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Muscle Car City museum in Punta Gorda fuels dreams of the past

By Michael Kruse, Times Staff Writer
 In Print: Wednesday, March 4, 2009

Nancy Boisvert of Cape Cod, Mass., checks out a shiny red 1967 Corvette Coupe and other Corvettes at Rick Treworgy's Muscle Car City in Punta Gorda on Tuesday afternoon. "I wish I could take one of them with me," Boisvert said. The official grand opening of the museum, housed in an old Wal-Mart, is next month. Treworgy plans weekly car shows and cruise-ins.



[DIRK SHADD | Times]

PUNTA GORDA — What we have here, in a new museum in an old Wal-Mart on the Tamiami Trail, is chesty, strutting swagger and honest to God, American-made *get-up-and-go*.

Rick Treworgy's Muscle Car City opened its doors for the first time Tuesday morning at 10.

Inside are 175 cars. A lollipop-red '62 Chevy Bel Air, a light-blue '66 Impala, and a mean black '67 Pontiac GTO with a license plate that says GR-RRR! The long bars of high fluorescent lights shine bright on the buffed-up hoods.

"These cars, they're not just cars," Treworgy said. "Like putting a saddle on a bolt of lightning."

These days, of course, the American auto industry is listing at best. The auto blog Jalopnik.com calls it the "carpocalypse."

Back in the '60s, though, when Detroit was one of the biggest cities in the country and not some real-time case study of urban decay, Ford had its Mustangs, Chevy had its Camaros and Chevelles, and Pontiac had its GTOs. The '64 GTO, some say, started the so-called muscle car era.

"Take the smallest, lightest body, and the biggest motor you can get in there, and let all hell break loose," said Bob Merlis, who writes about cars in *Automobile Magazine* and on the Huffington Post.

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style while checking out other celebrities who are turning 50.

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The Beach Boys sang about muscle cars. Burt Reynolds drove a Trans Am in *Smokey and the Bandit*.

Muscle cars started to disappear in the early to mid '70s. Stiffer safety regulations. Stricter emissions standards. Higher insurance rates.

In its time, though, "the muscle car era had a sense of magic to it," said Peter De Lorenzo, the publisher of *Autoextremist.com*, a longtime auto blog. "The Cold War seemed to be fading into the rearview mirror. The muscle cars were keeping with the national psyche at that time.

"Big horsepower," he said, "and big dreams."

But now, in early '09, Florida has the second-highest foreclosure rate in the country, and last year Charlotte County had the sixth-highest job loss in the state. The number of people receiving food stamps in the county jumped 113 percent. The director of the county's homeless coalition placed an ad in the local paper asking for high chairs.

Treworgy has lived here since '59. He has white hair and is 60 years old. He made his money in real estate and land development and he owns some pieces of several area restaurants.

He started collecting these cars in '73. He's been thinking about opening a place like this for 20 years. He says maybe now's not the greatest time.

Or maybe it's just right.

"I've lost money in the stock market, and I've lost money in real estate," Treworgy said. "I really haven't lost money in these cars."

Last year, he bought the old Wal-Mart, cleaned it out and brought in his collection. He says he's going to have weekly car shows and cruise-ins and billboards on Interstate 75 up to the Georgia line. An official grand opening is scheduled for next month.

On Tuesday, though, he just opened the doors, to see who'd come. Ten bucks to get in. Thirty for a pass for the year.

The parking lot started to fill up, with Mercurys and Cadillacs, with license plates from Maine, Massachusetts and Michigan. A man in cowboy boots and a rugby shirt made to look like an American flag walked in. Stiff-legged men in jean shorts and Velcro sneakers and women in sandals carrying sequined handbags moved from car to car.

Sheila Walas stopped at the long-finned blue '59 Impala near the far wall.

"Senior prom," she said.

She was here with her husband, Bill Walas, and they're from Rhode Island and winter in Punta Gorda. She took a snapshot.

