

Cars: 'We're caretakers of the cars'

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run by nonprofit organizations, generate money that allow the clubs to hand out gift cards to residents, buy school supplies for struggling students or donate to women's shelters and warming stations. He noted shows, such as the annual Hermiston Cool Rides Car Show, attract car owners from as far as Seattle or Portland to display their chrome-covered rides for thousands of visitors.

Lopez said the pandemic last year shut down the events, but this year, with new guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, they can resume again as the shows themselves take place outside, with minimal risk of spreading the virus. That's good news for classic car collectors who call Eastern Oregon home.

"We have a lot of fun with these cars. It's almost as if we're in our right mind. People say, 'Look at those guys, they're still living like they're in the '50s and '60s — and they're right,'" Lund said.

Lund, who owns a modest collection of cars he's acquired and restored over 40 years, keeps dice on every rearview mirror. But the cars he owns aren't just for showing off. Rather, they hold personal stories of a time when drive-ins were king, a few dollars would buy a burger and a full tank of gas, and cruising "the gut" was Friday night fun.

"My wife says I never get rid of anything," he said. "I kept her for 51 years. She's a keeper."

Of his collection, most notable is the deep mahogany 1951 Chevrolet Bel-Air — round and sleek with plenty of chrome. It's his wife Dixie's favorite car. It's also the second car he'd ever owned, though upgraded with newer mechanics and brakes, putting some serious power behind the wheel. And the pair of fuzzy dice hanging from the rearview mirror.

"You gotta have dice," he said.

Lund gets a kick out of the reactions people have to seeing a classic roll along.

"You can't go down the street without putting a smile on people's faces, and that's what it's all about," Lund said as he drove down Adams Avenue in La Grande. "The whole idea, for me, is bringing joy to other people, and helping them remember a much simpler, less stressful time."

Lund stepped on the gas as he exited town and turned on to Mount Glenn Road. The gentle hum of the 1951 Chevrolet Bel-Air turned to a thunderous roar as he shifted into second, then third gear. He smiled and cruised down the road.

"Yeah," Lund said, "it's got some power."

Lund drove to meet fellow car enthusiast Ken Leavitt, of Island City. Leavitt, who long since has sold off most of his collection of cars — nearly 30, at one point — and now only has a Chevrolet Corvair. It was through Leavitt that Lund was able to restore some of the cars he owns.

"We've been friends since 1986. He's been helpful to me over the years, whenever I run into problems fixing things," Lund said.

"And get you into deeper problems," Leavitt replied.

Car lovers

Love for classic cars, as it turns out, is rather common among Lund's generation. Around 40 members belong to the Timber Cruisers Car Club — and those are just the dues-paying members. Many more exist in La Grande alone that have one or two classic cars sitting in a garage or barn or even in front of their house collecting rust.

It's the latter that interests local classic car restorers, such as Ken Bruce and Leavitt.

Bruce is the type of collector for whom a car rusting in a field is a personal challenge, the silent voice of a frozen engine like a siren song of yesteryear. He only needs to



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Ken Leavitt's cherry-red Chevrolet Corvair stands out Thursday, May 6, 2021, against the backdrop of a shop near Island City Market & Deli, Island City. As summer approaches, more vintage cars will be hitting the road to join classic car shows — including the Elgin Riverfest car show Saturday, June 19, which sees hundreds of vintage car collectors across the county congregate to show off their rides.

probe his memory to recall what the engine should sound like.

Along with restoring the mechanics of classic cars, Bruce is an especially skilled mechanic in another way — his ability to procure obscure parts for classic automobiles throughout the country is remarkable. He searched as far as Shelburne, Massachusetts, which is where he got parts for a 1966 Chevrolet Corvair he was working on. Little did he know, a car collector in California was working on the same car, only three serial numbers apart.

"I was working on that '66 one time and I called up for something," Bruce recalled, "and the girl answered — her name was Cheyenne, I'll never forget it — and she answered and she said, 'What can I get you today?' and I gave her the list and she said, 'Y'know, would it be alright if I put that on your friend's account?'"

Bruce became cautious.

