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# Neighbors of Heber Valley



## Motoring Through American History

IN WALLSBURG, UTAH, RUSSELL BAKER AND THE RICHARD W. ERICKSON FOUNDATION HAVE CURATED A WORLD-CLASS COLLECTION OF CARS AND MOTORCYCLES THAT TELL AMERICA'S COMING-OF-AGE STORY

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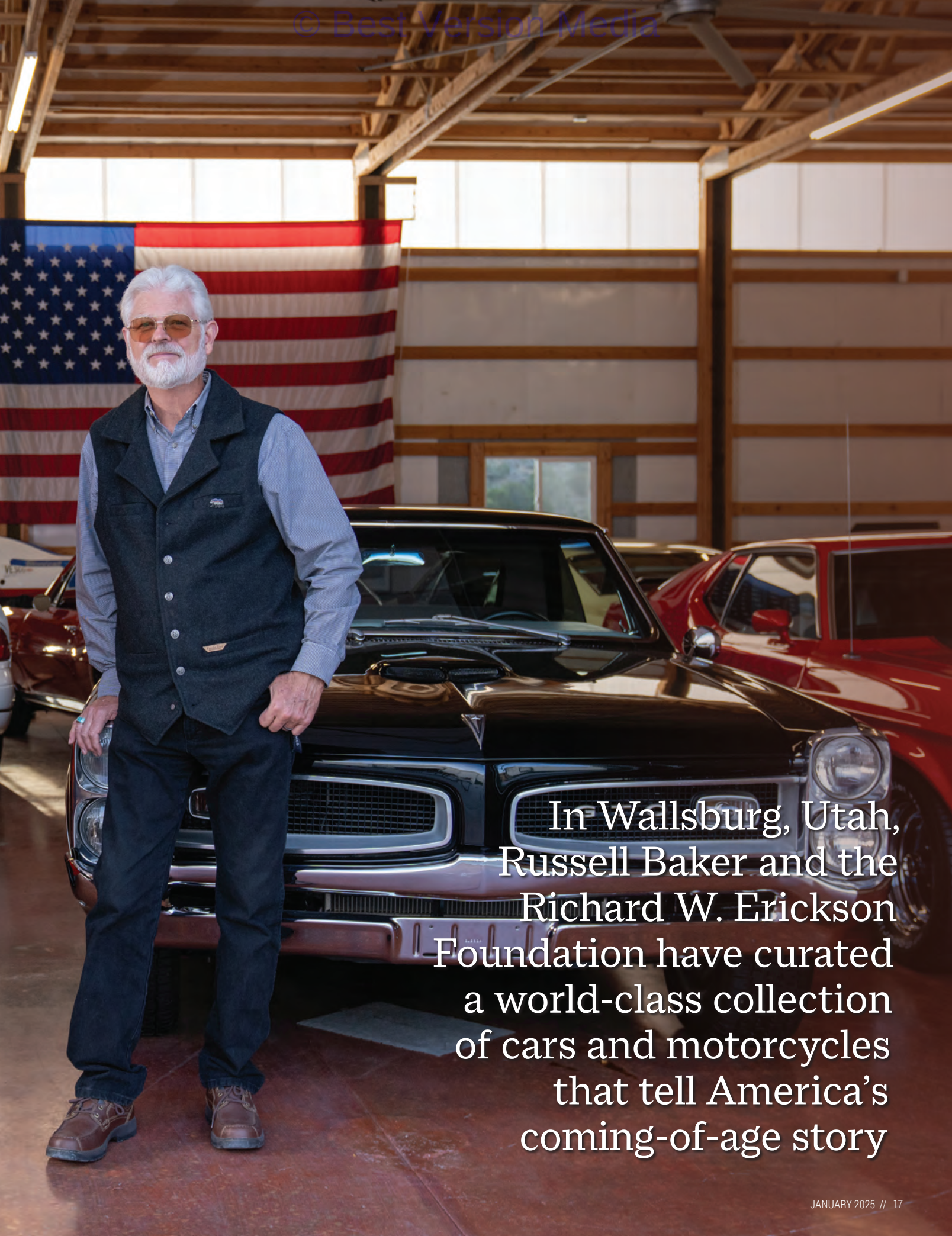


