Emptying the Field of Dreams: Where the Lambrecht cars went

MARCH 30, 2014 6:10 AM • BY PETER SALTER / LINCOLN JOURNAL STAR

PIERCE — Except for the grit whipped by a recent north wind, the dust in Ray Lambrecht's soybean field has settled.

Gone are the TV cameras that filmed here six months ago.

Gone are the long lines at the food trailers and even longer lines at the portable toilets.

Gone are the $20 parking spots, the Elvis impersonator, the constant background melody of an auctioneer calling for bids.

Gone are the thousands of people who traveled to these 80 acres from around the globe in late September.

And gone are the 500 reasons they came here — the cars that for decades made this field mythical and, during three days last fall, made it famous.

Click through the slideshow below to read more about the cars and their journeys from Lambrecht Chevrolet.

Slideshow: Where the Lambrecht cars are now

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Gerald and Betty Hixson hold photos of their 1957 Chevy from the first year they owned it. They recently

bought it back, and are spending more than $30,000 to restore it. "We feel like it's an investment," Betty said.

1957 Chevrolet Bel-Air, rural Pierce

1.5 miles from Lambrecht Chevrolet

PIERCE — That car contained too many memories — had carried his family too many miles — for Gerald Hixson to simply let it go.

So for years after he'd traded his 1957 Chevy to Ray Lambrecht for a station wagon, Hixson tried to buy it back.

"He wouldn't sell to anyone. There were quite a few of us who tried to buy cars back. I tried eight to 10, maybe even 11 times."

The two men had a history. His father's seed, feed and produce store stood next to the Chevy dealership. So when Hixson had returned from the Army to get married, he bought the '57 from Lambrecht.

"As soon as I saw it, I fell in love with it. I had to have it."

He had wanted a new car, but Lambrecht didn't have one. But this Bel-Air wasn't even a year old yet.

Hixson knew its first owner. As a teen, Hixson had run the projector and cleaned the theater for Mel Kruse. He asked his old boss what was wrong with the Bel-Air.

Nothing, Kruse said. His wife didn't like it.

Hixson and his bride, Betty, paid about $3,000 for the hardtop in the last week of 1957.

They paid $12,000 for it on Sept. 24, 2013.

And they'll pay another $30,000 to $35,000 on it by the time the repainted body comes back from the shop in Fremont, and the motor and transmission are rebuilt at the garage in Pierce, and the interior is replaced in Blair.

"Everybody thinks we're crazy," Betty said. "But we're not."

Sentimental, maybe. They drove their blue two-tone through the first dozen years of their marriage, back and forth to Oklahoma as Gerald finished his service, down to Texas and into New Mexico, and later, with children in the backseat.

"It's got a lot of remembrances. It was special," Gerald said.

But it wasn't big enough for their family. He traded it to Lambrecht in the early '70s for something with more room.

The Chevy sat next to Lambrecht's dealership for years.

"Then all of a sudden it disappeared," Gerald said. "And I said, 'You sold my car?' He said, 'No, it's in a safe place.'"

It had been hauled to Kansas City for safekeeping. It returned to Pierce for the auction, and Gerald

wasn't going to lose it again. He paid four times its original sticker, despite the faded paint, flat tires and falling headliner.

He heard from Ray Lambrecht after the sale in September.

"He was glad I got it."

ERIC GREGORY/Lincoln Journal Star

Deputy Dan Hallock (left) is helping Pierce County Sheriff Rick Eberhardt with the mechanical restoration of the 1954 Chevrolet pickup the sheriff bought after the Lambrecht auction.

1954 Chevrolet pickup, rural Pierce

10 miles from Lambrecht Chevrolet

The sheriff wore his uniform to the auction — and he carried his gun — so it wouldn't have been proper to bid.

He didn't want to intimidate the other buyers trying to bag one of Ray Lambrecht's decades-old classics. But he was looking.

"I always wanted one," said Sheriff Rick Eberhardt. "The day of the sale, I was so busy, we had so much going on."

Lambrecht's collection had kept the Pierce County sheriff busy long before the auction. The cars and

their precious metals were magnets for thieves and vandals, who stole radiators and broke windshields and stripped pieces of rare Chevy chrome.