"I said, 'Well, let's be careful, I don't have too many friends, and I don't want to wear out the friends I have,'" he recalled. "'Do you know who it is?' And she replied, 'Yeah, you know him really well — it's Jay Leno.'"

Leno, American comedian and TV host, is an avid collector, with some sources pegging his sprawling collection at more than 150 cars and 160 motorcycles, from a 427 Shelby Cobra to McLaren P1 supercars. Leno and Bruce had long since shared correspondence, relishing over new project cars they had been working on, and how much labor goes into restoring the classic cars to their former glory.

"They represent the ability to appreciate what we did in an earlier time," Bruce said. "This is how we got to where we are today."

Bruce said Leno once relayed that his restorations would cost tens of thousands to finish, only to turn around and sell the car to a neighbor for a fraction of the cost.

"If you go into this sort of craft or this sort of profession, don't ever go into it with the intention of making any money because you probably won't," Bruce said. "If you do, it's going to be an exception."

'So much chrome'

Maintenance comes with the territory.

In the past, cars came with instructions in the user manuals on how to adjust valve timings and other involved procedures, a far cry from the types of guidance you receive with a newer car. Older cars also had a certain panache, according to the collectors — the kind of style that you don't see on newer models.

"The stylings (on new cars), really, are not good," said Leonard Wolf, a classic car collector from Baker City, during a meetup at the Baker City Truck Corral, just off Interstate 84 in Baker City.

A few of the collectors who met for the Sunday gathering nodded in agreement. The group, which was formerly known as the Charley's Angels due to meeting up at Charley's Deli & Ice



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Ken Leavitt flips through a photobook containing photos of the numerous classic cars he has worked on through the years in his Island City home on Friday, May 28, 2021. Leavitt, retired, has sold off most of his cars, but can recall the work he put into each vehicle. He remembered restoring one of his first cars by painting it in the driveway, which he said wasn't a great idea at the time.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Ken Schuh of Baker City, wearing a Hawaiian shirt displaying classic coupes, sits with a group of other classic car enthusiasts at Baker City Truck Corral on Sunday, June 7, 2021. The group of nearly a dozen classic car collectors meets every Sunday at the diner to swap stories and socialize.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Ken Bruce rests his hand on the front emblem of his family's 1941 Buick Business Coupe in his Island City garage on Tuesday, June 1, 2021. Bruce says that of the 99,000 miles on the car, nearly all of them are from his adventures, and noted that in his youth and college days, he would pick up young women in this car and "teach them how to dance and drink beer."

Cream in Baker City, has nearly a dozen members.

"There's a few of them out there that look pretty nice," Wolf said. "Others you can't even tell the brand because they all look the same."

The collectors gave varying responses to what they find appealing about yesterday's rides, from form to quality, but they all agreed on one point:

"Chrome," said Ken Schuh, an avid collector and long-time car enthusiast.

"So much chrome," continued Sandy Payton, another collector.

Lee Swiger, sitting across from Wolf, flicked through his phone while waiting for his breakfast to arrive.

"I have lots of pictures of cars on my phone," Swiger said, looking for a photo of a DeSoto he owns. "I don't have any pictures of grandkids, but I've got pictures of cars."

Who comes next?

Classic cars and their owners shared eras. As an older generation leaves, a question remains.

"What will kids restore as they get older? What will they like?" Lund said.

A fair few will, of course, find an interest in the cars, especially those for whom classic cars run in the family. Others, the collectors contemplated, will move on to start their own classic car clubs with now-modern vehicles.

"When they hit 50 years old, they'll be trying to find a Datsun or a Nissan," Swiger said.

"We're caretakers of the cars," Lund said. "We're just caretakers for this time in our lives, and we'll pass it on to somebody else. Hopefully they'll appreciate the hobby, and hopefully make people smile just as much as we do today."



Port of Morrow/Contributed Photo

Contractors work on the expansion of the Port of Morrow's freezer warehouse in 2019. At least 15 workers left the warehouse on March 21, 2020, after an exposure to the coronavirus. Port commissioners in the days after that held executive sessions. The commissioners have acknowledged they violated the state statutes guiding those closed-door meetings.

