

# Yvette VanDerBrink

*Bringing the glory of unrestored old cars—and tractors—to the masses*



BY JIM DONNELLY • PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY VANDERBRINK AUCTIONS

It isn't supposed to happen this way. You understand, of course, that an automotive auction featuring collector cars is supposed to be all about unbridled excitement, pomp, hurrahing the crowd, as cars pass beneath neon and halogen lights that reflect their paint like tumbling gemstones. It's all about the spectacle, as camera booms sweep over the auctioneers while they jazz the crowd. A car auction is supposed to be an event, and as a rule, they deliver. There's always excitement in the air when dollars turn into dreams.

Some dreams are more vivid than

most, and that is where Yvette VanDerBrink comes in. At many of the sales that VanDerBrink Auctions presents, you won't find bright lights bouncing off yards-deep paint because in many cases, there's no glossy paint to be found. That's because the car may have been sitting on a lot or simply on the Midwest prairie for years, or decades, or a generation. It could be a family's private collection or a museum. That's Yvette's specialty. In an increasingly crowded universe of hammer-it sellers, she has found a niche. She's best known for estate and other liquidation sales that involve original, unrestored cars—not exclusively,

mind you; Yvette will sell whatever goes across her auction block—anything that came out of old dealerships or private collections. If you think that's a tiny sliver of the auction market, it is. And it isn't.

Take VanDerBrink Auctions' most famous sale, the Lambrecht Chevrolet auction held in 2013 in tiny Pierce, Nebraska. Scores of Chevrolets, all in original condition, some never titled, some with single-digit mileage showing on the odometer, found buyers in that sale, which swamped the little Cornhusker town. Lodging and attractions? Forget about it. Nothing there but Chevys galore, led by a 1964 Impala



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**Yvette runs the show, but a VanDerBrink sale can play to thousands.**

SS hardtop and a 1958 Apache pickup, which garnered \$97,500 and \$142,500, respectively, at the hammer. Like most of the cars that Yvette sells, none were restored; many ranged between number 4 and 5 condition.

Did that bother anybody? We think not, given that Pierce, normal popula-

tion around 1,600, ballooned in size to more than 20,000 during the Lambrecht sale, which generated more than \$2.8 million in revenue, not including buyer's premiums. It also garnered three hours of coverage on The History Channel.

It's the region where VanDerBrink has made its name. Yvette has run sales in 17 states, but it's hardcore heartland—the Dakotas, Nebraska, Iowa, Missouri and Minnesota—where the company and founder made their respective reputations. And it's home. Yvette is a country girl, a true child of the vast prairies, who has never strayed far from her rich-soil roots. Her parents, Art and Marie Nordstrom, ran a dairy farm just outside Garretson, South Dakota, while also building and operating an auto salvage yard.

She worked at a Minnesota hospital for more than a decade while helping out at the family salvage business, but also—and this was her genuine start—began buying and selling old tractors on the side, a potentially lucrative and active business in the upper Midwest. That was when Yvette made what turned out to be a life decision, attending auction school in Montana and gaining her auctioneer's license. But she had a little help, and enjoys relating the tale today.

First came her dad. "I grew up when my dad was a collector. He was into cars and liked Chevrolets; he had collected several '57 Chevys and some Impalas. Then we'd work at the dairy farm all week and on Friday, Saturday and Sunday, it was racing, every Friday, Saturday and Sunday night, because my dad was an official at the tracks. We'd go to Huset's Speedway, Interlake Speedway, Huron Speedway, over in South Dakota. My father had an old Ford tractor that he fitted with a nine-inch rear end and a 390-cu. in. Ford V-8 out of a Mustang, a hot rod tractor, and he used that at the tracks to push-start the Sprint cars. That was what we did, all summer long. It was our life and our entertainment. We'd get home and he'd go milk the cows. I was the trophy queen a couple of times, and I think I'm the first woman to finish a stock car enduro at one of those tracks. I was a tomboy growing up. I was into throwing the ball, working on the farm, working on cars and racing them."

