

Reflections in chrome

■ Enthusiasts from Northeastern Oregon explain why they love to own, and drive, classic cars

By Alex Wittwer
The (La Grande) Observer

LA GRANDE — “Remember the wind blowing through your hair? Remember hair?” Chevrolet emblazoned those words on billboards throughout Detroit in 2007 to celebrate classic cars. It featured the 1957 Chevrolet Bel Air convertible, bright red on a turquoise blue background. A small replica of the billboard hangs in Ed Lund’s garage in La Grande.

“You look back on a simpler time, just the nostalgia and the memories, and that’s what it’s all about,” said Lund, one classic car collector in Eastern Oregon.

As summer arrives, so do the classic car shows throughout the region, which offer opportunities for locals and tourists to check out some of the best-kept cars from yesteryear, complete with the gleam of polished chrome, mirror finishes and iconic hood ornaments.

Car shows offer a way to give back to the community as well, according to Hermiston Classics Car Club President Juan Lopez. The shows, 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 that shows, such as the Hermiston Cool Rides Car Show, attract car owners from as far as Seattle or Portland to display their chrome-accented 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,” Lund said. “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, 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



Alex Wittwer/The (La Grande) Observer

Ed Lund’s 1957 Chevrolet Bel Air sits Friday, May 28, 2021, in the garage he built in La Grande to house the collection of classic cars that he has accrued over 40 years.



Alex Wittwer/The (La Grande) Observer

Ed Lund drives down McAlister Road in Island City on Friday, May 28, 2021, in his classic Chevrolet Chevelle. Lund has a number of classic cars he has collected over a lifetime, but the Chevelle is special to him because it was the car he and his wife Dixie Lund were married in.



Alex Wittwer/The (La Grande) Observer

Ed Lund drives down Mount Glen Road in La Grande, while a pair of fuzzy dice hang from the mirror of his Chevrolet Chevelle on Friday, May 28, 2021.

for 51 years. She’s a keeper.”

Of Lund’s 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 ever owned, though

upgraded with newer mechanics and brakes. 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.”

— Ed Lund, classic car collector from La Grande

“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 onto 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



Alex Wittwer/The (La Grande) Observer

Fellow classic car enthusiast Donald Warren waves from his Model A coupe while Ed Lund passes him along Hunter Road in Island City on Friday, May 28, 2021.

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

Along with restoring 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, 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, ‘Yknow, 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 car 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 meet-up at the Baker Truck Corral. “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.”

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 Cream in Baker City, has nearly a dozen members.

The collectors gave varying responses to what they find appealing about yesteryear’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.”



Alex Wittwer/The (La Grande) 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.

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