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This year's featured vehicle is Ken Dotton's 1957 Chevy Bel Air



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1957 Chevy Bel Air: A “legend among the classics”



PHOTOS BY DENNIS WARDEN

BY ROXIE MURPHY
REPUBLICAN STAFF WRITER
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Not many old cars are more recognizable than the “legend among the classics” that

is the 1957 Chevy Bel Air, and Ken (Fuzz) Dorton’s newly restored vintage ride is a great example of the model’s timelessness.

“I always wanted a 1957 hardtop,” said Fuzz, who is most recognizable by his 1956 Nomad that he hot-rodged through the ‘70s

around Owensville.


Fuzz’s relationship with the ‘57 Bel Air began in 2006 at a GTA Car Club Christmas party at Allen Lowder’s Auto Body shop.

“The car was sitting there looking kinda sad in the bay,” Fuzz said. “Mike Reifer

comes up to me and says ‘you need to buy that from me.’”


Once the idea was planted, Fuzz couldn’t shake it.

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"I don't know, I just let my zeal override my common sense," he said. "Took me about a week-and-a-half and I was like 'alright, Reif, I'll buy this from you.' I even had to borrow the money. It took me five years to pay it off. I started working on it in 2010 and finished it in 2021."

Like every classic-car enthusiast who knows he will have to sit on that project a while before he can get it started, Fuzz dug into the history of the '57 while he eagerly anticipated its restoration.

"Gary Smart owned it since 1963," Fuzz said, talking about the Smart family from Gerald. "He was coming home from work one day in April 1982 and his wife was driving the car from Owensville to Gerald and rear-ended a guy in a pickup truck. Rumor was she was picking up a cake for (Gary's) birthday."

The car was eventually sold to Allen Lowder, then Reifer and finally to Fuzz.

"I put it in the barn for about five years because I had no money to do anything with it," Fuzz said. "When I got it, it was wrecked. A new windshield had been put in cause the hood went through it. The cowl was bent up."

From 2006 to 2010, the '57 remained



THE '57 Bel Air sits on this unnamed road in Memorial Park, known as hippie holler since the '70s.

in Fuzz's barn, waiting for restoration. She came out looking much the same with several more layers dust than she went in with.

"The floor pan was rusted out, the inner and outer rockers were rusted, the front end was wrecked," Fuzz said, remembering the rough condition she was in. "It had the windshield though."

Coming out of the barn, the apple red interior was still good as well as the door panels.

"I cut the floor pan out and put it up on the rotisserie and then sandblasted," Fuzz said. "I sandblasted the car all the way around six inches up the frame inside and out — the wheel wells and firewall. The rest of the body you work by hand. I don't believe in

sandblasting the body 'cause it roughs 'em up. But all that metal I was going to replace I wanted to sandblast to see what I could attach to it."

He said the trunk looked good at first, but after sandblasting, it wasn't good after all.

He took the whole thing apart to the last screw.

"These old cars look good on the outside, but things underneath aren't so well," Fuzz said from experience. "For five years the dome light was the only thing left hanging in it's ceiling and I eventually yanked that out."

The self-described machinist, mechanic, and autobody man realized that if he was to make this restoration happen on his own, he was going to need a few pieces unique

pieces to work with.

"It took me three months to make an automobile rotisserie," he said. "It's the Cadillac of rotisseries and one of these days I'm gonna sell it."

Made out of the axel of an old mobile home, Fuzz welded and cut until the rotisserie took shape and added levels, pulls, tires and brakes to make it adjustable. Holes were drilled to match up to the car so when it was skewered on the rotisserie it could be bolted down and rotated.

The headliner in the car was moldy.

Sandblasting came first, then replacing those rusted parts with new ones.

"Bondo is a real problem in old cars like this one," Fuzz said.

Cutting out the bad and replacing the underneath was a must.

He rebuilt all the suspension on the front and rear, put a new floor pan back in, sway bars, front and rear power disk brakes, drop spindles, power steering, power windows and locks, tilt steering column and Dakota Digital Gauges.

"They aren't really digital (gauges) but they have the needle on them and they look original and pretty," Fuzz said. "I also added a custom sound stereo system and download

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music to a jump drive to listen to it in the car. Plus rain gear wipers with a modern-day three-speed setting.”

He ended up replacing all of the windows, side trim, headlight bezels, bumpers, grille, emblems, and door handles.

“All the pretty stuff, all of the jewelry, a new headliner and new carpet (was replaced),” Fuzz said.

