

Automotive

Let 'Em Shine

When spring finally rolls in, Saskatchewan's car shows roll out the polished and the pimped – think classic beauties and flashy tuner cars

by Paul Sinkewicz

Draggins Rod and Custom Car Club, you had me at “hello.” That's because greeting visitors at the entrance to the club's annual automotive show is a gleaming two-door 1965 Pontiac Parisienne convertible, to be raffled off to some lucky show patron. Imagine, for less than the cost of a cup of coffee, I could join the community of classic car owners proudly showing off their prized possessions to the throngs of automotive enthusiasts here today.

Fire-engine red and sharply trimmed with gleaming chrome, the Parisienne boasts a five-button AM radio, white tuck-and-roll upholstery and those distinctive Pontiac over/under headlights of the period. It screams automotive perfection. And it should. Draggins club members have put in hundreds of hours of volunteer labour to refurbish the car as a fundraiser for Camp Easter Seal. Owning a restored vehicle usually takes years of part-time effort and thousands of dollars. But the club has shrunk that down to one minute – the time needed to fill out a draw ticket – and one dollar.

I circle the beautiful machine three times, drinking in the straight lines so representative of its era – a classic style burned into my memory from childhood. Car buffs are lined up at the ticket sellers who ring the display on three sides. With winter still hanging on outside, they're all lost in the daydream of driving the ragtop down to the ice-cream stand on a warm summer's evening. Buying a ticket, I make plans to display the car at next year's show and turn to take in the rest of the exhibits.

Saskatchewan goes car crazy every spring. Whether it's one of the countless car shows, fun runs, cruise nights, show and shines or swap meets, or just rumbling down the main drag on Saturday night, locals love to get out and see vehicles with a bit of personality. The Draggins gathering in Saskatoon kicks off the car show season on Easter weekend, with attendees turning out in droves at Prairieland Park to shake off their cabin fever. There are young families jostling for stroller space around a quartet of original Mustangs on display by the Saskatoon Mustang and Classic Ford Club, and seniors appreciating the wood-trimmed exterior of a 1947 Chrysler Town and Country sedan. A young girl breezes by wearing a T-shirt that says “hot rod honey.” Three young boys “ooh” and “aah” over the neon lights emanating from a modern tuner car, and a weathered farmer stands by a pristine pickup truck and laments: “When I was 23, I had a '58 GMC long box identical to this, and I sold it for \$500 – I was stupid.” It seems each display is somebody's favourite, and cameras are not in short supply. The entire place buzzes with conversation.

For car restorers, the show is a welcome break – a chance to scrub off the grease and get out and socialize. Dealer stands offer everything from shiny mag wheels to vintage vehicle nameplates. The show is a spectacle to some, but a resource to others. At a table by the concession stand, four guys sit around talking cars over coffee. One wears a

Dodge jacket, another sports the Valvoline logo on his back. Shifters are the topic of interest, and opinions are expressed with conviction.

Displays in the massive show room represent every era of the automobile, including John Schlosser's re-creation of a turn-of-the-century horseless carriage complete with handbrake and squeeze horn. The Pike Lake resident says he only had photographs to go by but still scrounged up the appropriate parts. He then installed a modern two-stroke Honda engine and ended up with a very authentic-looking replica that runs.

Modern cars are also on display. Draggins official Bob Burrows says the club is constantly trying to keep the show fresh by inviting vehicles that will appear for the first time or that have created excitement in the past. Updating the vintage of the exhibits is a natural way to lure in modern motor heads. "Now we're into a new generation of tuner cars, something we've added to our show," Burrows says. "That's mainly because a lot of the younger generation are into these cars now." (For those new to the car show scene, a tuner car is a modern stock automobile with aftermarket modifications to enhance speed, power or style.)

