

# KEN'S WAY

**After his cousin died in a racing accident, Ken Lingenfelter stepped in to steady his relative's performance engineering company before pulling back on the throttle.**

BY PAUL A. EISENSTEIN | 📷 JOSH SCOTT

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**KEN LINGENFELTER HAS A SECRET HE DOESN'T** do much to hide. It's tucked in the back of a nondescript industrial complex, taking up most of the space in an otherwise sleek warehouse that serves as the Brighton headquarters of Lingenfelter Performance Engineering. It's the sort of secret that's likely to make your eyes pop if you step inside, especially if you're a serious car buff.

The numbers might vary, but on a typical day, if you find your way there, you're likely to discover nearly 180 muscle and performance cars, with a few exotics like a Bugatti Veyron and a Ferrari LaFerrari added in for good measure.

Actually, the 62-year-old goes out of his way to share his private collection. He expects to host as many as 100 events at the Lingenfelter Collection this year, "75 percent of them for charity,"

he says, as he leads a visitor on an impromptu tour. Charity work is a passion that's almost as intense as Lingenfelter's love for high-performance automobiles. The great thing, he says, is that he's found a way to bring both together.

"At the end of the day, Ken Lingenfelter is building a legacy of helping people and creating great cars," says Mark Reuss, director of global product development at General Motors Co. in Detroit, and a longtime friend and fellow muscle car fanatic.

Michigan's improved business climate also convinced Lingenfelter to acquire Thompson Automotive, a legendary full-service engine shop in Wixom that offers rebuild services for street engines, manufacturers, and racing teams. The sale was completed last year.

In addition to offering an engine dynamometer for testing stock-type street engines and racing engines exceeding 2,000 horsepower, the facility supports an array of motorsports activities including drag racing, circle track, and off-road competitions, as well as marine sports, karts, and power sports. Brian Thompson, who founded the company in 1987, stayed on with the acquisition, while Lingenfelter brought in more equipment and resources.

"The business and tax climate has been much

## **DBrief:**

**Lingenfelter Performance Engineering**

## **Owner:**

Ken Lingenfelter

## **Founded:**

1964

## **Headquarters:**

Brighton

## **Employees:**

50+

## **Revenue:**

NA



**REV LINE** Ken Lingenfelter, owner of Lingenfelter Performance Engineering — who has one of the world's largest collection of muscle and performance cars — is “building a legacy of helping people and creating great cars,” says Mark Reuss, director of global product development at General Motors Co. in Detroit.



improved in Michigan since 2010, and was a large reason why we began to move some of our operations from Decatur, Ind., to Brighton and Wixom,” Lingenfelter says. “We now have a full Lingenfelter machine shop in Wixom, and we’re in the process of moving our whole parts warehouse from Decatur to a facility in Brighton just two buildings away from the collection. It’s the entire computer system and all of the parts, and we’re in the process of hiring more people.”

Lingenfelter’s fixation with fast cars isn’t entirely a surprise; he was born into an automotive family. His father was an executive with General Motors’ former Fisher Body division and, after dinner, he would occasionally take his son to one of the plants to see what he was working on — including the Oldsmobile Toronado, a breakthrough product which was the first mainstream American model to go front-wheel-drive.

Meanwhile, there were plenty of racers in the extended Lingenfelter family, notably his second cousin, John Lingenfelter, a champion NHRA drag racer who won 13 career national events and was the first driver in the Competition Eliminator class to break the six-second, quarter-mile barrier. He also founded Lingenfelter Performance Engineering 42 years ago in Decatur. LPE specializes in performance parts and “tuned” GM products like the Chevrolet Corvette and Firebird, as well as the former Pontiac Firebird and Trans Am models.

Ken Lingenfelter’s path to becoming the car performance king wasn’t an entirely straight road. Curiously, although his father was a GM man, the family settled in Ford country after moving from Euclid, Ohio. That didn’t always sit well with his classmates in Dearborn — especially when he got his first car, a ’67 Oldsmobile 442, rather than the requisite Mustang GT. “I got into a little trouble,” he recalls of the days spent racing with his friends, when he first revealed his prowess behind the wheel.

