

The Low-Mile Chevy Legend

The Story of
Ray P. Lambrecht and
Lambrecht Chevrolet Co.

By Jeannie Lambrecht Stillwell

Urban legends speak of a former Midwest Chevrolet dealer with a collection of hundreds of unsold and low-mileage vehicles hidden in a rural setting. Rumors abound regarding this man and the mystery of that collection. The rumors are true, and the man behind that legend is my father, Ray P. Lambrecht. Dad owned and operated Lambrecht Chevrolet Co. 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, Neb., 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 detail down to a hand-carved steering wheel and a complete exhaust system.

Dad first drove a car at the age of 9. He climbed into the family's tan 1927 Chevrolet coupe and drove his mother seven 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. Prior to the war, General Motors had been distributing franchises throughout small towns in the Midwest, and one of them had been given to Dad's uncle Ernest. Ernest had been operating out of a small garage, and he needed both Dad's financing and also his ability to construct a dealership building in order to really start growing the business.

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 operated the dealership in partnership with his uncle for only two years. After a serious illness forced Ernest to retire, Dad bought out his share of the business and became the sole owner of the franchise.

Lambrecht Chevrolet Co. was owned and operated by my parents, Ray and Mildred Lambrecht with only one employee, a mechanic. They operated the dealership for 50 years until they retired in 1996 at ages 78 and 75. My parents worked six days a week for 50 years, never taking a single day of vacation or one sick day. They worked hard and



Ray, Mildred and their granddaughter Kara stand outside Lambrecht Chevrolet Co. in Pierce, Neb. Thousands of new cars were sold from the dealership, but dozens of cars were unsold over the years — and still remain in inventory.

Dad was one of very few individuals allowed to purchase those materials, because of his 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, designed the building and then built the dealership that still stands today.

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 al-

lotted 16 cars. They were black or gray with cloth interiors and no heat. At that time, cars sold for around \$600 to \$800. They also received six 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 Co. 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.

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 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, Neb., 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.

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. Dad would let the kids sit inside new cars or look under the hoods while he explained how things worked to them. In many cases they also became life-long customers when they became



Mildred Lambrecht and her son Mark take a ride in a new 1953 Corvette outside Lambrecht Chevrolet Co.

adults, remembering the special treatment Dad had given them at an early age.

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 Dad's car collection. He sold many new cars and pickups. The trade-ins were often 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 4 years old and my little brother, Mark, was 2. 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.

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 '60s, 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 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, Wis. 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 Co. 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,

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coffee and donuts, souvenirs and lots of built-up excitement. Everyone in town would come to see the new car and truck models.

Throughout the years, Lambrecht Chevrolet Co. remained a small business. 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 "mom and pop" operation, and it stayed that way throughout the decades it was in business.

In 1996, after 50 years as a Chevrolet dealer, Mom and Dad made the difficult decision to give up the franchise and continue limited operations as Lambrecht Auto Co. 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 GM. 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 Co. was a difficult and painful one. The collection of more than 500 survivor vehicles comprise a life-

time 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 dealership's inventory includes dozens of never-sold 1950s-1980s Chevrolets with less than 10 miles and still on the original MSOs, as well as hundreds of low-mileage '50s and '60s trade-in vehicles ideal for restoration.

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.

VanDerBrink Auctions will offer this collection at no reserve Sept. 28 with a preview on Sept. 27. For obvious security reasons, no one will be allowed on site prior to the preview, and anyone trespassing will be prosecuted. For more information, visit www.vanderbrinkauctions.com or call 605-201-7005.

More information and photos will appear in next week's issue of Old Cars Weekly and are currently posted at www.oldcarsweekly.com.