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At Lambrecht Chevrolet auction, bids high for rides into history

By [David Hendee](#) / World-Herald Staff Writer



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Before the start of bidding, the crowd flocks around the highest-profile vehicle at the Lambrecht Chevrolet auto auction, a turquoise 1958 Chevrolet Cameo pickup truck with 1.3 miles on the odometer. The pickup was one of nearly 500 vintage vehicles, many never owned before, that longtime Chevy dealer Ray Lambrecht had collected in a field near his home.

PIERCE, Neb. — The old adage that it's cheaper to buy eggs and cars in the country was scrambled Saturday.

Then it was fried, poached and hard-boiled.

Car collectors and enthusiasts by the thousands paid big-city prices for a once-in-a-lifetime chance at an ultra-rare collection of nearly 500 vintage vehicles and memorabilia from local retired Chevrolet dealer Ray Lambrecht.

Exhibit No. 1: A rare 1958 Chevy Cameo pickup truck with 1.3 miles on the odometer sold for \$140,000.

Exhibit No. 2: A 1957 toy Corvette pedal car sold for \$16,000.

Exhibit No. 3: A 1978 Indy pace car Corvette, with four miles on the odometer, sold for \$80,000 in 55 seconds.

This weekend's sale of Lambrecht Chevrolet's leftover inventory captured international attention and big money. Bidding was fast and furious from start to finish.

More than 3,000 bidders were on site — in a crowd estimated at 15,000 by Pierce County Sheriff Rick Eberhardt — and there were more than 3,300 registered online bidders.

"I know that everybody in the county showed up and brought their dogs and their cousins," Eberhardt said.

Auctioneer Yvette VanDerBrink considered the Cameo pickup as one of the prize finds among 56 Lambrecht vehicles dating to the 1950s that had never been sold and retained their Manufacturer's Statement of Origin.

The '58 Cameo was the last of its Chevy line. Only 1,405 were built. It's the rarest of the line. Bidding started at \$50,000. Within about 90 seconds, Steve Ames of Marlborough, N.H., was the pickup's first owner.

"What have I done?" he said as a congratulatory crowd surged in on him.

The Cameo was one of Lambrecht's leftovers. He rarely resold trade-ins, and he declined to sell newer cars if a brand new model was available.

When he closed the dealership in 1996, he had hundreds of cars and pickups sitting scattered across town and countryside. Auction promoters described the collection as a time capsule of automotive history. It also was a boneyard.

None of the vehicles was cleaned and polished for the auction. They were "barn finds," vehicles tucked away in good — or not so good — condition and largely forgotten until they resurfaced covered in dirt and bird droppings. They were preserved as found for their new

owners to have the privilege of discovering what's beneath the grime, if they choose.

VanDerBrink said some collectors who buy the dirty, never-sold Lambrecht cars will get them running but will never wash or restore them.

"A true survivor car is untouched, just like they came from the factory," she said. "That's what makes them special."

Thrills and chills and speed and power are the core of Tanner Foust's racing and stunt-driving career, but all it took was a walk through the Lambrecht collection to give him goose bumps.

The 40-year-old Foust is host of the History network's "Top Gear" and was part of a three-hour "History Made Now: Wheels of Fortune" show broadcast Saturday night from the auction grounds.

He said it's hard to call the rag-tag cluster of vintage vehicles a collection because many were caked in dirt and damaged by rust or vandalism.

"But car people see through that," he said.

Foust walked past a Chevrolet C-10 pickup truck. A couple were sitting on the open tailgate.

"They were in their mid-60s. It was like a flashback to the days of 'Grease,' sitting at the drive-in theater in the back of a pickup truck," he said. "This is a walk down memory lane for so many people. That was a special moment for me."

Steven Blanchard lives in Vermont, 1,500 miles from Pierce. So he drove 24 hours more or less straight through to see the historic collection.

"Where in the world will you find 50 cars that have never been sold before, regardless what shape they're in?" he said. "Nobody's sat on the seats, except for a few times. It's unreal. I figured I'd never have an opportunity to see this again."

Blanchard owns a 1959 pickup he hopes to rebuild.

"I had to check out the Cameo," he said. "I wanted to see what they were like when brand new."

Blanchard said he was surprised Lambrecht didn't take better care of the vehicles. Most were stored outside on farmland he owns near Pierce. Wild trees grew up amid the vehicles. Thieves stole radiators and chrome trim. Vandals broke windows. Steel rusted.

"It's sad," he said. "People like myself love the old muscle cars and old cars in general, and here you've got 500 of them just sitting that he wouldn't let anyone else enjoy. But somebody will buy them and get a lot of joy putting some work into them to bring them back."

The mid-September day every year that Lambrecht Chevrolet unveiled the new model cars was memorable for Lyle Venteicher of Pierce.