BY RICHARD ELLIS
PHOTOS BY DEB DEKOFF

# MOTORING THROUGH AMERICAN HISTORY



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In Wallsburg, Utah, Russell Baker and the Richard W. Erickson Foundation have curated a world-class collection of cars and motorcycles that tell America's coming-of-age story

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**IN THE EARLY 1970S, 13-YEAR-OLD RUSSELL BAKER BEGAN TO BUY, RESTORE, AND RESELL 10-SPEED SCHWINN BICYCLES. HE SOON PIVOTED TO MOTORCYCLES, "AND THEN THERE WAS NO STOPPING ME FROM THAT POINT," HE REMEMBERS.** As a teenager in Riverside, California, he bought muscle cars for $700 to $900, souped them up, and resold them. To do the work, he bought broken Craftsman tools at swap meets for pennies and went to Sears, "because they had a lifetime guarantee, and I'd bring them in and get new tools." A "desert sledder," Russell also raced motorcycles on open terrain.

Today, Russell is a keeper and storyteller of these traditions. For 23 years, he has curated a world-class collection of cars, trucks, motorcycles, and much more for the Richard W. Erickson Foundation, a nonprofit established in Wallsburg, Utah in 1999 to preserve American history. Situated on 300 acres of ranchland just south of Heber City, the foundation has numerous attractions including a working sawmill, mid-20th century salvage garage, vintage service station, and its flagship Antique & Classic Power Museum.

The museum tells the story of the global auto industry, which arguably is America's coming-of-age story. For over a century, our wars and politics, our songs and movies, our cities and roads, our romances and friendships, our innovations and enterprises, our adventures and misadventures all reflected a society built on motorized transportation. Russell's mission is to collect vehicles and their stories for the next generation of inventors, tinkerers, and racers who, for better or worse, may repeat this history.

The Antique & Classic Power Museum has outgrown its motorcycle building twice since Russell began curating in 2002. He introduces the collection with a replica of the 1867 Roper, the first-known








patented motorcycle. "There's a coal-fired boiler between your legs. See any problem there?" asks Russell.

Side by side, the museum's 1907 Indian Camelback, 1909 Shaw, 1913 Harley Davidson bicycle with a 1913 Briggs and Stratton motor wheel, and 1918 Johnson resemble the cartoon of a crawling ape evolving into upright homo sapiens. Each inventor, eager to evolve the bicycle into a motorcycle, believed they could improve upon existing designs, and often did. That is how Russell Baker thinks, too. "I can't help but look at things and say, 'I can make that better. There's room for improvement here.' I just can't help it," confesses Russel.

The youngest of three siblings, Russell was born in the deserts of California but grew up all over the United States. His father, a World War II and Korean War veteran, was an aerospace engineer at the cutting edge of rocketry. "They were just trying to build a rocket that wouldn't explode," adds Russell, "and they accomplished that."

After flipping bicycles, motorcycles, and muscle cars, Russell paid his way through college working in construction and retail sales. At age 22, he earned his general contractor's license—making him one of the youngest GCs in California—and started his own construction business. His parents, meanwhile, relocated to Utah with his father working at Hill Air Force Base. While visiting them, Russell fell in love with the state. He sold his construction business and moved to Ogden in 1982.

Russell took a job with the Campus Planning Department at the University of Utah, where he became the institution's construction cost estimator, working with a team of engineers, architects, staff, and



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a colleague named Danna Crandall. The oldest of five sisters, Danna was born in Heber, Utah and grew up in Peoa driving tractors and hay trucks on the family's ranch. Danna tried to line Russell up with several of her friends, but he wasn't interested in them.

When they finally agreed to date, "It had to be out of the office and incredibly confidential," notes Russell, to avoid running afoul of the university's HR policies. The office only found out after Danna came in one day with an engagement ring on her finger.

Early 20th century board track motorcycle racers were the NASCAR drivers of their day. Initially, they raced in wooden velodromes made for bicycles but soon elongated them into ovals with 60-degree banks, where racers could reach 100 miles per hour. No one had safety gear, accidents were common (picture eight-inch splinters), and so were fatalities. Like most board track racers, the 1914 Indian 8 Valve, among Russell's favorite motorcycles in the museum collection, doesn't have any brakes. Racers coasted to a stop.

"Harley-Davidson had a conscience—they put a brake on theirs," Russell says. "But it didn't do much good."

