

# Ponies in the Garden

**U**NLIKE Los Angeles with its history as the birthplace of the hot rod, or Detroit with the Woodward Cruise or even Reno with its Hot August Nights, New Jersey, where I grew up, doesn't have much of a muscle car tradition. Its traditions, especially in the eyes of those who live outside the Garden State, runs more towards mobsters, toxic waste dumps and exits along the Garden State Parkway or the New Jersey Turnpike. For most outsiders, impressions of New Jersey are formed on final approach to Newark Airport, right above exit 13 of the New Jersey Turnpike; the chemical plants and oil storage tanks that flank each side of its 12 lanes of asphalt.

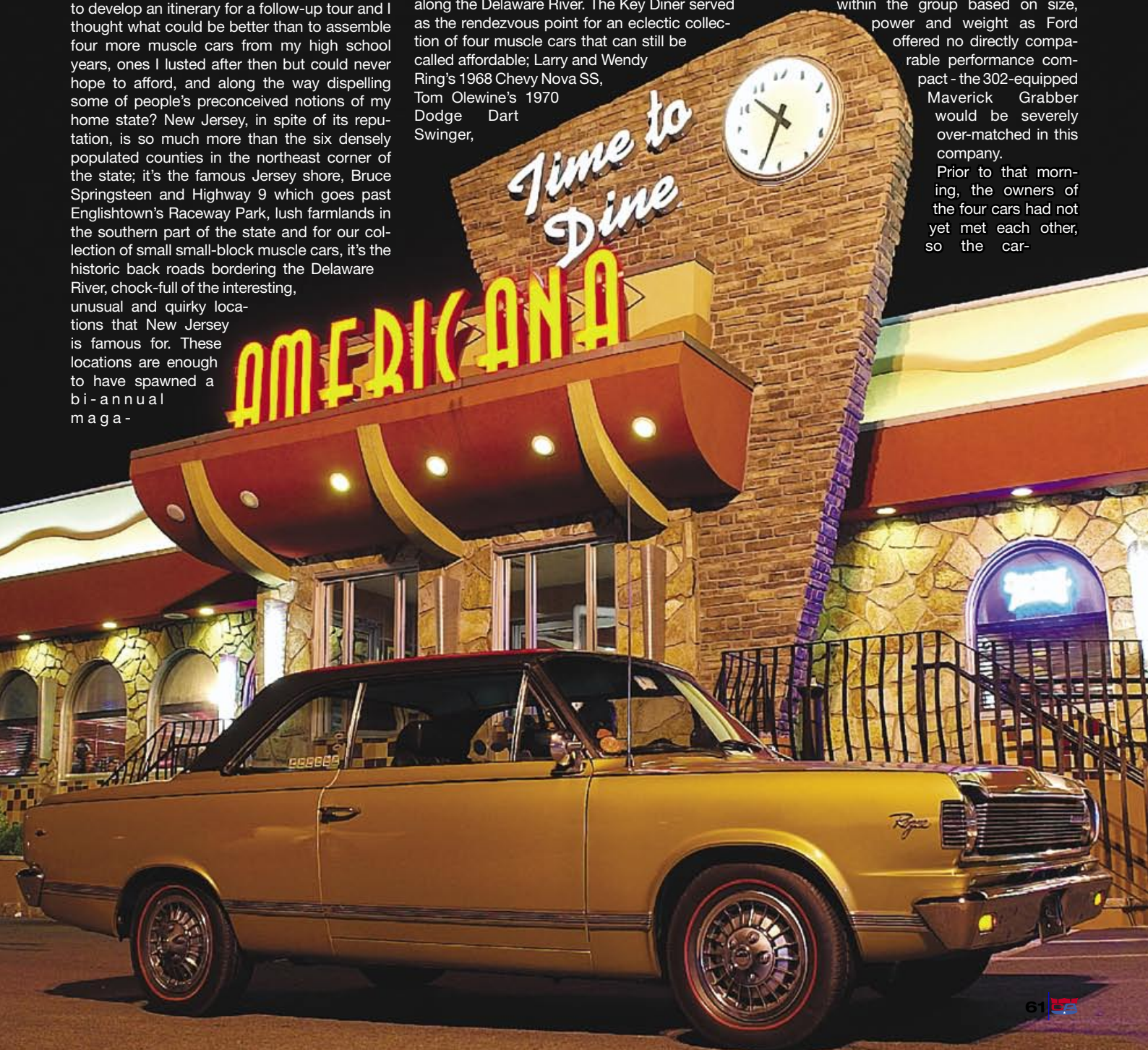
Almost two years ago I formulated plans for the first muscle car tour in Los Angeles and ever since then I've been itching for an excuse to bring together four more muscle cars, representing each of the four manufacturers, AMC, Chrysler, Ford and GM. It fell on my shoulders to develop an itinerary for a follow-up tour and I thought what could be better than to assemble four more muscle cars from my high school years, ones I lusted after then but could never hope to afford, and along the way dispelling some of people's preconceived notions of my home state? New Jersey, in spite of its reputation, is so much more than the six densely populated counties in the northeast corner of the state; it's the famous Jersey shore, Bruce Springsteen and Highway 9 which goes past Englishtown's Raceway Park, lush farmlands in the southern part of the state and for our collection of small small-block muscle cars, it's the historic back roads bordering the Delaware River, chock-full of the interesting, unusual and quirky locations that New Jersey is famous for. These locations are enough to have spawned a bi-annual maga-

