

THE SEAMAN BODY COMPANY

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Hemmings

CLASSIC CAR

THE DEFINITIVE ALL-AMERICAN COLLECTOR-CAR MAGAZINE

JULY 2018 #166



PLYMOUTH CONCEPT
1960 XNR SPORTS CAR



DODGE TRUCKING
THE EARLY RC MODELS



CARS OF THE SIXTIES

1960 RAMBLER – 1964 CHEVROLET – 1969 BUICK

**1925
WILLYS**
GETS
REBORN



PLUS
1942 CHRYSLER
1986 CADILLAC



HOW
**CARLISLE
PRODUCTIONS**
CAME TO BE



THE MILLERS, CHIP (LEFT) AND BILL.

Carlisle Productions

*Bill and Chip Miller
modernized the car-show concept
by creating the ideal venue
for postwar-car enthusiasts*

BY JEFF KOCH • PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF
CARLISLE PRODUCTIONS AND JEFF KOCH

Define "old." What is old? It's on a sliding scale, depending on the age of the person doing the considering. A memory that seems like only yesterday to some of us could well be ancient history to someone else. A car that feels classic to someone born in the '80s could feel like a recent memory for someone born in the '50s. Even Hemmings' own dearly departed *Special Interest Autos* had a story, in the '70s, wondering aloud how anyone could ever be bothered restoring '60s cars. So common! So much plastic! How could anyone want a dull little square '60s car over a chrome-laden, fantastic slice of '50s Americana? Clearly, the author of that piece hadn't counted on the lure of nostalgia for the Baby Boom generation. Old is relative, and it's all a question of perspective.

There was a time, only a few decades ago, when it was believed that old cars—that is, pre-WWII cars—were the only cars worth considering, worth keeping, and worth restoring. Anything built after the Potsdam Declaration was considered to be merely transportation—disposable workaday machines, unworthy of discussion, much less collection and interest.

But this was to change. The opening salvo in the modernization of the old-car hobby, the push into the modern era, came from an unlikely spot: Central Pennsylvania, not far from Amish country, where horse-and-buggy transport is still the norm.

In the early 1970s, the Milestone Car Society was still a young car club; in order to spread word of its existence, it bought booth space at the annual Hershey swap meet in 1973. Chip Miller was asked to bring out a car as booth candy, to entice passers-by to take a closer look. Corvette enthusiast Chip had a 1954 model he wanted to sell, and so he thought, why not bring that? An early Corvette would certainly qualify as a milestone vehicle, and what better place than Hershey to sell such a machine? His friend, Bill Miller Jr., no relation, rode shotgun.

You can imagine their collective surprise, then, when officials requested Chip remove his car from the premises. They informed him that his car was too new to sell at the event (the standard for an "antique" was 35 years or older in those days). Suffice it to say, their dismissal broke their hearts. Hershey was their favorite car-related activity of the year, and disappointment

SPRING
IF 75-80

Eastwood

FALL
IF 66-74

AUTO RESTORATION TOOLS & TECHNIQUES



doesn't begin to describe the feeling.

But even as they were waved away, conversation turned. What a shame that there wasn't a place where postwar cars—cars within their own living memories, as opposed to the ancient history seen elsewhere—and their associated parts could be shown, sold, and swapped. And the more the Millers talked about it, the more they mulled it over, and the more they realized that they were going to have to be the ones to make it happen.

