



PHOTOS BY ROSS SCHULZ

Dean Sparks shows a copy of a love letter he found underneath the driver's seat of a 1959 Chevrolet Bel Air he purchased at the Lambrecht Chevy auction in Pierce, Neb. At left, Sparks tries to read portions of the damaged letter.

'59 Chevy reveals love story

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In the world of journalism, it is said that every person has a story. The old adage may not apply to just people; it's entirely possible that each car has a story.

Last month, an auction in a small town in Nebraska drew the attention of antique car enthusiasts across the country and beyond.

The unsold inventory of Lambrecht Chevrolet in Pierce, Neb., mainly cars from the '50s, '60s and '70s, was auctioned off for a total of \$2.8 million in bids from nearly 7,000 bidders. Among the vehicles sold were about 500 cars that had been stashed in a field.

The first 10 cars sold at the Lambrecht Chevrolet auction sold for a total of \$676,500. A 1958 Chevrolet Cameo pickup, which had a grand total of 1.3 miles showing on the odometer, sold for \$140,000.

Rumor has it Jay Leno visited the auction site the day before the general public could. It would be interesting to learn what, if anything, he purchased and what he paid.

But out of all of that, maybe the most historically significant vehicle from the auction was purchased for just \$2,750 and is now owned by Dean Sparks of Corydon.

Sparks, who learned of the auction from his father-in-law, Glenn Wuest, despite national advertisement slots and a three-hour History Channel show dedicated to it, took to the Internet to scour the car listings and immediately fell in love with the 1959 Chevrolets, and one specifically, in lot 416L, the only one with a bullet-front bumper option.

Jeannie Lambrecht Stillwell, daughter of dealership founders Ray and Mildred Lambrecht, told the crowd that it was always her father's plan to have an auction because he never wanted to throw anything away. The founders never sold a used car. Instead, Ray Lambrecht, who owned and operated the dealership from 1946 to 1996, put all unsold inventory, or used cars from trade-ins into storage, which was the field surrounding the dealership. Even new cars that did not sell were added to the inventory.

In 50 years of operation, Lambrecht Chevrolet only had one employee, the mechanic and parts man. The Lambrechts handled the rest.

Sparks loves old cars and enjoys restoring them, so he thought long and hard about making the 801-mile trek to Nebraska for the auction.

"I kicked around the idea of going to see this once-in-a-lifetime auction," he said. "After much deliberation back-and-forth, my wife convinced me to go ... On Thursday, Sept. 26, at about

5 p.m. we (Wuest joined Sparks) started our journey with trailer in tow hoping to bring home a piece of history but figuring that I would not stand a chance against the caliber of bidders that would surely be there."

Three days later, the duo had the Harbor Blue 1959 Chevrolet Bel Air that Sparks had his eye on from the beginning on their trailer. Well, technically four days later since, by the time he paid for the car and got it loaded, it was 1 a.m. Monday morning. Finally, at about 6:30 p.m., Sparks and his piece of history arrived home.

Sparks said people restore cars every day without usually knowing the vehicle's story or even caring about the car's history. However, Sparks was eager to learn about his latest acquisition.

He opened the trunk to find what one might expect and then some: two spare wheels and tires, four bumper jacks, a pair of men's leather shoes in pieces, countless spark plugs, two citric hand juicers, two hand egg beaters, one unopened Coke bottle (the Coke had corroded through the cap), a folding chair, a carnival dish and an unopened can that appeared to be a Moosehead beer.

Sparks turned his attention to the glove box as he continued his search to find out about the car's history as well as its former owner. There, he found more of the same: ink pens from old Pierce, Neb., businesses, a room key from a hotel in Omaha, Neb., two unused condoms in their package and a 1962 diamond jubilee 50-cent coin from Leigh, Neb.

