





Where “the Automobile is the Art”

Interview with William “Red” Lewis
by David J. Voelker, *Voyageur* Editor-in-Chief

The Automobile Gallery, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization located at 400 South Adams Street in Green Bay, occupies the former Denil Cadillac dealership, which operated in downtown Green Bay between 1958 and 1997. When it was built, Denil Cadillac was a cutting-edge showroom, with extensive interior space for displaying new model vehicles. Today, the fully renovated building is home to the Automobile Gallery, which was made possible through the vision and generosity of William “Red” Lewis, founder of PDQ Carwashes and PDQ Manufacturing. Opened in January of 2016, the gallery not only houses about fifty restored automobiles but also offers event and meeting spaces, complete with state-of-the-art technology and catering services. Mr. Lewis recently sat down with *Voyageur* Editor-in-Chief David Voelker to discuss the gallery, its historical significance, and its educational mission.

Left: William “Red” Lewis, founder of the Automobile Gallery, poses in front of a 1937 Packard One-Twenty business coupe, one of only twelve cars like it left in the world.

Emma Hitzman

Q & A

“Green Bay is home.”

David Voelker (DV):

Why did you decide to create the Automobile Gallery?

“Red” Lewis (R.L.):

I’ve had some health issues over the years. I’ve had a stroke and some problems with my heart. A couple of years ago my family and I sat together just talking about estate stuff, like the cars and the businesses I had, and [my children were asking] “What do you do with this? What do you do with that?” Then we looked at the cars, and they asked, “Dad, what do I do with the cars?” I said “Take one, take two, or take them all.” My daughter said, “Dad, I don’t need that many cars.” I said, “Well, between you and your sister and brother, you can keep a couple and then sell the rest. Whatever you want to do.” My daughter said, “Dad, how do we sell them?” I said, “You make a call and they come with a truck and take them off to local or national shows. You get an appraisal from Mecum or Barrett-Jackson, and take a truck all the way down to Chicago, or wherever. Then she asked, “Dad, how many cars can they get in a truck?” I said, “I think six probably. Some will take seven.” She said, “Are you telling me I should get ten trucks up here all at once? How would I do that?” I said, “Well, let me think about this...” So, I thought about it for a couple months and then I cooked up this [gallery idea]. I was in the process of looking

to restore old buildings, anyhow. I had looked at this [former Cadillac dealership] but had not bought it by then. I went back to them [my children] and I said, “Here’s what you do. Why don’t you kids take whatever cars you might want, a couple of them—not necessarily the pricey ones but the ones that mean something, because it’s not about money. Don’t pick the most expensive cars; look at the ones that you had more fun with. For the rest of them, I’ll start a 501(c)(3) [non-profit organization] and put the rest of them in a trust. I told my daughter, “If I give the cars to this trust and the 501(c)(3) they are no longer in the estate. They’re gone. They’re not mine even. They’re not yours anymore.” And she said, “Dad, those are your cars, you fixed them and they’re yours. You have the right to do with them whatever you want. That’s not my stuff or my sister’s or brother’s stuff; it’s yours. If you give them all to start a nonprofit, that’s your business. Whatever you want to do, you can do.” She was really classy there. I wanted to give back to the community where I raised my family and made my living, and my kids were on board. That’s how we ended up with the 501(c)(3) organization.



I wanted to give back to Green Bay.”

DV:

And you mentioned getting an AMC Pacer. So you're still getting more cars?

RL:

Oh yeah, we're always getting cars and not necessarily expensive cars. I don't want to have the biggest list of the most expensive cars; I want the most unique cars. And that's what we're all about: unique and different.

DV:

Are there any other plans that you have for the gallery that you would like to share?

RL:

We're going to get another couple of high-tech sports cars. We have the GT now and we'll get one or two more of those in as guest cars [on loan from collectors]. I like them, and young people like these sports cars and muscle cars a lot. We're also going to add some high-tech, touch screen technology that will engage the younger folks.

