

Elmer's Auto & Toy Museum is known far and wide. Soon, this incredible collection will roll off to auction. Before that happens, there's one last story to share.

PEDAL



LES DUELLMAN HAS A WARDROBE DECISION TO MAKE.

It is August 3, 2019. A Saturday morning.

Standing in front of a packed house at St Mary's Immaculate Conception Catholic Church in Fountain City, Wisconsin, Les glances at his father's casket and knows this isn't right. "Dad, I know you're not a suit and tie kind of guy ..."

the oldest of Elmer and Bernadette Duellman's six children starts.

Then stops.

"Just a moment," Les says, before walking off to the privacy of the church sacristy. A eulogy with suspense begins to unfold.

The day before, at his father's wake held – naturally – at Elmer's Auto & Toy Museum, crowds of friends and family brought their cars and memories to celebrate Elmer Duellman's life. How many people showed up? No one's sure, but

the family received guests for about nine hours while Lakeview Drive-In served around 900 root beer floats, Elmer's favorite treat.

But now, in the Immaculate Conception sacristy, alone with his thoughts and plan, Les takes off his suit jacket and puts on his blue, white and black "Dirt Duelers Chassis" racing jacket, the one emblazoned with sponsor names and flames. He walks back out, rejoining his father's funeral mass.

"Well Dad," Les says, looking down

POWER



Photo Courtesy of Mecum Auctions, Inc.

at Elmer's casket, "it's technically a suit but I think it's one you would approve of."

The church erupted. You could practically hear Elmer's laugh.

Indeed, Elmer Duellman, a man with gas and oil in his veins for most of his 79 years, would love a racing-jacket-clad eulogy.

Elmer was a car guy. When he wasn't driving them fast, fixing them or selling them, he was collecting them.

Through the years, Elmer and Bernadette, his wife of 56 years, ran Elmer's

Auto Salvage, Elmer's Sales and Service, Bernie's Bargains, River Raceways, and, of course, Elmer's Auto & Toy Museum.

The museum, just outside the small town of Fountain City, in west-central Wisconsin, on a 90-acre piece of land along Eagle Bluff overlooking the Mississippi River, is as spectacular as the view. Elmer and Bernadette started the museum in 1994, filling five buildings with more than 100 cars, 175 motorcycles, 800 pedal cars, 250 bicycles, hundreds of signs and as many as 30,000 cast-iron,

pressed steel, tin wind-ups, Japanese tin and battery-operated toys.

A large portion of the collection will be offered by Mecum Auctions, the world's largest classic and collector car auction company, at an on-site event in Fountain City September 14-17.

"It's got to be in the top five of collections in the world," says Mecum consignment agent Gus Kozar, who is working with the family to continue Elmer's lifelong wish to share his collection with the world.

Kozar has worked with Mecum for



ELMER'S AUTO & TOY MUSEUM COLLECTION AUCTION

SEPTEMBER 14-17

Elmer's Auto & Toy Museum
W903 Elmer's Road
Fountain City, Wisconsin

Photos and detailed descriptions
are available at Mecum.com.
For more information
call 262-275-5050.

thirty years and has seen countless collections. He calls Elmer's staggering.

"Overall, the minute you walk into any of these buildings you have the same feeling. It's overwhelming the quality and volume of Elmer's collection," Kozar says. "It causes eye sensory issues because you don't know what to focus on. You start staring at the pedal cars and then you look up and there's another one, and then there's a pedal airplane. And then you look to the left and there's a pedal tractor. And then you look behind the pedal tractor and there are rows of memorabilia ..."

And on and on and on. Building after building. It's all ... staggering.

The museum remains open through Labor Day Weekend. Then, after its twenty-ninth season, Elmer's Auto & Toy Museum will close its door for good. The Mecum auction will begin the disbursement of a lifetime of collecting.

Elmer bought his first pedal car in 1971, a 1905 wooden, chain-driven beauty. After filling his available garage and stor-



age space with full-size classic and collector cars, he switched his attention to pedal cars, ultimately building one of the world's largest and most encompassing collections. Along the way, Elmer became one of the preeminent experts in the field, contributing to a series of books on the topic.

