

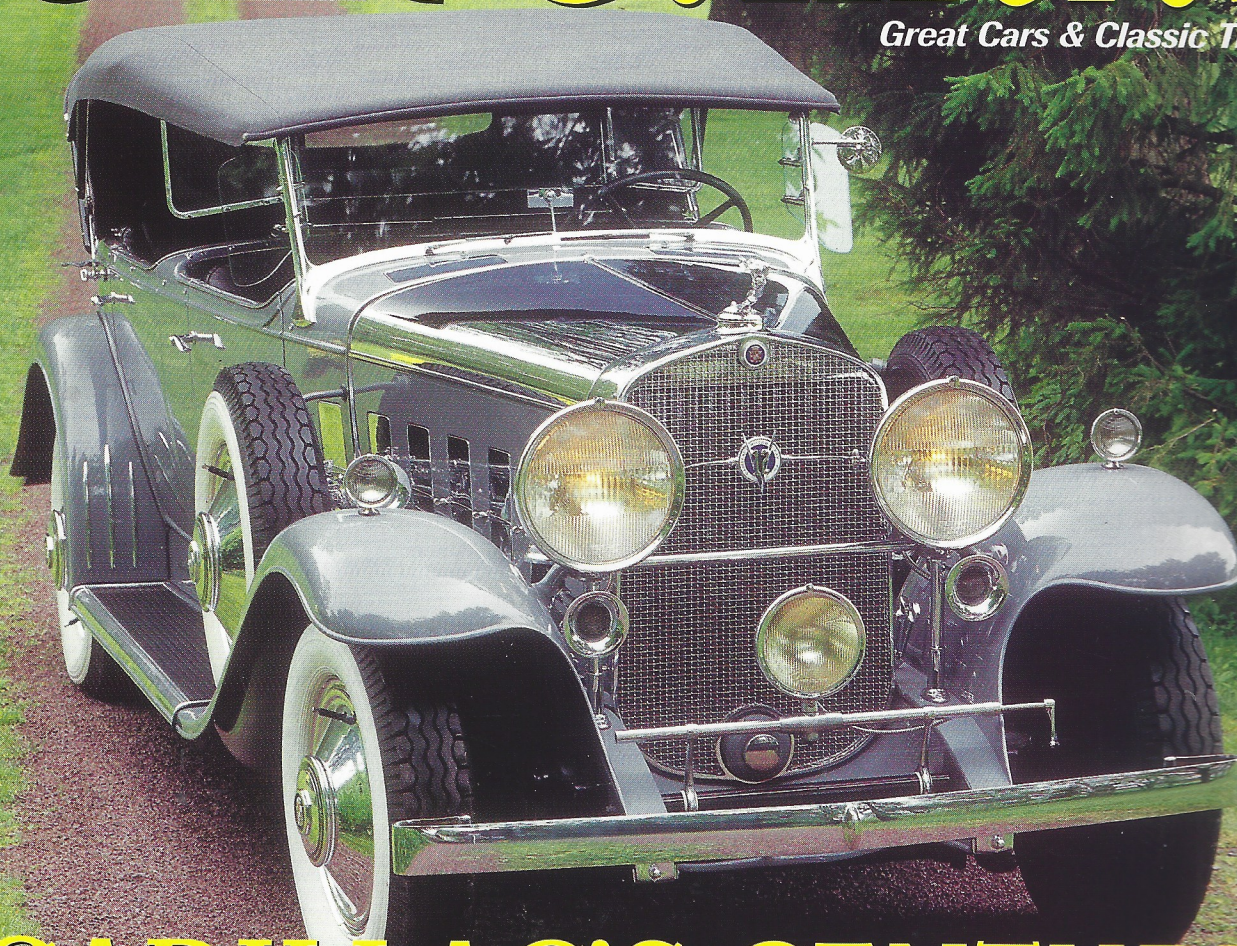
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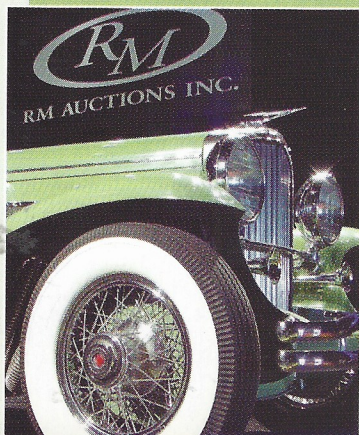
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CARS ON CAMPUS