While he did most of the work himself, Fuzz called friends who were car enthusiasts like himself to assist with certain parts of the project.

He didn’t stop with cosmetics though. Adding in AC and heat required additional wiring.

“The original car had like five wires and the new cars have 500,” Fuzz joked. “I replaced them with a 25-pound wiring harness from American Auto.”

The ‘57 was starting to retake her shape. He reinforced the frame with over 200 feet of angle iron.

“I did all the body work, primer work myself and got it pretty then talked to Bobby Scheel,” Fuzz said. “If you have painted yourself you know it’s a mess in your shop.”

When Fuzz called Scheel, his buddy wasn’t committing to painting anything.

“He’s particular,” Fuzz said. “Bobby said he would paint it if it was gonna look good. He came out and ran his hands over it and said he would paint it ‘cause ‘it’s gonna be pretty.’”

The car went out of Fuzz’s shop and into Scheel’s in pieces. Scheel painted it black and added a clear coat to make the car shine.

While he waited for pieces to be complete, Fuzz was building a motor for the car.

“I built the rung stand and fired the engine up on the rung stand,” Fuzz said. “I built a 383 cubic inch small block. I build my own engines when I am doing stuff like this.”

He also added mufflers.

“It sounds pretty good,” Fuzz said. “I am a machinist and a fabricator. I planned this stuff out before I do it.”

He also built a 4L60 overdrive transmission for the

“I built it to drive. I built it to cruise, not to smoke the tires.”

vintage ‘57 Bel Air that was taken off of a 1979 Camaro rear-end assembly and added 342 gears in it for a positraction rear-end that will provide the vehicle with more traction control on the open road.

“I made a pitman arm attached to a steering box — 600 Delphi that did not come original on a ‘57,” Fuzz said.

The project was made of the upper half of an ‘87 pickup and the bottom half of a ‘57. I cut them in half, grinded and welded them together.”

“An old-timer once said anybody can restore a car,” Fuzz said. “It takes a real one cut one up trying to modernize it. That thing fails, I’m in trouble.”

The ‘57 Bel Air came out with a factory 283 engine that could jump from zero to 60 miles per hour in 9.9 seconds, not fast by modern standards but impressive for its time. Fuzz wasn’t looking to change too much on the speed.

“I built it to drive,” Fuzz said. “I built it to cruise, not to smoke the tires.”

While Fuzz will say he did the bulk of the work on the ‘57 himeslef, his friends and lady were there any time he called for a hand.

“Mike Reifer and Mike Scego help me put the windshield and back glass in the car,” Fuzz said. “My sweetheart Marilyn Russell also helped me when I called her out of the house to assist and my brother Buck Dorton and his son Shane Dorton helped.”

Fuzz said that in projects like car restoration, relying on someone else to help get you moving, isn’t going to work.

“You can’t expect a lot of help from people,” Fuzz said. “You take on a project like this and have to understand you are going to be doing it on your own.”

After 10 years of working on the ‘57 Chevy for three to five nights a week, his efforts paid off.

“I finished the car back in August 2021 and this year I plan to take it to the TriFive event in Kentucky,” Fuzz said. “I cruised it up to Rustober Fest in New Florence during the summer of 2021 and that was quite a deal, big car party.”

He was driving home from New Florence on Highway 19 South of Hermann and turned left off of the bridge onto mainstreet to grab food on their way home.

“Didn’t know it was October Fest in Hermann and as we went to one of the restaurants to get something to eat, the street was jammed packed with people hootin’ and hollerin’ and runnin’ up to take pictures,” Fuzz said. “You’d think we was celebrities.”

It doesn’t get much better than making memories in

See **Bel Air**, Page 6B

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Bel Air • from page 4B

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“I am a child of the ‘60s and ‘70s,” Fuzz says. “I like the classics and I like to listen to the classics.”

PHOTOS BY DENNIS WARDEN

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DORTON BUILT a custom rotisserie (photos top and bottom left) for his 10-year project to restore the wrecked 1957 Chevrolet Bel Air he purchased from Mike Riefer in 2006. The wreck, in April 1982, required that he replace the front quarter panels and the engine compartment (photo above). The dome light (photo left) hung from the ceiling for five years before Dorton removed it. Dorton (photo opposite page) worked on the car three to five night each week from 2010 to 2021.