And during the sale, his department had to cope with three days of crowds that quadrupled his county's population.

But when the traffic faded and the auction yard emptied, nearly 20 cars remained. Some bidders hadn't paid, others just left their purchases in the dirt.

The sheriff was close to Ray and Mildred Lambrecht, and they offered him a chance to buy one of the leftovers.

"After the sale, they had these left and they made sure I got one. It worked out pretty good for me."

His new 1954 Chevy pickup needed some work. The original six-cylinder is frozen, so he found a bigger V-6 replacement in Utica. The bed had rotted, so he put in fresh plywood. He bought new baby moon hubcaps and plans to add dual exhaust and a new gas tank.

"You just bleed $100 bills."

But he's lucky, he said. His uncle, Larry Eberhardt, used to own a junkyard on North 56th in Lincoln, and he's giving mechanical advice. His wife, Robin, is granting permission. And showing patience.

Because the sheriff's personal shop is crowded with cars — the '30 Ford that belonged to his boxing coach in Grand Island, the '51 Packard that belonged to Robin's grandfather, a '53 Jeep that reminds him of his own grandfather, who sold Jeeps and Ramblers in Friend.

"I'm kind of a sentimental old goat when it comes to old cars," he said.

So he was thrilled when he traced the lineage of his Chevy and learned its last owner's daughters still live in Pierce. He's going to find them this summer, he said.

"I'm going to drive by and say, 'Hey, you want to ride around in your dad's truck?'"

MORGAN SPIEHS/Lincoln Journal Star

Jared Anderson (left) and his father Steve put the hood back on their 1954 Ford pickup they bought for $2,000 at the Lambrecht auction in Pierce.

1954 Ford F-100, rural Crete

140 miles from Lambrecht Chevrolet

They caught this curse a few years ago, after someone plowed into Steve Anderson's car on one of the Sheridan Boulevard roundabouts.

So Steve brought home a new Camaro, and his son Jared was introduced to acceleration.

"He realized his Saturn didn't have any power," Steve said, "so he got the LeMans."

And that's how it started, with father and son spending two years and thousands of dollars stripping and sanding and restoring Jared's '72 Pontiac, painting it Carousel red, hopping up its 400, entering it in the Lincoln Southeast car shows.

Then they spent two more years rebuilding a tree-torn '68 Mustang for Jared's mother, Lynda.

Now they're back in the dirt-floored barn owned by Lynda's parents, about to spend their next two years — and perhaps $20,000 — getting to know every rusty inch of the 1954 Ford F-100 they hauled home from Pierce.

They weren't entirely sure what they were looking for when they drove north from Lincoln: Jared was watching for an old beater with a manual transmission shift; Steve was drawn toward the dozens of Chevy trucks, some of them decades old but still considered new.

But they watched the bidding soar far beyond their self-imposed $2,000 limit.

"The Chevys were going too high and then we saw this Ford," Steve said. "Some of the Ford stuff got overlooked."

They became the truck's third owners in 60 years. They've since learned it was last registered in 1961, so it likely sat in Ray Lambrecht's field for more than five decades. And it shows.

It original Arctic blue is now various shades of rust. Most of its glass is cracked. The boards that lined the bed rotted years ago. A Flintstones-sized hole has eaten the floorboards. And they're not sure if the little V-8 can be saved.

"It needs some tender loving care," Steve said.

It also needs hours and hours of sanding and straightening. They want to return it to its original condition, so they'll search the region for replacement parts; they found a donor truck with a solid floor a few miles away, and they know a source for parts near Des Moines, Iowa.

The father and son know how to do this. They'll share the body work, and they'll share the drive train work.

And they'll get along.

Said son: "For the most part."

Said father: "It depends."

Courtesy photo

Steve VanDerBrink cleans up Leona, the 1953 Chevy Bel-Air his wife, auctioneer Yvette VanDerBrink, bought in Pierce after September's Lambrecht Chevrolet auction. "When we first got it home, it was a mess," she said. "It wouldn't roll at all. It had dirt everywhere. It had had animals living in it."