Then came somebody else. In 2001, her mother told her about a traveling minister from Minneapolis, specializing in modern-day prophecy, who was going to be appearing at their local church the following evening. Yvette had just had





some cross words with her father over his collection of cars, and was disinclined to make the services. She went anyway, only to have the minister single her out during his homily and begin asking her questions. One of them was about why she hadn't mailed in some papers that were in the kitchen cupboard. They formed the application to the Montana auction school. He also explained, knowingly, that she had enough money in her purse to cover the cost of the school's tuition. "I couldn't believe what I was hearing," she said. "Crazy story, isn't it? I didn't even know who this guy was."

Convinced that she'd been touched by divine providence, Yvette decided she had no choice but to enroll. She packed up her Jeep and headed to Montana. Right after completing the course, she returned to South Dakota and put on her first sale, while still helping out with the family enterprises and also holding down a position at the local hospital. She went from selling that first tractor to having a successful, much larger sale of farm equipment the following year. A lot of the customers were aware of her work ethic and smarts and encouraged her to do well. Some didn't. When she was starting out, as she tells the story, it was extremely



**You never know what's going to turn up at one of Yvette's sales, from little stuff to scores of cars. At the Lambrecht auction of 2013, buyers swamped the tiny Nebraska town that hosted the spectacle.**



**The auction house cut its teeth by selling unrestrained Chevrolets, such as this collection of models from 1957. Original cars are a big part of its stock in trade.**

rare to find a woman running an auction of mechanical or agricultural gear on the Great Plains. In 2002, Yvette was tailed by a stalker and said she received death threats that forced her dad to hire a private investigator, who eventually identified her tormentor. She admits to having nearly quit from the fear and frustration, but jumped back in a big way by tackling her first automotive auction in 2003, her father's collection of 1957 Chevrolets.

Auctions, like many businesses, tend to develop a niche. They can be all about glamour, or incredibly rare cars, or a specific category of vehicle. Yvette said her own niche isn't original cars per se—she is a licensed land appraiser and broker now in addition to her auction duties—but rather, approaching each sale individually and tailoring it to the needs of the family that's hired her. And increasingly, a VanDerBrink sale is a family affair, with the Lambrecht event standing now as a case study. The family which had owned all those Chevrolets and related stuff was leaving the auto business after more than half a century, and Yvette offered to take on the entire burden of organizing and conducting the sale so that the elderly consignees wouldn't be bothered. And the Lambrecht sale became one of the gotta-be-there collector car events of 2013. That 1958 Chevrolet Cameo pickup that sold, remember? It had all of 1 mile showing on its odometer. It was named the Third Most Earth-Shattering Auto Auction of All Time by Hemmings and Yahoo News.

Auctioning her father's cars turned out to be hugely successful, and Yvette backed that victory up with another profitable sale in Ohio. VanDerBrink Auctions' brand

began to evolve. One part of that process was Yvette's firm preference that all lots are sold with no reserve; it tends to speed the process up and guarantee that each sale is a total sell-through. Her firm was among the first in the nation of any kind to begin presenting live online auctions. That helped win Yvette a marketing award from the National Auctioneers Association, and getting the media involved in publicizing the sales has always been one of her specialties. In 2010, Women of Business presented her with a Woman of Excellence award in recognition of the barriers she had surmounted in the industry.

Once you get to know Yvette, you'll realize that despite her successes, she has not strayed very far from her Midwest roots. For one thing, she and her husband still live on a farm in Hardwick, Minnesota, not too far from where she grew up in neighboring South Dakota, where they mainly raise cattle and hay. The sales go on. As Yvette put it, "We started small, but started to grow from word of mouth as the word got around that we were just doing things a little bit differently here. We reached out with marketing and the new technology, and were one of the first to have live online bidding in this area."

"It all comes down to personal service," she continued. "We're not just doing consignments, we're working with the seller or the family to make the auction all about them, building the marketing around them. You know how they say that every dog has its day in the sun? Well, we're making sure that when it comes time to sell, they're going to have their day." 🐾