Lingenfelter picked up some extra cash working as a busboy and, later, as a short order cook at the local Howard Johnson’s. Then, at 17, he wound up getting “my first real job” working for a local real estate title company. He was doing so well, he never got around to going to college. Instead, he started a title insurance company of his own in 1974, when he was 22, and hired two employees. By the beginning of the new millennium, he had more than 1,000 employees, had added mortgage services and other operations, was licensed in 10 states, and, by his own account, was running the largest business of its kind in the United States.

In 2003, Lingenfelter got an offer he couldn’t refuse, and sold Metropolitan Title Co. — which was based in Howell and was producing \$150 million in annual revenue — to the publicly traded First American Title Insurance Corp. He agreed to stay on for five years, effectively running the business he had just sold. Some unexpected developments soon led Lingenfelter to shift gears.

Even in the dry world of title insurance, “My passion stayed with cars,” he says. He often could be found at the track, either driving or watching his cousin race. Then, John was critically injured in a crash at a drag racing event in Pomona, Calif., in October 2002. He seemed to be on the mend when he unexpectedly passed away on Christmas Day 2003. That threw the fate of Lingenfelter Performance Engineering into the air.

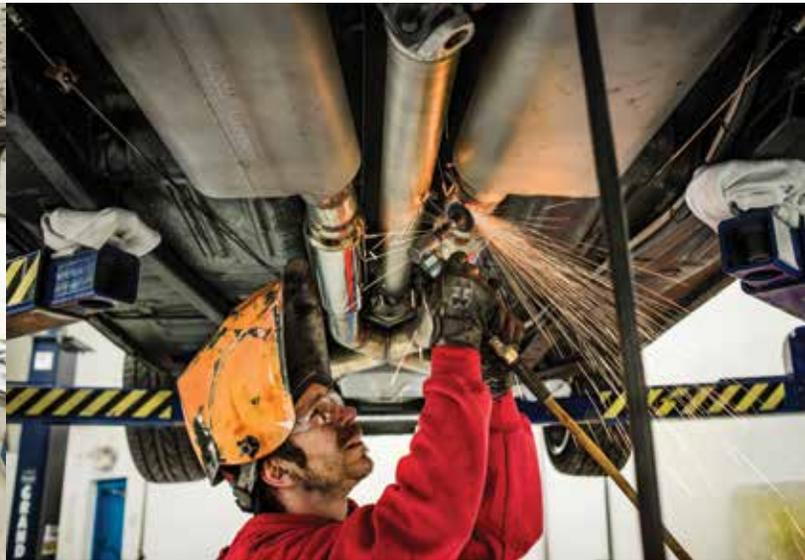
Ken Lingenfelter stepped in to help keep his cousin’s business running and, in 2007, he bought the performance company outright. “My first career really wasn’t my passion,” he says. “My second career is.” Perhaps, but at least the years in the insurance industry had honed his innate skills as an entrepreneur and seasoned manager.

**CLASS ACT** Lingenfelter owns nearly 250 cars that include, a 1967 Pontiac GTO; a 2008 Lamborghini Reventon, one of about 30 made; and a Falcon F7 made in Holly and powered by a 7.0 liter V-8 that provides 620 horsepower and has a body completely made of carbon fiber.



**CUSTOM MADE** Lingenfelter Performance Engineering has added a supercharger to the 2015 Z06 Corvette, above, and below, a 1968 Chevy Camaro with a Lingenfelter Retrokit and a 655 horsepower custom built Lingenfelter Trans Am.





» **MUSTANG MUSCLE** Lingenfelter Performance Engineering Technician Bobby Price works on the fabrication of a custom exhaust system for a 1970 Ford Mustang Mach 1, which is designed to maximize the amount of horsepower the engine can produce.

He would quickly need all the know-how he had accumulated over the previous quarter century as he had taken over the reins at LPE just as the U.S. auto industry was getting ready to sink into its worst downturn since the Great Depression. Within two years, Chrysler and General Motors would be filing for bankruptcy; with LPE focused almost exclusively on GM products, that was a serious threat.

