

“History On Wheels” At The Vintage Auto Museum

By: Pat Johnson

The Vintage Automobile Museum of New Jersey located in Bay Head is the only museum in New Jersey dedicated to antique autos. The Museum began in 2000 as an offshoot of the Vintage Automobile Club of Ocean County, said Dennis M. Derion, chair of the education committee. “A bunch of us were always kicking the idea around and then one member threw a hundred dollar bill on the table and said, ‘Let’s stop talking about it and get it started!’” The brick building was found in Bay Head next to the Johnson Brothers Marina and shares space with a separate New Jersey Boating Museum.

It opened in 2012 — six weeks before Superstorm Sandy hit the Jersey Shore! “We had 51 inches of water in the museum,” said Derion. Some of the cars on loan had been left in the building by their owners and were damaged and some were total losses. “So we had to rebuild,” he said.

The membership consists of 86 vintage car owners and aficionados. Derion is himself the proud owner of two antique cars—a 1937 LaSalle and a 1961 Nash Metropolitan convertible. Owners of these cars loan them to the museum for display on a rotating basis. The display is changed every two to three months to keep it fresh.

On the day of this interview, there was a sparkling blue 1930 Model A Ford, a sweet Volkswagen Beetle from the ‘60s, a 1965 Malibu Chevelle convertible and a replica of the first car Henry Ford ever built, the Quadricycle — built using some bicycle parts. There was also the 1966 Mustang Convertible that is being raffled off as a fundraiser for the museum.

The museum, though small in size, completes the automobile story with driving memorabilia: gas station signs including a Mobile Oil Pegasus, gas pump, juke box, barber chair, a replica of a Drive-In movie lot, car toys and travel brochures.

“People have lost sight of how the automobile drove the country’s industry, shaped suburbia, increased recreation,” said Derion “And they have lost some of the excitement of car ownership. I remember when someone got a new car in the neighborhood, everyone flocked to see it. Now it’s more of an appliance.”

His idea that much of American history is tied directly to the history of the car is what led to the Museum’s “History on Wheels” program that brings the story of the automobile to local schools. “My son, Steven Derion is a teacher at Southern Regional. When he started teaching 20 years ago, he said I could bring the cars down and make it a history lesson. So he and I produced a program and his supervisor said we could give it a shot and it’s been going great.”



*Education Committee Chairman Dennis Derion poses with a model A Ford.
Photo Credit: Pat Johnson*

“We’re the only mobile field trip that I know of,” said Derion. “We do it by decades — we bring the cars starting in the 1900s through the 1970s and the students move through decade to decade. We talk about how automobiles impacted society — even socializing and dating.”

One of the posters that is used to enhance the field trips, “Life in the Teens” talks about how the industry got started. “Henry Ford got the assembly line going to make cars less expensive. He was cranking out one every minute. It’s said he got the idea from witnessing a meat packing plant where a side of beef would be disassembled by a line of butchers — each taking a cut of meat. Actually Ransom Olds, (the founder of Oldsmobile) had a production line but each worker would go from car to car — it was a fixed production line. Ford took the idea and refined it to the Nth degree. During World War II, Ford built a plant to produce the B-24 Liberator Bomber (an airplane) and the production line was cranking out one an hour. It was fantastic, we won the war because we out-produced the enemy.”

The poster “Life in the Teens” also shows how money has changed over the years, for instance the average income in 1901 was \$1,076, and a new car cost \$500. The lesson plan includes important events that happened within the 1900 — 1919 time span: World War 1, the Russian Revolution, Arizona and New Mexico became states, the Titanic sinks — just to name a few.



The 1966 Mustang car to be raffled.
Photo Credit: Pat Johnson

When the idea of the ‘horseless carriage’ took hold in America, tinkers and backyard inventors wanted to get in on the new industry, said Derion.

“There were more than 2,700 car manufacturers early on — many producing just a handful of cars. And 450 of them were steam-powered — like the Stanley Steamer. There were more than 200 car manufacturers right here in New Jersey — General Motors originated in Trenton then it moved to Detroit.

“Most of the car manufacturers failed during the Great Depression. Even luxury models like the Pierce Arrow and Duesenburg didn’t survive. These were beautifully designed cars,” he said wistfully. “When the Depression ended, there were about 11 car manufacturers left.”

Derion was asked about his first car. “It was a Hilman Minx — a terrible car. I was sixteen and it cost me \$125. Its top speed was 62 miles per hour with a tailwind. Back then gasoline was .25 per gallon!”

Young people enjoy the history that the Vintage Automobile Museum brings to them but older folks have a different experience when the Museum brings their cars to adult communities and nursing homes. “At one nursing home, we had brought a Model A Ford and a gentlemen started talking about one that he had owned. We had a real conversation. We were told later that it was the first time he had talked in two years.”

The Museum also maintains a warehouse facility in Whiting where they fix and repair donated vintage cars. “We have a 1909 Flanders that was restored by teens and Boy Scouts under our supervision.”

The latest impact to society by the automobile industry has been the loss of car repair bonding

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between fathers and sons. “I wouldn’t know the first thing about repairing a new car today — all the electronics and computers — It’s impossible.”

The Vintage Automobile Museum of New Jersey is open Friday, Saturday and Sunday from Noon to 4 PM and is free though donations are welcome. The Museum also received funding this year through a grant from the Ocean County Cultural and Heritage Commission.

The Museum is located at
1800 Bay Avenue,
in Bay Head, Point Pleasant.
Visit:

www.vintageautomuseum.org
or call 732-899-0012.



The Ford quadricycle on display at the museum.

Photo Credit: Pat Johnson