

The Man Behind the Legend

The Story of Ray P. Lambrecht and Lambrecht Chevrolet Company
by Jeannie Lambrecht Stillwell

Urban legends speak of a former Midwest Chevy dealer with a collection of hundreds of vehicles hidden away in a rural setting. Rumors abound regarding this man and the mystery of that collection. The man behind that legend is my father, Ray P. Lambrecht. Dad owned and operated Lambrecht Chevrolet Company from 1946 until 1996, selling new Chevrolets to multiple generations of families all over the Midwest and beyond. This is his story.

Dad was born in 1918 during the Great Depression in rural Pierce County, Nebraska, a small farming community. He displayed a strong interest in cars and trucks from a very early age. As a boy, he created a lifelike replica of a delivery truck from scraps of wood and metal after spotting one on a street. The reproduction featured intricate detailing down to a hand-carved steering wheel and a complete exhaust system underneath.

Dad first drove a car at the age of 9. He climbed into the family's 1927 tan Chevrolet two-door coupe and drove his mother 7 miles into the nearest town for groceries. Driver's licenses costing \$1 weren't required by law until 1941. Dad made the journey driving 20-25 mph over dirt roads, barely tall enough to peek over the steering wheel. The sight was shocking enough to prompt the local banker to rush out of his office in amazement saying, "Look at that little guy driving!!!"

In 1942 during World War II, Dad was drafted into the army and served as a Sergeant for four years in the Aleutian Islands of Alaska where fierce fighting with the Japanese had just occurred. His planned marriage to my Mother had to be put on hold, but she followed him to California to be closer. When Dad was honorably discharged from the U.S. Army in 1946, he and Mom returned home to Nebraska and were married.

Dad's opportunity to begin his career as a Chevrolet Dealer presented itself upon returning home. He joined his uncle Ernest as a partner in Lambrecht Chevrolet Company in 1946. Dad later bought out his share of the business and became the sole owner of the franchise.

Life was extremely difficult during this period of time, and wartime rationing made it almost impossible to obtain even the most basic building materials. Dad was one of very few individuals allowed to purchase those materials because of his army veteran status. Even with that privilege, supplies were so scarce that Dad was forced to drive hundreds of miles from town to town to obtain needed materials such as cement block and roofing beams. Fortunately, Dad was a gifted carpenter and architect. He obtained the necessary materials, and then designed and built the dealership building that still stands today.

My parents, Ray and Mildred Lambrecht, operated the business with only one employee, a mechanic until they retired in 1996 at ages 78 and 75. They worked six days a week for 50 years, never taking one single day of vacation or one sick day. They worked hard and operated their business with honesty, integrity, and kindness, frequently lending a helping hand to others who were in need.

Dad managed the dealership and handled all sales. Mom was second-in-command, and supported Dad in every aspect of the business. She served as notary public for the dealership, handled all accounting, and made almost daily runs for parts.

That first year, the dealership was allotted 16 cars for the entire year. They were black or gray with cloth interiors and no heat. At that time, cars sold for around \$600 to \$800. They also received 6 pickups that year. They came with no box. Dad got the local lumber yard to supply wooden boxes for the pickups.

Some of Dad's first customers were his army buddies who learned that Dad now owned a Chevy dealership. These friends purchased new vehicles, and then returned to their homes scattered all over the country. They were so pleased with the experience of buying cars from Dad, they and their families became life-long repeat customers. They also began spreading the news far and wide about the good deals at Lambrecht Chevrolet Company. Before long, Dad was one of the top sellers in the entire country, receiving many awards for sales from GM.

Dad's real success stemmed from a basic philosophy very different from most auto dealers. He didn't deal or negotiate. He gave his best price the first time. When a potential customer arrived, Dad would pick up a pencil, make a few calculations, and then give him a number. That was it. People would argue with him, try to bicker on price, and threaten to walk out. Dad would always say, "If you can find a better price on this vehicle, then you should go get it". Invariably they would be back. After doing all of the legwork and the homework comparing prices from surrounding dealers, the conclusion was always the same. Dad had given them the best price right from the beginning.

I remember a man ringing our doorbell on a Sunday morning. He was a very nervous fellow standing there with his little notebook full of numbers. He very insistently told my Dad, "I'll buy that truck, but I won't pay a penny over this amount". Dad said "Fine", knowing that the fellow had gotten himself so confused after making all of the rounds that he was offering more than Dad had priced in the first place. The fellow was happy, Dad sold the truck, and all was well.

Dad sold cars all over the country. He was known far and wide as the Chevy dealer to see for the best price and the most courteous treatment. In 1959, Dad created the motto for his dealership while talking with the District Manager – "It Will Pay to See Ray". It was the slogan that embodied his entire philosophy, and it stuck.

Dad believed in the Golden Rule, and he treated his customers accordingly. He was especially kind to the children who accompanied their fathers to the dealership to look at cars and trucks. Dad would let the kids sit inside new cars or look under the hoods while he explained how things worked to them. The kids were delighted. In many cases they also became life-long customers when they became adults, remembering the special treatment Dad had given them at an early age.

Dad was so well known that he even sold vehicles to residents of other countries. I remember a man from Switzerland who ordered a new white 1969 Corvette from Dad and then had it shipped overseas. He called before flying out, and asked if Pierce, Nebraska was anywhere near Los Angeles. Dad told him to fly to a place called Omaha, and we picked him up from there. He was delighted with his new Corvette, and more than pleased with the price.