**As the muscle car era drew to a close, Detroit responded with smaller, lighter alternatives. Richard Truesdell assembled four that represent the era of higher insurance premiums and lower compression ratios, for a day's drive in the west New Jersey countryside.**

zine, aptly titled *Weird NJ* and a companion hardcover volume, fertile ground for back road explorations on a sun-filled Saturday in May.

If New Jersey is known by out-of-staters for anything worthwhile, it's our diner culture that spans more than a century. Our Saturday journey through western New Jersey's Warren and Hunterdon Counties started with what is now a muscle car tour tradition - breakfast at a period-correct eatery, in this case the Key Diner on the westbound side of Route 22 in Phillipsburg along the Delaware River. The Key Diner served as the rendezvous point for an eclectic collection of four muscle cars that can still be called affordable; Larry and Wendy Ring's 1968 Chevy Nova SS, Tom Olewine's 1970 Dodge Dart Swinger,

Blaine Hertzog's 1971 AMC Hornet SC/360 and Chris Matlaga's 1972 Ford Mustang Mach I, each of the four displacing no more than 360 cubic inches. Also attending was Ford and Shelby enthusiast Dan Reiter, and Larry Blatt who had volunteered his 343 Rambler Rogue as the camera car. Looking at the specifications for each car, it would be hard to imagine four more perfectly matched cars. Even though the more luxuriously trimmed Mustang is more pony car than low-buck compact, it fits almost perfectly within the group based on size, power and weight as Ford offered no directly comparable performance compact - the 302-equipped Maverick Grabber would be severely over-matched in this company. Prior to that morning, the owners of the four cars had not yet met each other, so the car-





## Van Iderstine Speed Shops

In the Sixties and Seventies heyday of the muscle car, if you wanted go-fast parts and lived in New Jersey, there was only one place to go - Van Iderstine's, a chain of speed shops located throughout northern New Jersey and Staten Island in New York. They were, as they say, an institution on the New Jersey performance scene. Their radio spots were part of the scene, playing over the big AM radio stations like 770 WABC, the home of 'Cousin Brucie' Morrow (who will now be moving over to his own channel on Sirius Satellite Radio).

Unfortunately times change and almost 20 years ago, in the late Seventies, the Van Iderstine chain broke up with independent operators running each of the individual stores. All that remains of this once iconic chain is a single store, now called Autosport, located on Route 17, near the New York border. Speaking with current owner, Sal Marsilla, he explained that he bought the current location 17 years ago and over the years has transitioned his business, as many others have, to the exploding 4x4 and import tuner car categories. 'The last remaining Van Iderstine other than mine,' says Marsilla, 'is the store on Route 22 in Springfield, which closed about a year ago.' Marsilla is now the last remaining link to what was once an icon in the NJ/NY metro area speed and performance scene.



