

Continuing the Legacy

Couple's car collection turns into history lesson

It's no wonder many people believe American car history is endangered, especially with major automakers struggling to stay afloat or discontinuing venerable brands. One such phase-out was Oldsmobile, which ended production in 2004 after more than 107 years in business.

But the story of Oldsmobile and its founder Ransom E. (R.E.) Olds lives on thanks to the efforts of Dublin residents Peter and Debbie Stephens.

The couple radiates a depth of knowledge about the company. The curiosity comes naturally. Originally from Lansing, Mich., Debbie is the great-granddaughter of R.E. Olds. She took the family history torch when her father, R.E. Olds Anderson, passed away in 2003. Admittedly, she only recently realized how comprehensive that history was.

"I knew the lineage was there when we were growing up. If something came up, it would be explained to us, but we were never taught the stories," Debbie says. "It was a very gradual, subtle learning process. I didn't get fully interested until my father got sick and needed someone to speak for him."

Debbie has two sisters, but says neither had the same interest. As a result, Peter and Debbie have become the unofficial family historians. They now have an antique car collection of historically significant vehicles from her great-grandfather's companies – Olds Motor Works (Oldsmobile) and REO Motor Car Company.

The Stephensens bought a 1930 Oldsmobile Roadster Convertible in 2004 and a 1903 Oldsmobile Curved Dash in 2006. As they caught the collector bug, they learned more about the cars and their creator. When their Oldsmobile

Curved Dash originally hit the market, R.E. Olds was lobbying for more roads, as there were very few and many people opposed car use.

"People didn't want to give up their horses. He had to test most of his inventions at night because so many people were against the ideas," Peter says. "He started tinkering with cars in the 1880s and powered them with steam, then electric, then gas. Electric was his favorite."

Shortly thereafter, businesses in the Lansing area offered him a location and finances to start a new company, which he did quietly.

"He introduced the REO in 1905 and immediately went back to having 25 percent of the market because of his name and his reputation," Peter says. "The man was incredible."

REO Motor Car Co. produced vehicles until 1975. The Ste-



Above: Peter and Debbie Stephens. Right: A younger Debbie poses in the "Baby" REO with her family, descendants of auto pioneer R.E. Olds.



"But he had trouble with the batteries holding the charge," Debbie continues. "It amazes me how much foresight he had and how creative and innovative he was. If there was a problem, he'd invent a machine to solve it."

The Stephensens often tag-team R.E. Olds stories. They explain Olds had a conflict with his financial backers and left the company.

phenses made it a point to have classics from both companies in their antique car collection.

They bought their third antique car in 2007 – a 1905 REO 5 Passenger. When the State of Michigan re-enacted President Theodore Roosevelt's visit in 1907, officials asked the Stephensens if they could use the '05 REO. They agreed, and their youngest son Gregg, now 22, drove the car (they have another son, Matt, 26).

The REO Company produced many notable models, including the "Mama" and the "Baby" REOs.

Prior to the 1906 auto show in New York City, Olds built a miniature version of his Model A and displayed the two cars together. The "Baby," handcrafted by Olds' engineers, was exactly one-fourth the original car's size and was fully functional. It cost \$3,000 to build, twice as much as the Model A.

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"Mama" and "Baby" REOs

"Nobody had seen anything like it before. It was a novelty. People wanted it. It was a huge, huge deal at the time," Peter says.

Olds refused to build another scale model and later leased it to Barnum & Bailey Circus. In the shuffle of time, the Baby got lost.

"For years nobody knew where this car was. Then they found it in some guy's garage. Then it ended up across the country. It's remarkable this car is even still around," Debbie says.

Not only is the Baby still around, it's now owned by Peter and Debbie. They bought it via telephone during a 2008 auction in California, along with its full-size counterpart.

"We heard 'The cars are yours' and our jaws dropped. I couldn't believe it," Peter says.

Peter and Debbie donated the cars to the R.E. Olds Transportation Museum in Lansing. They both serve on the museum board and travel to see the cars once a month. They also had the cars professionally transported to Dublin in July for the annual Arthritis Foundation Car Show.

"It was a chance to do something in our hometown," says Peter, who also sits on the Arthritis Foundation board. "It's a story that needs to be shared. And, boy, does that car have a lot of stories."

The couple continues learning as much as possible about their collection. Peter has a binder full of information for each car, including original owner's manuals, paint chips and advertisements. Some of it has been handed down and some has been found on auction sites such as eBay.

"This is all worth the time and money we put into it because we have so much fun meeting everyone," Debbie says. "It's been rewarding learning about what a remarkable man my great-grandfather was. Every show someone knows about this history and says they're glad we're doing this and that is a delightful surprise."

Although the Stephens say they're done buying antique cars for now, they still have work to do.

"Now it's not just about the restoration of these cars, but the preservation. People have an interest in them and we want to share as much information as we can," Peter says. "The history is disappearing and these stories need to be told."

Alicia Kelso is a contributing editor for Dublin Life.
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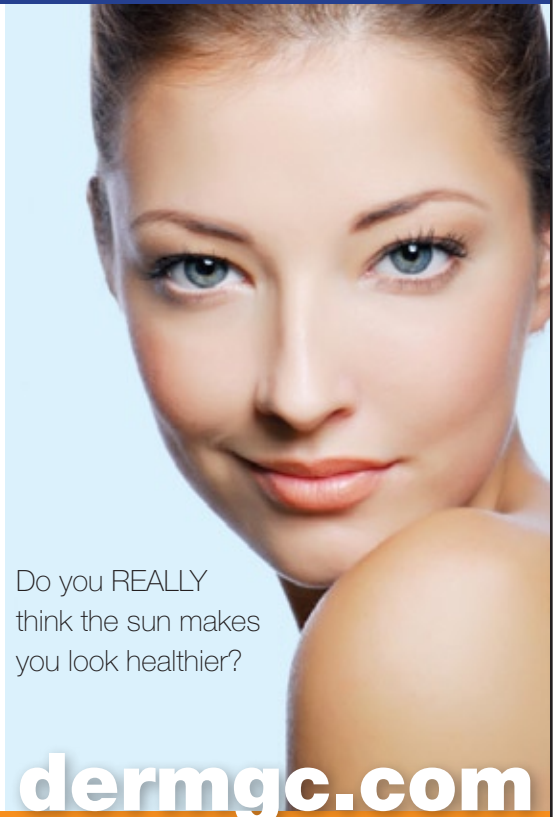
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