

Employees Only

One of the most cherished car shows in Detroit is an annual lunchtime display that virtually no one outside GM sees. Jeff Glenn was in Milford to check out the annual Employee Car Show.



On one particular Friday in August, the parking lot at GM's Milford Proving Grounds contains even more interest for car nuts than usual: It's the day of the annual insiders-only Employee Car Show.

If you ever wanted proof that the folks testing and developing GM's next generation of vehicles are real gearheads, this is the place to go. Except that you can't: The show is for employees and registered guests of the Proving Grounds only, with the occasional lucky reporter thrown in.

It's a short and informal affair. Just outside Milford's main gate, near the new cafeteria building, row after row of hardcore enthusiast cars sit there all morning seemingly waiting for someone to notice. Then, for about an hour and a half over lunch, the lot erupts into a full-blown show complete with peer judging, lawn chairs, popups, picnics, and plenty of tall tales. After lunch, everyone heads back through the gates for the second half of the workday.

The Employee Car Show has the organized, comfortable feel of a longstanding tradition, but in fact it's a new-ish phenomenon. Back in 1999, during the Proving Grounds' 75th-anniversary year, GM began holding special events every month. There was NASCAR Day, when Richard Childress brought out his team to show off its toys. There were photo contests. And there was Employee Car Show Day, which proved to be one of the crowd's favorite breaks of the year. About 40 employee-owned enthusiast cars turned up the first year, prompting the rest of the gang to admire their colleagues' iron and wish they'd remembered to drag out their own. That sentiment was strong enough to prompt Milford's bosses to make it an annual happening.

Nearly 140 cars showed up for the most recent Employee Show, proof of a strong enthusiast culture amongst Milford's 3500-odd staffers. Nor was the enthusiasm limited to cars from *The General*; free to enter whenever

they like, employees display a wide breadth of interests from prewar sedans to hotrods and racers. The field is primarily American, but foreign brands get their parking slots, too. The most unexpected entry I came across during my visit was a concours-prepared '67 Volvo 122. I mean...who does that?

Of course the real meat and potatoes of the Milford Employee Car Show remains the staples of US collecting: hotrods, musclecars, and '50s and '60s cruisers from GM, Mopar, Ford, and the big Independents. My own favorites were a number of pristine '60s family cars that only hardcore enthusiasts would be likely to save and display—a Pontiac Ventura with '62 Michigan dealer plates, a tough-looking Buick Le Sabre, a handful of pristine V8-powered station wagons....

And yes, quite naturally, the show brings out lots of Corvettes, too. Matt Purdy came in the very same 1966 Milano Maroon coupe featured in CM31. Still fresh from its home res-

Left: Once a year, at lunchtime, the parking lot of Millford Proving Grounds turns into a full-blown enthusiast show.



toration, the car gave its owner a chance to get to know more fellow Corvette-nut employees and show them what he's been working on nights and weekends. Matt works in the HPVO (High Performance Vehicle Operations) Group on tire, suspension, steering, and other ride/drive issues.

Mike Grohs, also a chassis-development engineer, brought his white '65 convertible. "My father and I bought it from another engineer about a decade ago, and we did a frame-off restoration together over the course of about three and half years. It's a 327/350 with a four speed and has always been in Michigan. It was purchased new in Saginaw in late '64—we're the fifth owners."

Grohs' dad retired from GM and was working on the Sting Ray restoration full-time when the project was interrupted by a near-fatal car crash involving both of Mike's parents. "It was very gratifying to finally finish it and have him drive it," Grohs says. "He's 73



and we keep the car at his place during the summer so he can enjoy it as much as possible. So far, we've covered about 1000 miles a year in it. The best money we ever put into it was a stainless chambered rear-exit exhaust—it sounds great whether you're sitting still or banging through the gears." Mike has been with GM since '81 and worked at the Proving Grounds since '86. He was the chassis-development engineer on the Chevy SSR and is currently working on GM's new breed of two-mode hybrids.

Dave De Carteret, an engineering specialist from the Vehicle Dynamics Advanced Development Group, rolled into the show with his slick '69 coupe. "Cosmetically, I've done nothing to it in the last ten years except maybe wax it a few times. The Employee Show is the only one it's ever in—who wouldn't drive his Corvette to work for a free lunch?!" Dave has done a little more under the hood in the time that

he's owned it, however. "Mechanically, I've done a pretty generic non-stock engine rebuild. The smallblock is fairly healthy but nothing extreme—it runs low 13s in the quarter with hard, skinny tires. A couple years ago I grafted a Tremec T5 transmission into it as well...I say 'Tremec,' but it's really a Ford bellhousing pattern. The Ford Racing T5," he adds conspiratorially, "is really cheap and durable. Frankly, I think the best mod that can be done to an old four-speed car to make it drivable for long periods is to put in an overdrive trans."

Jerry Wilson is the guy in charge of the Proving Grounds' PR efforts, and he organized the first gathering during the 75th-anniversary season. "The Employee Show proved to be a great networking place for all of the employees who were into older cars. Some people have expertise in one area or another, and here was a place that they could seek out others to work out trades and swap tips. One

person might be into wiring and electrical, another may build motors or suspensions or do bodywork.... It really gave folks from different divisions a chance to see and appreciate their coworkers' handiwork."

Sure enough, you can see the wheels turning as Milford's employees come out and wander the parking lot. To GM, the Milford Employee Show is as much about team- and pride-building as it is about ogling hot-rods, and to staffers it's as much about making new friends out of colleagues as wanting a People's Choice Trophy. And for lucky occasional guests like me, it's a way to be reminded that while you can take the engineer out of the Proving Grounds, you can't take the Proving Grounds out of the engineer. How many other shows can you think of where the dash of an early-1960s GM sedan is likely to carry a C6-style Head Up Display? ☺

THE HERITAGE CENTER WEIGHS IN

NEVER ONE TO BE LEFT BEHIND, the GM Heritage Center has begun rolling out some of its own gems for the Milford Employee Car Show. At the latest outing, the flashiest of the Heritage Center's offerings was a giant brass-era Oldsmobile Limited. GM's biggest vehicle of 1911. The Limited rolled in on 42-inch wooden rims and sported a 707-cid inline-Six making 60 horsepower. Also working the gargantuan vein was the Heritage Center's 1969 Chevrolet Kingswood Estate Wagon, a factory sleeper whose soccer-mom "woody" side panels belie its 427-inch Mark IV big-block V8.

Officially launched in June of '04, the Heritage Center was conceived as a private, centralized repository for GM's vast collection of historic vehicles, documents, and artifacts—a role previously reserved for each individual GM division. The switch from division-based to centralized archiving

and storage remains far from complete, and probably always will. Still, the Heritage Center continues to gain influence and artifacts.

Its role has both historic and PR elements, so sending cars to staff functions like the Milford Show is a natural. Open only to employees and, on a very limited basis, organized groups such as clubs, the Center keeps about 200 vehicles on active display out of the 800-odd in its collection. Build records for Cadillac and Oldsmobile are also now located on-site, as is a large slice of GM's photo archives. The Center even has non-automotive artifacts in its care, such as the first heart-lung machine ever constructed. (It was built by GM for a Michigan hospital.)

Interestingly, GM currently outsources the maintenance and logistics of the Center fleet to an outside contractor. The private firm performed about 4000 vehicle transfers for 300+ separate events in '06.—Jeff Glenn



GM Heritage Center's 1911 Oldsmobile Limited.