1953 Chevy Bel-Air, Hardwick, Minn.

170 miles from Lambrecht Chevrolet

The auctioneer named it Leona, after her grandmother, and she watched it return to life.

One taillight flickered at first, then the parking lights, and then a headlight, as if the current was slowly feeling its way through the wiring in the 1953 Bel-Air.

The car hadn't started for nearly 60 years. It didn't even roll because so much dirt was caked in its hubs.

Her husband had replaced the battery. Then he cleaned the fuel lines, put in a carburetor kit, set the valves — and soon Yvette VanDerBrink was rolling down the road in a 3,000-pound reminder of the job that consumed so much of her year.

The Minnesota auctioneer hadn't planned on buying a car from the Lambrecht Chevrolet sale in Pierce.

"I didn't want a conflict of interest," she said. "I was maybe going to get a hubcap as a souvenir."

She had already brought home so many experiences she now conducts seminars summarizing what she went through in Pierce: Untangling the cars and trucks from the trees that grew up, around and through them. Retrieving the valuable vehicles that had been stored out of town. Cataloging all 500, sorting out their titles with the state, hiring security.

And helping the town of 1,700 brace for a crowd that would reach an estimated 30,000.

"Rumors were rampant," she said. "I then reached out to the town and area and just talked to them. I put an ad in the paper telling them what we were doing, and how they could be a part of it."

But even when it was over, it wasn't. She still had 18 cars for sale — abandoned by bidders who didn't pay or buyers suffering serious remorse.

One of those cars was a green and white four-door Chevy. Its online buyer had traveled to Pierce from the East Coast, had second thoughts and asked to her to sell it for him.

VanDerBrink told her husband, Steve, about it.

"And he goes, 'Well, hell, you worked so damn hard and made those people all that money. What do you get as a souvenir?' I got to looking at it and I went, 'Yeah.'"

It had sat outside for decades on its original Mobil Oil tires, attracting mice and growing a hole in its floorboard. They'll patch the hole, replace part of its interior and put on new tires.

But that's about it. Leona's faded paint shows her age. It tells her story. The auctioneer plans to share it.

"I'm going to take it to town. That's going to be my goody-getting car."

Brothers Chad and Adam Hemmer of Tarnov bought this 1974 Chevrolet Impala at the Lambrecht Auto Auction in Pierce to use as a demolition derby car.

1970s Impalas (for demolition derbies), Tarnov

42 miles from Lambrecht Chevrolet

TARNOV — The Hemmer brothers had it easy: They lived less than an hour from the auction in Pierce.

But they kept seeing familiar faces from several states away.

"We saw quite a few people we knew," said Chad, 32. "We saw some guys from Wisconsin and Indiana."

Usually, though, when Chad and Adam see those guys, they're all wearing helmets, and they're trying to take each other out in the high-dollar, high-stakes field of competitive demolition derby.

For the past 15 years, the farmer brothers have traveled the Midwest — Nebraska, Kansas, South Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa and Illinois — disabling and destroying their cars but collecting the dozens of trophies that decorate their shop north of Columbus.

Their cars might make it through just one derby or survive several, but they rarely last more than a season.

So they always need fresh wheels, and they scour the country for big-bodied GM cars from the early 1970s. This spring, for example, they're rebuilding and reinforcing a Chevy wagon from New Mexico.

"We always collect certain types of cars, and when we decide to build a car, we have our own parts yard," said Chad. "You just can't go into town and buy a spare steering sector."

But then they could, in late September, when Pierce's former Chevy dealer finally sold the hundreds of trade-ins he'd gathered for 50 years. The brothers had relatives up there, and they'd competed there, so they knew about the legend of the Lambrecht cars in the trees near the golf course.

At the auction, the rarest vehicles drew the deepest pockets — $140,000 for a '58 pickup with 1.3 miles; $97,500 for a never-titled '63 Impala. But it also attracted derby drivers from around the country, who are always looking for a source of heavy metal.

The Hemmer brothers bought three 40-year-old Impalas and dragged them home.

They took stock.

And they felt a pang of buyer's remorse.

They found the cars too weathered and weakened to take the abuse of an event like Metal Mayhem in Rockford, Ill., "the Super Bowl" of the derby world, Chad said.

