

CLASSICS TURN UP ON PARTS SAFARI

Story and photos by John Gunnell

Americans still love old cars. That's a fact that became clear to me when I traveled halfway across the country to pick up some vintage MG Midget parts in Oregon. Old cars were everywhere — driving, riding on trailers, sitting in fields, for sale in dealerships, parked in storage yards, decorating antique shops, perched on poles and exhibited in museums.

Among the museum cars were several “big-C” Classic cars. When Classic Car Club of America (CCCA) members talk of a “Classic car,” they are using the term to identify specific vehicles which they define as “fine or unusual foreign or domestic motor cars built between the years 1925-1948 and distinguished for their respective fine design, high engineering standard and superior workmanship.” Most of us would think of these vehicles as “big, fancy, luxury cars of (basically) the Great Depression era.”

I have to admit that I did not see lots of these cars on my trip, but I did see enough to realize that the great Classics are never going to fade away, despite the continuing trend towards collecting 1950s cars, muscle cars, vintage sports cars, hot rods and trucks.

Of all the Classics I encountered on the 4,700-mile journey, the coffin-nose Cord was the hands-down winner in terms of frequency of sightings. I first ran into a pair of 1937 Cords at Pioneer Auto Show, a large and diverse tribute to American history located in Murdo, S.D. The two sedans — one cream colored and one finished in maroon — were among the 250 cars that Dave Geisler displays in his museum. He parks them together in one of the 39 buildings housing the collection.

In addition to his pair of full-size Cords, Geisler owns a unique Cord child's car that's part of his massive antique toy collection. The toy — technically a roadster — is about 4-1/2-feet long and finished in white, with red disc wheels and balloon tires. The sides of the hood are decorated with ribbed metal plates that approximate the horizontal air louvers that wrap around a real Cord's nose. The toy car also has bright metal accessories including external exhaust pipes, bumpers and a windshield. A red steering wheel lets the child driver turn the front wheels. Of course, the standard pedal-drive mechanism makes this compact Classic car the only rear-wheel-drive Cord!

Geisler has several other genuine Classic cars in his museum, with a headline attraction being cowboy actor Tom Mix's 1931 Packard dual-cowl sport phaeton. This car is exhibited in a special alcove along with related memorabilia.

Geisler also owns a 1931 Pierce-Arrow convertible coupe with the trumpet headlights that were a characteristic of this marque. Like many Classics, the Pierce has a huge engine (a 385-cid straight eight). The engine is fitted with a dual ignition system and develops 132 hp. That doesn't sound like a lot today, but it was among the hottest cars around in 1932.

Geisler's Pioneer Auto Show is located along I-90 at Exit 192 in Murdo, S.D. Winter hours are 9 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday to Saturday and 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Sunday. He can be reached at 605-669-2691.

After leaving Murdo, I encountered some snow in Montana. The TV weathermen were predicting more for the following week when I would be returning. To avoid problems, I followed the longer Southern



Harold Warp's Pioneer Village Museum in Minden, Neb., has two Cords among its 350-vehicle collection including a very well-preserved L-29.

route home after picking up the parts in Oregon. This took me through southern Idaho, Wyoming and Nebraska. In Minden, Neb., I ran into another coffin-nose Cord at Harold Warp's Pioneer Village Museum.

Warp is a man who grew up on a Nebraska farm in the 1920s. After inventing a plastic-type window material to use on chicken coops, he patented it, raised \$800 and drove his Model T Ford to Chicago to promote it. Eventually, his efforts paid off and he formed Warp Brothers, a company that grew to become a major player in the plastics sheeting industry. Warp was fascinated by man's progress through history and created his museum to honor that achievement.

Today, Warp's Pioneer Village complex comprises 28 buildings on 20 acres and houses more than 350 vehicles and 50,000 items of historical value. Many of the artifacts are arranged in groups and in the chronological order of their development. There are 12 historic buildings around a circular “green.” There's a frontier fort, real Pony Express station, Iron Horse locomotive, a home built of sod, a general store and a toy store. An original art collection includes 25 Currier & Ives prints, 23 Jackson paintings and the largest single collection of Rogers statues. You can ride the oldest operating steam carousel, see 17 historic flying machines and marvel at 100

antique tractors.

There are actually two Cords in the museum, one of which is an 810/812 sedan. The other is a 1931 L-29. Most cars in the museum have the appearance that they were driven in years ago, parked and not used again. The old paint job on the L-29 imparts this same impression of long-term preservation. Many of the placards describing the cars to visitors include copies of old vehicle titles and information on when the car was purchased by Warp, how much he paid for it, where it came from and who sold it back then.

Pioneer Village is located at 138 East Highway 6, Minden, NE 68959. For information, call 800-445-4447 or 308-832-1181. It is open every day of the year, including all major holidays except Christmas. The winter hours are 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m., seven days a week. Visitors who stay overnight at the Pioneer Village Motel qualify for free second-day admission to the museum.

From Nebraska, it didn't take very long to get home. The nine-day trip covered 10 states in which I saw more than 1,000 cars. Of these, less than 10 were “big-C” Classics. I guess that explains why such models are the ultimate prize when it comes to collecting vintage cars — only a relatively small number of people are able to say they have a Classic car in their garage.



A pair of front-wheel-drive 1937 Cords cater to the interests of Classic car fans at the Pioneer Auto Show in Murdo, S.D.



Here's a postcard shot of the Tom Mix Cord in its special setting.



Another Classic ragtop housed in one of the 39 car-packed buildings at Pioneer Auto Show is this 1931 Pierce-Arrow that was once a Ringling Bros. Circus parade car.