

Bennett Auto Museum

Forest City, North Carolina

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By Craig Brown

When traveling through the scenic mountains and valleys of North Carolina, budget time to stop in Forest City off highway 74 to visit Bennett Classics Antique Auto Museum. This gem won the Antique Automobile Club of America (AACA) best auto museum award for 2012. Once inside, the reason for the award is apparent.



Brothers Buddy and Joe Bennett started the museum in May 2007, but it is obvious from their collection that they have been at this for some time. Buddy happened to be working the front when we wandered in and he gave a history of the museum and the area. Chrissie normally works the front of museum and she gave us some additional information on the museum. Buddy and Joe worked at their Uncle Joe Young's Ford dealership in Burnsville, North Carolina while they were young. After World War II, there

was a shortage of automobiles and a great demand for used cars that was not being met in the area. Uncle Joe Young began driving to more populated cities like Washington D.C, Philadelphia, and Atlanta to approach drivers on the street to make an offer to purchase their car. After making the deal, a tow bar would be attached to the front bumper and the car trip back including exciting mountain roads would commence. This was not the best or safest method of automotive transport, so a car carrier truck was purchased to increase efficiency and safety. Soon the area around Forest City became known as “Little Detroit” because of the fine selection of automobiles available for sale during a time when it was difficult to purchase cars.

The brothers became fascinated with flathead Ford V8s and started collecting cars in the 1960s. Rutherford County is where they began their own businesses. Buddy is a quiet and modest man and he never once mentioned his “business” while talking about the museum. The clues are difficult to miss as the museum shares the grounds with Truck Service Incorporated and the museum has several very interesting Mack trucks from the 1960s. There are multiple warehouses and 18-wheelers on the move constantly. My personal theory is that Buddy’s involvement in the trucking of cars to help create “Little Detroit” after the war gave him the insight to recognize the importance of moving freight by trucks. This is just a theory, so you will have to get the real story from Buddy when you visit the museum!

When you enter the museum building, take note of the wood in the lobby, the staircase and the entrance wall. The materials were salvaged from a local doctor’s house built in the early 1890s. The quality of the woodwork is top notch and creates a nostalgic setting as you enter the display area.



The thing that jumps out is that each display is well labeled and meticulously maintained. There is no way to fit a description of every item into one article, so we will just present an abbreviated sample. Even the overview picture above does not capture all the vehicles.





A 1913 Ford Model T Roadster shares an alcove with another Model T just off the entryway.



Surrounded by several well-restored John Deere tractors, this 1923 Fordson stood out.





This immaculate 1928 Buick appeared to have just driven off the dealer's lot.



Once inside the Buick, it was evident that it had only been driven about 21,000 miles!



If you arrived by train and didn't have a car waiting, this 1928 Start Depot Hack was standing by to drive you around.





For the Model A fans, the 1931 roadster was a magnet.



Chevrolet faithful get to see a pristine 1934 Standard Series DC 3-Window Coupe with 46,000 miles. This was saved from being built into a hot rod in 1954.





The 1935 Ford 5-Window Coupe looks like Humphrey Bogart just parked it and walked into a seedy joint.





This 1939 Plymouth P-8 Deluxe Business Coupe has been driven just over 46,000 miles.



The 1940, 1939 & 1938 Ford Deluxe triplets.





1950 Ford Custom Coupe has chrome so bright it requires sunglasses to view.





1951 Mercury—black leather jacket and switchblade optional.



1956 Ford Crown Victoria driven only 63,000 miles.





All original 1959 Ford Thunderbird with only 28,000 miles from Uncle Joe Young's dealership. This was one of Uncle Joe's personal vehicles.





There are several Mack trucks on display. This is a 1962 B61 Thermodyne Diesel. Thermodyne refers to the open chamber, direct injection diesel engine introduced by Mack in 1953. When I was a boy the excitement level was always one notch above intense when a Mack truck was spotted. It was the combination of the sound of the air horn and the bulldog on the front. How could a ten-year-old not love seeing a truck with a bulldog hood ornament?



With so many great cars on hand, it was only a matter of time before Andy and Barney showed up for crowd control. This 1963 Ford Galaxie 500 is one of the cars provided to the Andy Griffith show. Ford provided a new patrol car for each season.





1964 was the first year for the Pontiac GTO. The first GTOs were sleek, understated and quick thanks to the efforts of people like Russl Gee, Bill Collins and John DeLorean.





Cushman ready to dispense ice cold Coca-Cola.

After reviewing the displays and taking some pictures, we told Buddy and Chrissie how impressed we were with the museum and that we would like to write an article for our local Antique Auto Club of America chapter. They graciously allowed us up in the second floor area to get the overview shots of the display floor and invited us into the office to get more information on the history of the museum and the area around Forest City.

One of the things learned from Buddy is the local cruise spot in Forest City is Smith's Drug Store on Main Street each Saturday morning. The cruise is known as "Donut Derelicts" because the participants start to showing up at 7:00 AM. It seemed a novel idea and counter to our local cruises that always start in the evening. If you see one of our local chapter's cars at a cruise-in location at 7:00 AM, it's most likely because it wouldn't start the night before! Since the next day was Saturday, we vowed to return early for the event.

While at the Donut Derelicts cruise we met some friendly folks from the local AACA club. They let us know they would be in neighboring town Hendersonville for a large car show later in the day that would include new 2014 models, classics and antiques.

By attending both the recommended events, we were able to see an impressive collection of classic and antique cars and met the enthusiasts who maintain them. Some of these cars may have even begun their service through Uncle Joe Young's dealership. The details and pictures of the cruise-in and car show will have to wait for the next article!