PHOTOS SUBMITTED BY KEN DORTON

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How to maintain an older vehicle

New cars have been costly for quite some time, but those costs have spiked considerably since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. That unprecedented rise has led many motorists to wonder how they can get more mileage out of their existing vehicles.

According to data from Kelley Blue Book and Cox Automotive, the average cost of a new car in September 2021 was just over \$45,000. That marked a \$3,000 increase from June 2021 and a \$5,000 increase from the end of 2020.

Drivers who can't afford to keep up with the rising cost of new vehicles can take these steps to keep their existing cars running smoothly for years to come.

- Take care of the timing belt. Engines may get all the glory, but they cannot run smoothly without a fully functional timing belt. Engines need various components to do their job, and those components must do so at the right time for the engine to run smoothly. Fully functional timing belts help to synchronize movements, but belts must be replaced every so often. Owner's manuals may note when to replace the timing belt, but they generally must be replaced every 60,000 to 105,000 miles. That's infrequent,



but drivers can ask their mechanics to keep an eye on their timing belts. One issue many drivers encountered in the early months of the pandemic when people were driving less frequently was timing belts that were failing long before they reached the projected mile

markers. That's because infrequent driving can hasten the demise of the timing belt. This is something for aging drivers who no longer drive a lot to keep in mind.

- Take care of the brakes and associated components. The experts at Popular

Mechanics urge drivers of older vehicles to replace their brake fluid every two years. Popular Mechanics also advises drivers whose cars are more than seven years old to replace the rubber brake lines when major brake work is required.

- Pay attention to oil levels. The older engines get, the more oil they're going to burn. So drivers of older vehicles should check their oil levels more often than they would if their vehicles were brand new. This also is a great way to discover leaks before they lead to potentially significant issues.

- Don't skip maintenance appointments. Even if you're still driving less due to the pandemic, it's best not to skip recommended maintenance intervals. That's true for drivers of all cars, but especially those whose vehicles are aging. Routine tune-ups and oil changes, which may need to become more frequent the older the vehicle gets, can keep cars running smoothly and protect the engine over the long haul.

The rising cost of new cars is compelling millions of drivers to keep their cars longer than they might have anticipated. Some simple maintenance measures can help those cars run strong for years to come.



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Ten gifts for automotive enthusiasts

The roar of the engine and the feeling of the wind in your hair is part of the magic of taking to the open road behind the wheel of a beloved vehicle. Whether a person is the ultimate gear head who needs to have the latest aftermarket accessory or someone who simply appreciates a pristine ride, auto enthusiasts come in all shapes and sizes. Luckily, there are all types of automotive gifts that can make it easy to impress car guys and gals this holiday season.

1. Dashboard cell phone holder: Using a mobile phone while driving is not a good idea. However, many people use their phones as GPS devices. Holding a phone while navigating is dangerous, but a phone mount near the dash can keep the phone visible without compromising the safety of drivers and their passengers.

2. Customized floor mats: Know an auto fanatic who's also a sports fan? Offer a gift that mixes the two passions, such as floor mats featuring a favorite sports team's logo.

3. Cleansing wipes: When drivers are short on time, a full car wash and wax may not be possible. Drop Wipes are a product made from a neutralizing acid that destabilizes stains or bird droppings for an easy cleaning.

4. Magazine subscription: A wide selection of publications are geared to auto enthusiasts. They provide plenty of pertinent information, and some car lovers like to collect and display certain issues. Yearly subscriptions are affordable and can make ideal stocking stuffers.

5. Racing experience gift certificate: Research racing car schools and experiences where you live. Chances are you can find an opportunity for an automotive enthusiast to get behind the wheel of a race car with professional drivers offering tips for navigating the course at high speeds.

6. Car cleaning kit: Taking care of a ride means making sure it is clean inside and out. A quality car cleaning kit can ensure the job is done effectively and the car or truck always looks its best.

7. Personalized leather keychain: Ensure that a person can drive and keep their keys handy in style with leather keychains engraved with a driver's name or initials.

8. Racing video games: A love for the open road may not end when cars pull into the driveway. Modern racing games and consoles produce incredibly realistic graphics and action that mimics real life.

9. Automotive cufflinks: As a nod to a



love of driving, find quirky cufflinks that are shaped like everything from gear shifters to speedometers to steering wheels.

10. Roof or car racks: When a love of driving merges with the call of the great outdoors, drivers may need something to help haul their stuff. Various racks have

been designed for toting around bicycles, kayaks, luggage, and more.

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