"It was scary," Lingenfelter admits, sharing the story of his October 2007 visit to the Specialty Equipment Marketers Association Convention in Las Vegas. Known as the SEMA Show, the event is the ultimate extravaganza for gearheads, drawing more than 1,000 exhibitors to the Las Vegas Convention Center to show everything from elaborate sound systems to high-performance "crate" engines. LPE traditionally had

a big display at the show, the highlight of an industry that, only a year or two before, had generated nearly \$40 billion in annual revenue. Soon, business would plunge by nearly 25 percent. "They said 80 percent of the companies were for sale, and there was no light at the end of the tunnel," he says. "It marked the start of some tough years, but we pushed through."

That's an understatement. Although the privately held company doesn't release financial data, those familiar with it say it's thriving. Lingenfelter's success helped drive the Thompson Automotive acquisition, which "gives us another brand" to tune cars apart from LPE's close relationship with GM.

The addition of the "Wixom Build Facility" also spurred the popular Cars & Coffee series, an event where motorsports enthusiasts meet up

every Saturday from May to September. In typical fashion, Lingenfelter transforms the facility into a place where other folks who share his passion can gather in a large parking lot, show off their cars, and trade stories. He thought about doing it once a month, but figured people might have a hard time remembering the right weekend, so it's become a weekly gathering that draws as many as 450 owners and their cars.

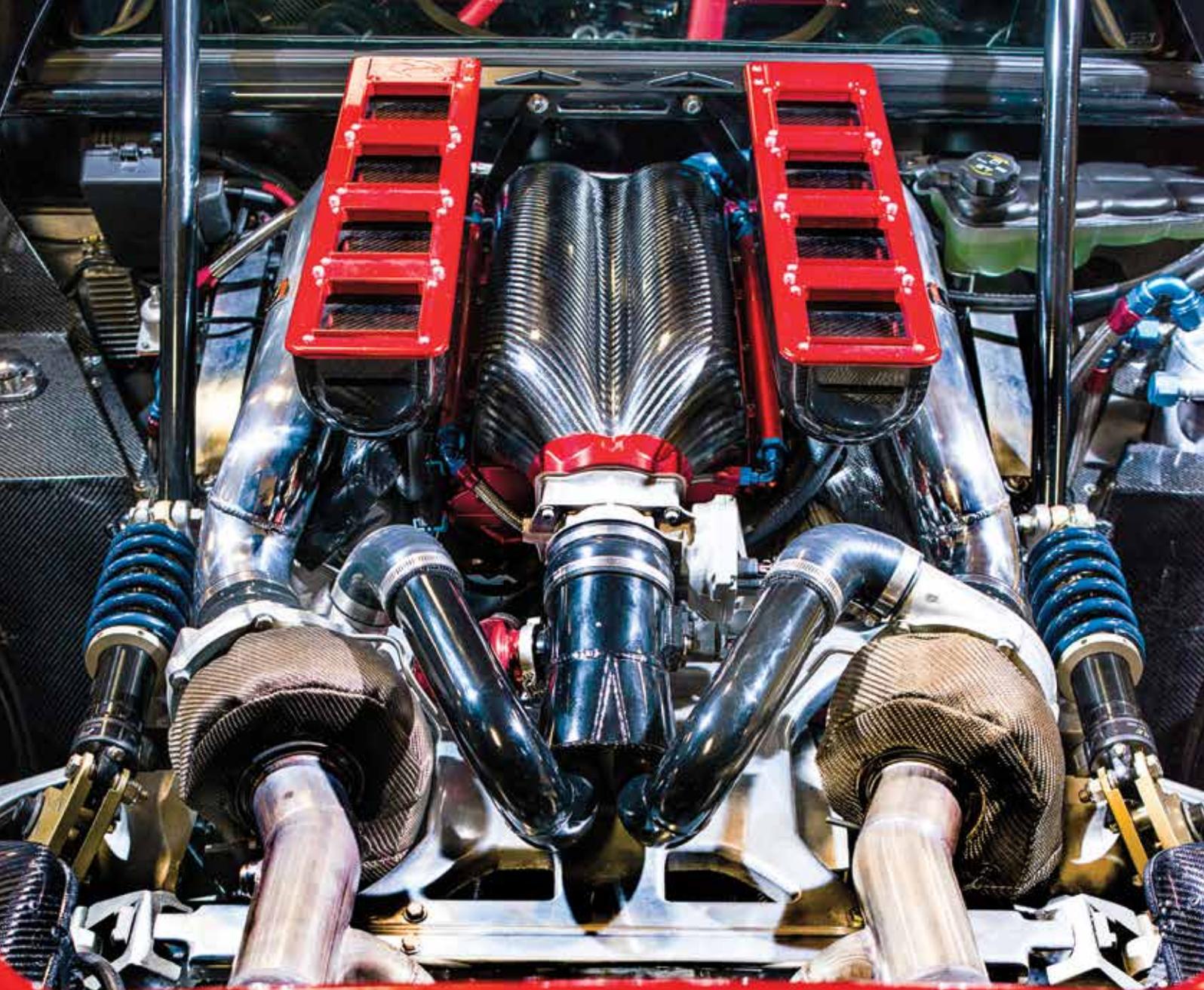
While Lingenfelter normally has a handful of vehicles from his collection on display, more likely than not he's off admiring the cars other folks bring.

