

Photo Of The Day: Vintage Chevy Auction

Grant Schulte, Associated Press

PIERCE, Neb. (AP) — Seventeen years have passed since Ray Lambrecht closed his Chevrolet dealership, a small-town operation in northeast Nebraska with a big and valuable secret.

For decades, the owner of the Lambrecht Chevrolet Co. in Pierce held on to new cars and trucks that didn't sell right away. He stashed them in warehouses, at his farm and in other spots around the town he worked in for 50 years.

Now, his automotive nest egg — about 500 vintage cars and trucks — will go on the auction block. Next month, visitors from at least a dozen countries and throughout the U.S. will converge on the 1,800-resident town, or bid online.

The two-day auction will feature mostly unsold Chevrolets that have sat untouched for decades. They'll go on the block in as-is condition. About 50 have fewer than 20 miles on the odometer, and some are so rare that no one has established a price. The most valuable, including a rare Chevy Cameo pickup, could fetch six-figure bids from collectors who view them as works of art to display or as restoration projects.

"To find this many new, old vehicles is unheard of," said Yvette VanDerBrink, the auctioneer coordinating the event. "It's like a white buffalo."

Preparations for the auction began in June, and VanDerBrink has taken calls from as far as Iceland, Singapore and Brazil. The two least-driven cars, a 1959 Bel Air and a 1960 Corvair Monza, each have one mile on their odometer. The oldest vehicle with fewer than 20 miles dates to 1958; the newest is a 1980 Monza with nine miles.

On a recent afternoon, VanDerBrink stepped over hubcaps and engine parts in the cramped, dust-caked dealership that closed in 1996. In the corner sat the sky-blue 1958 Cameo with 1.3 miles, a cracked windshield and a dented roof — but its interior is unblemished.

Nearby, a red-and-white 1963 Impala waits with 11.4 miles logged. Manufacturer's plastic covers the seats. The car was never titled. A yellowed, typewritten window sticker touts its original price: \$3,254.70.

Ray Lambrecht opened the downtown dealership with his uncle in 1946, on the corner of Main Street and Nebraska Highway 13. Live elephants meandered out front that day, with Chevrolet banners across their backs.

The U.S. Army veteran quickly established himself as an unusual salesman: He gave his lowest price up-front, without negotiation, and encouraged hagglers to try to find a better deal elsewhere. He rarely advertised, but was one of the first dealers in Nebraska to lease vehicles.

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His low-price, high-volume approach helped secure regular government contracts, and he often sold cars to the state. In 1954, Lambrecht drove then-Gov. Robert Crosby down Main Street in a parade celebrating the 100-year anniversary of Nebraska as a territory.

Lambrecht rarely sold cars or pickups that were more than a year old, and he used holdover models as a kind of rainy-day fund. Unlike most dealers who lowered prices to move out-of-date inventory, he assumed the older cars would appreciate over time.

"I believe that Dad's sales approach reflected his personal style," said his daughter, Jeannie Stillwell. "He is a very honest, straightforward man who was focused on giving his customers the best price right from the start. Negotiating over price was a waste of time, and so that element of the sale was eliminated."

The most valuable vehicles were stored for decades at a nearby warehouse, until a heavy snow collapsed the roof. Some were damaged, but many were saved and moved elsewhere. And the models at the dealership are among the best preserved, even as the building gave way to bats and holes in the roof.

The rest of the cars sat under trees at a nearby farm the Lambrechts owned, in the company of trade-in vehicles he didn't want to resell. Years passed, and trees started to poke through fenders and rusted pickup beds. The dealership's longtime mechanic lived on the farm, but when he died, his family moved away. Vandals and thieves pounced.

Ray and his wife, Mildred, retired in 1996. Ray, 95, and Mildred, 92, live in town, but the couple's health has declined. They decided to sell the collection so others could enjoy the cars and pickups, Stillwell said.

News of the auction enthralled the vintage car community, where rumors have swirled for years about a quirky Nebraska dealer who held on to his old vehicles. Nowadays, most classic cars have new paint jobs, interiors and engines. A true "survivor" has most, if not all, of its original material.

"This kind of stuff is absolutely the rarest of the rare," said Mark Gessler, president of the Historic Vehicle Association in Gaithersburg, Md. "You can see plenty of cars that have been restored. We want to ensure that we're celebrating the original craftsmanship, the original technique. It's a touchstone of our past."

The low-mileage cars and pickups will likely generate the greatest interest from collectors, who view them as works of art to be displayed, said Jay Quail, executive director of the Chicago-based Classic Car Club of America. Quail said he often sees old cars on eBay billed as classics, even though they're refurbished.

"I'd look at it and think, 'My God, it would have been worth way more if you just hadn't touched it,'" Quail said. "It's like having a Picasso in your garage. Collectors will pay for a car that's totally unmolested."

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At the same time, Quail said it's difficult to savor a barely-driven beauty.

"As a collector, do I just want to have the car sit?" he said. "If I bought a '63 Corvette with only one mile on it, I don't think I'd enjoy it very much. You couldn't drive it."

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