At Michigan State University

The Trials And Tribulations of Building A Concours d'Elegance

*By Gary Witzenburg
Photos by Steve Purdy*



Set on Michigan State University's beautiful Walter Adams Field, Cars On Campus 2001's featured marque attracted 24 outstanding Cadillacs and LaSalles.

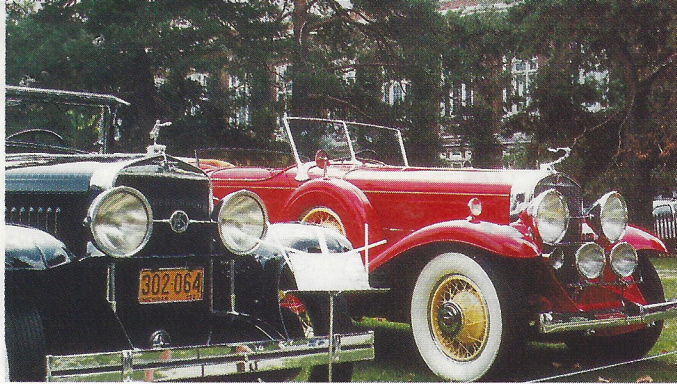
It was July 29, 1998, just over two weeks to show time, when East Lansing's Michigan Festival very publicly and painfully announced it was bankrupt and would end its 11-year run on the beautiful campus of Michigan State University. Our fledgling Cars on Campus Collector Auto Show, planned as an exciting new element of this popular annual event, was left without a sponsoring organization...or a nickel of support.

Our tiny committee, attempting to plan and organize our first historic car event, quickly met and decided to do our best to go ahead with our show despite the festival's misfortunes.

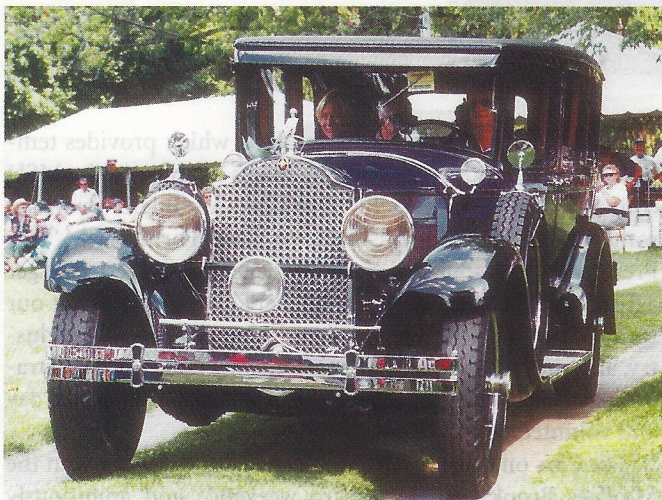
While the festival committee was canceling concerts and fending off angry creditors, we reluctantly canceled our distinctive trophies and just about everything else we had on order.

With the festival gone, the university suddenly asked, "Who are you, and who is your sanctioning organization? Do you have a letter of permission from the Board of Trustees? Event insurance?" We would no sooner scramble over one of these barriers than encounter another, then another.

Just that February, I had become an enthusiastic new member of the Michigan Festival Board with some new ideas, including adding a classic car show to its expanding list of activities. In



The Cadillac Division contributed four entries, including this 1927 LaSalle and 1931 Cadillac V16.



Lynn and Gary Dwight displayed their just-restored 1929 Packard 626, which took Best Of Show, Closed.

