

F2 South Bend Tribune

STUDEBAKER: 150 YEARS OF HISTORY

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Many events planned to mark 150th Anniversary

Contributions to community at forefront

By **TERENCE BLAND**
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SOUTH BEND
The Studebaker National Museum is observing several events to mark this year's 150th anniversary of the founding of the company that became a household name. Several new exhibits will focus on just about everything that the car, the Studebaker, means to the South Bend area, museum director Rebecca Beuhman, museum director.

The Studebaker family legacy stretches beyond the automobile. The family was very active in the community, helping to build several churches in the community, including St. James Episcopal, the former Presbyterian Church at Lafayette Boulevard and Washington Street, and St. Paul's United Methodist Church. Epworth Hospital, now Memorial Hospital, was largely paid for by the family.

Part of the gala includes the creation of the Studebaker Hall of Champions. The first inductee will be Andy Granatelli. Subsequent inductees will be named as they are announced. Another new exhibit entitled "Studebaker Goes to War" will open Sept. 15 and will run through Jan. 15. There will be a Studebaker Design and Art Show during the month of June at the South Bend

Regional Museum of Art. The show will be from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays. Wednesday, June 26, will be Studebaker Day at the Court. That day's basketball game is scheduled for 7 p.m., and there will be special offers for Studebaker Drivers Club and museum members, including picnic and VIP access.

The Studebaker Drivers Club International Meet will be June 28 at the Conary Center and the University of Notre Dame. On Saturday, June 29, from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., there will be the Studebaker Festival on the museum grounds. There will be games, food and entertainment.

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This 1936 Commander roadster, one of many beautiful Studebakers produced during the Great Depression, was featured in the movie "The Color Purple." Photo: Michael Smith



The 1955 Studebaker, the last and fanciest of the conventional cars, was sold after 1955 and 1954 sales. The coupe entered into the 1956 truck. Photo: Michael Smith

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Some models remained to be housed in the former ad manufacturing building. "There was a period of time when we had a lot of cars," Taylor recalled. As conventional business grew, Century Center was dropped to find the needed space for exhibits and cars. Now the center could house business Century Center needed to expand into Discovery Hall and that

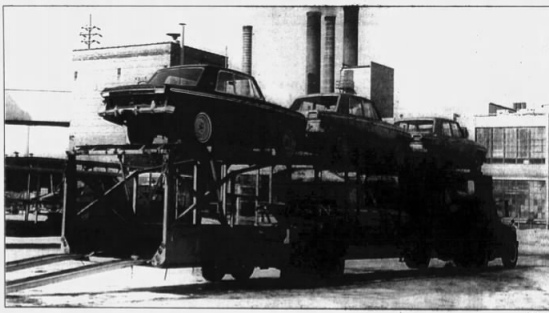
month the Studebaker museum and accompanying industrial artifacts, had to find a new home. A 55-member committee was appointed to find the best location for the museum. There was much wrangling about where to relocate. Suggested sites included everything from the State Theater to the former Central High School. Eventually, the committee decided the best location was the former Freeman Spicer dealership, where the museum stands today. The dealership originally had been built as a factory sales outlet. Still, there were concerns the site was not the best and that humidity and temperature extremes would take a toll on the collection, especially the wooden carriages.

Those issues still exist today as the board and Studebaker supporters try and rally local support to fund construction of a new facility. Mayor Stephen J. Loefer has said the city is committed to finding half of the project. Originally, that meant about \$15 million. Cost estimates for a new museum now have edged closer to \$25 million, maybe more. But Loefer is just as firm in his decision to withhold city funding until the museum and its supporters have done their part to raise their portion of the costs. Shortly after the museum moved into the Freeman Spicer building, officials talked about renovating the second floor of the 18,000-square-foot facility for use. But in

spectations showed it simply would be too costly to make the necessary structural improvements. Now, the second floor is used for storage. Under terms of a lease, any stand-the-older products of South Bend's industrial past. Museum officials hope to display that history again, sooner rather than later. Rebecca Beuhman, executive director of the museum, believes in spending the artifact collection with the intent of the appeal of the museum to more people. "If you weren't a car enthusiast, you were out of luck," Beuhman said of the vehicle-only display. Expanding the display opens the museum up to attract historians in interested in other areas of the city's heritage.

