy equation: Our cars had fins and chrome and plenty of road-hugging weight wafted effortlessly by V-8 engines. Their cars were tiny and sputtery and driven by college professors and counterculture bohemians. Today if you ask the average American the question, "What defines an American car?" you're likely to still get references to fins and chrome and roaring V-8s.

All of those attributes are definitely American, as are: hatchbacks, six-pack Hemis, fake landau bars, turbo fours, four-on-the-floor shifters, 8-foot load beds, fold-flat captain's chairs, vinyl roofs, lithium-ion battery packs, side pipes, opera windows, and rich Corinthian leather. In fact, what best defines the American car isn't any particular design or engineering trait. More than the cars of any other nation, our cars are mirrors that reflect back on us in perfect die-cast, cold-forged, and hot-stamped detail who we are and who we want to be. And they've been doing it for a century.

The fledgling automobile began to fully separate from the carriage and develop its own unique design language in the 1920s. Tall grilles, long hoods, low rooflines, and large wheels were pioneered by early independent coachbuilders like Brewster & Co. of New York as totems for speed, power, and prestige, design cues that are still with us a hundred years later. Annual model changes, a uniquely American phenomenon, were initiated to keep the automobile at the pointy tip of fashion and give the customer a reason to trade in.

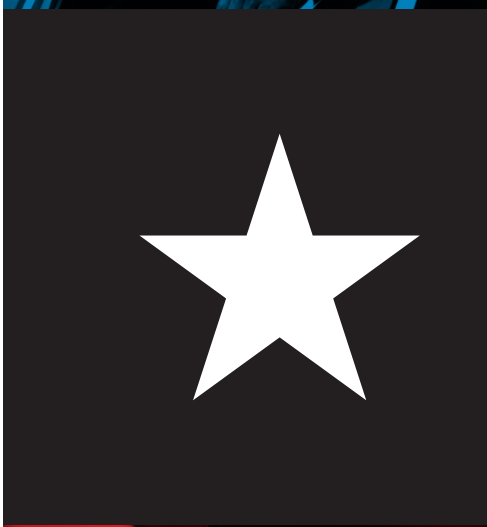
Consider that the Germans, long vaunted for their advanced technology, built essentially the same car, the Volkswagen Beetle, for more than 60 years. Britain's MGB was an alluring sex kitten when it debuted in 1962, a tired antique when it finally expired in 1980. In those same intervening decades, the American car was repeatedly reinvented from the ground up, morphing from art deco streamliners to finned behemoths to muscular heartthrobs to front-drive compacts. As America changed, so did its vehicles.

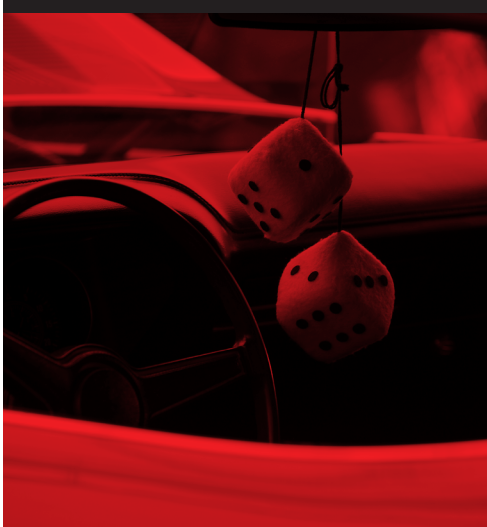
Harley Earl and Virgil Exner molded tailfins and chrome rockets on their cars because America was highly optimistic about its science-fiction future. Fins then disappeared after the Russians put up Sputnik and America was shamed for its rococo fakery, ushering in a more sensible era of straight lines and honest forms. The original Ford Mustang was a hit not because of the sexy 289s or Shelbys, but because single women entering the workforce wanted a stylish car and bought six-cylinder notchbacks in droves. The 1984 Chrysler minivan took off because young boomers were starting their families. Today, trucks dominate the market because they plainly speak American to Americans, being big in a big country, tough in a nation that is nostalgic for its rugged, pioneering past, and seemingly trustworthy at a time when people are desperate for heroes.

Compared with the rest of the world, we've been on high-speed evolution, automotively speaking, the car changing in sync with our dynamic, ever-changing society. Nowadays, an "American" car is a rolling United Nations, using parts from all over the world engineered by people from all over the world, once again reflecting America and its increasing diversity. The Honda Ridgeline is ours as much as the Corvette and the Camry. The U.S. auto industry including the transplanted foreign brands can't exist as an island, and to survive, it now has to build world cars with global appeal. As always, our cars keep rolling with the times.

Aaron Robinson arobinson@hagerty.com









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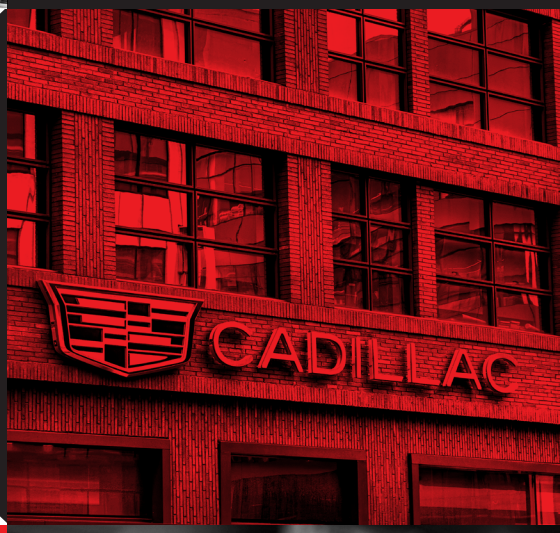
CADILLAC













LIGHTING THE FIRE

This split-window Corvette is a multigenerational gift from America.

Words by **John L. Stein**
Photos by **Andrew Trahan**





ON A TUESDAY AFTERNOON LAST WINTER

at the lowest point in North America shimmered a vast, white moonscape called Badwater Basin. Lying just behind an idling 1963 Corvette Sting Ray, it is the very bottom of Death Valley in California's eastern desert, a place so inhospitable that its chief ingredient is not even mud, or cacti, or spiders, but salt. That Badwater Basin is only 195 lineal miles from our starting point on the Pacific Ocean in Santa Barbara, the self-proclaimed "American Riviera" and billionaire haven, just adds to the shock and awe. From waves and wahines to the hottest place on Earth in arguably the sexiest American car ever built in one easy, epic drive. That's California dreamin' for you.

The product of eons of storm runoff from the Black Mountains, Badwater Basin grew one bitter layer at a time to form a vast salt flat, its surface cracked and sharp, corrosive, and testy until the next flood drowns it in another mineral bath. There is no sound here, not a whisper of wind nor a squawking bird nor a scuttling lizard. If you shut your eyes, standing here is as close to being in a deprivation chamber as you can get. Except for one thing: that raspy motor of the fuel-injected coupe parked nearby, which has just completed a 370-mile drive on wandering two-lanes from the coast.

REFLECTING NATIONAL optimism, Chevrolet built 21,513 new 1963 Sting Rays starting in late 1962. Like the shape much? To implode your mind, consider the design debuted barely 17 years after World War II ended, and JFK was president. The cars were assembled at the GM plant in St. Louis, Missouri, and dispatched to dealers nationwide, often by railroad. Of the '63 Sting Rays built, 49 percent or 10,594 were coupes, and an estimated 12 percent of those had the fuel-injected L84 engine of our subject car. Producing an advertised 360 horsepower, it was the highest-output auto engine GM had ever offered, and it resided under the forward-hinged hood of a 3000-pound spaceship now fondly known as the split-window coupe. Bold and decisive, emphatic and confident, the split-window didn't ask permission and didn't apologize. A period print ad promised "Instant celebrity." As we learned, that's still true today.

But that first Corvette coupe rode a choppy undercurrent, as its divided backlight and confounding mechanical fuel injection made it embattled from day one. The model was on what philosopher Joseph Campbell called the "hero's journey" from the start, where innate drive and talent are tripped by circumstances and foibles, before reaping victory through resolve. Of the estimated 1270 fuel-injected split-window coupes built, if 50 percent survived, a mere 635 genuine ones remain today. And on this otherwise quiet weekday, just one of those crossed Death Valley.

Contrasting today's look-alike new cars, homogenized by regulations, the chrome-bumpered, sharp-edged Sting Ray stands out like a cutlass among picnic cutlery. This was true at its debut and is doubly so now. While we paused to take in the sweeping majesty of Badwater Basin, the afternoon light reflecting bright as a searchlight into the brooding clouds above, a soft presence caught my attention. It was Huang, a tourist from China who had paused while passing by in his rental car. He quietly stood at my shoulder, studying the Corvette.

"Hi, how are you?" I asked. "Do you like Corvettes?"

No response, just a kind smile. Huang knew little English, but his focus revealed real fascination with the Sting Ray. Perhaps societal norms kept him from stepping closer without an invitation, so I initiated one.



"Come on, let's see it," I said.

He readily accepted, walking in quick steps toward the car.

"Do you know the Sting Ray?" I queried, seeking a baseline.

"No, no," Huang answered.

Still probing, I pointed to the die-cast Corvette and STING RAY emblems at the rear and tried again. "1963 Corvette Sting Ray, made by Chevrolet."

"No," he repeated. "In China, we have only China cars."

I was beginning to understand. "What do you like about it?" I asked.

Huang's answer stopped me cold. "America cool," he said with a grin. I borrowed his phone to take a photo of him posing beside the car, hand on the roof like he had landed a record billfish.

He then politely saluted, said thanks, and was gone. America cool, indeed.

SIXTY-THREE YEARS AGO, on October 14, 1962, to be precise, I experienced my own Sting Ray epiphany. The location was Riverside International Raceway, where as a child I had attended the Los Angeles Times Grand Prix in warm SoCal. Before the upcoming main event (won by a youthful Roger Penske), various support races and parade laps occurred. In one, a Tuxedo Black fuel-injected roadster and a Sebring Silver split-window coupe danced through the esses and past the Turn 6 grandstand. I'd never seen a Sting Ray before, but these apparitions looked like *Buck Rogers* rocket ships to me. They apparently had no headlights. Their body forms were knife-edged instead of bulky, and more F-4 Phantom than car. And they were way smaller than the Fords, the Plymouths, and the DeSotos that populated our neighborhood. I was smitten, my imagination bitten.

Though I could well relate to Huang's excitement seeing a Sting Ray for the first time, it took me from October '62 until 2025 to finally buy a '63 Corvette of my own. This one had belonged to my lawyer friend Greg Young, who used it (along with a Mercedes-Benz 300SL Gullwing and a four-cam Porsche 356A Carrera Speedster) as daily drivers for decades. During much of this time, he didn't even own a "modern" car. Young was all-in on living the classic car life, and he did it beautifully. None had air conditioning, power steering, or brakes. Occasionally sweating and always gracefully accepting the noise and inconvenience, he drove from coast to coast, in the country and city, and even let friends borrow them.

In early 2000, Young lent this Sting Ray and his Gullwing to a magazine I led at the time, Chevrolet Motor Division's *Corvette Quarterly*. I'd conceptualized a cover story called "Grand Touring," in which the split-window joined the Mercedes, a Ferrari 250 GT Lusso, an Aston Martin DB4, and a new Corvette C5 convertible, from Santa Barbara to Death Valley. At the time, with a growing family and a chunky mortgage, I had no shot at buying any such cars. And the notion of

With morning light splashing the Pacific, Derek Stein and the author ponder their trip of a lifetime—driving a '63 Fuelie into the unknown.





Above: Rochester fuel injection still represents superb engineering. Above right: Alloy wheels and BFG Radial T/As from Tire Rack pair up.

eventually owning this exact split-window was so far out of mind, it was cosmic fairy dust.

This early ’63 Fuelie featured a manual transmission, manual steering and brakes, leather upholstery, power windows, and an AM radio. Its October 17, 1962, production and dispatch to Los Angeles was soon after John Glenn had orbited Earth in his *Friendship 7* capsule and right as the Cuban Missile Crisis threatened nuclear war. The next year, Jimmy Clark would race at Indy as the rear-engine revolution shook the Brickyard, and ZIP codes would be invented. Wild times in America.

Young acquired the Corvette in the 1990s the old-fashioned way. Since websites basically didn’t exist yet, he found it in the *Trade Express*, a freebie local circular. When he went to see it, the Corvette was parked in the driveway of a modest California ranch house a few blocks from the cliffs and, below them, a rocky beach and restless shore-break. He bought it. Soon, Young removed the original steel wheels and one-year-only wheel covers, complex affairs made of 13 separate parts, in favor of alloy turbine wheels. Comically, years later, a story emerged of Young’s gardener “liberating” the covers and installing the rare pieces on his pickup. Somewhere on the California coast rides one fine-looking C-10.

NOW CARETAKER of this car, I’ll admit that it doesn’t entirely feel right. I must balance the joy of fulfilling decades of longing for a split-window with the nagging sense that this is really Young’s car, that I somehow don’t deserve it, and even that it represents stolen valor. To this point, I owe catastrophe some appreciation. When the Palisades Fire destroyed that community in 2025, it claimed a motorcycle collection I had stored there. After Hagerty paid up, I locked the money in a CD to earn some interest, but moreover to keep from spending it. Serendipitously, the Corvette became available days before that CD matured. After so long, well, longing for one, I had to do it. I just never believed it would be this nice, and a Fuelie too. Only a few times in my life as a motorcycle and car guy have I opened the garage door to check that I really do own something, and to behold that thing. The Sting Ray is the new champion of this compulsion. Perhaps I’ll eventually think of it as my car rather than Young’s, and that I deserve it. But until then, my friends, I’ll wear the emperor’s clothes and pretend.

Admittedly I was nervous before departing for Death Valley, since all test drives had been local only and involved regular efforts to fine-tune the fuel injection. The 1957–65 Rochester system was optional on various small-block V-8s from Pontiac and Chevy, the most famous being Corvette. Marketed as “Ramjet,” GM presented fuel injection as akin to the jet engines energizing commercial aviation at the time. Of course, Ramjet was not a jet engine at all, but a pressurized fuel-delivery system that replaced the carburetor.

In a traditional V-8 (327 cubic inches in the case of the ’63 Corvette), a mechanical fuel pump fills the carburetor float bowl, and vacuum created by the pistons’ intake stroke draws it into the combustion chambers,

naturally atomized in air. Such systems are effective, but they can't self-adjust for altitude, air temperature or density, they don't distribute fuel to cylinders individually, and they require an accelerator pump to respond to quick throttle openings. In contrast, Ramjet injects fuel directly into the intake ports via a high-pressure pump and a network of copper tubes, soldered together in an eight-legged "spider." Employing an array of diaphragms, levers, tubes, rods, check valves, and a drive cable, the system is a masterpiece of mid-century engineering. It's also 100 percent mechanical—no computers, wires, or electronics.

It's also perplexing to the uninitiated. The Lord Voldemort of Fuelie components is a cranking signal valve, useful for startups. Since the Rochester system doesn't have an accelerator pump, you can't punch the gas pedal to richen the mixture for starting. So the cranking signal valve uses the weak vacuum developed by the engine at cranking speed to prompt the high-pressure pump to send more fuel into the spider. Fuelie gossip has it that cranking signal valves "break bad" without notice, causing the motor to run full-rich full time. Thus, precautionarily before the trip I replaced both diaphragms and the cranking signal valve, available new from specialty Rochester injection experts. Along with installing a set of white-letter BFGoodrich Radial T/A tires courtesy of Tire Rack, that was effort well spent. After nearly 400 miles on this trip, the long-dormant split-window was a pretty happy warrior.

ON A BENIGN California coastal morning, the split-window sat with its sharklike nose in a gentle breeze. A quarter-century had passed since I'd joined Young in the same car, targeting the same destination. He was in midcareer, I was still climbing the professional ladder, and I'd left my young son Derek with his mom. Now here I was in the same car, only it was my turn to shepherd a younger person. Fastening the lap belt, I hoped to excel at it. I knew Derek would be watching—and learning. After encountering a 1963 Sting Ray for the first time, he remarked, "This is a really beautiful car. I've never seen one in person before—only pictures, and they don't do it justice."

For the best drive experience, I'd sought two-lanes from Santa Barbara all the way to Death Valley. These began with a historic route under oaks and towering eucalyptus, their long shadows reminiscent of the strident Ents in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Its solid lifters chattering like a 1960s secretarial typing pool, the 327's creamy torque carried us easily up, around, and down the endless twists, turns, rises, and drops of this bucolic backroad. Coupled with a manual transmission, the powertrain lacks for precisely nothing today; in 1963, it would have been transcendent.

While purchasing the car, I'd initially felt some disappointment that it didn't have options like power





Top: Money shot! In Corvette's 73-year history, there is but one split-window.
Above: Climbing inland, the 327 rumbles through a tunnel in the coastal range.

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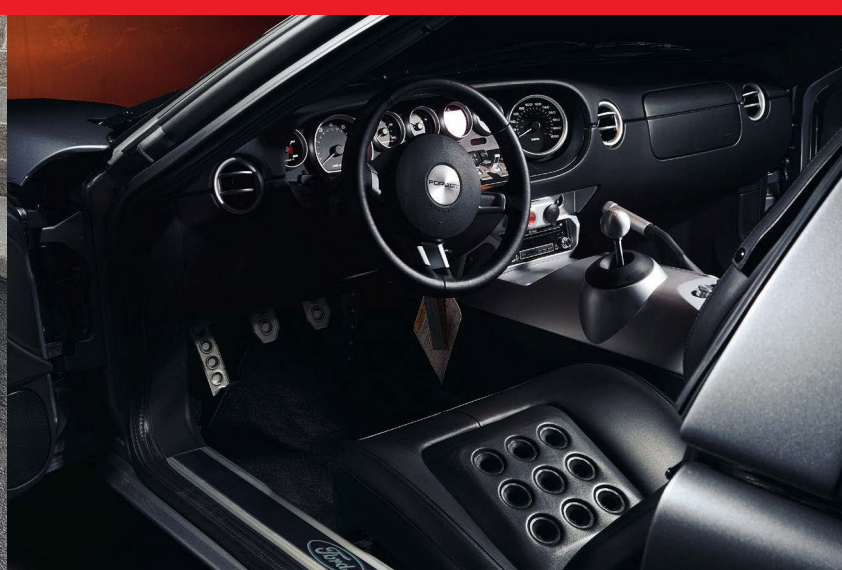

THIS LITTLE MOUSE MOTOR IS AGREEABLE AND ENERGETIC TO A FAULT.







steering or brakes. But now I'm glad that it doesn't. The steering is plenty light, and direct, and the four-wheel manual drums provide ample power and a pleasing pedal feel. This combination, taken in whole with the injected engine, makes an authentic driver's car. If you will, piloting it puts you inside GM design boss Bill Mitchell and Corvette engineer Zora Arkus-Duntov's personal visions.

This recalls a 1962 promotional film about the new Sting Ray, filmed at GM's Milford Proving Ground using racing drivers Dr. Dick Thompson and young hotshoe Dave MacDonald. In the film, the drivers hustled the new coupe and convertible around a road course and banked oval before being interviewed by Arkus-Duntov, his thick Russian accent blanketing the conversation like sour cream poured over beef stroganoff. "Dick, what do you think about acceleration and traction?" and "Dave, what do you think of inside of the car?" Surprise! The racers praised the advancements over the outgoing "solid axle" Corvette platform.

Coincidentally, Santa Barbara has a Sting Ray connection. Bob Bondurant drove one of the first of 199 hallowed Z06 cars here from the plant in late 1962, where race car builder Bob Joehnck prepped it for history's first Corvette vs. Cobra battle, a three-hour production race at Riverside on October 13. According to local lore, Bondurant arrived late at the Washburn Chevrolet dealership after stopping to enjoy the social scene (i.e., "chase women") in Hollywood, and when he finally made it, the glovebox was full of speeding tickets.

Later, in race trim, this same Z06 was the first known race car to use telemetry, as aerospace engineer Jack Ring created a system using an ignition transducer, a transmitter, a military receiver, and a paper recorder. In real time, this produced a record of engine speed everywhere on Santa Barbara's airport road course. The legwork for this occurred at Joehnck's shop, just 2 miles from the beach parking lot where we began our Death Valley trip. Yes, the Sting Ray was forged during the Cold War. Yes, America was being rocked by political and social upheaval. And yet, given how the world has evolved, now it seems like the most innocent of times. I wanted to experience and honor all of it.

OUR COMMITMENT to two-lanes meant vectoring from Santa Barbara into the coastal range, swinging through artsy Ojai, and then accelerating up magnificent State Route 33 toward its 5080-foot summit at Pine Mountain. On this route, the flora morphs from sage and oaks to pines, and the sandstone faces of

Make that Half Way to Hell, perhaps? The Fuelie pauses in verdant Cuyama Valley, en route to literally the hottest place on Earth. Throttle up!

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Up and over. An intrepid Corvette makes the final push into Death Valley, where it had starred in GM's *Corvette Quarterly* magazine 25 years earlier.

the cliffs and road cutouts change from tawny yellow to marmalade. Occasionally, wedged adamantly into a rocky outcropping, a sturdy conifer stakes its claim, creating a real-life version of Disneyland's Big Thunder Mountain ride. Somewhere within its boughs, chickadees call. Despite the nearly mile-high ascent, the Corvette's 327 frankly didn't care. People seem to adore big-blocks, but this little mouse motor is agreeable and energetic to a fault. Pure sweetness.

The starting drill for a Fuelie is straightforward—at least in theory. When the motor is cold, you floor the pedal once to set the butterfly choke and fast-idle cam, then release the pedal and turn the key. The mechanical lift pump and high-pressure fuel pump both actuate, and if the cranking signal valve works right, a rich mixture is shoved through the tiny spider lines into the ports as the engine turns and its plugs fire. After just a few seconds, the engine lights off and attains a steady 1500-rpm idle.

Early Sting Rays used Borg-Warner T10 gearboxes. The throw from neutral to first is short, with medium lever effort and positive, gratifying mechanical feel. The clutch likewise requires medium pedal pressure, and the engagement is smooth, with occasional vibrating depending on conditions. First gear is realistically just for starting off, because the engine is torquey enough to never need it while driving. To catch second, notch the black cueball shift knob straight back 6 inches; the action is quick and direct, as is shoving forward and over to third. At this point, the morning air began rushing past the open windows and into a warm, comfy cabin. On the back roads leading to State Route 33 (which Hagerty named the best driving road in America in 2024), the Corvette was joyous.

The car is not quiet. There is engine, intake, and exhaust noise, as the big exhaust pipes run directly under the fiberglass body tub. The transmission whines in all but fourth gear. Wind claws at the window seals, and the newfangled independent suspension talks whenever it encounters a bump. But at speed, the steering is brisk and straightforward, a startling reminder that simple cars have wonderful souls. From the right seat, Derek summarized his inaugural Sting Ray ride. "I am impressed with how well it runs," he began. "And it is surprisingly comfortable—I honestly thought it would be more rough and choppy."

But oh, that split-window! Its central 18 inches of fiberglass and trim caused a turf war at Chevrolet, when Mitchell defended it as part of the Sting Ray's

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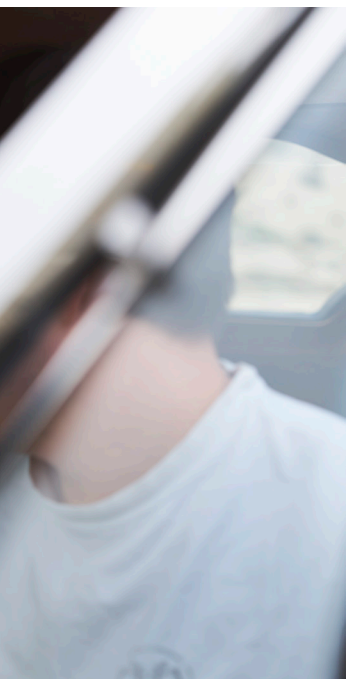



Scenes from a dream, clockwise from top left: V-8 thunder fleeing real thunder; nearing the bottom of North America; Derek's first Sting Ray drive; a man with a plan on the salt pan; gassing up in dystopian Trona.

raison d'être ("If you take that off, you might as well forget the whole thing," he had roared). Inspired by the Bugatti Type 57 Atlantic, it defined the Sting Ray body halves like the cartilaginous spine of a shark. However, Arkus-Duntov loathed it due to its occlusion of rearward vision. And the legendary spat between them reads like the Hatfields and McCoys. Considered from a driver's perspective today, the split-window does affect rearward visibility, as does the smallish driver's side mirror, which nestles close to the door. Ultimately, though, driving the split-window safely is not impossible, it just requires good situational awareness, i.e., keep your head on a swivel.

WITHIN TWO HOURS, we had crested fragrant Pine Mountain and started the long, serpentine glide into arid Cuyama Valley, where a generous aquifer makes carrot, pistachio, and apple crops thrive. So far, we had ranged from ocean to mountains to high desert in under 100 miles. Magic. And the Corvette was happy, that is except for a tricky hot start procedure, which I was still trying to master. (Pundits blame California's ethanol-laced gas.) From here, another hour of backroad cruising dragged us through Bakersfield, our only freeway stint. Known for 18-wheeler traffic, the segment tapped the Fuelie's midrange punch to jockey around the trucks and their swirling wakes.

Thanks to abundant winter rains, the verdant Kern River Canyon challenged Norway's fjords for beauty. Over the millennia, this steep gorge has provided key drainage for snowmelt of the Sierra Nevada, home of the largest trees on earth. Its walls are steeper than the Talladega banking and strewn with garage-sized granite boulders and loamy earth, which supports a wavy carpet of grasses. Deep in the gorge and alongside rushing Kern River, a two-lane road connects gritty Bakersfield with Lake Isabella, our trip's halfway point. The highway is fast and flowy, well traveled, and frankly scary.

The long climb gave the Corvette mill plenty of opportunity to overheat, but it refused. I honestly can't praise this motor enough. Compared with larger, later engines, there doesn't seem to be as much commotion under the hood, and the mill is strong over an impressive rev range. In hindsight, just like the original 1953 Corvette, the audacious '63 Sting Ray must have been a gamble at Chevrolet, but the year resulted in the highest production volume for the model yet. Pretty good results for a steel ladder frame, an iron V-8, plenty of passenger car chassis components, and a plastic body.

Our innkeeper that night bore a striking resemblance to Marty Feldman in *Young Frankenstein*, and further, announced that the motel had a peculiar history thanks to ongoing ghost sightings in various rooms. "Don't worry, though," she said. "Lucy doesn't bother the guys." Whatever that meant, we locked and chained the door.

Topping up the tank through the flip-up hatch under the backlight revealed the Corvette got just 13 mpg. Is that right for a Fuelie? I didn't know, but at speed, the car ran great. The next morning, passing iconic Joshua trees while edging into the desert toward Death Valley, Derek took the controls. Thanks to years with a 2019 Civic Si, he was well practiced at manual shifting—just not in a vintage Corvette. It was interesting to see him blip the throttle to get underway as he did with his 1.5-liter turbo or dirt bike. He soon learned that wasn't necessary with the 5.4-liter Chevy. Once underway, he had something to say about trying a split-window for the first time. "Easy-peasy," he said with a grin while accelerating through first and into second. "Responsive and smooth!"

SOMEDAY, YOU simply must drive through Trona, a living, breathing case study of a company town gone sour. Of course, this desert burg has plenty of company in the central and eastern U.S., but it's rare for California. Here, in the early 20th century, a mining concern began extracting valuable potash and soda ash from Searles Lake and built a bustling town around the operation. Atop a bleak, barren landscape, mazes of steel and concrete emerged, like an Erector Set of magnificent size. Pipes, towers, tanks, railroad tracks, hoppers, loaders, generators, stacks bellowing steam—it's a robust operation surrounded by volcanic mountains and wholly out of sight if you're anywhere but here. There were once homes, gas stations, diners, shops, schools; you could live here, and thousands once did. One who remained was a millennial with a flowing goatee, wearing baggy '90s skater apparel and pushing, ironically, a Schwinn Sting-Ray with a chopper fork.

But Trona is largely boarded up now. The growth of Navy town Ridgecrest a half hour away, and a damaging 2019 earthquake, sadly knocked the stuffing out of it. Now there isn't even a coffee shop open that we saw. Nevertheless, the Corvette paused at one of the two remaining filling stations—the only one with premium—to top up. Here and elsewhere on the drive, the split-window stops folks in their tracks. The juxtaposition of such a car in such places knocks the brain akilter, like seeing a gleaming Jaguar XKE in *Mad Max* might. "Agree, it's unusual to see here," I admitted to one admirer. "But underneath it's still a '63 Chevy. This is what it's for."



North of Trona, just past a sign warning of wild burros, what I'd call the true "Death Valley Experience" begins with a gallop across the expansive nearby Panamint Valley. The route is a desolate affair; the road is made of rough tarmacadam that undulates across the desert floor like a blacksnake with hiccups, and the Corvette juddered over it like an orbital sander running in a box of gravel. Truthfully, most of the asphalt is black, but some is hued red from iron-rich aggregate. If you're a *Top Gun* fan, in years past, you'd sometimes catch fighters making fly-bys over the valley floor, but when one crashed in nearby "Star Wars Canyon," those hijinks stopped. Still, while we paused to take in the scene here—and it is magnificent, heavenly, spectacular—a pair of F/A-18s jetted by at a higher level. The Right Stuff remains good stuff.

An ambitious Gen Z, Derek has a master's degree and a good start in tech as a UX researcher. And he's been a car and bike guy literally forever. While examining a ruddy pumice flow nearby (in particular, a green bottle filled with sand and a rusty beer can, circa 1950s), I asked him to compare his six-speed Civic with the four-speed split-window. After all, both have fuel injection, manual transmissions, and bucket seats. Yet we both knew that's about all that binds them.

"Going from my Si to that thing was literally nuts," he said, eyeballing the split-window. "I thought my Honda was quick, but the Corvette is outrageous. The power doesn't come on like a turbo. It kicks in right off idle and then keeps building and building. The steering is weird, though, because it's heavy when you first get going, then lightens up on the highway. Overall, though, the Corvette is less intimidating to drive than I had built it up to be in my mind."

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA has over 23 million inhabitants. It's astounding that, given the shortest route, you can get from downtown LA to this exact point in four hours, and yet few ever do so. While we lingered in the quietness, at most, a few vehicles passed. Important note! If you want to really get away, even in this most populous state, you still can.

A few miles farther and the route presented a "T" intersection: Go left for Lone Pine and Mount Whitney, the highest point in the Lower 48; or go right for Death Valley. And when we turned, the road shot due east in one of nature's best trompe l'oeil scenes. Running for several miles flat and straight, it then swung upward to the Martian-esque Panamint Range, making the road—from a distance anyway—appear to be descending. Hard to explain and harder still to comprehend. Also, here was a sign: Radar Enforced. It's almost like they can read our minds...

My confidence had grown in the Corvette. It hadn't missed a cue so far—fussy hot idle excepted—and had always started and run smooth and strong at speed.

In Death Valley winds charming one-way Artists Drive, where nothing anchors you to the present. Instead, you can time-travel, in this case to 1963.

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THE SPLIT-WINDOW DIDN'T ASK PERMISSION AND DIDN'T APOLOGIZE.

Just one more climb and it would be literally all downhill to Badwater Basin. There was time to ponder this while ascending to 4956-foot Towne Pass, the rim of the Death Valley basin. At least for me, stress and worry are always part of being far from home with an old vehicle. Servicing and inspecting prior to the trip, installing the new BFGs and injection parts, and performing multiple local tests built confidence. But not enough.

During that final climb, the real comfort came from knowing that the machine had proved itself repeatedly over hundreds of miles. At such times, I like to envision the parts and assemblies working. The fuel pumps simply needed to keep on cycling. The ignition system needed but 12 easy volts. And of course, all the oil and water pumps had to do was spin. The rest, I told myself, was merely steel shafts and gears spinning in oil baths. Nothing to worry about, because breezing along at 60 mph at part throttle hugely understressed their engineering. After all, in that long-ago October '62 Riverside event, a Corvette nearly like this (except for Z06 high-performance brakes and suspension) took on that first Cobra and won.

After Towne Pass, the road began a long, easy descent to the bottom of the Earth, including a series of dramatic humps that would surely pitch you airborne at triple digits. (No comment.) For once, it was good to see roadbuilders respect nature's contours instead of bulldozing them flat for a "better" road. Along the way, we passed abandoned buildings made entirely of river rock, leftovers from a previous century. Then inside the national park, the usually scarce foliage was more beautiful than I'd ever seen it. The climate is typically so dry here that except for areas around natural springs, the vegetation is low-slung, favoring shy flowers rather than trees. Eyes open, we caught fields of low greenery, desert gold wildflowers, and the occasional splash of magenta. It was all here in a rare superbloom as the Corvette rolled past.

If moon tourism ever becomes a thing, visitors will probably feel something like we did after passing a sign showing we were once more at sea level, and then continued, descending still lower to our destination. Then for an added dose of bewilderment, consider that thousands of years after its creation, you can experience Death Valley precisely as it was during prehistoric times. Further, among 4 million miles of roads in America, only one road runs through Death Valley. And finally, with over 300 million cars produced in America in the past century, only one says "America cool" quite like a Corvette. In this place. At this time.

I think the torch just got passed. *H* editor@hagerty.com



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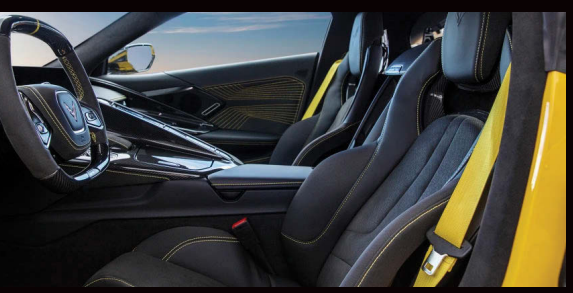



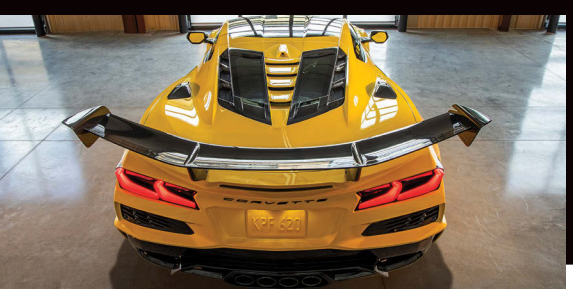

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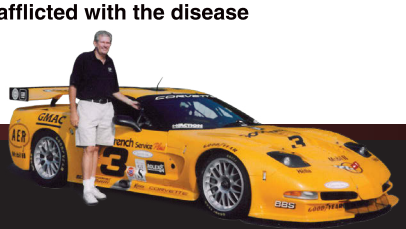

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Mile 18,891: Outran the butterflies

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HOME ON THE RANGE

Words by
Aaron Robinson

Sun, snakes, cattle, and Ford trucks have been part of King Ranch for decades.

Photos by
James Lipman


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IT TOOK Robert Silguero a few minutes to find a video on his phone. It shows Silguero, a fifth-generation Kineño as the local cowboys are called, astride his horse out on the range. Suddenly, with a lightning flick of the wrist, he whips his lasso at a movement in the brush and the just-visible tail of a rattler goes limp. "A 7-footer," he says proudly. Per the local custom, he took the snake and hung it on a fence belly-up as an offering to the rain gods. Amid a withering, months-long drought, King Ranch's cowboys are willing to do just about anything to undam the heavens.