**ABOVE: IT'S ALMOST A TRADITION - TOUR STARTED WITH A HEALTHY ALL-AMERICAN BREAKFAST!  
BELOW: TOUR EVEN TOOK IN ISLAND DRAGWAY**



**PREVIOUS PAGE AND BELOW: CAMERA CAR DUTIES WERE UNDERTAKEN BY LARRY BLATT IN HIS 343 RAMBLER ROGUE; NOT PART OF THE ORIGINAL SMALL BLOCK LINE-UP, BUT A DEFINITE CONTENDER**

bohydrate-loaded breakfast gave each of the participant an opportunity to get to know each other and swap stories on each of their cars. As three of the four were 'old-timers', so to speak, their muscle car roots going back to their high school days in the Sixties and Seventies, it was interesting to note how Chris related to the traditional enthusiasts being the youngster among the group and how he came to get interested in vintage muscle rather than force-fed, four-cylinder rice rockets.

Chris related that many of his friends had caught the V8 virus, so there are young enthusiasts that are already passionate about cars built before they were born, and in Chris' case, long before. It also gave us the chance to discuss the day's driving agenda and the best way to get dynamic tracking shots, always a challenge, of all four cars.

What's great when four old cars are assembled in one place is how easy it is to get cooperation from everyone around us. As we wanted to get a group shot of all four cars in front of the Key Diner, the manager made an announcement asking patrons to move two cars and this was done gladly as the cars in the parking lot had already attracted a crowd.

We headed south a few miles to the hamlet of Alpha, tipped off by *Weird NJ* that someone had metal dinosaurs on their property. Given that Alpha is so tiny (and we had the exact address) it wasn't hard to find the metal beasts





## 1971 AMC Hornet SC/360



**Owner:** Blaine Hertzog  
**Length:** 179.3in.  
**Wheelbase:** 108in.  
**Weight:** 3300lbs  
**Displacement:** 360cu.in.  
**Horsepower:** 245bhp (285 with Ram Air)  
**1971 SC/360 production:** 784  
**Base Price:** \$2663

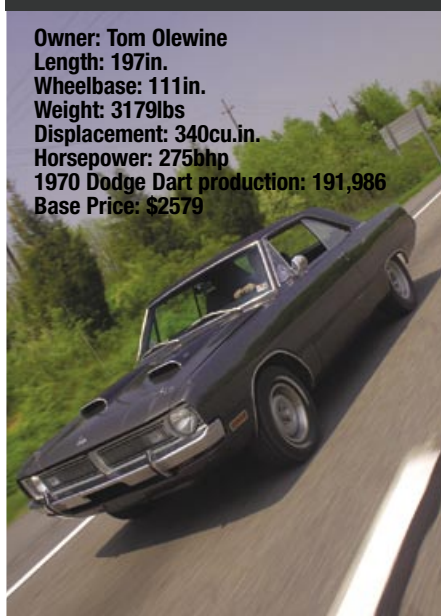
on Industrial Drive. It gave us a chance to think about how such similar creatures gave their bodies so that millions of years later we would have the petroleum necessary to feed and lubricate our cherished muscle cars. Since the dinosaurs were on private property, we quickly grabbed some shots and departed with haste.

While getting the tracking shots I knew that the shots would turn out great given the green background with the spring foliage in full bloom due to the almost torrential rains this spring. Pulling in for gas, we immediately caused a stir at the pumps. After topping off the tanks we headed east, back across the Delaware River into New Jersey over the narrow two-lane bridge leading into the town of Belvidere, the smell of unburnt hydrocarbons totally intoxicating combining with the sounds of 32 cylinders spread over four distinctly different V8s.

As it was already almost time for lunch so we headed to Buttzville, yes Buttzville, and another Garden State institution, Hot Dog Johnny's, where the menu was dominated by, of course ... hot dogs. Here it's still possible to get a premium frank, fries and a drink and get change back from three dollars. In an era of homogenized fast food, Hot Dog Johnny's instantly returns you to a simpler time. First opened in 1944, Hot Dog Johnny's has continuously served up great food at reasonable prices and the proof of its enduring success is that no matter what the time, weather or season, it's almost always packed and standing room only. At Hot Dog Johnny's our caravan competed for the attention of patrons with a beautiful copper-hued four-door tri-Chevy post station wagon. With so many Nomads having been restored, it was a pleasure to take in the clean simple lines of this underappreciated classic.

