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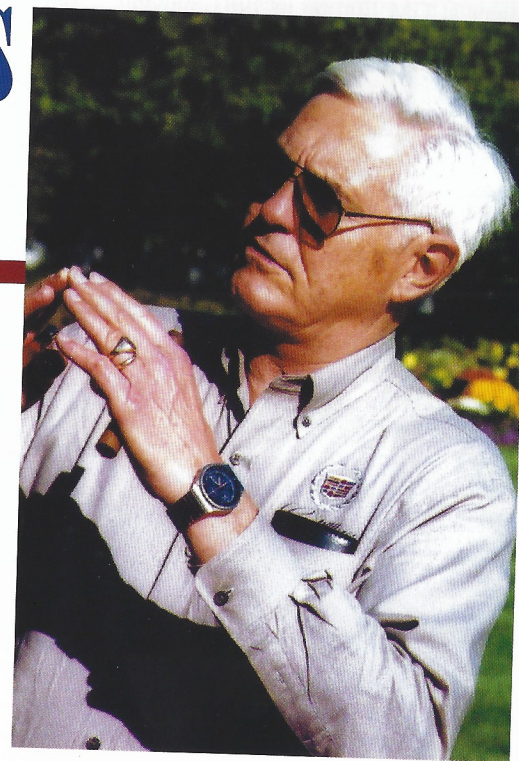
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Lutz at LARGE

GM's top "car guy" shares his cars, his memories

After driving up the winding drive of the spacious farm near Ann Arbor, Michigan, we were warmly greeted by Robert A. "Bob" Lutz, president of General Motors North America and vice chairman of GM Product Development, and his wife Denise (who flies her own helicopter), followed by a small pack of friendly, energetic dogs.

Also greeting us was an eclectic collection dominated by great design and engineering and, in many cases, high-horsepower American V8s, awaiting our inspection and discussion. Ducks and swans circled gracefully on a large pond to our left. One of the two family helicopters sat ready (for a grocery run?) in the background.



BY GARY WITZENBURG

General Motors shocked the automotive world in the fall of 2001 when it hired Bob Lutz to be Vice Chairman, Product Development. GM's product renaissance was well underway, but it needed a passionate spark plug to lead, enable, motivate and further energize it. Lutz is widely acknowledged as one of the industry's all-time best. He was laboring as chairman and CEO of battery maker Exide Technologies at the time.

A former Marine fighter pilot who flies his own helicopter for transportation and an ex-Lybean Air Force jet fighter for fun, Lutz began his auto career at GM Europe in 1963, moving

through ever-higher positions at BMW, Ford and Chrysler before "retiring" as Chrysler vice chairman in 1998. Not long after returning to his original employer, he was named chairman, GM North America ... and celebrated his 70th birthday.

The Lutz's vehicle collection includes 19 cars and trucks, 14 of them collectible (including a 1974 Steyr-Puch Pinzgauer military 4x4), eight motorcycles (including a 1956 Rumi Super-Sport Competizione) and three aircraft, including two helicopters and a 1979 Czech-built Aero-Vodochody L-39 jet "ZO" fighter.

As our discussion began, Lutz unwrapped one of his trademark cigars.

1934 LASALLE CONVERTIBLE

Lutz's yellow 1934 LaSalle is a stunning example of the mid-1930s U.S. auto design influenced by modern art and architecture.

"It was the first car I remember as a little kid," he recalls with a grin. "My father was one of the guys who got out of the market before the '29 collapse. He was 26 years old and driving something like a \$2,000 car, which today might be \$55-60,000.

"I remember leaning out the top floor window, and I'd see at least four people on the front seat and at least three more in the rumble seat, and everybody with bottles in their hands and behaving irresponsibly." He laughs heartily. "It was a '34 that looked exactly like this one ... that's why I had it redone in these colors.

"When you look at what others were doing in 1934, it was pretty special. Look at the pants crease in the fenders and the ornaments at the front of the fenders, the grille, the ornamentation, those half-cups on the side, the biplane bumpers. On the interior, the theme is consistently carried through in the welts on the door trim, horizontal and vertical, and they come to different points. It's just outstanding! This car was just so brilliantly designed, it's unbelievable!"

Lutz's parents moved to Switzerland and took the LaSalle with them. One day, his father took it to a dealership in Zürich for some trouble with the brakes. "During the lunch hour," he relates, "one of the car-washers decided to take it out on a stretch of four-lane in the industrial area of Zürich; it was the only road in Switzerland where you could do

80-90 mph. This guy was doing 80-90 mph, and a huge truck pulled out of one of the factories and he T-boned the truck at about 80 mph. Needless to say, he no longer had to answer for his actions."

