

# 'Automotive Dreams' on Display at 32nd Annual St. Ignace Car Show

## Weekend Event Will Reflect Changing Culture of America's Transportation Age

By Paul Gingras

"I was raised in an American age when one of the great technological breakthroughs was transportation," said car enthusiast Richard Tobin of Hessel and Miami, Florida, who will show his heavily modified 1941 Lincoln Continental convertible at the 32nd Annual St. Ignace Car Show Thursday, June 28, through Saturday, June 30.

A lifelong automobile devotee, he wrote a book in 2006, with co-author Rick Tobin, entitled "A Guide to Investing in Collector Cars: Collecting Cars for Fun and Profit."

Mr. Tobin describes this weekend's St. Ignace event as "a fun show, an excellent show" that amounts to an historical parade. It allows car enthusiasts to delve into the American psyche, he said, resurrecting the passions of a country that has focused, undeniably, on technology.

Prior to the oil crisis of 1973, the automotive industry concentrated on the graceful merger of art and engineering, leading to decades of stunning designs and powerful engines. The cars were simple, he said. The average person could understand, repair, and modify them, in ways that may never be repeated with modern computerized engines.

Vintage, antique, and muscle cars built between the 1920s and the 1970s are essentially "metal sculptures," he said. The golden age of car production represented a radical departure from the grandest design achievements of earlier eras.

"Rather than focusing on building cathedrals, many of the country's best artists, the best designers between the 1920s and 1950s, were designing cars," he explained. "Watching the models change over the years was important for Americans."

The country enjoyed a steady procession of aesthetic and mechanical innovations from the 1920s through the 1940s, which was interrupted by World War II, but went into high gear after the war ended, he said. Meanwhile, in Europe,

a similar surge in vehicle interest had been unfolding, but the European focus was different, and there development was disrupted by both World War I and World War II.

The golden age of classic cars produced now-famous features such as wings, stylish control panels, and quaint, eccentric, even stylistically aggressive, frames and bodies. The car age was also a special time for engineers.

Unlike the modern era, "engineers were not focused on building computers or space stations," Mr. Tobin noted. "They were building propulsion systems for cars."

Year after year, new innovations like the first "no-shift car" thrilled Americans, and between the 1920s and 1930s, the engineers developed all of the main components of modern cars. Essentially, everything that followed is modifications of their developments, he said.

Following World War II, the economic recovery of the United States added to the rise of the middle class and produced more disposable income, which people often spent on cars. American culture had developed a sense of power and was ready to "take on everything," Mr. Tobin said. With that came a surge in desire for fast, thundering vehicles.

Engineers focused on the V8 engine, and the 1950s car culture was born.

Mr. Tobin was finishing high school during this time, and like many others, he worked on beat-up hot rods and besieged his parents to choose faster cars.

The age of the muscle car had come into being, he said, and by the 1960s, it exploded with innovations by American car makers.

In the 1960s, "no red-blooded American didn't have a muscle car," he said.

Curiously, while Americans were focusing on large, powerful engines, Europeans were focusing on small, fast, maneuverable vehicles, and the two met and battled it out at car shows, where drag races were regular features, Mr.

Tobin said.

The 1973 oil crisis marked "the end of the car world," he added. "There was no more focus on beauty or speed."

Emission control standards came into play and driving new cars "was hardly any fun," he said.

As a response, car enthusiasts "started buying the old ones," he said. They got good at repairing and refurbishing old vehicles, and another automotive birth took place: the emergence of the "gearheads," hobbyists who enjoy working on these cars.

Few car enthusiasts in the 1950s and 1960s could actually build and race cars, but that changed when they began to resurrect older models.

As revealed by the St. Ignace Car Show, and other shows across the country, the wave of car collecting and modifying is "still going strong" and even increasing, Mr. Tobin said.

Baby boomers are retiring and buying the old models they always wanted, so vehicles from the 1920s through the 1950s are in hot demand, he noted.

"That's pretty much the case here," said car enthusiast Jim Western of Boyne City, who will be showing a 1955 Chevrolet Nomad in St. Ignace.

Although not a gearhead, Mr. Western is a lifelong car fan who retired from the computer industry three years ago and now immerses himself in the nostalgia of classic cars.

Mr. Western agreed with Mr. Tobin that watching the development of older models is exciting.

"It was interesting in the early years because they changed so much each year." Now, American manufacturers stick with the same model for several years at a time, probably owing to cost considerations, he said.

## Event Highlights

- Kewadin Cruise Night: Thursday, June 28, at 7 p.m., registered vehicles will leave Kewadin Casino's parking lot on Mackinac Trail, just north of St. Ignace, roll down Mackinac Trail, cruise through downtown St. Ignace, head west on US-2, and return to the casino via I-75. A car exhibition follows at the casino, where employees vote on their favorite cars and award trophies.



The innovations of automotive celebrity Jack "Doc" Watson will highlight the car show. This year's guest of honor, Mr. Watson is known for his pioneering work with Hurst/Oldsobile.

- 26th Annual Down Memory Lane Parade: Friday, June 29, at 7 p.m., a display of floats, musical groups, vintage cars, and other entertainment will proceed down State Street in St. Ignace, finishing at Glen's Market on US-2.

- The St. Ignace Car Show Exhibition: Saturday, June 30, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., antique, classic, muscle, and collector cars will be parked along State Street in St. Ignace. A Manufacturers Swap Meet will take place during the exhibition, at Star Line parking lot near the old railroad dock, where companies and individuals will sell all manner of car paraphernalia, from car parts to T-shirts.

Nevertheless, newer cars are nice too, he added.

At one point, Mr. Tobin took a class to learn how to work on newer cars. Knowledgeable about computers, he found himself confronted with an array of high-tech diagnostic tools, which mechanics need to discover the problems in modern vehicles.

Without these tools, working on new engines is practically impossible, he said, and those who understand how to use them are involved in a process much different than the tinkering of old-school gearheads.

"It's no challenge," he said. "Now, if we want to play with cars, we play with the old ones."

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