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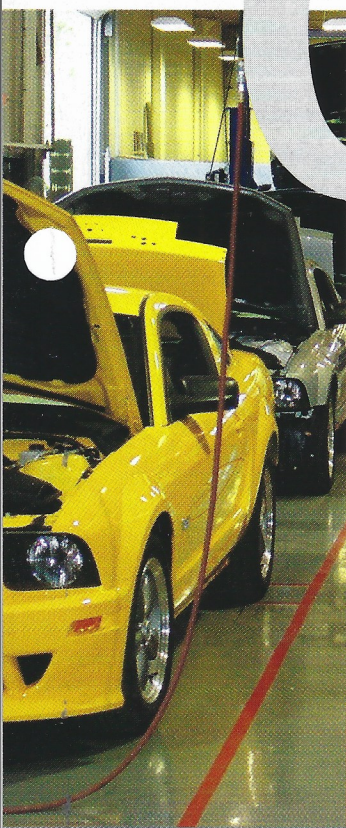
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AMERICAN COACHBUILDING SALEEN SPECIAL VEHICLES

*GARY WITZENBURG gives us a tour of Steve Saleen's
new coachbuilding facility in Detroit*



Quick, check your model car collection. If it contains an AMT-brand Ford GT40, chances are your scale replica of that legendary racer was born in the same building where Ford's modern roadgoing GT is assembled today. "This used to be the AMT model cars building," says Ed ("Eddie O") Orzechowski, Saleen Special Vehicles (SSV) Show Vehicles Director. "It's kind of ironic that they built a GT40 model here. After that it became the Stanley Door building. Then it sat dormant from 1996 until we showed up."

There's no sign identifying this tidy, nondescript Troy, Michigan industrial building, but if you squint just a bit, you may be able to see a very special car through its tinted front window: a red Ford GT with the signature broad white stripes, the second of three early examples built for Ford's 2003 Centennial celebration. Also in the showroom are a Saleen-tuned N20 Ford Focus, a new S281 Saleen Mustang and a mind-boggling show property – a second red GT sawed in half lengthwise to reveal the incredible detail and complexity of its inner workings.

Saleen acquired the 181,000 square foot facility and a 41,000 square foot annex after winning the contract to build Ford's 550 hp, \$140,000 tribute to the 1966 Le Mans-winning Ford GT racer. "There was literally nothing here," Eddie recalls. "The whole plant was full of dead birds and dirt. We were stationed in a Roush facility in Dearborn at the time and started moving here, going back and forth, in late 2002."

How did specialty-car designer, developer and builder Saleen, Inc. get the Ford GT build assignment? Turns out the company was involved almost from the beginning as a partner to Ford's SVT Engineering, even providing the car's chief engineer, Neil Hannemann. "I look at Saleen as a leader, if not the leader, in what I'll call very targeted, or 'niche,' vehicles," founder and president Steve Saleen explains. "We have the resources to take a vehicle from a clean sheet of paper to the final product. The Troy facility shows one aspect of that, which is traditional 'coachbuild-

ing'—like a Bertone or Pininfarina—where we can build a very high quality vehicle with show-car-quality paint very efficiently at a rate of quite a few a day."

"We began by making just the west wall a workable area," Eddie O. continues. "The first job we did here was the three hand-built GTs for the Centennial. We had 60 days to build those three vehicles. The white car is Bill Ford's. The red one up front in the lobby is the #2 car, which was driven by Dan Gurney and Jackie Stewart at Laguna Seca for demonstration rides. After that, everything started to come alive, the assembly line came together, and we installed a \$7.8 million paint system over in the annex."