1934 RILEY MPH SPORTS COMPETITION ROADSTER

I always wanted one," Lutz says of his rare Riley Roadster. This British marque dates to the Riley Cycle Co. of 1898, which built three-wheeled tricars and four-wheeled automobiles until it was absorbed into the British Motor Corp. (later British Leyland) in 1952 and eventually discontinued in 1969. The MPH roadster debuted in 1934 with a 1.7-liter twin-cam six-cylinder engine, 90-mph capability and Le Mans aspirations.

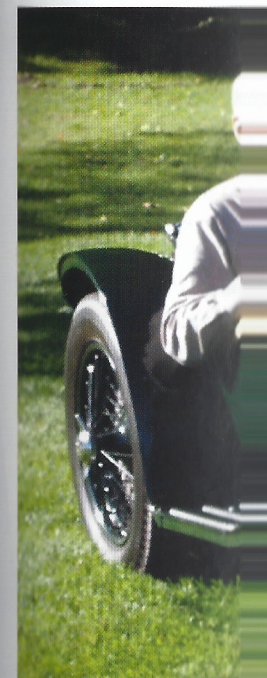
"I had seen this one for years in a garage in Bern. It belonged to the Riley importer, who had raced it before the war. Then he died, and his widow wouldn't sell it, and then I forgot about it." Then, when Lutz was in the Marines, he saw an ad for it, at 13,000 Swiss Francs (\$4,000 at the time).

He didn't have that kind of money but hit his uncle up for a loan.

"I had it stored in a garage and couldn't do anything with it for years. It had been sold out of the estate to an architecture student, and this guy had brush-painted the wheels red and painted peace signs on the hood, and every body panel was lumpy. He just ran it into the ground." What followed was a long and expensive restoration in England starting in about 1969.



Lutz savors a trademark fine cigar in his 1934 LaSalle Convertible Coupe—"The first car I remember as a little kid."



"The proportion on the front is beautiful," says Lutz. "It's just a handsome sports car. It's an early '30s Alfa Romeo coupe outline, the rear fender is very short, and the very short, under deck.

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The 1934 Riley MPH Sports Competition Roadster—"a super, super, super handsome sports car."—and its instrument panel.

"The proportion on this car is incredible," says Lutz. "It's just a super, super handsome sports car. It looks like the early '30s Alfa Romeo Zagato: the door cutline, the rear fender, the fin in back. But it's even better than the Zagato because it has this extreme long hood and the very short, rounded, tucked-under deck.

"One of the best views is the rear three-quarter. It looks like it's accelerating so fast that the whole body has slid aft on the chassis, which gives it a tremendous feeling of thrust."

Another element that today's designers would appreciate is the beautiful surfacing of the fenders. "They start out flat and gradually pick up more crown ... and

this curve is beautiful, and the mating of these two surfaces. It's a beautifully surfaced car, at a time when most designers and body builders didn't care about surfacing, they just put fenders on them. It has a beautiful instrument panel, and such a beautiful engine for 1934, designed by the same guy who did the Bentley engine of that era."

The shift quadrant is also unusual. "That's the Wilson pre-selector. It is in fact a semi-automatic gearbox. You pre-select the gear, and the clutch is only a switch for triggering the shift." At this, Lutz demonstrates, leaning into the cockpit, starting the engine, and selecting a gear. One expects the Riley will take off on its own and scatter the dogs on its way into the pond.

"It's not going anywhere," Lutz reassures, "until I tap the clutch. The clutch triggers the selection of the gear, but it still won't move until I add throttle. It's a centrifugal device that gradually engages the clutch. If you look inside the box, it has everything a modern automatic transmission has, with epicyclic gear trains and bands. What they couldn't figure out was the torque converter and vacuum devices for the shifts."

Lutz goes on to explain that these transmissions were popular because of their robustness and because they allowed the driver to pre-select the desired gear before going into a corner. "Then, as the car is going sideways, and he's flailing the wheel around—which they had to do in those days—he doesn't have to worry about taking one hand off and finding a gear. He can just tap the clutch, and there it is."

Such transmissions were designed for Le Mans, and Rileys had done fairly well with a couple of class wins, but by the time this 6-cylinder Riley arrived on the racing scene, competitors were running more modern technology. Approximately 10 of this Riley's type survive from a total production of 21, including the prototype.



