

Tired of vandals, 91-year-old WWII veteran will auction massive antique car, tractor collection

By RHETT MORGAN World Staff Writer | Posted: Sunday, August 10, 2014 12:00 am

CLEVELAND, Okla. — Carl Davis doesn't remember how he met his first wife.

But when it comes to his hundreds of vehicles, the 91-year-old knows every make and model.

The automobile has been his lasting love.

“That's what keeps him young,” says his daughter, Joyce Merriman.

Davis says he was 8 when he bought his first car, a 1927 Dodge for which he paid a Mr. Pennywell six bucks.

“That was a lot of money back then,” Davis says.

By age 12, he was trucking wheat to Pawnee.

And then over the generations, as Davis flitted from farming to construction to tire repair, all the cars and trucks simply started to accumulate.

“When I would see one sitting around, I'd go buy it,” he says. “It didn't cost much. Some people would give them to you for getting them out of the yard. I just like cars.”

In the spring, he had at least 300 of his vehicles (1972 models and up) crushed and sold for scrap, Merriman said. On Saturday, her father will relinquish the balance of his collection — save for a handful of his favorites — at an auction at his shop on U.S. 64. By his daughter's count, buyers will be examining an array of 64 antique tractors and 215 cars, including some that date to 1927.

“When I first met him, he asked me, ‘Have you ever seen the movie “Grapes of Wrath”?’ I've lived it,” says Yvette Vanderbrink of Vanderbrink Auctions, the Minnesota company that is handling the sale. “He's amazing.”

Vandals are to blame for the liquidation.

Crooks study his routine and take advantage of his age and poor eyesight, Merriman says. Sometimes, one person will divert his attention while a partner makes away with inventory on his spread, which includes a 10-acre plot just south of his shop. Davis has been victimized by broken windshields and stolen parts and machinery.

“He told me he was just tired of them ‘stealing off me,’” Merriman says. “It worries him. He gets very



ANTIQUES MAN

Carl Davis, who will auction many of his cars, is seen at his Cleveland property last week. MIKE SIMONS/Tulsa World

upset by it.”

Tough situations

A Navy veteran who served in World War II, Davis constructed his own home when he returned to the states. As an employee for a Tulsa concrete company, Davis said he helped erect football stadiums in as many as 10 cities, including Cleveland, Oklahoma, Ponca City, Coffeyville, Kansas, and Texarkana, Texas. He also has sold sand, fixed flats and repaired boots and saddles.

Nowadays, Davis, whose second wife died about 18 years ago, shows up seven days a week at his garage, where he restores his classics and kicks the tires with whoever drops by.

“I just sit here and jabber,” he says.

And while Davis, himself, is a 1923 model, his chassis is much younger.

When he was in his early 80s, as he bent over to air up a truck tire, it blew up in his face. The impact was so violent that it bruised his chest black and “knocked his false teeth down his throat,” Merriman said. The explosion also punctured a lung, broke his jaw and crushed the bone around his eye. He was unconscious for four days and spent two weeks in the ICU.

“The doctor said that if he wasn’t in such good shape, it would have killed him,” his daughter said.

That episode came a handful of years after he went Jack Dempsey on a hooligan.

Davis’ wrecker service had impounded a car, and three men came to reclaim it. Problem was, they didn’t have the proper paperwork. When Davis refused to release the vehicle, one of the men called him something you can’t print in a family newspaper.

“I didn’t like what they said, and I went and boxed that boy a good one,” Davis said. “He was standing about where you are now. He landed back out there in the road.

“But he had a buddy that was a big ol’ dude. What he hit me with I don’t know. But he knocked me down. That’s when the trouble started.”

Cold-cocked by a 2-by-4, Davis grabbed a bumper, rose to a knee and made it to his feet, a shock that sent the visitors scattering. No charges were filed because he threw the first punch, Merriman said.

“He’s gone through quite a bit in the last 15 to 20 years,” his son, Rick Davis, said. “He is tough.”

’35 coupe hums

Carl Davis knows what it’s like to work hard. So he makes his machines do the same.

Close to 30 of his vehicles — which Davis refers to as “drivers” — are tagged and road-ready. And he relishes taking each for a spin.

“He wants to drive them,” Merriman said. “He doesn’t care if you touch them. And if you want to get in and drive them, he’ll tell you it’s sitting right there.”

His favorite, a 1935 Ford Coupe, sports black paint that is bubbled and peeling, and a long crack runs on the passenger side of the windshield. Davis opens the door, climbs in and twists the key.

The engine hums.

Turns out both have plenty left under the hood.