"Same color," she said. "Same everything."

"Yep," he said. "Tropical turquoise."

"I remember my blue dress with the white, with the crown," she said, "feeling like the cat's meow."

"You see the couples," said Kathy Sweck, 67, from Port Charlotte, and she took her elbow and nudged her partner, Dan Kennedy, 64, "and they remember the back seats."

At Muscle Car City, up front by the register, the line was long.

The people wanted in.

Staff researcher Caryn Baird contributed to this report. Michael Kruse can be reached at mkruse@sptimes.com or (727) 893-8751.

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hans from sarasota

Mar 9th, 2009 11:50 am

late 50s and early 60s were the days you could get away with dragging your buddies up and down the streets of Sarasota in your rod without getting caught because there were few cops at the time. Was that great !

Nick from N. Ft. Myers

Mar 6th, 2009 8:26 pm

I remembmer as a kid in Long Island, the Plymouth Superbirds were all lined up on Montauk Hyw .Flourescent blue, lime green, hemi orange,,,etc. I wonder those cars sold for bawk in the days ???

Nick from N. Ft. Myers

Mar 6th, 2009 8:05 pm

I would LOVE to see another Gremlin X, Levi package,6cyl. stick,,,, I drove one of these back in the early 80s. Maybe not a muscle car (unless it had the 409), but Everbody knew the AMC Gremlin!

Stan from So Portland,Maine

Mar 5th, 2009 8:49 pm

Coming down in April and anxious to see it all !

chuck from Dunnellon, FL

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Mar 4th, 2009 5:12 pm

Also the 351 boss mustang. Garlets has a few nice cars at his place in ocala. Resist the "northern" pronunciation, its not poon-ta gorda its pronounced pon-tah gorda.

Ken from Nowhere, Alaska**Mar 4th, 2009 3:03 pm**

What about the greatest of them all, the Hemi-Cuda or the Plymouth Superbird?

Sue from St. Petersburg**Mar 4th, 2009 2:07 pm**

I had a '67 GTO way back when and I miss that car every day. If I knew then what I know now, what a difference there would be! LOVE IT!!

Raye M from ST. Petersburg FL**Mar 4th, 2009 1:59 pm**

Own a 1970 Challenger RT -- 426 HEMI. Today I have an 09 Challenger 6.1 HEMI. Next monthwe are going on a road trip to Punta Gorda. Glad that Rick Treworky has been able to save these cars.

Kenny from Fort Myers**Mar 4th, 2009 1:11 pm**

As a 2004 Mercury Marauder owner, I get to enjoy the last of the Muscle Cars. This collection will remind people that WE invented the car - drove the passion and made icons out of steel and rubber. I think this may restart the American car interest.

Garry from Tampa**Mar 4th, 2009 11:47 am**

I have fond memories of modifying late '50s & early '60s machines for street racing in Detroit. Had a buddy with a full race 7 leter overhead cam Ford in a rusted out Mercury shell that made more money on a Saturday racing than he did working 40 hours.

D from St. Petersburg**Mar 4th, 2009 10:39 am**

address, phone number, website? thanks

Bob H from Brooksville**Mar 4th, 2009 10:01 am**

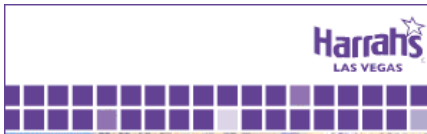
Nice article, but you didn't have to go as far as Punta Gorda. Tarpon Springs has a nice showroom/museum, Classic Corvettes and Collectibles. Great place to spend an afternoon.

David from Clearwater ,Fla**Mar 4th, 2009 8:41 am**

I think that your business is a great tribute to the American spirit and to American inguinenety. Thanks for your contribution.

Scott from Sarasota**Mar 4th, 2009 8:29 am**

Best use of a Walmart I'VE ever heard.



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