

You couldn't buy a *used Ford* from this man

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While touring South America in 1968, W. Edward Towe spotted a 1934 Ford Model C Phaeton at a gas station in Paysandu, Uruguay

That car today is in Deer Lodge, Mont., one of 160 antique fords that Towe owns.

The collection includes at least one representative of every year and model from the founding of the auto company in 1903 until 1942, when production stopped for World War II. Towe has 102 of them on permanent display at the old Montana territorial prison in Deer Lodge, west of Helena.

Towe, a Circle, Mont., banker, now 64 and semi-retired, has been collecting antique Fords since he bought a 1923 Model T Roadster in Winterset, Iowa, for \$75 in 1952.

Towe said he made that first purchase in what was to become a car-collecting fever because "I guess I got a longing to drive a three-pedal car again" (The third pedal kicked the car into reverse. The throttle was on the steering wheel.)

There are many collections that are bigger than mine," Towe said, "but as far as we know, this is the largest (antique) Ford collection on display anywhere."

All the cars on display are in good original condition or have been restored — all, that is, except the 1934 Model C Phaeton. Towe drove it 9,000 miles from Uruguay back to Circle, and for sentimental reasons left it in the same condition.

Towe said the uruguayan purchase was one of the most interesting he has made. He knew practically no Spanish, and the car owner didn't speak Spanish, so they negotiated through an interpreter.

Towe won't say what he paid for the Phaeton, an open touring car with side curtains, which nicely augmented his collection of what was then some 40 antique Fords.

But he indicates he got a good deal from the Paysandu man, whose country's taxes discourage the purchase of new cars and force the residents to use the antiques for daily transportation.

After outfitting it with tools and extra tires, gasoline, oil and water, Towe, his wife and a friend drove it to the river ferry between Uruguay and Argentina, but were denied permission to cross.

It took two weeks and sometimes confused discussion and pestering in Uruguay's capital of Montevideo to finally produce the proper export papers.

But no sooner did they cross into Argentina than the car was impounded because Towe didn't have Argentine permission to drive a foreign car across the country.

That permission was secured in a day, but Towe said he continued to run into difficulties at almost every border in South America, including Peru, where passage was not allowed until the local car club posted a \$1,300 deposit to ensure the car would not be left in the country.

"The reason they stop you at the borders in those countries is all of the countries have such a high on cars," Towe said, adding that tariffs can boost the price of a new U.S. car to \$15,000 or \$20,000.

The governments discourage citizens from buying foreign cars — and even imported car parts — for fear of depleting their nations' money supplies, he said.

The same economic conditions also make officials discourage anyone from taking cars out of the country.

In Uruguay, said Towe, "one official told us that the reason it is difficult to take the car out of the country — the old car that we had — was, by taking the car out of the country, we are depriving someone of transportation who could not afford to drive a new car."

By happy circumstance, and perhaps because of the warm climate, Towe said about half the cars sold in Uruguay and other South American countries in the 1930s were open cars.

"There probably were 100 sedans sold here (in the United States) for every open car in 1934 ... now the open cars are the most highly desired specimens for collectors' items here, and the most difficult to obtain.

Towe said he encountered few major mechanical difficulties on the route across the Argentine prairie, over the Argentine and Chilean Andes, through Peru and on to Ecuador. However, the engine had to be overhauled in Argentina. Towe overcame the language barrier by getting his elbows dirty alongside a Spanish-speaking mechanic.

Towe's experience as an old Ford mechanic may be the key to his interest in collecting antiques. His father set him up with a bicycle shop in Paulina, Iowa, in the late 1920s

when he was barely into his teens. At age 15, he graduated to Model T's, opening a junk salvage yard.

He soon branched out into building power plants for grain elevators from old Model T engines, and made farm wagons by stripping the bodies off Model T's and building wooden boxes onto the frame.

After his return with his Uruguayan Phaeton, the valuable antiques being driven in South America stayed on Towe's mind. He returned last winter to buy 39 more open cars, completing his Phaeton collection. About half of the new shipment of cars probably will be sold.

The prices of the antique Fords increased markedly between Towe's two trips as some of the old cars finally "gave up," he said.

Most of Towe's collecting today is through established channels, such as antique automobile auctions, magazine advertising, and head-to-head negotiating, including one bargaining session in which he was able to buy a 1904 Model B — one of only four known to exist. The Model B is still being restored.

Towe declines to discuss the monetary value of his collection, saying it's not for sale.

Other cars in his collection include:

- A 1906 Model K. "That was the car (Henry) Ford made under protest because his financial backers insisted that he make a car for wealthy people rather than the common people," Towe said. "It didn't prove successful, and the history now is that the Ford Motor Co. lost money on every one they made."
- A 1911 Model T, called the Torpedo. All other Model T's had the gas tank under the driver's seat. The Torpedo had the take behind the driver, which, along with a shorter running board, made the car look more streamlined.
- A 1915 town car, another vehicle aimed at the wealthy. The car was chauffeur-driven, with special upholstery, flower vases and a glass partition between the driver and the passengers. It was the first model to have electric headlights.

This year Towe drove a 1935 open Phaeton back to Circle after buying it in Reading, Pa. And he is talking of a possible trip from Buenos Aires to the United States in a 1933 Phaeton this winter.