In 2003, eight of Elmer's pedal cars were featured in a seventy-car exhibit at the Stamford Museum & Nature Center in Stamford, Connecticut, titled "Pedal to the Metal: A History of Children's

Pedal Cars." Elmer's 1905 chain-driven model was the earliest pedal car in the exhibit featured on "CBS Sunday Morning News."

Elmer and Bernadette also gifted one of their pedal cars, a circa-1953 Kidillac to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. in 2003, as part of the "America on the Move" display within the National Museum of American History.

So respected as a pedal car expert, Elmer was the go-to guy on the hit TV



Photos Courtesy of Mecum Auctions, Inc.



Elmore shared his impressive knowledge of classic cars and toys with anyone who asked, including Mike Wolfe (above with Elmer), the creator and star of the hit TV show 'American Pickers.' Wolfe considered Elmore a mentor and friend, calling him 'a big kid at heart.' Elmer's Auto & Toy Museum (at left) opened in 1994. The museum will close after Labor Day Weekend to prepare for the auction.



show, "American Pickers." When Elmer died, Mike Wolfe, the creator and star of the show, wrote an emotional tribute to his long-time friend and mentor on social media.

"Elmer shared his knowledge of classic cars and antique toys with me when I first started pickin' all those years ago," Wolfe said. "He was always there to support me and answer my questions – something I always appreciated. I believe as collectors, we have the responsibility





Photos Courtesy of Mecum Auctions, Inc.



Elmer and Bernadette's wedding day, 1962.

Photos Courtesy of Duellman Family

The young couple with sons Les (left) and Rick.





The museum collection features 800 pedal cars. From left (clockwise): 1950 Garton Kidillac; 1950s AMF Caterpillar D-4; Ford TW-35; 1950s Murray Super Sonic Jet; Minneapolis-Moline tractor; Murray Country Squire; black and turquoise 1961 Dodge; Murray Radio Patrol Police Car; 1950s Murray Atomic Missile; Murray Dude Wagon; and John Deere Tractor.



Brad and Les in the rumble seat, Melissa on the running board and Rick inside the family's Model A roadster.



Elmer and Bernadette were married 56 years.



to honor the items and pass along their stories to the next generation. Elmer lived a similar truth.”

Of course, there’s more to life than a collection, even one as impressive as Elmer’s.

Back at Immaculate Conception, in front of family and friends, wearing his racing suit jacket, eldest son Les begins to share stories about his dad. It’s a greatest hits compilation, gathered from his brothers and sisters (Rick, Brad, Melissa, Eric and Amanda) and the eight pallbearers.

It comes as no big surprise, really. If you know the Duellman family – and everyone around these parts does – then you know they are natural storytellers. With Elmer and Bernadette as parents, you never run out of material.

So, here are a handful.

HI, I’M ELMER!

Born in Fountain City to parents who owned a gas station, Elmer could overhaul tractors by the time he was a teenager. But fixing cars wasn’t as much fun as racing them. Elmer became a demon

on the local dirt-track racing scene. One night, after losing a race, Elmer was drowning his sorrows with a few buddies when he rolled into Cochrane, another small town up the road from Fountain City, in his 1958 Chevy Delray.

That’s when fortune smiled on Elmer. By happenstance, he pulled that Chevy up to a bowling alley where Bernadette was working as a “flower girl” pinning flowers on the shirts of the incoming patrons. She pinned one on Elmer as he stumbled into the joint. He was thunderstruck. Perhaps emboldened by drink, Elmer asked Bernadette right off if she’d like to go out with him on a date.

Son Brad takes the story to the finish line: “She said, ‘Go home, sober up and come back and ask me later on,’” Brad says with a laugh. “So, he did that, and a few hours later, he came back, asked her out, and they dated for the next 10 days. Every night, he would come up, and Mom would cook them a meal to share along with her parents.”

The two were married October 27, 1962. That ’58 Chevy Elmer was driving that night? Elmer used it as a daily driver

and for drag racing, almost never losing behind its wheel. Elmer eventually sold it, only to buy it back decades later as an anniversary gift for Bernadette.

THE FIXER-UPPER

With the money Elmer makes working at his dad’s gas station, coupled with a wrecker service and a gig snowplowing city streets, he and Bernadette scrimp and save just enough money to buy a gorgeous piece of land along one of the prettiest spots on the Mississippi River Valley. Amazing views. But the house? It needs work. A lot of work.