That sense of humility becomes apparent in any conversation with Lingenfelter. It's not that he's not proud of his numerous successes in business, but there's no aura of boastfulness — just a sense of resilience and drive. "When you have that singular passion, you see ways you can make things work," he says of the years during the downturn. He then quickly brings his cousin back into the conversation, calling him "bigger than life. I'll never fill his shoes, but it's a lot of fun trying."

Whether John Lingenfelter could have done any better, there's no way of knowing. What's clear is that LPE has firmed up its reputation as one of *the* performance parts companies for General Motors muscle car fans. "Their work is known to be of the highest quality," GM's Reuss insists. "Quite simply, if you buy Ken Lingenfelter's GM products, they don't break." That's all the more impressive when you consider the sort of numbers they make.



**TEST TRACK** A 1972 Chevrolet Chevelle is tested for horsepower and torque on a computerized chassis dynamometer. The system will calibrate the different mechanical, fuel, and electronic systems on the vehicle to get the best combination of power and drivability.



**RAW POWER** The Falcon 7 is powered by a 1,000 horsepower twin turbo engine built by Lingenfelter Performance Engineering.

Back in the late 1970s, as the U.S. recovered from a pair of Mideast oil shocks, automakers suddenly faced the first Corporate Average Fuel Economy standards. For a few years, they even were forced to use speedometers that could only show a top speed of 85 mph. The V-8, the pundits warned, was dead. Fuel economy was the only thing that was going to matter going forward.

They weren't entirely wrong. Today, manufacturers face the toughest CAFE mandates ever — the numbers are set to jump sharply for the 2016 model year, and will keep climbing until they reach 54.5 mpg by 2025.

Surprisingly, even coming out of the factory, today's cars are producing more power than ever using advanced technologies like direct injection, supercharging, and turbocharging — improvements that also deliver unexpectedly good mileage. The new Dodge Challenger Hellcat, for example, generates an astonishing 707 horsepower, while the new 2015 Corvette Stingray makes 455 horsepower, but gets an EPA-rated 31 mpg on the highway. Still, automakers have to deal with new mileage and emissions standards, which means they're often tapping only some of the potential built into their vehicles. That leaves tremendous opportunities for companies like Lingenfelter Performance Engineering to satisfy the need for speed. "We get to do a lot of things with cars that the OEMs don't get to do," Lingenfelter notes.

Walking a guest through the Lingenfelter Collection, he wanders over to a first-generation Corvette. It was, he notes, the first — and, until recently, the only — Vette equipped with a supercharger. The Rube Goldberg-like contraption gave the sports car an extra 10 horsepower boost. These days, using superchargers, modified pistons, cams, and other accessories, LPE is able to add hundreds of extra horsepower to a Corvette or a Camaro. "The process is such today that we can do so much with so little," he says.