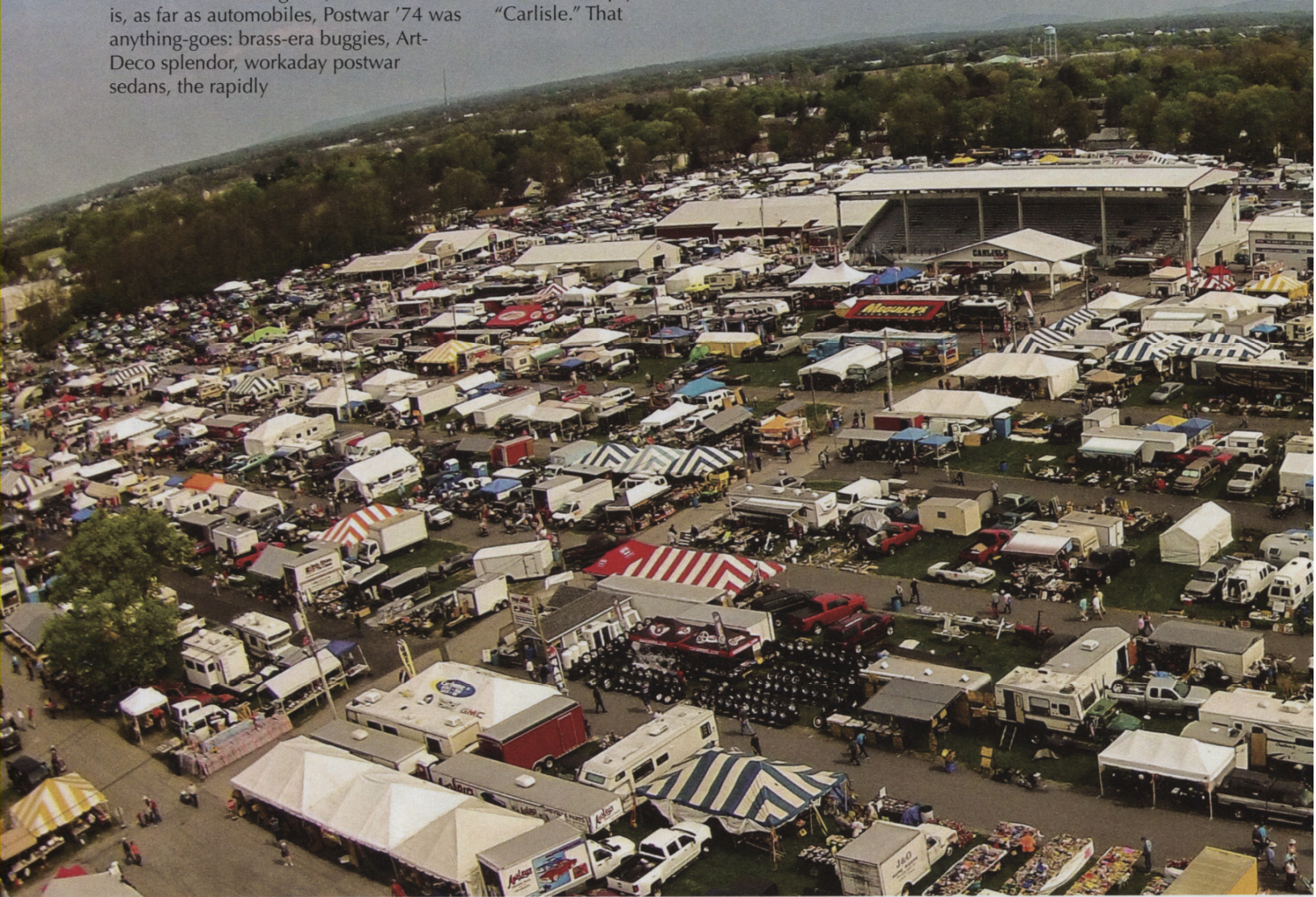
Searching around Pennsylvania, the Millers decided that the 70-acre Carlisle Fairgrounds was ideally placed for a car event. It was centrally located in the state, at the spot where Interstates 76 and 81 met, making it easy to get to (and, at the end of a long and tiring day, to get away from). Chip and Bill incorporated as Carlisle Productions, each putting up \$500 to rent the fairgrounds. On September, 26, 1974—one week before the annual Hershey cornerstone that inadvertently inspired events—"Postwar '74" was held. The name suggested that anything built after WWII was fair game, but the truth is, as far as automobiles, Postwar '74 was anything-goes: brass-era buggies, Art-Deco splendor, workaday postwar sedans, the rapidly

fading memory of muscle cars, and the associated parts and tchotchkes that went with them.