1952 CITROËN 15-6 SEDAN

Citroën is a fascinating car," Lutz exclaims. "I think every car guy should have one because there is so much interesting history. This is a 1934 design—this one was built in '52 because the war made it a very long product cycle. It's a 2.8-liter overhead valve in-line six ... a truck engine that they reversed and took the drive off the front, so it's the world's first in-line six front-drive car, and the world's first

unit-body car, at a time when everyone else was still using frames.

Budd designed the unitized body but couldn't sell it to U.S. producers, so Citroën picked it up. "Look at the '50s Hudson-style step-down design, and where the beltline is compared to a '34 car designed in the U.S. We don't have beltlines like that today. It's an absolutely modern proportion.

"And look at the rear legroom ... Charles DeGaul had one of these as a staff car. And no overhangs. They got the wheels absolutely out to the corners of the car, which gives it this wonderful, low-slung appearance. It's got full torsion bar suspension on all four wheels, with the longitudinal bars going to the A-arms in front, exactly like Chrysler did in the '60s. In the back it's got transverse torsion bars with trailing link suspension, à la post-war VW and Porsche."

Lutz explains the origin of the chevrons on the grille: "Citroën was originally a gear-cutting factory, and they invented a process to make gears for extreme high-torque applications. With conventional epicyclic gears with diagonally cut teeth, you always got side loads, and under very high torque the gears want to squish away from each other because of the diagonal teeth. Spur gears can stand much higher torque, but they're noisy as hell. Citroën's claim to fame was that he figured out that if you could do the epicyclic gears joined in the middle, like a pine tree, you'd have the benefit of the diagonal gear teeth but you wouldn't have the effect of squishing them apart.

"The difficulty was machining them in

that pattern, and that was invented. He basically was selling these high-torque cars and that became the syn-

Lutz compares his design cars. "The Citroën was leading edge technology. French. The British but really nice. LaSalle was antique and has a gorgeous body."

1952 ASTON MARTIN

After the war, Martin was purchased by trialist David about re-establishing credentials before morph it into a built high-performance, handling cars for the wealthy.

Brown's first post-1948 DB1, was a roadster prototype coupe scored 7th at the famous Le Mans race in 1949. His new wedded this attractive new 2.6-liter twin-cylinder engine on a shortened excellent DB1 chassis. Mans but finished and soon became a respected GT cars or would be purchased General Director of Switzerland, in 1952.

"He bought it because he had done well at Le Mans. He was the 'King of the Hill' blown off by colleagues. XK-120s, which were

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Lutz compares his three 1934-
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has a gorgeous body."

1952 ASTON MARTIN DB2 COUPE

After the war, in 1947, Aston
Martin was purchased by indus-
trialist David Brown, who set
about re-establishing its compe-
tition credentials before beginning to
morph it into a builder of high-style,
high-performance, hand-crafted sport-
ing cars for the wealthy.

Brown's first postwar Aston, the
1948 DB1, was a roadster, but a stylish
prototype coupe scored an impressive
7th at the famous Le Mans 24-Hour
race in 1949. His next car, the DB2,
wedded this attractive coupe body to a
new 2.6-liter twin-cam six-cylinder
engine on a shortened version of the
excellent DB1 chassis. It never won Le
Mans but finished consistently well
and soon became one of the most
respected GT cars of its decade. One
would be purchased by Lutz's father,
General Director of a bank in Zürich,
Switzerland, in 1952.

"He bought it because Aston Martin
had done well at Le Mans, so he could
be 'King of the Hill.' But he'd get
blown off by colleagues with Jaguar
XK-120s, which were half the price

with way more horsepower," Lutz
laughs. "He wanted to be loyal to
Aston, because it was a make that he
liked very much, and it wasn't ostenta-
tious. Being a Swiss banker, he felt he
couldn't have a Ferrari, or a Maserati
or anything too flashy."

Lutz was barely 20 when his father
bought the DB2, and it made a lasting
impression. "This Aston Martin is my
dad's car, absolutely the car, which I
had restored back to the way he had it.
The Aston was a breakthrough design
in '52, the first Italian-style British
sports car. It really looks a lot like a
Touring Superleggera body. He kept it
until '59, when he got a DB2 MkII S
with the triple-Weber engine and 205
horsepower."

