

Larry Camuso

A Rocket-powered bent to his collection doesn't mean it's the same Olds story



Words and photography by Jeff Koch

It's one thing to enjoy your car, or even prefer a particular marque. After all, Detroit made a mint on the concept of brand loyalty. And it's not uncommon to sink money into a car that, value-wise, may take decades to recover—who among us hasn't lived this?

It's another step to have more than a dozen examples of a marque in your collection. And it takes things a step further yet to credit that particular marque with getting you started in a business that's lasted nearly three decades and allowed you to buy the three dozen or so machines that grace your collection.

Larry Camuso of San Jose, California, blames it all on a GM division no longer in a position to defend itself. "I grew up with Oldsmobiles," he says to the surprise of no one who's ever seen his garage. "My parents always owned them; they were considered a good car. Prior to the Oldsmobiles, they had a Pontiac and a Chevrolet, and they just moved up to the Oldsmobile."

First was a Series 78 four-door—"the car they came to California in when they moved from back East." Later came a 1951 98 four-door that they had when Larry was born in 1960. "I remember

riding in that car. They'd had other Oldsmobiles over the years, but when I was a kid, I aspired to a Cadillac. Anything big and long and extravagant and that had skirts really turned me on as a kid. I could have cared less about Mustangs—show me a Buick Electra and I was thrilled!"

Another Oldsmobile joined the Camuso family stable in 1969: a green-on-green two-door Delta 88 coupe. It's also the car that's been in his family the longest: Rather than letting it go when its time as family transportation was done, Larry simply held onto it. It remains





Stunning 1941 four-door convertible in owner's favorite color combo



He's got a '72 Hurst/Olds convertible tucked away as well



A clean 1964 98 goes in for some regular maintenance



Languishing at a local dealership, Larry rescued this beauty

unrestored, runs fine, and makes an interesting visual counterpoint to a car that it inspired: his one-of-none custom 1969 Delta 88 Royale convertible. "That's the car, more than any other, that caused me to prefer Oldsmobiles."

So Larry's Oldsmobile bent was forged early on. "I actually joined the Oldsmobile Club of America in January 1975, before I had my license," he recalled. But when it came to drive a year or two later, Larry was thinking about ... old Mustangs?

"I liked early Mustangs then," he confessed, "but all the convertibles were \$700 or more. I thought that was ridiculous money for a glorified Falcon." In his research, he happened upon a factory photo of a 1970 4-4-2 convertible. "I thought, 'That's what I have to have.'"

Eventually one turned up in the paper. "It wasn't red, but it was a 4-4-2 convertible. I learned to drive stick on that four-speed; the original owner of the car, probably in his 30s, taught me how to drive it. That's not really the sort of car you should learn to drive stick on—it had a big clutch, I stalled it six times at an intersection and couldn't get it going...I barely made it home. I was terrified, and didn't touch it for three or four days after."

The Olds club membership continued. "Sometime in the late 1970s, I read

an ad for someone looking for doors and sheetmetal for a 1969 88 convertible he was restoring—it caught my eye since that was my parents' car at the time." Turns out that it was noted Olds collector Dr. Limbeck of Edina, Minnesota. "I was curious why he wanted doors for a car that was only 10 years old, so I called him up and asked. 'Because,' he told me, 'here in the Midwest, cars rust. Why not just go to the yard? The cars in the yard are all rusty too!'"

Lesson learned, Camuso immediately set out to take advantage of his geographical proximity to clean steel. "I went to the local yard, got a set of doors, sold them to Dr. Limbeck, and that was the start of my business." From this inauspicious start came GM Sport Salvage, his General-centric parts store that stocks a mind-numbing array of components.

Meanwhile, driving (and repairing) his 4-4-2 convertible led to one of the rarer Oldsmobiles in his collection: the 1948 Series 68 woody wagon. "I wanted a '48 sedan because my parents had one, but I couldn't ever find one. Meanwhile, the local Olds dealer (Merry Oldsmobile, would you believe) had accepted this '48 wagon; a customer just gave it to them. He had inherited it from his grandma, and he had no interest in it—but he thought it might be neat to

display in the showroom. Well, they never did: It was tucked away in a corner of the service area and it went downhill over the years.