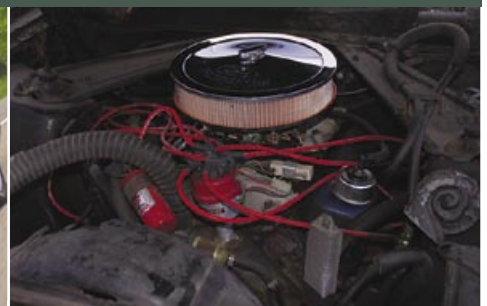
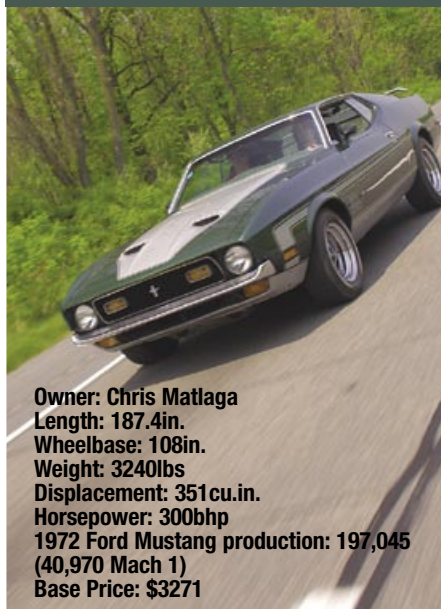
Next stop, not far from Hot Dog Johnny's, was Island Dragway, another throwback to a time when muscle cars dominated street and strip. A small family-operated strip, Island Dragway is Blaine Hertzog's home track, and he has his own designated parking space. Walking around the staging area, we snapped shots of cars waiting their turn in the staging area for their weekly crack at quarter-mile immortality; or something like that. While we would have liked to put our cars through their paces, given our tight schedule, it wasn't possible but Blaine proudly showed us several time slips from recent runs,

## 1970 Dodge Dart 340 Swinger



**Owner:** Tom Olewine  
**Length:** 197in.  
**Wheelbase:** 111in.  
**Weight:** 3179lbs  
**Displacement:** 340cu.in.  
**Horsepower:** 275bhp  
**1970 Dodge Dart production:** 191,986  
**Base Price:** \$2579

## 1972 Ford Mustang Mach 1



**Owner:** Chris Matlaga  
**Length:** 187.4in.  
**Wheelbase:** 108in.  
**Weight:** 3240lbs  
**Displacement:** 351cu.in.  
**Horsepower:** 300bhp  
**1972 Ford Mustang production:** 197,045 (40,970 Mach 1)  
**Base Price:** \$3271

all well below 14 seconds. Hertzog's best time is a very respectable 13.539 at 101.22mph with full exhaust, street tyres and stock AMC exhaust manifolds.

While in the staging area we pulled out our maps and because we had stayed as long as we had watching cars take their runs, we decided that instead of heading further north and visiting a couple of vintage roadside attractions, we would turn south, back into Hunterdon County with the county seat of Flemington our next and ultimately, final destination. The route we took south was county road 519, which runs side-by-side with the Delaware, just a few miles to the west. I used the opportunity to get behind the wheel of the Mustang and was reminded of how similar it felt to my own Mercury Cougar that transported me back and forth to college 30 years ago. Matlaga's 351 was strong and willing and could still easily light the tyres. As we approached our original starting point of Phillipsburg, we came upon Sweet Treats and Eats and seeing another photo opportunity, we paused and enjoyed their famous frozen custard confections.

It should be noted that western New Jersey is home to several local wineries and Sweet Treats and Eats is located between the two, Alba Vineyards to the south in Milford and Four Sisters to the north in Belvidere. Just when you thought you knew everything about New Jersey, you find out that there are actually 20 wineries that dot the state ([www.newjersey-wines.com/map.html](http://www.newjersey-wines.com/map.html)).

