

HEART TRIP

BY JOE SAGE



When Harold E. LeMay dragged home his first old car, in the early days of his waste collection business—literally somebody else's trash becoming his treasure—he never in a million years would have visualized what his idle yet irresistible passion would beget.

From concept through construction, LeMay—America's Car Museum has been an invigorating challenge for its dedicated backers and staff. Some of the progress can surely be recounted by them in excruciating detail. Yet for us, the progress appeared impressively swift. We first visited the site in spring of 2011, when the structure was just rising above grade, as concrete floors were being poured (see our May/June 2011 issue). The roof followed from spring into summer—an amazing compound-curve design in which no two arched glue-lam beams and no two pieces of metal roofing are the same. By September of 2011, the building was ready for its first gala: Hard Hat & High Heels (see our Nov/Dec 2011 issue), with the building closed in against the impending winter, even as construction continued all around.

UP TO 500 CARS UNDER ONE ROOF

The Museum has its origins in Nancy and the late Harold LeMay's collection of 3500 cars (a Guinness World Record), many of which are housed at the new facility, many of which are housed at the LeMay family's own facility in Pierce County, and many of which will be rotating through ownership and/or location in the coming years. Other vehicles will also become part of the constant flow—whether coming from clubs (including the Museum's developing nationwide Club Auto network), or manufacturers, or other sources such as major concours and race events nationwide—as the display space is extremely adaptable, occupying some 165,000 square feet indoors and with a 3.5-acre show field adjacent. A series of six ramp galleries—together comprising about a half-mile walk—surround four major floor galleries, plus there are three cornerstone galleries, for a total of thirteen galleries at any given time. Add slot cars, a kids' zone, a library, banquet hall and two private clubs with balcony views of downtown Tacoma and the waterfront.



As ACM Vice President Scot Keller points out, roughly only 10 percent of the population are car enthusiasts or experts, but everyone understands America's love affair with the car. "We appeal to not only enthusiasts, but to people who don't really know anything about cars. We tell the story, too, of that whole time. It's very eclectic." We entered the museum on opening day with a local friend who was not a car enthusiast, but had heard the concept. Within 30 seconds, we heard, "Oh! My grandmother had one of these, and we used to take it to the lake!" This was such a perfect mimic of the stated mission, we thought it was a joke at first, but it was 100 percent legit. Mission accomplished. As Keller says, "it's not a head trip; it's a heart trip."

OPENING DAY

We toured the Museum three or four times during construction, as well as at last fall's gala, and stopped by other times in between. There's no way we would miss Opening Day, June 2, 2012. The event included a free outdoor car show, go-kart racing, slot car racing and live concerts. Weather was ominous overnight, but the clouds blew away and the sky turned sunny and blue about 15 minutes before the 10am Opening Ceremonies. Fate had been kind. The Puyallup Indian Nation performed blessings, and ACM President David Madeira thanked dignitaries and all those who have given of themselves to accomplish this task, before presenting the Key to the Museum to Nancy LeMay—and opening the doors to many generations of visitors yet to come. ■

DESTINATION: TACOMA

Our fascination with LeMay—America's Car Museum is not hard to figure. First off, we've visited with the executives and board as they traveled to Arizona the past two Januaries during auction week, for a sunny warm-up and business retreat. Second, Tacoma is our kind of town: a small waterfront city with a solid work ethic and all sorts of magic up its sleeve. Ultimately, ACM is a world-class attraction beyond any geography, a place every car enthusiast will want to visit (and become a member of). Part car show, part car club and part "Smithsonian," ACM offers an experience anyone in America will enjoy.

It's an easy flight from Phoenix, about two and a half hours to SeaTac. Grab a car and head south 25 miles to Tacoma, completely avoiding crowded Seattle. ACM is next to the Tacoma Dome, near the Tacoma Art Museum, Museum of Glass and Washington State History Museum. A variety of lodging includes even waterfront hotels for a fraction of Seattle prices.

Join the Museum before you go, and you'll already have your ticket and other benefits before you arrive. For information, visit www.lemaymuseum.org. ■