My Dad just loved to sell new cars and trucks, and he sold lots of them. Also, he felt very strongly about the issue of safety for families with young children. He would strive to put those families in new cars that were safe and reliable rather than selling them a used car. That was the genesis of my Dad's car collection. He sold lots and lots of new cars and lots and lots of pickups. The trade-ins were parked on our farm outside of town. Their numbers gradually grew into a massive collection. New cars that were left unsold were also stored. There is a lot of history in that collection. Dad can look at any of those vehicles today and tell you the story behind it. He remembers each used car and the former owner, like the 1928 Durant owned by Mom's uncle Louie.

I remember the 1953 white Corvette convertible we had when I was four years old and my little brother, Mark, was two. Mark spent his free time tooling around in a little Corvette replica pedal car that looked like the original. I, however, was more interested in getting inside the real thing. What I remember most is my frustration in not being able to open the doors. The 1953 Corvette had no outside door handle and I was pretty short. I remember jumping up to grab the top of the door and then struggling to reach inside to pull the door handle open. Sometimes I succeeded, and sometimes I didn't. But it was a real joy sitting inside that beautiful Corvette. My love of new

Chevrolets was in my DNA and starting to show. When attending gatherings of friends and family, Dad would often turn to me and loudly ask the question, "What is the finest car made?" I would shout, "Chevrolet!!!!", and it would bring down the house. I didn't really know what was so funny, but I was happy to play my part.

When I turned 16 and got my driver's license, it was a very exciting day. My first car was a 1963 Chevy Corvair. It was black, with a red interior, 4-on-the-floor manual transmission, and an oversized shiny chrome gear-shift knob. It was a used car that someone had modified adding "dumps" to the exhaust system. What a wonderful loud purring sound the engine made as I drove that little car all over town, smiling all the way. The rear engine really helped with traction in the snow. And if I did get stuck, a couple of friends could just pick up the rear end, spin me around, and I would be on my way. I loved that car, and it sits in the dealership to this very day.

While attending college at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln, I drove a white 1964 Chevrolet Impala with a red interior. My first new car was a red Chevy Monza with a white top. After that, I fell in love with Camaros. I sold my 1987 Camaro, but I still have my 1995 red Camaro with a red interior. It has been lovingly cared for, and at 18 years old still has only 45,000 miles on the OD. My husband and I now have a white 2012 Camaro with a 3.6L V6 engine that gets 28 mpg driving between our home in Florida and Nebraska. We both love new Chevrolets.

Growing up, I loved spending time at the dealership. Dad kept me away from the service area in the back for fear that I would get hurt. But my brother and I had the job of cleaning up the new cars for delivery. In the 60's, all new Chevrolets would arrive with an opaque white covering of protective wax. It was a real job getting it off and polishing the paint up to a showroom shine. The windows were always the most difficult, and Dad invariably had to step in and finish polishing the windows with his strong arms.

I remember how excited my brother and I would be when the new cars would arrive on transports from Janesville, Wisconsin. Our home was right across the street from the dealership. We would hear the loud clang as the transport driver lowered the heavy metal tracks onto the brick street, and we would run out of the house in anticipation. It was so exciting to see the brand new models of Chevy cars and trucks being unloaded.

Announcement Day at Lambrecht Chevrolet Company was a huge event for the entire town. Unlike today, one special day in September of each year was the first opportunity for anyone to view the new car models for that year. New cars would be delivered in advance and then hidden away so that nobody could see them before Announcement Day. Early that morning, Dad would move one shiny new Chevrolet into the showroom. There would be balloons and banners, coffee and donuts, souvenirs, and lots of built-up excitement. Everyone in town would come to see the new car and truck models.

Lambrecht Chevrolet participated in all of the important local celebrations and events throughout the years. For its grand opening in 1946, there were real live elephants in front of the dealership wearing Chevrolet banners on their backs. During the Nebraska Centennial in 1954, Dad had the honor of driving the Governor of Nebraska in our 1953 Corvette down Main Street in the parade. Pioneer Days in June of 1959 was the 100th anniversary of Pierce County, Nebraska. Dad again drove dignitaries in a new 1959 Chevy in the parade. There were countless other functions and parades.

Throughout the years, Lambrecht Chevrolet Company remained a small business operated by Mom and Dad with one mechanic. Pierce, Nebraska remained a small community of about 1,200 people. In the 80's, my parents made the transition from typewriter to computer for communications with General Motors. But Mom still used an adding machine for maintaining handwritten financial ledgers and paper files. The original cash register from 1946 still sat on the front counter and was used daily. Original MSO's and titles were carefully stored. This was a small "mom and pop" operation, and it stayed that way throughout the decades in business.

In 1996 after 50 years as a Chevrolet dealership, Mom and Dad made the difficult decision to give up the franchise and continue limited operations as Lambrecht Auto Company. Now 17 years later, they have agreed to liquidate the dealership's massive inventory. Dad is now 95 years old, and Mom is 92. Dad is still fiercely loyal to Chevrolet and General Motors. He actively follows trends in automobile design and manufacturing, and loves to see photos of all of the new models.

The decision to auction the inventory of Lambrecht Chevrolet Company was a difficult and painful one. The collection of over 500 true survivor vehicles comprise a lifetime of hard work, tears, and joy for both of my parents. The dealership today is a virtual time capsule that will be opened and all contents will be sold at auction. The inventory of the dealership's vehicles includes many new cars with original MSO's as well as hundreds of rare 50's and 60's Chevys ideal for restoration projects. Looking back at the history of Lambrecht Chevrolet, my parents have no regrets, and are proud of the thousands of new cars and trucks they sold to many generations of happy customers. They hope that these rare collectible vehicles will now be the source of joy and inspiration for car enthusiasts everywhere.