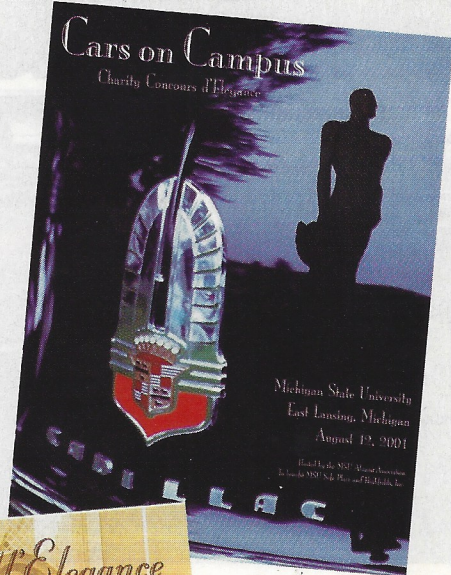
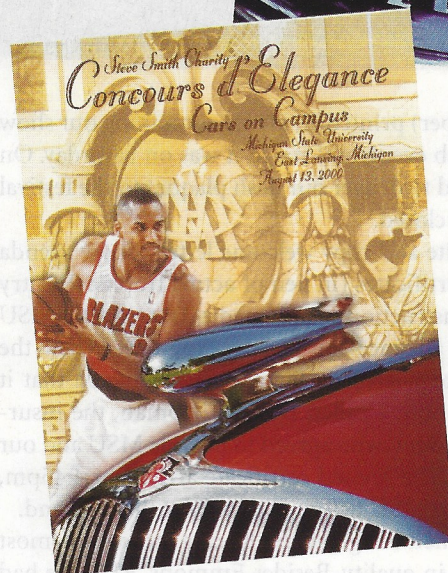
early May, after considerable thought, the Board said, "Do it." With the festival organization's support and budget behind me, I thought, "How hard could it be?" Little did I know.

I began assembling a handful of helpers, including Mark Scheer, a graphic design business owner, who agreed to do our logo and help select distinctive trophies; Chaz Osburn, car enthusiast and then City Editor of the major Lansing paper; Gary Dwight, oral surgeon, Packard collector, and Classic Car Club of America (CCCA) member; Linda Sutton, assistant to the Michigan Festival manager; and Darwin Umbarger, chairman of a large show put on by his Capital City Old Car Club.

With little time to establish a new event, the first priority was getting out the word. We bought event listings in July and August *Hemmings*, got listed on the suburban *Detroit Oakland Press*' comprehensive car event calendar, designed and copied flyers, and drafted and distributed press releases. Hoping to make it a club-oriented event (and earn some much needed help), we began calling Michigan chapters of all the car clubs we could find, and we continued working on sponsorship to cover expenses and attending local shows for ideas and entries.

Every encounter was a learning experience. With so many established shows, large and small, in the area, any new event is an unknown quantity. It didn't help that our date conflicted with both the Woodward Dream Cruise on one end of the scale and Pebble Beach on the other.

Gary Dwight called some fellow CCCA members and Harry Emmons, enthusiastic about an old car event at MSU,



agreed to bring his stunning '31 REO Royale (which was on display in Lansing's R.E. Olds Museum) and encourage other local car owners to attend. On the other hand, when I asked to leave some flyers at a CCCA event, I was told "members only." OK, I thought, cooling off on my way home, next time I'll be a member. And I am.

With all this work and progress being made, we simply refused to fold when the festival did. We did not want people to show up to find nothing but a sign that read, "Sorry, Event Canceled." But now we really needed sponsorship. USA Cafe, a local restaurant looking for car enthusiast business, agreed to host a Friday cruise-in and pick up our costs for insurance and dash plaques. A local MacDonalds gave us \$200. That was it. We would have to pay other expenses out of pocket and purchase and mail trophies later with entry fee money.

Meanwhile, the Michigan Festival Board was telling the media all events were suspended. People calling the Festival office (the number in our listings and flyers) got a recorded message that everything was off. USA Cafe was telling callers their Friday event was on but our Sunday show was not. We were calling entrants to ensure them our show was on.

