

Former auto trim plant houses collectors' cars

BY GARY HOFFMAN

Special to CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS

In a neighborhood rich with the lore of Detroit's industrial past, a former automotive plant has become the home away from home for hundreds of vintage and other prized cars.

Classic Vehicle Storage occupies the old Ternstedt trim plant at 2700 Junction on Detroit's southwest side. Inside its rough-hewn walls of brick and block is a veritable museum containing everything from a 1986 Ferrari to 1960s-era hot rods, many wrapped ghost-like in dustcover shrouds.

The sprawling Clark Street Cadillac complex — to which the building once belonged — virtually surrounds it. Nearby are the homes where generations of plant workers lived and still live.

No one — not even the most prized client — wanders this corridor alone, because of the value of some of the cars. Cars valued in the high five figures are commonplace. But a surprising number are considerably less expensive hot rods and muscle cars owned by weekend mechanics — including a cherry-red '62 Chevy 409.

"Some people get more attached to their hot rods and muscle cars than people do to a Ferrari," says Norm Anchor. He himself owns a 1933 Oldsmobile and a 1937 LaSalle.

Anchor, 47, and Greg Bawol, 45, who were childhood friends in northwest Detroit, started the business in January 1985. They already owned the 220,000-square-foot building. They had bought it for \$100,000 in 1984, considering it a rock-bottom-price real-estate bargain.

"To build this building today would probably cost \$20 million," Bawol says.

It did not immediately occur to them to store cars and other vehicles. They started by renting out parts of the building to tenants, and using other areas for the conversion of postal vans into ice cream trucks. But the U.S. Postal Service soon stopped releasing postal trucks, and the pair discovered they really didn't like having tenants. So they hit upon vehicle storage.

The costs of running the building were not such a bargain. Even minimal heat, just enough to keep the pipes from freezing, cost the two men \$100,000 a year. They are now switching over to a compressed-air sprinkler system (which holds air in the pipes until the sprinkler activates), and they say they will no longer need to heat the building's storage areas.

They say they took in just \$54,000 last year, but hope to double that this year. Until the business be-

comes profitable, they say they get income from their other businesses — Bawol owns a wholesale ice cream business, Rainbow Street Vending in Dearborn, that Anchor once owned, and Anchor has rental properties in Detroit.

The two say that their customers have many different cars and various motives for turning to Classic Vehicle Storage. They say their prices are somewhat better than self-storage areas in the suburbs. Mostly, the customers want to protect their cars from the harsh Michigan winters and the omnipresent road salt.

Anchor and Bawol say their building boasts amenities such as floors made of wood, not concrete. The wood reduces rust-causing condensation under the cars, Anchor says, adding that a burglar alarm and sprinkling system assures the cars' safety.

In some cases, customers want to store their cars while they are on temporary job transfers. "Those are nice," Anchor says. "They're here all year round."

"Some will leave their cars here all year round, and then drop in on a sunny summer weekend to take them for a ride," Bawol says. "There are some guys who come almost every weekend."

The place is open seven days a week, 10 a.m. until 4 p.m., but Bawol says special arrangements can be made to open storage areas at other times, if necessary.

The capacity is 450 vehicles, and Anchor estimates that the maximum last winter was 220 cars. About 80 cars were stored last summer.

They originally called the business Dollar-a-Day Car Storage, and that was about what they charged. But it was not enough to support the business. The pair soon doubled rates to \$60 a month and \$300 for six months, which most of the slush-and-salt fleeing customers choose. Besides cars, the building houses recreational vehicles, boats and even a fire engine.

Competitors generally charge about \$80 a month.

The two Classic Vehicle Storage owners have knocked around in some different professions. Anchor got started in the ice cream business as a teen-ager while he was waiting to start an apprenticeship in wood pattern-making — his father's trade. When the apprenticeship came up, he took it for a year, but went right back to his truck business and became a common sight on Lincoln Park and Wyandotte streets. He later bought the Dearborn wholesale ice cream business.

He sold the ice cream business to Bawol in 1978, worked for him for a time, and then briefly owned a business as a tree planter.

"The thought of doing one thing all my life was not appealing," Anchor says. **COM**