The next day, Lingenfelter notes, he'll be flying off to Dubai to meet with some of his best clients. "Our Middle East customers always want at least 1,000 horsepower," he says. How far beyond that can his engineering team go? "The sky seems to be the limit."

Lingenfelter always appears to be pushing the limits. That goes for his charity efforts, as well. Even though he handles as many as 100 events a year, he says, "I'd like to do more." It's been a way of life; do a quick Google search and you'll discover that even when he was running his title company, Lingenfelter was always willing to offer his help to his friends, colleagues, and the community at large.

He hasn't cut back his commitments since taking over LPE. Quite the opposite. Among the

many projects Lingenfelter has taken on, he now serves on the board of Concours d'Elegance of America. The event — which was, for many years, held on the grounds of Meadowbrook Hall in Rochester Hills — moved to the Inn at St. John's in Plymouth Township a few years back. When it comes to putting in time, "He's been generous to a fault," says board chairman and event chairman Larry Moss. "Ken Lingenfelter is as charitable as anybody I know. If you need something, it's done. Without a question."

Lingenfelter has helped steer some of the major activities at the annual summer event. In the past, the Concours' Friday night gala was traditionally just a gathering of classic car collectors. Today it has become a premier charity event, reaching beyond the typical car guy groups to raise money for juvenile diabetes. Along with his wife, Kristen, Lingenfelter also is active with

## **LPE has to reinvent itself every time a new model comes out.**

— KEN LINGENFELTER

charities that include the Alzheimer's Association. "His eyes light up when you talk about a charity," Moss says. "The irony is that most of the people attending a Lingenfelter charity event probably wouldn't even know their host if they weren't introduced to him. Ken is far from shy, but (he) isn't (an) over-the-top persona who radiates his presence like a neon sign. Ken flies under the radar. You don't see him. He just gets things done."

Access to the Lingenfelter Collection is certainly part of the draw when it comes to a charity event. A first-time visitor is likely to feel paralyzed, trying to figure out where to start. It's not that there are rows and rows of great, and sometimes legendary, cars; rather, there's one cathedral-sized room after another.

The collection is a very personalized one. Where most of the larger collectors tend to focus on great cars of the pre-war years, there's only one in the Lingenfelter Collection, and Lingenfelter is quick to note the Auburn is actually a "fake" based on a modern Chevrolet platform. The oldest car is a 1953 Corvette, and the rest is a mix of muscle cars, exotics, and a few new "ultra cars," including a nearly \$2 million Bugatti Veyron and a brand-new Ferrari LaFerrari, one

of only about 100 coming to the U.S. What surprises other collectors is that during a charity event, Lingenfelter is likely to encourage visitors to touch and even sit in the cars.

He's particularly pleased when kids climb into the cars, although Lingenfelter admits he's not being entirely altruistic. "If there's any real threat" to companies like his, he suggests, "it's that millennials don't have the same interest we had in cars." Helping them understand his passion is both a personal and a professional mission.

He's excited to find anyone who shares his love of cars, even if he admits to being more than a bit over the top. "Passion is the only word I can use about the collection," he says. Of course, it helps that his wife both keeps him grounded and shares the same passion about cars and charity work.

On this particular afternoon, she's busy working in the gift shop, where visitors can purchase T-Shirts, jackets, and other Lingenfelter merchandise. She also oversees the numerous details that go into hosting a charity fundraiser.

Lingenfelter says a complete performance makeover of a muscle car can run anywhere from \$50,000 up. Those Mideast buyers he'll be meeting with in the coming days are likely to be spending several times more. All told, LPE will tune somewhere between 400 and 500 cars a year. For those who can't afford an entirely new engine and major body and suspension work, LPE also sells modified pistons, cams, crankshafts, and other engine and performance parts, and that business makes up about 50 percent of the annual revenue.