Still, the cars were complete, and they had small-block motors. And the brothers saved on shipping costs.

"They were probably too high for what we got," Chad said. "But they were close enough to haul."

They might strip them, they might sell them, they might run them in a lower-impact, local derby. For now, they'll just park the Chevys in the trees on the edge of their own field, two counties from where they'd already sat for so long.

Courtesy photo

When Jim Louhis got his 1979 Chevette home to northern Iowa, he just needed a fresh battery, a tank of gas and a new key to get it started.

1979 Chevette, McIntire, Iowa

327 miles from Lambrecht Chevrolet

Jim Lohuis pulled into Pierce in late September with his trailer, his sister and his nephew — but with no hard plans to buy anything.

The 35-year-old was looking for memories.

"It wasn't so much to come back with a car; it was kind of the fact I don't believe ever in my lifetime there will be a situation like this. We more or less went to see the show."

They saw the first morning's bids break the $100,000 mark and stay, for a while, in the high-five figures.

Then they saw the Chevette.

His nephew saw it, actually. And they lingered there, in that field surrounded by Bel-Airs and Corvettes and Impalas and hundreds of classics.

"For some reason, he had it in his head the Chevette was the cool car," Lohuis said. "Don't ask me why."

The '79 economy car was red, free of the rust that had eroded so many other Lambrecht cars but with a sun-fried interior. Bidding hit $600, then $700. Lohuis raised his hand.

"And I ended up getting the car. I'd never owned a Chevette in my life."

But after he owned it, and when they returned to camp at the fairgrounds, they learned plenty of people had owned Chevettes, the top-selling small car in the U.S. in 1979.

"You'd be amazed by how many people came up and said, 'I had one of those in high school.' They were the hand-me-down cars from the folks. That car reminded them of something."

Think about it: You don't see Chevettes anymore, he said. "They rotted away. They were designed as a throw-away vehicle."

Back in northern Iowa, he gave it a new battery and fresh drink of gas. He turned the key. And it started.

He might just sit on it, wait until his 13-year-old nephew is old enough to drive, see if he still thinks the Chevette is the coolest car.

- **1963 Chevrolet pickup, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada**

   1,963 miles from Lambrecht Chevrolet

   The pickup was perfect, the rare white Chevy in a long line of Chevys a half-century old but still considered new.

   And the trip was perfect, too. Andy Waterhouse and his son had flown to Nebraska from New Brunswick, where he runs a repair shop and a used car dealership.

   "We loved it. We had the best weekend me and my son have ever spent together."

   In the field on the edge of Pierce, he found the pickup he had been targeting online: a C10 with 16 miles on the odometer, built in '63.

   That was important to him: "It may sound foolish, but I was also born in 1963."

   He paid $20,000. He planned to clean it and park it in his showroom — no paint, no bodywork, no restoration. That was important to him, too: He wanted this Chevy in its original condition.

   He bought a second truck, a well-worn '65, for his son. They spent part of the weekend screening and selecting a company to haul the pickups home to Canada.

   He pauses. "And that's where things start to turn for the worse."

   He learned later the man he hired had subcontracted the job. And that the new company had to unload, and reload, the trucks in New Jersey.

There is a right way to load an auto with a forklift — from the back, lining the forks up beneath the sturdy frame. In Pierce, with help from the auction company, the pickups were loaded correctly, Waterhouse said.

But in New Jersey, the hauler lifted the trucks from the side, the weight of the vehicles crushing their lower body panels against the forks.

"The people who did transport the vehicle considered it to be junk. That's what they told me on the phone — 'I have your pieces of junk on my truck.' Well, I paid a fair amount of money for that junk."

A pair of body shops each estimated the repair bill at $6,500, but the hauler refused to pay for the damage, Waterhouse said. He thought about suing but then thought about the cost.

So he parked the pickup in his garage while he decides what to do with it. He'll likely get it repaired and repainted, but then his original 1963 will never again be original, like it was in that field in Nebraska.

"It would have been so nice to get it to run, put on some tires and say, 'Look at this, it's a brand new truck that's aged 50 years.'"