Around these parts, which is about 45 minutes southwest of Corpus Christi, Texas, it's a rare mile on a highway that you don't pass half a dozen Ford trucks coming the other way. Some of them bear a chrome "Flying W" logo, indicating that they are deluxe King Ranch Editions, an ultra-plus trim level for the Expedition SUV and F-Series pickups. But King Ranch is more than just a Dearborn marketing concoction. It is a real place, situated on a tropical plain abutting the Gulf Coast and paved with oceans of Bermuda and bluestem grass, cultivated cotton and sorghum fields, sand dunes, watering holes, and dense thickets of gnarled mesquite, prickly agave, and flowering fiddlewood. It is owned by a real family and inhabited by real people and real animals who for generations have eked out a codependent existence under a brutally indifferent sky.

Indeed, the King had been a working ranch for 147 years before Ford came calling in 2000 with an idea to partner up on an F-150 trimmed in saddle leather from the ranch's sprawling herds. As we discovered in Harrel's Pharmacy in downtown Kingsville, the relationship goes even further back. Framed on the wall by the lunch counter is a Ford ad from 1949. It reads: "'With some 50,000 head of cattle on approximately 900,000 acres to look after, the '49 Ford is a welcome addition to the Ford family. I can drive mine all day without fatigue,' says Mr. Richard M. Kleberg, Jr. of Kingsville, Texas."

Coincidentally, the vintage Ford F-1 that was brought down from San Antonio by its owner, Hagerty member Ben Sanchez, to be our photo prop, is also from 1949. Its skinny bias-ply tires, rudimentary gauges, and flathead 100-hp V-8 with a three-speed represent accurately what Ford pickups used to be, before they became plush four-door family liners. Back then, pickups were driven almost exclusively by ranchers, farmers, road builders, and other tradespeople needing basic, sturdy workhorses. Computer screens, massaging seats, radar cruise control, and even air conditioning would have all seemed like science-fiction stuff, yet today, a fleet of fuel-injected, semiconductor-stuffed descendants of Sanchez's '49 still work the ranch, screens and all.

At 825,000 acres divided into four divisions all in the vicinity of the quiet burg of Kingsville, King Ranch is the largest such ranch in the United States. Vice president and general manager Heath Grigg was quick to apologize for the desiccated state of the landscape when we arrived. "You're not seeing us at our best," he

Horses and Ford trucks have been essential equipment at King Ranch for decades. When our '49 F-1 photo vehicle was new, King Ranch—today the largest ranch in the U.S.—was already 96 years old.







Captain King might have picked a more hospitable place **for his ranch.**

said as the relentless sun peeked through early March clouds that offered intermittent shade but no rain.

The economics are simple: When it rains, nature provides an abundance of free food in the form of green pastures. When it doesn't, the ranch has to feed its stock an expensive kibble of protein and grains called "range cubes." Drought sparks a bitter cycle: As costs go up, the beef supply shrinks, propelling beef prices upward, which eventually causes consumers to look for cheaper alternatives. Especially for the most profitable U.S. Department of Agriculture–rated Prime and Choice varieties that King Ranch prefers to supply. The cowboys like to say that every dry day is "one day closer to rain."

Meanwhile, where 50,000 head of cattle once roamed in fenced pastures that seem to stretch to the horizon, the herd has in recent years been thinned down to about 32,000, mainly of the Santa Cruz and Santa Gertrudis varieties that King Ranch calls its own. Developed through selective breeding, the cattle better endure the high temperatures and humidity of the climate while still producing the beautifully marbled meat that chefs crave.

Captain Richard King might have picked a more hospitable place for his ranch, but it undoubtedly made sense at the time. Apparently restless as a jewelry apprentice in New York City, King was just 10 when he stole away in 1834 on a steamship bound for Mobile, Alabama. His captain took a shine to him and taught

Horses are still the most efficient way to work the ranch, say the cowboys, and it's cheaper to make good quarter horses than to buy them. The branding barn (above, left) is where the ranch's "professional mothers" get their ultrasounds.







Nobody is sure how the ranch came by its Flying W logo. One theory is that it's a tribute to the ranch's ubiquitous rattlesnakes. The '49 Ford F-1 may be retired and out to pasture, but it looks ready to jump back into ranch duty at any moment.

him the ways of the water, and at 21, he joined up to pilot steamers ferrying troops and supplies down the Rio Grande for the Mexican-American War. After the peace, King ran a thriving steamboat business, eventually branching out into land and cattle. He and a partner bought an old 15,500-acre Spanish land grant in 1853 called the Rincón de Santa Gertrudis. The price for this wild land of thickets and snakes was $300 (nobody quite knows the origin of the ranch's Flying W logo, but one theory is that it's a rattlesnake). A year later, he snapped up another 53,000 acres for $1800, and about 60 other land purchases later, the King Ranch became more or less what it is today.

The Mexican herders who came with their families to work for King called themselves Los Kineños, the King's People. They formed the wellspring of what today is a community of 300 residents living on the ranch, of whom 160 are employees, many of them multigenerational. Though Captain King had four children, it was only his daughter, Alice Gertrudis King, who bore any children. In 1886, she married Robert Justus Kleberg from a family of locally prominent German immigrants. Thus, while it is still called the King Ranch, it is the Kleberg family who has run it for more than a century. They are the closest thing South Texas has to royalty, which is why you can drive King Avenue through Kingsville out to the gates of King Ranch in Kleberg County.

THE FLATHEAD V-8 in the old F-1 burbled lazily as the truck picked its way across one of the ranch's 32,000-acre pastures, perfectly at home amid the cow patties and dried-up mudholes. Its rudimentary suspension, a half-step up from a prairie schooner's with its four sets of leaf springs carrying two solid axles, can take plenty of punishment. But the driver on the small, cramped bench feels every impact. The fact that Ford touted this ½-ton truck as having a "Million Dollar Cab" with its "Spiralounge Floating Seat," "Feather-Foot Braking," and "Airplane-Style Shocks" seems quaintly hilarious. Sanchez, who admits that he isn't as svelte as







he used to be, installed a small hot rod–style steering wheel just so he could fit behind the wheel.

Trucks weren't large back then and they didn't weigh nearly as much as they do today. Nor were they able to carry as much. The "Bonus Built" Ford F-1, as Ford called it in the ads, was able to haul 1480 pounds in its bed, for a gross weight rating of 4700 pounds. Today's bottom basement F-150 with a 2.7-liter turbo V-6 carries 1775 pounds and can tow 8400. Numbers matter on a ranch. So does four-wheel drive, though despite the fact that Ford had built Army jeeps during the war, it would take the company another decade to offer the feature as factory equipment on its pickups.

Still, the "master of a thousand-and-one light delivery jobs," as Ford dubbed the new F-1 when it debuted in 1948, had some clever features to help endear it to the ranch hands. As with Ford and Chevy pickups since the '30s, the sides of the steel cargo box were rolled over into a loop at the top, both to make the bed sides more rigid but also so that items such as sod bags won't snag but simply slide over into the bed. The bed came standard with holes for stakes, and monotube gas shocks, though not new (wartime jeeps had them), were still novel in 1948.

Even so, the most valuable piece of equipment on a ranch in 1948 wasn't a truck but a horse, a fact we were surprised to learn is still true in 2026. The King Ranch employs 34 cowboys, and the goal is to have four horses for each cowboy to account for rest, feeding, and illness. Between roundups for deworming, vaccination, branding, pasture rotation, shipping to feed lots, and other purposes, the cattle are regularly on the move during their 18-month lives at the ranch.

Why not use cheap dirt bikes or ATVs? "Horses don't cause fires," explained Silguero, and they also have brains, which, when tamed and trained, provide the cowboys what in car industry terms might be called Level V self-driving automation. The range is rough, full of mounds and snakes and hidden holes. A horse can pick its way up a trail while the rider looks elsewhere, not possible with a motorized machine.

King Ranch runs a clothing boutique in Kingsville that also includes a pro saddle shop. One of the ranch's cowboys (above, right) looks on as the broken handgrip horn on his saddle is repaired.

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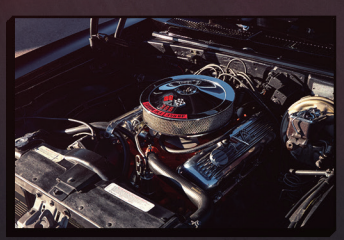

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The old F-1 was perfectly at home amid the cow patties.

It costs $20K to breed a horse, **but it's cheaper than buying.**

Hence the ranch is an American quarter horse breeding operation, because it's cheaper to make at home these compact, agile sprinters than it is to buy them. It costs about $20,000 to $25,000 to breed a horse, what with insemination and vet bills, but that might be half the purchase price of a decent ranch horse. The process is agonizingly slow, however, and not every foal is suitable for range work. A tick-borne disease decimated the ranch's horse herd 15 years ago and it's still recovering, said San Antonio veterinarian Ben Espy as he inserted his arm into a mare's rectum all the way up to his shoulder.

Espy, whom the cowboys consider the best equine specialist in the region, was giving the horse an ultrasound. Which, because the 1200-pound animal is so thick, can only be done from the inside, with the probe inserted well up the poop chute. King Ranch maintains its own stock of "recips," or recipient horses. "They're professional mothers," Espy explained, meaning horses whose temperament isn't suited for anything other than breeding, much of it done through in vitro fertilization. "They're recips for a reason—they're a**holes," he quipped, shortly before one of them kicked her steel stall so hard that it sounded like a gunshot.

Head cowboy Lee Roy Montalvo, a seventh-generation Kineño, led four mares into the breeding barn at a time so that Espy could examine their ovaries and see if any had foals aboard. Only one of the mares was pregnant, and Montalvo was disappointed. "This looks easy; it isn't easy," he said.

Hagerty member Ben Sanchez (below) is a veteran print press operator from San Antonio who uses the F-1 for slow cruises around town. Not a bad life for a 77-year-old retired pickup truck.









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"If you haven't been bucked off, **you're not riding horses**."

Actually, nothing about working rugged rangeland among thousands of large animals in the South Texas heat looks easy. Silguero, a fifth-generation Kineño who has worked on the ranch since he was 12 and now has two daughters in college, was thrown when he was 17 and lost hearing in one ear. "If you haven't been bucked off, you're not riding horses," he said with a shrug. Espy, the vet, has mucked out horse afterbirth in 110-degree heat and has been kicked hard enough to be sent to the hospital a half-dozen times. "Skin grafts aren't fun," he said.

It is a life, however, and nobody we met seemed willing to trade it for a cube and a computer. "Ranching is different every day. I don't feel like it's work," said division manager Bull Alvarez, another fifth-generation Kineño who pulls out a professional Canon camera snapped into a long lens whenever things get slow. When not shooting adorable portraits of his new granddaughter or the coiled rattlesnakes he finds under his truck, Alvarez captures the ranch's other diverse wildlife, including white-tailed deer, wild turkeys, javelina, Asian nilgai antelope, African waterbuck, raptors, quail, a ridiculous-looking pig-like creature called a peccary, and the 15-foot alligators that prowl the ranch's ponds and creeks.

In 1912, the Klebergs realized that King Ranch was quickly being depleted of its wildlife and embarked on an aggressive conservation and management program.

Like a lot of small American towns, Kingsville looks like its best days are behind it, but the adjacent ranch, naval base, and other businesses pull in enough trade and visitors to keep Kleberg Avenue busy.

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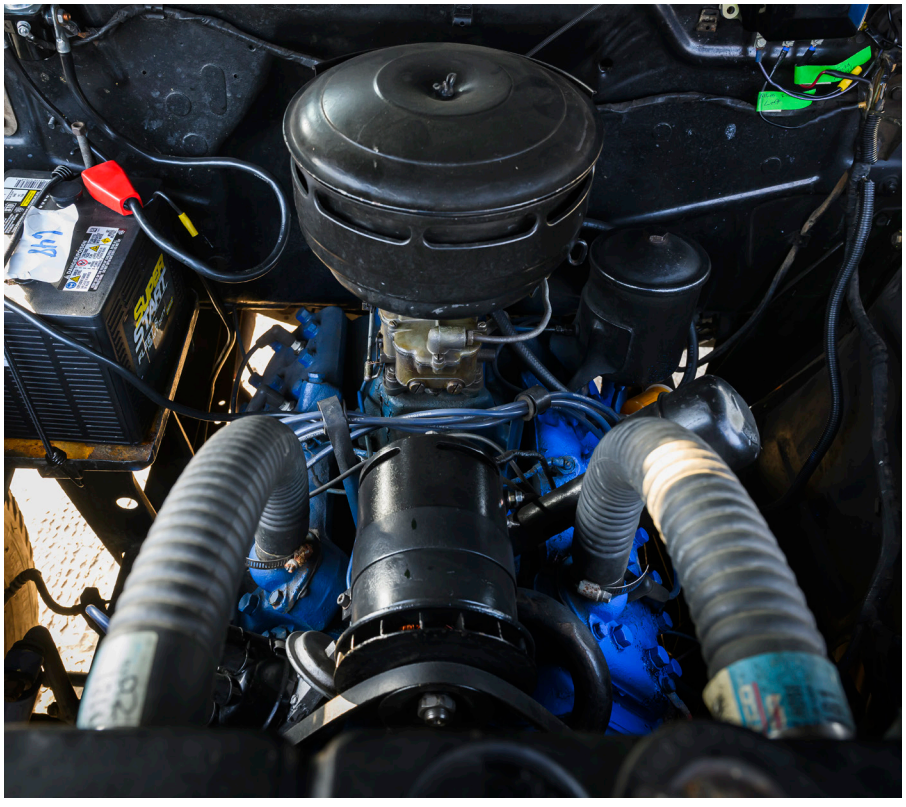



The San Gertrudis and Santa Cruz cattle that King Ranch raises love to lick old pickup trucks. At the end of the shoot, the ’49 was covered in cow spittle. At one time, a 100-hp flathead V-8 (left) was considered plenty for ranching work.



It proved both a prescient decision and a financially wise one, because today, leasing to private hunting operations is a large and growing segment of the ranch's revenue. King Ranch is designated a "low-fence" operation, meaning the wildlife have free range to roam, and hunting is via "fair chase" methods, a more traditional way of tracking and bagging, which many hunters prefer to penned hunts, even if the trophies aren't guaranteed.

The cowboys had warned us that the cattle would lick the '49 as we parked it in a herd for some shots. Sure enough, the old pickup was shellacked in snot and steer spittle from bumper to bumper. One had even rubbed a Picassoesque circular pattern into the door with its horn. Sanchez just chuckled and mumbled something about claiming it on his Hagerty insurance. Give us a call, Ben.

Cattle ranching, farming, hunting, horse breeding, a saddle shop with five locations in Texas offering high-end Western wear: King Ranch earns its living in the 21st century in an astoundingly diverse variety of ways. And soon it may be more than new Ford trucks that bear the Flying W. Plans are being considered to offer King Ranch–branded meat in the grocery store, so you know where your steaks come from, and a wider catalog of King Ranch clothing and accessories, possibly from a national chain of stores.

Unlike so many brands out there today, King Ranch would be one that has a truly authentic core, because in good years and bad years, under spacious skies and starry nights, amid the mesquite and hackberry and bluestem grasses, it all really does happen out there much the same way it has for over a century. Granted, with some modern science to augment the cowboy intuition and experience.

Ford trucks have been there much of the way, evolving with technology but still hauling whatever the horses can't. Our '49 was perfectly at home on the biggest of ranges, completing a scene that you can only find in America. *H* arobinson@hagerty.com



The King Ranch-Ford tie-up officially began in 2000 with uplevel versions of the F-150, but the relationship goes back much further.

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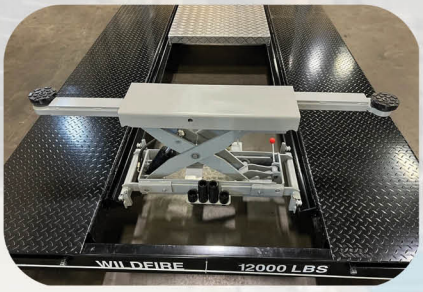



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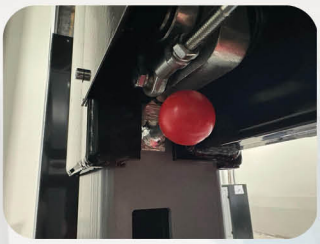

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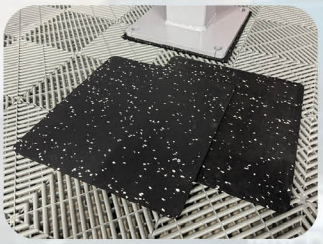

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Words by **Aaron Robinson** Photos by **Matt Tierney**



ON A HILL just behind The Lodge at Pebble Beach on California's Monterey Peninsula, the world's most exclusive traffic jam starts before sunrise every third Sunday in August. A queue of some 200 meticulously fettled machines sit bumper to bumper, waiting to roll onto a golf fairway and bask in the boundary where commerce and technology intersect with art. Among them in 2025 were 13 Packards, for the simple reason that there are always Packards on the lawn at Pebble Beach, because staging a Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance without a Packard is like staging *King Lear* without the king.

Drive almost any antique car dating from the earliest years to about 1940 and, at some point, you are bound to be asked if it's a Packard. Nearly 70 years after the brand disappeared from showrooms, it is the one name from the classic era that average people can recall at a moment's notice. Packard's fame lives on in old gangster movies, in stories that fathers and grandfathers tell at family gatherings about the cars they admired when they were kids, and in car shows where wide-eyed children gaze up at towering chrome grilles that seem to scrape the heavens, their parents unconsciously replanting the seed in the next generation by



Packard at the height of its prowess: A 1938 Packard 12 Model 1607 Club Sedan cuts the imposing figure that Packard owners craved.





reading a placard and saying out loud, "Oh yeah, that's a Packard."

If there were a Mount Rushmore for cars, a Packard grille would be at top dead center. Fully a quarter-century into the 21st century, a Packard remains the bluest of blue-chip American classics, the quintessential car from the before times, the one that best epitomizes the elegance and formality of an earlier age and the old trope that "they sure don't make 'em like they used to." Machines bearing that famous script logo have roamed all the continents and defended democracy in the air and at sea. You don't even have to ask the man who owns one, per the company's famous ad tagline, because everyone already knows that Packard was the best America had to offer in a period when its empire was ascendant and its citizens seemed confident that it always would be.

"THEY WERE just a remarkably successful high-quality luxury firm in the era when a stand-alone luxury marque could survive," affirms Chris Bock, chief judge at Pebble Beach and a strong advocate for keeping Packard as one of the first brands to be given a standing class at the event. That was in 1983, and more Packards have won Pebble's coveted Best of Show award than any other brand except for Duesenberg. Says Bock, "I hear people saying, 'Why would we celebrate Packard instead of Cadillac?' and then I have to point out that there are more classic Packards extant than all the other luxury marques combined. They outsold most of the other marques from the classic era. It's easy to defend."

"They used the best materials, they had the best craftsmen, Packard was the soft-spoken boss of the road," said Ross Myers, a dairy farmer from Boyertown, Pennsylvania, who brought to Pebble a '32 V-12 roadster. "I like fixing up stuff, and if you're going to spend all the time to fix up an old car, I like it to be something special, and Packards to me are special."

"Everybody who is into classic cars wants a Packard," said Stephen Babinsky of Automotive Restorations in Clinton Township, New Jersey. A serial Packard owner himself, he was on the lawn that morning overseeing the pre-judging prep of a dark blue Dietrich-body '34 1107 Twelve Coupe restored in his shop. "Of course everybody wants a Duesenberg, too, but they are a different level. For somebody who wants to get into the hobby, Packards are the way to go because they're really good cars and they're affordable. They are just well engineered, and they're good driving cars, especially the early '30s stuff. I have Cadillacs, I have Chryslers, I have all kinds of sh*t, and the Packard is just the best all-around car."

A new car bearing the Packard name hasn't sold



On a Mount Rushmore for cars, a Packard grille would be top dead center.

Packard used several mascots over the decades, perhaps most famously the "chrome doughnut lady," as some call the Goddess of Speed (top, left), a tribute to the Greek goddess Nike, which appeared in various forms on Packards from 1926 to 1950.

since 1958, yet the brand remains as relevant as Bentley, Bugatti, and Chevrolet in the hearts of collectors. What makes it so special has something to do with the magnificent cars and engines and a lot to do with the people behind them, most of whom didn't bear the name Packard. In fact, Packard is further proof that men such as Henry Ford and Walter P. Chrysler, founders who remained with their companies long enough to see their names grow into carmaking institutions, are rarities in the annals of auto history. Louis Chevrolet lasted barely four years in his namesake startup before selling out, David Dunbar Buick just seven years. The engineering-minded James Ward Packard and his business-savvy brother William Doud Packard lasted only a decade in the car business before handing over the enterprise to others.

Descendants of early English colonial settlers, the thriving Packards of elysian, well-to-do Warren, Ohio, were already successful in various fields. The brothers ran a bustling factory producing incandescent lamps, wiring, and other electrical devices while their sister, Alaska Packard Davidson, was destined to become the first female investigator at the FBI (and one of the last until 1972, after being fired in 1924 by newly installed director J. Edgar Hoover).

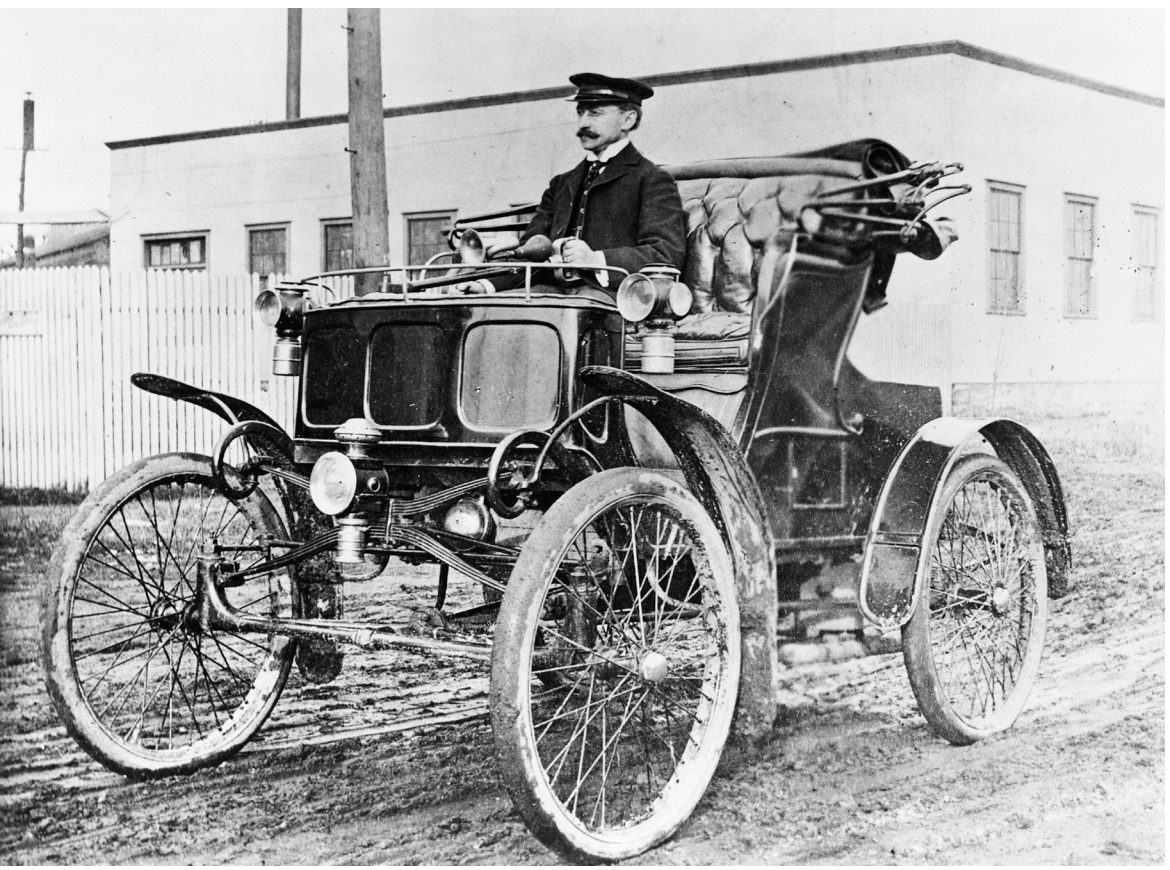
A trip to France in 1896 saw James Ward return with a de Dion-Bouton motorized tricycle, a stubborn and idiosyncratic device which seemed determined to uphold every crass French stereotype. Packard's growing interest in cars undaunted, he then bought a car from Alexander Winton, his Scottish neighbor up the road in Cleveland. It proved to be hardly more reliable. According to *Packard: A History of the Motor Car and the Company*, by the editors of *Automobile Quarterly*, Packard made numerous trips back to the factory to get his motor carriage fixed and to suggest engineering changes. Finally, in 1899, in a scene that would play out again some 60 years later between Enzo Ferrari and Ferruccio Lamborghini, Winton exploded and told Packard that if he thought he could do better, he should damn well build his own car.

Packard thought about it, then poached several of Winton's key employees. His new auto firm, The New York and Ohio Company, produced its first car, the Model A, in November 1899 (the name was soon amended to The Ohio Automobile Company). A harbinger of future Packards and their renowned durability, that first car still exists, a gift from James Ward Packard to his alma mater, the engineering school at Lehigh University, which maintains it to this day in running condition.

The new design featured a number of firsts for the auto industry. As a spark-fired internal combustion engine revs up, the timing of the spark needs to advance, and the standard practice into the 1920s was to affix a lever on the steering wheel that the driver could advance manually to keep the engine running properly. Being electrical men, the Packards endowed their car with automatic spark advance years before it became common. There was a rev limiter built into the distributor to prolong engine life. Orders began to trickle in as word got around town and the region. Legend has it that the company's famous slogan, "Ask the man who owns one," was born on a busy day in 1901 when the office secretary asked James Ward for a reply to a letter from a potential buyer in Pittsburgh inquiring about the car's features. "Tell him I'll be over to talk with him—no, wait, tell him to ask the man who owns one."

Right about so many things in 1899, by 1901, Packard was already falling out of step with the fast-moving industry. Yes, Packard was an early American adopter of the steering wheel to replace the tiller. The company also established the industry's first training school for service mechanics. But the founder of the company that







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"The Boulevard," as insiders called Packard's sprawling plant (left, top) in Detroit. William Doud Packard (lower left) pilots the company's second car, the Model B, past the original plant in Warren, Ohio. By 1912, a $6200 Packard limo (lower right) was an avatar of American wealth.

would later be famous for its V-12s believed that "more than one cylinder on a Packard would be like two tails on a cat—you just don't need it." James Ward held that a simple, reliable engine placed under the seat, which kept the weight centralized and low, with more of it on the rear axle for traction and stability, was better than putting a larger, more complex one under a removable cover out in front of the driver, as was rapidly becoming the industry standard.

Besides, James Ward and William Doud's enthusiasm for the project seemed to be waning as their first interest, the growing electrical components business, demanded more of their attention. It's thought that officially changing the name from the Ohio Automobile Company to the Packard Motor Car Company in late 1902 was an effort to make it easier to raise capital through share sales and, if necessary, move the operation out of state. No doubt they were influenced in part by the son of a prominent Detroit railroading family who had decided to become a major investor in Packard, the first of several outsiders who would build Packard into what it would become.

Henry Joy's arrival was the beginning of the end for Packard the carmaking brothers and the start of Packard the automobile institution. An ardent automobilist and fan of the product, Joy somehow convinced James Ward to hire a new chief engineer, Frenchman Charles Schmidt, who brought to the company fresh ideas already being tried in Europe. The proverbial two-tailed cat, the Packard Model G, arrived in 1902. Joy brought in other wealthy Detroit investors, and soon the rumor spread that the whole company would soon be decamping for the embryonic Motor City.

By all accounts, Joy's Detroit mob was amply funded and well organized, meaning Packard had a solid financial backing at a time when the industry was rife with penniless dreamers and honey-tongued charlatans. Joy had big ideas for Packard, the main one being the construction of an enormous new factory to replace the scattershot workshops in Warren where the cars had been built to that point.

Given Joy's ties to Detroit, a move was inevitable. Joy purchased the Weber farm, a 67-acre cow pasture at Grand Boulevard and Concord Avenue just northeast of what was then Detroit's city limits, and hired the architect Albert Kahn, the already respected German immigrant whose industrial designs for Ford, Chrysler, and General Motors would become iconic. The newspapers estimated the new plant would increase the city's labor pool by at least 1000 and drive up local property values. Joy figured his future king of car companies needed a suitably impressive castle. One early visitor to "the Boulevard," as the new Packard headquarters came to be known, was no less than Henry Ford, whose own Packard limousine was stolen off the streets in Detroit in September 1916. The auto magnate went in person to retrieve the chassis and engine numbers in order to file a complete police report.

Packard's model designations by letter gave way to model designations by numerical series, a practice the company would use for decades, eschewing the more traditional use of model years that came with a relentless imperative for annual changes. The two-cylinder engines grew into four, then into six, then, in 1915, into the 12-cylinder Twin Six, the start of Packard's long quest for the smoothest, most refined horsepower possible.

"They didn't get lost in the weeds trying to reinvent the wheel," notes John Bothwell of Douglas and Company, a prewar specialist in Costa Mesa, California, who has worked on a number of Packards. "They stayed with conventional wisdom: When T-head engines were the thing, they had T-head engines, when everybody was doing twin-cylinder engines, that's what they did. They weren't trying to reengineer stuff, they just went with the trends, but they focused on doing what they did at a very high quality."

The titular president of the company, James Ward had long since become a passenger on his own train, and in 1909, he and William Doud stepped back completely from the auto business. Henry Joy would soon be gone too, a victim of his boundless enthusiasm for distractions that the Packard board found exhausting. The search for the perfect man to run the enterprise took a year and ended when the next great figure in Packard's history stepped into the story.

ALVAN MACAULEY—he hated when people misspelled it "Alvin"—was a 42-year-old patent lawyer from West Virginia who was already feted in Detroit's industrial circles for reviving the fortunes of what would become the Burroughs Adding Machine Company. He did so in part with a lightning move of the factory and its 400 workers from St. Louis to Detroit that lost only two days of production. By 1916, Macauley was the president of Packard, a position he held along with chairman of the board for the next 32 years.

The papers called him "tight-lipped and bespectacled," and "the personification of conservatism." It was said that he never lost his temper, that his favorite food was turtle soup, that he could both milk a cow and mill his own furniture, and that he hand-carved cigarette





The original garages at the Packard Proving Grounds Historic Site in Shelby Township, Michigan, are a perfect backdrop for an assortment of Packard's elegant products. Opened in 1928 as the first of its type in the auto industry, the facility is now a 17-acre museum and event space.



Macauley was the embodiment of Packard's customer.

cases to give as gifts to friends. Besides a wood shop in which he spun out chairs and cabinets and miniature furniture for his grandchildren's dolls, Macauley's Grosse Pointe mansion contained rare tapestries, artwork by the great masters such as Rembrandt, and an enormous library. He could recite long literary passages from memory, and his favorite book was *Lorna Doone*, a 19th-century romance epic by the English author Richard Doddridge Blackmore.

Which was slightly ironic since Macauley found long names annoying, a reason he dropped his own first name, James, to make his signature quicker to sign (a practice he encouraged in subordinates). His management philosophy was summed up by an inscription that hung for years in the Packard executive offices: "I know of no more stricture that can be passed upon the manager of any business than to have it said of him that in all his direction and handling of men, he developed mediocrities. We are on earth that we may ourselves succeed and enable others to succeed; the manager who develops among his organization the greatest number of successful men will himself enjoy the greatest measure of success."

Urging Congress to lower tariffs just months before the Great Crash of 1929 got him on the July cover of *Time* magazine. In a rapidly growing Detroit that was a melting pot of immigrants, Macauley was an ardent America-firster, telling his shop-floor workers that advancement at Packard was dependent on learning English. They apparently revered him, partly because experienced craftsmen who grew too old to mill wood or machine metal were given easier jobs within the plant rather than turned out in the street. His stature among the rank and file climbed further when it was reported that his salary of $256,000 in 1929 was whittled down to $30,000 in the lean year of 1933. Unlike many of today's executives, Macauley shared the pain when business was bad.

American newspapers helped make Macauley a household name by occasionally running his bylined column in which he opined on the economic and industrial issues of the day. His overriding message was one of optimism. Business was always looking up, from Macauley's perspective, so long as men of good character were willing to do hard work. As chairman of the National Automobile Chamber of Commerce, one

Packard and Alvan Macauley (above, right figure) are inextricably linked, Macauley having successfully helmed the company through the Great Depression and two world wars. He was the person the average Packard buyer wanted to be.

Photo courtesy of Packard Proving Grounds Historic Site



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of several industry trade groups he chaired during his career, Macauley weighed in on everything from the shortage of parking spaces in Philadelphia to "the evils" of the trade-in scheme.

Contrary to his colleagues at other companies who were pioneering planned obsolescence with annual model changes, Macauley exhorted Packard owners never to trade in, but to keep their cars until they were entirely spent. Otherwise, he said, it only encouraged the industry to produce cheap, disposable cars, a waste of money and resources. "A homely but exact parallel might be found in a man at a fruit stand," he wrote in a 1927 column that reads like one of Franklin Roosevelt's folksy fireside chats. "A nickel for an apple, one bite, and then another apple might catch his eye because of a brighter color. One bite from that, after payment of another nickel, and then an unusual plumpness might intrigue him into the purchase of a third.

"The remainders of the first two apples are as sound and just as good in every way as before the bites were taken, but they have been stigmatized and their value lowered because of use. They are used apples." Macauley wondered that people who were so careful with their nickels by eating apples down to their core were nonetheless "prodigal with their hundreds of dollars" by trading in perfectly good automobiles.

Relentlessly upright, always immaculately dressed, a pillar in the business community, and apparently without vices, Macauley was the embodiment of Packard's idealized customer. While the Hollywood glitterati bought Packards clothed in flamboyant bespoke coachwork by Dietrich, Murphy, or Hibbard & Darrin, many ordinary bankers and businessmen bought Standard Eights because they thought they were—or wanted to be—Alvan Macauley. And in the next great figure in Packard history, chief engineer Jesse Gurney Vincent, whom Macauley brought over from Burroughs in 1912, the company had the man to create the cars to fit the image.

An Arkansan who dropped out of school in the eighth grade to work as a blacksmith and a machinist, Vincent would eventually attach his name to more than 400 patents. He wasn't at Packard long before drafting a 35-page memo outlining the advantages of a V-12 engine. "From the time when the first practical car made its first run on the road," Vincent summed up, "there have been three things which every motorist asked for—more range of ability, greater smoothness, and less noise." These attributes came to define Packard's guiding principles through its golden years of the '20s and '30s.

Though Vincent would be associated with the

A 1925 Model 333 (top, left) embodies a period when many of Packard's rivals disappeared, unable to survive the era of the Model T and mass production. The 1942 Model 2021 (right) was Packard's last expression of elegance before the war.





Packard cranked out thousands of the 1200-hp V-12s.

development of four-wheel and power brakes, air conditioning, and hypoid gears, as well as one of the industry's first vehicle proving grounds, his first love was engines. Anchoring the company's reputation as the "Master Motor Builders" were perfectly balanced straight-sixes and -eights and whispering V-12s with hydraulic valve-lash adjusters for ultimate silence. An avid pilot, Vincent was a co-architect of Packard's World War I mainstay, the light but powerful Liberty aircraft engine (an effort that earned him the rank of colonel in the U.S. Army Signal Corps). With Macauley's enthusiastic support, he also developed the first diesel aircraft engine. And he worked with champion boat racer Gar Wood to stuff multiple Liberty engines into racing hulls in the 1920s, an effort that directly led to the company's marine engine business.