DV:

Why did you choose Green Bay as the location for the gallery?

RL:

I looked in De Pere, I looked in the far east side of Green Bay, I looked out by the Packers, and [I looked at] this building here. I think downtown Green Bay is coming back, and lots of new things are happening downtown. And I thought, "You know what? I can do that, and if I do it right, hopefully it will stay for a lot of years." It's not a commercial business; it's an art gallery. I wanted it to be a gift to Green Bay, you know—that's what my thought is. Green Bay has been really good [to me]. I've done well, between the car washes and the manufacturing company. And all of it started in northeastern Wisconsin. But, Green Bay is home. I wanted to give back to Green Bay. I think people can't understand that, but that's really it. I've been asked, "Why would you do that? Why wouldn't you go by the Packers? Why didn't you get [a location] on [Interstate] 43?" Because my roots are in downtown Green Bay.

Above: The valve cover from a 1956 Ford F-100 pickup truck.

Sunshine Tourtellott

DV:

What do you want the public to learn about cars from the gallery? You said your mission is educational.

R.L.:

If you look at the 2005 GT technology compared to the [1912] Maxwell [Messenger], you see that technology has changed over the past 100 years. In the next 20 years, it's going to even faster. And I think that everybody'll be sitting in their car—you won't drive anymore. In 20 or 30 years the car will drive for you. You can see the difference if you look at cars from the 1900s to the 1910s to the twenties to the thirties to the forties, all the way through to 2015. And that's why I wanted to give [visitors] a chance to see cars from all of the decades. You know, like that 1937 Packard. Isn't that a nice piece?

And look at the difference between the 1960 Studebaker and the 1960 Triumph. They're both really unique. It's not just hot rods and convertibles or old stuff. It's a brew, so anybody can come in and say, "Hey, I'd like to have one of those" or "I used to have one of those." Or "My dad had one" or "My uncle took us for a ride in that station wagon." People really like that, and that's what I wanted to show.

DV:

You're talking about the appearance of the vehicle and the changes in the whole style. I know your interest is also mechanical restoration. Is there something important under the hood for people to see as well?

R.L.:

That is why we have several of the cars with hoods up, so people can see the difference between the car engines. There is a coral (or pink) Plymouth over there. If we look at that and look at the engine and compare it to one of the other cars, we'll see how much difference there is. It is amazing; you would not think it, but the difference is there.

DV:

So you're going to get guest cars. How long are you typically keeping a guest car?

R.L.:

It will last two weeks to three months, depending on what our guests would want and what our exhibit is for that time period. We're finding there are people that own one, two, or three cars and don't drive them anyhow, and they're pretty proud of them. We do a nice story about them. Every car has a story. Sometimes personally, sometimes technically, but there's a story.

