

How We Became New Jersey's Only Public Antique Auto Museum
written by John Mahoney

It all began on a cool September night, the last Cruisin' Downtown Toms River of 1998. A bunch of car guys from the Vintage Auto Club of Ocean County were standing around discussing what they know best—cars. “Whose car is that? What about that engine? I like those wheels. He does good work. Sounds good too.” We talked about the various car shows we attended that season, and all the great cars we saw at each show. But, one question arose during that conversation. “Why don't we see more cars from the early part of the century? If this trend continues, everyone will think the Model T came equipped with a V-8 engine.”

That question led to another question. “Why doesn't New Jersey have a museum for old cars?” Good question. Other States have antique car museums. New Jersey doesn't. Maybe we should start one. As antique car enthusiasts, it is our duty to remind the public what a Model T looks like; how it sounds; how it smells. But the big question was, “How do we do that?” How does a group of car guys with absolutely no experience and no money establish a museum? The answer: Baby Steps.

The first thing you do is to ask people in your club if they think it's a good idea. And why wouldn't they think it's a good idea? We are all like-minded thinkers when it comes to cars. We talked about the museum possibility every chance we had, and we especially talked about it during our regular monthly club meetings. At the February, 1999 Vintage Auto Club meeting, the business part of the meeting drifted toward another mention of a car museum. That's when lightning struck. It was lightning in the form of our eldest member, Walter Piatkowski. A veteran of two wars, Walter was of the generation whose catch phrase was “get-er-done!”. “Enough talk!” he said, standing. “I have a check here for one hundred dollars to get this museum going! Who's with me?” Within two minutes, another eight members slapped their one hundred dollars on the head table. We were on our way.

Next was a letter to the State Historical Society. Perhaps we could get the State of New Jersey on our side. It made perfect sense to us, and the State agreed that an antique auto museum would make a great tourist attraction. But that was as far as there support went.

Then we wrote a letter to the local newspaper. The paper gave us a nice write-up on their Op-Ed page. Now maybe we could get support from the public. But, not one response.

It quickly became apparent that if our museum were to flourish we would have to go directly to the people who would most likely support us—car people. The word was put out that we would have a special meeting to discuss forming New Jersey's first antique museum. We had that meeting in March, 1999. Most of the people in attendance were from the Vintage Auto Club of Ocean County. Unfortunately, some club members wanted nothing to do with the museum, and in fact resented any notion that the museum would be a part of the club. So at that first meeting we decided to name the museum, The Vintage Automobile Museum of N.J., a

separate entity from the Vintage Auto Club. We elected officers at the first meeting. John Mahoney as President, Walter Piatkowski as Vice-President, Elie Chesney as Treasurer, Doug Graham as Secretary, and Roger Naylor as Membership Chairman. And thanks to Walter's son, who was a graphic artist, we soon had a logo. The logo included the Mercer automobile since it was built in N.J., and the Barnegat Lighthouse, a New Jersey landmark, which had stood to protect ships at sea for over one hundred years.

We opened our own bank account. We not only deposited that original \$900, but we soon had other contributions from within our own ranks, and from other groups who joined us in building a museum. Those additional contributions numbered 29 individuals, and some spouses, plus, one car club and the Rotary of Point Pleasant Borough. Included in the 29 was the original nine Vintage Auto Club members, and the entire body of contributors up to that point became known as the Museum's Founding Sponsors. There is now a plaque in the museum inscribed with all 31 names of the Founding Sponsors. While the names will always remain on the plaque, some of the people connected to those names are no longer with us. A few, including Walter Piatkowski, did not live long enough to take part in our Grand Opening in September, 2012.

The secret of success of any venture is to bring aboard those individuals who not only share the same passion, but who are also capable of moving the venture forward. We were lucky to have a select few who were willing to work hard, sacrifice much, and earn nothing in return except gratitude. We became a not-for-profit organization in July, 2000. We were an antique car museum in every sense of the word, except for the biggest word—a building. We had everything that goes into an antique car museum, but we did not have a roof over our heads. Instead of having a place for people to visit, we took the museum to the people. We developed educational programs, such as our History on Wheels, and brought antique cars to schools, nursing homes, historical societies, fraternal organizations, and just about every group who wanted a car museum in their own backyard, for just a few hours. We also developed a Speakers' Bureau where we have a power point demonstration, at times at the aforementioned locations, but without cars. Instead, we wrote several narratives relative to the history and development of the automobile. One narrative even discusses the highways and byways on which we all drive. All of our educational programs have been very popular, and even other museums across the country have inquired about our programs.

For twelve years we wondered if we would ever have a building that we could fill with our cars and automotive memorabilia; a building open to the public. There were, and still are, many vacant buildings throughout the state, but the cost of renting any amount of space larger than a four car garage was prohibitive. Our collection grew, but not necessarily our bank account. Then, in the Summer of 2012 we finally struck a deal for 2200 square feet of a 5000 square foot building at a marina in Point Pleasant Borough. With much fanfare, we held our

Grand Opening on September 17, 2012. We were home at last. Our neighbor on the other side of the building is the New Jersey Museum of Boating.

Sadly, our jubilation was short lived. A mere six weeks later, on October 29, Super Storm Sandy roared into N.J. Having a museum in a marina during a super high tide overwhelmed any preventative measures we had taken. We visited the museum the very next day. By that time the water had subsided and upon opening the door we were greeted by heart wrenching destruction. By gauging the stains on the walls, we concluded that before the water emptied back into the marina, it had reached a level of 52 inches inside the museum. Everything in the museum lower than those 52 inches was damaged or destroyed. Model cars, books, carpeting, display cases, furniture, all items that had been donated, lay in a soggy, smelly heap. Some of the display cars had already gone home to their owners, but the cars that remained, even after we had placed them on blocks, were water logged up their interior floors.

As sorry a sight that it was, “quitting” was not something we considered. It took nine months to fix and replace all that was damaged, including the more than four feet of walls that we ripped out. In August, 2013, we had a Grand Re-Opening to an equal, if not better, fanfare than the original.

Our museum is still at 2200 square feet, and the average number of vehicles on display at any one time is ten. But since we change all the vehicles every 60 to 90 days, our guests, numbering in the thousands, have enjoyed an interesting variety of antique vehicles. We are, “The Biggest Little Car Museum in the Nation.”

We’ve come a long way since that conversation under a street lamp. First of all, we have earned full support from the Vintage Auto Club, with both organizations sharing a larger number of members. We have visited other car museums and gleaned from their directors a wealth of knowledge. We are kept informed of trends as well as the dos and don’ts of running a museum by joining the National Association of Automobile Museums. We have a yearly car raffle, using mostly classic Mustangs, which have been very successful, and we also receive a welcomed amount of grant funding from Ocean County Bureau of Tourism.

Now we are celebrating our 17th year as a museum. No one can celebrate a 17 year anniversary without having sixteen successful anniversaries before it. And part of that success comes from a small band of insanely dedicated car people, who despite slow growth and minor setbacks, continue to honor the mission of the Vintage Automobile Museum of N.J.

And now we invite YOU, the members and friends of the one and only—and therefore the best—antique car museum in all of New Jersey, to visit us and take a closer look at how we answered the question: “Can we do it?”