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The Golden GM - Salvaged '50s Concept Car Stars in Auto Museum

By Kristen Hannum -

John S. Hendricks, founder of The Discovery Channel, was sitting at a campfire under a starry Kenyan sky with a BBC film crew when he asked the well-traveled group where they had seen the most dramatically beautiful landscape of their lives.

"I had expected them to list exotic locations in Nepal or New Zealand, but to a person they said "the American Southwest," Hendricks wrote in his 2013 memoir, *A Curious Discovery: An Entrepreneur's Story*. "I was only a little surprised: there really is no place on earth possessing such grand contrasts."

It was the tipping point for Hendricks, who already had reasons for loving the West. When he returned from Africa to his Maryland home, he and his wife immediately began searching for a place of their own in the West's spectacular country, a retreat where they could unwind. They bought a ranch in a remote lay of southwest Colorado, but instead of building a secluded retreat, Hendricks built a resort and museum, the Gateway Colorado Automobile Museum. In the same way the Discovery Channel gave him a way to share his passion for science and engineering, the resort and museum give Hendricks a way to share his passions for the Southwest and rare cars. In fact, the museum is home to one of the most famously expensive and unique cars in the world, the 1954 Oldsmobile F-88 concept car, a prototype created for showcasing an automaker's styling, a car shown at motor shows but often never put into production.



Despite the fact that most Coloradans have never heard of the place, the resort and museum attract visitors from around the globe. Celebrities who love rare cars also favor Gateway.

Jay Leno?

"Can't say," says Scott Shaw, who works at the museum. "We respect our patrons' confidentiality."

Escaping the crusher

If Hendricks's journey to success is an inspiring story of a man transforming his boyhood love of science and engines into a multimillion-dollar cable empire, then the F-88's story is pure mystery.

Who saved it? The F-88 was supposed to have been sent to the crusher, the fate of dozens of other GM concept cars.

Is the gleaming, golden car, rotating silently on its pedestal at the Gateway museum the original car shown off in 1954? Or is it the other F-88, the cherry-red car that its designer, Harley Earl, ordered up for his own use? Or was it only constructed later, out of extra parts that Earl and his team had saved?

"It's the original, one of the great prototype cars developed in the fifties," says Don Williams, a legendary classic car owner and seller. "It's one of the many cars in my life that I wish I hadn't sold," he sighs.



According to the original GM press release, "Oldsmobile's experimental sports car, the rakish F-88 is a two-seater sports convertible with 'competition-type' instruments and a low-slung body that gives an impression of speed even when standing still."

Like the 300 original Corvettes that debuted in 1953, the F-88 had a fiberglass body. Earl, the son of a coach builder



who became GM's vice president of design, led the teams that created both the Corvette and the F-88, a car that combined the sexy, good looks of the Corvette with extra bells and whistles, including a powerful engine. (The first Corvette was equipped with only an inline 6-cylinder engine.)



The F-88 starred in the 1954 GM Motorama, that year's version of the GM traveling shows that hit America's major cities with both the concept cars and new models for sale.

Only two F-88s were ever built; the gold one that went on tour, and Earl's personal cherry red model. No one knows what happened to that red F-88, although it is rumored that it was destroyed, either in an accident or from catching on fire. People supposedly involved have discredited both of these stories, so the fate of the red F-88 remains a mystery.

The gold F-88 also disappeared. To the extent that anyone gave its fate any thought, it is assumed that the gold show

car suffered the same ugly demise as dozens of other concept cars. GM's policy was that the cars be scrapped within a year of their creation. "They were told to cut up the F-88," Williams says. "It's what happened to most of the concept cars; they put them in the trash."

That wasn't a policy Earl agreed with, so it's possible he was the person who sent a passel of wooden crates containing a disassembled F-88 to the Beverly Hills home of E.L. Cord, a former racecar driver, car salesman, auto company owner and designer.

But why was the car shipped to Cord in pieces? Was it because Earl was following the letter of GM law by rendering the F-88 (temporarily) unusable by pulling it apart into scrap?

Loving cars

As those crates sat moldering, stacked in the Cord family's six-car garage, Hendricks's father was taking pride in how his son could reel off the make, model and year of just about any car they saw on the West Virginia roads.

Hendricks's father had only reluctantly returned East after World War II; what the older Hendricks really wanted to do was to move to Colorado's Western Slope. "He often told me that there was a particular place out West he thought the most beautiful and grand: the canyon country southwest of Grand Junction, Colorado," wrote Hendricks in his memoir.

Hendricks's father and uncle worked on western ranches as young men. The two brothers traveled all over the West and amassed a good collection of both maps and memories.

After his dad returned home from his work, young Hendricks often headed out to sit behind the wheel of the family car, armed with his dad's stories about the West and those brightly colored maps of Colorado and other western states. He would plan his routes and imagine long western drives, all in the driveway of his family's modest West Virginia home.



