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MOTORAMA MASTERPIECE
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12 DYNAMIC DODGEDARTS

FUN CARS THAT YOU MUST OWN



RESTORATION PROFILE
RESURRECTING A 1927 DODGE
ROADSTER FROM PARTS



PLUS:

- 1934 STUDEBAKER
- 1949 PACKARD
- NASH METROPOLITANS

JACK MILLER

Better known as Mr. Hudson, he's on a one-man quest to ensure bygone marques are never forgotten



WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM DONNELLY

It would be wrong to insinuate that Jack Miller was crushed, or even had his mood dampened, when the field at Riverside Park at this past June's Orphan Car Show in Ypsilanti, Michigan, ended up under an onrushing wall of brown water. It was show Sunday, barely 8 a.m., a few hours after churning nighttime thunderstorms turned the show field into River Channel Park, if you will, and Jack was up throughout. Got calls in to the Detroit TV and radio outlets so the postponement (until September 26, we should add) would hit the air. Because only 40 cars showed up, the party then moved to Jack's nearby museum, the very last Hudson dealership to sell a brand-new Hudson.

From this vignette, we can learn a few things. One, living on the upper edges of Tornado Alley makes people—including car collectors—resilient. Second, Jack was sanguine despite losing perhaps 90 percent of the turnout for one of the Midwest's greatest car shows. Third, the guy cuts a lot of marble in Ypsilanti. Within days, the city had given him a rain date, which most park events in that town simply don't get.

Were it not for Jack Miller, untold thousands might have never learned that Ypsilanti, a town

that defies easy description, has one of the greatest automotive legacies of any Michigan locale. Tucker, Kaiser-Frazer, the Corvair and the Hydra-Matic transmission all call Ypsilanti home. Kalitta Air, operated by the first family of drag racing, flies its fleet of Boeing 747 cargo jets out of the Willow Run Airport. It's a proud, chin-out, blue-collar town, about 30 miles west of Detroit.

The city's name is not American Indian in origin, despite the way it sounds, but instead, Greek. Demetrius Ypsilantis was a military hero of the Hellenic revolution in 1821. The new Michigan city, a onetime French trapping camp on the Huron River, took his name when it incorporated four years later. So not everything in Ypsilanti is as it first seems, other than that people here really, truly respect cars, with Jack Miller as their elder statesman. His collection, the Ypsilanti Automotive Heritage Museum, is colloquially called The Last Hudson Dealer, but actually embraces the entire local automotive scene, effectively and affectionately.

"My father, Carl Miller, bought into the Hudson dealership at the very end of 1932. He ended up buying out his partner before World War II, when it was known as Hudson Sales and Service," he



“People come here because, as a Hudson dealership, we never really closed. I still try to sell at least one restored Hudson a year to keep that connection intact.”



In the foreground, what you see are two 1/4-scale engineering and styling models that were used by Hudson in 1934. What would you pay for that kind of irreplaceable collectible? A literal lifetime in the Hudson business gives Jack Miller this kind of juice. The dealership's service and parts departments are preserved at the level of full functionality.



recalled. "The reason it got changed to Miller Motors was because after the merger, when American Motors was created, Hudson dealers automatically got both Rambler and the Metropolitan. We wanted to be a little more neutral, because we were selling multiple lines, so we changed the name."

Don't be misled. Jack Miller's blood corpuscles are actually little white triangles. The origins of Miller Motors as a Hudson, Essex and Terraplane place reach to 1927. The building itself, which was once the site of an automobile fender stamping company, and later retailed early Dodges, dates back to 1896. Carl Miller's career in auto retailing started in Ann Arbor, where he partnered in an Oldsmobile dealership. Easy access to water power made Ypsilanti a manufacturing town way before the car arrived; a block across the street from Miller Motors produced plows. A few blocks away, a factory made corn-shelling implements.

The Miller family ran a farm in nearby Washtenaw County until Jack's grandfather sold it in 1916, moved to town and bought the livery stable, which he turned into a taxi company. The firm's first cabs were Model T Fords, before it began using the Flint-built Star automobile promoted by Billy Durant. As a sideline, the Millers stored private cars during the winters. All this turned Carl

Miller into an early car enthusiast.

