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PEBBLE BEACH 2008

Junkyard Dogs, Now Best of Breed

By [DON SHERMAN](#)

GOLF carts will give way to scores of classic automobiles next Sunday, when the fairway of what may be America's most picturesque 18th hole becomes the backdrop for the annual Pebble Beach Concours d'Élégance.

This year, the prestigious car show on the Monterey Peninsula of California ventures beyond the usual collection of Duesenbergs and Rolls-Royces to celebrate the futuristic concepts and design studies of the General Motors traveling showcase known as Motorama.

In its heyday during the 1950s, Motorama delivered the automaker's message of postwar optimism to millions of curious spectators. On display will be the 1938 Buick Y-Job that begat the dream-car era; 17 Motorama showpieces from the 1950s; a 1959 Corvette racecar that forecast the '63 Sting Ray; and one of the custom-crafted trucks that hauled Motorama exhibits around the country.

Were it not for a persistent collector and self-described auto archeologist — and a fortunate turn of events 20 years ago — the historical record would not be nearly so complete, and the 100th birthday of G.M. would not be nearly so festive. Five of the cars on display are owned by Joe Bortz, a retired nightclub owner from Highland Park, Ill., who has been the leading preservationist and cheerleader of the dream-car cause for a quarter of a century.

By all rights, two of the cars on loan from Mr. Bortz's collection should no longer exist. Two decades ago, Mr. Bortz and the late Harry Warholak, owner of Warhoops Used Auto and Truck Parts of Sterling Heights, Mich., conspired to save three 1955 Motorama stars and one 1956 dream car from certain annihilation. The Chevrolet Biscayne and the La Salle II Sports Coupe from that find will be among the treasures at Pebble Beach.

As the 1950s were winding down, a changing of the guard at G.M. — when Harley Earl, the design chief, was succeeded by Bill Mitchell — prompted a house cleaning. To save storage costs, dozens of show cars were slated for disposal.

A problem cropped up, according to the current owner of Warhoops, who is the son of the original owner and is also known as Harry. The Detroit company that usually hauled G.M.'s scrap refused the consignment because the cars, made of fiberglass rather than metal, had no salvage value. The elder Mr. Warholak, having earned G.M.'s trust in previous sensitive assignments, was given the job, in part because the Warhoops salvage yard was less than 10 miles from the G.M. design center in Warren.

Three cars were shipped without incident. The fourth delivery caught the attention of a curious G.M. employee who sounded an alarm back at headquarters after following a truck hauling a dusty show car to the Warhoops yard.

“The remaining Motorama cars were never shipped,” Mr. Warholak said. “But to compensate my father for his trouble, the Chevrolet Biscayne, the La Salle II Sports Coupe and La Salle II Sedan, and the [Cadillac Eldorado](#) Brougham Town Car were left in his possession. Later, G.M. personnel came to supervise the destruction of three of the cars with sledgehammers. Because my father hoped to fix up the Town Car for use in my sister's wedding, it was spared.”

The cars' remains were left to the ravages of weather for nearly 30 years. Their sentence was commuted only after Mr. Bortz read an article in *Automobile Quarterly* revealing their whereabouts.

Mr. Bortz's fascination for dream machines began in 1954 when, as an impressionable 12-year-old, he was one of nearly two million spectators who attended the Motorama extravaganza during its first visit to Chicago.

“Dream cars are nothing like today's concepts and design studies,” Mr. Bortz said. “The dream cars mark the high point of American design. They are the truly the [Van Gogh](#) masters of the automotive world.”

The notion of cars making artistic and fashion statements has deep roots. In 1904, wealthy prospects were invited to the top floor of Macy's to view the latest in European custom coach designs. In 1917, with World War I raging, Cadillac, Packard and other top domestic brands finally gained access to the annual Automobile Salon. The top New York hotels hosted these black-tie events for the Four Hundred members of the social register and their chauffeurs.

When the Great Depression ended the champagne and caviar feasts, G.M. initiated what it called Industrialist's Luncheons at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in Manhattan for top banking and financial executives. Live music, floral arrangements and magnificent paintings created an elegant setting for the production models on display.

The first G.M. show open to the public was the 1949 Transportation Unlimited

exhibition at the Waldorf. In 1950, the inaugural year of the Pebble Beach Concours d'Élégance, G.M. borrowed the name of its permanent exhibit at the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry to rechristen its New York fashion show the Midcentury Motorama.

After a two-year break, the G.M. Motorama returned in 1953 with major improvements. Now it was a \$5 million show that drew 1.5 million attendees during a six-month, six-city tour. To supplement standard production models, G.M. introduced its first wave of dream cars. Seven were pure flights of fancy, but the [Chevrolet Corvette](#) was such an overwhelming hit that it was immediately approved for production and rushed into showrooms.

Motorama momentum grew for four years and generated many memorable designs. Unfettered by concerns over the cars' production feasibility, designers toyed with extravagant shapes, soaring fins, exotic propulsion systems and impractical gimmicks. The best ideas graduated to production models, while the turbine engines and titanium body panels never made it past the pages of Popular Science. As television matured into a mass-market entertainment medium while the public grew less inclined to make the effort and pay the cost of attending live events, the G.M. Motorama lost some of its cachet. Only production models starred at the final Motorama event, in 1961.

Mr. Bortz's enthusiasm for automotive artifacts led to the purchase of an experimental supercharged Pontiac called the X-400 in the late 1970s. After word of that acquisition spread, he became the nation's most powerful magnet for dream cars. By 1988, when his son alerted him to the dream-car exposé published by Automobile Quarterly, he already owned half a dozen of the one-off designs.

When Mr. Bortz visited the Warhoops yard that year to view the shattered and stacked remains of the Chevrolet Biscayne, the yard's owner realized he had found a kindred spirit who respected the car's heritage. "The price discussed a day later via telephone seemed outrageous," Mr. Bortz recalled, "until Warholak revealed it was for not one but a total a four dream cars, three of which were stashed out of sight during my visit."

Mr. Bortz describes the Biscayne's condition at the time as "beyond junk." Powertrain and chassis parts were missing, the body was cut into pieces, and the delicate hand-made windshield frame was a twisted mess. But, because of its place in history, he couldn't stand to leave the car behind.

Bonding the body back together was a three-year effort. Molds were made to create a new windshield, replacing the swept-back glass that G.M. called Astro-Dome design. A fortuitous file cleaning at G.M. yielded photos of the chassis that proved

instrumental in getting the car rolling again. A standard 1950s-era Chevrolet V-8 now provides power in place of the original driveline, which Warhoops donated years ago to a local high school's shop class.

Mr. Bortz is a preserver, not a restorer, and his revival of the Biscayne has been a 20-year endeavor. "It's still a work in progress," he explained.

"Whether the car is in pristine condition or in its present state awaiting paint, chrome and trim, what matters most is the image created during a very significant design period."

Mr. Bortz added: "The La Salle II roadster is what I call junkyard fresh. While every other car at Pebble Beach is either lovingly preserved or lavishly restored, the Biscayne and the La Salle II are both unfinished. Their intrinsic beauty is evident without sparkling chrome or a perfect paint job."

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