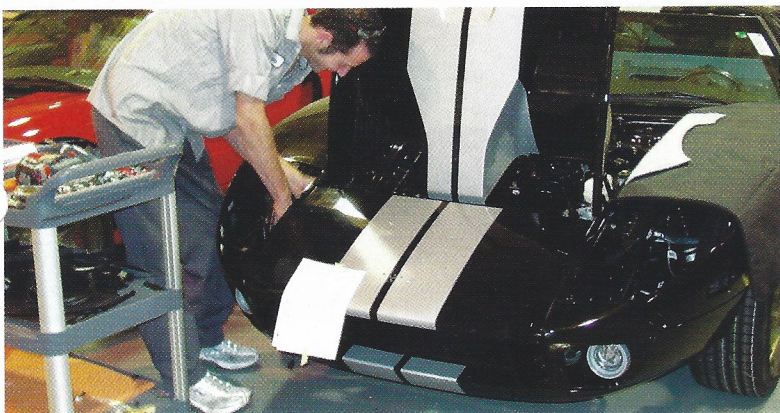
Beside the Ford GTs, which are assembled at the fairly impressive rate of 52 each week (1,138 as of May 20 this year), a separate second line since January has been transforming stock 2005 Mustangs into 325 hp S281 coupes and convertibles, and another out-of-sight area builds Ford show and concept cars. "We built the GT-R year before last," Eddie relates, "and the Shelby GT500 Mustang this year. We also did the Meta One concept, based on Mercury's version of the Freestyle, and the Sport Trac concept for the Detroit show, which was revamped as the SVT Adrenelin for the New York show. We do design and clay modeling here as well. This new 2005 S281 was designed here in conjunction with our California studio."

Eddie points to a cluster of black-painted Ford GT frames in one corner of the building. "Milford Fabricating produces the chassis in Detroit," he explains. "And this is the way they're delivered to us. The entire frame is aluminum, with a carbon fiber inner structure and a few small sheetmetal parts. Then it's shipped to Norwalk, Ohio, where Mayflower Vehicle Systems puts the body panels on it – the fenders, doors and 'clamshell.' Those aluminum body panels are made by Superform in California using a process where the aluminum is heated until it turns very pliable, almost melting, then is sucked down onto a form.

"From here, they go through a thorough inspection,



The Ford GT does a lot of traveling before it gets an engine or gearbox. Even when it is assembled and arrives at Saleen Special Vehicles, it is disassembled for paint and prep before going back onto a truck for more traveling. We were surprised at the care and quality-control-detailing accomplished before the body/chassis goes off to have the drive line installed – very carefully.



where an assembly book is tied to each vehicle, then they go through our paint system, then they're walked through the line." The remainder of the outer body—hood, front and rear fascias and lower side "doglegs"—are composite. The fenders and hood get painted on the body, while the other composite parts go through the process on a rack directly behind the vehicle.

At that point, Orzechowski entrusts us to another expert guide, executive assistant Kim Sauve, who, as one of the first employees on the original GT line, seems to know everyone and everything in the building. "After the paint process," she relates, "it goes to the striping area if it is to receive the optional painted stripes. Then to the foaming booth for the foam that provides sound insulation, then to the assembly line. When general assembly is complete, it goes to a 'house of lights' where they do 'gap and flush' measurements and a final paint inspection. Then it ships to

Wixom, Michigan Assembly for installation of the powertrain and interior."

We shoot some photos and watch as a diverse team of craftsmen and women go about their important business of inspecting, assembling and priming America's only mass-produced mid-engine supercar. (Yes, Saleen's own 550 hp, 200 mph California-built S7 is more "super," but it's hand-built at about three each month and sells for quadruple the price.)

While the Ford GTs are assembled literally from their frames up, the S281s—named for the 281 cu. in. (4.6-liter) displacement of their SOHC V-8s—go through a significantly simpler process. In addition to a 25 hp engine upgrade, their transformation from stock Mustang GTs includes new front and rear fascias, rocker cladding, a three-piece wrap-around rear spoiler on the outside and a special instrument cluster, headrests, steering wheel logo, shift handle as well as other Saleen design touches on the inside. Chassis modifications begin with special wheels and tires and extend through racing front struts, stouter springs and stabilizer bars, and dual center exhausts that "dump" to lower-restriction mufflers at wide-open throttle.

"To date, we've built 330 S281s," Sauve says, adding that the hotter 400 hp Supercharged and white-hot 500 hp Extreme variations are built in Saleen's Irvine, California headquarters.

The two parallel, highly organized and efficient assembly lines are indeed impressive, as is the whole facility. But the most impressive sight in the place greeted us just inside the door upon arrival and again on our way out: -- a couple dozen beautifully finished GT body/chassis, neatly aligned and ready for shipment to Wixom, and from there to future fortunate owners.

While hand work is an important factor in the quality of the Ford GT, one wonders at the amount of hand work required to cut an entire car in half.

