



Photographs by Jack Reynolds

**TIME TRAVEL:** Students (from left) Pat Carey, Keith Falkowski, Steve Distefano, Greg Gimalski, Nicole Andreotta, Molly Mitchell and Alex Robinson are all eyes, ears and automotive appreciation.

## Vintage Automobile Club Delivers History on Wheels

# Students Cruise Through Class

By VICTORIA FORD

A car says a lot about its driver, but what does a car say about the era in which it was made? How might it reflect, or impact, the society that appreciates, purchases and drives it? What might its design features or innovations suggest about the goings-on in the world at the time, about the national or international political climate?

These were some of the questions on the minds of Southern Regional High School sophomores and juniors Thursday as they strolled through the school parking lot both admiring and learning from historic automotive specimens during their U.S. History I and II classes.

The program gets the students thinking visually and moves the classroom setting outside, a fun and creative way “to left-handedly teach history,” according to Humanities Supervisor Robert Johnson.

“Anything that can get the kids interested in history is a plus,” he added.

Members of the Seaside Heights-based Vintage Automobile Club and Museum volunteered their beautifully restored cars, spanning 50 model years – from the earliest horseless carriages of the 1920s to the boxy, tank-like sedans of the ’40s to the muscle-bound, boat-like V-8s of the ’70s – to be part of the History on Wheels program.

Approximately 20 vehicles were parked in a line (in order from oldest, a 1921 Ford Model T, to newest, a ’79 Corvette) in the lot outside the main entrance to the 11/12 building on a sunshine-and-blue-sky kind of day, the only kind most historic cars ever get to see, as meticulous owners protect their cars’ immaculate paint jobs from so much as an outside chance of rain.

With so many examples from every era in the same place at the same time, students could observe how automotive form and function

changed from one decade to the next, according to club President David DiEugenio, a retired Southern Regional biology teacher and football coach. Moreover, they were able to glimpse more than half the 20<sup>th</sup> century all in the span of one class period, Johnson added. Students moved through the exhibit by listening for the whistle approximately every four minutes that signaled the classes to shift to the next set of cars, where they heard a brief historical summary of the decade from their teachers and a mini-presentation given by the owners of those cars.

Thus, each car or set of cars served as “a functional educational tool” or a visual aid to help them remember facts about the past, DiEugenio said, such as who was president when the brand new 1962 Chevrolet Corvette was sitting in showrooms. (Pat yourself on the back if John F. Kennedy sprang to mind.)

The reason cars make such great teaching tools, in the opinion of Vintage Auto Club members, is they are rich in potential for discussion on topics related to science, math, politics, aesthetics, society and technology. Car-centered lessons can also be tailored to groups of all ages and levels of learning ability.

“We’re trying to show how these automobiles impacted society, and vice versa,” Denny Derion of Toms River said on behalf of the club and the Vintage Auto Museum, and to highlight some of the “technological changes that occurred in that time period.”

In addition to Southern Regional, he said, the History on Wheels program visits school districts throughout the state.

The club is currently looking to purchase property in New Jersey on which to build a museum. The endeavor is predicated on the club’s philosophy that museums play an essential part in educating American youngsters by providing them with

tangible pieces of history that supplement the lessons they learn in their classrooms, textbooks and on television.

“Once we find some land and build a museum, we’ll do that,” Derion continued. “But until then, we’re a museum on wheels.”

What makes the program a win-win is that, while the students are educated and enriched, the proud owners get to indulge in two of their favorite car-related pastimes: showing off their wheels and sharing what they know about the cars they love.

Take Howard Saloom of Seaside Park, for example, who brought his bright red 1964½ Ford Mustang – the half-model-year an important distinction because it means the car was built within just four months of the New York World’s Fair in April of that year, where the car that would become an American classic was unveiled for the very first time. Aside from new paint and tires, his is an all-original car, and he is only its second owner.

