



BMW NA 50th Anniversary | 50 Stories for 50 Years

Chapter 40: "The Ultimate Driving Museum: The BMW CCA Foundation Brings History to Live in South Carolina"

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From the outside, the building that houses the BMW Car Club of America Foundation is fairly undistinguished, as one would expect of a former pharmaceutical warehouse in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Inside, however, it's a treasure trove of BMW ephemera, and the only museum outside Munich devoted exclusively to BMW. Dubbed "The Ultimate Driving Museum," this humble space has been hosting truly

spectacular exhibits since 2017, when guests were invited to explore a world-class collection of BMW race cars entitled Heroes of Bavaria.

To say the Foundation hit it out of the park with its first exhibit is no overstatement. Heroes of Bavaria featured a mind-blowing group of cars, from a 1939 328 sports racer to a Z4 GTLM raced by BMW Team RLL in the IMSA series in 2013 and 2014. In between, the exhibit included the first of two 700 RS Spyders raced by the BMW factory team in 1961 and '62, the Miller & Norburn 2002 that carried Nick Craw to the 1973 IMSA BF Goodrich title, the only 3.0 CSL built as a rally car by BMW Motorsport, and the BMW Motorsport 3.0 CSL that won the 24 Hours of Daytona in 1976. Heroes also included a slate of M3 touring and GT racers, all with significant histories, plus BMW of North America's trio of March-BMW prototypes from the 1980s, the factory IMSA Group 4 M1, 1996 McLaren F1 GTR, and 1999 Williams-BMW V12 LMR. BMW's open-wheel racers were represented by a 1981 March-BMW F2, a 2003 Formula BMW, and a Williams-BMW FW22 raced in Formula One in 2000—to name just a few of the cars in the exhibit.

By the time Heroes of Bavaria opened, the BMW CCA Foundation was 15 years old, though its roots go back to 1991. That's when Tammi Hull served as an instructor at a car control clinic hosted by the BMW CCA's Golden Gate Chapter, of which she'd been president since 1990. "I saw how transformational it was for those kids," Hull said. Four years later, she joined the club's national board and suggested that it provide teen driver education nationwide via a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization.

A second dimension was added to the proposed foundation when longtime CCA member Dennis Ryan died, leaving behind a trove of memorabilia that his widow wanted to donate to the club. Hull suggested that the nonprofit could serve two missions: teen driving education and historical preservation. “[Executive director] Wynne Smith started planning to finally bring it to life in 1999,” Hull said. “Wynne was the driving force that made it happen.”

The BMW CCA Foundation was chartered in March 2002, and in 2003 it began hosting Street Survival teen driving clinics with major support from Tire Rack, BMW of North America, and Liberty Mutual Insurance. Street Survival teaches young people to control cars at the limit while improving their accident avoidance skills well beyond what they could



learn from their parents or high school driver's education programs. Headed by Bill Wade, Tire Rack Street Survival holds more than 100 schools each year, hosted nationwide by chapters of the BMW CCA, Porsche Club, and Sports Car Club of America. "I get emails on a weekly basis thanking me for running the program, from parents telling me it saved their kid's life," Wade says, noting that car accidents are a leading cause of death among young people.

The other half of the Foundation's mission—and that which led to the creation of The Ultimate Driving Museum—involves preserving BMW's rich history, which archivist Michael Mitchell has been doing since he became the Foundation's first employee in 2002. Following the initial donation of Ryan's memorabilia, the Foundation's collection has become the largest repository of BMW-related items and documents in the US, and it's accessible to the public in accordance with the Foundation's non-profit mission.

In 2013, the Foundation moved into its permanent home in Greer, South Carolina, directly adjacent to the BMW Performance Center and just across the highway from BMW Manufacturing, where X-vehicles are assembled for worldwide consumption. A former pharmaceutical warehouse, the Foundation's space has been transformed to house the archives and host exhibits. Those exhibits began with modest displays of cars owned by the Board of Trustees, then took a crucial step toward professionalism and historical interest when Heroes of Bavaria opened on May 19, 2017.

Heroes was the brainchild of the Foundation's first executive director, Scott Dishman. Dishman had attended BMW's 2016 centenary celebration at Laguna Seca and wanted to stage a similar display of BMW's motorsport history.

"Our request to BMW of North America was this: You had an amazing exhibition of race cars at Laguna Seca, but most BMW enthusiasts on the East Coast never got to see it, and almost none of the 9,000 associates that work at BMW Manufacturing here in South Carolina got to see it," Dishman said. "Let us recreate that, as best we can, and hold it for a while so that enthusiasts in this part of the country can make their way here over the course of the next three or four months and enjoy it."

Thanks to cooperation from BMW NA's Tom Plucinsky, the Foundation arranged to borrow nearly the entire race car collection owned by BMW Classic USA. "We were really happy to be able to do this," Plucinsky



said. "I'd much rather have these cars on display for people to see and appreciate rather than hidden in our warehouse. The only thing that could be better than having them at the Foundation would be having them on the track."

