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BORN INTO CARS

BOB BENNETT'S MILWAUKEE-BASED HOT ROD AND RESTORATION SHOP, **BENNETT COACHWORKS**

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BOB AND JANELL BENNETT

Bob and Janell Bennett: happy to be in business together. (Photos courtesy Bennett Coachworks)



Born Into Cars

BENNETT COACHWORKS LLC

BY EDDIE WIEBER

Owner: Bob Bennett

Location: Milwaukee

Website: www.hotrodbuilders.com

Services Offered: full service restorations

Current Projects: 20-30 cars are in various stages of completion, including a Pacer, a 1928 Pierce-Arrow, a 1969 Z-28, a 1929 Model A, a 1962 Lincoln Continental, a 1969 Trans Am, an Austin-Healey 3000 replica, a 1934 three-window Ford, a 1967 Corvette, a 1951 Ford panel truck and a few Datsun 240- and 260-Zs.

Grandparents, uncles and the Indianapolis neighborhood where Bob Bennett spent his early childhood encouraged his interest and participation in the car-rich environment he grew up in. At age 6 his Grandfather Carlson, an R&D machinist who worked for Schweitzer Turbo, started taking him to Gasoline Alley at the Indianapolis Speedway on Carburetion Day for time trials. "They were still running roadsters, and it was like, real noise!" Bennett says. "He used to set me on his lap and tell me how someday there's going to be turbochargers on cars on the street because they were so efficient."

His Grandfather Bennett was a machinist for International Harvester. In the five-car garage behind his house was a steady parade of projects: cars, trucks and machinery that his grandfather and uncles were always building or fixing.

He helped them all by cleaning parts, doing paint prep and carrying a compressor around behind his grandfather Bennett as he painted. By age ten, he was able to identify all the major components of a car.

The family moved to rural Wisconsin when Bennett was 12. He quickly learned his way around the new environment and soon had a job maintaining farm equip-

ment. "It took a couple of weeks to figure out how to get one of the tractors to do a wheelie," he says.

He also bought his first car at age 12: a 1961 Pontiac Catalina with a 389 four-barrel and a four-speed hydromatic transmission, which he "test drove" around on the farm. He was also a member of 4H, which included learning to show and judge cattle — a skill he says served him well years later when he found himself looking through the microscope at classic automobile restorations.

"By the time I was 16, I probably owned 15 or 20 cars," Bennett says. "I always wanted to build hot rods, so the first thing I'd do when I'd get a car was tear it apart. The big deal was to see how much rubber we could lay and if we could get the front wheels off the ground."

CORVETTES & COBRAS

He worked on restoring a Corvette collection to pay his way through college where he studied philosophy and psychology; Bennett may have started a practice as a psychologist but says he lost interest one day, when one of the kids he was working with at a boy's school decided to punch a few holes in his car's radiator.

"I had an epiphany then," he says, "and decided I didn't want to be a psychologist." He decided to open a hot rod shop, which he says turned out to be not as easy as he thought. But in the space above was a shop called Dave's Restoration that specialized in Jaguars. Bennett went to work there helping in the body shop.

A quick study, he soon picked up enough of the process to take on side jobs painting cars for a few buddies. That led to a job painting a Ferrari for a guy who was in a sports car club, which opened even more doors and Bennett soon took over the entire 6,000 square foot shop.

In the 1980s, Bennett left the Midwest for San Francisco, where he worked for Arntz Engineering as the in-house R&D guy on the first Cobra Replicas built.

"I had the great pleasure of working with Dick Guldstrand (Father of the Gran Sport Corvette), Ron Butler (one of Shelby's top fabricators), Roman Slobidinski (Porsche's Indy Car engineer), and the folks at Dan Gurney Racing," Bennett says. "I also showed the very first Cobra Replica ever shown at a SAAC (Shelby American Auto Club) Convention in Dearborn in 1982. It caused quite a stir, as you can well imagine. Many of the companies that went on to build Cobra Replicas were originally customers of Arntz Engineering."

Afterwards he returned to Milwaukee to design, prototype and build all the tooling for the Cobra Replicas that were sold by Milwaukee's Excalibur Automobiles. "It was longer and wider than the original Cobra, for American sized people,"

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BENNETT COACHWORKS



Long-time, multi-skilled employee Dave Comina (top right) has helped build and restore many of the cars rolling out of Bennett Coachworks. The ZX-1 (bottom) is a limited edition, transformed C6 Corvette completely customized for each owner. (Photo by Michael Hoepfner and Dylan LT Gilje)



Bennett says. He also built the first 10 chassis and steel sets for Excalibur. "We have at this point modified quite a few of the Excaliburs to perform past their original Federal states of tuning. We have now built 40 Cobra Replicas in-house. All makes and types."

THE BUSINESS TODAY

For a long time, Bennett Coachworks was a two-man shop that had a reputation among collectors for top-notch Ferraris and Lamborghini restorations. Among the achievements were restorations of the third 427 Cobra, (CSX 3003) ever made (one of the first Cobras to sell for over \$100,000) and the Ferrari Superfast that was the star of the 1956 Paris Auto Show.

Bennett's wife, Janell also plays an important role in the business. Originally a degreed print artist and art teacher, working in galleries, she started working in the shop doing metal work. Now she oversees the books. "I love my wife very much and we're very happy being in business together," Bennett says.

Long time shop foreman Tom Ljubic was also a big part of the business until he passed away early in 2013. "He was one of the nicest guys, extremely talented and it just worked out," says Bennett. "We were twin sons of different mothers."