"Several of us guys would walk the four or five blocks from the high school to the dealership during our lunch hour to check out the new Chevys," he said.

Venteicher already was a Chevy fan.

"My grandpa had a light blue '64 Impala. I thought it was the prettiest car ever built."

Venteicher, who was in the same high school class as Ray and Mildred Lambrecht's daughter, Jeannie, said his family bought Chevrolets from the dealership, but it wasn't always easy.

Venteicher said his father, Anton, drove his 1957 Ford to the dealership to trade it for a 1963 Chevrolet.

"Ray came out and told him to take it back where it came from," Venteicher said.

So Anton bought a '63 Galaxy from a Ford dealer.

Six years later, Anton tried again at the Chevy dealership. This time, Lambrecht welcomed him, accepted the Galaxy as a trade and Anton bought a '69 Bel Air.

"That's just the way Ray was," Venteicher said. "If you got along with him, he'd bend over backward for you. If not ... "

Venteicher said his dad's Galaxy sat unsold and parked in the street in front of the dealership for several years.

In 1975, Anton bought a new Chevy and gave the Bel Air to Lyle. In 1990, Lyle Venteicher's family was growing, and he took the Bel Air to Lambrecht to trade for a new Suburban.

"Ray told us what he told everyone: You go out and get the best price at anyplace, bring it back to me and I'll beat it," Venteicher said. "That's what we did. We brought him the best price we could get somewhere else, and he cut it. So we ordered the new car from him. He made a lot of money."

The auction is giving some people a second chance at a car of their youth.

A red 1966 Chevrolet Impala on Sunday's auction block had the attention of Doug Koehler of Norfolk. He was the last owner of the two-door hardtop, and he wanted it back.

Koehler traded the Impala at Lambrecht Chevrolet for a 1975 Nova nearly 40 years ago. The Impala went into Lambrecht's field. Koehler saw it in the trees every time he drove past.

Koehler's wife, Jane, tried to buy back the car from Lambrecht to surprise her husband for his 50th birthday nearly a decade ago.

"He wouldn't do it," Koehler said. "I'm going to try again now."

Neil Heimes of Norfolk said he tried 17 years ago to buy a 1963 Chevy pickup from Lambrecht. It was like one Heimes' father owned.

"I walked into his shop. It was a time warp. He had cars everywhere," Heimes said. "I asked about buying one of his '63s and he said OK. Well, we never had money to buy one, and then he started saying they weren't for sale."

Heimes hoped to pick up one during the auction.

VanDerBrink said Lambrecht's philosophy to not sell used vehicles or leftover models makes the collection unique.

"If the '64s were out and you saw a '63 on his lot, he'd say you don't want that. You want the latest, greatest Chevy," VanDerBrink said. "He was Chevy to the core."

Lambrecht, 95, and his wife, Mildred, 92, still live in Pierce in a house across the street from the shuttered dealership. His franchise no longer exists but he continues to hold a dealer's license.

VanDerBrink said the family decided it was time to sell the collection.

"There have been problems with vandalism, and they weren't getting any prettier," she said.

The sale continues today at 9:30 a.m. in a field near the Pierce golf course. Vehicles left behind after buyers strip out the parts will be crushed for scrap iron.

Quick thinker measures profit by the yardstick at auction

Chevy memorabilia was in high demand Saturday.

Lyle Ekberg of nearby Wakefield bought a box of about five dozen hefty wooden Lambrecht Chevrolet promotional yardsticks for \$1,000. They seemed a bargain at about \$17 apiece.

Ekberg had watched someone buy one yardstick for \$225. Someone else bought five for \$500 before Ekberg got his chance at the box.

Minutes later, Ekberg was selling the yardsticks for \$50 each as fast as he and two enlisted visitors from Indiana could make change for souvenir seekers with cash in their pockets.

"Cheapest thing you'll buy here," he said.

Best guesstimate easily puts auction haul over \$1 million mark

There will be no publicized accounting after the last of the Lambrecht Chevrolet cars, parts and memorabilia are sold tonight.

Auctioneer Yvette VanDerBrink said she has a policy of never disclosing the gross proceeds of a personal sale.

"The public doesn't need to know what your neighbor's doing," she said.

But the estimated 15,000 people at the auction Saturday could keep tabs, if they wished.

Auctioneers announce the winning bid for each of the nearly 500 vehicles and other items. Using that method, the auction cleared the \$1 million mark after the sale of about two dozen cars that were considered the most valuable of the collection.

Bidding interest was high. Registered on-site bidders were expected to handily exceed 5,000 people before the end of Saturday, officials said. Proxibid, an Omaha-based company, had nearly 3,000 registered online bidders.

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