



Driving “THE FORD”

As the man who sets up and oversees the transportation exhibits at the Henry Ford Museum, Bob Casey may have one of the world's greatest jobs.

BY ROB SASS >>
PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEVIN NETZ

WITH ITS SOARING 40-FOOT CEILINGS COVERING NINE ACRES, THE HENRY FORD Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, is big enough to park the Hindenburg in a corner. And in the company of exhibits like the Rosa Parks bus, the chair from Ford's Theatre in which Lincoln was assassinated and R. Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion House, the long-gone dirigible would hardly be the most compelling attraction.

I half expected the curator of such a place to be a giant, but Bob Casey is of average stature. We began chatting in front of the Ford GT40 Mk IV, which won Le Mans in 1967. The car is one of the automobiles to be featured — hood up — in an exhibit of engine compartments. “Today,” Casey began, “I have to write summaries of what's going on under the hoods of the cars here — there's a lot to talk about with the GT, including the 427 NASCAR V-8 and the ‘bundle of snakes’ exhaust.” Later, Casey has to respond to a request for some old racing photos, and review some steam car text to appear on a souvenir cup.



Above: Casey inside Lamy's Diner, part of the Automobile in American Life exhibit.

Casey — who holds degrees in mechanical engineering, American history and the history of technology — is a curator in the purest sense. Leaving fundraising and benefactors to others, he primarily deals with issues like preservation and planning exhibits that use the several hundred automobiles, trucks, motorcycles, carriages and bicycles to illustrate the vehicles that have had the greatest significance in marketing, engineering and styling.

Although Casey loves what he does, there is no routine. The only common thread running through his days is that each one begins when he boots up his computer.

"An example of something that can just blow your plans for the day was a call from a Windsor, Ontario, TV station," Casey says. "A father and son from Chile were driving a Model A from the tip of South America to Dearborn. This was the first we'd heard of it. They spoke no English and had no sponsors. It was a real 'kindness of strangers' type of thing." The pair put a sticker on the car to recognize everyone who had helped them. Casey pointed out one from the Best Western in Dearborn where the museum had pulled strings to get them a room after they donated their Model A to The Henry Ford.

Equally unexpected was the call about some prototype automobiles from auto industry supplier The Budd Company. One turned out to be a rather significant "could have been" story. In 1962, Budd proposed that AMC build a sporty car on a shortened Rambler chassis. Casey explains, "AMC just didn't have a visionary like Iacocca who saw the value in taking something mundane and making it into



something desirable." The sole resulting Budd XR-400 is astutely displayed next to the first of millions of Mustangs, which it resembles.

Clockwise from top left: Casey at the helm; a few of the Ford's prized vehicles on display; the 1930s Texaco tanker truck; prepping for the Engines Exposed hood-up exhibit; in front of his beloved Old Number 16; the 1967 Le Mans-winning Ford GT40 Mk IV.

One of the issues that Casey frequently confronts is preservation vs. restoration. He prefers to acquire unrestored artifacts, but in the case of a streamlined 1930s Texaco tanker truck, "there simply weren't any well-preserved originals available." The restored example on display is refreshingly authentic — no better or no worse than it would have been in 1937.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is Old Number 16, the 1908 Vanderbilt Cup-winning Locomobile racer. All of its exterior finishes are original. Casey read about it as a kid in Ken W. Purdy's seminal *The Kings of the Road*. "Bringing it here was the fulfillment of a childhood dream," Casey says. Not unexpectedly, its conservation

is a continuing battle. "From time to time, paint will flake off and we'll literally glue it back on."

The engine of Old Number 16 presents the museum's most serious preservation issue. "Recently, we noticed a crack in the combustion chamber. We've been monitoring it and it's clearly getting worse; oil is starting to mix with water. Old Number 16 has been run every year since 1906. We haven't said we'll never run it again, but if we do, it will be very sparingly."

Casey's love for the car is evident: "When it runs at twilight, you can see flames coming from the exhaust; at idle, you can hear the individual explosions and it literally blows smoke rings from the exhaust." It visibly saddens him that this living and breathing piece of history may become inanimate. However, Casey can take satisfaction in knowing that his efforts have ensured that Old Number 16 will remain on display where thousands of people will see it each year. And although the massive Locomobile holds special meaning for him, there's no telling what is one unexpected phone call away.