That said, the most popular era among exhibitors is the late '50s to early '60s. Perhaps because during the post-war period, automobiles become widely available, making the transition from utilitarian tools to expressions of freedom and personality. Or perhaps because they were so closely linked to popular music. But no matter the reason, those vehicles and that time made an indelible stamp on the North American psyche. And keeping those golden memories alive is the Landrie family, who've gone all out today, donning period outfits to complement their two-vehicle display. Bob Landrie's shop in Saskatoon, Fabian's Autobody, did the exterior work on the family's 1956 Chevrolet 210 sedan and 1956 Chev Nomad station wagon. The seafoam green cars, along with a gas pump from the era and mechanic's box both painted to match, bring to mind a scene at a 1950s service station. Daughters Jennifer and Lisa are decked out in poodle skirts and neck scarves; Bob and wife Jean are a hit in biker-guy and -gal attire. The effect is a blast from the past that draws plenty of interest and animated conversations.

Another popular display takes me back to small-town Saskatchewan of yesterday, when every gas station had its own pickup truck parked beside the garage for running parts around and making service calls. Jim Steadman, 61, has been lovingly refurbishing vehicles since he was 14, starting with a Model A Roadster pickup. He even restored vehicles as a business for a while. Today, he's brought his latest work to the show – a 1958 Ford F100 painted like a service-station truck. Steadman says when he first finished the truck in original Ford shades of green and yellow, his granddaughter remarked that the colours matched the logo of the service station on the popular Corner Gas TV show. A light bulb went off in Steadman's head, and he soon had permission from the show's brass to use the logo.

Wearing a Corner Gas shirt and cap and drinking coffee from a Ruby café mug, Steadman looks like he'd be right at home on the set. Unlike the show's theme song though, Not a Lot Goin' On, there's lots going on here as a steady stream of smiling visitors ogles the display. In fact, the genial mechanic estimates that during the car show's two-day run he'll talk to about 1,000 people, including those with strong memories of the truck model. Many were sold in the province, but they were put to such hard work – and were notorious rusters on top of it – that few survived. "I like all the old guys who come by," says Steadman. "Because they had one like it, or their neighbour

had one like it . . . it brings back lots of memories for them. Especially in our farming province, you know, because for so many young guys, their first vehicle was a truck and they went courting in those trucks.”

Part of Steadman’s philosophy when it comes to restoring a vehicle is to drive it as much as he can so as many passersby as possible have the pleasure of seeing it. Rather than haul his prized Corner Gas truck in a trailer from his home near Porcupine Plain three hours away, for example, Steadman drove it into Saskatoon for the show. “You get thumbs up all over the place,” he says. “The other day I had a lady pass me on the highway, and she had her window rolled down and was taking pictures of me on her cellphone . . . I do [the shows] so [my vehicles] can be seen and enjoyed. I really don’t like seeing things restored and then hidden away.”

I admire that attitude. Unfortunately I won’t be able to emulate Steadman just yet. Something has gone terribly wrong – the raffle car has gone to somebody else.

Car Show Crawl

Pick any weekend after the ice melts in the spring and before the first shock of snow in the fall, and you’ll likely find some sort of car show going on in Saskatchewan. From Estevan in the south to La Ronge in the north, from Lloydminster in the west to Wapella in the east, Saskatchewanians love their shiny vehicles. Though the website www.autoevents.ca listed more than 90 Saskatchewan car shows, fun runs, swaps and cruise nights in 2007, we have room here to list only four of the major events in 2008.

- The Saskatoon Draggins Rod and Custom Car Club show is an early favourite, held every Easter weekend. The club’s 48th show runs March 21-22 at Saskatoon’s Prairieland Park.
- Attracting between 175 to 200 vehicles, the 42nd Regina Majestics Car Club Show runs April 26-27 at Regina’s Ipsco Place.
- Saskatchewan hosts Super Run 2008 on August 1-3 at Prairieland Park. Jointly hosted by provincial car clubs and alternating between Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba each year, this massive non-profit event attracts more than 800 vehicles — from antiques to hot rods to custom machines.
- The CKOM/Rock 102 Cruise Weekend attracts more than 900 classic, stock and modified vehicles, covering 10 city blocks in downtown Saskatoon at the end of August each year. The 26th annual event runs August 22-24. I—P.S.
www.autoevents.ca