With the next war looming, Packard accepted the enormous job of building the Rolls-Royce Merlin aircraft engine under license after Ford passed on the contract, judging the hand-built 27-liter V-12 to be "unsuitable for mass production." Vincent wrote one of his legendary memos, enthusiastically endorsing the project and figuring the company would need a separate plant employing 14,000 workers to fulfill a wartime demand that would see more than 55,000 Packard-Merlins produced.

Delicate negotiations with the protective British over the design dragged out for months, their armed services demanding features in which the U.S. War Department had no interest. Everything from thread pitches to block castings to carburetor types to supercharger configurations were points of contention. While Packard didn't completely redesign the Merlin, it made so many changes that its version resembled the original about as much as a Tennessee twang resembled a Liverpool scouse. The same mother tongue, but that's about it.

At the same time, Packard cranked out thousands of the 4M 2500, a 2490-cubic-inch, 1200-hp V-12 marine leviathan. Three of these engines in the 80-foot Elco

Chief engineer Jesse Gurney Vincent was interested in boat racing, which led directly to Packard building huge marine engines. Examples of Packard cars and engines can be seen at the Packard Proving Grounds Historic Site in Michigan.

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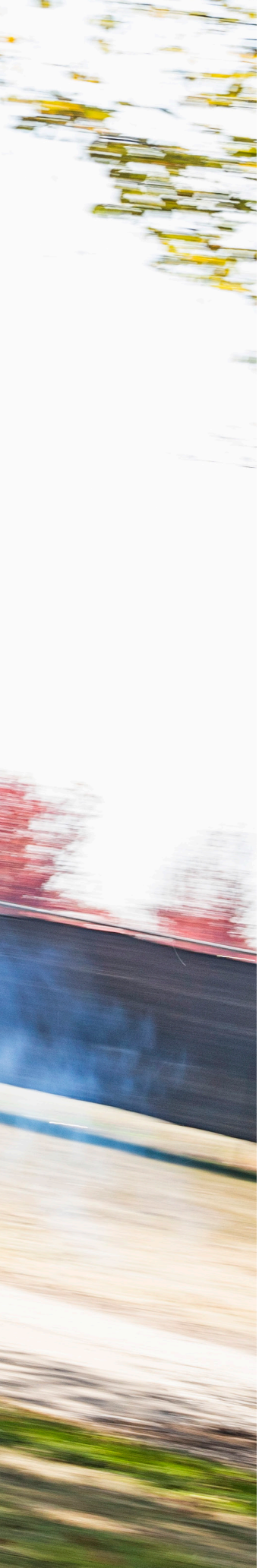


Packard was the last independent American luxury manufacturer when it merged with Studebaker in 1954, having outlasted its peers and outsold for years even well-funded rivals such as Cadillac and Lincoln, which were just luxury divisions of much larger automakers.

"They just drive a little easier, the brakes are a little better, the machine work is a little tighter."

PT-109 propelled a young Lieutenant (JG) John F. Kennedy and his crew to almost 50 mph while patrolling the Solomon Islands. Over in Europe, General Dwight D. Eisenhower shuttled to and from his headquarters in an army green Packard sedan, and Joseph Stalin was such a fan that he ordered his own domestic limo maker, ZiL, to exactly copy Packard's designs. Knockoff Packards built by ZiL and, later, GAZ, ferried the party elite in the Soviet Union for decades.

After the war, forces that had been pushing Packard to lower the drawbridge with less expensive cars gained momentum. The introduction of the "junior" Packards of 1937, with prices starting at $795, an unfathomably low sum for a new Packard, led to the Boulevard's best sales year ever: 109,518 cars. The success of the juniors caused Packard to rethink its antiquated and somewhat artisanal production methods and embrace mass manufacturing techniques that lowered costs. These changes served Packard for a time when the peace came.

However, some bad product decisions, waves of labor strikes, and postwar shortages and inflation started Packard's long slide toward its disastrous 1954 merger with Studebaker. While new Clippers and Caribbeans remained status symbols in the nicer parts of town, Packard, the independent luxury automaker, could not compete against the Cadillacs, Lincolns, and Chryslers that had huge manufacturing and sales organizations powered by the million-unit sales of mass-market brands to sustain them. It hung on much longer than its brothers in the once-formidable "Three P's" (Packard, Peerless, and Pierce-Arrow), but eventually time and progress caught up to Packard with an anticlimactic decision in 1958 by the Studebaker-Packard Corp. to drop the Packard name altogether.

When asked, owners and restorers are hard-pressed to come up with specifics as to what made Packards stand above. "They just drive a little easier, the brakes are a little better, the shifting is easier, the machine work is a little tighter," said Babinsky, the New Jersey restorer, before admitting, "Honestly, I don't know what the combination is."

Owners of cars from this era talk a lot about how Packard used solid brass and bronze in their door handles and other fittings, whereas other luxury brands used cheaper pot metal, a metal alloy of various low-cost materials such as zinc, lead, and copper that is cooked up in a "pot." It's a reputation for quality "that has never gone away," said Craig Handley, president of the marque's oldest national owner organization, the 73-year-old Packard Club. "What attracts people still, after all these years, is that reputation. All the histories of the industry portray Packard as the Rolls-Royce of America, that it was the ultimate car."

Ultimately, what keeps Packard relevant is its story as much as the machines. They say that nothing lasts forever, and to be sure, Packard's full run was a mere 59 years, meaning it has been gone longer than it was alive. But if you're wondering how it's possible that old guys who were excited about Packards in the 1960s got replaced by new old guys who were excited about Packards in the 1980s, and how that cycle keeps repeating to this day (such that the Pebble Beach Concours today still receives far more Packard applications than it can accept), then consider that the story of one of America's great car companies still fascinates us. It still inspires people to keep retelling it and to keep sinking their time and money into preserving the cars. And it's looking like it always will. *H*

arobinson@hagerty.com



First Lady

Beverly Rae Kimes was a pioneering historian of the early auto industry.

Words by
Lyn Woodward

WHEN I FIRST HEARD the name Beverly Rae Kimes, I was already a decade into my career as an automotive journalist. That meant two objectionable facts were true: First, there was a lot that I still didn't know about my own profession, and second, no one talks about Kimes enough. The so-called First Lady and Grand Dame of Automotive History, Kimes was a writer so prolific that Google can't accurately calculate the cumulative volume of her work: hundreds of articles and 20 or so books over her 40-year career writing about cars and the car industry. There aren't that many women in this business, so how had I never heard of her?

Perhaps it was her deep desire to learn about the subject that made her so productive. After all, Kimes admitted she knew nothing more about cars than the information on her driver's license when she first started writing about them. Jim Donnelly, a colleague and friend, wrote in a tribute to her after her death of her interest not only in the mechanical workings of machines but the people behind them, reinforcing a belief I've long embraced—that one doesn't need to know the bore and stroke of an engine to be a car enthusiast. The characters behind the cars color her work. "One must study the people to understand the full story," Donnelly said. Kimes fully understood the story.

Her final book, *Pioneers, Engineers, and Scoundrels: The Dawn of the Automobile in America*, reads like a scandalous novel. "A news item from Wisconsin in 1902," reads one passage, "that the Hotel Racine has recouped part of its bill by selling off the expensive clothes Edward Joel Pennington has left behind in a hasty departure indicated that this con man of *Chicago Times-Herald* renown had worn out his welcome in England and returned home. Subsequently, he jumped hotel bills in Cincinnati and Pittsburgh..." Based on her telling, were I a TV producer, I'd pitch a limited series on Pennington. A charismatic huckster who invented the Tractobile (a failure), promoted a $300 16-hp car that was never sold, and, most famously, coined the term "motorcycle," yet avoided prison for his sketchy business deals sounds ready for Netflix.

"She didn't break down on the technical aspects of her job, but it was the people who fascinated her," recalled Jonathan A. Stein, former *Automobile Quarterly* publishing director who did everything at the title from overseeing editorial to cleaning toilets (such were the budget constraints). He spoke highly of Kimes' writing as being "as erudite as Griff's, but a hell of a lot easier to read," referring to Griffith Borgeson, another early automotive journalist known for his dense, technical writing.

"She was a fun person to be around, and she was just a sponge for history," recalled Chris Bock, currently the chief judge of the annual Pebble Beach Concours. He remembers doing old-car tours with Kimes and her husband, who drove a prewar Auburn. "Once we were touring in Georgia, and the Auburn was having vapor lock. She took a cantaloupe, dug out the seeds, and stuck it on the fuel pump. That kept it going."

Raised in West Chicago by parents Raymond and Grace Kimes, a railway man and a homemaker, Kimes graduated with degrees in history and journalism from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. After earning a master's degree in journalism from Penn State in 1963, she headed to New York City. A lover of theater, she aspired to write about it, a dream that didn't quite pan out. The Great White Way's loss was the car world's gain; out of necessity, Kimes applied for a secretarial position at *Automobile Quarterly*, a new, ad-free, hard-bound book that aimed to tell highly investigated and well-written stories. L. Scott Bailey, the brain behind AQ and a

Illustration by John Magnifico



1978



1985

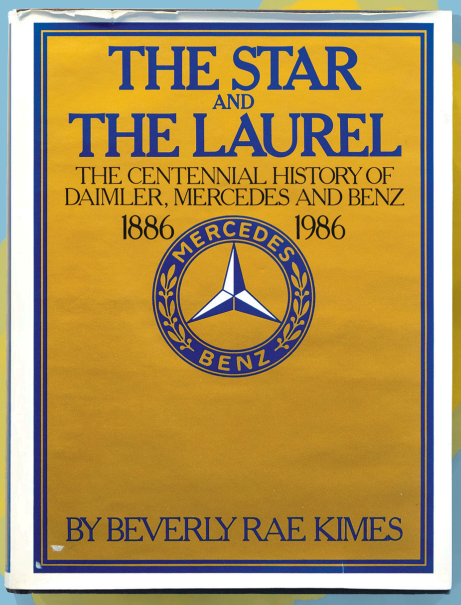
Her prose exploded with detail, color, **and historical context.**

former vice president of the Antique Automobile Club of America, quickly learned he'd found in Kimes a solid writer whose keenness for research was matched only by the pace of each publication deadline. Kimes earned the title of editorial assistant quickly, followed by assistant editor shortly after. She ascended to managing editor only two years later.

Kimes' first article, "Nothing to Watch but the Road," about the 1901 curved-dash Oldsmobile, showcased early her gift for turning a phrase. "The price was less than a dollar a pound: $650." Calling out car pricing as though measuring a quantity of produce feels cleverly female without alienating a core male audience. Throughout her career, her prose exploded with detail, color, texture, and historical context. She used witticisms sparingly and in just the right spots, flavoring each automotive dish with exactly the right spice. "This does not look like a vehicle one would return a borrowed lawn mower in," Kimes said of the Ford Aurora, a concept wagon from 1966. With that droll line, readers didn't need to see an image of the car to know it wasn't your average grocery getter. It was this engaging brand of writing that elevated her to the role of *AQ* editor in 1975, a post she held until the freelance life came calling in 1981.

Thanks to the publication's rule of only one staff byline per issue, Kimes wrote under several noms de plume, including Thomas Cullen, a device she also used while writing for *Classic Car* magazine. Thus, it's no wonder the internet fails at knowing the full measure of her catalog, which likely includes hundreds of articles.

After leaving *AQ*, Kimes became executive editor at the Classic Car Club and produced both its magazine, *Classic Car*, and the *Classic Car of America Bulletin*. She wrote books during her tenure called *The Classic Car*, published in 1990, and *The Classic Era*, which received the Nicolas-Joseph Cugnot Award, a prestigious prize awarded by the Society of Automotive Historians, as the best book of 2001 in the field of automotive history. The six Cugnot awards she won



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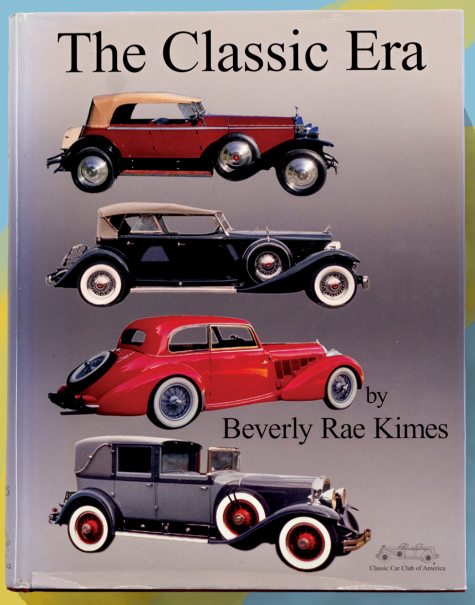

2001

over her lifetime put everyone else to shame—Karl Ludvigsen, her closest rival, won only twice.

There were other books, including a history of the Ford Motor Company, *The Star and the Laurel* detailing the history of Mercedes-Benz at its centennial, and *My Two Lives: Racing Driver to Restaurateur*, co-written with prewar grand prix star René Dreyfus. Other stories she penned earned Kimes the Carl Benz Award from the Society of Automotive Historians, an organization she eventually ran in the mid-1980s.

Kimes' deep automotive curiosity and infinite energy benefited those of us who followed in her steps with her most notable works. The first, *Packard: A History of the Motor Car and the Company*, a book with multiple authors over whom Kimes acted as chief editor, is still considered the foremost authority on the marque today. But it's the omnibus *Standard Catalog of American Cars 1805–1942*, subsequently published by Krause in three editions covering later cars, to which we are all indebted. The size of a small city's phone book, Kimes' initial volume painstakingly covers more than 5000 marques regardless of their success or obscurity, even those that never made a car but tried or who once sketched an idea on a cocktail napkin over a two-martini lunch. Any journalist with a deep curiosity about the automobile's origins has referenced this book.

My favorite article by Kimes might be one from AQ's fourth-quarter issue in 1974. It documents Britain's King Edward, who famously abdicated the throne for love, and the subject of that devotion, Wallis Simpson. When Simpson was still married to husband number two, Ernest Simpson, an American-born British shipping executive, she owned a McLaughlin-Buick—improbably so, as this was better known as a lovely car for the well-to-don'ts rather than the well-to-dos. The Buick, and, as we can presume, the lady, turned Edward's head. An unapologetic Anglophile, Kimes told of the car's Canadian, British, and United States production pedigree. She deliciously intertwined the soapy origins of the star-crossed lovers' history-altering relationship while extolling the touring saloon's delightfully elegant details. In the last line of the story, Kimes cheekily presumes what common owners of this rather unroyal Buick might have thought of the scandal: "One imagines the doctor in Bournemouth wouldn't mind. Neither would the doctor in Toledo. All the world, after all, loves a lover."

While she left us volumes of car history, Kimes left the automotive industry and the world far too soon, passing away in 2008 at the age of 68. She likely wouldn't recognize the editorial model today, as we're shoulder-deep in a new era of automotive journalism. Save for a very few, magazines are gone, and the written word has been subjugated by YouTubers. There's nothing I can do about the fact that it took me so long to learn of Kimes' contribution, but in her honor, I'm changing objectionable fact number two and from now on talking about Beverly Rae Kimes to everyone I know. *H* editor@hagerty.com


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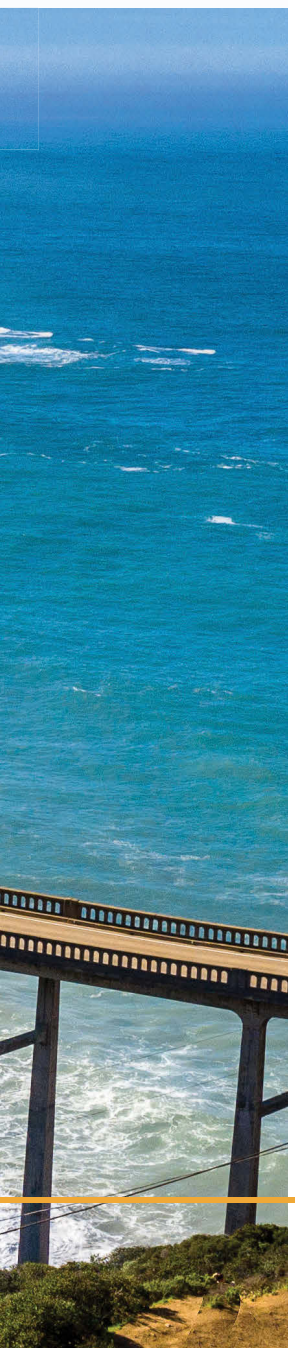

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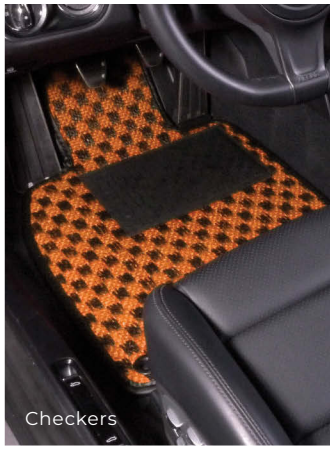



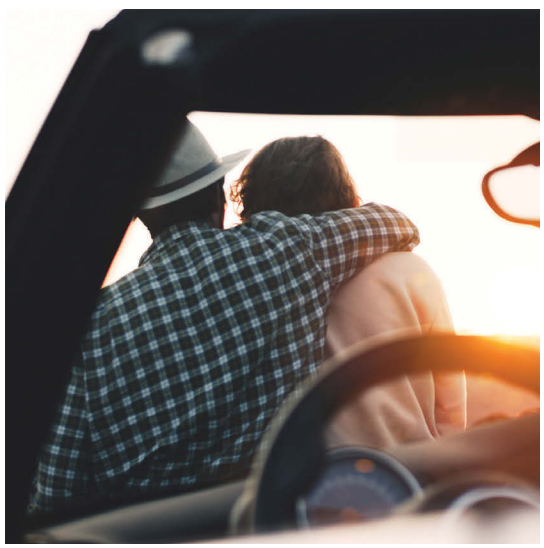

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VING

The 1955 Chrysler C-300 kicked off the muscle car era.

Words by **David Zenlea** Photos by **James Lipman**



TIME WAITS for no one. It certainly wasn't waiting for us on a Thursday morning last fall at Ace Speedway. The 4/10-mile oval in Altamahaw, North Carolina, built back in 1956, is a field of dreams for anyone who appreciates stock car racing, but the people wrenching in the infield were too busy prepping for a slate of races to pay any mind to the Not From Heres admiring the track and vintage signage. No, they were not aware that we were planning to shoot a magazine story here, and no, we can't just sneak in for a few minutes. A Camaro-bodied stock car in the pits agreed, firing up and settling into an idle that sounded like an artillery barrage.

But then, into the divide, glided our subject car, a 1955 Chrysler C-300. Not *a* 300, actually, but *the*, as in the first production version ever built of what is often called the first muscle car. Morning sunlight glinted off polished chrome. Hard squints from the infield gave way to respectful "Hooo boys" and "No sh*t, is it...?"

The Chrysler, not for the first time in its history, made everyone stop and pay attention.

ALTHOUGH THE 300 looks at home on an old racetrack, especially with its livery (more on that in a bit), the car in truth belongs to a faraway time and place: 1950s Detroit.

Most of us don't remember the '50s. This is true in the grim statistical sense: Americans born in that decade or earlier account for less than a fifth of the current U.S. population, and most of those are baby boomers whose memories of the decade are childhood flashes of *Buck Rogers* TV episodes and elementary school duck-and-cover drills. Yet even when the '50s were recent history, they tended to get refracted through the tumult and change that followed. By the early 1970s, the decade had been flattened in the cultural consciousness to Elvis, poodle skirts, and waitresses on roller skates. A more innocent time, wiped free of social strife. Hence, the television series *Happy Days*.

These prejudices play into perceptions of Detroit cars from the era. They are broadly celebrated for their style, yet they are also, with few exceptions, given less attention (read: are worth less money) than what followed. Hagerty's index of 1950s American cars, which includes several Chrysler 300-series cars, has declined nearly 15 percent in the past 10 years. During that same time, our index of muscle cars has risen 8 percent.

The irony is that much of the disruption and dynamism we associate with the 1960s and later actually belong to the 1950s: The Beatles and the Rolling Stones filled their early albums with covers of Little Richard and Chuck Berry; American soldiers started dying in Vietnam in '56; the Civil Rights Movement had reached fever pitch by '55, with bus boycotts in Montgomery.

So it is with cars. This was the decade that gave us not only the Hemi that powers the 300 on these pages, but the American car—and the American car industry—as we all know it. It's when "...the high-compression engines, the suspension systems, the automatic, and the power assists were developed, and more important, made to work," wrote longtime *New York Times* journalist Jerry Flint in his book, *The Dream Machine*, which cataloged the era.

There were profound changes in how cars were put together, as well. Automakers had in the previous decade morphed into the Arsenal of Democracy. In the '50s, they raced to stand up new factories in the style of the sprawling, single-story facilities that had churned

"Race on Sunday, sell on Monday" really meant something in 1955. Here, driver Brewster Shaw waits for a speed run at Daytona in the very 300 we drove 70 years later.

Photo courtesy of McCandless Collection



out bombers during the war, located strategically along newly built highways and filled with automated tooling.

The catch was that deploying all this new technology required enormous investments that only enormous companies could make. "The scramble to automate production crushed independent automakers," wrote historian Thomas Sugrue, whose book, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, examines changes and tensions in 1950s Detroit. A colossus like General Motors could snap up farmland all over the country and dot it with state-of-the-art assembly lines; smaller competitors remained tied to dated, multistory factories crowded near Detroit's riverfront, supplied by small tool-and-die shops and reliant on skilled laborers.

Thus, whereas the '50s were a golden age for the biggest players, for the rest, it was an unprecedented age of extinction. At the end of World War II, close to a dozen major American automakers resumed production of new cars. By 1955, according to a story that year in *The Saturday Evening Post*, just five companies were building cars in any real numbers and two "Goliaths," General Motors and Ford, accounted for 84 out of every 100 cars sold in the United States. They were able to leverage their manufacturing advantages by building cars in huge numbers, then undercutting the price of smaller competitors. Storied companies like Packard, Hudson, and Nash were either forced into mergers (Studebaker-Packard, American Motors Corporation) in frantic efforts to survive.









The C-300 is remembered as the first muscle car, and indeed the Hemi engine fits the description, but its finely crafted leather and chrome detailing more closely foreshadow high-performance luxury cars like the Cadillac V-series.





The big selling point, both in ’55 and today, **is the engine**.

Chrysler was by this point a significant enough player that the term “Big Three” had entered the lexicon, yet it was an order of magnitude smaller than the other two. It had been able to introduce some new technologies, such as power steering, but lagged on others, such as fully automatic transmissions and single-piece curved windshields. And although it invested $500,000,000 in new plants and tooling in the decade after World War II (more than $6 billion in 2026 dollars), its manufacturing footprint was older than GM and Ford’s. Sugrue noted that by 1960, Chrysler had become the city of Detroit’s largest employer, a dubious distinction reflective of the fact that its competitors had moved elsewhere. (Although the ’50s were supposedly a golden age for Detroit carmakers, the city itself lost more than 100,000 manufacturing jobs over the course of the decade.)

Compounding these challenges, automakers found themselves in the then-novel position of having to convince people who already had a newer car to buy another. The incredible sales growth of the late 1940s was already sputtering in the early 1950s and then stalled outright. “Nobody thought the postwar sellers’ market would last forever,” noted *The Saturday Evening Post* in ’55. GM and Ford, thanks to their cost-of-labor advantages, were able to lower prices to keep sales soaring. Chrysler, unable to keep pace, bore the brunt of the decline: Its sales in 1954 plummeted 38 percent.

THE 1955 Chrysler C-300, tasked with reviving Chrysler’s fortunes, looks and feels caught between eras. The design, penned under the leadership of Virgil Exner, who had recently joined Chrysler from Studebaker, looked new in a way few cars before or since really do. The 1949–1954 Chryslers, like many first-generation postwar cars, had seemed almost deliberately dowdy—still clinging to Depression and wartime notions of virtuous restraint. The ’55, marketed as the “100 Million Dollar Look,” gleefully threw off those shackles. The C-300’s squat stance and narrow greenhouse seem to take a note from the hot-rodders who’d been chopping sections out of the roofs of their 1940s Mercurys, while voluptuous fenders and vestigial fins at the taillights hint at what was to come.

Things would get much wilder as the decade progressed. As if to illustrate that point, not long after our C-300 was unloaded at the track, its owner, Mike McCandless, drove up in a 1959 DeSoto convertible. Its sparkling purple paint and steep tailfins had the effect of a peacock in full courtship trotting around a shy blue jay. That said, the considered glam of the C-300 has in many ways aged better than the all-out excess of its cousin. Eye of the beholder, of course.

The C-300’s interior winks at the car’s capability—the speedometer reads up to 150 mph. But the quality of its construction nods at the past. Chrysler-brand cars rolled out of an east-side Detroit assembly plant that had been built in 1904, and the dash alone, with its stitched-leather top and intricate chrome inlays, evinces the kind of skilled craftsmanship that soon disappeared on mass-production cars.

The big selling point, both in ’55 and today, is the engine. Chrysler’s 331-cubic-inch OHV V-8, replete with hemispherical cylinder heads, had debuted for 1951 with a respectable 180 horsepower, but this was the first model to realize its potential. Two four-barrel carburetors, high-flow intake and exhaust, and an aggressive camshaft pushed output to heights once unheard of in a mass-produced production vehicle. The new name emphasized the watershed number: 300, for 300 horsepower. (The car is often referred to as “C-300,” following Chrysler’s naming conventions of the time, which denoted model series with the “C” prefix. Later histories sometimes call it “300A,” retroactively recognizing it as the first of the so-called letter series cars. Period marketing materials simply call it 300.)

Whether this combination of style and power merits the moniker “The first muscle car” is up for debate—frankly, a pedantic one. Some will argue the formula was only truly created in the ’60s with the GTO; others might insist it’s at least as old as the 1914 Stutz Bearcat. What’s beyond question is that the Chrysler C-300 was on the bleeding edge of a new paradigm: Performance, which had to that point been largely reserved for the rich or, alternatively, achieved by hot-rodders in back-alley speed shops, was now a marketing tool to

North Carolina's Ace Speedway, where we took most of our photos, is a 1950s relic that's still running strong—just like our C-300.

the masses. A very effective one at that. Chrysler had record production in the first quarter of 1955, according to a story that year in *The New York Times*, and increased market share by 63 percent over the previous year.

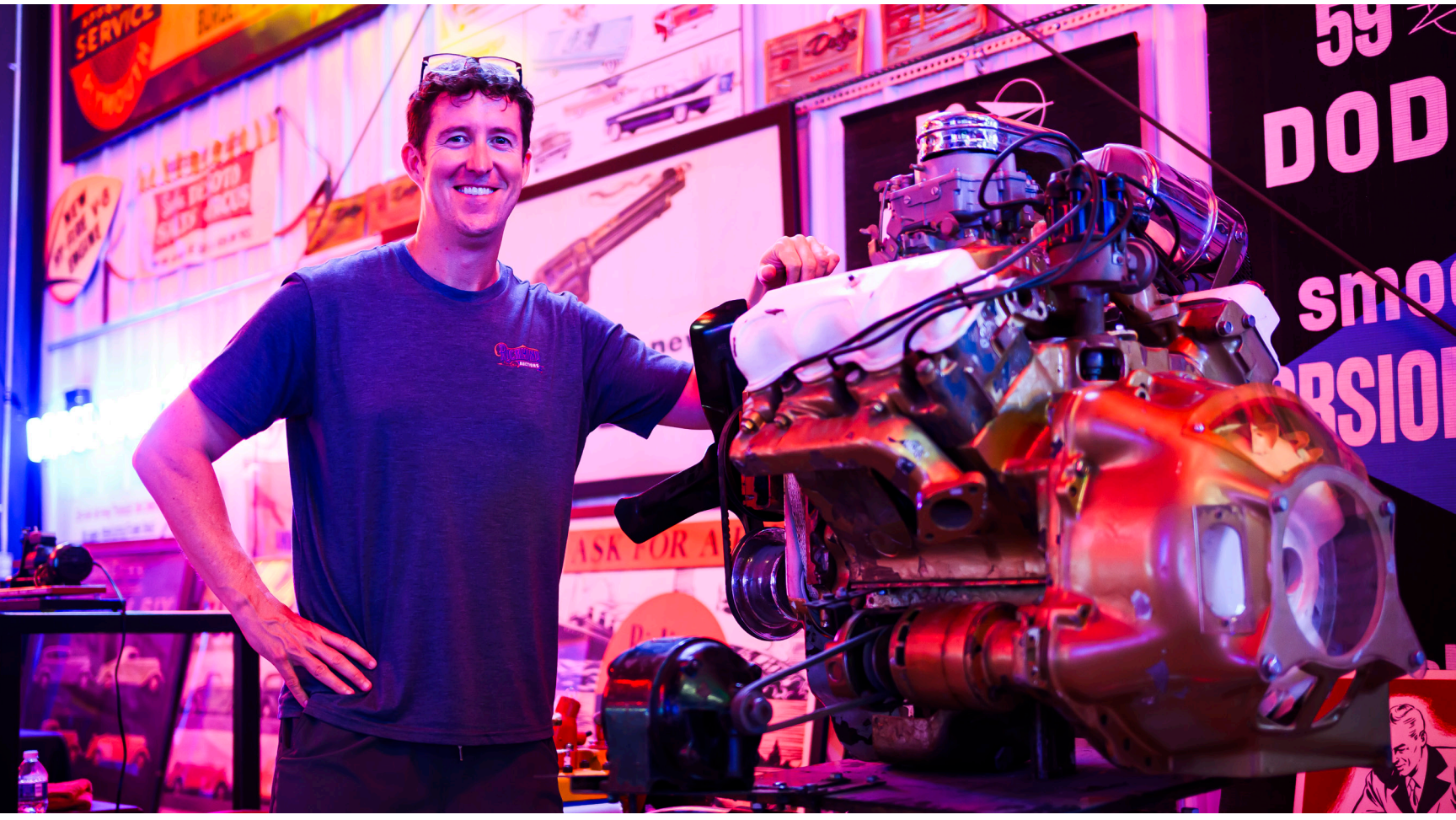
"SO... DID YOU like driving it? Did you want one?" That'd be editor-in-chief Larry Webster, politely interrupting the history lesson with pertinent questions. Pertinent and maybe a bit loaded. The common dig on big old American cars from the 1950s is that for all their beauty and significance, they're not much good on modern roads.

Said reputation is, broadly speaking, unfair, and largely derives from the fact that many of the 1950s classics still on the road are poorly maintained. Even the ones that look cherry tend to be driven sparingly, such that making sure all the unsexy suspension bits are fresh is rarely a priority. To wit: Prior to writing this story, I got a short stint behind the wheel of the 1955 Chrysler C-300 in Stellantis' corporate heritage collection. It was gorgeous, but I found myself wondering how anyone ever drove it in traffic, let alone found it sporty. Steering was squirmy. The brakes, a mere suggestion.

McCandless' C-300 technically lives in a museum—his own. Yet he is hardly your typical collector of 1950s metal, and this is hardly a typical C-300. McCandless, a 50-something entrepreneur who by appearances and boyish enthusiasm could pass as 30-something, has assembled a sprawling, Mopar-heavy collection that spans from sought-after late-1960s muscle cars to modern-era dragsters with plenty of misfit toys in between. He also has assembled significant vehicles raced by his father, legendary NHRA racer Herb McCandless (aka "Mr. 4 Speed"). When we walked by a pro-stock 1972 Dodge Demon, Mike warned us not to lean on it—the sheetmetal had been dipped in acid to reduce weight and has roughly the structural integrity of double-ply Charmin.

The heart of his collection is a parade of 1950s machines, including that gleaming purple DeSoto and several Chrysler 300 letter cars. "Fifty-five to '61 is my wheelhouse," he said. VIN 01 '55 is the crown jewel, fresh off a concours-level restoration and typically occupying its own corner of his sprawling garage. When we first approached McCandless about the prospect of


CHRYSLER
CHRYSLER



"The 1950s **were all about excitement**, having fun."

driving it for this story, he was refreshingly nonchalant. "No *Dukes of Hazzard* jumps?" he quipped. "We'll sort the car [before the shoot], but I'm not worried."

He was right: There was nothing to worry about. What stood out most, in the first few minutes of driving it, is how little stood out. Many vehicles from the pre- and immediate postwar period require some amount of training to operate today—be it the nuances of an unsynchronized gearbox or when and where to move various levers to adjust throttle and spark. In contrast, I'm pretty sure my kids' babysitter, who recently earned her learner's permit, could figure out the Chrysler. Simply shift to "D" and get going. The thin-rimmed steering wheel whirls around easily but isn't comically boosted, and it tracks accurately with the front tires. The brakes are soft by modern standards but not spookily so. Jerry Flint argued in his book, *The Dream Machine*, that "the automobile became a trustworthy machine in this Golden Age." At the wheel of this Chrysler that was expertly returned to factory specification, it's hard to disagree.

But is this 300-hp Dream Machine fast? Well... sorta. The main limitation here is clearly the automatic transmission. Two gears aren't sufficient to realize the Hemi's full potential. Period performance tests pegged 0-to-60 mph in about 10 seconds, serious speed in the era and more than enough to keep pace with traffic today, but admittedly not the stuff of YouTube Ultimate Drag Races. As the performance wars heated up, letter cars could be special ordered with manual transmissions to go along with ever more powerful Hemis. With the right tune, they could be legit racing machines—someone in the infield at Ace Speedway noted they once set up a 300D as a drag racer. Yet it's not hard to see why many enthusiasts gravitate to the outré Mopar muscle cars that followed in the 300's wake,

Mike McCandless poured time and money into the 300's restoration—but refreshingly isn't precious about it.



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McCandless has curated a collection devoted to the history of Chrysler's various brands (including DeSoto), as well as to the career of his father, drag-racing luminary Herb McCandless. (For more on "Mr. 4 Speed," check out this documentary.)



If you think ’50s cars are no fun to drive, then you haven’t driven a perfect one, like this 300.

just like you can’t blame late ’60s teenagers for preferring Jimi Hendrix’s distorted wails to Chuck Berry’s precise pickings.

McCandless brings a different perspective. Like many who have spent lots of time in and around purpose-built racing cars, he has a kind of wan indifference to fast road cars—his daily driver is a minivan. He thinks speed is beside the point when it comes to collecting. “You’re not going to go fast in an old car,” he said. In any event, the C-300’s shortcomings compared with 1960s muscle fades when you zoom out to the present, with its 815-hp Mustangs and 1064-hp Corvettes. The very notion of the C-300’s obsolescence has, in a sense, become obsolete.

“They’re smile cars,” said McCandless. “The 1950s were all about excitement, having fun.”

A FEW YEARS before the C-300 debuted, Detroit homemaker Vicki Wood went to see a “powder puff” (all-female) race with her husband, Clarence “Skeeter” Wood. Like so many in her generation, she had seen a lot in a short time—her first husband had been killed in Germany during the war and now she was raising four stepchildren. She had never, however, participated in motorsports. Still, after taking it in, she was convinced she could do better.

“The women in that race were so bad,” she later told *Autoweek*. “They were all over the track, running into the wall and all that sort of stuff. I said to Skeeter, ‘If I couldn’t drive any better than that, I wouldn’t be out there.’”

Skeeter, who had some experience behind the wheel himself, put that claim to the test. The next week, he brought Vicki back to the same speedway and directed her to a 1937 Dodge in the pits. She came in ninth. The next night, she competed in a powder puff race and came in first. She started racing men, and beat them too, earning mentions in the *Detroit Free Press* (“Weaker Sex Vie at Flat Rock,” declared one headline). According to designer Peter Stevens, who penned an admiring tribute to Wood for Collier Media after her death in 2020, her husband then managed to bring all this to the attention of Chrysler’s media relations department.