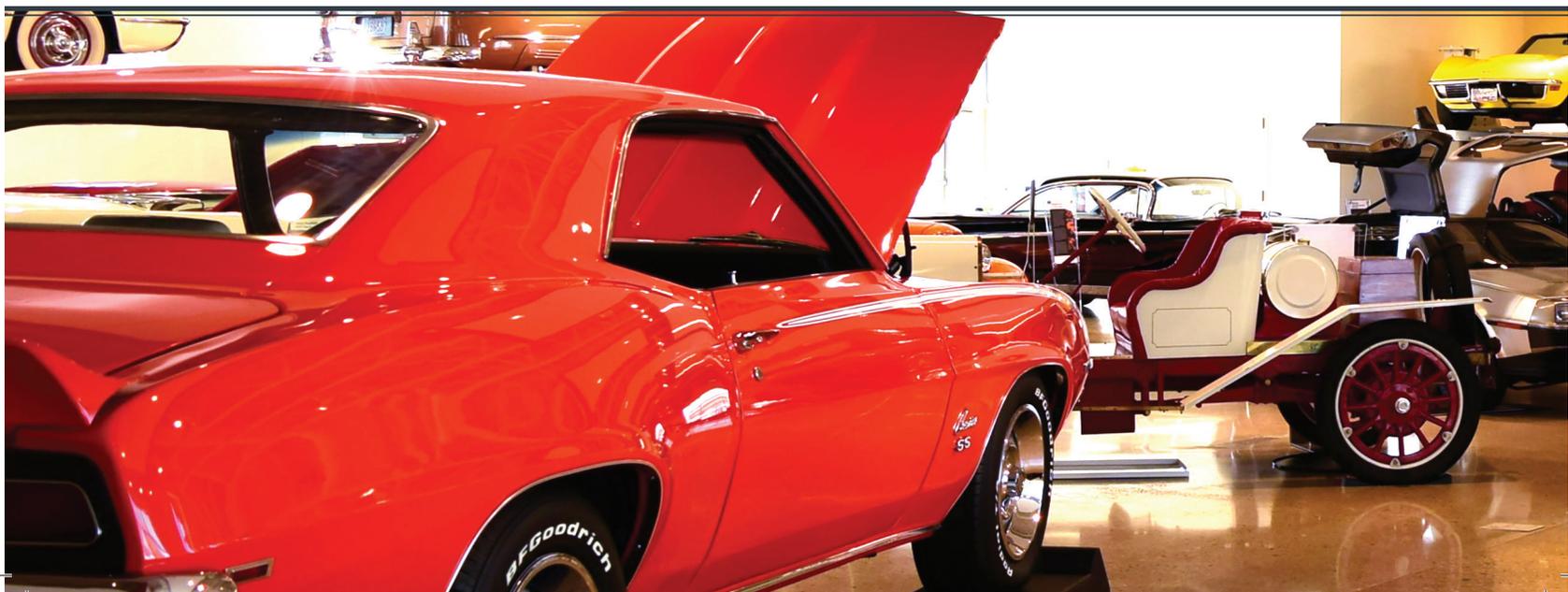


DV:

What did you find most enjoyable about the restoration work?

R.L.:

The mechanical part. I was not a painter, but I had done some work with machine engines and auto parts, so I knew that [aspect]. And [my father] was good at everything. We fixed [the Model A] all up. We fixed the brakes on it and got the engine running. We took it apart. And that's what got me going on these cars. That [Model A] car is outside now. It sits there, and it runs well. Every once in a while I'll drive it. That one will always be in the family, I think. That's my goal, anyhow.



DV:

What was going on here between 1997 when Denil Cadillac moved and 2015 when you started restoration work?

RL:

I don't know what the whole life was, but I know that Brown County used it to store cars and stuff. This room [now the corporate conference room] was all boarded up, and the county had impounded property locked up there.

Interjection by Mary Beth Leopold, Executive Director:

And [this building] was the plight of the neighborhood. Captain's Walk Winery [the business next door] is so thrilled that we're here; they have blended a wine just for us. It's called Collaboration, and they're donating a dollar back [to the Gallery] for every bottle that they sell, just to help keep us alive. We've made an impact in this area for them and the rest of the neighborhood.

RL:

Yeah, they're pretty happy about it. We had the most difficult time when we were getting started. I didn't tell anybody what I was doing. The mayor knew and a few other people, but I didn't talk much about it. I didn't tell anybody—any media people—and they were getting a little impatient. So, then people started asking, "What's going on?" "What's going in there?" Everybody had to give a different angle or a different story. And then [the rumors] got to be so much that Channel 11 said they were going to do a story on us. And I thought, I don't want the publicity [right now], but I want the story to be right. I don't want them guessing. So we had a press conference and let everyone know.

DV:

Are there other things about history that you would like for people to learn from the gallery?

RL:

Anybody who has a car—it's a part of their history. From the guys that are young to the guys that are in their nineties, there is a story for everybody. It's just learning about automobiles. And that somebody would look at them as art rather than as only vehicles. In my life, I didn't always see the beauty in other arts. The painters? I can't get those. But I can take a look at an automobile or motorcycle and say, "this is something." That is what I like to go with. The automobile is the art.