On Friday, August 7, 1998, one week to showtime, MSU needed an Event Request. I wrote one up and faxed it that afternoon. On Monday, I called and faxed a release to every newspaper in town, priced some banners (too expensive), and ordered two signs (\$70 each). On Wednesday, MSU's Board of Trustees had some questions. I called and answered them, winning verbal approval to hold our event. The *State News*



Gary Baranski's beautiful 1957 Cadillac Eldorado Biarritz convertible won the featured marque American class in 2001.

© Margaret Hehr

(MSU's student paper) printed an article combining our show with a Model T club event, and stated it was on Saturday. On Thursday, UPS tried to deliver our dash plaques to the festival office and found it closed.

I still had to write and copy welcome letters, show agenda and rules, award certificates (in lieu of actual trophies), entry lists, tour route instructions, and media fact sheets. MSU needed money in advance for facility expenses. When the insurance certificate arrived by fax at 4pm, I noticed that it covered USA Cafe only. I called David Chapman, the insurance company president, who agreed to include MSU and our committee as well. The revised certificate arrived at 4:45pm, just in time to fax to MSU before it closed for the weekend.

The weather turned out great and 80 cars showed up, most of them very good in quality. Besides Emmons' REO, we had a 1929 Auburn and a gorgeous '29 Graham Paige roadster. Gary Dwight brought his immaculate 1912 Packard Six phaeton and his father brought a '39 Rolls Royce limousine. Darwin's Capital City Old Car Club arrived early and proud with 14 entries and some volunteer help. And when it was done, everyone encouraged us to make it an annual event.

If we did, we decided, we wanted to elevate it to an invitational charity Concours d'Elegance. Keith Williams, Executive Director of the MSU Alumni Association, agreed to get involved as on-campus host. Over the next few months, we added more good people to our team, including attorney Norm Witte, CPA Ray Lemmen (both old car buffs), neighbor and collector Don Baron, and charity event coordinator and ace photographer Steve Purdy, and established Cars on Campus as a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt corporation.

We teamed with Highfields, an outstanding mid-Michigan

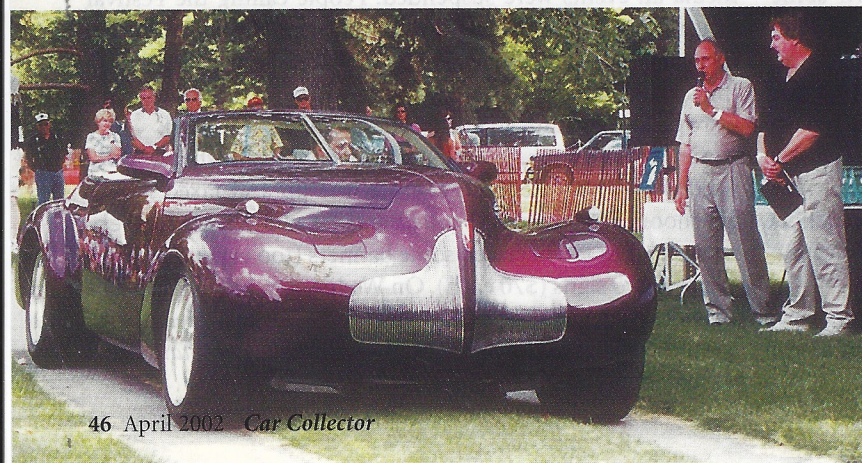
children's charity, and MSU Safe Place, which provides temporary shelter and counseling to victims of abuse in the MSU community. Oldsmobile PR Director Gus Buenz provided some much-needed sponsorship dollars. Former GM Vice President and Cadillac General Manager John Grettenberger agreed to be a judge, and his very credible presence on our team helped attract more excellent judges from media, industry, and the collector car hobby. Concours and auction extraordinaire Ed Lucas (an MSU alum) actually called one day and volunteered to help.