It was dawning on automakers around this time that if they had any hope of maintaining stratospheric



DRIVESHARE owner Bonnie from Phoenix AZ,
and her 1973 VW Super Beetle, known as 'Lucy'.

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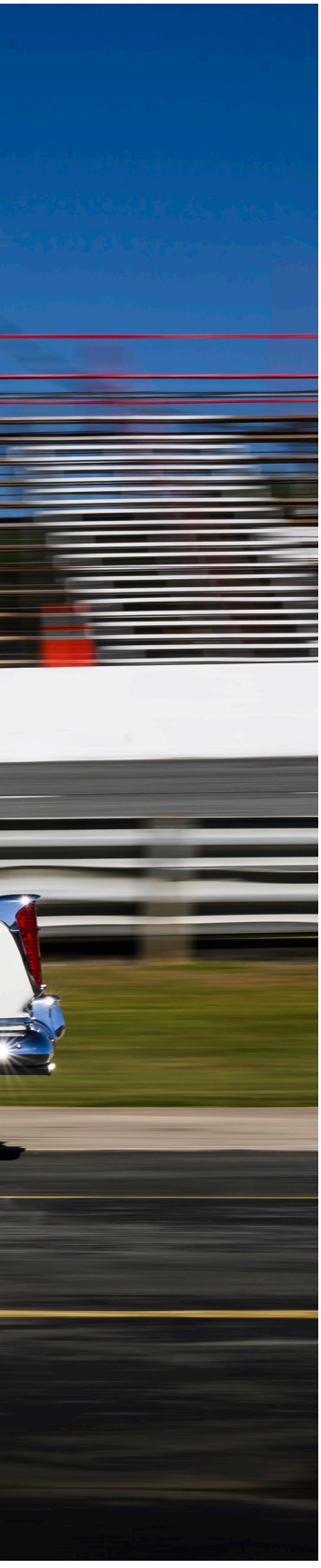
After putting down triple-digit speeds at Daytona with drivers Brewster Shaw and Vicki Wood at the wheel, the Chrysler was sold off as a normal new car. McCandless bought it in 2019 and was in touch with Wood before her death in 2020.



Time can glide by so quietly you barely notice or it can sweep by with a thudding roar. **But it's always moving.**

postwar sales, they needed to speak to previously untapped audiences, including women. The same year the C-300 debuted, Dodge introduced a model called "La Femme," complete with Heather Rose paint and interior fabric fashioned after rosebuds.

A fast-driving housewife from Detroit was thus a marketing dream. Chrysler sent the very first C-300 off the line to a dealer in Daytona Beach, Florida, right in time for Speedweek. With Wood behind the wheel, the C-300 stormed the beach at 125.838 mph, good for second place in Class 4 for U.S. Stock Production Cars.

The antics captured the attention of Lee Petty, who was supposed to compete the same week in the Grand National Division (now known as Cup Series) with a measly 250-hp Hemi. Chrysler hastily swapped the C-300's engine, along with its front end and associated badging, onto Petty's car, which went on to take second place. (McCandless notes that if you study old pictures of Petty's car in that race, you'll spot the subtle trim misalignments.)

Wood returned to Daytona in subsequent years, campaigning several 300 letter cars. When the new Speedway opened in 1959, Wood was supposed to be on it. When she attempted to get to the track, she was purportedly stopped by officials who said women weren't allowed in the pit area, at which point none other than NASCAR founder Bill France intervened. "Vicki Wood is not a woman," he roared. "She's a driver, and she's allowed in the pits." Wood quit racing in the early 1960s, in large part because men started refusing to compete against her, and went back to being an unassuming housewife. "If I had not been told what she did, I'd never have known," said her grandson, Neil Wood. "She was just Grandma."

The '55 also returned to civilian life. Post-race, the body components were put back in order, but not the engines, such that to this day, the C-300 has Petty's original block, marked "special" on the side (it has since been upgraded to 300-hp spec). The car went back to the Daytona Beach dealership, which unceremoniously sold it to a man in West Virginia. From the 1970s, it passed through the hands of several collectors, finally landing with McCandless in 2019.

Wood lived to 101, long enough to see a woman secure a full-time ride for a NASCAR Sprint Cup team (Danica Patrick in 2012)—and to be in touch with McCandless during restoration of her 300. "I still have her voicemail saved on my phone," he said.



VICKI WOOD

CA. 1958
DAYTONA BEACH

The restoration was extensive and expensive. McCandless admits the chrome alone could have been the total bill for many cars. For many 1950s classics, these costs have become tough to justify. Hagerty's price guide puts the going rate for a 1955 C-300 in "good" condition at $40,000, and even examples restored to concours-grade barely clear $100,000. On the other hand, that means a running, driving, presentable classic from this era can be yours for less than what people are currently paying for certain 1990s and 2000s sports cars.

Such estimates go out the window when terms like "first one built" and "racing provenance" enter the conversation. Keeping the significance and likely value in mind, I made no effort to drive like Vicki Wood at Ace Speedway and instead concentrated on steering the C-300 clear of the marbles in the banking. The car seemed happy just to be out and about, its Hemi burbling politely through dual exhaust tips and running without incident the entire day. The Camaro stock car waited respectfully as we ran our laps. Then, as we parked in the pits for more photos, it was off, drowning out our conversation. Time is like that. It can glide by so quietly you barely notice, or it can sweep by with a thudding roar. But it's always moving. *H* dzenlea@hagerty.com



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DODGE v. FORD







Over a century ago, an epic grudge match raged in Detroit.



Words by
Kirk Seaman

WHEN FRENCH officer Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac planted the royal banner of France on the banks of *détroit* (French for "strait") on July 24, 1701, he couldn't possibly have imagined the wheels he was setting in motion.

Four wheels, to be precise.

Those wheels (wire-spoke bicycle wheels, in fact) were attached to a wobbly, baby buggy–like contraption with a tiny two-cylinder engine good for a wheezy 4 horsepower. Yet when Henry Ford grabbed the engine's flywheel, gave it a spin, and fired up his creation in the wee hours of June 4, 1896, he might as well have set off a bomb. Detroit—and the world—would never be the same.

By 1900, Detroit had evolved into a gorgeous and sophisticated city, with Beaux-Arts architecture lining French-inspired, wide avenues and boulevards arranged in an elegant radial, hub-and-spoke layout. Designer Augustus Woodward—today honored by the city's most famous thoroughfare, Woodward Avenue—took inspiration from the streetscapes of Paris, all of which earned Detroit the nickname "the Paris of the Midwest."

The decorum of those quiet streets, however, was about to be shattered.

For the first two decades of the 20th century, Detroit was as lawless as the Wild West and as innovative as Silicon Valley, dominated by swashbuckling, fearless founders who stood to make unimaginable millions producing a revolutionary new technology: the automobile.

In the beginning, there were Henry, brilliant yet deeply flawed, and his earliest suppliers, brothers John and Horace Dodge, who owned one of the best machine shops in the Midwest. The three men were studies in opposites, and throughout their entire relationship, they never got along. Henry was famously a teetotaler and often railed against the evils of alcohol, whereas the Dodge boys never passed up the chance to throw back a drink or two. Or six.

They were different physically, too. Henry, thin as a rail, was constantly in motion, with piercing eyes. Throughout his life, he stayed active and lean, with his appearance often described as "youthful" and "energetic" even into his 80s. John and Horace, by contrast, were stocky, red-headed rabble-rousers who chugalugged whatever got them drunkest the fastest, their faces often puffy from late nights spent drinking and carousing. John was four years older than Horace and oversaw their company's finances and contracts, while Horace was a mechanical genius with dirt permanently under his nails and grease on his hands, as if he were being fingerprinted for a crime. Despite these differences (or perhaps because of them), with Henry's vision for the automobile matched with the manufacturing capabilities of the Dodge boys, anything was possible.

"Crazy Henry."

That's what the neighbors up and down Bagley Avenue in Detroit called him. "Crazy" because of his all-consuming, relentless obsession with creating a gas-powered motor car. When he wasn't working as chief engineer at the Edison Illuminating Company of Detroit, Henry spent every waking hour in the brick shed behind the house he rented with his wife, Clara ("Callie" was his pet name for her), and their only child, Edsel, born in November 1893. Most times, Henry would ignore the mockery. When he did deign to acknowledge it, he would tap his temple with his finger, nod slowly, and reply, "Yes, I'm crazy," a slightly amused smile crossing his face. "Crazy like a fox."

Two businesses were founded and failed before Henry proved his neighbors wrong, but the third time was indeed the charm: The Ford Motor Company was incorporated on June 16, 1903, and although it suffered initial growing pains, within a few years its success was assured. There were Henry plus 11 shareholders—a small but influential group of Detroit businessmen who provided the seed money Ford needed to start his company—two of whom were John and Horace Dodge, who served as the company's largest supplier. At Ford Motor Company's inception, its automobiles were actually more Dodge than Ford. Between 1903 and 1914, the Dodge brothers supplied every major component of a Ford automobile—up to and including the Model T—except for the wheels, tires, and bodies. By mid-1914, the annual production of Dodge's Hamtramck factory was prodigious: 240,000 transmissions, 225,000 rear axles, 190,000

Photos by Getty Images and courtesy of The Henry Ford





From 1903 to 1914, Dodge supplied every major component of a Ford except for **the wheels, tires, and bodies**.

front axles, 205,000 crankshafts, 855,000 connecting rods, 412,000 U-joints, and another dozen major parts or assemblies.

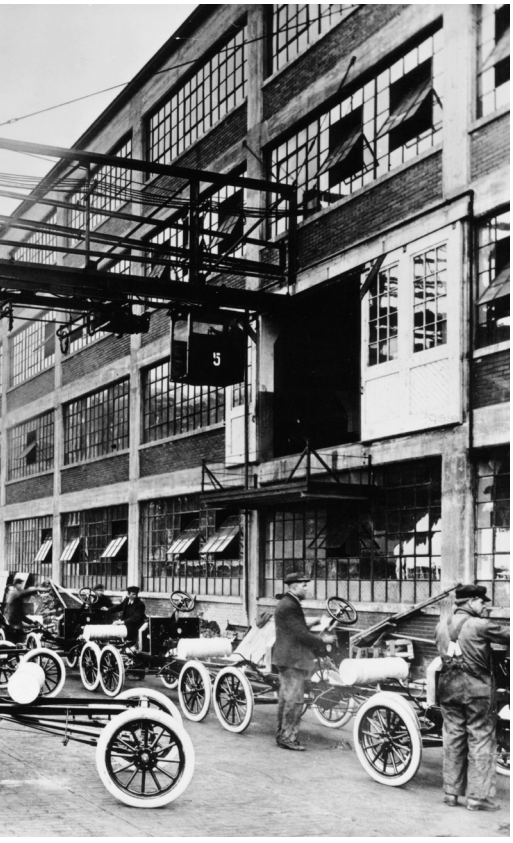
From the beginning, however, Henry was at war with his shareholders. He advocated for a light, inexpensive car with a four-cylinder engine, whereas the other shareholders wanted a big, expensive car with a six-cylinder engine. Henry would not be denied. In January 1907, he began work in a secret shop on the third floor of the Ford factory on Piquette Avenue in Detroit. The shop was outfitted with a few tools, a chalkboard for sketching ideas, and a rocking chair that had once belonged to Henry's mother. He would sit in that chair and rock for hours, surrounded by a few select workers, overseeing and discussing the development of his great invention: the Model T.

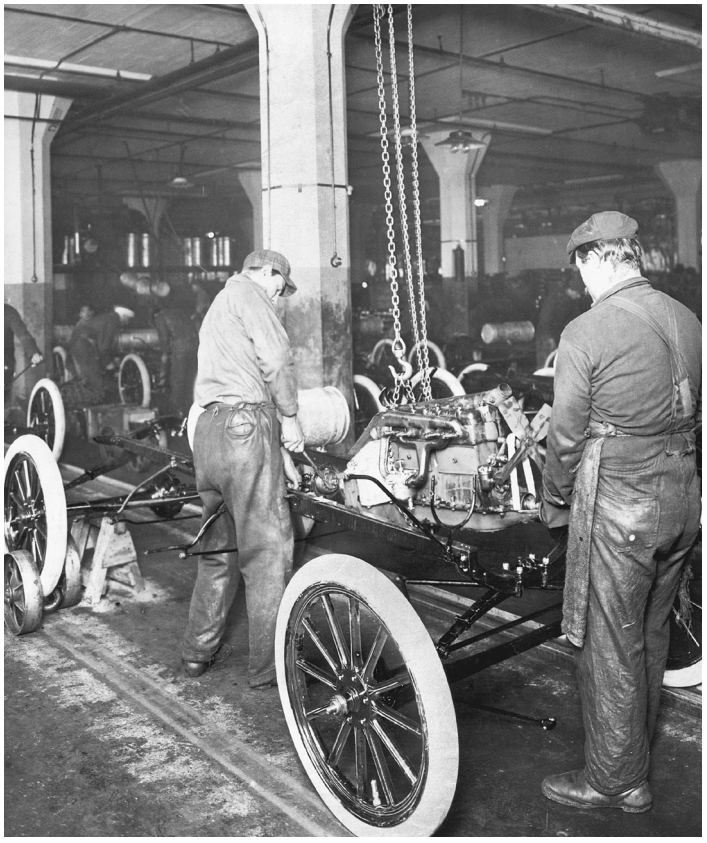
By the spring of 1908, workers had completed a few Ts for testing. The car was everything Henry had conceptualized, bold and brilliant in its simplicity. The T was light, durable, and easy to operate and repair. Most important, at $850 for the five-seat touring version and $825 for the two-seat runabout, it was roughly half the price of the competition. The Model T went on sale on September 27, 1908. Only 11 cars were sold in October, but by December, 200 cars had been sold. The production numbers were limited by the inefficient layout of the Piquette plant. The second floor housed light machining and sub-assembly, while engines and axles were assembled on the ground floor. By January 1910, the purpose-built factory at Highland Park was ready for the next phase of Henry's vision: perfecting the moving assembly line.

The exact source of inspiration for the moving assembly line is not clear—some claim it came from the meatpacking industry, while Henry himself claimed the idea came to him when he visited a watch factory and observed the use of a staged assembly process—but the result cannot be denied. In August 1913, before the concept was implemented, it took an average of 12.5 working hours to produce a Model T. A year later, after the moving assembly line was in full swing, it took just 1.5 working hours. From 1903 to 1908, Ford had built less than 10 percent of the cars in the U.S. By 1914, it had produced almost half of them.

Though the production numbers are staggering, they came at a

Photos by Getty Images





BIRTH OF THE MOVING ASSEMBLY LINE

Renowned architect Albert Kahn designed Ford's Highland Park factory. Its glass roof and walls of windows prompted its nickname, the Crystal Palace. The additional light and ventilation yielded a more tolerable work environment, while the widely spaced concrete columns allowed more space for machines and workers.

very human cost. The work on the assembly line was viciously repetitive, turning people into mindless drones and causing incredibly high turnover rates in Ford's workforce.

By 1913, accountants determined the company was spending $3 million annually in training new employees. Ford's greatest innovation, the moving assembly line, had become the company's greatest curse. The solution: raise wages to $5 per day. Exactly who came up with the inspiration for this transformative event is unclear. One version credits Ford's general manager, James Couzens, with the idea. Another version, related in the reminiscences of other employees, credits Henry. Suffice it to say, ultimately both men would have had to approve the policy, otherwise it would not have been adopted.

There were a couple of long strings attached. First, Henry insisted that the wage be considered profit-sharing so that it could be withdrawn if the company suffered a downturn. If a worker earned $2.30 a day under the old pay structure, for example, they still earned that wage. If a worker met all of the company's requirements, they earned a daily bonus of $2.70. To ensure the workers met those requirements, Ford established the Sociological Department to monitor employees' behavior outside the workplace.

Workers had to abstain from alcohol, not abuse their families, not take in boarders, keep their homes clean, and contribute regularly to a savings account. Ford inspectors visited workers' homes and recorded the general living conditions. If "violations" were identified, the inspectors directed the families to resources offered through the company to resolve them. Only after these problems were corrected did the employee receive his full bonus.

The announcement came on January 5, 1914. In a single stroke, Ford had not only created the American middle class but also a whole new group of customers. The people who built the Model T could now afford to buy one.

On January 6, several thousand men showed up at Highland Park looking for work. The situation quickly spiraled out of control. Riots erupted, and the crowds were dispersed with fire hoses in the icy January weather. Ford announced that it would only hire workers who had lived in Detroit for at least six months, and the situation slowly came under control. The system worked; absenteeism dropped from 10 percent per day to less than 0.5 percent. Detroit's population exploded. In 1900, it had 285,704 residents. In 1910, that number was 465,766, making it the ninth-largest city in the U.S. By 1920, there were 993,678 residents, more than doubling over the decade.

The other Detroit automakers accused Henry of being a traitor to his class and that he would destroy the industry. The issue went from being a local sensation to a national one. In one editorial, *The New York Globe* opined, "It has all the advantages and none of the disadvantages of socialism." A reporter for *The New York Times* who was present when publisher Adolph Ochs received the news heard Ochs say of Henry, "He's crazy, isn't he? Don't you think he's crazy?"

Henry's old neighbors on Bagley Avenue knew the truth.

Ford's sales surged, powered in part by the Model T's pricing—which dropped to $550 in 1913 to $360 in 1916. It became a virtuous



ON TRACK The Dodge Brothers test track was a pioneering facility to gauge a vehicle's durability, speed, and hill-climbing abilities. It was part of the Dodge Main manufacturing complex located in Hamtramck and permitted immediate testing of new models.

circle—the cheaper the car, the greater the sales, and the greater the sales, the cheaper the car. Henry once quipped, "Every time I lower the price by a dollar, I get a thousand new buyers."

The money came in torrents. The investors had already seen a return on their initial investments of nearly 300 percent. Dividends were $500,000 in 1908, the year the Model T was introduced, and its sales proved to be rocket fuel for the company's profits. Dividends shot up to $3.6 million in 1909—the Model T's first full year of production—then $2.3 million in 1910. By October 1915, a total of $41 million in special dividends had been paid.

As the dividends went higher, so did Henry's blood pressure. He believed that anyone who wasn't making a hands-on contribution to the manufacturing process was, in his mind, a "parasite." Adding to his frustration, the Dodge brothers had launched their own automobile company in 1914. Highland Park's manufacturing capabilities made Dodge's services redundant, ending the lucrative supplier contracts. Henry decided to turn off the taps. In 1916, he shocked the business world with the bombshell news that Ford dividends—which had totaled $60 million the previous year—would be restricted to a pitifully scant $1.2 million annually. This meant that the brothers' 10 percent of dividends, which had previously been worth upward of $6 million annually, would now be worth no more than $120,000 per year going forward. Henry hated the idea of his company's profits directly bankrolling the brothers' automaking venture.

He especially hated that within a year of its introduction, Dodge Brothers' new car, the Model 30-35, ranked third in sales despite its price of $785 compared with $490 for the T. The Model 30-35 was vastly superior to the T in several crucial areas. It had a more powerful 35-hp four-cylinder engine, ran on a 12-volt system versus a 6-volt, featured a starter-generator instead of a difficult hand-crank starter, and had a sturdy all-steel body rather than the T's creaky wood-frame construction.

Henry wanted to stop funding the operations of the Dodges and enrichening the rest of the shareholders. Publicly, he stated his desire was "to employ still more men, to spread the benefits of this industrial system to the greatest possible number, to help them build up their lives and their homes. To do this we are putting the greatest share of our profits back in the business."

While perhaps true to some degree, Henry's generosity should not be overestimated. With the shareholders out of the picture, Henry could funnel all Ford Motor Company's profits into building his vision of a fully integrated industrial complex—what would become the River Rouge complex—where raw materials would enter one end of the factory and emerge as complete cars out of the other. From there, he could ship his cars to any port he pleased: through the Great Lakes to Cleveland, Chicago, Buffalo, and beyond. This set him on a collision course with the shareholders, and only Henry could emerge the winner. But the brothers wanted their money; not only were they ready for a fight, they welcomed it.

Photo courtesy of the Chrysler Archives

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MODEL 30 The Dodge Brothers offered an all-steel convertible sedan as part of its Model 30 lineup. The car was superior to the Model T but cost almost double the price of the Ford.

Photo courtesy of the Robert Tate Collection

It was time for a lawsuit... ***Dodge v. Ford* was on**.

Fighting, fortunately, was in their nature. Their specialty was busting up local watering holes; on one memorable occasion, John demanded that the proprietor of one establishment dance on a table for John's amusement. When the proprietor demurred, John pulled a revolver and snarled, "I mean what I say and I want you to get up on that table and dance!" So dance he did. Was this Detroit or Deadwood?

The next day, the bar owner showed up at Dodge's office with his attorney. "Mr. Dodge," the attorney began. "Here's a man who's going to make trouble unless you do the right thing. You threw glasses last night and broke the bar mirror. In addition, you pulled a gun on him, which is against the law; you had no business carrying one, which is another thing. This man is sore and mad, and as his attorney, I'm going to see that you do something or else we'll sue you." John readily admitted to the accusation: "I guess that's so. I did get loaded. All right, I'll settle with him. How much does he want?" To which the attorney stated, "He wants $35,000." (Roughly $1 million today.) Dodge replied curtly, "I'll draw him a check."

The more money the brothers got, the more the brothers spent, and they had elevated spending to an art: There were multiple mansions, multiple yachts, and plenty of paintings, sculptures, and artworks to fill them. And since the brothers had canceled their supply contracts with Ford in 1913 to start their own automobile manufacturing company, they needed more cash to fund that venture. Ford was sitting on $60 million in cash; the brothers owned 10 percent of the Ford Motor Company, and they wanted the dividends owed to them. It was time for a lawsuit.

The brothers' timing put a sharp barb on their point: They filed suit on November 2, 1916, the day after Edsel Ford's wedding, which John Dodge had attended quite congenially and without a hint of what was about to go down. *Dodge v. Ford* was on.

How Henry learned of the lawsuit was brutal. He and Clara were at the train station saying farewell to Thomas Edison and his wife, who had attended Edsel's wedding. One of Ford's branch managers ran up to the group clutching the evening edition of the *Detroit Journal* and pointed excitedly at its headline, the giant letters spilling across much of the front page: "Dodge Brothers Sue Ford!" Henry's rage was incandescent. Once he had regained his composure, he decided on his response. He would plead his case in the court of public opinion.

Henry started by telephoning his friend E.G. Pipp, who, as editor-in-chief of *The Detroit News*, could publicize Ford's side of the story. Now it was the Dodges' turn to be savaged in the newspapers. "Ford makes reply to suit brought by Dodge Brothers," the headline blared. "Says present plans of expansion are only in line with past history of company. Declares that on investment of $10,000 Dodge have drawn out $5,571,500 in dividends and still have holdings that they value at $50 million." In the staged interview, Henry painted himself as a philanthropist whose primary interest was providing his customers with the cheapest car possible and his employees with good wages. In contrast, the Dodges and the rest of the shareholders were driven by greed.

"Dodge Brothers say I ought to continue to ask $440 for a car," stated Henry. "Would I be serving the interest of our firm best by holding up the price because the manufacturer of another automobile [i.e., the Dodge Brothers] wants us to, or by reducing the price in the interest of our own customers, our own employees, and our own business standing and profit?"

He summed up his position by asking rhetorically, "Did you ever before in your life hear of any concern being complained of because the goods were sold at too lower a price, as the Dodge Brothers allege we are doing?" Henry would soon get his answer.

At 9 a.m. on Tuesday, November 14, Henry walked into a small courtroom in downtown Detroit. The actual trial of *Dodge v. Ford* would not begin for months, but Henry was in attendance to testify on the issue that was of the greatest importance to him. The outcome of these preliminary hearings would determine whether Henry could move forward with his plans to expand the Rouge while he waited for the actual lawsuit to be heard.

Elliott Stevenson, attorney for the Dodges, listed their allegations, then began his attack by calling Henry to the witness stand. "*The Detroit News* seems to be your oracle for disseminating your views, and Mr. Pipp your subcounsel," he bellowed. Snatching a newspaper off the plaintiffs' table, Stevenson dramatically began to read Pipp's article, quoting Henry back to himself. "'And let me say right here that I do not believe we should make such awful profits on our car. A reasonable profit is right, but not too much. It has been my policy to force the price of the car down as fast as production would permit.'"

Stevenson asked Henry, "Is that your statement?"

"Yes," replied Henry.

"What is your policy about this business, Mr. Ford?"

"In what respect?"

"You say you do not think it is right to make such profits? What is this business being continued for, and why is it being enlarged?"

"To do as much good as possible for everybody concerned."

"What do you mean 'by doing as much good as possible'?"

"To make money and use it, give employment, and send out the car where people can use it."

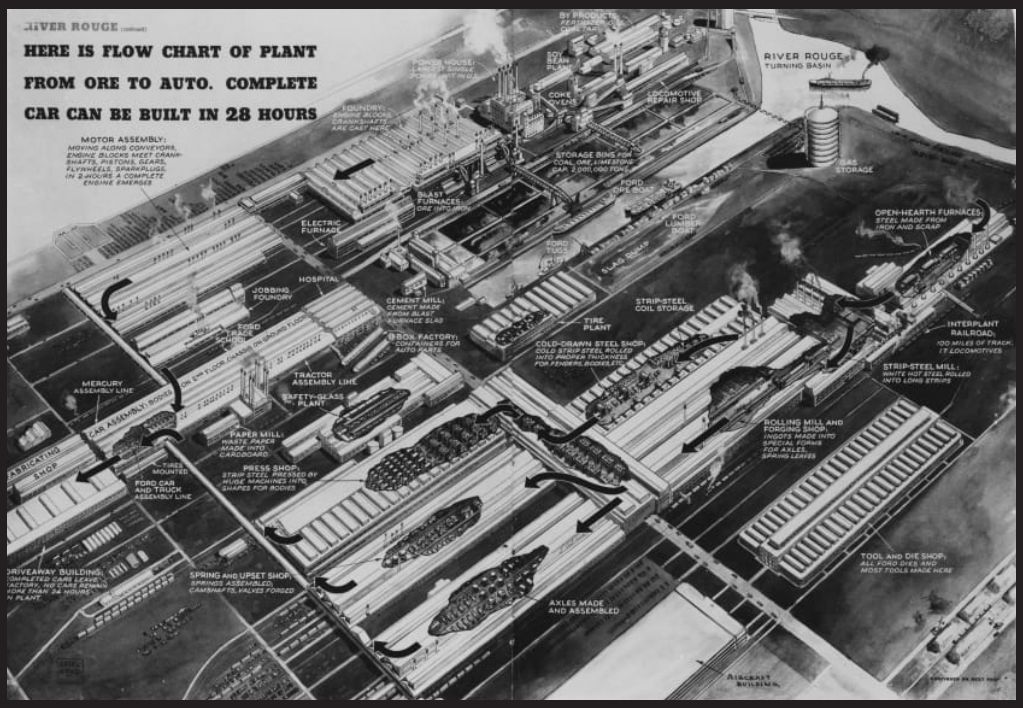
"Haven't you said you had enough money yourself and you were going to run the company hereafter to employ just as many people as you could and give them all the benefits of the high wages you pay, and give the public benefit of a low-priced car?"

Ford answered he supposed he had—"and incidentally to make money."

Stevenson pounced. "Incidentally?" he yelled.

"That's right," Henry nodded benevolently. "Business is a service, not a bonanza."

A month later in mid-December, the court issued its injunction. Ford Motor Company could not use its surplus money to build a blast furnace at the Rouge, at least until the question of dividends was settled. That verdict came on October 31, 1917. "Henry Ford Beaten in $60,000,000 Suit" read *The New York Times* the next day.



THE MIGHTY ROUGE

This diagram illustrates how Ford's River Rouge plant turned the raw materials of coal, iron ore, limestone, rubber, and sand into iron, steel, tires, glass, and, ultimately, finished automobiles.

Ford appealed to the Michigan Supreme Court. On February 7, 1919, the court issued a verdict where each side could claim victory—as well as defeat. The court determined that a business corporation was formed and run primarily for the profit of its stockholders. Although Henry's altruistic impulses were admirable, the court determined that the Ford Motor Company was prosperous enough to both expand the Rouge plant and pay large dividends at the same time. The court would not interfere with the company's plans for expansion; however, Ford must pay a reasonable dividend and decreed that $19.3 million be distributed to the company's shareholders. While the shareholders would receive their dividends, however, they couldn't outfox Crazy Henry.

A few months before the final judgment in February, Henry had announced his resignation from Ford Motor Company. When asked why, he told reporters with an air of mystery that he was leaving to "devote my time to building up other organizations with which I am connected." Rumors about his intentions ran rampant in the press, which had made a full-time business of reporting on Henry's every utterance. On March 5, 1919, a month after the Michigan Supreme Court's final verdict, Henry made the announcement the world was waiting to hear: He was starting a new business. It would build a cheaper, better car that would be half the price of the existing car—a "super" Model T. Sales of the existing Model T dropped as the public awaited this new super T, and shareholders got nervous.

Henry's next move was to begin anonymously sounding out the willingness of the other stockholders to sell their shares. Though some suspected a ruse, most believed that if Henry's intentions were serious, it would put an end to the rich dividends, the rights to which they had recently regained. Resistance collapsed, the shareholders conceded: They would sell. Upon hearing the news, Henry danced a merry jig, then later confessed to reporters, "Of course, there is no need of a new company now."

However, Henry was cash poor from paying the dividends required by the lawsuit. To buy out his shareholders, he needed money. He had never borrowed money in his life—not privately, not publicly. He had never taken a mortgage for a home, and all of the factories had been built through earnings and paying reduced dividends. In one of the earliest examples of a leveraged buyout, Ford borrowed $75 million and for a total of $105 million, Henry, Edsel, and Clara became the sole owners of the Ford Motor Company. By comparison, at the height of his involvement, John D. Rockefeller Sr. held just 30 percent of Standard Oil.

For their original investment of $10,000, the Dodge brothers had received $5.4 million in dividends from Ford and $1.7 million in profits from their contracts for manufacturing parts for Ford. With the sale of their stock, each brother received $12.5 million. But less than six months later, both brothers fell ill with pneumonia after attending the New York auto show. John, whose health was already fragile from decades of drinking, succumbed on January 14, 1920, at the age of 55.

Photo courtesy of The Henry Ford

Jay Leno's Garage





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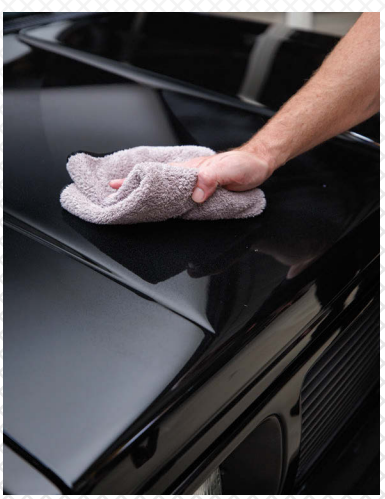

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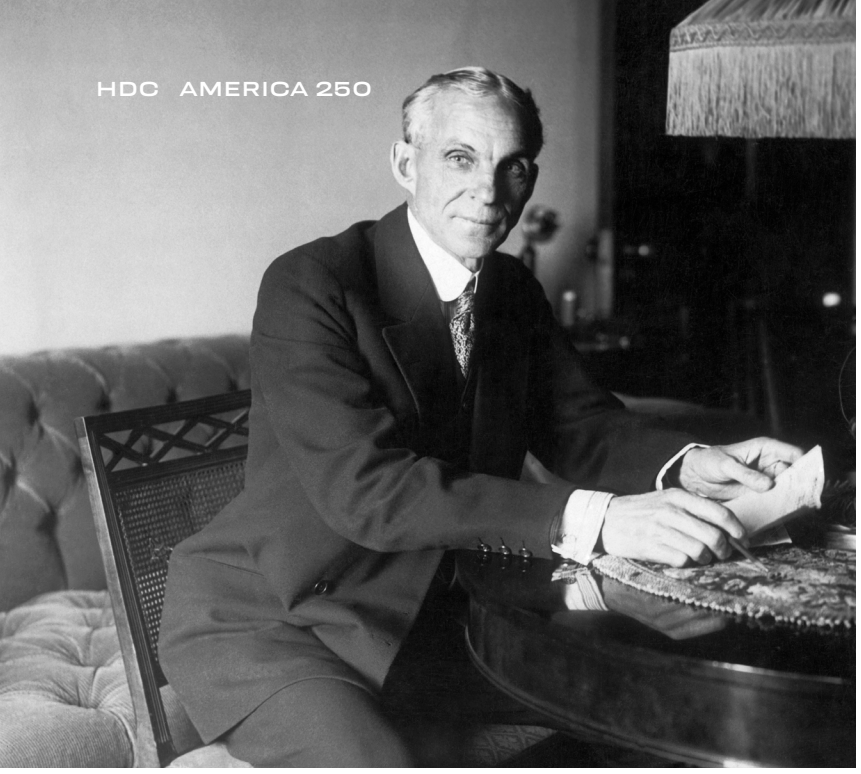



CRAZY HENRY

Those who met Henry Ford often commented on his lively, piercing eyes. History has vindicated his vision for the River Rouge plant, the ultimate example of industrial vertical integration.

Henry once quipped, "Every time I lower the price of a car by a dollar, **I get a thousand new buyers**."

Horace recovered from pneumonia but not from the death of his brother. Chronically ill throughout the remainder of 1920 and psychologically adrift from John's death, Horace saw no purpose in going on. He spent the last days of his life at his ocean-side mansion in Palm Beach, Florida, where he died on December 10, 1920, age 52. Inseparable in life, the brothers were now inseparable in death. The cause of death was listed as cirrhosis of the liver, but the world knew the truth: Horace Dodge died of a broken heart.

While the Dodge brothers were laid to rest side by side in the family mausoleum, their ghosts still hovered over the company. John's widow, Matilda, and Horace's widow, Anna, were treating the business like their private piggy bank, siphoning off dividends and demanding various funds and loans. Fortunately, the company was flourishing under the steady leadership of president and general manager F.J. Haynes and his board of directors, with sales ranking as high as third in 1921. In 1925, the two widows decided to get out of Dodge, so to speak, with a sale to the investment firm of Dillon, Read, & Company for an all-cash deal of $146 million—cited by business historians as the largest cash transaction in history up to that time.

It only took Dillon, Read three short years to run Dodge into the ground. By 1927, Dodge ranked 13th in sales and Dillon, Read was ready for an exit. Walter P. Chrysler, head of the eponymously named automaker, was ready to deal, but since he lacked cash, it would have to be purely a stock transfer. For $170 million in shares of the new Chrysler Corporation, the deal was consummated on May 28, 1928. That same year, Walter P. was named *Time* magazine's Man of the Year.

Meanwhile, the Ford Motor Company remained privately held by the Ford family until January 1956, when the company went public with an initial offering of $657 million that is considered the largest IPO of the pre-tech modern era. Shrewdly, the Ford family retained 40 percent of voting shares, enabling them to effectively control the company and its governance.

More than 100 years later, the industrial leviathan known today as the Ford Rouge Center covers 600 acres. Raw materials enter one end of the complex and vehicles emerge from the other—exactly as its creator envisioned. The Rouge has produced more than 19 million vehicles, including the Model T, the Model A, and 6.7 million Mustangs. From 1942 to 1945, the Rouge assembled jeeps, tanks, and trucks, helping Detroit earn the name the "Arsenal of Democracy" and enabling the Allies to win World War II. Today, the Rouge produces the F-Series lineup of trucks, the bestselling vehicles in America for 44 years straight, and cranked out 801,525 trucks in 2025 alone.