Fate: Story preceded announcement by company

Last the impact of that decision be understood, some thoughts on the off-hoof controversy were that the plant closing really was a good thing. It was not. It was a terrible thing for the laid-off workers and their families, made worse by the shock of finding that pension would not be paid. Just as Kenner employees dreams of retirement money have been shattered, no expectations of retirement security vanished back then for the Studebaker workers. For the auto-workers, it was worse. Most were over 40 and had no skills easily transferred to other employment. Suicide rates climbed among former Studebaker workers. For so many people, it was not good. Oh, sure, the Studebaker closing forced diversification of the local employment. Many of the laid-off workers did find other jobs. Government helped in a way still beneficial today. Retention of military truck contracts helped carry on vehicle production here and led to creation of the firm that now makes Hummers. Now, as before Dec. 8, 1963, an assembly line will again be producing vehicles for a major automotive company this time. Hummers for General Motors. Decision-makers had been warning back as Studebaker struggled to stay afloat that grass would grow in the streets of South Bend if auto production ended. So, it was not pleasant to write that Studebaker auto production was indeed fading here. Especially, you would not want to spread such bad news, maybe help new grass seed in the streets, if there was any possibility at all, that the story of automotive demise was not true. So, good news, told us of what the Studebaker board wanted to keep secret until the next day that they did not could not be understandable reasons — be quoted by name. Keeping the secret enabled some who knew the truth to sell their stock. Another similarity with Enron. Only the sellers back then made a mistake. Studebaker stock actually went up with first news that the corporation was dropping the money losing automotive production in South Bend. An official involved in stock transactions — who would have been in big trouble

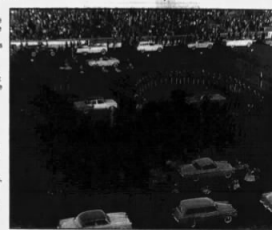


As 1963 drew to a close, the last shipment of South Bend-made Studebakers leaves the factory.

him if he was identified as a source — con-ferred sales, told us who was selling and the reason given. Some union officials had been notified and decided they were more concerned in letting their community and their workers know than in keeping a secret for the board and the bankers in New York. We learned that the company would still try to make some after shutting down South Bend production by shifting all assembly operations to the corporation's Hamilton, Ontario, plant in Canada. The official announcement, we found, was to be the next morning in New York. With facts in hand, there was no reason for us to wait for New York. But were sufficient facts in hand? Never before had I been summoned to the publisher's office. Young reporters don't get their office and most times don't want to. Franklin D. Schurz Sr., then editor and publisher of The Tribune, Powers and I went in the publisher's office with the first line fact approaching. What to write? An announcement as delivered in the last news might be, I was ready to write the story — in fact had written a draft of it — until the news.

Mr. Schurz — all of us in the newsroom used the "Mr." title with genuine respect asked me if I was absolutely sure of the story's reliability of the sources and the accuracy of the information. "Yes." Then the publisher asked Powers if I was sure if we should go with the story "Yes." Thus, the story. If my story had been wrong, no doubt I would not be working in journalism today. Of course, it was not wrong. With all the information we had, we weren't taking some wild risk. We knew. Some others did, too. There were too many leaks, even among those pledged to secrecy in New York. By the time of the final edition, there was official word in New York, but the details, but confirmation that South Bend automotive production would end. Even as the paper was hawked at the plant gates by the street sellers of that era, some workers leaving in the cold and the rain refused to believe the news. A few showed hostility toward the sellers. They did not want to believe the sad truth of the final song on the day the music died.

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In this photo from the mid-1950s, a marching band forms the traditional Studebaker Corp. "S" while Studebaker vehicles are displayed during a company event at Nelson Drive Stadium.