

**WRECKING BALL FLATTENS DEARBORN HOME OF THE FAMED 'FAIRLANE COMMITTEE' – MUSTANG'S SPIRITUAL BIRTHPLACE**

By John M. Clor

**A**s time marches on in the world of the automobile business, "change" remains the most challenging constant. While that simple truth keeps automotive product planners and marketers mired in career-long struggles adapting to an ever-evolving marketplace, another equally important truth often gets overlooked. And that is the old saying that, "You can't know where you're going until you know where you've been."

That's why I remain a student of Mustang history in my job at Ford Racing, marketing the Ford brand by engaging the enthusiast customer. Long ago my mother convinced me to read and study the history textbook I lugged home from school each day. She said what I learned would be my beacon to a successful future. "After all," she told me, "those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it."

For years I thought my mother was an amazing philosopher, until I learned in high school that her words of wisdom actually belonged to George Santayana, a Spanish-born American poet and literary humanist. My bubble was burst further in college when I learned that Santayana was actually paraphrasing Edmund Burke, a British statesman from the 1700s who had been the first to write: "Those who don't know history are destined to repeat it." Whatever that statement's origin, I can honestly say that I've discovered real value in the idea that "knowledge is power" in marketing and communications. I've found that either knowing enough or simply being around long enough to surface some lessons-learned can be the key to successful decision-making, and may truly make or break a project or product.

As Mustang enthusiasts, we share an interest in the car's storied past as much as in its promising future. Its sporting heritage actually helps drive our purchase considerations for vintage and new Mustangs as well as for performance parts. History plays a big role here, if only for brand clarity's sake. Even with a secondary brand like the Boss, you can see why retaining a sense of historical purity is important, despite it being applied on a thoroughly modern product.

For me, the most intriguing thing about delving into Mustang history is discovering how the product development process now in place at Ford compares to what the car's creators faced back in the day. The only way to get the "real" story is to talk to those who were there and part of Mustang programs. But many of the original team are getting up in years (Lee Iacocca turns 86 in 2011; Don Frey, Mustang product planner, passed away last March at 86; Joe Oros, chief stylist, is 94). So you can understand why I relish any opportunity to meet and speak with those who had a part in Mustang's past—whether it's from 1964 or 1994.

One such opportunity came up recently after I spoke on a local radio show. Ford retiree Alan Anderson, who was chief engineer on the 1964½ Mustang convertible, was listening-in and decided to call the radio station to get my contact info. After trading emails, we agreed to meet for lunch. What a treat that was! Alan's stories of his work at Ford in the late '50s and early '60s were enlightening. His efforts on the original Mustang program—engineering a convertible from the coupe's body structure—struck me as a testament to the



dedication of all who contributed to the development of Ford's iconic pony car. When we left the restaurant, I thanked him for his time and gave him a signed copy of *Mustang Dynasty* to critique. I was blown away a few days afterward, when he sent me a signed copy of one of his original engineering drawings of the first Mustang convertible! I will treasure that forever!

I'd like to share another bit of Mustang history that I came across in Dearborn. To most people, the demolition last October of a shuttered Quality Inn at 21430 Michigan Avenue looked like any other construction project. But to well-versed Detroit-area auto enthusiasts, it was the erasure of a structure that had been long associated with the true birthplace of the Mustang.

I didn't hear about it on the TV, radio, or see anything about it on facebook or Twitter. Rather, I got a phone call from my longtime mentor and former supervisor at Ford SVT, Jim Sawyer: "Hey, John! I thought you, of all people, would like to know that they're tearing down the old Fairlane Inn," Jim told me after a drive past the site. "Maybe you should get a picture of this!"

Jim and I go way back and like me, he knew exactly what happened in one of the five structures on that site back in 1962. I was on the road speaking at a Mustang show that weekend, so I called co-worker Andrew Casselberry at Ford Racing to see if he could get a few shots before the old motel was gone forever. He obliged, and captured the moment for you, as seen on these pages.

For decades a gas station operated at the corner of Michigan and Brady. With Ford Motor Company's postwar boom, the Fairlane Inn Motel was constructed on that expanded parcel of land to serve an increasing number of business travelers visiting Ford's World Headquarters. Over the years the motel changed hands and underwent a remodeling or two, but later faltered along with the industry. After struggling as a Quality Inn it was closed in 2005, and sat vacant since.

Automotive history buffs know the story behind the Fairlane Inn, how it played a major role in Mustang history. You'll recall that after being named Ford VP and general manager of Ford Division in 1960, the young, upstart Lee Iacocca took a controversial stance to convince Henry Ford II that a new global car proposal code named "Cardinal" that cost millions in research and design, wouldn't sell in





the United States. His insistence eventually won over Mr. Ford, who killed the project, but it cost the young Iacocca the support of several older executives who wanted to see the car go to production. With that mainstream sedan proposal no longer going to market, Iacocca was free to start on other projects and quickly got to work attempting to change Ford's stodgy image among boomers who were entering the workforce in a strong economy. So he called together a future-products brainstorming group of up-and-coming Ford managers, and took them off-site to a motel meeting room for a series of after-hours sessions.

