

# California Automobile Museum

BY GARY AND PAMELA BAKER

**L**ocated in Sacramento, the California Automobile Museum's collection of antique, custom, hot rod and classic cars represents some of the finest vehicles to have ever cruised America's roads. Here, visitors can explore 120 years of automotive evolution and California car culture and intriguing facets of its history, art and technology.

Founded in 1986 by a group of vintage car enthusiasts and five investors, the museum's original focus was on the American Ford. Operating as a 501(c) 3 non-profit corporation governed by the California Vehicle Foundation, the museum's first 95 cars came from the breakup of the Towe Ford collection in Montana, one of the largest of its kind at that time. Today the museum displays 160 vehicles with a variety of manufacturers represented.

Housed in a cavernous 50,000-sq.-ft. warehouse, the collection is arranged along a creative timeline of galleries. Numerous well-maintained and highly polished vehicles from each of the automobile's historic eras are on display. The museum's well-designed serpentine layout allows visitor to see how far cars have evolved through the years.

Visitors can take a self- or docent-guided tour through the galleries. The knowledgeable guides bring each car to life with insight and descriptions of the history and detail of car types, styles, mechanical features and the manufacturer's influence on car development and culture. Tour guides generally start museum-goers at the dawn of the automobile in the brass era, then take them

through the flapper era, the Great Depression, the jet and atomic age and a horsepower-and-fin fascination gallery. From there, visitors explore 1960s counter-culture before eventually coming to contemporary methods of alternative propulsion.

The museum's early brass-era models include cars that relied on gasoline, steam or batteries for propulsion. By the end of the tour, visitors see modern-day alternative-fuel cars. Today, 120 years later, it appears the industry is heading back to where it started.

For example, the museum's 1911 Detroit Electric Brougham was designed for city driving by wealthy society ladies. The electric car didn't require a crank to start, and there were no burned gasoline fumes. The Detroit Electric's roomy passenger interior with high ceilings would accommodate ladies' fashion apparel such as broad hats and full flowing dresses. A bud vase further

**Women were fond of early electric cars such as this 1911 Detroit Electric Brougham, because they didn't require a crank to start them.**

accentuated its feminine appeal while brass exterior accessories added to its visual and social status.

Detroit Electrics were popular with celebrity owners of both genders. Owners included Henry and Clara Ford, Thomas Edison, Mamie Eisenhower and John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Ironically, electric cars are returning to roads today.

As one follows the museum's historic timelines, it becomes quickly apparent that the love affair with the gas engine beat early use of alternative propulsion prototypes. By the time of the Great De-



pression, inline sixes and eights, V-8s and V-12s engines began to dominate. With the increased power from these engines emerged more aerodynamic body styles. The museum's 1933 Lincoln sedan originally owned by the founder of the Bank of America, A.P. Giannini, is a great example. Originally priced at \$4,500, this 1933 Lincoln boasts an L-head V-12 of 448 cubic inches with 150 hp. Sturdily built, the large Lincoln weighs approximately 7,000 pounds yet cruises beautifully at 70 mph.

After World War II, the emergence of the atomic age and jet propulsion encouraged auto makers to further explore faster cars that were lower to the ground, sometimes with race car proportions. Perhaps the best known example is the Chevy Corvette.

Designed under the great Harley Earl, the 1953 Corvette was General Motors' first attempt to build a sports car to compete with the racy British imports. Featuring a fiberglass body, GM's two-seater was powered by a 235-cid "Blue Flame Six" engine that produced 150 hp. With a two-speed automatic transmission and hydraulic drum brakes, it weighed only 2,850 lbs. and sold for \$3,523.

Horsepower and style drove car culture during the late 1950s, and this era is beautifully reflected in the California Automobile Museum. While touring among the long-finned power cars in this section, visitors hear the music of Elmer Bernstein's driving score from the 1956 movie "The Man with the



**A member of the California Automobile Museum's Pit Crew services a 1949 Buick in the museum.**

Golden Arm." In the film, Frank Sinatra portrayed a drug-addicted card player in a time when American auto consumers at large were developing an addiction of their own for speed and for wild styling. The museum's 325-hp 1959 Cadillac Coupe deVille is the epitome of the era's mass consumer craving for decadent, oversized tailfins and shark-like velocity in raw power.

The car culture of the 1960s continued the thirst for speed, but began to seek smaller cars that provided better fuel economy, or were lighter weight for faster speeds. The latter was exemplified by the 1966 Shelby Cobra roadster produced by the little-known Auto Car-

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rier Co. car company of England. The iconic Cobra brought a race car to the street. Under the hood, this sleek two-seater could be powered by a huge 427-cid Ford V-8 engine capable of 425 hp at 6,000 rpm. Just under 400 Cobra 427s were built and those examples built for the street listed at \$7,495 before options.

The California Automobile Museum is staffed by more than 150 knowledgeable and enthusiastic docents, with six on duty every day. Three special docent crews include the Pit Crew (mechanics) dedicated to keeping the cars in running order, the Detail Crew who polishes the cars to a dazzling finish and the Road Crew that takes the cars out cruising on the third Sunday of each month with visitors along for the rides.

To experience the impact of car culture on California, visit the California Automobile Museum any day of the week except Tuesdays and major holidays. **OC**



**(RIGHT)** This 1934 Lincoln was originally owned by A.P. Giannini of Bank of America fame.



**(LEFT)** The era of finned giants is represented by this 1959 Cadillac Series 62 coupe.