"I got to know the parts manager at the dealership, and he offered it to me one day. It wasn't my parents' streamlined four-door, but I knew the woody was a curiosity—as well as a neat car. That's when woodys weren't nearly as sought-after as they are now." Yet despite a low 66,000 miles on the odometer and a light cosmetic restoration, it "ultimately wasn't what I wanted..."

Larry eventually did come across a 1948 Series 78 beyond his dreams. "It's got just 7,400 miles on it—I've just recently found and painted a set of correct wheels and reproduction tires, and taken the original tires and wheels off to display them. I was afraid to drive it with the original bias-ply on it."

We always marvel at how such fantastic vintage steel could be left to sit and languish with such low mileage on the clock, but Camuso knows this car's story. "I got it from the original family up in Quincy, California; it was bought new by a millworker up there. He wanted a stick car but couldn't get it—post-war production was still limited, and not everything was available. He was next on the list, so he bought it, but was never happy with



This 1970 4-4-2 convertible initially intimidated its young owner



Rare Toronado GT has been refinished in its special-order paint color



This one-of-none 1969 Delta 88 "Royale" convertible is a real gem



This green '69 Delta 88 gave Larry the push into his business

it. He parked it in 1952 after 7,400 careful miles, bought a Chevy sedan with a stick, and that was that. His kids inherited it, and it sat in the garage for years. It's a time capsule. The interior is NOS, and it's got great chrome and paint."

The newest Oldsmobile in his fleet, as well as the most recently completed, is a 1976 Olds Custom Cruiser. "Those clamshell wagons in 1971 ... I remember being amazed that there was finally a 98 wagon—the Custom Cruiser. It's actually a cross between an 88 and a 98; it's trimmed as a 98, but it has the 88 interior. And I remember the Custom Cruiser well ... Merry Oldsmobile loaned my high school several '76 Oldsmobiles, including a Custom Cruiser. And kids in my class actually learned to drive on a car like this one. I took my driver's test on one like it!"

This one was purchased as a delivery vehicle in 1994 and managed to work its way into Larry's collection not long after. "I allowed my restorer, Mike Knoy, to go crazy with it. It's probably the most perfect Custom Cruiser on Earth—and anyone who drove them knows that they were anything but perfect when they were new."

"But the interior was the one thing I really didn't like, so I found a 98 Regency with the same color interior, took the seats

and door panels, and modified my interior to have the Regency look—reupholstering the seats, and reconfiguring the rear seat cushions to accept Regency upholstery.

"Plus, it's a station wagon ... with skirts! It doesn't get much better than that. I can't even tell you how much I have in it—I'd sound like a nutcase. As long as we love the end result, it doesn't really matter."

Larry professes a fondness for 1970s-era machinery, since they were around when he came of driving age, but he hasn't seen a commensurate increase in interest at his shop. "The interest in '70s cars has increased somewhat—and not just for the obvious convertibles and hardtops, but even for four-doors, and especially wagons. I'd say that wagons have come on a lot stronger than '70s cars in general. It was the last hurrah for the 1970s full-size wagon, especially with the wood paneling.

"But the popularity of wagons isn't why I did mine. I'm not driven by the popularity of a segment of the hobby."

And, if you're getting the impression that Larry refuses to settle, you're right. "My collection is made of exactly the style of car I want—make, year, model, body style and color. If they don't come together, it doesn't end up in my collection. All have their reason. Now, some

of them, like the '58 convertible, I didn't have much of a choice: white and red is fine with me. And the '41 four-door convertible is blue with a red interior—I'm thrilled I found the car, period. But that also happens to be my favorite color combo of all time, on any car ever.

"If you look at some collections, you'll find the obvious collector cars. You know, I have a 1937 Packard. I have a '59 Cadillac convertible. I didn't buy them to make money...if they were worth nothing, I would still love them.

"But if you're a real car person, you may not want to own a Ferrari, or something else that's popular. If you're putting money into the restoration, it should be an individual choice. The cars I have interest in are largely driven by style. They started at a young age for me—I have clear memories of cars I rode in when I was two or three years old.

"I believe that it's something that's cultivated, not learned, and that an overall appreciation of style, color and design comes early on. That 1937 Packard is sitting next to a '76 Olds station wagon, and I'd hope that a savvy visitor to my garage would come away thinking, 'This is a real collector.'

"You know, my green '69 88 coupe is probably worth the least of anything in my garage. But it means the most to me." 