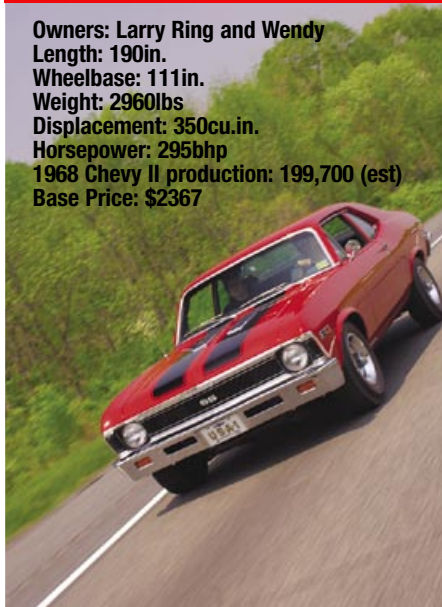
The journey south continued where we picked up Interstate 78 east to NJ 31 south in Clinton. Constructed in the Sixties and completed in the Seventies, Interstate 78 made it possible to traverse New Jersey east to west in less than an hour without hitting a single traffic light, replacing US 22, known in many parts of the state as Death's Highway. Approaching Flemington from the north we made our way to the centre of town and the historic Union Hotel, situated just across the street from the original Hunterdon County Courthouse, site of 1935's Lindbergh Kidnapping Trial, once called 'the crime of the century'.

At this point it was time to finish up the tour as the participants all lived further north, in eastern Pennsylvania in the Bethlehem area. But before we said our farewells, thankful for a great day and an even better drive, we stopped at the Citgo Quik Mart on 31 north, just south of the Flemington Circle. Normally this wouldn't rate a mention except for the fact that it carries one of the most eclectic selections of magazines to be found anywhere, with all the expected domestic titles as well as motoring titles from the UK (including your favourite American car mag), Australia and even France.

As certifiable magazine junkies, we can tell you that it's worth the trip. In our tour of New Jersey we saw cows, not chemical plants; lush

## 1968 Chevy II Nova SS

**Owners:** Larry Ring and Wendy  
**Length:** 190in.  
**Wheelbase:** 111in.  
**Weight:** 2960lbs  
**Displacement:** 350cu.in.  
**Horsepower:** 295bhp  
**1968 Chevy II production:** 199,700 (est)  
**Base Price:** \$2367



farm lands, not Mafia burial grounds; a far cry from what you'd imagine if your perception of the Garden State is formed from the impressions provided by the mass media.

Best of all, in this part of the state, the roads are pretty much as they were 30-plus years ago, roads that are less traveled, giving the day's drive an authentic, period-correct and relaxed feel that's not possible in most locations. The 'land that time forgot' look made the drive that much more memorable for everyone. And best of all for this collection of classic Detroit muscle, no one succumbed to a catastrophic meltdown.

While the day's participants headed home, Larry, who lives far to the south, outside of Philadelphia, and I headed south where well after sunset, we came upon the uber-classic Americana Diner in East Windsor. After eating I decided it was time for one last shot, especially as Larry was careful to keep his car out of the day's spotlight, reserving the fun for the four participants. And what fun it was. ★



### Flemington's Historic Union Hotel



HAVING grown up about 25 miles away, I wanted to end the day's tour for the participants at a place of historical importance as many of the traditional speed shops of the muscle car era have faded into history themselves. While planning the route at the height of the sensational Michael Jackson trial, it dawned on me; I would end the tour at the Union Hotel in Flemington, New Jersey.

Flemington was the site of the first 'trial of the century', where Bruno Hauptmann was tried, convicted and sentenced to death in New Jersey's electric chair for the kidnapping and murder of Charles A. Lindbergh Jr, the infant son of famed aviator Charles Lindbergh, the first man to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean.

The Union Hotel, whose original tavern dates back to 1772, remains situated across the street from the original Hunterdon County Courthouse where the trial was held. During the trial it served as the base of operations for both the prosecutors as well as the news media, primarily newspapers but some radio broadcasters as well. The Union Hotel currently houses one of the area's finest eateries, though it's been some years since it's hosted any paying overnight guests unless you count the ghosts who are reputed to still inhabit the rooms upstairs.

Photos from the era show the daily mob scene out in front of the courthouse; with the exception of the missing satellite dishes, the scene was eerily familiar to the circus out in front of the courthouse in Santa Maria, California, 80 years later.

**ABOVE: FLEMINGTON COURTHOUSE WHERE 'THE TRIAL OF THE CENTURY' - WELL, THE LAST ONE ANYWAY - TOOK PLACE IN RESPONSE TO THE LINDBERGH BABY KIDNAPING CASE**

**LEFT: IF YOU THINK NEW JERSEY IS JUST MOBSTERS, INDUSTRIAL LANDSCAPES AND TURNPIKES, THINK AGAIN - RICHARD TRUESDELL RECKONS HIS HOME STATE IS PRETTIER THAN WE CREDIT IT!**