Private owners—including Foundation trustees Peter Gleeson, Scott Hughes, and Lance White—loaned yet more race cars, and the result was a jaw-dropping collection that covered BMW's entire motorsport history in the US...and beyond. Each car's history was chronicled by Jackie Jouret, whose research was published in a beautifully-printed exhibit catalog illustrated with photography by Zach Suggs.

Heroes of Bavaria marked the start of an annual exhibition-and-book series at the BMW CCA Foundation. It was followed in 2018 by "The ICON", a celebration of the 2002's 50th birthday that included every 2002 variant produced by BMW, as well as a fine selection of modified cars. Adding to The Icon's visual appeal, the 2002s on display encompassed the range of colors in which the model was offered, from the sedate beiges of the early 1600-2s to the jewel tones and florescent "safety colors" of the 1970s models.

For its third exhibit in 2019, the Foundation celebrated a half-century of the BMW Car Club of America with "PASSION: 50 Years of BMW Cars and Community". That exhibit featured 22 BMWs that had inspired particular passion among enthusiasts, each owned by a dedicated club member of long standing.

PASSION was followed by an even more spectacular exhibit, entitled "GENESIS: BMW from the Beginning". GENESIS covered BMW's history from its origins as a manufacturer of airplane engines from 1916, through its addition of motorcycles in 1923 and automobiles in



1928. It included a trio of significant motorcycles, including a 1927 R47 sport bike and a 1931 R2 single, as well as a number of pre-war and early postwar automobiles, beginning with a 1930 3/15 HP DA2 believed to be the oldest BMW in the US.

BMW didn't begin exporting cars directly to the US until 1954, and then only in limited volume until the 1600-2 became a surprise hit in 1967. Its earlier cars are rare in this country, yet GENESIS assembled a comprehensive selection of automobiles that told the full story of BMW's prewar success and postwar reconstruction. The cars and motorcycles were loaned to the Foundation by US collectors including Dirk de Groen, Manny Carter, Manfred Scharmach, Rick Meinig, and Karra Cannum, to name but a few. Nearly all had significant histories: Meinig's 327/28 convertible, for example, was originally owned by Schorsch Meier, a factory BMW motorcycle racer who won the 1939 Isle of Man TT as well as numerous championships. Two postwar BMWs built at Eisenach revealed Germany's Cold War cleavage into two states, giving attendees a rare look at these BMWs built under Soviet domination. Others had more personal histories, like the 1960 3.2 Super sedan that Alf Gebhardt inherited from his father, its original owner.

Alas, few were able to see GENESIS in person, as the Covid pandemic forced the closure of public spaces like The Ultimate Driving Museum shortly before the exhibit was set to open in May 2020. While the exhibit's opening was on hold, the Foundation released a video by David Rose that highlighted the beautiful BMWs waiting to welcome guests when the doors finally opened that fall.

"Doing the virtual video opening was important," said trustee Bruce Hazard, explaining that the museum wasn't the only Foundation activity affected by the pandemic. "We kept the museum open as much as possible given the city, county, and state restrictions, and we didn't give up! But we were forced to close down Street Survival temporarily, because we couldn't expose students or instructors in the closed environment of the car."



With the worst effects of the pandemic in the rear-view mirror, and following Dishman's departure at the end of 2019, the Foundation carried on with a mini-exhibit on the history of the Z-cars produced across the street by BMW Manufacturing, and full exhibits celebrating the 50th anniversary of BMW Motorsport in 2022, and the 100th anniversary of BMW motorcycles in 2023. Last year, the museum took a comprehensive look at MINI, exhibiting a range of pre-BMW Minis from the 1960s to the highly personalized MINIs of the current era

under BMW's ownership of the marque. In 2025, the Foundation is celebrating ALPINA with a similarly thorough exhibit. As always, opening and closing events give attendees an opportunity to mingle with the cars' owners as well as Foundation trustees and BMW NA executives.

The BMW CCA Foundation has helped turn Greer, South Carolina into the epicenter of BMW enthusiasm in the US, especially given its proximity to BMW Manufacturing and the BMW Performance Center. (The headquarters of the BMW Car Club of America and Motorcycle Owner's Association are nearby, as well.) The Foundation benefits further from a close working relationship with BMW of North America and MINI USA, both of which support the organization's efforts to preserve company history. Crucially, BMW Classic USA has raised money for the Foundation by offering rides in its fleet of vintage race cars at the Performance Center and other tracks.

"We at BMW NA are very fortunate to have passionate club and foundation organizations that love our products and enjoy sharing our history. Our job at BMW NA is to help both the club and the foundation thrive. Over the years, as the company has grown, we have come to rely on the BMW CCA Foundation to preserve our archival materials and display elements. It is a synergy that works very well for the company and the club members". Added Plucinsky.

Equally important, the Foundation has strong ties to the BMW collector community throughout the US. Its board of trustees includes a number of past presidents and national officers of the BMW CCA and many of the country's most prominent collectors, ensuring that the Foundation

has a firm connection to the car club at large as well as strong sources of expertise and support.

"Many of the trustees have given decades of service to the club, devoting a ton of time and energy to making these ideas come to life," Wensberg says. "The club has a lot to be proud of in terms of what the Foundation has accomplished."

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