Crazy Henry indeed. *H* kseaman@hagerty.com

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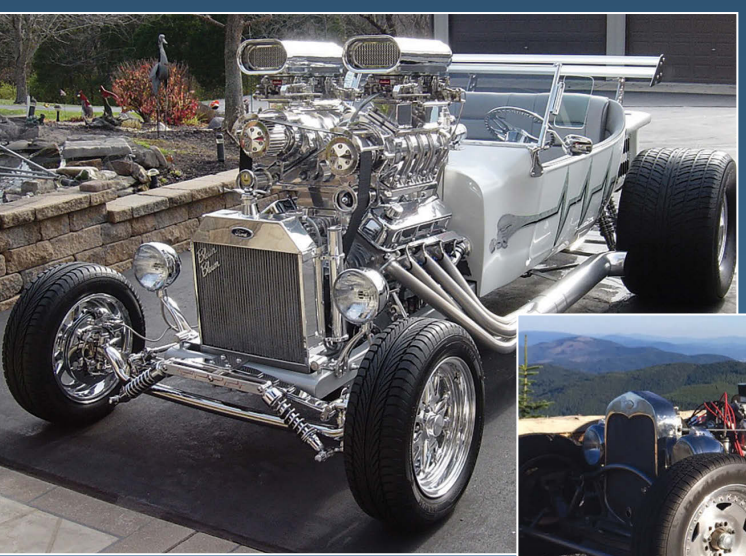





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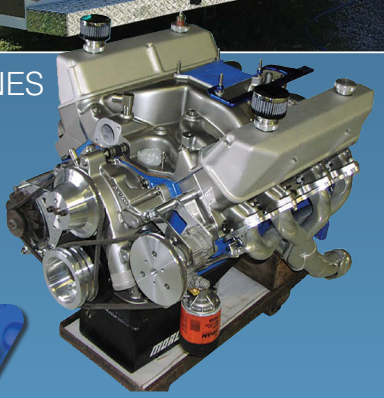

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AKA

"BIG DADDY"

94-YEAR-OLD LEGEND | FATHER OF SWAMP RAT | UFO ENTHUSIAST | AND UNEQUIVOCALLY...

THE GREATEST DRAG RACER EVER

Words by **Steven Cole Smith** Photos by **Cameron Neveu**



Photo by ISC Archives/CQ-Roll Call Group via Getty Images

Garlits at rest—an unusual sight—in his office at the Don Garlits Museum of Drag Racing in Ocala, Florida, 50 miles south of Gainesville.

WE'RE STANDING near the entrance of the Don Garlits Museum of Drag Racing, located in Ocala, Florida. It's a comprehensive, full-day history lesson, packed with dozens of famous drag racing cars, many of them driven by Garlits, known to fans as "Big Daddy"—we'll explain how he got the very appropriate nickname in a moment. We're winding up a lengthy interview with him, during which we were dazzled by his ability to recall names, places, dates, and details from a career that spans 75 years.

He is much easier to talk to than he was a few months ago. Garlits, understandably, was stone deaf, so you would shout questions. Once that no longer worked, he began using his phone, attached to an iPad—you would state your question, and the phone would transcribe it. He'd read on the iPad, and he'd answer. The process took a while. But he got a cochlear implant above his still-barely functioning right ear for Christmas, and you no longer have to shout. "He told me it was the first time he'd ever heard my voice," a young museum clerk said.

As I typically do, I'm ending the interview with a trademark boilerplate question: "Don, is there anything I haven't asked you?"

We are, incidentally, surrounded by members of the museum staff, as well as customers who did not know that their $22 admission would include an audience with Big Daddy himself. They all eavesdrop with interest.

Garlits considers my question for a moment, then takes a half-step toward me. He looks me in the eye and says, in a low, very composed growl: "You didn't ask me about the *aliens*!"

I step back, shocked and surprised, but probably not for the reason you think. Oh, I knew about the aliens, all right, and I definitely didn't ask about them. But did Garlits remember a particular story I wrote years ago? Just how good was his memory? And that almost under-his-breath growl—why did it sound so familiar? It clicked. Clint Eastwood. You know: "Go ahead. Make my day." Maybe it's a generational thing: Eastwood is 96, Garlits turned 94 in January.

Garlits' longstanding interest in aliens—extraterrestrials, flying saucers, Area 51, classified government secrets, and especially UFOs, which Garlits has personally seen four times—wasn't that big of a secret, but nobody had written much about it. Long ago, 20 years or so, I learned that in addition to the expected, brand-friendly website of www.dongarlits.com, there was a second one, www.garlitsdon.com.

Click on that one, and this is what it said: "Aliens: What You Never Really Wanted to Know! By Don Garlits, UFO Investigator." It was page after page of what he had learned in his years-long investigation—personal experiences, interviews, history—all very entertaining, and it dovetailed with his adjoining assertion that the Apollo moon landings never happened. I wrote a story for a magazine that mentioned the website, and two days after it came out, garlitsdon.com disappeared. It's still gone. Did I cancel his website? And did he remember that? Was he angry?

Don't think so. We talk about aliens, but merely friendly chitchat. Over and done. The rest of this story will be about Don Garlits, not UFO Investigator, but The Greatest Drag Racer Ever.

Big Daddy was there at the start. And against all odds, he's still here.

Garlits was born in Tampa on January 14, 1932. His father was an engineer for Westinghouse, who quit his job and moved south for his health. Growing up, Don loved cars, but it wasn't until his shop teacher brought a copy of a 1949 *Hot Rod* magazine to class that Don's imagination expanded beyond the basic cars-as-transportation concept. He took a genuine and immediate interest in the magazine's philosophy and developed a revised cars-as-hot-rods world view. Or at least a Tampa view.

Back then, drag racing was two cars, stopped at a traffic light, squealing tires down Main Street when the light turned green. You hoped there were no cops around, and you secretly prayed nothing happened that might qualify as a *Rebel Without a Cause* moment. You know—the driver's education filmstrips that showed a mother pushing a baby carriage into the intersection, then skid marks, and finally two caskets, one regular-size, one tiny. Cool guys sneered when they watched the movie, but that sort of thing sticks with you.

In June 1950, Garlits and his hot-rod buddies finally got a chance to do some informal but legitimate drag racing at the nearby Zephyrhills airport, a U.S. Army Air Force facility during WWII that was passed on to the town of Zephyrhills. Once a month, they'd close down a runway to use for drag racing.

Garlits, and his 1940 Ford convertible with a Mercury engine, was at the head of the line. By the end of the first day, the fire was lit.


Charlie Crist
U.S. SENATE
DON LISA
NO SMOKING
DON GARLITS
"THE LEG
OF DRAG RAC
OCALA, FLOR

GARLITS CONSTANTLY WENT IN SEARCH OF ONE LESS TENTH OF A SECOND, ONE MORE MILE PER HOUR.

Garlits began building engines and cars that would go faster and faster. A junkyard Cadillac engine soon replaced the Mercury in his ’40 Ford.

About that time, he and his wife, Pat—they had met at a popular lake in 1952, and were married February 20, 1953—were driving to a planned picnic near Lake Wales, just north of Sebring, when they spotted a sign that said “Drags Today,” with an arrow pointing down the dirt road leading to the drag strip. They detoured and never made it to the picnic. Garlits won his first trophy. Yes, he still has it.

If the drag-racing fire was lit in 1950, by 1954, it was raging. Garlits was never satisfied, always planning his next mechanical move. There was a ’36 Ford coupe, then a 1927 T roadster with a Mercury engine that he built under a tree in the front yard. He correctly reasoned that extra weight was a bad thing, so he stripped the T of everything but the body. Then one day, the body went.

Meanwhile, drag racing was getting respectable. The National Hot Rod Association, the drag equivalent of NASCAR, was formed by Wally Parks, then the editor of *Hot Rod* magazine. This year, the NHRA is celebrating its 75th anniversary, beginning in March with the Gatornationals in Gainesville, Florida, right up the road from Garlits’ museum.

By 1957, he and his friends had massaged their on-the-fly design into an approximation of a slingshot dragster—the driver was in the very back, legs straddling the transmission. The engine, a Chrysler Hemi, had been moved as far to the rear as it would go. Bigger tires were mounted inches from the driver. Frame rails from a junkyard ’31 Chevrolet cradled the engine and led to the skinny front tires. It did, indeed, look a little like a cocked slingshot. And like the dragsters in *Hot Rod*.

Garlits wanted a car that was proper-looking, a representative for his business, Don’s Speed Shop, which was painted in big letters on the side of the dragster. The rest of the car was gloss black, a consistent Garlits trademark, as was a gold cross painted right in front of the cockpit. On November 10, 1957, the dragster



went 176.4 mph and covered the quarter-mile in 8.79 seconds.

Garlits had built and driven the world's fastest dragster, and the first one to top 170 mph. That this happened in Florida, and not California or at least Detroit, caused much peeing of pants in the national drag-racing community. Garlits and his car were getting so much publicity that a racer from Detroit began posting disparaging comments in drag-racing publications, starting a semi-friendly feud, and claiming that Garlits was nothing but a "swamp rat" from Florida.

Garlits liked the name, and his car was christened the Swamp Rat 1. With each new car, that number would increase by one. Ed Iskenderian, who owned a camshaft-grinding company south of Los Angeles and was a legendary entrepreneur and pot-stirrer, placed ads in magazines like *Hot Rod* and racing newspapers like *Drag News* touting Garlits' ever-increasing performance benchmarks, invariably insisting that Isky Cams were one big reason for his success, especially at the expense of the California contingent. Iskenderian died in February at 104; when I talked to him last September, he told me to give Garlits his regards.

Garlits' fame spread from coast to coast, but he had yet to race farther west than Texas, and eventually he, wife Pat, and little brother Ed made the trip to California. It was humbling, a learning experience. But the next time they went back, Garlits dominated.

Garlits' fame continued to expand, though the cars slowed down—the NHRA instituted a gasoline-only rule from 1958 to 1964, but still Garlits went fast even without nitromethane. In 1962, he was racing at Indianapolis, a tough town. He'd gone there with Pat and their two young daughters, and the other racers began calling him "Daddy" Garlits. When Garlits won, the announcer, Bernie Partridge, said on the microphone, "Guess we'll have to call him 'Big Daddy' now!" The Indianapolis newspaper picked it up, and the name stuck.

For much of his career, Garlits followed the money, cherry-picking rather than chasing season championships. He raced with the NHRA, the IHRA, the AHRA, and anywhere else he felt like running: Big Daddy was always welcome. Well, by promoters; racers weren't always so happy to see him.

All the while, Garlits couldn't stop thinking, couldn't quit innovating, constantly went in search of one less tenth of a second, one more mile per hour.

Sometimes it got him in trouble. On March 8, 1970, at Lions Drag Strip outside Los Angeles, he was racing the Swamp Rat XIII, a conventional slingshot—driver in the back, engine just ahead of him, and straddling the transmission. This transmission was an experimental two-speed unit that Garlits was trying to perfect.

As he was leaving the starting line under full power, on the final run of the day, the transmission exploded. The dragster broke apart right behind the engine. The rear portion of the Swamp Rat, where Garlits was sitting, levered straight up, in a 90-degree angle from the car, then slammed onto the pavement, separated from the engine and the rest of the car. The explosion sent hot oil and metal shards into the crowd, nearly severing a teenage boy's arm.

And the splintered transmission cut off half of Garlits' right foot. It was bad. Compounding it, the ambulance crew slammed the door on what was left of his foot. He was out for the rest of the season.

While he was in the hospital, he began designing a rear-engine dragster, where any catastrophic drivetrain failure would occur behind the driver, not in front. That design had been tried multiple

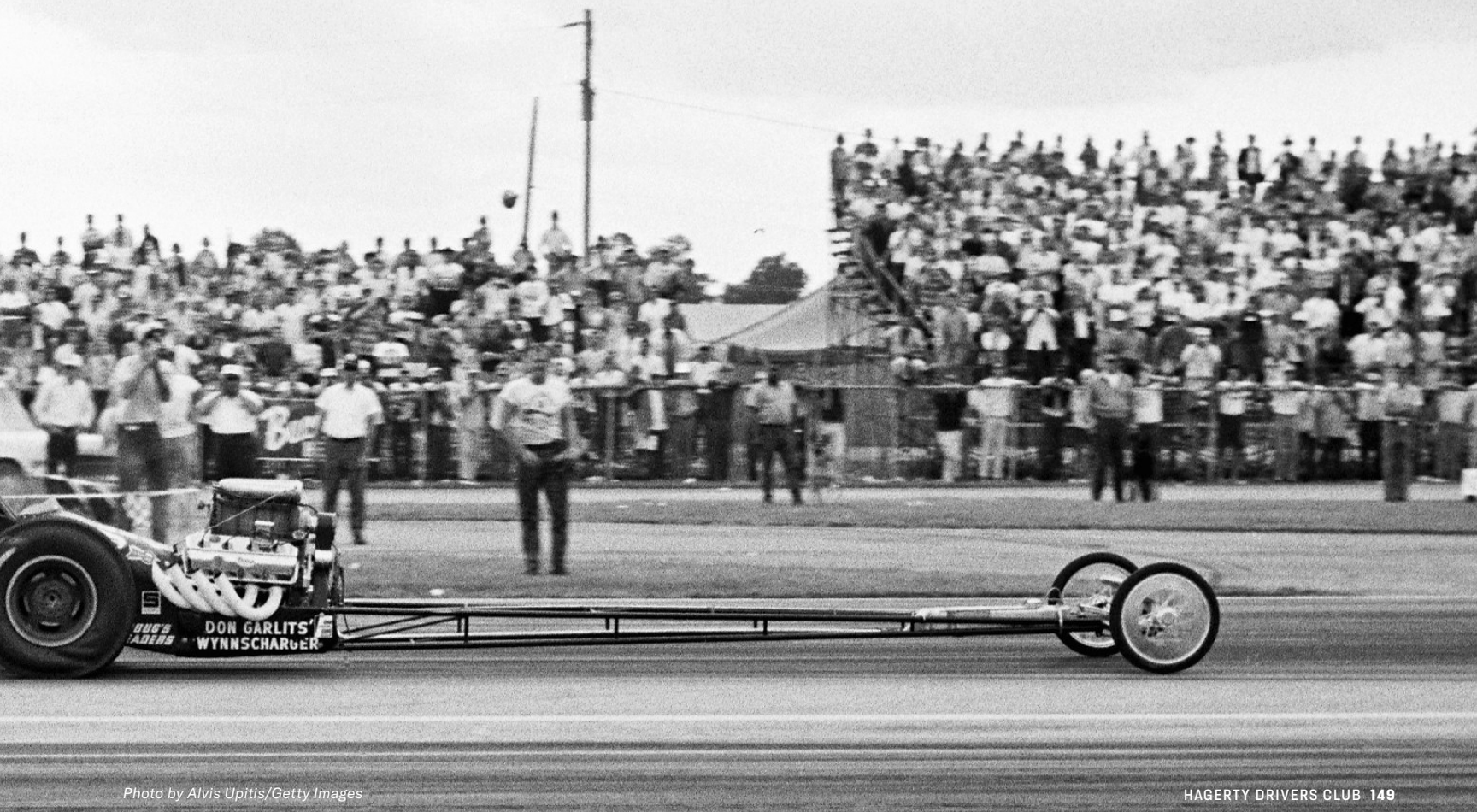


Photo by Alvis Upitis/Getty Images

GARLITS IS AN UNOPPOSED GENIUS WHEN IT COMES TO FIGURING OUT WHAT'S WRONG AND FIXING IT.



times before but had always failed. Back in Florida, moving around his shop in a wheelchair, Garlits and his crew of T. C. Lemons and Connie Swingle started work on Swamp Rat XIV.

To no one's surprise, Garlits lost in the first round when he debuted the car back at Lions Drag Strip the next season. But Garlits is an unopposed genius when it comes to figuring out what's wrong and fixing it, and soon he started winning, and by the end of 1971, the advantage of a rear-engine Top Fuel dragster was apparent to everyone. Within a couple of years, most every new Top Fuel dragster was rear-engined.

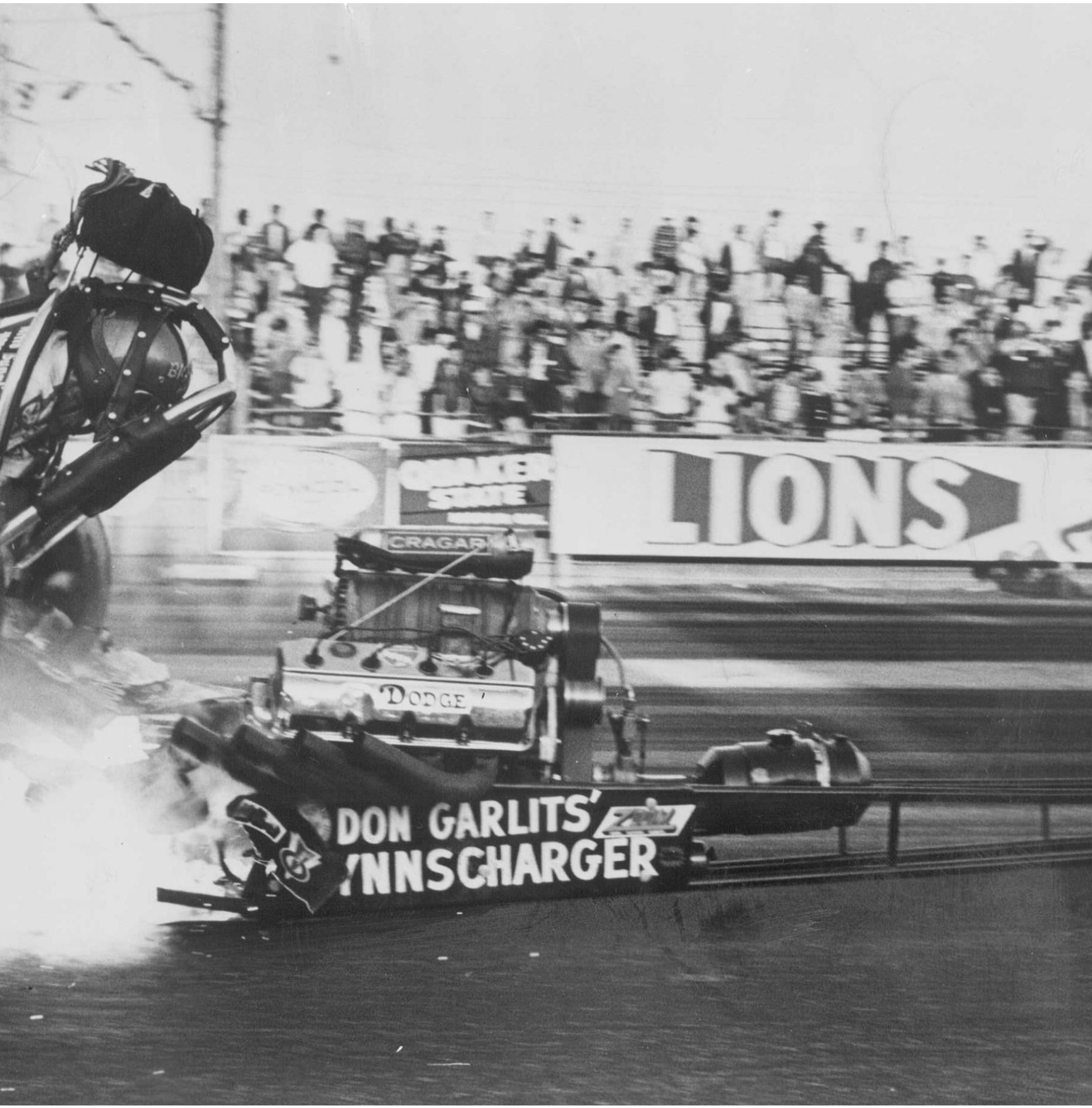
By 1986, Garlits was up to Swamp Rat XXX, and it was performing remarkably well, winning the NHRA championship, the first dragster to top 270 mph. (Note that Garlits was also the first piston-powered drag racer to go 180, 200, 240, and 250 mph. Jet-powered dragsters had gone faster, but they were exhibition-only.) The nose of XXX had a snake's head appearance, flaring out around the tiny front wheels, then angling down, designed to maximize aerodynamics.

Racing in the NHRA Summernationals at Englishtown, New Jersey, the front wheels lifted slightly off the pavement as Garlits launched, but he kept his foot on the accelerator, eager to beat fellow Florida racer Darrell Gwynn, just starting his career. Suddenly, about halfway down the track, the front wheels lifted even more. Air caught under that wide nose and blew the car straight up, pointing at the sky, as even the rear wheels briefly left the ground. Swamp Rat XXX rotated 180 degrees and slammed down onto the asphalt, aiming back toward the starting line.

The engine was still running, and the car drove out through a cloud of smoke, Hollywood-like, made a slight left turn, and stopped. Garlits, shaken, emerged from the car. The crowd exploded into cheers and applause, convinced Garlits drove out of that cloud, ever the showman. But he said later he was simply a passenger and had no control over what happened. "What those people witnessed was a 20th-century miracle," he said. "My guardian angel looking after me." Swamp Rat XXX went to the Smithsonian.

A second, and even worse, blowover crash happened a year later at Spokane, Washington. Garlits had some injuries but healed up and then retired to the television booth to become a commentator. He attempted a comeback a few years later but had to quit after a race in Atlanta in April 1992, when detached retinas in both eyes made him see spots. It was caused not by the launch of his Top Fuel dragster, but by the deceleration, the 4g shock that occurs when twin parachutes unfurl at the

Photo by Denver Post via Getty Images



It wasn't an entirely new idea, but it wasn't until Garlits lost part of his right foot in this exploding-transmission incident at Lions Drag Strip near Los Angeles in 1970 that he was compelled to perfect a rear-engine car that moved the drivetrain to behind the driver. It turned out to be better in every way.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Swamp Rat XXX does a "blowover" in Englishtown, New Jersey. It happened a second time in Spokane, Washington.

finish line to jerk the dragster to a stop. Doctors told him he would be risking the loss of his sight completely if he continued racing.

Still, he qualified for a few more races, the last in 2003, when he was 71. His best speed: just over 323 mph. More recently, he built an electric dragster, hoping to be the first to hit 200 mph. Swamp Rat 38 went 189 mph, and that's all it would do. Not bad for an 87-year-old driver.

Lately, Garlits has been staying closer to home, which isn't far from the museum, though it's likely he'll do some personal appearances for the NHRA's 75th. That museum is a revelation: Garlits either saved or bought back many of his historic cars, and he has displayed not only them, but cars made famous by other racers, including inventory from other forms of motorsports.

That the museum even exists is literally an answered prayer, he says. Garlits' first attempt at being a museum curator failed: He built it so far off the beaten path, on his family homestead, that nobody could find it. Wife Pat said that to succeed, it needed to be located off either Interstate 4, which runs from Tampa to Daytona Beach, or even better on I-75, which starts in South Florida and ends in Northern Michigan, at the border to Canada. Pat added up how much they could spend on land located near an I-75 exit: "She told me we could write a check for $80,000," Garlits says.

They knelt by their bedside and prayed. They began looking for land, but what they found started in six figures, often ended in seven. They made one more trip north on I-75 and pulled off at an exit south of Ocala. There was nothing there but a gas station and a turquoise-roofed Stuckey's. But there was vacant land there that would be perfect. A tiny cardboard sign in a ditch said it was for sale and listed a phone number. They drove to Stuckey's and made a phone call. A surly woman answered: Yes, it was for sale.

"How much?" Garlits asked. "It's $80,000," she said.

Not long after, Garlits was walking his property when a man approached him at the fence line. "I own this property next to yours," the man said, "and I'd like to buy your land. I'll give you $180,000." Garlits told him it wasn't for sale at any price. The man asked why: "Because God found this land for us," Garlits replied. The man's last name was du Pont. Yes, he was one of those du Ponts. The museum opened in March 1984. It's located on 16 acres, and the display area has grown from 10,000 square feet to 65,000.

Garlits has an office there, and a garage where he can work on his cars. Unless he's on the road, he is in the office or the garage most every day. "See those file cabinets over there? They hold all my personal racing pictures," he said, pointing behind his desk. "And they are filled up. Thirty-eight Swamp Rats, and there were cars before we started naming them. My 1940 Fords, my '36 Fords, my roadsters, my flathead dragsters, and then we get to the Swamp Rats. I'm in the process of scanning all those files, and I'm down now to the third drawer over on the far side, up to 1984. I'm trying to identify every picture—it's easy telling what the car is, but it's a lot harder to figure out where the car is—sometimes I'm looking for some little clue in the photo that gives it away. I'm putting all those pictures on my little Samsung hard drive.

"On top of that, I'm in the process of writing my life story—Don Garlits, The Official Autobiography—I'm at 85,800 words, and I'm up to 1987, and I'm just getting ready to have the big wreck that took me out of racing." There have been multiple books written about Garlits. It will be interesting to see his own take.

Staying busy is important to Garlits, and one of his answers to the inevitable question: What's your secret?

"I can't stop working. You stop working, you die," he said. There are so many memories, bittersweet ones. Garlits lost his wife, Pat, in 2014. They were married for 61 years. "She was the love of my life," he said. A man isn't supposed to outlive his wife: Ask me how I know.

His younger brother, Ed, died in 2020. Most of his friends are gone. From his high school graduating class in Tampa, he is one of two who "are still vertical," he said.

Garlits has, at least, retained his sense of humor.

"You have to keep moving, use every part of your body," he observes. Including, as it turns out, the penis. "It'll shrink right up!" he says. He knows this because "I've seen it with my own eyes!" No, not on Garlits, but on his brother, who was in a nursing home. "He had a nice one. But one day they were changing his diaper. All he had left was this little button! You've got to use everything, or you'll lose it.

"Sorry," he says, "but the filter's gone at 94. I just say whatever in the hell I want."

Photo by ISC Images & Archives via Getty Images


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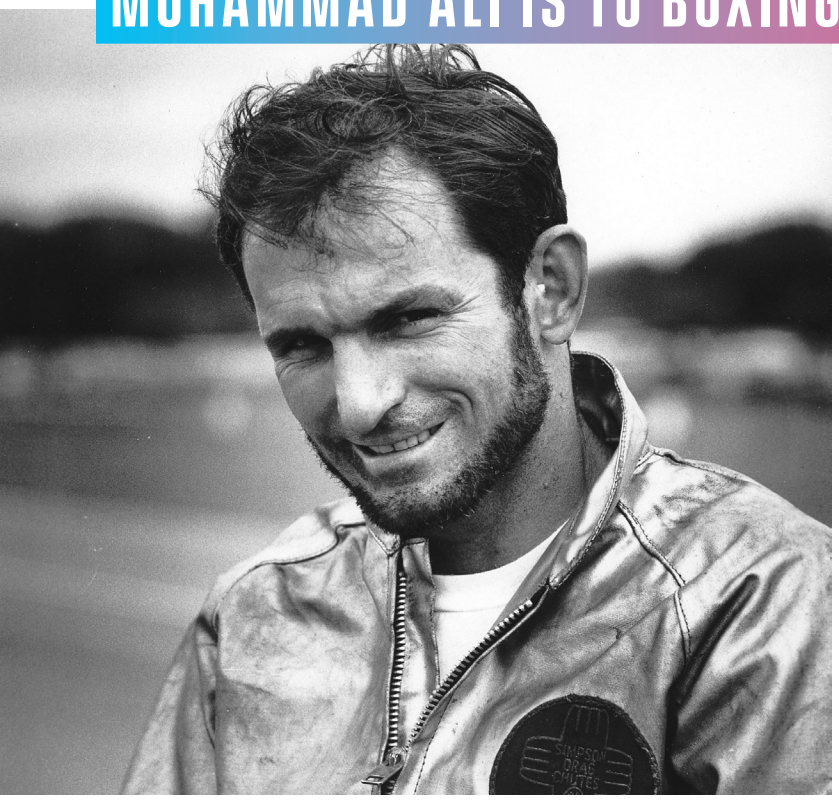



In 1967, Garlits grew a beard, vowing not to shave until he ran the quarter-mile in less than 7 seconds. He finally did in September when he ran a 6.77 at the U.S. Nationals in Indianapolis, where he shaved on the starting line, surrounded by fans. Above right: Garlits today at 94.

Garlits also advises fiscal responsibility. "I've got to save for my future! I'm going to be old someday! I'm not going to any nursing home, I'm gonna have a private nurse come to my house and take care of me, 24 hours, around the clock." He laughs. We all do.

I first interviewed Garlits 48 years ago at the long-gone Hallsville Drag Strip, located right outside the town of Hallsville in East Texas. Like a lot of the top drag racers back then, Garlits often did match races at smaller tracks around the country to earn extra money, maybe $2500 a weekend, when the major series were taking a weekend off. To draw a good crowd, the promoter for a second-tier track, where the usual participants raced hot-rodded, home-built '55 Chevrolets or Ford Mustangs or Pontiac GTOs, would hire a pair of big-name drivers to match race each other in their 2000-hp Top Fuel cars.

On this particular weekend, in April 1978, Garlits raced Paul Savadin, the owner of Paul's Crank Shop in Devine, Texas, near San Antonio. Savadin may not have been nationally famous like Garlits, but he was well known in Texas and regarded as one of the best crankshaft guys around—he built them for Garlits.

It was billed as the local boy takes on Big Daddy and—well, loses. But even then, it made for good bragging rights for Savadin, comparable to the time East Texas boxer Donnie Fleeman stepped into the ring with Muhammad Ali—who was still Cassius Clay then—in February 1961. Fleeman was knocked out and promptly retired, but lived another 50 years after that fight, plenty of time to let everybody in Midlothian, Texas, know that their Donnie Fleeman was the first pro fighter to last seven rounds with the soon-to-be Greatest Of All Time.

Don Garlits is to drag racing what Muhammad Ali is to boxing: the best. The difference is that pro boxing as we know it has been around since 1882, when John L. Sullivan became the first American heavyweight champion. A popular joke suggests that drag racing began when the second car was built, but the hobby became a sport in 1951, when *Hot Rod* magazine editor Wally Parks founded the National Hot Rod Association.

The NHRA's 75th celebration began at the Gatornationals on March 8 and will conclude 19 races later at the NHRA Finals in Pomona, California, on November 15. We're 108 years too late to hear John L. Sullivan talk about the early days of boxing, but we still have Don Garlits to talk about the birth of professional drag racing.

And, of course, UFOs. May the force be with you, Big Daddy. *H*

scsmith01@hagerty.com

Photo by ISC Images & Archives via Getty Images

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SERVICE DEPT.

DISPATCHES FROM THE AUTOMOTIVE WORLD





REAL OR FAKE?

A spark plug is a spark plug, right? The counterfeit plug on the left uses less durable, cheaper metals on its electrodes, meaning it will wear out faster.



AVOID DISASTER

Faux Parts: How to Avoid Counterfeit Components

Fly-by-night manufacturers, overseas countries with lax intellectual property laws, the explosion of online shopping, and advances in reverse-engineering technology like 3D scanning have made counterfeit auto parts increasingly prevalent. In 2024 alone, U.S. Customs seized more than 211,000 counterfeit auto parts, nearly double the amount from the previous year. It's a headache for manufacturers, who get undercut by the fakes—and a potential hazard for car owners, who think they're getting a deal and often wind up with a faulty part.

We talked to Bob Stewart, president of the Automotive Anti-Counterfeiting Council and Aftermarket Service Support and global brand protection manager at General Motors, to learn how to make sure you're getting the real thing.



FAKE OR REAL?

Differences between genuine and counterfeit products are often subtle. The bootleg key fob on the left has slightly thinner linework on its icons.

WHICH PARTS ARE TARGETED BY COUNTERFEITERS?

Any auto part can be counterfeited. But Stewart most commonly sees maintenance and repair items such as spark plugs, oil filters and fuel filters, and engine sensors. Performance parts like carburetors, lifters, and valve springs are also common targets, as are critical safety components such as airbags, seatbelt straps, and brake pads.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

Counterfeiters aren't concerned about material science, service life, or structural integrity; they just want it to look real. The best-case scenario is a part that wears out faster than the legit version. "I'll get reports of fake ACDelco spark plugs that have failed after 5000 miles but look like they have been run for 200,000 miles," says Stewart. Many modern spark plugs use platinum or iridium for their electrodes—the parts the spark jumps across. But these hard-wearing metals are difficult to work with and expensive, so counterfeiters use cheaper, softer metals that degrade a lot faster. The worst-case scenario, particularly with safety-related parts, is catastrophic failure. One big area of concern for manufacturers is counterfeit airbags, as they tend to act more like grenades than inflatable restraint devices.

HOW DO I TELL THE DIFFERENCE?

You shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but you should judge a part by its packaging. Typos or subpar printing of brand names (both accidental and deliberate on the part of counterfeiters, in an attempt to evade copyright lawsuits) are a red flag, as is the absence of identifiers like hologram stickers and logos. Also be suspicious if the part doesn't fit well in its packaging or if the box itself is flimsy. That said, counterfeiters have been getting more sophisticated. "Translation errors used to be a dead giveaway, but I think artificial intelligence has really helped them eliminate those errors we used to identify," says Stewart.

On the part itself, again check for missing or incorrect logos and markings, use of the wrong hardware, and poor material finishes. Many of the tells will be specific to the part. Here the internet is your friend: For instance, hundreds of videos on YouTube will show you how to spot a knockoff ACDelco spark plug.

WHERE SHOULD I BUY PARTS?

It's rare for fake parts to break into the supply chain of reputable retailers, like your dealership or a reliable brick-and-mortar parts shop. Here the internet is not always your friend.

Online marketplaces are largely hands-off when it comes to third-party products sold through their platforms, making it easier for unscrupulous businesses to pass off counterfeits as the real deal. Furthermore, the burden of policing counterfeits is placed on brand owners and consumers, meaning that third parties can continue to sell fakes until reported.

If you do decide to shop online, make sure to compare prices. If a deal seems too good to be true, it probably is. But, Stewart warns, some counterfeiters have adjusted their prices to be more in line with legitimate sellers, which makes spotting the fakes based on price alone more difficult.

WHAT'S BEING DONE TO STEM THE TIDE?

Stewart's organization, Automotive Anti-Counterfeiting Council and Aftermarket Service Support, works closely with law enforcement to prevent fake parts from getting into the country. "We've done a lot of work helping suppliers within the industry to get their trademarks registered and recorded with customs so that customs knows what to look for." This relationship is important because some of the counterfeits don't have brand trademarks on them until they're packaged.

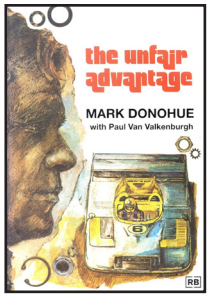
However, as long as there is a financial incentive for counterfeiters, it will be a cat-and-mouse game between them, the manufacturers, and law enforcement.

Photo courtesy of GM

BOOKSHELF

Let Freedom Read

Americans love reading about cars almost as much as they love driving them (you're here, aren't you?). No surprise, the American automotive canon is vast and spans genres, from literature to biographies to children's books. Here are some of our favorites.

