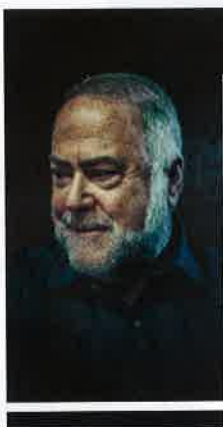


by John Phillips

NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM.



Last week I drove C/D's long-term Mini Cooper S to the LeMay Museum in Tacoma, Washington, 1500 miles round trip. Not LeMay as in "Old Iron Pants" Curtis, but LeMay as in garbage mogul Harold, who, before stripping his mortal gearbox in 2000, employed 530 refuse workers and amassed a car collection whose provenance spanned 100 years. *Voilà*, a ready-made museum, although the building that would house Harold's hobby—designed by Alan Grant and resembling a giant segmented worm covered in Reynolds Wrap—took two years to assemble.

Inside are 350 vehicles and 200-plus volunteers scattered over 165,000 square feet. Fifty of those cars are privately owned and come and go in six-month intervals. Every car in the museum is a runner, except for a 1917 Simplex Crane whose engine is out for rebabbiting, as well as the very first Studebaker Avanti, which is out for a frame-off resto, in part to remedy its vomitous sparkle-green paint. The cars are repaired on site by Dale Wickell, whose workshop is always open for viewing. As I watched Wickell fiddle with a '69 Camaro Z/28, Renee Crist, the museum's collection manager, told me: "We drive our cars. All of them."

Which is how I wound up touring Tacoma in a 1970 Olds Cutlass 4-4-2 convertible. It was a car that, 45 years ago, I almost persuaded my father to buy. Yet I'd never sat in one. Pale blue, with a dark-blue interior, roll-up windows, and a smoothly idling engine, the 4-4-2's overall structure recollected jellyfish anatomy, and the battleship hood shivered like a gaffed tuna. Floaty suspension, too, more or less completing the nautical motif as we cruised past Tacoma's harbor. "Tippecanoe and 4-4-2," I said, and Crist smiled.

I was invited to the LeMay to attend an annual fundraising soiree called "Wheels & Heels," the latter referring to the attire adorning the grandees gathered in the museum's Concours Club. I owned no heels, so I introduced myself as the kind of heel you'd find on Skid Road. The members seemed to grasp this with no further explanation, perhaps because they've



► Great weather, 350 collector cars, and "my" Olds 4-4-2.

coughed up \$53 million in endowments, whereas I coughed up \$5 to park the Mini.

"No museum makes it on gate proceeds," said David Madeira, LeMay's CEO. "And when people are asked to support rare cars, they say, 'Whoever owns these automobiles is rich; let *him* do it.' Anyway, most car collections are vanity projects—one person's cars, cars that interested him. That's why we have a dozen rotating exhibits, so a guest can come twice a year and not be bored." Madeira told me that 170,000 people visit the LeMay annually.

"We're the largest-drawing car museum in America, by far."

Among other swells, Rick Hendrick showed up to receive the museum's Nicola Bulgari Award for some sort of automotive derring-do that was never made clear to me, and a couple of Bulgaris were on hand to present the sterling-silver trophy. Hendrick wore a Johnny Cash suit underpinned by black sneakers. "One of the highlights of my life," he said, "was riding around Rome in one of the Pope's cars," an event organized by a Bulgari, if I understood correctly. "Like Harold, my dad owned 350 cars before he died," Hendrick told me, "250 of which we couldn't get anyone to pick up." Then both of us were introduced to Harold's widow, Nancy LeMay, to whom Hendrick said, "You are one frisky lady." She liked that.

During dinner, items of swagger were auctioned off. My wife and I pursued a coffee-table book called *Roar with Gilmore* and were eventually lured to a dizzying \$35 bid, which is when one of the aforementioned Real Heels bid \$139. Goodbye, Gilmore.

Turns out glass sculptor Dale Chihuly, he of the pirate visage, is crazy for the LeMay and thus offered for auction a blown-glass bowl called "Cinnamon Macchia." It was the size of a football and looked to me like a neon sea anemone, although I was told it contained fantastic "dust and small chunks of glass called jimmys," which less-well-heeled persons might call mistakes. Anyway, just as I bit into a tender piece of beef, I noticed a white auction placard being waved high in the air and attached to my wife's arm. A Chihuly devotee, she shouted, "\$2500," which caused one of those super-animated bidder's assistants to materialize instanter, looking very optimistic. Goaded either by his manic encouragement or by a second gin and tonic, my wife next shouted, "\$4500," an incremental jump sufficient to cause me to spit

a portion of beef, which made an impressive splat-landing beside my dinner partner, a fashion editor in a sparkly gold gown. That's when a similarly attired lady across the room shouted, "\$6000," and, even as I was gasping for oxygen, my wife lowered her paddle and said, "Oh, well."

Fireworks followed, launched from a parking lot mere feet away. Some of the detonations were so close as to deposit ash on my shirt. But compared with the auction's fiscal land mines, the incoming artillery felt like a warm bath in Valium. ■