“He was so proud of that house,” Les says. “One day he grabbed his younger sister Ruth, brought her up here to see the place. It was rough. No running water. No toilet. No insulation. They had an outhouse. They didn’t even have a well. Their water was delivered by a tanker. There was like 20 or 30 junk cars in the field. He had a vision for the future, but my aunt remembers looking around and saying, ‘Oh my goodness, Elmer, what did you get yourself into?’

But Elmer and Bernadette knew.



Photos Courtesy of Mecum Auctions, Inc.

They could see it. All of it was possible if they just kept working shoulder to shoulder. So, they did, for 56 years.

WHO NEEDS A COUCH?

Years later, when the hard work is starting to pay off, Elmer buys a 1929 Ford Model A Phaeton. The couple needs another car like the Pacific Ocean needs another bucket of water. Scared of what Bernadette might say if he's found out, Elmer hides the car. Hiding a Model A is no easy task, even when you own a salvage yard. Of course, the car is spotted, but instead of being upset, Bernadette loves it.

"That Model A is nice enough to put in the house," she tells Elmer.

A seed is planted.

A few years later, when the couple builds an addition on their home, Elmer creates a false wall allowing the car to be driven into the living room and parked next to the fieldstone fireplace. Everyone finds that hilarious.

A shared sense of humor affords a couple great gas mileage on life's highway.

BACKSEAT DRIVERS

With six kids, money is tight. You make fun where you find it. And for the family, fun is found behind the wheel of a car.

A few years ago, Melissa, told the *Winona Post* (Winona, Minnesota) about family car rides, ones where Elmer let the kids decide where to go. "When we got

to an intersection, we'd say 'left,' 'right' or 'straight ahead.' And we'd just do that for hours. Whatever direction we'd yell, he'd go," she said. Off they went, with no particular place to go, but all together, having fun.

THE END

Orson Welles, the great American director, actor, screenwriter and producer, knew a little something about stories. He once said, "If you want a happy ending, that depends, of course, on where you stop your story."

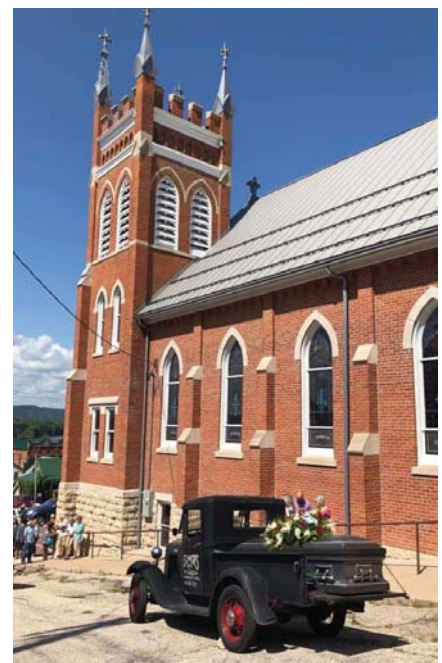
Ours stops in the back of a pickup.

Elmer Duellman was not a suit and tie guy. He was not a hearse guy either. After Elmer's funeral, the family loaded his casket into the back of the museum's black 1932 Ford pickup parked outside the church. A parade of cars followed Elmer and that black Ford pickup for one last lap around his hometown before heading off to the cemetery.

When all is said and done, everything from the museum – the cars, the motorcycles, the pedal cars, the toys, all of it – will be auctioned off. Everything, that is, except for the black 1932 Ford pickup with Elmer's Auto & Toy Museum in white paint on the doors.

The family is keeping the truck.

Bernadette, Elmer's partner through all the adventure – the children and fourteen grandchildren, the auto salvage, sales and service business, the racetrack, the museum – has dementia. She's in a care



Instead of a hearse, Elmer Duellman made the last lap around his hometown of Fountain City in the bed of his museum's 1932 Ford pickup, shown here outside St Mary's Immaculate Conception Catholic Church on the day of his funeral.

facility. Some days are good. Some days, not so much.

So, yes, the family is keeping the truck. The kids will use it again when Bernadette takes her last ride.

And then they will tell stories about Elmer and Bernadette.

Lots and lots of stories.