Years later, Lutz the younger drove
a friend to an Aston Martin restoration
shop to pick up a car. "And there I saw
this green DB2 with the wrong rear
window, kind of like a Corvette back-
lite that went around the sides. And I
said, 'Gee, my dad had one of these,
but it didn't have this backlite.' And
the guy said, 'Well, the former owner
had that put in.' And I said, 'Well, my
dad's was metallic blue.' And he said,
'Look under the hood. This one looks
metallic blue.' And I said, 'My dad's
had these recessed boxes under the
pedals.' He reached into a box and
said, 'Did they look like this?' I said,
'Yeah, but my dad's also had these spe-
cial chrome bumpers.' He reached into
another box and said, 'Did they look
like this?' Then he said, 'Let me go
check the build ticket,' and he went to
his file and rummaged through, and
there it was, made out to Robert H.
Lutz. I bought it on the spot."



Lutz was barely 20 when his father bought this very same 1952 Aston Martin DB2 Coupe — "The first Italian-style British sports car."

1952 CUNNINGHAM C3 VIGNALE COUPE AND C4R

Lutz reflects on the derision with
which his Swiss car-loving
friends held American products
in general: "American cars don't
handle, American cars don't brake,
and there's never been an American
car that's done anything at Le Mans,"
he recalls. "And then Briggs
Cunningham started running at Le
Mans, and placing well, with basically
the early prototype Chrysler 300
engine."

Lutz's C3 coupe came when Le
Mans told Cunningham that the race

was for car producers, not prototypes.

"So he put this coupe into produc-
tion with a similar chassis to the C4R
racer, a slightly detuned engine and
this Michelotti-designed Vignale body.
It has a lot of awkward elements. The
windshield is way too straight. The
rear wheels are way too far forward,
and the back is sort of soggy and
drips down over the rear."

Then there's the upper compartment.
"What Vignale did, whether you had
a Ferrari, a Maserati, a Lancia, a
Cunningham or whatever, this green-
house and the doors and seats were
always the same. Then he'd change the
fenders and grille and do whatever he
had to do to satisfy whatever the chas-



Above: Briggs Cunningham built this 1952 C3 Vignale coupe when Le Mans organizers told him he would have to produce a car to continue running in their 24-hour race. Below: 1952 Cunningham C4R—"It looks like a great big old '50s Ferrari."



sis was. We were at the California Mille Miglia two years ago, and I thought a guy there had another Cunningham, but it was a Ferrari. He had exactly the same interior, trim

parts, everything—it was identical!"

Vignale's Italian interpretation of an American instrument panel is a blend of American flash with basic European design, something that

attracted Lutz to the car.

"This one is heavily modified underneath," notes Lutz, "with adjustable Konis, a Toyota Supra front bar and 14-inch ventilated Corvette discs, and it's de-cambered a bit. I don't mind doing some minor chassis, and especially brake, modifications on the cars I use for going fast. These things are lethal with drum brakes! The performance is way the hell and gone, and they grab—even worse if you can't rely on them going straight."

The C4R racer still rumbles and shakes and twists with torque like a race car. Its rectangular tubular space frame is a lightweight aluminum structure (about 2,100 lbs) with a 331 Chrysler Hemi (over 400 hp) "on those skinny Dunlop racing tires on the original Halibrands. And there's nothing on it ... no heater, no ventilation, no windows, no door seals, no door inners, no carpeting. It is a bare bones sports car, and it's got enormous torque. At the California Mille, when Denise and I had it out there, we sucked the doors off all the Ferraris, and it hangs with the C-Type Jaguars. It's really fast, really fast!"

According to Lutz, Briggs Cunningham designed the body, probably without any outside help. "I thought the Cobra was one of the most exciting sports cars of all time, and this car was 12 years before the first Cobra, with that same sort of shape."

Despite its weak design elements (i.e., windshield too vertical, front wheel cut too awkward from certain angles) it has great presence.

"Even the things that are bad, like that Pratt and Whitney air-cooled

engine oil radiator sticking up, or the clearance hump for the Weber carburetors ... nowadays you wouldn't have that vertical face on it, you'd fare it in in front. But all of those things give it character."

1955 CHRYSLER 300 COUPE

This is another one I always wanted," says Lutz. "In '55 ... to the enthusiast, this meant more than a Cadillac, because it was the first American musclecar, the first car with 300 horsepower. And then they dominated NASCAR for a number of years, so it was a genuine American high-performance icon."

Lutz notes that the engine was created thanks to Cunningham: when Chevy came out with the Corvette and Ford launched the Thunderbird, Chrysler had nothing. "So they reached into the parts bin and did a commercial version of the Cunningham racing engine."

"I also always liked the design, because it didn't slavishly imitate the '54 GM products, which were terrific with that reverse-slope A-pillar. And all the GM cars at that time had the very horizontal hood and the very blunt front."

