

The Simeone Foundation a Hidden Gem of Racing



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Tucked among a non-descript collection of industrial buildings not far from the Philadelphia Airport sits a collection of some of the most racing significant automobiles in history.

The Simeone Foundation Collection is the culmination of a lifetime of shrewd collecting spearheaded by Dr. Fred Simeone, a neurosurgeon by profession. Collections of any kind reflect the vision of the architect, but visit the website for the Foundation and read the commentary that

n Collection – ing History



Dr. Simeone provides to get a sense of the individual engagement with each car. He not only includes a history of the model and what makes it noteworthy, but he includes personal recollections of what made the car special to him and the logistics of obtaining the car.

In many cases, he had a very specific car in mind and worked persistently to obtain it. He tells tales of trades organized, in some cases with multiple parties involved. He tells of reluctantly trading a car away only to re-acquire it later.

Many of the cars were acquired before the car collecting market took hold in the 1990s and inflated values to the stratosphere. Dr. Simeone tells of acquiring a Mercedes 300SL gullwing after seeing an ad in The New York Times in 1970. That alone should indicate how long he has been building his collection and the vision involved to recognize the significance and novelty of each car long before they turned into unobtainium. In fact, he kept cars in an unmarked personal garage for years in downtown Philadelphia before finally

making the move to a larger facility and organizing the foundation in 2008.

What kind of cars? Winners of LeMans, Mille Miglia, and the Nürburgring and competitors at many other tracks. Marques cover the range from Mercedes, Porsche, Aston Martin, Bentley, Ferrari, Corvette, Alfa Romeo, Delahaye, Jaguar, BMW and Bugatti – and more. Some are the sole remaining example. Others had production runs in the single digits.

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Many cars in the collection originate from the 1920s and 1930s as auto racing was reaching wide-scale popularity and tracks and marques that became legend were earning their place in history. Others come from the 1950s and 1960s as technology and design were making their own history. Other time periods are scattered throughout but most cars on display were built before the mid-1970s.

Dr. Simeone clearly has an affection for race cars in particular, but also has an appreciation of the time and place that made each famous. Enormous murals, victory wreaths, flags and pit lane facades help to provide the context. There are a handful of road cars in the collection but they

mostly have some racing connection via the marque and time period.

The facility is a fairly simple warehouse with concrete floors and high ceilings, but focused dioramas placed around the perimeter. The displays have a theme and each car has an

explanatory plaque. Hay bales, low rows of tires, and guardrails set the displays apart and border each display. The collection comprises about 70 cars, with a few significant cars on loan from generous friends.

The center of the space is a flexible open space that commonly accommodates events, whether they be car-related or fund-raisers for other causes. If you're in the Philadelphia area and looking for a place to host your event, they would surely entertain your inquiry.

All of the cars in the collection are runners. They are mechanically maintained and run around the large parking lot behind the building when the Foundation hosts "Demo Days" featuring three or four cars with a common theme.

The cars are all thoughtfully preserved – they are not over-restored. Some cars led very active lives and then were hidden away in barns and garages. The cracks in the seat leather and paintwork have been retained. Originality and patina are retained wherever possible.

The Foundation has a shop on-site for most regular maintenance but uses outside expertise when needed. On our visit, a disassembled engine from a silver 1955 Mercedes 300SL lay on a working table in the shop in the process of a rebuild. A shiny crankshaft sat next to a line of valves and springs and an injector that looked every part the representative example of German engineering. The shop is a workplace and not usually open for visitors, but Dr. Simeone clearly was enthused

about the mechanical aspects (and a bit embarrassed about the low miles accumulated under his stewardship) and wanted to make sure the 300SL engine got attention on our visit.



The silver road-going 300SL (sans

engine) was on display, but stripped of its bumpers to give a sense of what it would have looked like if prepared for racing in period. The effect is remarkable and really transforms the look of the car, bringing out the beauty of the lines.

While the 300SL made its mark in the mid-1950s and the Foundation has two fine examples, another Mercedes Benz in the collection is even more significant.

In 1927, the companies of Mercedes and Benz combined. In the same year, the legendary Nürburgring in Germany opened and the first German Grand Prix was held.

Eight examples of the 1927 Mercedes Benz Sportwagen were produced. One car won the first German Grand Prix in 1927 at the Nürburgring driven by Otto Merz. The winning car and the only intact survivor of the eight built sits in the Simeone Foundation Automotive Collection.

Its supercharged in-line 6-cylinder engine produced 180 horsepower to propel its 4170-pound aluminum body on a steel frame. It is a very long car with a wheelbase of 140 inches, the usual long front hood of the day, and four seats. The engine and chassis were designed by Dr. Ferdinand Porsche who would go on to found the company that made its own automotive history.

The three-pointed star appears in several different places on the car, but two stars without the circular outside ring we are familiar with are shown on the top of the front radiator. The badge difference is likely evidence of a young company still working out what its logo should be.