It could have gone horribly wrong. With the first OPEC fuel crisis in full swing, it could well have been that no one wanted to pay for the gas to travel to Carlisle. The cars of earlier eras were not, as a general rule, designed to be particularly fuel-efficient. Admission was \$1—roughly the cost of a gallon of gas. Yet the Millers defied the times: Postwar '74 drew 600 vendors in 800 spaces, as well as a diverse crowd of more than 13,000 people of all ages, with their enthusiasm all over the automotive map. Thirteen thousand people at a car show/swap meet is a healthy number any time. For a first-year show, it's outstanding. For one executed in an era that wasn't particularly car friendly, it's astonishing. For Carlisle locals, with a population in the '70s of just 18,000, it must have been overwhelming.

Needless to say, the Millers decided to plow on. The catchy "Postwar '74" moniker wouldn't work for 1975, so the show simply became known as "Carlisle." That

event, and the one the year following, grew quickly, and for 1977 Bill and Chip introduced a second show—"Spring Carlisle '77," which was held after the snow went away, and quickly became the first big automotive event of the season in the Northeast. The shows sold out by 1980, and a Summer Carlisle event was added. (Today, the events are known as the Spring [or Fall] Carlisle Collector Car Swap Meet & Car Corral, or, simply, as Spring Carlisle and Fall Carlisle.) That year saw one other change—a venue shift, to the Pennsylvania State Farm Show in Harrisburg. The owners of Carlisle fairgrounds continued to raise the rent as the events increased in popularity, so Carlisle Productions moved for a year, bided their time, and in 1981 the Millers purchased the fairground facility outright. This meant that they could make physical alterations to the setup of the grounds, customizing the layout for vendors and spectators, alike. Renting the space meant they couldn't make alterations against the owners' wishes, but now that Carlisle



Productions owned the grounds, they could maximize their space, and do as they saw fit. Through the '80s, capital improvements were made to the facilities. Roads were paved. A food court was added. Permanent bathrooms were made bigger and better. Electricity hookups spread throughout the grounds. It became civilized, far more hospitable for vendors and visitors alike. A family friendly atmosphere flourished.

The next year, 1982, saw the first of Carlisle Productions' marque-specific enthusiast shows, focused beyond the general sell-and-swap meet. Chip's enthusiasm for the Corvette saw Chevrolet's sports car as the focus of its own show and swap meet. It turned out to be the right answer: Though other Corvette shows are older, Corvettes at Carlisle is the world's largest Corvette event. Soon, other shows launched, each one specifically tailored to a rabid group of enthusiasts: Ford Nationals, Chevrolet Nationals, Chrysler Nationals, Hurst Nationals, Truck Nationals, and

Import & Performance Nationals for the sports car crowd. Nine big events between April and October. And the fairgrounds are expanding; thanks to the purchase of some surrounding land, the Fairgrounds now stands at 82 acres.

You might think that the harsh Pennsylvania winters would curb the fun, but Carlisle has recently expanded to Florida, with a pair of Autofest events at the Sun 'n Fun complex in Lakeland. Spring, Summer, and Fall Carlisle events are now home to Carlisle Auctions, and Winter Florida Autofest has an auction, too. Unique among car auctions (that we've attended, anyway) is the "Free Unless Sold" guarantee: Any seller whose 25-years-old-or-older car doesn't sell at the event, will get their fees returned to them.

And yet, as Carlisle Promotions grows, it remains very much in the hands of family. Chip Miller passed in 2004, but Chip's son Lance returned to the fold shortly thereafter, and became 50-percent owner in 2009. Bill Miller Jr., has retired, and his son Bill III now owns the other 50 percent of

Carlisle Productions. Together they are bringing the company into the future.

Time marches on for all of us. Attitudes regarding old cars are slow to come around, although newer cars are being brought into the old-car hobby all the time. New generations, new ideas. The AACA's sliding 25-year rule today means that anything made in 1993 or before can be considered a classic. National rod and custom shows are slowly updating their nothing-past-1972 rules to nothing-past-1987. Chopped-roof kustom-with-a-k classics and Shelby Mustangs have appeared on the lawn at the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance—an unthinkable prospect not that long ago. An entire generation of Generation Xers are recalling the vehicles of their own '80s and '90s-tinged past—and, finally, have the income to pursue them. The evolution of the old-car hobby, incorporating some sliver of modernity, may well have happened without a couple of guys named Miller getting kicked out of Hershey for daring to hawk a Corvette. But there's no denying that Carlisle Productions helped usher things along. 🏎️