After the Hendricks family moved to Huntsville, Alabama, Hendricks had an even more important car experience. His sister's boyfriend pulled up in a 1958 Corvette. "I simply could not stop touching every curve and every piece of chrome," Hendricks wrote for the introduction of *The Performing Art of the American Automobile*, a coffee table book about the Gateway collection. "My life changed that day," Hendricks remembered.

Hendricks's love affair with cars shifted into a higher gear when he achieved the dream car of just about every teenage boy of the late 1960s: a Camaro. "A key number is still etched in my mind: \$83.17," Hendricks wrote in *The Performing Art*. "According to my father, that was the monthly car payment required for the purchase of a new Camaro with a sticker price of \$2,575."

He managed to buy the Camaro — just as, in 2006, he managed to buy the F-88.

A non-terminal disease

Williams describes obsessing over classic cars as a non-terminal disease. He reassures that it's not contagious and afflicts mostly the male of the human species. The guys who have it tend to hang around with other guys who also have it, and so they all begin to think they're normal.

Williams doesn't see a division between the high-roller car collectors who spend millions and the fellows who get paid by the hour and do the restoration work themselves. The desire to collect and restore cars can potentially strike anyone.

Williams does see a difference between wealthy people who collect cars because it's fashionable and those for whom it's a passion. "I think it's a passion for Hendricks," he says. "You'll see the Gateway Museum there for a long time."

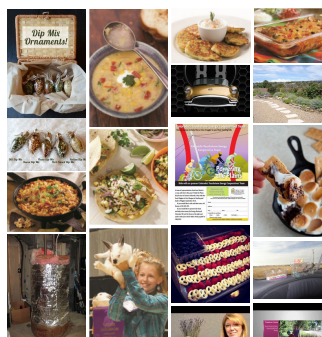


Williams admits that he quickly learned he wasn't cut out to do the mechanical work himself. As a young car salesman, he began feeding his own obsession by buying the cars he dreamt of buying when he was a kid. That evolved into developing a taste for rare automobiles and into his

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consciousness that cars can be art. "I realized how beautiful they are," he says.

Williams has made a tidy living buying and selling classic cars. He was the first person to sell a car (a 1931 Duesenberg) for more than \$1 million. He sold more than \$100 million worth of classic cars in 1992, in 1998 and annually since 2001.

He briefly owned the F-88, and sold it twice.

Before Williams acquired the F-88, the car was, as GM instructed, unusable. No one knows how long the pieces — along with water-stained blueprints for putting them back together again — sat in those wooden crates in Cord's California garage. But at some point the crates began to change hands. According to Consumer Guide's How Stuff Works, the crates went to first one and then another supplier of vehicles to the film industry. They were sold to classic car dealers in Arizona, Ohio, Michigan and then back to Arizona. It was that last buyer before Williams, a talented restorer, who began the painstaking job of put the F-88 back together. It was already recognizably beautiful when it caught Williams' eye. He bought it in 1990 and then quickly flipped it at the 1991 Barrett-Jackson auction in Scottsdale, Arizona, a world-famous event (at least in classic car circles) that he co-founded. The car came back to him in 1997, and he sold it again at his California consignment showroom, a part of his Blackhawk automobile museum in Danville, California.

The F-88 comes to Colorado

The last time the F-88 sold, it was again through the Barrett-Jackson auction in 2006, this time for a record \$3 million to Hendricks.

The car, which bears a definite resemblance to that Corvette Hendricks fell in love with as a 6 year old, now spins, stately, on a dais, the centerpiece of his museum. Like the rest of the world-class collection of rare and unique cars at the museum, it is displayed like a gleaming, lovely piece of art.

It almost didn't happen, at least in Gateway. In his memoir, Hendricks wrote that he and his wife had decided on property in northern New Mexico when he happened upon a real estate ad in *The Wall Street Journal*, a "ranch for sale in the spectacular red rock canyon country southwest of Grand Junction, Colorado."

Those words brought up so many childhood memories of his father's stories that Hendricks, who lives in Maryland, immediately changed his schedule to take a look at what turned out to be "the most stunning red rock landform I had ever seen, glowing in the morning light."



Appropriately, the road to Gateway from Grand Junction, a 45-minute section of Colorado Scenic and Historic Byway 141, is beautiful enough to film car commercials on, something that hasn't escaped the automobile marketing people. In sections it's like driving down the center of a small-scale Grand Canyon with red, red rocks beneath a blue, blue Colorado sky.

More people make the trek than you might think. Shaw says people from around the world come to see the cars. They tell him it's more like an art museum than the unfortunate parking lot effect that some car museums offer. They also love the Colorado scenery.

So is it beautiful enough to lure Jay Leno? Especially considering that the resort rents out high-end vehicles to tool around in?

"Can't say," Shaw repeats good-naturedly.

But he will admit that Hendricks pops in on a regular basis. "It's his baby," Shaw says. "He stops in and looks at the cars."

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