

Silver Auctions asks...

# Why just once a year?

Story and photos by Larry Edsall



For more than 20 years, Mitch Silver's sale has been a regular part of the Arizona auction week that takes place each January.

But unlike the other auctions, Silver's sales are not held in Phoenix or Scottsdale, but a pleasant 20-minute drive east across the desert, at the Fort McDowell Resort and Casino on the 24,000-acre grounds of the Yavapai Nation.

The facilities there include a Radisson hotel, which along with Four Peaks—the tallest mountain in this part of the state—provides a backdrop for the peaks of the big white tent Silver sets up as a base for his auction sales.

Recently restored and lightly modified cars include this '59 Chevy Bel Air four-door crossing the block inside the Silver Auctions tent, or this '52 Mercury two-door post sedan in flat black. • Badges are on a '73 Buick Riviera and a '41 Ford. • You wouldn't find a tire that's a little low on air ('55 Chevy pickup, bottom left) at the top-dollar auctions, but then again you would expect to pay a lot for that air, at those. • Any '57 Chevy is bound to get attention, and this four-door 150 sedan was no exception.

But location isn't the only thing that separates Silver's auctions from the others.

For another, the cars he offers up for bidding are not over-restored objects of art you might expect to see in a museum or in an exotic car collection. For the most part, they are classics you can buy at an affordable price and enjoy driving to local cruise-ins and car shows.

The latest wrinkle that separates Silver's sales are their frequency. For several years, Silver not only was part of Arizona Auction Week, but a week later he'd stage what he called a "last-chance" sale, offering car owners one more opportunity to sell vehicles that hadn't sold the previous week at the auctions.

After a few years, Silver switched from the last chance auction to a spring sale timed to take advantage of the Valley's population boom during baseball's Cactus League spring training season in Arizona.

In late November of 2013, he was back with yet another sale, this one right after Thanksgiving.

"It's pretty crazy for a market that size [Phoenix is the fifth most-populous city in the country] to have auctions only one weekend a year," Silver said.

"We did the March sale with very little pre-announcements," he added. "We didn't have time to do national advertising, but the March sale was very successful."

Silver said he added the autumn event in part because of the success of the twice-a-year sales Keith McCormick stages at Palm Springs in California.

"They're timed around the snowbirds' arrival and departure," Silver said.

"It makes sense," he continued. "People are looking for something fun and new to drive, but maybe don't want to take it home with them [after a winter in the desert]. There's a fair amount of that activity. It's not necessarily collector



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This '55 Chevy Bel Air convertible sports V8 power and rare power windows. • The wild hood is on a '99 Chevy S-10 Blazer prepared for SEMA in Florida and with only 29,000 miles. • This '57 Pontiac has a 502 crate motor under that scoop. • Purple paint on a '57 Lincoln contrasts with maroon on a '40s Buick Eight. • The '62 Mercury Monterey convertible is a full rotisserie restoration.

cars, more borderline exotics—Mercedes, Porsches, really nice cars that are fun.”

Silver includes himself among those customers. He said he usually takes a couple of Arizona auction cars back to Spokane, Washington with him.

“I usually bring them home and drive them for six months and then sell them up here,” he said, adding that people in northern climates appreciate such good, clean, rust-free cars, even if sometimes they aren't quite old enough to be considered true classics.

Silver got into the old car business more than 30 years ago. A professor at Eastern Washington University, his hobbies included searching for aging automotive gems “in backyards and out in farms” and traveling to as many countries around the world as possible. There, too, he'd often go off to explore the local car culture.

One weekend, he drove across the state to attend a classic car auction in Seattle “and it was the greatest thing I'd ever seen.”

So he went home and organized a classic car auction in Spokane. A decade later he left teaching and went into the classic car business full time, usually staging around a dozen events a year in the Pacific Northwest and Arizona.

Again in contrast to the major auctions held in Phoenix and Scottsdale in January, Silver's sales are low-key, with an almost picnic-like, local car show sort of atmosphere. Silver often takes the microphone and serves as the auctioneer.

He said the new fall sale here provides an opportunity “to meet some people and show them what we do, so when January [and his big auction] comes around, they'll be comfortable with us and feel they know us.”

Oh, and Silver isn't finished with his auction calendar just yet. He's also talking about a summer sale, although that one would be held not in a tent but in an air-conditioned indoor facility. ■

