

Driven to



by Blythe Thimsen

FOR MOST OF HIS ADULT LIFE Glen Cloninger has been passionate about four things: architecture, the city of Spokane, Lewis and Clark High School and Montana State University (MSU). A graduate of both Lewis and Clark and MSU, Cloninger is a Spokane native who has spent more than 40 years putting his MSU architecture training to good use, adding his signature look of elegance and drama to some of Spokane's most coveted homes and commercial buildings. Recently, though, there is one more thing Cloninger has developed a passion for and which gets his motor revving: a 1953 Chevrolet, five-window pickup.

Lining the wall in his office, are shelves upon which sit nearly two dozen diecast replicas of Corvettes and Chevrolets. They are all created under the masterful care of Franklin Mint or Danbury Mint, which are world leaders in the design and development of collectibles. "I had a pent up demand for cars," says Cloninger of his collection, which, though he had admired the cars from his youth, he was only able to begin collecting the expensive diecast replicas once he began his career.

It is one automobile in particular that most revs Cloninger's interest, and that is the 1953 Chevrolet pick-up. "The 1946 to 1954 Chevrolet series pickups changed the face of automobiles, both in terms of style and innovation," he says. "Its notable features were the five-window design, easily recognized by the small, curved windows flanking the rear corners of the cab, and a side-mounted spare tire; however, the 1953 model ultimately became the classic year of this body style."

Sometimes inspiration comes with the turn of a page, and such was the case for Cloninger. One afternoon while leafing through a Danbury Mint catalog, his eyes settled on a 1953 Chevrolet pickup customized for the University of Washington. From the school colors in which the pickup was painted, to the bed of the truck, which was filled with classic tailgating essentials like a director's chair, barbeque, flags, coolers and even a mascot, the truck was a perfect replica of a 1953 Chevrolet, but with a collegiate twist.

Impressed by the truck, Cloninger scanned the page to locate an MSU truck, but didn't find one. A scan down the list of featured schools came up empty as well. Curious how an MSU alumnus could get a truck to showcase his Bobcat pride, Cloninger contacted Danbury Mint directly. What he discovered is that they did not create a diecast model for MSU because they believed it, along with many other Division 1 schools which were not featured, had too small of an alumni pool to generate enough sales and interest to deem the project worthy.

What Danbury Mint didn't know is that they had one very interested and determined alumnus on the phone with them,



photo by Winslow Studio and Gallery



Glen Cloninger shows off his Montana State University diecast trucks to Debra Smith, of Spokane Coeur d'Alene Living.

and he wanted an MSU diecast 1953 Chevrolet to add to his collection. "My family has a long history and rich tradition with Montana State," says Cloninger. "My wife, my three children and I all graduated from there and even my grandfather attended, in 1898. It provides one more string to have a family bond," he says of his family's tradition of attending MSU. "We've had an awful lot of family success because of that school. There are collateral benefits. All of us went to Jefferson Elementary, all to Lewis and Clark and all to MSU. It is no coincidence. We make the trip to attend several football games every season and are what you would consider avid fans and proud alumni, and this fueled my desire to have my own Bobcat truck model and make them available to other alumni."

Though Danbury Mint was initially opposed to the idea of custom designing and developing an MSU batch of trucks, Cloninger hoped to sway them and inquired about a custom order. After much persis-

tence and many phone calls to Danbury Mint, Cloninger discovered that due to the intricate process that is required to make each replica, the minimum number of cars that needed to be ordered to make it feasible was 750.

With a \$150 price tag on each piece, and a minimum order of 750 trucks, it would cost well over \$100,000 to place an order. "This staggering sum shocked me, but I was still curious as to what it would take

to get these into my school's bookstore," says Cloninger. "After extensive volleying, the mint agreed to sell the lot to me at a discounted price."

A long time supporter of his alma mater - Cloninger had redesigned the football team's helmets in 2000, with an M-design, and ended up donating the helmets for the entire team - the administration should not have been surprised when one of their active alumni approached the school with his idea. "I have had past experience with special projects involving the school," says Cloninger. "Projects like this are far more rewarding for me than simply writing a check."

The school was excited by Cloninger's idea. He agreed to take on all of the marketing and "elbow grease" needed to get the trucks designed, developed and into the school bookstore, with the agreement that all of the profits made after he recovered his initial investment would go toward an endowment for the



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make this restoration as close to the original as possible. He had to decide if he would deviate from the original for any parts, whether it was the springs, suspension, glass, upholstery, weather stripping, wheels, tires, hubcaps or radio. There was one resonating answer to every question: No deviation at all, if possible. "Everything, including separately painting every individual body part such as the fenders and doors, had to be exactly the way the factory originally made this vehicle," he says. "I set the bar very high and didn't accept anything that wasn't accurate.

In the end, a few virtually undetectable differences from the original were inevitable. A 12-volt electrical system was used, and Cloninger agreed to install a turn signal that is embedded in the original taillight and he upgraded the running gear. These items are not noticeable to the untrained eye.

Regardless of whether it is a trained or untrained eye that beholds the truck in its finished state, there is only one thing it will see. "An absolute beauty," says Cloninger describing it. "We had the benefit of a half-century of progress in auto paint jobs. No car in the 1950s had quality paint close to the deep metallic blue and gold skin of this dynamic beauty that turns heads and elicits appreciative wows."

A significant amount of money, a great deal of sweat equity, and twenty-six long months after it began, the restoration was completed in December 2008. "It's a head-turner," says Cloninger of the completed truck, which was shortly thereafter delivered to Bozeman. "In the end, I'm glad I didn't know the monetary, mental and time costs going into this project because there is a good chance I wouldn't have done it," says Cloninger.

"The finished project is truly something to be proud of though, and I'm so glad I did it," says Cloninger. "I'm happy to be able to give something back to a school, which I feel has done so much for me. This project was my way of saying thank you and a way of showing my Bobcat pride."

Through his time, talent and efforts, Cloninger, who is passionate about architecture, the city of Spokane, Lewis and Clark High School and MSU, can add one more thing to his list of passions which rev his engine: giving back! **S**