Bennett says his training in philosophy and psychology has had a significant influence on how he approaches business. "You have to know where customers are coming from and where they want to go," he says. "You have to understand that not every customer coming in the door can afford to spend a hundred grand on a car. You also have to be empathetic to what's going on in the world, so you can tailor your business to fit around it."

After the economy tanked in 2008, Bennett estimates that half the shops in Milwaukee went under. But that year was actually pretty decent for his company; in '09 it was better and better again in 2010 and 2011. "Last year we came

close to having our best year ever," he says. "I'm sure if I didn't have the ability to sit down and think things through; if

I went off on my first impulse, I'd have bald spots, customers that hated me and employees that quit. I almost never have

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BENNETT COACHWORKS



Projects have included Indy racecars as well as a long list of specialty cars in Bennett's 38-year career.



an employee quit. They just don't."

Today there are seven full-time and two part-time employees, and each brings a special interest and skill to the table.

"All of these guys' hearts are in it," Bennett says. "It's not just a job."

ROCKS AT THAT SPEED

Bennett says he likes working on all types of cars and all phases of the process. "We run the gamut," he says, and names off a short list of projects currently in the shop: a Pacer, a 1928 Pierce-Arrow, a 1969 Z-28, a 1929 Model A with a 671 blower on top of a 383 Stroker motor, a 1962 Lincoln Continental convertible, a 1969 Trans Am, an Austin-Healey 3000 repli-

ca, a 1934 three-window Ford, a 1967 Corvette, a 1951 Ford panel truck and a few Datsun 240- and 260-Zs. "We've made parts for locomotives; World War 2 bombers and a 12-meter "Skeeter" ice racing boat," he adds, "and that's about a third of what we're working on."

The shop's newest venture is the ZX-1, a limited edition Corvette conversion build that starts off as a C6 Corvette. "We take the body off and then we go to it," Bennett says. "The ZX-1 is almost a foot wider in the rear, about six inches wider in the front and six inches longer. Depending on what the customer wants, we can put anything from a mild to wild custom interior in it."

Besides interiors, a lot of "trick stuff" and extras are engineered into each custom ZX-1, including ATI Superchargers; full-length belly pans and air ducting that helps break the drag behind the car.

So far, the shop has completed its fourth ZX-1 and at press time is negotiating on number five. The least powerful version makes 450 bhp and Bennett says he's had a 650 bhp version up to 175mph — "in fifth gear, with one gear to go. The car rocks at that speed."

Another, built for Paul Greenstone, Chairman and CEO of Datanational Corp. and displayed at Detroit Autorama in March, is equipped with an ATI F2 supercharger and makes over 850 bhp.

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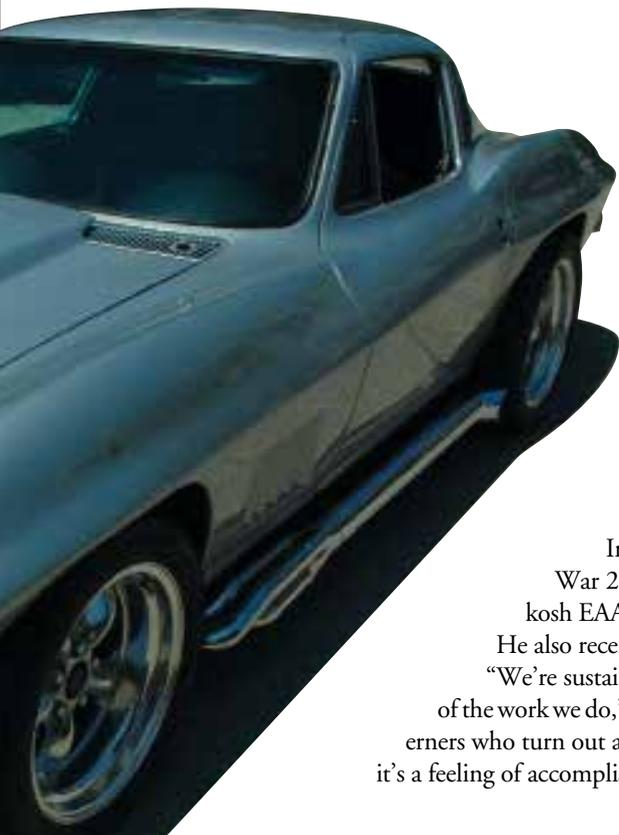
BENNETT COACHWORKS



A few of the many classic cars that have been restored.



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Bennett Coachworks has been recognized at events and shows worldwide. And Bennett knows something about what his customers' needs are because as a driver, he holds track records and class championships in several series and classifications.

A few of Bennett's many memorable awards include winning Pebble Beach several times, the Millennium Show in Philadelphia, Amelia Island, Meadowbrook and several "Best of Show" at Borchardt's Father's Day Show in Milwaukee.

In the 1990s, Bennett took a five-year break from cars to work on World War 2 fighter planes and during that stint he won Best Warbird at the Oshkosh EAA Fly-In (the equivalent of the top car show in the world) for a P-51D. He also received the award for Best P-51D at Kissimmee Sun and Fun.

"We're sustained on old valued customers and word of mouth for the vast majority of the work we do," says Bennett. "We're not anywhere near rich. We're honest mid-Westerners who turn out a product that kicks ass all over the world. Every time a car leaves here, it's a feeling of accomplishment. We're very proud of the level of work we do here." **HRR**

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