He says it's a challenging business. Customers always want to stay one step ahead, and LPE has to reinvent itself every time a new model comes out. Even before the new Cadillac CTS-V reached showrooms, Lingenfelter's engineers were working on ways to drag a few 100 more horsepower out of its already impressive 640-horsepower supercharged V-8. They're also coaxing some extra numbers out of the brand-new Corvette Z06. "We got one in, and by the next day we had it completely dismantled and began looking (at) what we could do," Lingenfelter says.

That's what makes going to work each day more than a job for Lingenfelter. While there's plenty of work to be done at LPE, there's also an amazing amount of play, and he's always looking to see what he can do, whether it's providing more horsepower for a performance junkie or helping raise money for a charity in need. Ken Lingenfelter is the first to admit that he was lucky enough to have a first career that taught him the intricacies of business — and gave him the cash to begin a second career. **db**

## Personal Collection



**BEST VETTES** Lingenfelter has one of the country's best collections of Chevrolet Corvettes, including this trio of 1954 models. In the center, is a "mule," a cobbled-together two-seater used by Zora Arkus-Duntov, the legendary "father of the Corvette."

|| **IT IS SAID THAT** every picture tells a story, but when it comes to the Lingenfelter Collection in Brighton, so does every car. If you're lucky enough to have Ken Lingenfelter for your personal tour guide, plan on spending plenty of time wandering through the vast warehouse. It's not just the raw number of vehicles; it's the fact that there's a personal connection. "There's a story to every one of them," he says.

But those who visit expecting to find a sea of sleek Bugattis, Talbot-Lagos, or pre-war Mercedes sedans are in for a surprise. The focus is on "horsepower," says Lingenfelter, emphasizing, "This is a collection of cars I like," rather than one designed to show how much he could outbid other collectors.

At first glance, there are 150 vehicles on display — but those are just the cars tucked away in the sprawling facility behind Lingenfelter Performance Engineering's headquarters. He confides the actual number is closer to 250, and it includes one of the country's best collections of Chevrolet Corvettes. The most unique, a "mule," a cobbled-together two-seater used by Zora Arkus-Duntov, the legendary

"father of the Corvette," to test early engineering developments and the integration of a V-8 engine (earlier models only offered a V-6).

Quite a few of the vehicles are limited-edition models "tuned" by Lingenfelter Performance Engineering, or LPE — including a fourth-generation Corvette, dubbed the Sledgehammer, driven by his late cousin, John, to a 250 mph speed record, and a relatively rare and eagerly-sought-after 1963 "Split Window Vette." Lingenfelter counts himself lucky to have so many of the Chevy sports cars, in part because five of the most significant ones were returned from a temporary loan to the Corvette Museum in Bowling Green, Ky., last year, just 12 days before a giant sinkhole opened up and swallowed a major section of the museum.

Since LPE focuses on General Motors products, the collection includes a number of Pontiac Firebirds and Chevrolet Camaros, many of which are unique one-offs. And there are some distinct oddities, like the Pontiac Solstice Coupe, which is rare enough on its own before you realize the Lingenfelter team

managed to shoehorn a 550-horsepower V-8 under the hood.

While most of the collection is domestic, and almost exclusively GM, there are a handful of Ford Mustangs lining one wall. And while there's no pre-war Bugatti Royale, there is a modern Bugatti Veyron, as well as a number of Ferraris, capped by the Italian maker's latest ultra car, the LaFerrari, priced around \$1.7 million.

Several models inside the collection — including a 1966 Oldsmobile Toronado — might not seem to have much real meaning until you factor in sentimental value. Lingenfelter's father worked on the vehicle line during his years with GM's former Fisher Body division. As a young boy, Lingenfelter recalls, he'd go to the plant with his dad and sit in a Toronado as it rolled through the factory's water leak test chamber. The other special model is an Oldsmobile 442 he found at an auction a few years back. Down to the paint color, it's a twin of his very first car.

*The Collection hosts numerous charity events as well as offering open house days. To find out more, call 248-486-5342, ext. 10, or email [info@thelingenfeltercollection.com](mailto:info@thelingenfeltercollection.com).* ■