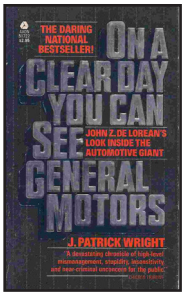


THE UNFAIR ADVANTAGE

by Mark Donohue with Paul van Valkenburgh

$50
Bentley Publishers

▲ Mark Donohue, who won races in everything from Trans-Am Camaros to Indy cars, was known as much for his shrewd intellect as his raw driving abilities. It's thus no surprise he authored one of the most enlightening books written about racing. In 1974, at the height of his career and just a year before he was tragically killed in a crash, Donohue took a sabbatical to write about his life as a driver. It's less an autobiography and more of a chronologically detailed record of the engineering approach he took to squeezing the most performance from every car he drove, always looking for what he coined "the unfair advantage." It's a great look at the golden age of American racing.—*Chris Stark*

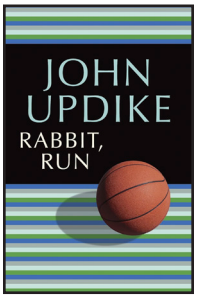


ON A CLEAR DAY YOU CAN SEE GENERAL MOTORS: JOHN Z. DELOREAN'S LOOK INSIDE THE AUTOMOTIVE GIANT

by J. Patrick Wright with John Z. DeLorean

Your favorite local used-book store

▲ Call it the mother of all exit interviews. John Z. DeLorean rose through the ranks at General Motors during the company's 1950s to 1970s zenith, when its market share hovered around 50 percent, and was seemingly destined to become CEO. Instead, there was an ugly breakup. DeLorean recounted his disillusionments in a book—then got cold feet and refused to publish it. Lucky for us, his ghostwriter, journalist J. Patrick Wright, insisted on completing the task. Although DeLorean obviously had an axe to grind, the book is in essence a diagnosis of the dysfunction that reigned at the automaker and a study in how great companies fail.—*Sajeev Mehta*

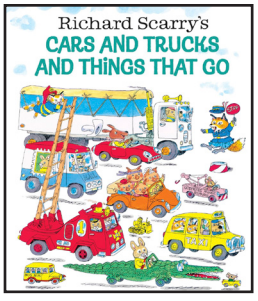


RABBIT, RUN

by John Updike

$18
Penguin Random House

▲ OK, OK, not *really* a car book. Yet the scene in Updike's classic in which frustrated family man Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom climbs into his 1955 Ford and, on impulse, drives several states south captures the promise of cars in America: There's enough road and enough cheap gas to escape it all.—*David Zenlea*

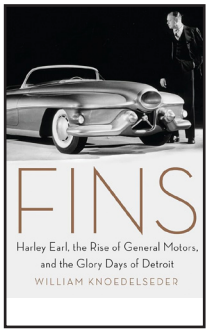


CARS AND TRUCKS AND THINGS THAT GO

by Richard Scarry

$18
Penguin Random House

▲ As an introduction to the wonderful world of cars, there has never been a better book than *Cars and Trucks and Things That Go*, by prolific children's author Richard Scarry. For a curious little person with an interest in vehicles of all sorts, this book is the perfect companion on a lazy afternoon, at bedtime, or whenever the grown-ups start talking about boring grown-up things.—*Stefan Lombard*



FINS: HARLEY EARL, THE RISE OF GENERAL MOTORS, AND THE GLORY DAYS OF DETROIT

by William Knoedelseder

$18
HarperCollins

▲ Though this book is called *Fins*, the origin of the tailfin doesn't come up until Chapter 12, meaning you're in for a full history of General Motors, its pioneering design chief Harley Earl, and the vital role that both played in shaping the entire auto industry during the middle years of the 20th century. A must-read for anyone who has ever admired the soaring fins of a '50s car and wondered how and why they got there.—*Aaron Robinson*



Photos courtesy of respective publishers

HIDDEN FIGURES

The Most American Truck is a Honda

Depressing fact: Levi's no longer sews a single pair of blue jeans in the United States. The state of affairs for the other defining symbol of the American worker, the pickup, is a bit less bleak, but still not what you'd think. Automakers are required by law to detail the origins of any passenger vehicle for sale in the United States. Not just where it's assembled, but the percentage of U.S. and Canadian parts (the law doesn't delineate the U.S. from Canada), the country of origin for the engine, and the country of origin for the transmission. The most American pickup by this definition? The Honda Ridgeline. The more likely suspects from GM, Ford, and Ram all fail to crack 60 percent.



HONDA RIDGELINE

- 75 percent of materials are sourced from the U.S. or Canada
- Final assembly in Lincoln, Alabama
- Engines and transmissions are made in the U.S.



JEEP GLADIATOR

- 74 percent of materials are sourced from the U.S. or Canada; 15 percent are sourced from Mexico
- Final assembly in Toledo, Ohio
- Engines are made in the U.S. or Mexico; Transmissions are made in the U.S.



FORD F-150

- 45 percent of materials are sourced from the U.S. or Canada
- Final assembly in Claycomo, Missouri, and Dearborn, Michigan
- The 3.5-liter EcoBoost V-6 is made in Mexico. All other engines are made in the U.S.; Transmissions are made in the U.S.

GMC SIERRA/ CHEVY SILVERADO

- 37 percent of materials sourced are from the U.S. or Canada; 37 percent are sourced from Mexico
- Final assembly in Roanoke, Indiana; Flint, Michigan; Oshawa, Ontario, Canada; Silao, Guanajuato, Mexico
- Engines are made in the U.S. and Mexico; Transmissions are made in the U.S.



RAM 1500

- 55 percent of materials are sourced from the U.S. or Canada; 39 percent come from Mexico
- Final assembly in Sterling Heights, Michigan
- Engines are made in the U.S. and Mexico; Transmissions are made in the U.S.



Photos courtesy of respective manufacturers



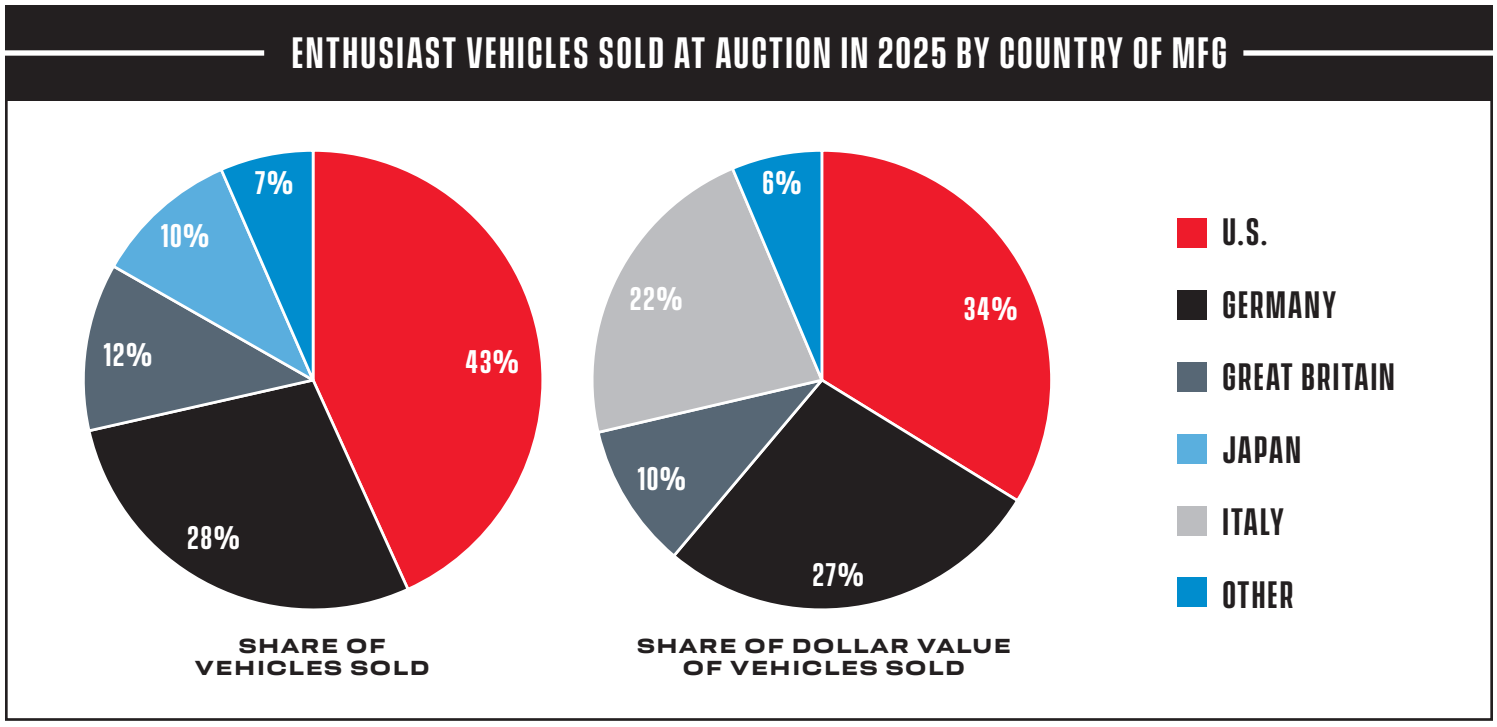
Kings of the Road

In the second half of the 20th century, American enthusiasts set the stage for the collector's world we still live in.

WHEN YOU STOP to think about it, collecting automobiles requires a lot. Money, time, and good roads are the first few things that come to mind, and following the end of World War II, we in the United States happened to have just a bit more of each than almost any other Western nation.

Credit first and foremost our mighty manufacturing capability. Our ability to pivot in mere months from building automobiles, tractors, and refrigerators to war machinery was a primary reason we came out on top—and wound up winning the peace, as well. Since World War II was not fought on North American shores, those factories hadn't been devastated as was the case in much of Europe and Japan. Moreover, because war-ravaged countries had to remove rubble and rebuild

Illustration by John Magnifico



▲ Italy built some of the world's most valuable classics, and Japanese cars are on the rise—but it's actually American makes that dominate overall.

cities before retooling, modernizing, and starting over, our industrial base could immediately focus on transitioning back to civilian production. And because American citizens didn't have to bear the enormous costs of said rebuilding (aside from some $13 billion in aid to Europe via the Marshall Plan), they were relatively well positioned to purchase whatever those resurgent factories could produce—and then some. In contrast, when manufacturers in countries like the United Kingdom got back on their feet, there was relatively little consumer economy to serve. Hence the U.K.'s famous postwar mantra, "Export or perish." All to say, most of the best cars produced in the decades following World War II found their way to our shores.

When it comes to time, there are subtler factors at work. The generation that fought in the war—and later gave birth to what became known as the baby boomers—had a large segment who grew up on farms but, following the war, moved to the rapidly expanding suburbs. About 23 percent of the United States population lived on farms in 1940. By 1955, the number was only about 14 percent. Why does that matter? In two very important ways. Kids who grew up on farms were much more likely to possess the skills needed to keep old equipment running (a skill set that is, sadly, increasingly lacking in more recent generations). The second difference is not as obvious, but owning a newer house on a quarter-acre lot requires quite less in terms of the chores involved than running a farm, which helped to increase leisure time.

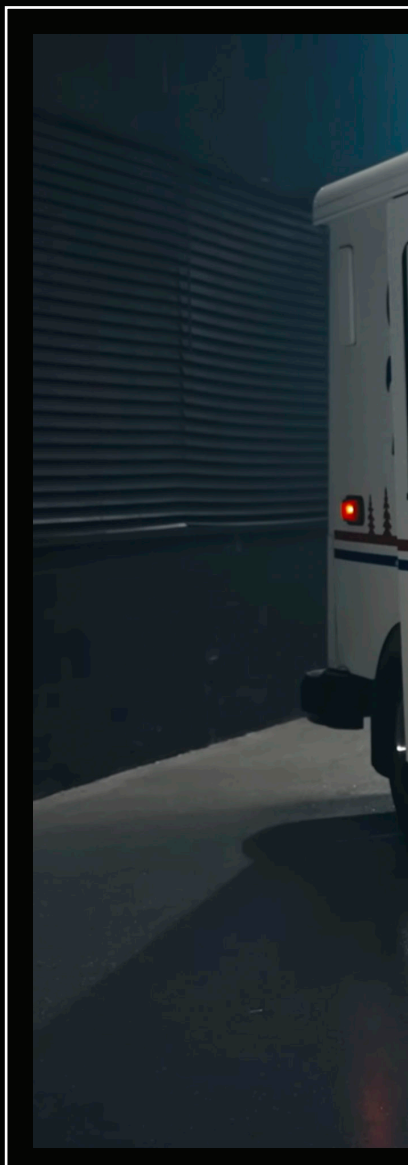
The United States hardly had a lock on great roads, but we did have increasingly accessible wide-open spaces and an infrastructure that was, by the 1950s, built around the automobile. The concept of a road trip was, for a short period of time at least, a uniquely American phenomenon. The thought of taking a pleasure drive existed in many places, but extending that for hundreds or even thousands of miles would have been far-fetched for all but extremely wealthy European drivers. Our gasoline was cheaper and our cars were larger. We were willing and able to take the whole family, gear, and pets on a trip to the beach, grandma's house, or Wally World.

Our American love of cars is hardly unique, but our combination of geography, economy, time, skills, and just plain luck all came into play to make us the Big Dog in global car collecting. Hagerty estimates there are presently more than 40 million enthusiast cars in the United States. For reference, that's roughly equal to the total number of motor vehicles in places like France and the United Kingdom. And it's worth noting that despite the rise of Japanese and European collector cars, most collectors continue to favor American cars—auction data show that domestics dominate both in terms of the number of vehicles sold and the total dollars they bring in.

Will we continue to reign supreme? The only constant is change. But for now, and in the near future, American car collectors remain the Kings of the Road.

Dave Kinney editor@hagerty.com

RETURN TO SENDER



The Grumman LLV has finally reached the end of its mail delivery days.

Words and Video by
Jason Cammisa

THE GRUMMAN LLV—for Long Life Vehicle—mail truck is proof that sometimes federal bureaucrats get it right. The aluminum-bodied lump just completed four decades as the principal mail carrier for the United States Postal Service.

The history of mail delivery is, of course, inextricably linked with the history of American transportation. Legal documents and love letters were once transported via Pony Express and horse-drawn carriages, but by 1906, the USPS began using gasoline-powered vehicles. With the advent of Parcel Post in 1913, the need for commodious, motor-driven mail vehicles was ever more acute, as Americans a century ago liked to ship and receive stuff just as much as we do today. Over the ensuing decades, the postal service fleet reflected the times, with the Ford Model T making way in the postwar period for surplus military Willys Jeeps. In the early 1960s, Studebaker collaborated with Pennsylvania manufacturer Met-Pro to develop a purpose-built mail wagon known as the Zip Van to promote the newly introduced ZIP codes.

The Zip Van was short-lived but pointed the way toward a solution to an ongoing problem: The postal service used too many different mail carrier vehicles, from too many manufacturers, and it was a huge logistical challenge to stock parts and train mechanics. By 1984, the USPS solicited bids for a purpose-built vehicle rather than continuing to adapt existing vehicles. After a series of brutal endurance tests, the LLV, the product of a joint venture between military contractor Grumman and General Motors, was the winner. Its garage-style rear door, sliding side door, and right-hand-drive setup seemingly were inspired by the Zip Van's form factor from two decades earlier. The postal service promptly ordered 99,150 of them. *H* editor@hagerty.com

CLICK SCREEN TO PLAY VIDEO



JUNK MAIL EXPRESS

Click here to watch Jason Cammisa's full history of the development of the Grumman LLV, a workhorse for the USPS that is finally being put out to pasture.





MADE IN THE USA

Harder to make and more expensive to buy, American made tools are worth it every time.

JOEL CAMASSAR lies awake nights wracked with anxiety about screwdriver handles. It's an odd image for a night terror, sure, but consider their importance to Camassar's livelihood. As an owner of Chapman Manufacturing, which has been making the same small precision screwdriver and ratchet bits in Durham, Connecticut, since 1936, Camassar has a tradition—and a business—to uphold. Every Chapman product is made in America. Still, the company isn't large enough to vertically integrate its supply chain (à la Henry Ford's attempts to establish rubber plantations), and some materials are difficult to come by domestically. "If you want it made in the U.S., the suppliers are much more limited," Camassar says, adding that for plastic screwdriver handles, "there's one company to do that." So he has fitful dreams about extrusion molds.

To manufacture in America is to face innumerable obstacles, as I learned when I wrote a book about a group of scrappy, determined American-made apparel entrepreneurs. Sometimes, like Camassar, it's as if you're trying to keep a restaurant going with a thin pantry of ingredients. Almost always you're competing with cheap, foreign-made products and asking consumers to consider more than just their wallet. For these reasons and more, I buy made in the U.S. whenever I can.

And I am heartened to report that the tool industry, unlike clothing, toys, appliances, and countless others, hasn't been hollowed out by offshoring. Indeed, the mindful wrencher has enough options to fill out a tool bench.

True, there are some gaping holes. Generally speaking, you can't buy power tools made in the U.S.; if it has a power source, in almost every case it's going to have imported parts or be made overseas (beware of sneaky-worded claims to be made in the U.S., "of imported materials," an attempt to win points without doing the hard work).

There have also been high-profile industry missteps in recent years, like the $90

Photos courtesy of Chapman Manufacturing

Wright's Barberton, Ohio, manufacturing facility forges wrenches from American steel.

million automated factory that Stanley Black & Decker opened near Fort Worth, Texas, in 2022, to bring its Craftsman line back home. In the end, as *The Wall Street Journal* put it witheringly, the world's largest toolmaker "couldn't figure out how to make a wrench" in America.

But plenty of other companies, including Klein (wire strippers), Channellock (pliers), Estwing (hammers), Wright (ratchets), Snap-on (wrenches), and Bondhus (hex keys), have solved the riddle. They produce hand tools forged with American steel and made by American workers—and have been doing it for decades. Although U.S.-made tools hardly monopolize the market, neither are they a dying niche. Industry-wide figures are hard to come by, but Snap-on alone operates 15 manufacturing facilities in the United States, and its tools group posted revenues of $2 billion in 2025. (The company also has global factories in South America, Europe, and Asia, which it says mostly serve local markets.)

"There are a few reasons for their staying power," says Scott Paul, president of the Alliance for American Manufacturing. "Many of these American-made brands are synonymous with quality and customer service."

You won't find these hammers, wrenches, and ratchets in Home Depot or your local hardware store, however. They're often sold through select distributors or the brand's own channels. Snap-on, the Wisconsin-based company whose tools have become a kind of status symbol in automotive shops, regularly calls on nearly a million technicians—automotive, heavy duty, collision—and approximately 250,000 repair shops. About 35 percent of its tools are sold from its mobile vans, direct to technicians. "I met a guy with a Bentley. He said, 'I feel like I have to throw myself in front of a Snap-on truck to get your tools,'" says Nick Pinchuk, the company's chairman and CEO. "He was right."

What might seem like bad business—why wouldn't you sell to everyone?—is in fact a survival strategy. For one thing, the hand-tools market is a bit like an iceberg in that the biggest chunk isn't visible above the surface. A 2023 study of the industry by the research and consulting firm Arizton found that "the industrial segment holds the most significant share" of the market. American-made tool companies have also learned that by making tools for specific, critical tasks where the penalty for failure is high—say, building a bridge or repairing a military vehicle in wartime—they can charge a premium. Camassar put it bluntly: "The guy using a screwdriver around the house to open paint cans is not what our tools are for." Rather, Chapman's precision milled bits are used for work in robotics, stadium sound systems, and even pinball machines.

In automotive applications, American companies' niche is tools engineered for very tight spots. Snap-on, for instance, recently came up with a custom profile socket that allows mechanics to reach into the heart of Ford's 6.7-liter engine. "Customize a tool for the task," Pinchuk says. "We're not trying to beat on scale. We're trying to beat on application and experience."

What you're getting for the extra money is a tool guaranteed not to fail and customer service that's a few states rather than an ocean away. "I answer the phone. I'm easy to do business with. Lifetime warranty," says Tom Futey, the president and co-owner of Wright, which makes a 400-piece hand-tool set for military Humvees, among thousands of other items, at its Barberton, Ohio, plant. "Buying a cheap tool is not saving you money," he adds. "It could be costing you money."

Weekend mechanics, take heart—you can still get your hands on these American-made tools even if you're not a NASA engineer or Ferrari restorer. Chapman sells direct through its website. Wright works with a network of distributors that includes Amazon sellers, while Snap-on sells through its website. Will you pay more than the Chinese-made, $20 socket set at a big-box store? Yes. Is it worth it in the long run to buy more durable tools and support American manufacturers? You already know the answer. *H*
editor@hagerty.com

STEVEN KURUTZ is a reporter for *The New York Times* and author of *American Flannel: How a Band of Entrepreneurs Are Bringing the Art and Business of Making Clothes Back Home*. He owns a 1983 Mercedes-Benz 380SL.

Photos courtesy of respective manufacturers

IF YOU CAN, YOU SHOULD

Four American-made tool companies worth a damn, and your dollar.



CHAPMAN MANUFACTURING

DURHAM, CT
EST. 1936

Chapman specializes in precision milled screwdriver and ratchet bits that are used for work in robotics, stadium sound systems, and even pinball machines.



ESTWING

ROCKFORD, IL
EST. 1923

If you swing it, Estwing probably makes it. The company's Shock Reduction Grip gives their hammers, axes, and rock picks an ergonomic edge.



SNAP-ON

KENOSHA, WI
EST. 1920

While not every tool in Snap-on's catalog is made in the U.S., the ones that are continue to be the gold standard in automotive shops across the country.

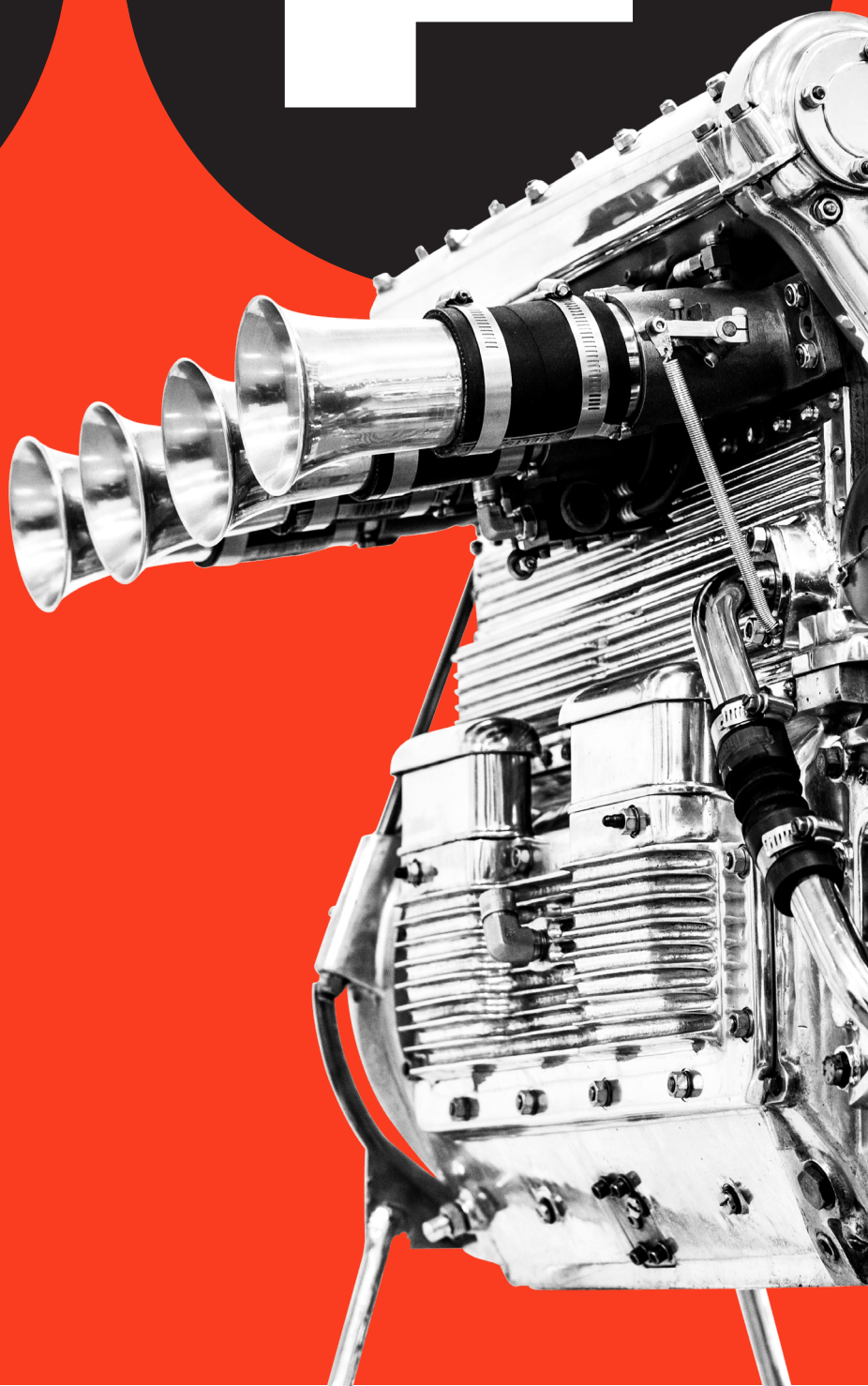


WRIGHT

BARBERTON, OH
EST. 1927

Wright makes a wide variety of hand tools—they supply a 400-piece set for military Humvees—as well as tool chests, cabinets, and boxes.

OF



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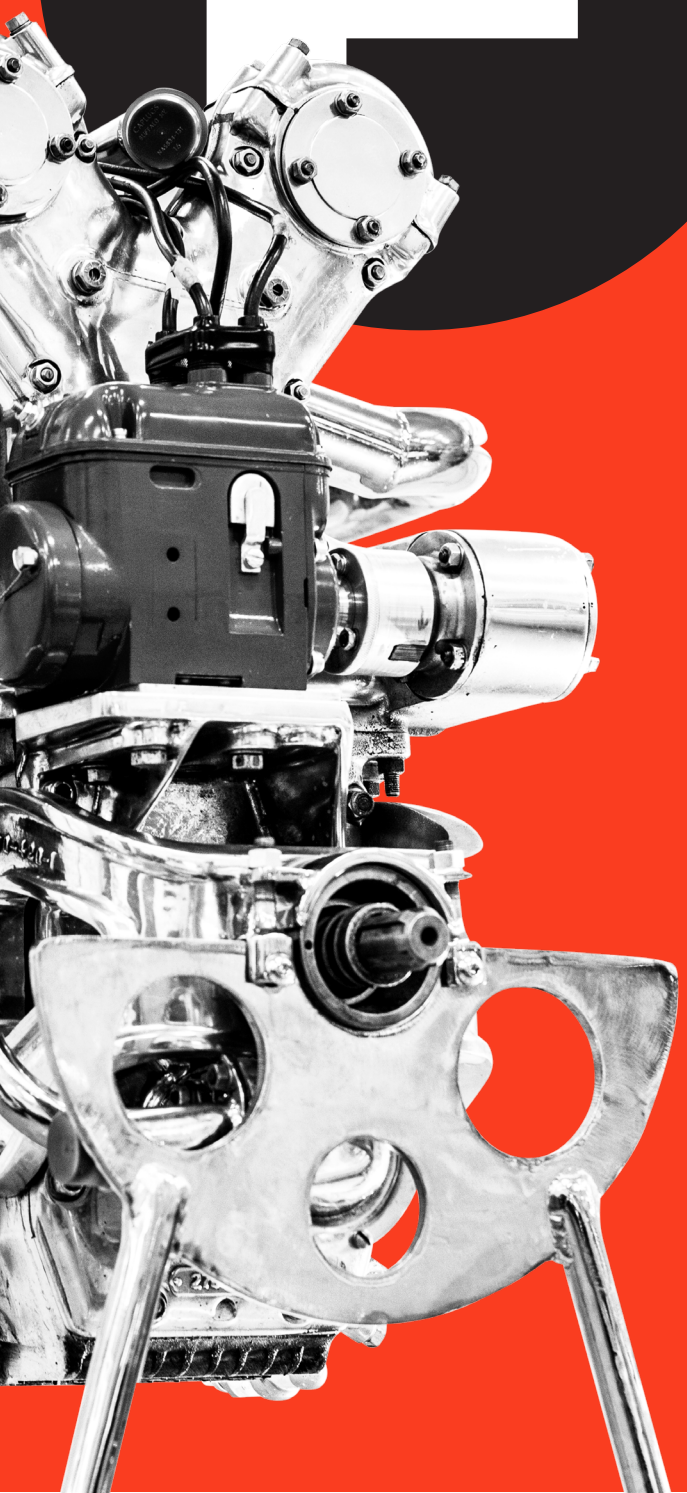


Four letters.

Four cylinders.

Four decades as the engine to beat in American racing.

Words by **Preston Lerner**
Photos by **Cameron Neveu**


Sampsonite
Sampsonite

Note the complex plumbing of the turbo Offy that propelled Joe Leonard and his Parnelli VPJ-1 to the top of the Indy-car championship in 1972.

CHEW ON THAT FOR A BIT. We now live in an age when memes are born, flourish, and are forgotten over the course of a week. So how did the Offy manage to spend four decades as the undisputed heavyweight champion on everything from the bricks of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway to the pavement of the Milwaukee Mile to the dirt on bull-rings buried deep in flyover country? Well, technical excellence was one reason. Being in the right place at the right time was another. But mostly, the Offy thrived because it was a unicorn, a felicitous match of form and function and an ideal weapon for an era when road racing was for wimps and oval-track racing was the sine qua non of American motorsports.

"I won three features in one day in an Offy-powered midget—Labor Day in 1963," Mario Andretti recalls. "Later, when they turbocharged the Offy, before they put a limit on the [boost] pressure, you could just wind the sh*t out of it, and it was a characteristic of that engine that it could withstand it. I mean, look at how reliable it was, for so many seasons, over so many decades. OK, sure, you blew an engine now and then. But if you rebuilt the engine in the proper time frame, you could run it forever, and that reliability factor was something that wins you championships. So yeah, it was hard not to love that engine."

The Offy bears the name of master machinist and former shop foreman Fred Offenhauser, who opened his own small business in South Central Los Angeles in 1933. Initially, he kept the lights on at his cramped, scruffy shop by rebuilding truck engines. But in 1934, he began selling four-cylinder race motors branded as Offys, and fellow Southern Californian Kelly Petillo scored the first of the engine's 27 wins in the Indy 500 the next year. The motor displaced 260 cubic inches and made about 250 horsepower, which allowed Petillo to qualify at a speed of 115.095 mph.

Nearly a half-century later, the same basic engine still reigned supreme thanks largely to the addition of a turbocharger to goose power output to levels unimagined by its original builders. In 1973, with the manifold pressure—which measures how much extra air is being rammed into the combustion chamber, usually in terms of pounds per square inch or inches of mercury—registering God-only-knows how much boost, Johnny Rutherford used a turbo 159-cubic-inch Offy to turn a 200-mph lap during practice for the Indy 500 and qualify on the pole at a record speed of 198.413 mph.

"In those days, there was no limit on the manifold pressure," recalled engine builder Roger Bailey, who also built the Offy that Rutherford drove to its last Indy 500 win in 1976. "We had a 120-inch manifold pressure gauge, and we bent the needle. Our Heenan & Froude 490 dyno pegged out at 1350 horsepower, and that engine on the dyno went way past that. We'll never know the true horsepower. But Rutherford always said that he could spin the wheels on the short chute at the Speedway."

It's almost impossible to overstate how dominant the Offy was during its long stretch at the top of the American open-wheel mountain. The record book shows that 255- and 270-cubic-inch models won every Champ Car race except Pikes Peak from October 1946 to August 1963. And from 1953 to 1960, every car that qualified at Indy was either an Offy or a Novi, which had been built initially at Offenhauser's shop. To this, add thousands of wins chalked up by smaller versions of the engines designed for midgets and sprint cars. No other race engine was so successful for so long. None has even come close.

Over the years, the Offy vanquished countless other contenders to its throne: the Sampson V-16, the Big Six and Little Six of Art Sparks, the Novi, the four-cam Indy Ford, flathead Fords, and various other stock-block motors, not to mention grand prix engines from Maserati, Alfa Romeo, Mercedes-Benz, and Ferrari. Conventional wisdom says that the final nail in the Offy's coffin was the development of the Cosworth DFX. Which makes sense. After all, the Cossie was a thoroughly modern, turbocharged take on the esoteric Formula 1 motor that had dominated F1 for decades. So, of course, it was better than the Offy, right?





Well, yes and no. During the late 1970s, Indy-car racing branched out to road courses, where the Offy, designed and optimized for ovals, clearly wasn't competitive. Then, the engine was weakened by ever more draconian limitations on fuel allotments and manifold pressure. The ostensible goal was to reduce speeds, but as a practical matter, it prevented crew chiefs from screwing up the boost pressure of the Offy to stratospheric levels that would have caused the eight-cylinder Cosworth, with its tiny ports and valves, to blow up like a Roman candle. So in a very real sense, the Offy was a victim of politics as much as superior technology.

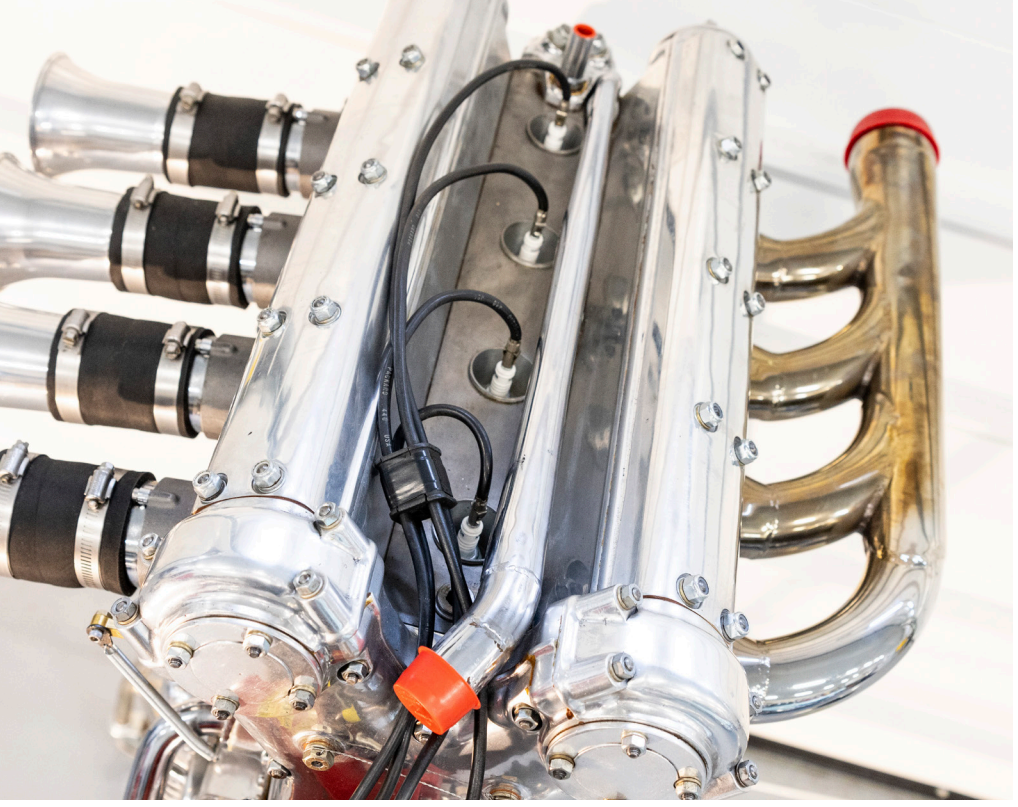
Engine builder Stewart Van Dyne was there when the Offy was laid to rest, and he's got his own take on the cause of death. "Rules," he says simply. Sad but true. Here's the story behind how it happened.