DV:

You wanted to help with the economic development of downtown Green Bay?

RL:

Yeah, that's what I'm trying to do—didn't I just say that? [chuckles] You know, we only have two full-time employees, and the rest are volunteers. [Almost] everybody is a volunteer, so that's what really gives a warming thought. It's great. I've got a guy, George Yursis, who takes care of the building and the cars, and he gets a lot of work from the volunteers. And Mary Beth [Leopold]—she's the boss. You've got to have a boss, but the rest are volunteers.

Left: An engine from a 1934 Ford V-8 closed cab pickup.

Below: The Automobile Gallery floor.

Sunshine Tourtillott

“The automobile is the art.”



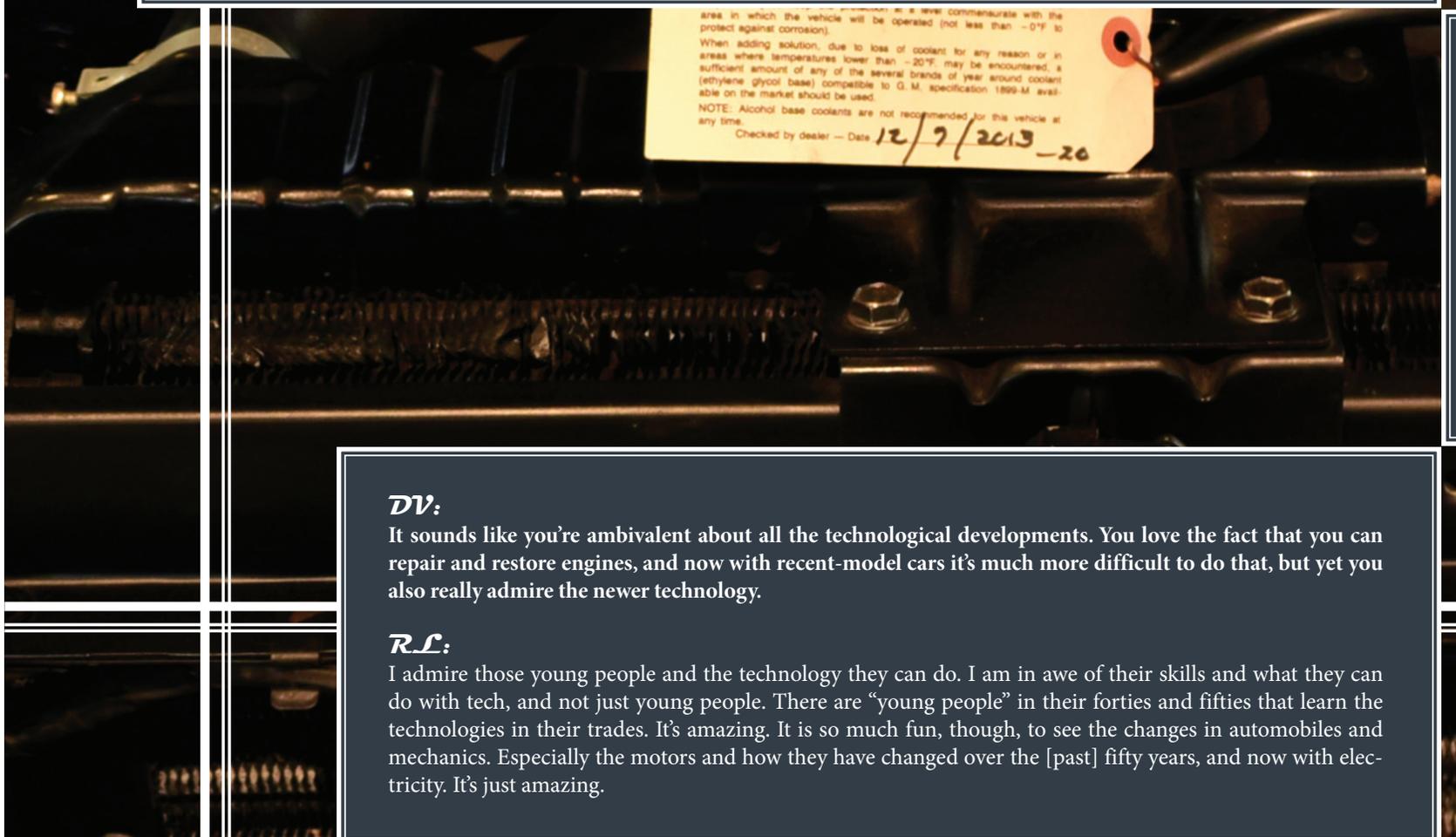


DV:

Related to your educational mission, you have a garage area that's getting used by teachers and students?

RS:

Yes, we've had NWTC [Northeast Wisconsin Technical College], FVTC [Fox Valley Technical College], Lakeshore Technical College, and numerous high schools bring their students in to get them excited about automobiles and repairs and the body—whatever we have to do. There is a need for technical mechanics and technicians nowadays. And we have sharp young people, boys and girls, who need to learn how it used to be and what they have to work on now. We talked earlier about how you and I could learn to fix some of that stuff [the older automobiles]. But now, young people have to be trained and trained and trained. Everybody that used to be a mechanic would work in a garage and learn as they worked. Now they learn technology in schools, and they have tech schools that are amazing. So if they want to bring in their classes and use the shop, we'll let them do it.



DV:

It sounds like you're ambivalent about all the technological developments. You love the fact that you can repair and restore engines, and now with recent-model cars it's much more difficult to do that, but yet you also really admire the newer technology.

RS:

