

# Henry Ford Museum Led the Way

1987 HFM exhibit changed image of car museums



**ABOVE:** Opening in the fall of 1987, the Henry Ford Museum's "The Automobile in American Life" exhibit marked a change in the image of car museums.

**LEFT:** Racing cars are exciting and the Wisconsin Short Track Hall of Fame inside the Wisconsin Auto Museum in Hartford, Wis., has upped attendance.



"Floating" featured cars over others on unique single-post lifts is an attention getter at The Automobile Gallery.

Story and photos by John Gunnell

A little more than a year ago, I watched a museum-like facility in Green Bay, Wis., being built. It was called The Automobile Gallery, because the man who created it wanted it to be different than other car museums.

The founder, Red Lewis, made his fortune in the car wash business. Along the way, he learned a few things about education, entertainment and excitement. These are three qualities he wanted The Automobile Gallery to possess.

Showing cars from a 100-year timeline helped with the educational aspects. Showing electric cars and hot rods and including a catering area helped with the entertainment requirement so people could actually have parties in the building. Showing brightly colored cars that looked sexy and flashy added to the excitement, as did perching seven cars up in the air on unique single-post lifts.

Lewis also put a lot of thought into the building's black, white and red interior colors and the art gallery-like atmosphere. He said he wanted the cars to be displayed as if they were works of art.

Another thing Lewis insisted upon

was rotating cars in and out of The Automobile Gallery each month. This takes time, effort and money, but it keeps visitors coming back to see what's new month after month. The Automobile Gallery never falls into that "been there seen that" rut that can hurt a museum's attendance.

The Automobile Gallery is not alone among car museums when it comes to innovation and showmanship. Not too many years ago, I visited Gregg Gramms at the Volo Museum in Volo, Ill., to learn about the TV and movie cars he has collected. Gramms said that cars of this type boosted his attendance from 100,000 people a year to 250,000. Why? Because the so-called "Hollywood cars" brought out whole families instead of just car-loving dads.

There used to be a time when car museums were little more than dusty buildings filled with dusty vehicles. Fortunately, such places are rare today. If you ask me, the change began in the fall of 1987 when The Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village opened up its "The Automobile in American Life" exhibit in Dearborn, Mich. This long-running attraction covered six themes: the automobile as an American symbol; the automotive landscape; getting away from it all; evolution of the automobile and its industry; designing the automobile; and advertising and promoting the automobile.

The Henry Ford Museum's exhibit was professionally designed by Allen H. Woods Associates of New York City, but it then served as an example to other auto museums, large and small, by showing them how to blow the dust away and add education, entertainment and excitement to a car museum. The exhibit opened 30 years ago, but its impact is still seen today in nearly every corner of the car museum world. It was definitely a change for the better and inspired many of the great collections we can visit today as we travel America.



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