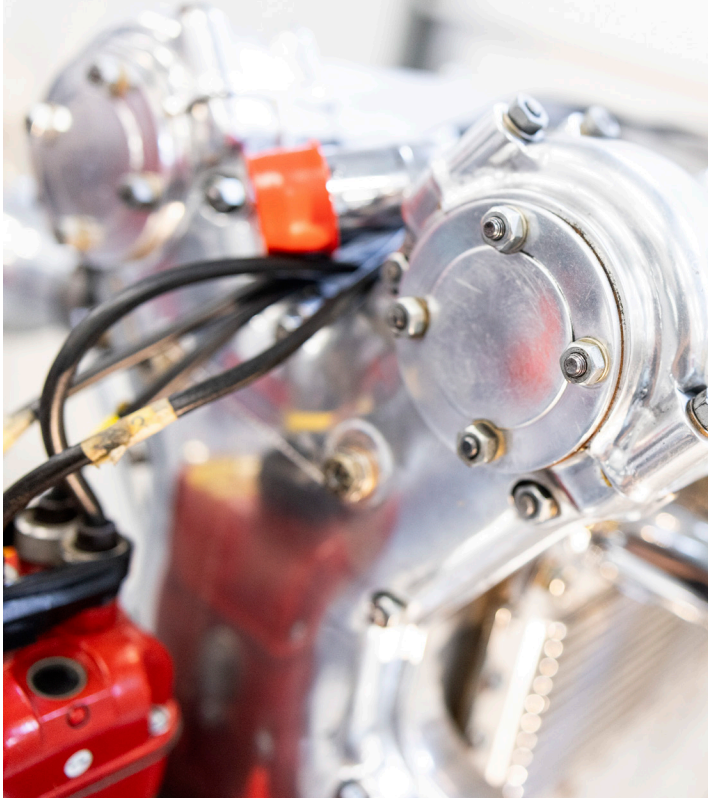
WE ALL KNOW the paradox of the Ship of Theseus. If every part of the ship has been replaced, is it still the same ship? It's tempting to ask the same question of the Offy. Over the years, the engine benefited from countless upgrades, from magnetos to electronic ignition, carburetors to fuel injection, and more. But what's truly amazing about the venerable four-banger is how much remained the same. The Offenhauser's last official race was a 500-miler at Pocono in 1982. If you were to remove the turbocharger assembly and a few ancillary components from the Offy in the back of Jim McElreath's winged Eagle, you'd see a tall, narrow, Y-shaped powerplant immediately recognizable as a sibling to the engine in Kelly Petillo's high-riding front-engine Wetteroth chassis at Indy in 1935.

Whether the engine had been built during the depths of the Great Depression or at the height of the disco craze, it always featured a handful of signature elements: first, a pair of slender cam boxes shrouding overhead camshafts operating four intake and exhaust valves per cylinder. Second, an integrated block and head that eliminated the need for a failure-prone head gasket. Third, a barrel-shaped aluminum crankcase fitted with bronze bulkheads known as webs that gave the Offy its legendarily stout bottom end. And fourth, a tall gear tower housing a cluster of gears that ran the camshafts, the oil pump, and the magneto/distributor with far greater precision than chains or belts ever could.

Many of the features found in the Offy have been rendered passé by modern advances in metallurgy and machining. But one of them remains the gold standard in contemporary high-performance engines: the four-valve double-overhead-camshaft valvetrain and pent-roof combustion chamber. Ironically, this DOHC arrangement is the oldest of the bunch, dating back to the pioneering years of automobile development.

Nicolaus Otto received a patent for the four-stroke internal combustion engine in 1876. Plenty of progress was made over the next quarter-century, but there was still no shortage of disagreement





Skeptical Peugeot engineers dubbed them **Les Charlatans**.

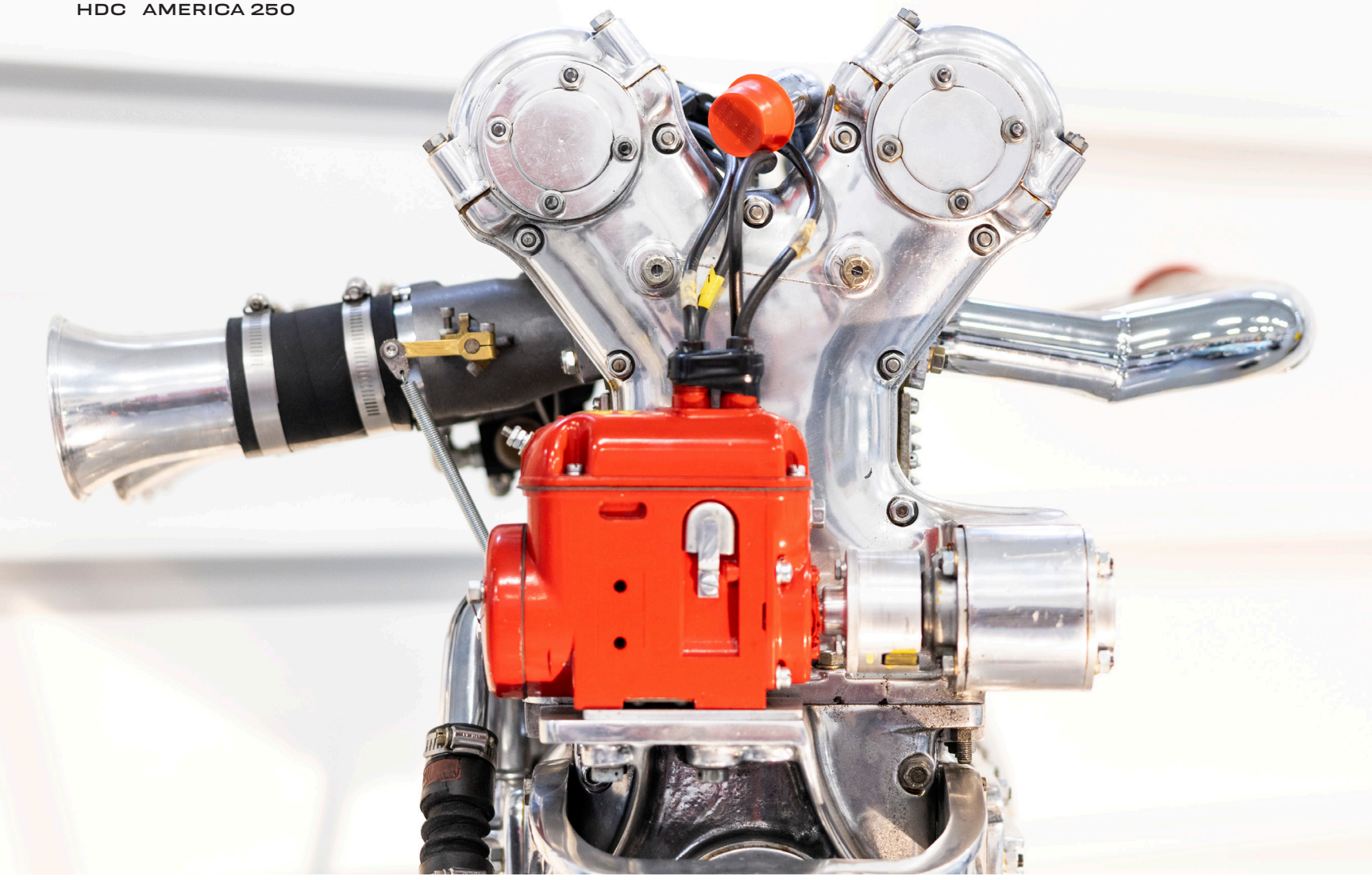
The gleaming pair of cam boxes were a signature feature of all Offys. The red Joe Hunt magneto was a Bendix Scintilla aircraft unit specifically adapted to the normally aspirated 255-cubic-inch version of the engine.

about which designs worked best. In an era before computers, much less computer simulations, it was impossible to know exactly what happened inside the combustion chamber—how smoothly the air-fuel mixture flowed into the cylinder, how efficiently it was burned, and how easily the spent gas escaped through the exhaust port. Theories abounded, but trial and error was the only way to determine what worked. Which is why racing was so important to the development of the nascent automobile.

Nowadays, racing is a form of entertainment that exists primarily to amuse fans and give manufacturers a platform to market their products. Since the 1970s or so, sanctioning bodies driven by the twin imperatives of safety and parity have been forced to promulgate rules that slow cars down by clipping wings, limiting engine speeds, and so on. A century ago, by way of contrast, racing was a laboratory for wild-hair experimentation. True, a lot of would-be innovations turned out to be losers that were quickly swept into history's dustbin. But most of the car features we now take for granted were first proved on the racetrack.

Peugeot is the world's oldest automobile manufacturer, and one of its early models shared first prize at the world's first automobile race, run from Paris to Rouen in 1894. In 1911, in preparation for the freshly revived French Grand Prix, the company decided to build a brand-new race car. But instead of entrusting its design to its in-house engineering department, the assignment was given to three factory race car drivers, augmented by a brilliant draftsman by the name of Ernest Henry. The four men had no formal training. On the contrary, they were empiricists who operated by the seat of their pants. Skeptical Peugeot engineers dubbed them Les Charlatans. Imagine their surprise when this group of apparent poseurs unveiled a design that changed the course of automotive history.

An internal combustion engine is essentially an air pump that trades heat for energy. All things being equal, the faster you get the air-fuel mixture into a cylinder, and the more efficiently you burn it before the spent gas flows out of the exhaust port, the more power you're going to make. As with everything in life, there are trade-offs. If you want an engine that breathes better and spins faster, you'd better be prepared to pay a premium and accept a higher possibility of catastrophic failure. Which is why automobile manufacturers primarily concerned with generating



profits often spec engine designs that are suboptimal from a performance perspective.

Consider the groundbreaking flathead engine that Ford introduced in 1932. This is the unit that brought V-8 power to the masses and served as the technological foundation of the hot-rod movement. To cut costs and minimize complexity, the valves—two per cylinder—were located side by side in the block rather than the head and opened by lifters actuated by short rocker arms attached to a camshaft located just above the crankshaft. (Technically, this is known as an L-head engine. If the valves were located on either side of the cylinder, it would be a T-head. But both are flathead or side-valve designs.) The upside? Easy and cheap to manufacture. The downside? Strangled airflow and a compromised combustion chamber.

After World War II, Ford's lunch was eaten by a new generation of overhead valve motors from General Motors. The signature feature of these OHV engines was valves actuated by long pushrods. Although the valvetrain was more complicated and expensive than the flathead's, putting the valves in the head over the cylinders permitted the design of a more efficient combustion chamber. Then Chrysler raised the bar by creating a combustion chamber whose top was shaped like the dome of a planetarium. A crossflow head with an intake port on one side and the exhaust port on the other promoted better breathing, and a spark plug located at top dead center of the dome optimized combustion. Engines built to this design were originally sold in 1951 as FirePower units, but we know them now as Hemis.

A hemispherical combustion chamber allows the use of large valves that produce big power. The drawback is that a hemi head can accommodate only two valves per cylinder, and that's a problem. Remember, an internal combustion engine is essentially an air pump, so a critical factor in how well it performs is what's known in engineering-speak as volumetric efficiency. This translates roughly into how close you

AN ENGINE FOR THE AGES

With its tall gear tower and slender block, the Offy was perfectly symmetrical, so intake and exhaust manifolds could be swapped from side to side, depending on the crew chief's preference.

Virtually every single component of his race cars was **built in-house**.

can come to completely filling the capacity of the combustion chamber with the air-fuel mixture flowing through the intake port. If increasing volumetric efficiency is the goal, then four valves are obviously better than two. The downside is that four valves won't fit inside a hemi head. Instead, you have to use what's known as a pent-roof head that's made up of five angled surfaces (as in a pentagon), rather than a hemispherical dome.

Believe it or not, Les Charlatans figured all of this out way back in 1911. And they had another profound insight. They didn't want to bury the camshaft in the block and open the valves with long, heavy pushrods that would limit engine speed. Instead, they located the camshafts above the cylinder head and opened the valves with L-shaped cam followers. The car they designed was built around a four-cylinder, 16-valve, twin-cam engine whose architecture is still pretty much the go-to solution to this day for everything from an entry-level Honda Civic LX to the 416-hp Mercedes-AMG CLA45 S.

For the record, Les Charlatans didn't invent the DOHC design. But they're the ones who proved that it worked. In its debut in 1912, the brand-new Peugeot was driven to victory in the French Grand Prix by Georges Boillot, who was one of Les Charlatans. The car finished 13 minutes ahead of a Fiat that had been, until then, considered to be the most sophisticated race car in the world. The next year, another member of Les Charlatans, Jules Goux, won the Indy 500 in an upgraded version of the Peugeot. He, too, outdistanced the second-place car by 13 minutes despite pausing during pit stops to revive himself with infusions of champagne.

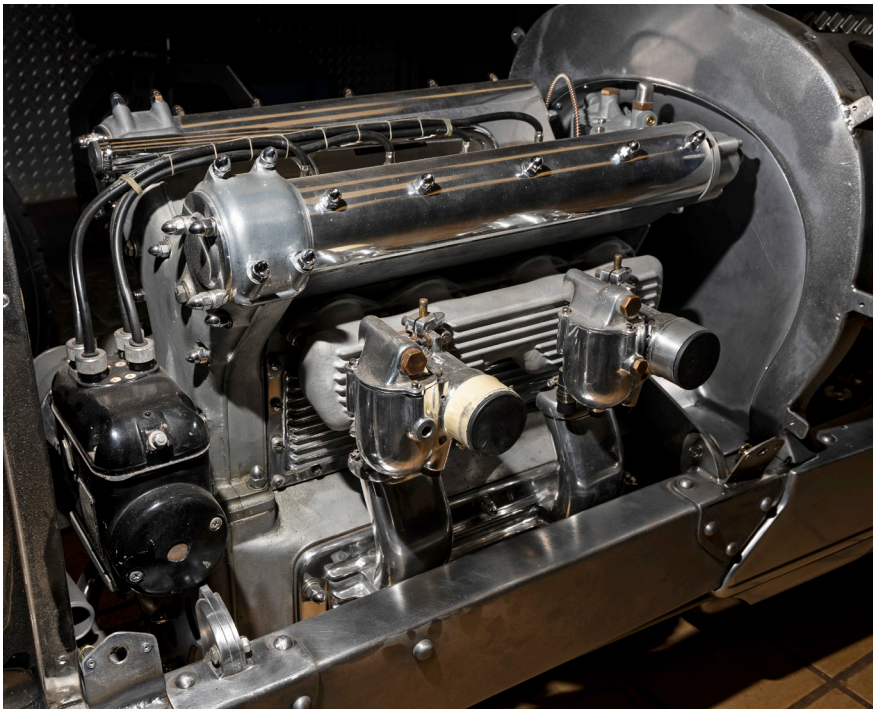
The Americans immediately realized that the French interlopers had a better idea. In 1915, a Peugeot was acquired by "Wild Bob" Burman, who'd set a land-speed record in 1911—41.732 mph—in the ex–Barney Oldfield Blitzen Benz. Burman marauded from coast to coast until blowing up the motor. To rebuild it, he enlisted the aid of a man whom historian Griffith Borgeson would later describe as "the greatest creative figure in the history of the American racing car."

Like Les Charlatans, Harry Arminius Miller was an intuitive and protean self-taught genius. Although later photos depict him as a dapper raconteur with a rakish fedora and a waxed mustache, he came from sturdy Midwestern stock, the son of a German immigrant, born in a small Wisconsin logging town. Miller's formal education ended when he quit elementary school to work at a bicycle shop. Fascinated by machinery, he was a classic tinkerer who learned how things worked by taking them apart. But unlike most do-it-yourselfers, he wasn't content merely to put them back together. No, he aspired to build a better mousetrap, whether it was a simple fuel pump or a W-24 marine engine for hydroplane racing.

During his formative years, Miller ran a bicycle shop, repaired steam engines and milling equipment, designed and built a motorcycle, patented a spark plug, and worked at several car companies. He learned the rudiments of racing while preparing an early Olds for competition, and a stint serving as the shop foreman at an ironworks company taught him the latest thinking in metallurgy and casting techniques. At some point, he turned his attention to a problem that has bedeviled anybody who has ever worked with carburetors: how best to regulate the mixture of air and fuel. Eventually, he patented a unit that used a rotary barrel to progressively expose fuel jets as the throttle was opened. Although his so-called Master carburetor didn't work well at part throttle, it was perfect for high-performance driving. Besides establishing his credentials in the racing world, his experience selling carburetors whet his appetite for more ambitious motorsports projects.

By 1915, Harry A. Miller Manufacturing employed more than 50 people, and his shop just south of downtown LA became a hub for a burgeoning cadre of professional racers. Later that year, he designed and built the first of several single-overhead-cam four-cylinder engines. In 1920, he unveiled the first of his magnificent straight-eights, featuring a DOHC valvetrain clearly inspired by Burman's old Peugeot. Miller soon emerged as the colossus of American race car design and production between the wars, and the shadow he cast over the sport didn't disappear until the Offy finally faded away in the early 1980s.

The Miller factory was a soup-to-nuts operation; virtually every single component of his race cars was built in-house. And what amazing cars they were! Designed for high-speed, banked board tracks where the throttle was rarely cracked, the chassis were impossibly slender, measuring only 18 inches wide at





The Offy was built **by racers, for racers,** and there's a method to its madness.

the cockpit. Later, Miller introduced a front-wheel-drive version especially for Indy. By eliminating the driveshaft, Miller was able to lower the cockpit and make the bodywork even cleaner aerodynamically. But the secret to the success of his cars was the engine under the long, sleek hoods.

The first of Miller's straight-eights displaced 183 cubic inches. Then came a 122-cubic-inch version of the same engine. But his masterpiece was a supercharged 91-cubic-inch (1.5 liter) straight-eight that produced speeds that almost beggar belief. In 1927, Frank Lockhart clocked a lap at 147.7 mph around a board track in Atlantic City. He used the same car, totally unstreamlined, with four exposed tires, to go 171.02 mph on a short course laid out on the dry lake at Muroc, California. The speed Lockhart achieved with a 1.5-liter Miller was only 32 mph short of the record that Henry Segrave had set recently in a purpose-built LSR car powered by not one but two 22.5-liter airplane engines.

In addition to being an engineering genius, Miller had the soul of an artist, so he was determined to build not only the fastest cars and engines but also the most beautiful ones. The purity of its fundamental design, coupled with a variety of unnecessary aesthetic flourishes, transformed the Miller 91 race car into an industrial jewel. As Mark Dees wrote in a caption in his authoritative history, *The Miller Dynasty*, "It was designed to be as light and efficient as the knowledge and materials of the time would allow, and the early example shown here has seldom, if ever, been matched for its architectural beauty and truly elegant simplicity."

But Miller wasn't a one-man band. Two collaborators were especially critical to his success. The first was Leo Goossen, a formally trained engineer and draftsman who was able to transform Miller's esoteric concepts into detailed industrial drawings. Quiet and self-effacing, projecting an image more like an accountant than a stalwart of the racing world, Goossen would be a principal player in the design of every purebred American racing engine over the next 50 years. The other critical employee was shop foreman Fred Offenhauser, whose Teutonic precision allowed Miller components to be machined to tolerances that were unheard of at the time. Offenhauser also had the business moxie that served as a counterweight to Miller's cost-be-damned approach to commerce—which was a major reason that the company always seemed to be teetering on the edge of financial disaster.

Unlike their big brothers, Offys built for midget racing had only two valves per cylinder. This early model is a 97-cubic-incher equipped with a pair of side-draft Riley carburetors.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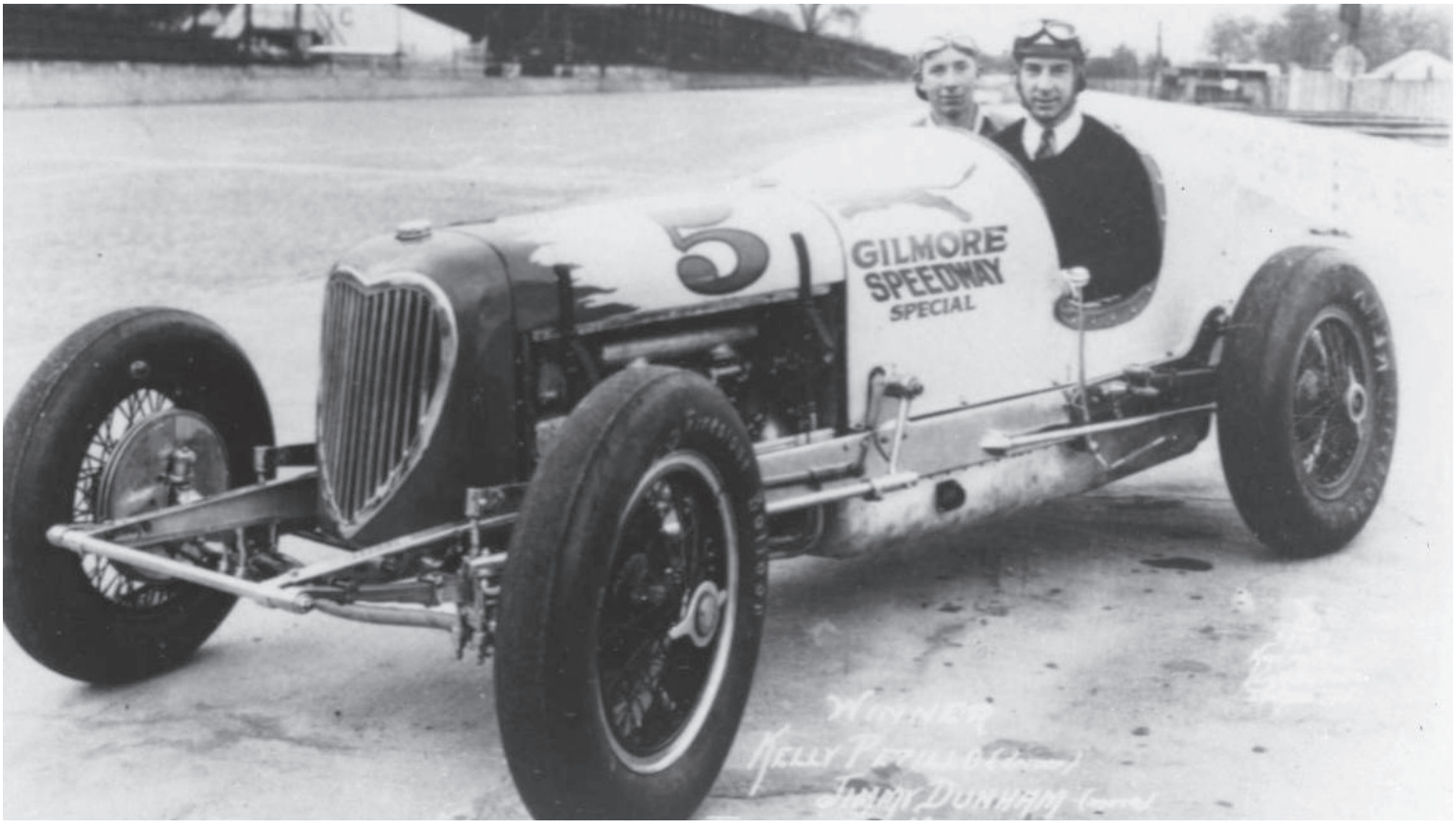

"Miller didn't have any money," says Gary Schroeder, a longtime midget racer and racing-parts supplier whose father, Gordon, was a famous builder of steering boxes and torsion bars and owned various Offy-powered race cars. "He didn't have state-of-the-art machinery, just clapped-out tools run by overhead belts and pulleys. But he had some really clever people working for him, so the tolerances on the engines were amazing. They don't have any gaskets on them. I mean, there are no gaskets anywhere."

Miller wasn't the only American with money trouble after the stock market crash of 1929. Expensive and exotic, the Miller 91 was all dressed up with no place to go as the Depression spawned new forms of less expensive, shorter-track racing. Miller reluctantly agreed to develop a four-cylinder engine that could be sold at a more affordable price. As it happened, he already had a four-banger in his portfolio: a marine engine that had been created a few years earlier for the 151-cubic-inch hydroplane class. While enlarging it to 200 and then 220 cubic inches, Miller and Goossen replaced the SOHC valvetrain and hemi head with the 16-valve twin-cam arrangement and pent-roof architecture familiar from the straight-eight engines. Although it didn't carry the nameplate yet, this was, in effect, the first Offy.

Four-cylinder Millers finished 1-2-3-4 at Indy in 1934. Alas, this proved to be the swan song for Harry A. Miller Inc., which had been forced into involuntary bankruptcy the previous year. In lieu of back pay, Offenhauser spirited away assorted tools and machines, along with the patterns for the 220 inline-four, which he immediately began producing at the shop he opened after Miller went out of business. The following year marked the first Indy win for an engine badged as an Offy. (Confusingly, four-cylinder engines built at the Miller factory before it closed won the 500 in 1936 and 1938.) Goossen, who went to work for Offenhauser, always maintained that the "big" Offys were effectively rebranded Millers.

For the record, Offenhauser also commissioned Goossen to design a new engine to take advantage of the craze for midgets, which were the most popular form of open-wheel racing during the Depression. To save time and money, Goossen based it on half of a 183-cubic-inch Miller straight-eight. Unlike the twin-cam valvetrain in the "big" Offys, the small engine had a hemi head and a single-overhead cam. But this mighty midget was badged as an Offy, and it was downright unbeatable for decades.

Offenhauser moved to a bigger, better-equipped shop—though still in South Central LA—in 1941 and



THE FIRST OFFY CHAMPION

Kelly Petillo spent his life savings to build this car, and Fred Offenhauser provided an engine on credit. Petillo won not only Indy in 1935 but also the AAA national championship.

Photos courtesy of Indianapolis Motor Speedway

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prospered doing defense production work during World War II. In 1946, he sold his business to three-time Indy winner Louis Meyer and his one-time riding mechanic Dale Drake. With Goossen providing engineering expertise, Meyer-Drake Engineering thrived in the postwar era while building three different sizes of engine: 270s and then 255s for Indianapolis and the rest of the Championship Trail, 220s for sprint cars, and 110s for midgets. Technically, there were no rules saying you had to run an Offy. But if you wanted to make a living in American open-wheel racing, you either got an Offy or found another line of work.

THESE DAYS, most purpose-built race engines come directly from automakers or specialist engine factories. They're designed by mechanical engineers working with cutting-edge computers and multimillion-dollar budgets, they feature components formed by sophisticated mills and tooling, and they're assembled in clean rooms by teams of meticulously trained technicians. In the IndyCar world, teams lease engines from Honda and Chevrolet, which provide fully built motors and the technicians to work on them. It's very much a plug-and-play operation.

Not so in the 1930s and '40s. Or the '50s and '60s. Well into the 1980s, racers either bought engines from specialists such as Cosworth and Traco or built them from components sourced from parts catalogs. Teams were responsible for optimizing performance, doing routine maintenance, and making repairs when something broke. There was a lot less money in racing back then, so engines tended to be run hard and put away wet. When something failed, which happened a lot more often back then, engines had to be fixed on the fly in crappy conditions at county fairgrounds and rudimentary bullrings. So during an era when even well-funded teams rarely had more than a crew chief and one or two mechanics, racers prized engines that were tough, dependable, uncomplicated, and economical.

Can you say Offenhauser?

"It was a tractor engine more than a race engine—a big, heavy motor with big, heavy parts, and it didn't turn too fast," said Jim McGee, who worked on naturally aspirated Offys during his years at Leader Card Racers in the 1960s before becoming one of the winningest crew chiefs in Indy-car history. "But it was reliable and cost-effective. You had to rebuild the four-cam Ford and the Cosworth every two races, but you could go four races or more with the Offy. You

The engine on the stand is one of the 255-cubic-inch normally aspirated Offys that dominated Indy-car racing in the 1950s and early '60s. By 1972, Joe Leonard's Samsonite-sponsored car packed a 159-cubic-inch version augmented with a massive turbo.

"**It was a tractor engine more than a race engine**—a big, heavy motor with big, heavy parts."

could probably run it 1000 miles, and then all you had to do was take it apart, Magnaflux it, and put the pieces back together, and it was ready to run 1000 more."

The Offy isn't a simple engine—far from it—and its more idiosyncratic design features require some annoying mechanical gymnastics. For example, since the cylinder head isn't detachable, as with conventional motors, boring and honing the cylinders can be tricky, and a valve job requires a special tool and technique. Installing the crankshaft is an even more time-consuming operation since the crankcase is a one-piece unit. But the Offy is nowhere near as finicky as, say, the Wilbur Shaw–driven Maserati 8CTF that won Indy in 1939 and 1940. "In the Boyle Special," says Dan Rosenau, restoration manager at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Museum, "between the throttle pedal and the second carburetor, there are 17—no, make that 18—bell cranks, rod ends, bushings, and bearings. It's the most complicated throttle linkage I've ever seen."

The Offy was built by racers, for racers, and there's always a method to its apparent madness. Take, for instance, the integrated cylinder block and cylinder head. The primary benefit of this unorthodox design is eliminating the need for a head gasket. That doesn't sound like a big deal today, when blown head gaskets in purpose-built race engines are an exceedingly rare event. But this wasn't the case when the Offy was designed in the 1930s, thanks to far inferior gasket materials. And gasket failures would have been an issue in the 1970s, when turbocharged Offys were producing more than 1000 horsepower, or roughly four times as much as the original engine.

The monoblock design also eliminates the distortion to the cylinder bore that inevitably occurs when you clamp the cylinder head to the block and torque down the head bolts. "That distortion will happen even when everything's perfect," says Frank Honsowetz, who restored a variety of Offys during his tenure running Ed Pink Racing Engines. "And it doesn't have to be much. A human hair is about three-thousandths of an inch in diameter. And if you move the bore 1 thou, that's enough to hurt the sealing to the piston rings." Today, again, thanks to advances in metallurgy and fastener design, this is no longer a gigantic deal. But it used to be, and the Offy solved it by casting the head and block as a single piece and getting rid of head bolts altogether.

But the most unusual feature of the Offy was the one-piece barrel-shaped crankcase, which forced mechanics to employ techniques that weren't taught in Engine Assembly 101. To install a crankshaft in a conventional engine, the block is turned upside-down and the oil pan is removed to expose the bottom end. The crank is then lowered onto semicircular main journals and bearing inserts that will support it and allow it to rotate freely. Next, semicircular main bearing caps are bolted to the main journals, fully encircling the crank. Once the oil pan is reattached, you're good to go. Obviously, this glosses over all the work that goes into the process. But in big-picture terms, the process is easy-peasy.

Installing a crankshaft in an Offy is a much more complicated and labor-intensive operation. To begin with, there are no main journals or main caps. Instead, the crank was ringed by stout bronze discs known in Offy lingo as webs. After these are set in place on the crankshaft, the empty crankcase is heated to at least 200 degrees either in an oven or by an acetylene torch with a rosebud tip. The case is then stood up on its nose, and the fully dressed crankshaft is lowered down into it through a just-big-enough hole in the back. The webs are clamped to the case while the aluminum is still hot. The so-called interference fit formed when the metal cools and shrinks is stronger than simply bolting the components together. This process is a pain, literally—it's almost impossible to avoid burning your hands and wrists while turning wrenches inside the narrow access hole on the side of the heated case. But as they say: No pain, no gain.

A one-piece crankcase is significantly sturdier than a standard split case with main caps. This is an especially powerful advantage when the engine is an inline-four with a flat 180-degree crank, which sends cylinder pressure straight up and down in a vertical plane and puts the main caps under tremendous loads. Although the problem can be addressed by anchoring the main caps with four or even six bolts, a one-piece crankcase is an even better solution. With its barrel case and webs secured via interference fit, the bottom end of the Offy was virtually impervious



The most inventive guys were known as **"Offy witches."**

to vibration even after engines started making 1000 horsepower and more. "As long as you got your clearances right, it was just rock-solid when you slid it together," says Mike Devin, who built countless Offys as an Indy-car crew chief before becoming the technical director and director of competition for USAC.

Robustness was one of the Offy's most compelling attributes. But in racing, the goal isn't merely to finish; it's to finish first. So during the years when everybody was running an Offy, crew chiefs were constantly tinkering to find an advantage, however small. The most inventive guys were known as "Offy witches," and their black magic ranged from minor tweaks like employing different cam grinds for different tracks to major upgrades such as creating a "double pumper" lubrication system with a pair of oil pumps. Creative crew chiefs even mounted Offys in a "lay-down" position, as much as 90 degrees from vertical, to lower the hood line of their hulking front-engine roadsters.

The most common area for experimentation was bore and stroke. Some engine builders favored a longer stroke (coupled with a smaller bore) to maximize torque and acceleration off the corners. Others preferred a shorter stroke (and bigger bore) to allow engines to spin faster and develop more top-end horsepower. Camshaft grinds, too, were open to interpretation. "There were a lot of choices, and everybody had different ideas for different tracks," Schroeder says. Back then, remember, races were run on dirt and pavement, short tracks and long, and the condition of the surface—heavy, slick, whatever—was another factor to take into consideration.

The improvements produced by these variations were measurable in terms of race results but only incremental when quantified by speed. When the first Kurtis KK500A roadster appeared at the Speedway in 1952 with a 270-cubic-inch Offy, Bill Vukovich was the fastest qualifier at 138.212 mph. A decade later, in a Watson roadster powered by a 255 Offy, Parnelli Jones took the pole at 150.370 mph. An increase of 12 mph in 10 years didn't seem like much. But it was enough, as long as the Offy was the only game in town.

Everything changed in the early 1960s, when regulations allowing far bigger stock-block engines rendered Offys increasingly uncompetitive in sprint-car



BOBBY UNSER, TURBOMEISTER

In 1968, driven by Bobby Unser, an Eagle powered by a Herb Porter–built Offy outlasted Lotus turbines and four-cam Fords to become the first turbocharged engine to win Indy.

Photos courtesy of Indianapolis Motor Speedway

and midget racing. Then, in 1963, Jim Clark finished second in the 500 with a 255-cubic-inch version of the 289 Ford found in the Cobra. The next year, after a $10 million development program, Ford returned with a four-cam V-8 that had 75 horsepower and 2000 rpm on the Offy. An Offy eked out a providential win at Indy in 1964, thanks to A.J. Foyt, but Clark triumphed with a four-cam Ford the next year. In 1966, only nine of the 33 starters ran Offys, and none of them were competitive. Adding insult to injury, Louis Meyer split with Dale Drake to take a job running the Ford engine program, and the shop moved to a new facility in Santa Ana, not too far from Disneyland.

It looked like it was time to put the tired nag out to pasture. But it turned out that, thanks to some new technology, there was still some life in the old warhorse.

THE MOST STRAIGHTFORWARD way to get more power out of an internal combustion engine is to pump more air through it. This can be accomplished in two basic ways: You can either increase engine speed by spinning it faster or you can force more air into the cylinder during each intake stroke. The Offy was already maxed out in terms of revolution per minute. So that left Door Number Two as the only option in what was turning out to be a one-sided battle with the four-cam Indy Ford. And that was fine with crew chief Herb Porter.

Herbie Horsepower, as he was known in the USAC community, was a high priest who worshipped at the altar of forced induction. During World War II, he'd served as a staff sergeant overhauling P-40s and P-51 fighters, and he developed a deep appreciation for the superchargers on their screaming Merlin V-12s. After the war, he fitted a sprint car with a Roots-style supercharger in 1949 and, later, a centrifugal blower. Encouraged by the speed of these cars, he built a blown Offy that qualified on the front row at Indy in 1952 (the car was named, fittingly, the Miracle Power Special). But it crapped out after 20 laps and was classified 33rd and last. Like the heroes of Greek myth, Porter's supercharged cars tended to be spectacular but short-lived, and he took a hiatus from his adventures on forced induction.