I admire those young people and the technology they can do. I am in awe of their skills and what they can do with tech, and not just young people. There are "young people" in their forties and fifties that learn the technologies in their trades. It's amazing. It is so much fun, though, to see the changes in automobiles and mechanics. Especially the motors and how they have changed over the [past] fifty years, and now with electricity. It's just amazing.

DV:

When was it that you restored that first car?

RL:

I think in the mid-seventies—about '75. That's when we started on the Model As. Then, after that, we'd get a car, fix it, and sell it. That's how I started. Then I started keeping them, I wouldn't sell one. I'd just get another one. Then, all of a sudden, I had ten or fifteen cars. Pretty soon I had a lot of cars.



DV:

A very important aspect of what you've done here is the location and the building. What would you say about the historical significance of this building? Why did you want to reclaim it?

RL:

It was a dealership. It was all cars, all its life. And it seemed like it was the perfect thing to put cars in, specialized cars, you know. It's an old dealership, and now there's old cars in it; not necessarily all old cars, but different kinds of cars in there.

Sunshine Tourtillott

Above: A Buick V8 Wildcat 445 engine.

Right: Ford Model A that Red restored with his father.



DV:

That was the first car you restored?

RL:

Yes, I repaired that Model A with my father, and we got closer with that, and it made me happy to see him so happy with that old car. I like Buicks too. I started with '59 Buicks and restored six of those. And then a national magazine came and said they were "six of the finest '59 Buicks found anywhere in the world." I've had that DeLorean since 1981, and that one I've kept all these years. I liked that Thunderbird because I had one and had to sell that to make payroll, and the red Corvette [replaced a car that also had to be sold]. And [I've really enjoyed] getting some of them back. And John Bergstrom—I just met him this year—a delightful man, and he said, "Red, I've done the same thing. Things are good [financially] today, but it wasn't always like this." He had some tough times, and if you had a car and had to sell one to make payroll, you know, it makes it a little special when you get it back twenty or thirty years later, if you do.