But Chrysler incorporated a very strong Virgil Exner influence, and Ghia influence from Italy."

The chrome fin taillamps are another topic of conversation. "Chrysler never had any money, times were tough, the fin era was in full bloom, and they didn't have the money to do a new quarter panel for the fin.



1955 Chrysler 300 Coupe

So they just had one C a diecast fin that they

Lutz's 300 is exter original. Internally, Koni shocks, heavy s inch Corvette disc speed Torqueflite ins because the Lutzes car events.

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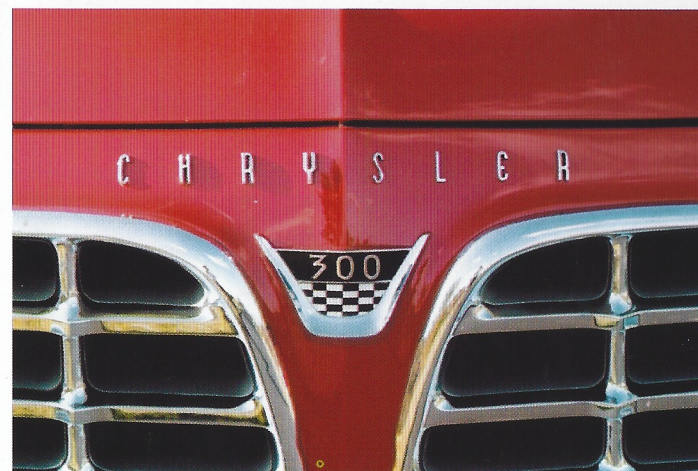
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1955 Chrysler 300 Coupe—"America's first musclecar."



So they just had one of the suppliers do a diecast fin that they could pop on."

Lutz's 300 is externally 100-percent original. Internally, it has adjustable Koni shocks, heavy stabilizer bars, 14-inch Corvette disc brakes, and a 3-speed Torqueflite instead of a 2-speed, because the Lutzes use it for vintage car events.

"It's fun going over the California mountains chasing the Porsche Speedsters, and they can't believe it," says Lutz. He answers doubts that a 1955 American car could handle fast

corners, and with a quick stop by telling naysayers: "American cars were a lot better than you guys gave them credit for."

1971 MONTEVERDI 375 HIGH-SPEED COUPE

I remember falling in love with that car at the 1971 Geneva show. It was another one of those cars that, like Iso Rivolta, Bizzarrini, Lamborghini, was created by a

wealthy individual—Peter Monteverdi, a Swiss—who was sick and tired of doing business with Enzo Ferrari. It's one of the many anti-Ferraris. The impossible nature of Enzo Ferrari—when people complained, he said [thick pseudo-Italian accent], 'You alla time complain, that's it, I no sell you no more car! I no sell car to customer who complain.'

"'I'll build my own!' His obnoxious nature created a whole bunch of interesting brands. Coachwork was easy to get done in Italy. There were so many

special body builders and tons of people who could do the chassis for you. And then all you needed was a powertrain, and everybody said, 'Why should I get all these overhead cams and develop my own engine when I can goto the American parts bin and get all the power I need?' Chevrolet, Ford, Chrysler, Cadillac. Monteverdi chose a Chrysler 440 Wedge with 375 horsepower.

"The design is by Frua, executed by Fissore. It has a lot of the same lines as the Ferrari 330, but I think it's much better. The 330 looks somewhat high



Above: 1971 Monteverdi 375 "High-Speed" Coupe—"One of many anti-Ferraris." Below: A brace of Vipers grace this Lutz Garage.



and narrow because it's on a much smaller chassis. But the Monteverdi has this great big tubular space frame to fit the Chrysler 440 and Torqueflite transmission, so it's a much wider and

longer car, much better proportioned with a much longer hood. I just think, for 1971, everything on the car is just so good! That proportion is still excellent today."

It has an interesting juxtaposition of angles and curves. "Yes, and that is exactly where design is again. It's not that far away from where we are with Cadillac right now.

"I saw it in a Christie's catalog ... for sale in Geneva. It was another of those 'always wanted one' cars because it was Swiss, it was beautiful, and it's almost unknown. No one's ever heard of Monteverdi, so it's sort of a secret make. It was still in the original color, a very light metallic silver blue, but badly rusted, and it hadn't run in years. We got it for 7,000 Swiss Francs. There were no other bids and no reserve, so for about 4,000 bucks it was mine. And then \$80,000 later ..." He laughs again.