Russell, likewise, doesn't have brakes. "I always had a level of confidence, perhaps to the point of delusion," he says. Maybe that's why after he and Danna married in 1984, he decided to pursue an item on his bucket list: cattle ranching. They bought land in Kirksville, Missouri, where both of Russell's parents were raised. Having grown up on a ranch, Danna should have known better, but "I was young and stupid in love," she says. They moved east in 1985.

Russell and Danna both took big pay cuts moving to Missouri. Russell accepted a position with the City of Kirksville as the lead building inspector. While building the ranch and raising a family, he stumbled into an opportunity. While on staff at the University of Utah, Russell had gained experience dealing with asbestos, a carcinogenic insulation material. A local company in Edina, Missouri hired him to build up its environmental services business around mitigating asbestos. Five years later, that company earned a place on Inc. magazine's list of the 500 fastest-growing corporations in America.

In 1990, Russell and Danna decided to return home to Utah, where Russell accepted an offer to work for an environmental services company within a conglomerate. "I didn't realize it at the time, but I was the turnaround guy," he says.

Rather than bail out the whole failing conglomerate, Russell and a colleague, R.J. Sartori, a dear friend of Russell's to this day, decided to do "a friendly takeover." They spun out Thermal West Industrial, Inc. in 1992. Under their leadership, it became the intermountain region's top environmental and heavy mechanical insulation contractor—and remains so today. Copper smelters, oil refineries, and power plants were among its specialties.

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As Russell shows this reporter the classic car room, a train whistle blares from somewhere on him.

"My staff at Thermal West were pulling a joke on the old man," he explains. When he ordered a new phone in 2016, they set a train whistle for text notifications and ducks quacking for phone calls. "They gave me the phone, and it played those, and I said, 'This is fantastic. I love it!'" Eight years later, Russell's phone still whistles and quacks.

While building Thermal West, Russell immersed himself into classic cars and motorcycles, amassing a collection. He and Danna even owned a motorcycle dealership in North Salt Lake City, selling Triumph, Moto Guzzi, and Italjet bikes and restoring British motorcycles shipped in from all over the country. It was "a hobby that grew out of control," Russell says.

At auctions and auto shows, Russell regularly ran into Richard "Dick" Erickson, a collector who made his fortune in trucking, sand and gravel, asphalt, road and railroad construction, and demolition. "I'd be at an auction, and Dick would lean over to me and say, 'What do you think? And what do you think it's worth?'"

And then he kept saying, "you've got to come up and see my collection,'" says Russell, who was too busy at the time to make the journey from his home in Davis County to Wallsburg.

In 2001, at a motorcycle auction, Erickson ran out of room in his trailer and asked if Russell could fit some motorcycles into his. "He snuck a few bikes into my trailer," as Russell puts it. Then, after Russell hauled the bikes back to Utah, Dick convinced him that he might as well deliver them to Wallsburg.

"That was Dick," Russell says.

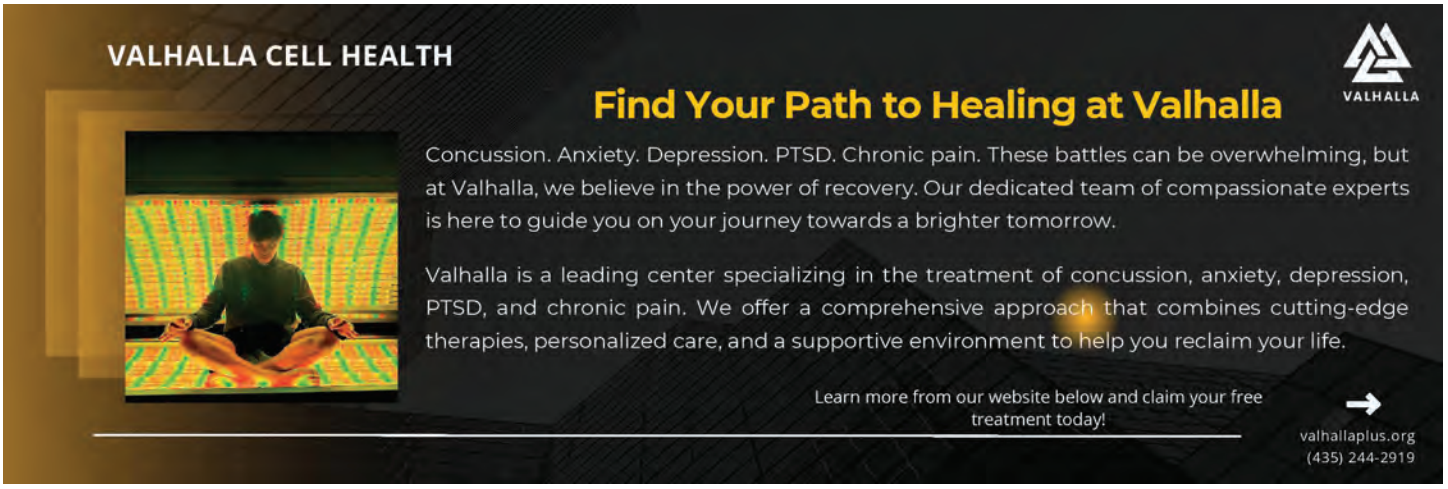
In Wallsburg, Russell and Danna saw the beginnings of the Antique & Classic Power Museum. Dick had a knack for recruiting people. First, he said he could use some help with the motorcycles. Russell was interested. Then, Dick asked Russell if he'd take over the motorcycle collection. "And in no time at all, I'm the curator of everything—cars, trucks, and motorcycles, and then became a trustee," Russell remembers.