That's really what's driving the price on [classic] cars. There's a lot of people who've had one, and they've lost it for whatever [reason]. They get married, and they had a two-door, and they had to go get a four-door, or they had a Mustang and they had to get a station wagon, or whatever they had to do. Now, they can afford another one, and they go out to Barrett. I call it, "buying their youth" again. That's what they're getting back. You get a Mustang or Corvette or Camaro that they had when they were in college and they had to sell it. Now they've got it, and they've done well, and if it was another couple thousand dollars, it didn't make any difference. That's what they wanted.

DV:

What are a couple of your favorite cars in your collection and why?

RL:

The old black Model A outside. That was my father's—that's my favorite.



DV:

When did you start collecting cars? What was the draw for you?

RL:

The first thing, I was very close to my father, and he helped me a lot. I found an old Model A in a barn and so I purchased it. I showed it to him, and he really liked it because he was born in 1908. He remembered growing up with old Model A cars. So we did two of them; we fixed them up, my dad and me. And then, when it was his birthday, I gave him the car and the title. I said, "That's your car." He loved the car, and he would drive that old Model A all over town. He worked for a convent on the west side; he took care of the boilers. On Sundays, he would take some of the nuns or sisters in their habits and put them in the old Model A and take them downtown to go to St. Willebrord's for church. That was great fun. I have good memories of that. Then I bought a couple of Corvettes. I would sell them and buy something else and make a couple dollars on them. I had a nice Corvette that I would love to have back, but my son was born, and I didn't have any insurance, so I had to sell that Corvette to pay the bills; that was a good deal. I've got my son, but I don't have the Corvette. I think I'm better off—I really am.

DV:

How long did it take to go from that idea to actually opening this place up?

RL:

About the better part of two years. I had that stroke, so for about a year or maybe nine months, I thought, "Should I do this? Should I not do this?" I could hardly even talk at that time. I could get one-syllable words out. I wrestled with it a lot, doing it or not doing it. Then I thought, "You know what? I can do this. It'll give me a challenge, to make things go." That's when I called an architecture firm, Somerville, and said, "I want to build this [gallery]." I talked to their interior designer Nancy Widi, and I said, "Nancy, this is what I want. I don't want a museum. I want a gallery. I don't want all kinds of signs in there. I don't want to see gas pumps; I don't want to put oil cans up. And everything else that you see in automotive museums—big signs (Shell, Mobile, Amoco, Standard)—you see all that stuff. I didn't want to do that. I wanted white walls—everything white. Light contrast floors, white in the top, and then let the cars be the color. If you'll notice, there's a great variety of colors in the automobiles over the years. So the cars themselves are the art. And Nancy was really good. She understood what I wanted, alright, because she had seen things like this before, and then she added the red glass—all of the glass—there's lots of glass in here. That's how we ended up with this look.

DV:

I noticed you have a bust of Abraham Lincoln here in your corporate meeting space. Is there a story behind that?

RL:

I think Abe is the best president we ever had. It was a different time, you know, with the blacks and the whites and the South and the North. And he kept it all together. I saw that [bust], and I just had to have it. Everyone thought I was going to take it home, but I said, "No, it's gotta go up here" [in the gallery's corporate conference room]. Everybody who's meeting here sees that [sculpture]. Think wise and be wise with your subjects or what you're doing. Corporate people have board meetings here. They're making lots of decisions, so they have to make wise decisions, and I don't know anyone who was wiser than Abe.



DV:

Do you have anything else you'd like to share?

RL:

My goal is that this [gallery] is here for years and years, to keep it going, and to keep it in Green Bay. That's why we do most everything using volunteer work. The work on the cars and all that is volunteer. We hope the community will see our value and support us for years to come.

Above: A bust of Abraham Lincoln in the gallery's corporate conference room.

Sunshine Tourtilot

The Automobile Gallery is located at 400 S. Adams Street in Green Bay. It is open to the public on Saturdays and Sundays from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. and on weekdays when not hosting private events. The Automobile Gallery is open seven days a week for corporate meetings and private events. The Gallery's mission is to appreciate the automobile as art and to educate, inspire, and share that passion with others so they too can truly appreciate the form and function of the automobile—past, present, and into the future.