

The 'guru' of the Studebaker

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When Minnesota resident Henry Votel recently found an unidentified ornament in a box of old Studebaker parts, he got answers from someone 450 miles away.

Mokena resident Richard Quinn, a retired history teacher and a former mayor of the village, saw a photo of the object on an Internet discussion group and quickly identified it as a badge mounted on the headlight support bar of a 1928 Commander GB.

Impressive? Yes, but nothing extraordinary for Quinn, who auto experts say has the world's largest private collection of Studebaker memorabilia — all crammed into his modest three-bedroom home.

"He is the guru of Studebakers," said Votel, 55, of Forest Lake, Minn., who owns 10 Studebakers. "He's a very knowledgeable man. To have somebody ID that in a few hours, that was exceptional."

Quinn fields about two dozen calls a week on Studebaker trivia, answers e-mailed questions, edits a fan publication, writes a column for another and contributes to still others.

Quinn, 63, was bitten by the "Studeophile" bug as a 19-year-old in Peoria when his older brother Pat bought a Studebaker. Transfixed by its looks, Quinn went out and got himself a 1940 model.

"I looked at it and said, 'Man, that's a nice-looking car,'" Quinn said, adding that he has since bought and sold the car three times. "That was my first one, and they seemed to follow me home after that."

The Studebaker Manufacturing Co., formed in 1868, grew from a blacksmith shop in South Bend, Ind., to become the biggest wagon manufacturer in the world — and the only one to successfully make the change

from horse-drawn to gasoline-powered vehicles.

By 1913, Studebaker was America's third-largest automaker, but bad decisions made during the Depression sent the company into bankruptcy.

It recovered to make 240,000 vehicles in 1950 (its peak production year), but it gradually lost too much ground to the Big Three automakers. The last Studebaker rolled off the assembly line in 1966.

But Studebaker cars and trucks — especially the curvy 1950s models — retained a cult following. Film critic Roger Ebert, Ralph Nader and former President George H. W. Bush are among the famous figures who've owned Studebakers, Quinn said.

Starting in the 1960s, he began collecting spare parts, signs and manuals from the remaining Studebaker dealers. Using a complete run of corporate newsletters he had collected, Quinn tracked down former employees and gathered photos and other items.

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"He's preserved a lot of information that would have been lost otherwise," said Fred Fox, a Delhi, Calif., Studebaker author and expert.

Today, Quinn owns six Studebakers. The red 1931 President coupe that he spent 15 years restoring (Quinn has a picture of it over his fireplace) is in the National Studebaker Museum in South Bend.

"When I was growing up, most of my friends were car guys," Quinn said. "I think all of them had either a Ford or Chevy. You always want to be a little different. I just always liked the styling of it."

Quinn's closets are jammed full of Studebaker repair manuals, his garages are stuffed with rare parts and albums bulge with his collection of about 13,000 Studebaker publicity photos. On an end table is "probably the largest collection" of bronze Studebaker medallions around.

"I don't think you're going to find a collection equal to that anywhere," said Andy Beckman, the archivist at the National Studebaker Museum.

Beckman, who describes Quinn as a "noted Studebaker scholar," sometimes forwards callers looking for information on pre-war models to the Mokena man.

"He still has a schoolteacher demeanor, but under that gruff exterior is a very kind-hearted person," Beckman said.

One of Quinn's cars was totaled and many of his parts were destroyed in a garage fire five years ago. Quinn has taken steps to make sure that his photo archives, which include flammable nitrate negatives, don't create a similar problem.

Not surprisingly, Quinn's home decor isn't exactly modern. The televisions are in wood cabinets, an eight-track player sits next to the garage and the magazine on the coffee table is a May 11, 1942 issue of *Life*.

Quinn, who was Mokena's mayor from 1981 to 1983 and helped launch the town's historical society, assembled his collection on a teacher's salary.

"A major benefit of being a Studeophile is the friends [I've] made all over the country...I could literally get in my car today and travel from here to Seattle, Washington and never stop in a hotel — just stay with friends along the way. Studebaker people are very nice people."

—Richard Quinn

"I wasn't living very high on the hog, and I had to be very careful about what I bought," said Quinn, who never married and has no children. "(Until 1988) I always lived in an apartment. When I first came out here, I just had a room."

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