In addition to serving as Dick's advisor and curator, Russell became the museum's storyteller. With each new acquisition, he delved into the vehicle's origins, engineering qualities, and relevance to American history.

All along, Russell saw ways to make the foundation better. He envisioned the ranch becoming a venue for bigger public events—like the multi-day music festivals that now take place every summer. "Oh, that's great," Dick would respond when Russell shared his ideas. "Wait until I die." Before passing in 2018, Dick chose Russell to serve as a chairman of the foundation.





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Russell and Danna told their origin story to this reporter in a building that houses a 1966 Pontiac GTO, one of the models Russell bought and flipped in his youth, alongside a 1969 Pontiac GTO Judge. “We, as a couple, have our disagreements,” he says. “We both love GTOs, but I'm the 66-67 guy. I like the sleek lines, but in ‘68, they made it big, fat, and heavy, full of muscle. Danna likes the big body GTO.”

Their relationship resembles another item in the collection: the 1984 Harley Davidson Road Racing Sidecar, raced by husband-and-wife team Bob and Linda Bakker. Bob piloted the motorcycle and Linda served as “the monkey,” hopping from side to side of the moving vehicle to counterbalance it on turns. As Russell’s sounding board and collaborator, Danna plays a similar role, balancing her determined, hard-driving husband through the twists and turns of running the foundation (and much more).

During major events, like the foundation’s three-day Boomer Fest, a classic rock concert that raises money for Utah veterans, Danna holds down their base camp in the motorcycle building. Russell wanders the museum and, inevitably, gathers an audience. The history he describes isn't just in his mind, but in the vehicles themselves.

Russell doesn’t just look at a car or motorcycle. “I'm looking through it,” he says. “I see an engineering drawing, an exploded drawing, with all the pieces and parts. That's how my mind works. I look at the engine and I'm automatically seeing the pistons, the rods, the crank and cam. I see the working engine.”

History tends to be written abstract and impersonal, but Russell makes it up close and personal. He helps visitors observe the art and ingenuity in every piece of technology. He beckons them to re-engage with a motorized world that has become foreign now that most of us have highly digitized vehicles that “look alike and drive alike” according to Russell.

Inside and outside each vehicle is a story about an inventor, tinkerer, or racer who, like Russell, believed they could make something better. “The automobile industry was the world's largest, most mechanized industry that changed the world,” Russell says. “Technology that came out of the automobile industry affected every part of life. And there are lessons there to be learned about all the small guys that had significant contributions who drifted away or were gobbled up by the bigger guys.”

A tour through the museum is about people—innovators like Henry Ford, John and Horace Dodge, Walter Chrysler, John D. Rockefeller, George Pierce, William Harley, the Davidson brothers, and so many others, small and big, who helped create the world we live in today.

To Russell, the vehicles are much more than just items; they are historic reminders. “The story,” he says, “is what's important.”

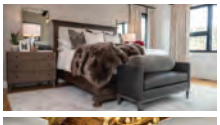
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