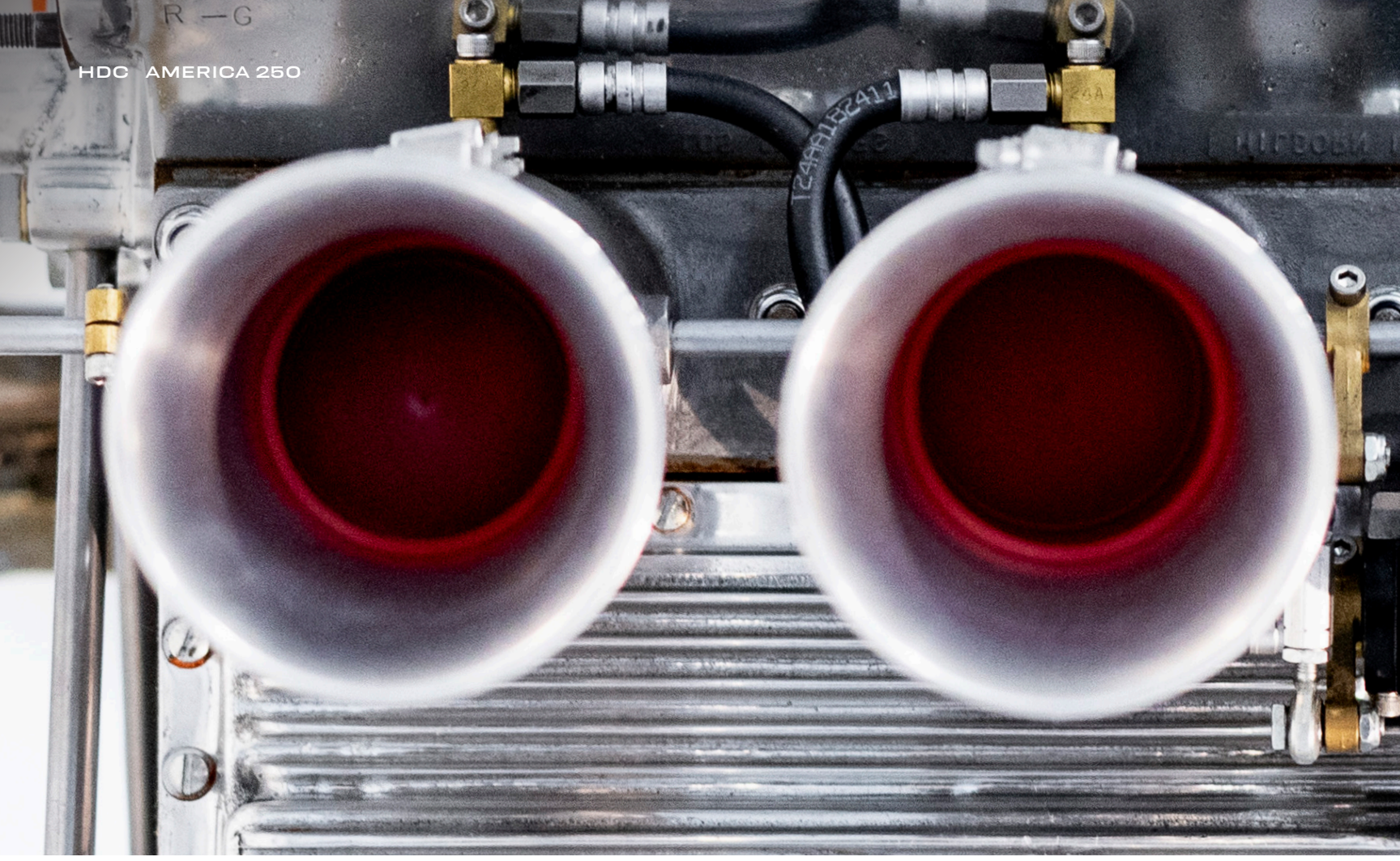
A supercharger creates horsepower by forcing more air into the cylinders. It's typically driven by a belt, gear, or chain run off the engine, and this drive mechanism exacts a penalty by sapping a certain amount of power. A turbocharger, by way of contrast, is driven by exhaust gases that would otherwise flow out the tailpipe, so the extra power it produces is more or less free. The downside was that it took time for the turbo to spool up, so there was a lag between depressing the throttle and picking up speed. It was also difficult to tune the turbo to work well across a broad range of engine speeds.

Nevertheless, turbos started to appear on trucks and tractors in the 1950s, and in 1962, General Motors was emboldened to apply the technology to the Oldsmobile Jetfire. Engineer Bob DeBisschop was hired by Garrett AiResearch to make it work. It didn't, or at least not well enough to sell in appreciable numbers. Throttle lag was a drag, and the turbo didn't do much at low speed. On the other hand, it worked really well at high speed, so DeBisschop thought the turbo might have a future on big ovals where engines spent most of their time in a relatively narrow rev band, and he found an ardent ally in Herbie Horsepower.

Aided by Stu Hilborn (of fuel-injection fame), Porter and DeBisschop fitted an off-the-shelf TE06 turbo designed for an Allis-Chalmers diesel tractor to a spare Offy. Before long, they were making 600 horsepower on the dyno. Yowza! In 1966, Porter crammed the engine in an elderly Watson roadster, with the turbo and a crude Rube Goldberg–like network of large pipes and tubes hung out the side of the cockpit. With Bobby Grim behind the wheel, the car whistled down Indy's front straight at 200 mph and belched flames on overrun in the corners. Grim described it as "an absolute plumber's nightmare of two sets of injector nozzles, one adjusted for unblown, the other for when the blower kicked in. Which meant that at low speeds, the roadster was a slobbering idiot—pop, spit, slobber, it barely ran at all. Then all of a sudden, *BLAM*! The turbo kicked in, and it was hold-onto-your-ass."

Although Grim managed to qualify—barely—he was eliminated in the big opening-lap crashfest. The addition of a wastegate and other detail upgrades improved drivability, and Lloyd Ruby scored the turbo Offy's first USAC win next year. In 1968, Porter worked with DeBisschop and Jud Phillips on Bobby Unser's turbocharged Eagle. Unser won Indy, and Offys powered nine of the first 11 finishers. By 1969, Ford was forced to start turbocharging its formerly unbeatable four-cam motor. But in a weird twist of fate, the old-school, heavy-duty design of the Offy—especially the stout bottom end—allowed it to absorb stratospheric levels of boost better than the Ford. The Offy also breathed better as the power levels rose.

"The problem with the four-cam Ford was that they designed it with ports the size of a four-cylinder 255 Offy, and they were too big for an eight-cylinder engine," says Van Dyne, who built the turbo Offy that propelled Mark Donohue to winning Indy in 1972. At first glance, bigger ports seem like a good idea since they'd theoretically allow more air into the cylinder.

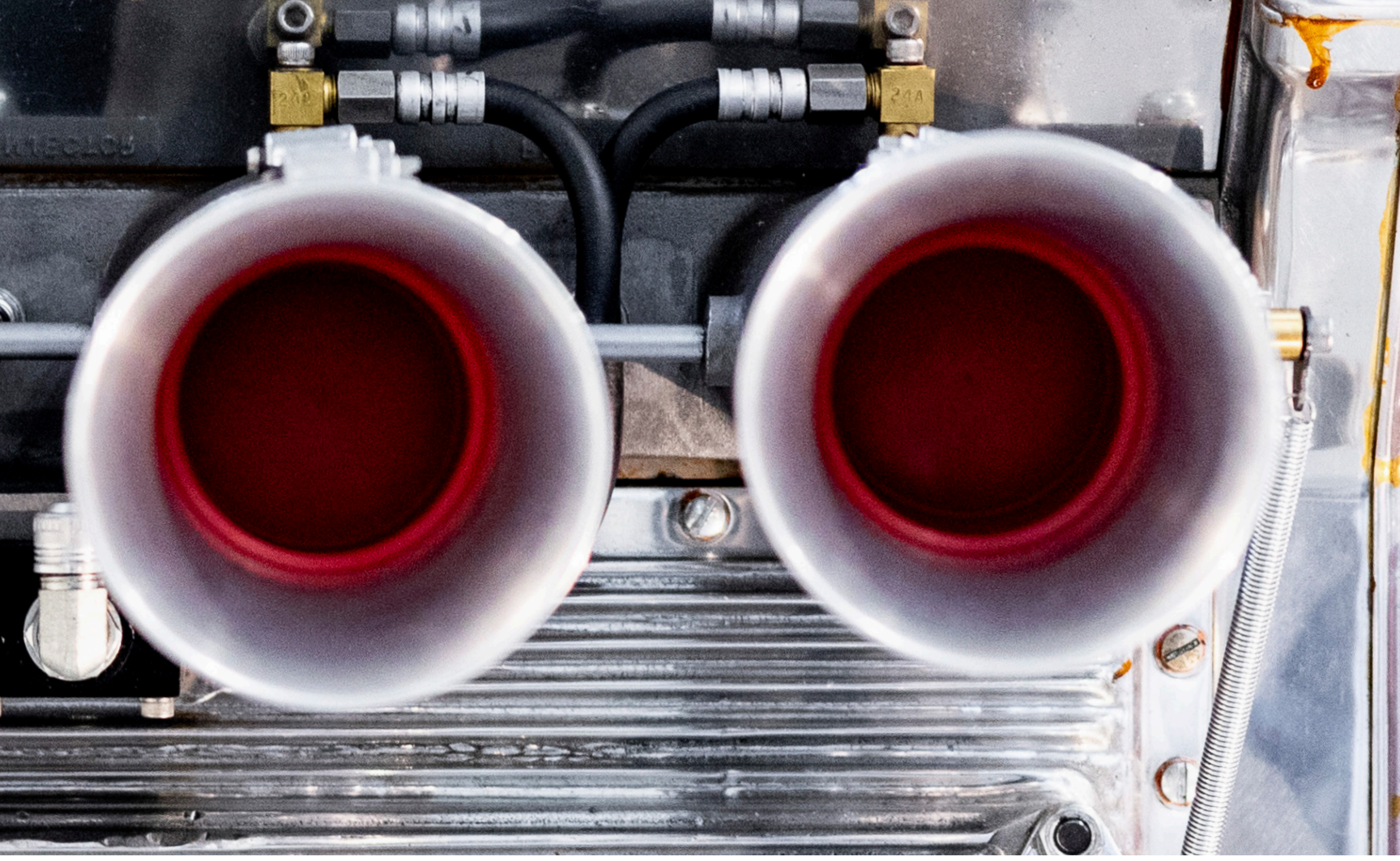


But intake ports aren't analogous to the windows in a house. The difference is that the size of the cylinder affects the velocity of airflow through the port, with bigger cylinders able to suck in air faster than smaller ones. This increases the volume of air being combusted during each power stroke. The Ford had big ports, but the cylinders were too small to efficiently suck in air through them. In fact, many teams inserted what they called port stuffers to better match the size of the ports to the size of the cylinders.

Thanks to the insurrection launched by Herbie Horsepower, Offy was able to reclaim its throne. Ford shuttered its Indy-car operation in 1971 and sold all of its equipment to A.J. Foyt. And from 1972 to 1975, Foyt was the only driver to win an Indy car race with anything other than an Offy. This streak came to an end at Pocono in 1976, when Al Unser finished first with a four-cam Indy Ford, but not the four-cam Indy Ford. Instead, he was using a brand-new turbocharged iteration of the Cosworth DFV, which had dominated Formula 1 since being introduced in 1967.

The Cosworth belongs in the great engine pantheon alongside the Offy. The DFV won 155 races from 1967 to 1983, and the Indy-car derivative, designated the DFX, won another 153 races. Light and compact, it was strong enough to serve as a stressed member of the chassis, and it made good power through a wide range of engine speeds. Designer Keith Duckworth's most influential technical innovation was placing the valves near the top of the combustion chamber, at a narrow angle from vertical, rather than at the sides, which used to be common practice. This improved the shape of the combustion chamber and allowed the use of flat-top pistons, which improved flame travel and promoted better combustion. Also, that narrow-angle valves translated into a straighter—and, therefore, more efficient—flow of air through the ports.

The included valve angle of the DFV—that is, the angle between the exhaust and intake valves—was 32 degrees. In the Offy, designed during an era long before the benefit of narrow-angle ports were understood, it was 72 degrees. Facing an existential threat in the form of the DFX, the Offy empire struck back. An Offy derivative known as the D-G-S, for Dale Drake, Leo Goossen, and Art Sparks, reduced the included valve angle to 44 degrees, and it was followed by another engine—the last of the Offys—with an



Up close and personal with the ingenious mechanical fuel-injection unit invented by Stu Hilborn. The "piss and squirt" system debuted in 1949 on a 270-cubic-inch Offy driven by Jimmy Jackson.

included valve angle of 38 degrees. The improvement was dramatic. But the Offy's major enemy wasn't the Cosworth; it was the rule makers.

In 1974, reacting to the fuel crisis and the gruesome Indy 500 the previous year, USAC instituted regulations designed to slow cars down. Manifold pressure, which had been unrestricted, was limited to 80 inches of mercury. Lower fuel allotments were a special challenge for the Offys because crew chiefs tended to run them rich, which hurt fuel economy, to prevent pistons from melting. Manifold pressure was cut in 1976 and again the following year, down to 42 inches. This was perfect for the Cosworth, which would have been a hand grenade with the pin pulled at 80 inches. But it yanked the rug out from underneath the Offy.

The Offy won its last race in 1976, the D-G-S in 1978. By that time, it was painfully clear that the four-cylinder engine was long past its sell-by date. John Drake, who'd taken over the business after the death of his father in 1972, decided to build a V-8. After Goossen's death at the end of 1974, ex-BMW engineer Hans Hermann was hired to design it. The Drake V-8 ran a few races in 1979 and showed some promise, but it was too little, too late. "Money was an issue," says Van Dyne, who had been hired by Drake to build the engine. "And the bar-room banter really hurt us." Drake shut the doors for good in 1979.

A few backmarker teams continued to race the Offy until 1982. The engine last appeared at Indianapolis in 1983, when an Offy-powered car practiced but failed to make a qualifying attempt. Nearly a half-century after the first example came out of Fred Offenhauser's humble shop in Los Angeles, the Offy was finally silenced. But what wonderful noise, in so many cars and on so many tracks, it had made for so many years!

"The normally aspirated engine was nearly bulletproof if maintained well and not too badly abused," historian Gordon Eliot White wrote in his marvelous book, *Offenhauser*. "The engine had no particular weakness. It could survive horrendous piston speeds, severe vibrations, even liberal doses of nitromethane for qualifying. When turbocharged, it would hang together under pounding that would destroy stock-block engines and the Ford four-cams of the 1960s.

"It was," he concluded, "the engine for its age." *H*

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Special thanks to engine owner Chuck Jones and builder Dan Webb

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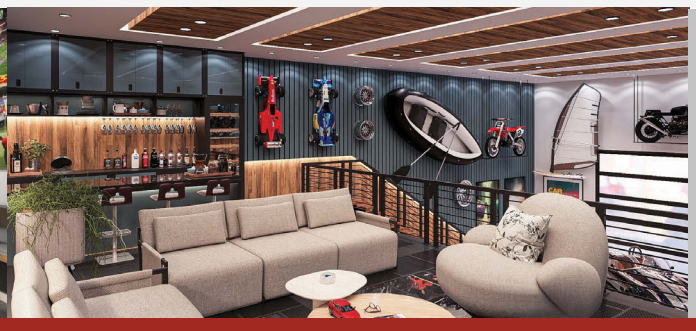



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ROUTE 66 AT 100

Words by
Bob Merlis

A century since its creation—and decades since it was made obsolete by the interstate—Route 66 remains front and center in the American imagination.

THE BEST THING about U.S. Highway 66 is that it isn't really a highway. Although the official designation dates back 100 years, to 1926, much of the road existed before that as stretches of state and municipal byways. Route 66 is thus a kind of Main Street that meanders across more than half the width of the continental U.S., connecting places as disparate as Chicago, Illinois, and Kingman, Arizona.

Perhaps that's why the Mother Road, as it came to be known, remains a cultural touchstone. It's a character in popular culture, with references in literature, cinema, music, and the common parlance on par with the railroad and river steamboats in earlier times. We set out to survey some of the more salient 66 cultural touchstones as we celebrate the centennial.

Photo by Valentin Wolf/Getty Images



SONG

(GET YOUR KICKS ON) ROUTE 66

This song was written by singer/pianist/actor Bobby Troup, who conceived the idea when he decided to move to Hollywood from his Pennsylvania home. The brilliance of it is the fact that it serves as a sequential musical roadmap, naming some of the key places the highway goes, although not all of them. Albuquerque is missing, since "beef jerky" seems ungainly in a rhyme, but New Mexico is represented by Gallup, which might have languished in obscurity had it not been for Troup. The first hit version was sung in 1946 by Nat King Cole, who knew the road well from constant postwar touring. The Rolling Stones had perhaps the definitive rock version in 1964 and recorded it again the next year for a live album. It's almost a given that they had never been to Amarillo or Flagstaff—not to mention Kingman or Barstow—when they first tackled the lyric. Let the record show that the band's very first U.S. performance on June 5, 1964, took place at the Swing Auditorium in—yes—San Bernardino. "Route 66" came five songs into the set, after "High Heel Sneakers" and before "Walking the Dog" (they didn't write much of their own material back then), and contemporary reports indicate the crowd went wild when the town was mentioned. Decades later, British electro-gloom rockers Depeche Mode improbably turned the song into a dance hit in 1988.

BOOK

THE GRAPES OF WRATH

John Steinbeck's 1939 Pulitzer Prize–winning novel and the John Ford–directed Oscar-winning film chronicle the plight of Tom Joad and his family, Oklahomans who sought a new life in California during the Depression era's Dust Bowl diaspora. They traveled west on 66 in their 1926 Hudson Super Six that had been converted into a pickup with their earthly possessions piled high, presaging *The Beverly Hillbillies*' 1921 Oldsmobile-turned-pickup seen in the opening credits of the riotous saga of rubes who move to Tinsel Town. The book is the origin of the term Mother Road, which made its way into the vernacular and provides a gritty, realistic view of the struggle to survive in those bleak days, with 66 representing a lifeline for the downtrodden.



FILM

EASY RIDER

By the time this film was released in 1969, the Interstate Highway System was in full swing, and the Mother Road had largely become a secondary route. Billy (Dennis Hopper, who also directed the film) and Captain America (Peter Fonda) make their way through the Southwest on Harleys, spending much of the film with 66 under their choppers' wheels. The film's tagline, "A man went looking for America. And couldn't find it anywhere," encapsulates the mythic drug-drenched journey in what is the ultimate existential road movie, which put them on 66 in scenes shot in Las Vegas (New Mexico, *not* Nevada), close to Flagstaff. It's in that town's jail where the film's third memorable character, boozed-up lawyer George Hanson, is introduced, launching the career of Jack Nicholson. After spending untold hours on the back of Captain America's bike, George sits down at a diner and says, "I think I'll order kidneys, 'cause I left mine out there on the road somewhere." The film posits the journey across 66 as a psychedelic experience, making the Mother Road a cypher for expanding consciousness as it long has been, even in pre-acid days.



BRAND

PHILLIPS 66

This brand of gasoline brought the legend of Route 66 to much of the rest of the nation through its network of service stations. Though founded in Houston, the company's most significant assets were located along 66 in Oklahoma. Phillips 66 gas stations date from 1927 and the name is still in use today. Thus, the mystique of the route made its way to places far afield from its namesake route, but still associated itself with the romance of the road.



Ridley Scott was nominated for a Best Director Academy Award for his 1991 hit *Thelma & Louise*, which starred Geena Davis (left) and Susan Sarandon and used Route 66 for many scenes.

FILM

THELMA & LOUISE

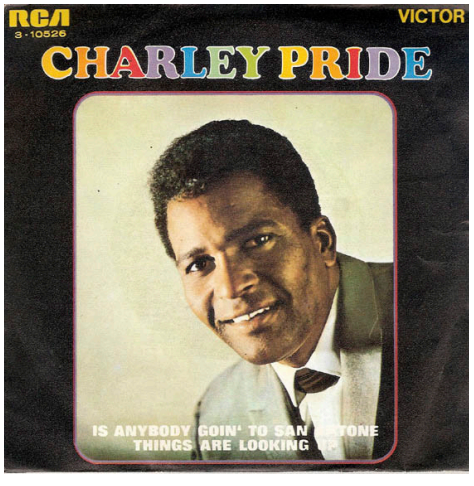
Ridley Scott's 1991 film, starring Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis, offered a more contemporary take on the road's liberating powers. Two feminists take matters—and a beautiful 1966 Thunderbird—into their own hands, setting out to free themselves from the oppression of married life, paying the ultimate price for renouncing the norm. As they travel 66 through Oklahoma, New Mexico, and eventually into the Grand Canyon, just north of Flagstaff, they embrace their personhood, reflecting 66's unbridled spirit.

SONG

IS ANYBODY GOIN' TO SAN ANTONE?

This Charley Pride 1970 hit song makes reference to 66 even though his character's goal is far south of the route. The lyric paints a bleak picture and immediately sets a scene of desperation, where being stranded on the side of the road offers more fulfillment than a loveless relationship.

> *"Rain dripping off the brim of my hat*
> *Sure is cold today*
> *And here I am a-walking down 66*
> *Wish she hadn't done me that way*
> *Sleeping under a table at a roadside park*
> *A man could wake up dead*
> *But it sure seems warmer than it did*
> *Sleepin' in our king size bed"*



FILM

CARS

Most of the action in Pixar's family favorite, released in 2006, takes place in Radiator Springs, Arizona, a fictional town that's right on 66. The film's Cozy Cone Motel is based on the Wigwam Motel in Holbrook, Arizona, where since 1940 you can spend the night in an ersatz wigwam. Animators capture archetypes of "another roadside attraction" with huge signs and programmatic architecture meant to catch a driver's attention as they search for a night's rest or a cup of joe. You'll find U-Drop Inn, a cafe and Conoco service station that is considered an art deco masterpiece on 66 in the town of Shamrock, Texas. Likewise, the *Cars* movies have Ramone's House of Body Art, a car-customizing operation that is housed in a building that's a ringer for Shamrock's deco palace. Amarillo's legendary *Cadillac Ranch*, conceived and constructed by the Ant Farm collective in 1974, is overtly referenced in the film, where some of the action is set before a mountainscape, the peaks of which are shaped exactly like the back ends of be-finned Cadillacs built between 1949 and 1963.



FILM

LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE

Another 2006 hit film that brought 66 to life, albeit in less kid-friendly form thanks to a heroin-snorting grandfather (played by Alan Arkin, who won an Oscar for the role). If ever a car could be thought of as a co-star, it was the yellow and white 1979 VW bus that improbably conveyed the dysfunctional

family of 10-year-old Olive, portrayed by Abigail Breslin, from Albuquerque, New Mexico, to Redondo Beach, California, in a mad dash so that she could participate in a children's beauty pageant. It's a classic road picture in many ways and an exemplar of the alt lifestyle led by her nutty extended family.



SERIES

ROUTE 66

The elephant in the room, especially for baby boomers, is the *Route 66* television series that ran on CBS for four seasons from 1960 to 1964. It starred Martin Milner as rich kid Tod Stiles and George Maharis as Buz Murdock, whose collar was blue until the final season, when Buz flew the coop and was replaced by a new guy named Linc (Glenn Corbett), whose backstory wasn't explained. The show's theme was provided by Frank Sinatra/Nat King Cole collaborator Nelson Riddle, setting the sonic backdrop for the protagonists' wandering and meddling. It broke into Billboard's Top 30 and quite literally underscored the show's popularity. Sponsored by Chevrolet, Tod and Buz (or Linc) cruised around the country, interceding in localized dramas and conflicts. Although some of the action took place along the titular route, much of it was shot far afield in places like Maine, Ohio, Vermont, Florida, and Minnesota. The payoff was, of course, the Corvette in which the duo traipsed around the country. It was always a current model year convertible, but as the show was shot in black and white, its color could not be discerned. It has been suggested that Chevy's ad agency Campbell-Ewald played a role in launching the series, and that's understandable, considering the overall Chevy-ish vibe of the show. It was never explained how those two roustabouts got a new Vette every season—perhaps a lesson in suspension of disbelief. Though actual action along Route 66 was limited, the show conveyed the idea that we live in a vast country peopled by citizens whose respective stories are worth telling.

FILM

TWO-LANE BLACKTOP

New wave auteur Monte Hellman's taciturn 1971 saga is a minimalist road movie that follows two characters known only as the Driver (James Taylor) and the Mechanic (Beach Boys drummer Dennis Wilson) as drag-race hustlers who travel 66 from Needles, California, to Flagstaff in a '55 Chevy 150 dragster. They encounter GTO (Warren Oates), who drives a showroom-fresh yellow coupe with twin hood scoops/nostrils that bears his name. And there's a female character who is part of a triangle, portrayed by Laurie Bird, whose character is the Girl. The Road is played by Route 66.



FILM

NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN

The Coen Brothers' 2007 feature also treads some familiar and bleak territory, including Las Vegas, New Mexico, where Easy Riders Captain America and Billy met George Hanson in the town pokey 38 years earlier. The film is a neo-gothic modern-day Western featuring Javier Bardem as a soulless hit man, Tommy Lee Jones as the sheriff, Josh Brolin as a morally conflicted guy who takes the money and runs, and Woody Harrelson as a bounty hunter. Things are dicey for all the characters and the grim mise-en-scène is a mother of another type. *H* editor@hagerty.com



Feeling the existential angst? *Two-Lane Blacktop* was not a big commercial success when it was released in 1971, but it has become a road-trip cult classic in the ensuing decades.

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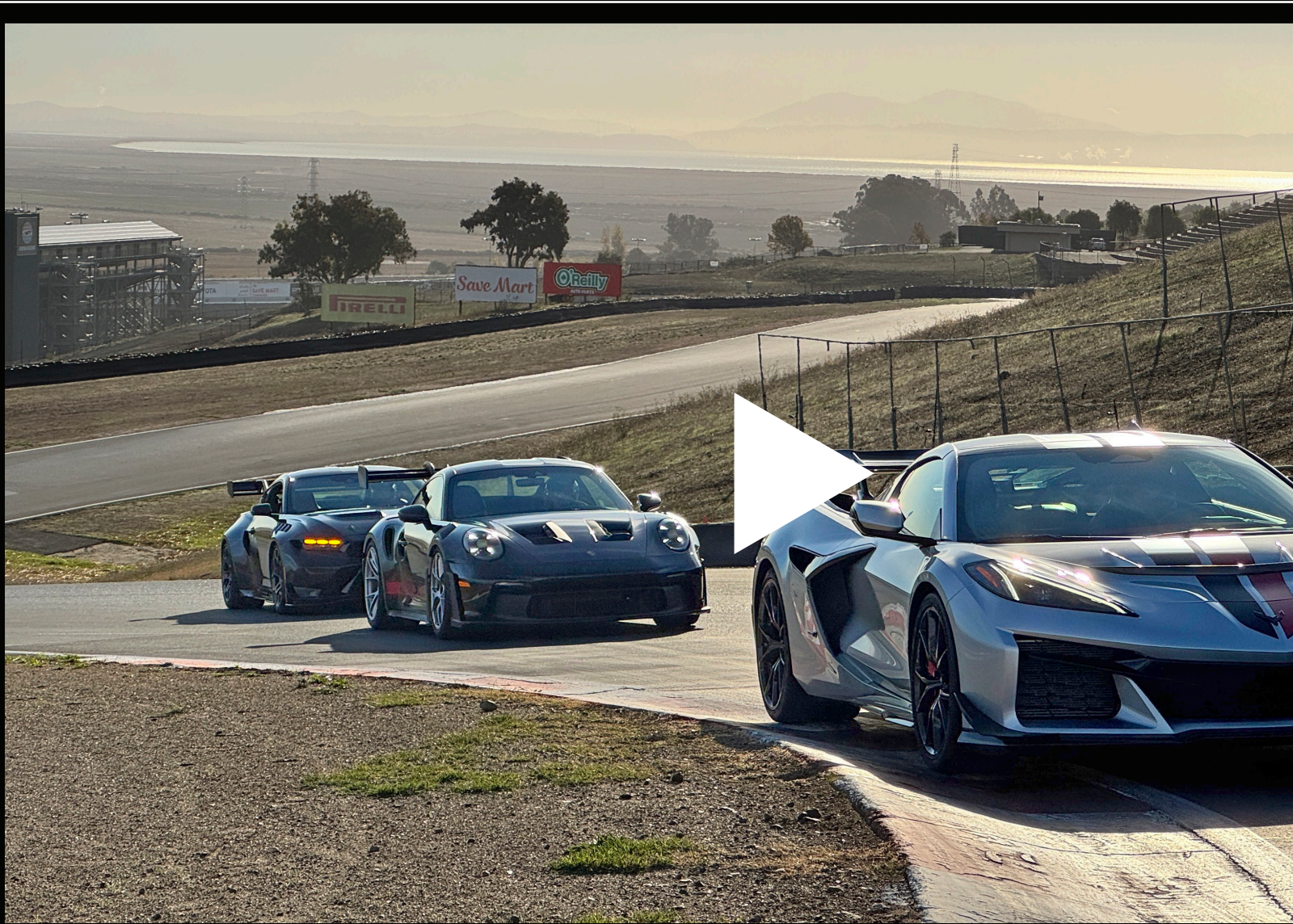

TRACK STARS

Yes, dear, it's a picture *and* a video. Click to catch Cammisa's Ultimate Lap battle, starring the Chevrolet Corvette ZR1, the Porsche 911 GT3 RS, and the Ford Mustang GTD.



AMERICA TAKES ON THE WORLD

A new golden age: Corvette ZR1 vs. Mustang GTD vs. 911 GT3 RS.

Words and Video by
Jason Cammisa

MUCH OF THIS issue is devoted to celebrating America's glorious automotive past, but we'd be remiss in not noting that our nation's automotive present is also pretty darned great. In fact, it may never have been this good.

Consider as exhibits A and B the Chevrolet Corvette ZR1 and the Ford Mustang GTD. Both bristle with tech and clever engineering. The ZR1's twin-turbo V-8 revs to 8000 rpm; the Mustang has a rear-mounted transaxle, trick pushrod-actuated adaptive dampers, and massive tires that required redesigning the entire rear floor of the car. Both cars post performance numbers that are almost difficult to comprehend. The Mustang gets to 60 mph in less than 3 seconds; the Corvette in just over 2 seconds. More than all that, each has the kind of polish and poise at speed that only comes from hundreds of hours of development at the world's gnarliest racetracks. Don't believe us? Check out this video, where the GTD and ZR1 take on the latest Porsche 911 GT3 RS. Hint: One of them set a production car record at California's Sonoma Raceway during our filming.

You may be thinking, "So what?" Tip-of-the-spear sports cars that most of us will never be able to afford bear little relation to an American auto industry that is in many respects in disorder. Records at Germany's Nürburgring won't solve GM and Ford's riddles around electrification or help them navigate tariffs and global conflict.

Yet the ability to build a world-class sports car remains a clear measure of an automaker's engineering talent and its ability to marshal resources toward a common goal. For decades, most elite machines came from Europe with a smattering of competitors from Japan. Nowadays? The highest-performance cars are built here in America as often as not. Think Corvettes and Mustangs, but also Teslas, Lucids, and V-series Cadillacs.

Perhaps more important, history tells us that the best enthusiast cars tend to live on in our memories longer than whatever turmoil accompanied their creation. We don't pretend to know where the American auto industry is headed in the next decade, but we're willing to bet people will still care about the amazing cars being produced right now. editor@hagerty.com

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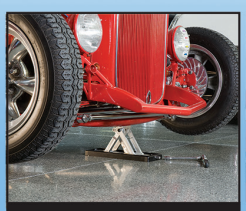

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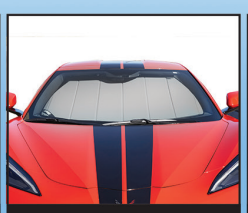

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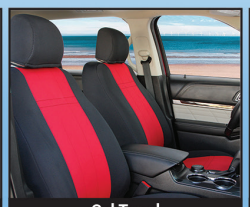

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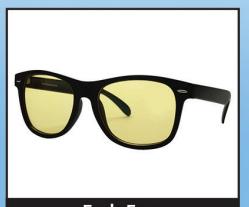

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From 1922 to 2010, the Campbell-Ewald ad agency created Chevrolet's advertising, including the famous baseball, hot dogs, and apple pie jingle.

WHEN I learned this issue of the magazine was devoted entirely to American cars in recognition of the USA's 250th anniversary, I was reminded of a catchy 1970s jingle that many car fans over 55 can probably still sing to this day: "We love baseball, hot dogs, apple pie, and Chevrolet!"

If you're not familiar, here's a link. Fair warning—it's a real earworm, even if it hasn't exactly aged gracefully. Baseball endures, but hot dogs have probably lost some appeal now that we're all a bit more health conscious. And apple pie? I've always preferred pumpkin, but that's just me.

The Chevrolet part still resonates, though. Who doesn't love Chevrolet, Ford, or any of the other great carmakers that have been such a huge part of American life since the Model T rolled out in 1908? Cars remain one of the few things most of us agree on. We love buying them, working on them, talking about them, and, most of all, driving them.

That passion defines us. We're a car-mad, driving-obsessed, curve-hugging nation, unlike any other in the world. Yes, many countries build automobiles, but none of them have the car culture we do. America itself is a land custom-made for driving, which is why I've always been fond of Henry Ford's remark that he built inexpensive cars so people could "enjoy with [their] family the blessing of hours of pleasure in God's great open spaces."

In that promise, Ford gave shape to an idea of American mobility. By the time he devised the assembly line that spit out roughly 15 million Model Ts, that idea had changed life in America. Suddenly, distance wasn't nearly the barrier it once was. Horizons beckoned. Limits fell away. Possibilities expanded.

Of course, Ford wasn't alone—luminaries like Billy Durant, Ransom Eli Olds, Walter P. Chrysler, and others helped form the foundation of not only the automobile industry but also the American obsession with cars. Today, their legacy lives on in a new breed of leaders—Elon Musk at Tesla; Jim Farley, who is rebuilding Ford around car passion and has made "no boring cars" his mantra; and Mary Barra and Mark Reuss, who greenlighted a 1064-hp Corvette, brought Cadillac into F1, and are set to deliver GM's sixth-generation small-block V-8 in 2027.

Some say the age of the car is waning. That's nonsense. The revolution that began more than a century ago isn't ending—it's shifting gears, finding new rhythm in new hands. A younger generation is claiming the machines they love, from supercars and hypercars to older Broncos, SUVs, and the icons of Japanese performance.

Which brings me back to today's *Hagerty Drivers Club* magazine, which is not only a tribute to American cars and innovators, but also our first-ever digital issue. Print editions are not going away—you'll still get four gorgeous hold-in-your-hands paper-and-ink issues each year, along with two digital. Why digital? Because we have so much fantastic automotive video and web content we want to share with you, including some of the pieces you see linked here.

The beat carries on. It always has. Each generation gathers its favorites then passes them forward like stories worth retelling. And with every passing year, the world of cars only widens—more to discover, more to love—so that, in every moment, we are living at peak car. This isn't a passion that fades. It's one that replenishes itself, again and again.

Case in point: this edition of the *Barn Find Hunter*, which is one of my favorite videos for personal reasons. In it, host Tom Cotter and team struggle to resuscitate a long-dormant 1966 Ford F-100 pickup that had been adapted to carry tourists through the massive sand dunes near my home in Northern Michigan. My dad drove one for a summer, and it meant the world to him. We searched nationwide for years, only to finally find one within 40 miles of where I live. We fixed it up and now show it off in local parades as a piece of Americana.

People love it because, of course, cars, trucks and Americans go together like... well, you know.

Until next time, never stop driving.



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