Ethics:

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According to the preliminary reviews, the violations came to light when performance auditor Ariana Denney of the Oregon Secretary of State Audits Division was conducting an audit related to the federal stimulus bill known as the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act, or CARES Act. Denney detailed the complaint in an email on Nov. 6, 2020.

The port's commission in March 2020 created a bank of 80 hours of emergency paid sick leave for COVID-19 and approved payments of any unused portion of the leave to all employees in December 2020 as an incentive to keep them coming to work during the pandemic.

The port commission discussed the leave payout during executive sessions during two special meetings on March 23 and 26, according to the ethics commission's review, while discussing specific staff members' medical conditions. Denney learned of the sessions while exchanging emails with Eileen Hendricks, the port's chief financial officer, who was addressing how the port determined spending the federal money was necessary to respond to the coronavirus crisis.

Oregon law allows the discussion of medical records of personnel in an executive session, had the commission advertised the session under the correct Oregon Revised Statute "exempt by law for public inspection" instead of advertising it as a discussion of "leases and legal." But the leave payout does not fall under the reasons Oregon allows for governing bodies to meet out of the public's eye.

Port commissioners said the violation happened at emergency meetings during a time of immense pressure as they attempted to navigate executive orders shutting down businesses while keeping essential services at the port running and trying to protect thousands of workers there.

Healy called it an undeniable mistake, but an inadvertent one. He said if people look at the commission's agendas dating back for years, they will see that each one includes a potential executive session to discuss leases and legal issues, such as lease negotiations between the port and private companies interested in locating there.

"Ninety nine point nine percent of the time, that's what those executive sessions are about," he said.

Commissioners knew they were able to talk about employees' medical conditions in executive session and simply forgot to update their standard agenda line to the correct ORS number, he said, and then strayed into territory they shouldn't have when they also discussed the leave policy.

They did hold the vote on the policy in public session, he pointed out.

According to the ethics commission's preliminary reviews, executive orders on COVID-19 shutdowns and two events on March 21,

2020, set the stage for the pair of executive sessions.

That day the port commission and management staff received notice that port Executive Director Ryan Neal was "out for an undisclosed reason for an undisclosed amount of time," the reviews stated. Management staff also received information about a major COVID-19 scare at the freezer warehouse, where at least 15 employees left work in a panic about being exposed.

The preliminary review stated the port commissioners "appear to recognize their errors relating to these two executive sessions and are receptive to taking steps to improve their compliance" with the law.

Padberg echoed his colleagues, telling the East Oregonian that commissioners did not deny they had made a mistake and were committed to not letting it happen again. He said they were not trying to hide anything from the public.

"It was just a slip on our part. There wasn't some kind of secret deal going on between commissioners," he said.

Jim Doherty, who sits on the Morrow County Board of Commissioners, was critical of the mistake, but acknowledged it was "easy to stray" from public record law. He said he believes the incident will lead to more transparency in the port.

"I think you want to be open and honest and transparent, so I think this is healthy, ultimately," he said.

Doherty said he heard from officials close to the state's investigation that the findings were supposed to be released in late April, right around the time of the board's election. But for some reason, he said, it got set back. He said that was unfortunate, because he believes the outcome of some of the races in the May 18 election might have been different.

Stokoe, Healy and Taylor were up for reelection, and all retained their seats despite challengers for Stokoe and Healy.

"A few of the folks that I've just talked to downtown have said, well, likely they'd have punched a different ticket in light of this," Doherty said. "I think you're talking a couple hundred votes was the difference."

Oregon Government Ethics Commission investigator Susan Myers prepared the final orders, and she, ethics commission Executive Director Ronald Berson and Assistant Attorney General Joshua Nasbe signed off on the orders March 23.

The five members of the port board agreed to the orders and signed them before Dan Mason, the chair of the Oregon Government Ethics Commission, signed each order on June 11, making them public.

Despite a report from another media outlet, the ethics commission did not fine the port members. Oregon law allows the ethics commission to issue fines of \$1,000 per violation of executive session laws, but in most cases the commission instead issues letters of education. That is what happens in this case.