

HEMMINGS CLASSIC CAR

The Drive Home III: Day one – bomb cyclone

William Hall on Jan 4th, 2018



The Drive Home III team assembled in Dania Beach, Florida. Derek Klein photo.

It's day one of the Drive Home III, and the annual winter classic-car road rally put on by America's Automotive Trust and the North American International Auto Show in Detroit is ready for launch.

Or is it detonation?

Least I risk burying the lead on this story, it should be noted – at least for posterity – that we are about to drive these classic cars through the outer vortices of Winter Storm Grayson. That name makes this winter hurricane sound like a civilized English butler, so let's go with the term *The Washington Post* prefers: "bomb cyclone."

A bomb cyclone is apparently a situation where the barometric pressure drops so fast that a storm strengthens explosively. In this case, Grayson is drawing arctic air from Siberia and Greenland, and depositing it in Mickey Mouse's backyard. Winter-storm warnings have been issued for Tallahassee. Jacksonville is colder than Anchorage.

Now, being a Midwesterner, this, on its face, is not a big deal. Only 48 hours earlier, I had attended an outdoor gathering at the beachfront Tiki Bar in Elkhart Lake, Wisconsin, where hundreds ritually gather to greet their neighbors and wish them a happy New Year's Day. Wind chills were -24 Fahrenheit. We went inside only when the little icebergs forming at the opening of our tall-boy Pabst cans needed to be thawed out.



The Hagerty International straddles a puddle during a respite from the storm. Remaining photos by author.

But down here, it's a different story. Folks are not used to driving in this stuff. In fact, it's why they moved away from places like Elkhart Lake. That much-maligned road salt would be a welcome sight in areas that could be crippled with ice through early next week.

A mid-morning meeting of the crew re-emphasized safety. We are not out here to be irresponsible with these old vehicles. Slow and steady wins the race. Fortunately, our route will zig westward while the storm zags northeast. AAT Vice-Chairman David Madeira's plan to ride the Triumph Thruxton motorcycle will be tentative; we think it would look pretty cool strapped in the bed of the El Camino anyway.

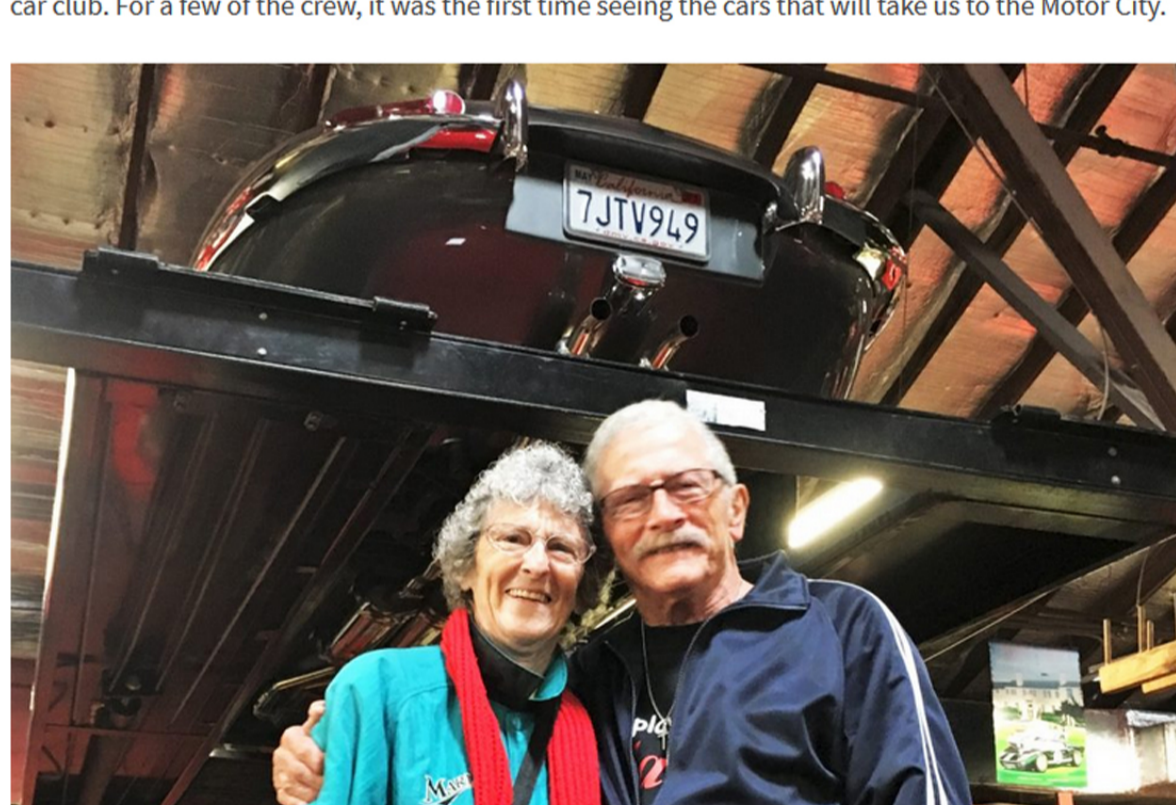
Despite the cold outside, we had a very warm sendoff at The Creative Workshop in Dania Beach, Florida. The place is part restoration shop, part museum, and part comfortable living room. Owner Jason Wenig's rustic building is a work of art in itself, and speaks volumes on the sensitivity of his aesthetic when restoring old cars. One-off Maseratis and Ferraris share space with Mustangs and Mercedes. If you like spaces that celebrate craftsmanship, stop in for a look around.



Jason Wenig and David Madeira address the crowd at The Creative Workshop.