In its day, Saloom said, it was considered an economical sports car with a straight six (the only year Ford made the first-generation Mustangs with six cylinders and a 180 cubic-inch engine before switching to the larger V-8), for the guy who wanted style and performance reasonably priced between \$2,400 and \$2,700.

“It’s got enough power,” he said. “You can get up and go with this.”

As for the 2005 Mustang, which most industry experts seem to feel does a fine job of paying homage to the original on which its design is based, Saloom can just as soon leave it.

“I don’t like (the new one),” he said. “Doesn’t have the lines this one has. It’s too bulky.”

Derion was another owner proud of his car’s lines. He sang the praises of Harley Earl, General Motor’s chief designer from practically the dawn of the automobile through what was known as the “Motorama” age, for bringing styling and streamlining to

the automotive industry in 1927 with the LaSalle. Earl later introduced tailfins with the conception of the 1949 Cadillac; he is considered “the father of the Corvette,” introduced in 1953; and he is also remembered for being “big on chrome.” Derion’s LaSalle was a 1937 model, considered a high-end luxury automobile that sat just below Caddy in the pricing structure of the day, he said.

During the Great Depression, people came to value the luxury of motorized transportation more than ever before, such that many “would sooner lose their homes than their cars,” he said – if only because cars enabled folks to go out and look for work.

A few years later, when the United States entered World War II, it’s perhaps not surprising the vehicles began to resemble tanks. Incidentally, by that time only about 25 percent of all cars had a built-in radio – an important news source and means of mobile mass communication taken for granted today.

In 1972, the Cadillac Eldorado, like the four-door hardtop Mary Schwankert of Toms River had on display, was perfect for a “Sunday drive” with the wife and kids – after all, gas cost only 30 cents per gallon. Unfortunately, the oil embargo that caused the gas shortage over the winter of 1973 and 1974 drove the price of gas up to \$1.50. Those who had bought and loved the Eldorado now moaned its V-8 was “the thirstiest engine in production” and its fuel efficiency ranked “somewhere near zero,” according to an issue of *Automotive Quarterly* that year. (Sound familiar?)

Of the reactions the History on Wheels program typically prompts from students, Johnson said, “The boys love it, of course, because they’re into the engines, and the more mechanical side ... and the girls think (the cars) are pretty.”

The car that illustrated his point

precisely was the one all the way at the end of the line, the newest of the bunch and perhaps also the most familiar-looking to several salivating students: the gleaming black convertible 1979 Chevrolet Corvette that was brought to the exhibit by Andy Kmosko, a retired Southern Regional health and physical education teacher.

“This is hot,” one girl cooed as she leaned over the passenger side door to peer at the dashboard gauges.

Junior Garrett Mink of Harvey Cedars and Justin Ente of Manahawkin were surprised to learn the car’s transmission had four speeds instead of five, but were googly-eyed over the whole package nonetheless. The classic American “muscle cars” of the ’60s and ’70s are among their favorites, they said.

“They go, ‘hmmm-duka-duka-duka,’” Mink impersonated.

Kmosko invited a couple of the students to go ahead and sit inside the two-seater, and they gladly accepted. Asked if the clambering teenagers made him nervous, Kmosko said a little anxiety was nothing compared to the thrill he knew it gave the kids. (“You guys look pimp!” another girl said approvingly to her friends sitting in the driver and passenger seats.)

“I had the fever since I was old enough to know what a car was, and the Corvette was always my love,” Kmosko said. His is a C3, or Shark – the designation given to Corvettes made from 1968 to ’82.

He also tried to impress upon the ’Vette’s admirers that old cars in great condition are smart investments.

“You win two ways,” he explained. “You get to drive a fun car like this, and it’s money in the bank.”

For more information about the Vintage Auto Club or to help in the museum efforts, contact club members through the web sites [www.vinatgeautoclub-nj.org](http://www.vinatgeautoclub-nj.org) or [www.vintageautomuseum.org](http://www.vintageautomuseum.org).

[victoriaford@thesandpaper.net](mailto:victoriaford@thesandpaper.net)