"But, unfortunately, nothing to shed light on the original owner of the car," Sparks said. "I decided to remove the front seat so I could see how bad the floor was in the front. I chiseled the rounded over bolts off and removed the seat. I pulled it out of the passenger-side door and went around to the driver's side to survey the damage. There, under the driver's side of where the seat had just been, was an envelope. I carefully removed the envelope. It was addressed to Mr. Ronnie Waterbury, Pierce, Neb., from Beverly Barber, Platte Center, Neb."

Sparks said the envelope and letter, dated Feb. 7, 1965 (which oddly is Sparks' birthday) was water-damaged and partially eaten by mice, but he was able to make out most of the words on the tissue-like paper.

"I could tell it was written by someone still in school or freshly out," he said. "She referred to missing him and passing the time by going to a ballgame at school. It went on and, at the end of the letter, she wrote 'let's get married.'"

Sparks, now with a name of what must have been the owner of the car, Ronnie Waterbury, attempted to locate him.



Above, much work needs to be done on the interior to restore the vehicle before taking it to the former owner's son in Kansas so he can drive it. Below left, an advertisement for the auction is displayed in Sparks' garage. Below right, the steering wheel and dash are still in fairly good shape.



"The first thing that came up was a military cemetery stone ... Waterbury died in 1998. I read the next of kin list that said spouse, Beverly Barber. They had gotten married; how cool."

He then tried a search for "Beverly Barber" and learned she also had died, in 2002, but he was able to find out she had two sons, Rod and Wade Waterbury.

After searching Wade's name, the first thing to pop up was a youtube video from the Lambrecht auction, which immediately grabbed Sparks' attention.

"I played the video," Sparks said. "It was Wade sitting on the back of an SUV. He said, 'Hi, my name is Wade Waterbury. I'm the

son of Ronnie Waterbury, the mechanic and only employee of Lambrecht Chevrolet."

"My heart skipped a beat. I bought the mechanic's car. This was the man that kept everything at the dealership working. In my eyes, the most important person there. Unbelievable."

Undoubtedly, if anyone at the auction knew the car had belonged to the one-and-only mechanic, the price would have sky-rocketed. This was an auction where yardsticks with Lambrecht Chevrolet written on them sold for \$470. Now, the car is in Sparks' garage, ready to be restored.

"It was the most important car there, as far as history goes," Sparks said. "It



was owned by the guy that worked on all of the cars."

Wade Waterbury said it was the only car his father ever bought new.

The car is quite unique, even without its former owner.

Out of 19 1959 Bel Air's in the auction, Sparks' was the only one with the rare feature of a vacuum ashtray that used suction from the engine to collect cigarette ashes and deposit them in a glass jar. The feature was installed by the dealers at the time, so Waterbury, no doubt, installed it himself.

"The glass jar version pretty much doesn't exist anymore," Sparks said.

The car also was the only one with an original grill guard and had extra mirrors.

"It had all kinds of extra options," Sparks said.

And, not surprisingly so, since it was owned and used by the mechanic and parts man of the auto dealership.

Waterbury used it a lot, Sparks said, racking up nearly 9,200 miles in a six-year span.

"That's a lot for the '60s," Sparks said.

The car also has a 1965 "The Beef State" license plate. That was the year Ronnie's son, Wade, was born, and also when, for some reason, Ronnie

stopped driving the car. Wade rode in the car as an infant, but, later in life, he never got to drive it.

Sparks hopes to change that. His plan is to fully restore the car and take it to Kansas, where Wade now lives, and let him drive the car that his father took to the highway more than 50 years ago; the same car where the elder Waterbury stashed his love letter from Wade's mom, asking — or telling — Ronnie to marry her.

"I'm chomping at the bit to get after it," Sparks said of restoring the car.

Sparks has been in contact with Wade Waterbury and sent the original letter to him.

"It kind of got him pretty good," Sparks said of the letter.

Sparks said Waterbury was worried the car wouldn't sell and would be crushed as scrap.

Adding to the intrigue, Waterbury said his father and Sparks shared something else: Waterbury's middle name was Dean.

"It's like it was meant to happen," Sparks said. "This is the one that stuck with me to begin with. I definitely feel that fate brought me to this car or it to me because it has more stories to tell and history to make."