Isn't the parts bin a little shallow for such a rare car? "Well, no, not really, because this is what the Italian coach-builders always did—and it's a discipline that we have to learn as we try to execute something like the [GM concept] Pontiac Solstice for very little

money. This is a totally 'everybody else's parts bin' car. The rear suspension is Jaguar, the instruments are British Jaeger, the taillights and door handles are Fiat 124. Everything was stolen from somewhere else.

"Part of Monteverdi's problem was that he was way too creative for his own good; he could never stick with one car. Instead of working on building and selling what he had done, that didn't interest him any more. He was only interested in the creative act.

"If I let myself go, if I didn't have the discipline of a large corporation and finance guys, who I know will say 'No,' if I had a limitless money pot, I'd do exactly the same thing. I'd build concept car after concept car after concept car and probably never put anything into production.

"That's the challenge. That's where you have to blend your passion with your sense of responsibility. The truly successful car people in the industry



Dodge's Li'l Red Express

are the ones who can't contain their enthusiasm just enough. They can actually make a better car. He laughs again.

Our photographer works in the rich late afternoon before it fades to dusk, leaning on his '78 Li'l Red Express, cleaning its battery terminals, hopeful that it's not too corroded. He had tried to start it earlier, then decided to extract one of the other

"This was the quarter-century vehicle in 1978," he says, flexing his muscle at that time. Nothing. Trucks over the years have to carry emissions of 3,505 because of the way it was on it. It was the first time he tried a sport truck."

Inside this garage, a brace of Vipers grace the ragtop and his brace of a 1992 R/T-10 roadster and a 1998 GTS-R (one of a series of 100).



Dodge's Li'l Red Express pickup—"The quickest American vehicle in 1978."

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Our photographer is finishing his work in the rich late-afternoon light before it fades to dusk. Lutz is working on his '78 Li'l Red Express pickup, cleaning its battery's terminals, hopeful that it's not quite dead, just corroded. He had tried unsuccessfully to start it earlier, then pushed it out to extract one of the other cars.

"This was the quickest American vehicle in 1978," he says. "If you wanted muscle at that time, it was this or nothing. Trucks over 3,500 lbs didn't have to carry emissions, and this is 3,505 because of that wood they put on it. It was the first time anybody had tried a sport truck."

Inside this garage are a '41 Chrysler ragtop and his brace of Dodge Vipers, a 1992 R/T-10 roadster (VIN 00002) and a 1998 GTS-R coupe (no. 99 out of a series of 100).

"One of the reasons I like that '41 Chrysler—and my Dad had one of those in exactly that color—was that '41 was a fabulous year for American design: '41 Buicks, '41 Cadillacs, '41 Oldsmobiles, '41 Chryslers and DeSotos. It was when the designers discovered surfacing, and they had these beautiful full surfaces that blended into each other. It was the beginning of the great American design era.

"I think good design is coming back now. We're in an era when the whole world is doing both good and bad design. There's bad Italian stuff, and there's some good Korean stuff just starting.

"I've got an Autocraft Mk. IV Cobra in the other garage, which isn't starting at all. It has a totally dead battery. I think it's just corrosion on the battery terminals." Denise offers to help push it out. "From the other garage? No, that resembles work. We'll just have to skip that one today"

What else is on his "always wanted"

list? "Well, I've kind of disciplined myself. I just know I'm going to own a 12-cylinder car at some point ... might be a Ferrari. But I have to watch that I don't get too much stuff. It's at the ragged edge.

"I am in that in-between stage, sort of that little valley, where you have enough net worth and income to be able to own all this stuff [he gestures broadly to include the farm and everything on it], but you don't have enough net worth and income to hire a full-time staff of guys in uniforms with the beautiful semi transporter that says 'The Lutz Collection.' And all these guys do is work in a tiled garage all week, and on Friday you call up and say, 'George, for this weekend I'd like the Monteverdi. Make sure it's fully fueled, tire pressures checked.'"

It was 6 o'clock, the light was low, the photos done and the family and friends gathered for dinner getting impatient. We helped him push the battery-dead Li'l Red Express truck back into the garage. Bob and Denise wished us well, and we headed home. We agreed it had been one of the more interesting and enjoyable three hours we'd spent in some time.

At 70, Bob Lutz is again making a difference, this time at GM. And it's not hard to understand why. His energy, his knowledge, his passion for the product are shared by few at any level in or out of the business. We wish him many more productive years ... and that V12 Ferrari still on his "always wanted" list. **AQ**