Merz took almost 5 hours to run the 18 laps and recorded the win with a three minute margin, helping to put both Mercedes Benz and the Nürburgring on the racing map. Apparently seven models of the 21 race starters were Mercedes Benz cars which shows how seriously the newly combined company was taking the event.

Ironically, driver Otto Merz was a chauffeur in the motorcade when Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo to trigger World War I in 1914. Somehow, Merz managed to survive both the assassination and racing at the Nürburgring but died later in a practice accident in heavy rain at Avus (near Berlin) in 1933.

The 1927 Mercedes sits in a display of other major race winners. One is the 1936 Bugatti 57G "Tank" - the only remaining of three built. The unique shape gives the car its nickname and the car won the 24 Hours of LeMans in 1937. The glorious red 1938 Alfa Romeo 8C 2900B that won the 1938 Mille Miglia sits in the center of the room. One of only four built, it is a rare and beautiful car and Dr. Simeone coordinated a restoration and took it to run the Mille Miglia event again in 1986. The car is unapologetically Dr. Simeone's favorite of the collection.

Another winner is the 1952 Cunningham C-4R which was the vision of Briggs Cunningham, one of the keys to the growth of auto racing in America. Only three examples of the C-4R were built and the Foundation's example won its class in the 1954 24 Hours of LeMans and finished third overall. A 1958 Aston Martin DBR1 sits alongside that carried Sterling Moss and Jack Brabham to victory at the Nürburgring, among other racing history. It is only one of four built.

At some point, the breadth of the collection is difficult to grasp. Any one of the cars would be a featured attraction at almost any other museum, concours or vintage race.

With the current attention around the Ford GT and its return to LeMans and retail market, the Foundation's pair of Ford GT40 examples earns their share of

attention. A yellow GT40 (chassis XGT1) ran at LeMans in 1966 before retiring 5 hours into the event with clutch problems. Sister GT40 cars swept the podium that year making a historic finish for Ford. A deep blue 1967 Ford GT40 with a more streamlined body (chassis J8) sits alongside the yellow car. It tied the mark for the fastest lap speed that year.

Ironically, the 1967 Ford GT40 held its share of the fastest lap at LeMans until it was broken in 1970 by another car that now sits just across the room – the 1970 Porsche 917LH (chassis 043). The so called “Hippie” car - due to its swirling green, white and purple livery – is one of the most iconic Porsche racing cars and finished second at LeMans in 1970. The “LH” designation is the German term for Langheck – or long tail – to describe the long and curvy aerodynamic bodywork.

The Porsche 917 is the clear fan favorite of the collection. At any Demo Day the Museum holds where the fans pick which cars run, the 917 is always at the top of the list.

Walking down the line-up from the Porsche 917 is a march through road racing history.

A white 1959 Ferrari 250GT “Interim” Berlinetta (one of seven made) sits next to a 1957 Ferrari Testa Rossa (one of 21 made) and a 1954 Ferrari 375MM (one of twelve made). Any of the three would highlight any other collection and each would break most people’s piggy banks.

A 1936 Delahaye that placed second to the Bugatti “Tank” car at the 1936 French Grand Prix and won LeMans in 1938? If that wasn’t enough, it was rebodied and run at LeMans from 1949-1951 as well.



British fans might enjoy seeing a 1934 MG K3 that won its class and finished fourth overall at LeMans before finding success at the Mille Miglia in Italy.

How about one of two 1936 Aston Martins made specifically for LeMans that year but was unable to run when the race was cancelled?

A pair of silver Jaguars – a 1953 C-type and a 1956 D-type - both raced in America in period at places like Sebring sit together.

If American racing history is more to your taste, walk across the room and see one of five 1962 Corvette Grand Sports (chassis 002) or one of six 1964 Cobra Daytona Coupes (CSX2287). There is too much history surrounding either one of them to contain in one sentence or one paragraph. Books have been written about each and the stories comprise the stuff of racing legend – not to mention the twists of ownership history over the decades. As with the other cars in the collection, both are preserved to maintain their originality.

Regrettably, this modest attempt at describing the collection will do no justice to any particular car or the decades of cultivation required to develop the collection. The only solution is to find your own way to Philadelphia for a visit. Before you go, spend some time on the Foundation’s website reading about the cars and the history so that you’ll have a greater appreciation of your experience. Check the calendar for a list of Demo Days to see the themes and hear and see the featured cars in motion or visit on a quiet weekday when you’ll likely have a fairly private visit.

Thanks to Dr. Fred Simeone, Kevin Kelly (curator and head mechanic) and volunteer “Shiny” Bob for their hospitality and assistance.

The Simeone Foundation Automotive Museum only a short drive from the Philadelphia Airport. Visitor information is available on the website at www.SimeoneFoundation.com.