For Cars on Campus '99, we slipped our dates between the Meadow Brook and Woodward weekends and ambitiously attempted three events: a Saturday (mini-Woodward) cruise through town; a Sunday Concours; and a concurrent open show. The cruise was drowned out by rain, but Sunday's early mist and drizzle cleared, and our new concours site, Adams Field in the prettiest part of MSU's campus, was perfectly beautiful. With Packard and BMW as featured marques, we attracted 150 cars—roughly half for the concours and half for the open show.

Gary Dwight brought three Packards, including a brass era 1912, an equally magnificent 1913, and a 1955. Olds aficionado Sue Neller and daughter Jenny brought their 1904 curved dash and a 1911 Autocrat roadster. Local collector "Doc" Wallace contributed a wonderful 1914 Ford Model T speedster, a '54 Kaiser Darrin, and a '63 Jag. GM sent two spectacular show cars from the '50s: the jet-powered Firebird II and the monster-finned LeSabre. And there was plenty more of interest in all 12 classes: antiques, classics, sports, luxury, pony and muscle cars, and carefully coddled family heirlooms from turn-of-the-century through the sexy '60s.

On the negative side, our simultaneous open show proved beyond a doubt that trying to run two events at once with too few people was not a smart idea. Highfields and Safe Place provided volunteers, but we were severely short-handed. Partly due to lack of time and resources for PR, our paid attendance was a paltry few hundred. When the money was counted and all bills paid, we ended up with \$4,000 for our charities...not a

Judge Steve Pasteiner and Ed Lucas discuss Buick's popular Blackhawk retro design concept car.



lot to show for all the effort. Still, we got lots of good feedback from both entrants and spectators.

A tall, generous and talented man in sneakers became our savior for COC 2000: MSU alum and NBA basketball star Steve Smith agreed to be title sponsor in exchange for a cut of our charity earnings for his scholarship fund, which sends an outstanding scholar/leader from his high school (Detroit's Pershing High) to MSU each year. Oldsmobile doubled its support, auto supplier Freudenberg NOK sponsored beautiful commemorative license plates, we increased major awards to 10 and classes to 16 and, as before, raised additional dollars by selling trophy sponsorships.

Highfields executive Greg Pincumbe took over the daunting task of coordinating volunteers and organization of the show itself. Don Baron's wife, Anita, a part-time professional event planner, put together an outstanding charity reception, dinner and auction for Saturday evening.

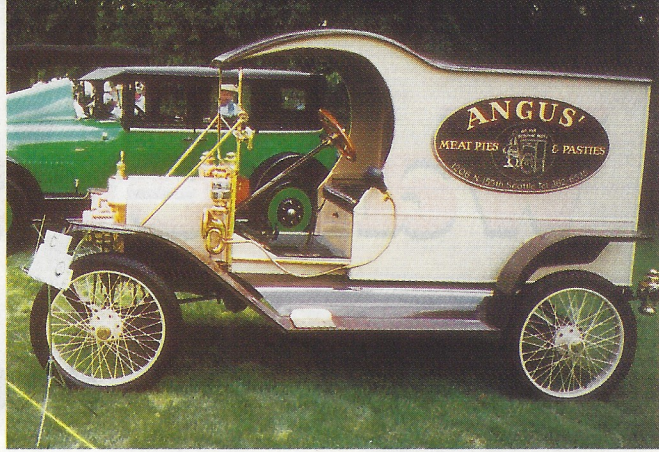
Partly due to Oldsmobile's continued support, and partly because Lansing had been "Olds Town" since the dawn of automotive time, we chose Oldsmobile as American Featured Marque and (mostly because we love them) Jaguar as European. I recruited some good cars through club contacts and was spending weekends attending shows to find more first-hand.

