

Sweet Chrome Alabama

That place in the South where the Big Wheels Keep on Turning

BY MICHAEL MILNE • PHOTOGRAPHY BY LARISSA MILNE AND THE AUTHOR

Although the state of Alabama has one of the best rock-and-roll songs written about it, it's often undersung when it comes to classic car attractions. And that's a shame, because a car buff can put together a perfect roadtrip in the state that includes one of the finest selections of Mopar muscle in the country, relics of NASCAR, the oldest Army jeep in existence, and a tour of Mercedes-Benz heritage.

When people think of Alabama and cars, one of the first things that comes to mind is the Talladega Superspeedway, located an hour's drive east of Birmingham. Adjacent to the famous track is the International Motorsports Hall of Fame that honors not just NASCAR drivers, but also Indy Car, NHRA, Formula One, and more. More than 150 vehicles are spread out over a multi-building complex.

The wheel-shaped main building is decorated with murals of beach scenes, reflecting on the early days of racing on the sand in Daytona. Sammy Packard, the last survivor of the legendary hotel meeting in 1947 when NASCAR was founded, raced the 1940 Mercury Sedan that is displayed on the beach. Another historic vehicle is the black-and-gold #22 Pontiac in which Fireball Roberts won every race he entered in 1962, including the Daytona 500. One of the most popular cars is Richard Petty's 1974 Dodge that he drove to his fifth and sixth NASCAR championships. It even has the nicks and scuff marks to prove it. The walls of the



Richard Petty's 1974 Dodge Charger that helped The King win the NASCAR Championship that season.

museum are lined with memorabilia, including driver-worn racing suits, posters, and a collection of more than 500 model cars.

If you happen to be passing through Birmingham after leaving Talladega, stop in at the home of the Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum, featuring a massive collection of motorcycles. It's also worth visiting Rickwood Field, opened in 1910; the oldest baseball park in the nation was the location where parts of the Jackie Robinson movie *42* were filmed.

A short trip from good old American racing to Teutonic engineering reveals the breadth of Alabama's automotive heritage, both

old and new. The Mercedes-Benz Visitors Center in Tuscaloosa showcases more than a century of the brand's history and also offers plant tours to see current models being assembled. While visitors are waiting for the tour, they can amble through the exhibit set up in the lobby. Some of the highlights include a supercharged 1927 Mercedes-Benz 630K 24/100/140 PS roadster, an elegant 1958 Mercedes-Benz 300SL roadster, and, up to current days, a 2017 Mercedes-Benz AMG SL63.

The tour of the assembly plant is a peek at modern industrial activity as welding sparks fly and robotic arms frantically swing car parts in the air, looking like Transformers run amok as they produce 700-800 cars per day. Despite all that frenzied activity, much of the car assembly process consists of waiting for the paint to dry: It takes 32 hours to build a vehicle, about half of which is spent in the paint processing area.

One of the finest collections of Mopar muscle waits at the Wellborn Musclegar Museum in Alexander City. Built in a restored 1940's Chevy dealership, more than 40 vehicles are on display. The focus here is on Dodge products, a lifetime love affair that started in Tim Wellborn's youth when his dad showed up in the driveway with a new 1971 Charger Hemi. Due to that early impression, at one time, he practically had the



The 1970 Paint Chip 'Cuda was modeled after an illustration in a Rapid Transit System brochure that Tim Wellborn first saw as a young boy.

market cornered on 1971 Dodge Charger Hemis. The museum reopened in March 2017 after founders Tim and Pam Wellborn sold off a chunk of the collection to create more floor space for other legendary Mopars.

A real one-of-a-kind car is billed as the “most famous musclecar that never existed, until now.” It’s the 1970 Plymouth Paint Chip ‘Cuda. Based on a drawing of a polychromatic Plymouth that was used for marketing purposes, The Bomb Factory in New Orleans vinyl-striped it on the passenger side from front to back in the 25 different paint schemes that were available and shown in the ad. The other half of the car remains untouched.

One of the most sentimental vehicles is the 1970 Plymouth Hemi ‘Cuda known as the “homecoming ‘Cuda.” It was the first Hemi purchased by Tim and his brother Curtis back in 1978, but they reluctantly had to sell it almost a decade later. Flash forward 28 years and the car was on the auction block at Mecum Indy. They were able to get it back — with only 300 more miles on the odometer — and amazingly found Curtis’ Hemi cap still nestled in it. Oh, if we could all find our first car that easily.

For all the shiny grilles on display, not all the cars have their chrome polished to the

max. A dusty 1971 Challenger R/T is left in the “as-is” condition in which it was found in an Ohio barn in 2008. It had been sitting there, untouched, for 33 years.

The northern part of the state offers a glimpse at a beefy vehicle that predated muscle. The 1940 Ford Pilot Model GP-No. 1 Pygmy is one of only 18 vehicles on the National Historic Vehicle Register. Better known as a “jeep,” it’s on display at the U.S. Veterans Memorial Museum in Huntsville, Alabama. This Pygmy is the oldest known survivor of early prototypes that were developed by Ford, Willys, and American Bantam. It was the first one to feature Jeep’s legendary front grille with integrated headlights that has become a symbol for automotive ruggedness worldwide. Although it was built by Ford, it was based on a design by Pennsylvania’s American Bantam Car Company. After surviving robust testing at Camp Holabird, it was returned to Ford.

Classic cars (and a bit of baseball lore) make Alabama a state worth exploring. And to paraphrase Lynyrd Skynyrd, the skies really are so blue. 🇺🇸

Michael Milne is the author of the Roadster Guide to America’s Classic Car Museums & Attractions.



A firesuit worn by Bobby Unser during his career racing for Roger Penske is among the historic memorabilia on display at the IMHF.



This one-of-211 Hemi-powered 1968 Dodge Charger R/Ts at the Wellborn Musclegar Museum was a finalist for Hemmings Muscle Machine of the Year in 2013.



This 1940 Ford Pilot Model GP-No. 1 Pygmy at the Veterans Memorial Museum is the oldest known survivor prototypes developed by Ford, Willys, and American Bantam.



A 1927 Mercedes-Benz 630K 24/100/140 PS at the Mercedes-Benz Visitors Center. Power came from a supercharged 140-hp inline six.



Fireball Roberts dominated the Daytona 500 in 1962 in a black-and-gold Pontiac Catalina tuned by Smokey Yunick.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- ▶ International Motorsports Hall of Fame: motorsportshalloffame.com
- ▶ Wellborn Musclegar Museum: wellbornmusclegarmuseum.com
- ▶ Mercedes-Benz Visitors Center: mbusi.com/visitorcenter
- ▶ U.S. Veterans Memorial Museum: memorialmuseum.org