David Madeira spoke to the assembled crowd about the importance of passing our love affair with the automobile onto the next generation – one of the missions of the RPM Foundation. Wenig and The Creative Workshop have taken that task to heart by offering internships and employment to young restoration craftsmen that have been placed through the RPM Foundation's programs.

It was a well-attended event despite the soaking rain outside. We made a number of new friends, including *Hemmings* readers who stopped by to see the cars in person and meet the drivers. Bob and Kathy Godin came by, bringing their Jaguar XJ6 alongside fellow members of the local British car club. For a few of the crew, it was the first time seeing the cars that will take us to the Motor City.



Hemmings readers Bob and Kathy Godin got their dream Jaguar in their 70s. "Never give up on the dream," said Kathy.

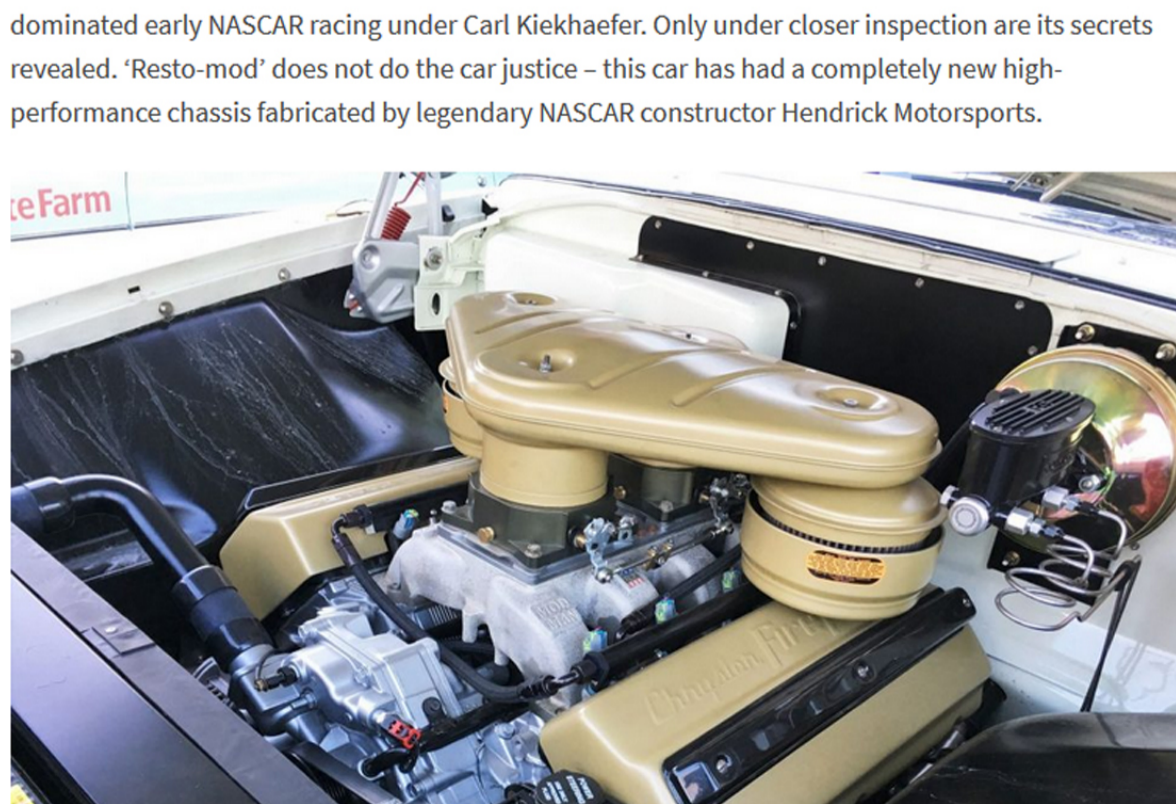
I'm impressed with the Camaro. It's a solid driver, with power steering and power brakes. The clutch feel is good, and the four-speed shifter positive. A whiff of oil smoke is present upon startup – perhaps valve seals – and I make a mental note to keep a watchful eye on the oil consumption. Sheepskin seat covers and a wrapped steering wheel are not my style, but the gesture by the LeMay-America's Car Museum collections department to keep me warm is not lost upon me.

We head out for a brief jaunt to Boca Raton for an enthusiast gathering at the Casa de Montecristo, a cigar, and fine spirits lounge. A number of modern supercars are already present in the parking lot, and make way for our classic caravan to park out front.



The Chrysler C-300 outside of Casa de Montecristo.

Late to arrive but making a dashing entrance is the 1955 Chrysler C-300 from the NB Center for American Automotive Heritage. By all appearances it's a stock C-300; the cars that famously dominated early NASCAR racing under Carl Kiekhaefer. Only under closer inspection are its secrets revealed. 'Resto-mod' does not do the car justice – this car has had a completely new high-performance chassis fabricated by legendary NASCAR constructor Hendrick Motorsports.



A nasty Hellcat motor hides under the hood of the C-300.

Under a stock batwing air-filter and valve covers lies the big surprise – a 6.2 Hemi motor from a 2016 Dodge Challenger Hellcat. The Hemi's supercharger was removed to complete the disguise, and the heads were specially milled to accept the older valve covers. Putting a reported 711 rear-wheel horsepower to the ground via an independent rear suspension, the car tracks as if on rails, and was briefly demonstrated at speeds that would be grounds for incrimination.

We are heading north for Thursday and Friday events at the Ace Cafe Orlando, a throwback spot that pays homage to London's legendary ring-road diner. It's a great chance to check in with the cars and crew before we light the fuse and log some miles on our exciting run to the North American International Auto Show.