Parts salesman, dealer, racer. The last distinction, interrupted when his Model T slammed into a tree, left Carl Miller hospitalized for a year, his jelly-and-chips left arm thereafter articulated by a system of sash cords attached to pulleys, allowing him to move his hand and fingers a little.

Miller Motors lasted as a Hudson dealership right through the bitter end, holding onto its new-car franchise through 1958. Jack drove the final car, a 1957 four-door sedan, onto the showroom floor. He'd already been working at the store since age 14. The family would have continued as AMC retailers, but Carl had worsening emphysema and was unwilling to build a new Rambler showroom on U.S. 12, as Kenosha was insisting. From 1959, Miller Motors continued on selling used cars, Hudson parts and restored Hudsons. Carl Miller passed away in 1973.

"I was starting to get calls because the Hudson club was in its infancy, and I started looking for old dealers," Jack remembered. "The biggest load of parts came from a little town called Brilliant, Ohio, across the Ohio River from Wheeling, West Virginia. This little guy had purchased all the parts from Costello Motors, which had been a Hudson distributor. It was huge. The second-biggest load came out of Petiscodiac, New Brunswick, Canada. That guy wasn't

The brick portion of the dealership, in the middle, dates to 1896 and originally sold the first Dodge Brothers cars. This neighborhood, incidentally, is called Depot Town, in honor of Ypsilanti's long association with the New York Central, and is among the best-preserved historic districts in the Detroit metropolitan area.





Most of the treasures in this trove are not actual cars. Above the display cases are big-scale Hudson styling models from late in the nameplate's lifetime. The pedal car mimics a 1934 Hudson Eight. Inside the cases are trinkets associated with Hudson's great racing history, especially its "fabulous" NASCAR heritage.

even a dealer, but he liked Hudsons, and besides buying out Canadian dealers, he had been coming into the northeastern United States. He had about 65 cars sitting on a farm plus a building full of parts.

"When I got rid of the parts business in 1996, when we started the museum, there was a 54-foot semi loaded to the top and the rear doors that went out of this building, plus five parts cars. We also had a sheetmetal rack with probably 75 pieces: new hoods, doors, decks. The parts department and the whole upstairs here were loaded to the gunwales. I haven't sold a part since 1996. I sold the parts to a friend of mine near Flint, whose father had been a Hudson dealer in Chesaning, Michigan. He bought the whole thing. Then I just referred people who needed parts to him."

No single event moved Miller Motors from dealer to museum to show organizer, but Jack gives a lot of credit to Peter Fletcher and Skip Ungrodt for prompting that transition. Both men recognized that Jack had the full sales and service records for all 969 cars that were sold at the dealership since his father acquired a share in it. That's approximately where the all-Ypsilanti history concept came together, which the collection reflects. Its Tucker is a prop from the 1988 movie, built on a Ford LTD chassis; Preston Tucker lived in Ypsilanti (two or so blocks from the

museum) and built the Torpedo prototypes there. Randy Mason, another local collector, persuaded Jack that a show of deceased brands, beyond Hudson and the rest, slotted in just right with Ypsilanti. Jack then proposed that idea to the city fathers.

One connection with Hudson here, however, merits mention if even from a distance. By that, we mean Jack's restoration of the actual Twin-H Hornet with which the great Herb Thomas won the 1951 NASCAR Grand National title. It's now on loan to the new NASCAR Hall of Fame in Charlotte, North Carolina. The capsule account is that Jack had been directing Hudson parts to a collector whose Hornet had oversized hubs and brakes. Jack offered to buy it, thinking it might have been a police-spec Hornet. The response took 10 years, by which time the owner had figured out it was a factory race car—a Dana differential was the giveaway. After making the deal, while doing the necessary bodywork, Jack found the number 92 painted at the roof corners, possibly by chief mechanic Smokey Yunick himself.

"The guy knew what he had, but wanted money for a new camper and didn't care," he explained. "People come here because, as a Hudson dealership, we never really closed. I still try to sell at least one restored Hudson a year to keep that connection intact." ☞



Miller Motors could just as easily be characterized as All Things Ypsi. The 1977 Chevrolet Nova and 1974 Pontiac GTO in the foreground are both as new, both GM Willow Run Assembly creations. Ditto for the lineup of early Corvairs to the rear. Of course, Kaiser-Frazer gets its props in this collection, as well.