My selection philosophy was simple and (for most Concours) heretical. I saw my job as assembling a diverse variety of hardware to attract and entertain paying spectators. I wanted original-appearance pieces that looked good and fit our carefully chosen classes. Not all had to be top-of-the-line, most expensive or highest performance. Not all had to be 100 percent original (under the skin) or flawlessly perfect, since most spectators would not know or care. I looked especially for the rare and unusual, vehicles that people seldom see, with emphasis on cars of most of our collective youths: classic era through early '60s. I purposely did not try to limit our display to the elite and spectacular, since lots of more prestigious shows do a fine job of that.

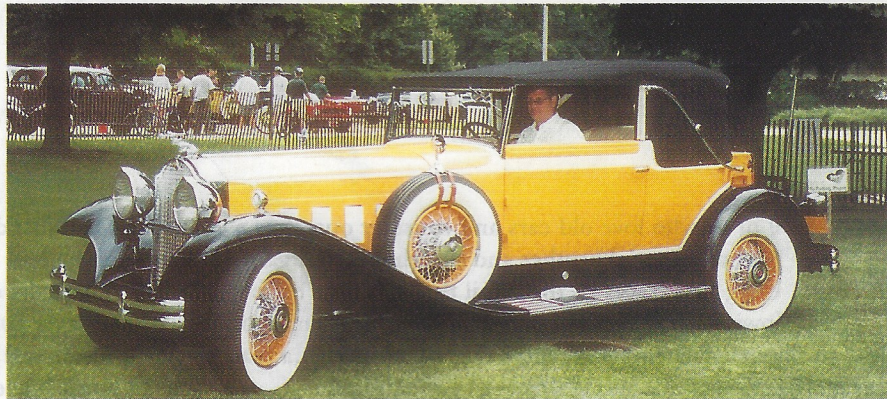
And we showed some really fun stuff: a 1913 Overland touring, a 1913 Ford Model T speedster, a 1922 Ford flat rack truck, a 1926 Willys Knight cabriolet, a 1933 Morgan Super Sport three-wheeler, a 1935 Hudson Deluxe Eight, a 1950 VW Beetle, a 1950 Dodge Wayfarer sportabout, a 1951 Jaguar XK-120 LeMans racer, and many more unique automobiles.

Our field of 170 cars exceeded our goal of 150. Among the many positive comments, most praised the content, the wonderful variety, and depth of vehicles on display, proving our selection philosophy was well received. Our spectator count nearly tripled from '99 and, most importantly, we generated \$40,000 for our charities, ten-to-one over the year before.

Building on our growing momentum, Cars on Campus 2001 turned out even better as an aesthetic and critical success: 210 outstanding entries in 18 classes; 24 wonderful featured marque Cadillacs, including two V16s; feedback such as, "Best show I've ever seen," "A car show for the family, with



William Adcock's 1912 Ford Model T delivery took the Board of Director's Trophy for most historically significant.



Peter Ministrelli's 1930 Packard Dietrich bodied 745 convertible coupe.

© Margaret Hehr

a degree of class and a beautiful setting," "Every car out there could have received an award." GM Vice President and true car guy Darwin Clark, who served as a judge and entered his flawless '63 Corvette split-window coupe, called it a "real peoples' Concours [with] a great mix of automobiles. It brought back a lot of memories."

As this is written, we have gained major TV and radio partners for Cars On Campus 2002, and Ameritech will put our Steve Purdy-designed poster on their Lansing area phone directory cover. These are huge publicity plusses.

We have come a very long way in just four years and, given the overwhelmingly positive comments following the 2001 show, seem to be on the right track. Those who attend our show seem to love it. Our word-of-mouth is great, and the media and community have begun to discover us. Survey results show that some 94 percent say "Yes," they would enter again; the other 6 percent say "Maybe," depending on their schedules.

Still, we have a long way to go in attracting major sponsors and large numbers of spectators, and much room to grow as a charity fund raiser. We know these things take time, and incredible hard work. For more information on this year's Cars On Campus scheduled for August 11, call (517) 371-8693; www.msu-alum.com/cars

Gary L. Witzenbrug is an engineer with General Motors, an automotive journalist, and the author of several books, including Firebird—The Complete History and Camaro!—From Challenger To Champion.