In his book, *Iacocca: An Autobiography*, Iacocca explains how the Fairlane Inn became a think tank for his hand-picked product team:

"Right away, I brought together a group of bright and creative young guys from the Ford Division," Iacocca wrote. "We started getting together once a week at the Fairlane Inn in Dearborn, about a mile from where we worked" [just down the street at Ford World Headquarters].

"We met at the hotel because a lot of people back at the office were just waiting for us to fall on our faces," Iacocca wrote. "I was a young Turk, a new vice president who hadn't yet proved himself. My guys were talented, but they weren't always the most popular people in the company. (But) the 'Fairlane Committee,' as we called ourselves, had a lot on the ball."

To his credit, Iacocca had indeed surrounded himself with other passionate "car guys" who soon became major players in the Mustang saga: There was Frey, the Mustang's product planning manager, his special projects assistant Hal Sperlich, and Racing Manager Jacque Passino (who would be key to bringing in racer Carroll Shelby). Plus Don Petersen, who headed up marketing (and later became Ford's president), and his managers Frank Zimmerman and Chase Morsey. Also included was Ford PR Manager Walter Murphy, Ad Manager John Bowers and Sid Olson from the J. Walter Thompson agency, along with Research Manager Bob Eggert.

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Other major players were Design VP Gene Bordinat, Gale Halderman, and some of top stylists: Oros, Dave Ash, and Charles Phaneuf. There were other contributions from people like Phil Clark, a young designer who is said to have toyed with the Mustang brand theme at GM before penning the Pony emblem and coming over to Ford. Plus interior designer John Najjar, who promoted the Mustang name and helped push Clark's design for the Mustang I Prototype—a mid-engined, 2-seat, rear-drive sports car concept that won international acclaim in 1962 as a possible Corvette-fighter from Ford.

But Iacocca knew that any production car he proposed would have to be a much more practical and less-complex-to-build 4-seater if it were to ever see an assembly line. So his team was tasked with turning that dream into a reality while he attempted to sell this new idea to top management—which turned out to be quite a challenge in and of itself.

Ford's "youth market" car at that time was the reliable Falcon, a strong-selling economy car that Iacocca helped give more sporting pretensions by 1962. By then a dolled-up Falcon Futura model gained a V-8, bucket seats, and a floor shifter. Those additions did little to slow the interest that Chevy's Monza version of the Corvair was enjoying. Iacocca knew Ford needed a fresh, new sporting entry—and soon—if he was going to be able to capitalize on this burgeoning market.

Despite repeated attempts to gain the go-ahead to produce a stylish, new "youth car," Iacocca's proposals were regularly rejected. Frey and the team had come up with a wonderfully clean design for the project, code named "T-5," in early 1962. An internal competition in the design studio produced a unanimous favorite in less than two weeks—a low, sleek, four-place compact with a long hood and short deck. Mainly penned by Ash, who had been working with Oros on what they dubbed the "Cougar," the basic design of this "Special Falcon" (as the early Mustang prototypes were called) would eventually reach production relatively unmolested—a hallmark of many timeless designs, yes, but truly a rarity in an auto industry long plagued with "design by committee" products.



Phaneuf would later say the original Mustang was nothing more than a scaled-down Continental Mark II, especially when viewed from the side. But Iacocca believed it was uniquely appealing, so he and Frey took it to top execs for yet another "youth car" sales pitch in September of '62. Again, concern over how much Iacocca's proposal would cut into Falcon sales led the discussion, and the fact that the company had already set aside a whopping \$250 million to revamp the entire Ford lineup for '65 certainly didn't help his request for a quarter of that to experiment on a brand-new model.

The good news was that the most important person they needed to convince—Henry Ford II—finally gave in and approved the proposal against the advice of his top advisors. The bad news was that Iacocca was given a budget of a paltry \$40 million to develop and tool the car and get it to market in less than two years—months to be exact. With the odds so stacked against them, it was a risk few managers would ever take. But Iacocca and Frey were thrilled just getting the chance. More important for Ford, that chance turned into smash hit. Mustang has galloped on to thrill some nine million owners over a span of nearly five full decades, and it shows no signs of stopping still today.

The motel that lent its name to a committee of men who dreamed up the Mustang is now gone. Plans for some of the city-owned site include the expansion of facilities and parking at the adjacent Dearborn Historical Museum, and new public access to the Rouge River. Some of the Michigan Avenue frontage still is tabbed for a private development, but city officials said they aren't actively pursuing bidders at this point.

A piece of Mustang history is now gone. My hope is that with some help from this column, it will never be forgotten. And one more thing: There's a common misconception that Henry Ford had a personal disdain for history, thanks to the "History is bunk" quip long attributed to him. But if you do a little digging, you'll find that what he actually said in that 1916 interview with the *Chicago Tribune* was, "History is more or less bunk. It's tradition. We don't want tradition. We want to live in the present, and the only history that is worth a tinker's dam is the history we made today."

Turns out that Ford's comments were actually in reference to European leaders who had blundered into World War I. Ford was attempting to articulate how devotion to the past prevents us from grappling with the present and may encourage us to make war out of historical grievance. Taken out of context, it sounds as if he felt looking back had no purpose. In reality, Henry Ford believed in learning from history, and using the past to promote progress and shape the future, especially when it came to manufacturing.

Funny how knowing some history can give us a better understanding of—and appreciation for—the things that are important to us in life. ... As usual, mom was right!

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