New Kid on the Block

One of America's youngest museums for the next generation of classic-car buffs

This 1934 Ford five-window coupe holds its own among stately prewar cars in the exhibit.

BY MICHAEL MILNE • PHOTOGRAPHY BY LARISSA MILNE

It's always exciting to witness the birth of a new car museum. Not only does it offer the possibility of unearthing a forgotten classic vehicle, it also demonstrates that interest in the hobby is alive and well, and ready to coach a new crop of enthusiasts. Such is the case with the Classic Motor Museum of St. Michaels, which opened in August 2017 on the bucolic eastern shore of Maryland.

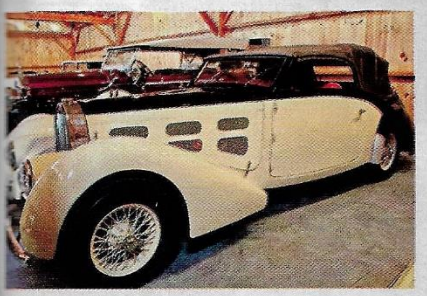
"The museum's mission is to educate the next generation about auto restoration and give back to the community," executive director Linda Haddaway King said. "Our plan is to add automotive restoration to the career technology education classes offered at the local high school. In February, with 11 students, we formed the Classic Motor Museum Student Chapter of the AACA, which was just recognized at their annual meeting." The students have been restoring a 1938 Alvis under the discerning eye of museum president Tad duPont, who is rarely seen without a chamois cloth in his hand to wipe off errant fingerprints from the cars on display. The goal is a concours-level restoration, which is appropriate for a town that will hold its 12th-annual Concours d'Elegance September 21-23 at the well-regarded Inn at Perry Cabin just a few blocks away.

The 21-car collection resides in an Amish-built barn-like structure just steps from the downtown retail core of St. Michaels. According to Tad, "So far there hasn't really been a theme because we're so new. The locals have been very generous about providing cars and some come from farther away as people discover us. Some are on loan, some are promised, and some are donated."

The variety changes regularly as local owners pick up one car they have on display and drop off another, so there are new cars to see on each visit. With a small collection, the museum tries to offer something for everyone. It's not unusual to view a 1934 Auburn Speedster sitting next to a 1969 Oldsmobile 4-4-2, while the oldest vehicle is a 1910 International Harvester Model A Auto Buggy.

"Everybody's had a first car, and whenever I ask if they'd like to have their first car back, they all say 'yes'," Tad said. So, the 4-4-2 is joined by a 1966 Pontiac GTO and a 1967 Chevy Camaro in a corner of the museum that could be subtitled "the ones that got away."

Classic horsepower from different eras: a 1969 Olds 4-4-2 and a 1934 Auburn Speedster.



This Bugatti Type 57 Stelvio Cabriolet with coachwork by Gangloff was a new arrival when we visited.

A sporty 1953 MG TF (foreground) and a 1949 MG YT represent Great Britain with matching bright red paint.

Fellow gearheads check under the hood of a visitor's Mustang outside the Classic Motor Museum.

A 1941 Buick Super convertible shines in Sequoia Cream with red interior.

A red 1964 Chevrolet Corvair Monza convertible reminds one how beautiful and unique these cars were. A 1941 Buick Super Eight convertible is just begging to be taken to the open road with the top down. Since all the cars here run, it will soon get that opportunity.

Currently, pride-of-place belongs to a 1938 Bugatti Type 57 Stelvio Cabriolet, which had just been delivered on the day of my visit. Gangloff of Colmar, France, built the body. This was the first year that Bugatti's son Jean successfully prevailed on his father to install more reliable hydraulic brakes, unlike earlier models that used cable-operated brakes. Ettore Bugatti did not trust hydraulics, stating his cars were made to go, not stop.

Also, from across the pond, there's a pair of fire-engine red MGs: a 1949 YT and 1953 TF. The color matches nicely with an actual fire engine, a 1931 American LaFrance, on which visitors are encouraged to ring the bell and climb aboard for a photo op. Plans are afoot to take people out for rides on it.

To put the cars in context, placards that highlight historical details accompany them. For example, the 1934 Ford Deluxe notes that it's the same make and year car in which bank robbers Bonnie and Clyde were killed. The 1922 Packard open-touring car appeared in the HBO series *Boardwalk Empire*.

Coinciding with the Concours d'Elegance, the museum will host its first Autofest on September 22. According to Tad, "The Autofest is for everybody. While the Concours is high-end and very specific, this will appeal to everyone, from fans of Model Ts to Corvette enthusiasts." Doug and Richard Tuthill Bassemir, who drove a 1917 Maxwell cross-country to celebrate a century since their grandfather did so, will talk about their journey and are bringing the car, which they will leave at the museum for six months. It will also be the grand opening of the museum's classroom and library that will help educate the next group of car buffs with hands-on education geared towards classic car restoration.

Michael Milne is the author of the Roadster Guide to America's Classic Car Museums & Attractions.

CLASSIC MOTOR MUSEUM OF ST. MICHAELS
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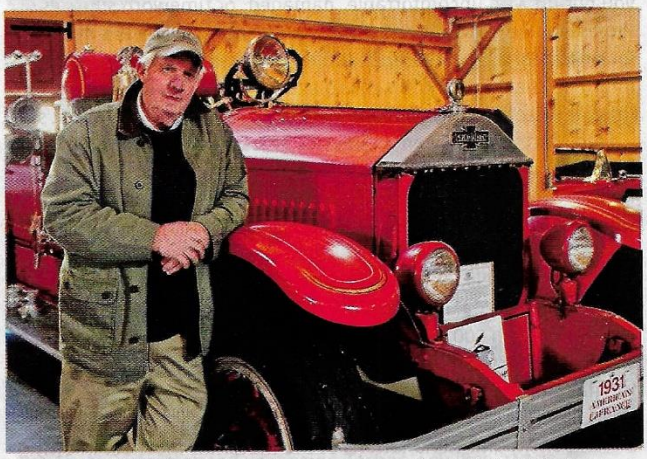

President Tad duPont with a 1931 American LaFrance fire truck that visitors are encouraged to climb aboard.