

MORE AUTOMOTIVE ARCHEOLOGY

What is it about Nevada's defunct car dealerships that draws me repeatedly to the Silver State? In this case, it was the quest to locate and possibly acquire a '70s-era AMC dealership sign that Bill Basore, owner of the 1968 Cougar XR7-G featured in this issue, told me was still standing in Hawthorne, Nevada, about two and a half hours southeast of Reno.

For this trip I was driving the new Jeep Compass, definitely not a musclecar, back from Portland, Oregon, to Southern California and had overnighted in Astoria, Oregon at a historic Hotel Elliot (hotelelliott.com), in Dunsmuir, California, at the Railroad Park Resort (rrpark.com, where the motel units are converted railway cars – very cool!) and at the Hilton Casino in Reno. But instead of taking US 395 back to Orange County, as I had done many times in the past, after locating Hawthorne on the map, I detoured, choosing ALT US 95 and US 95 instead, which would give me the opportunity to do some mid-June

snooping in Death Valley to see if there were any 2008 Challenger test mules testing (there weren't).

The trip took on something of a roadside automotive treasure hunt at my first stop in Yerington, about 90 minutes southeast from Reno, at the junction of ALT US 95 and NV 208, which also happens to be the Mayberry USA-like Main Street. What caught my eye, as I'm always looking for suitable period-correct backgrounds for future photo sessions, was a vintage Rexall Drug Store, and proceeding further down the street I encountered a closed Chrysler/Dodge dealership, the Crescent Garage, with '60s-era blue square Chrysler signage. But what struck me most was right above the garage door, was a '70s-era AMC Service sign. I took this to be a good omen. Maybe the brands had merged in Hawthorne prior to 1987?

Next stop would be Hawthorne, more than an hour south, driving past Walker Lake and an Army ordinance facility, probably the town's main source of employment. Bill had told me that the AMC sign was in an open lot, next to the McDonalds. Approaching from the north, I saw the Golden Arches from at least three miles away on an elevated sign and there it was, just where Bill had said it would be – a lighted, mostly intact '70s-era vertical AMC dealership sign.

Asking around I was able to learn that the dealership was housed in the Quonset hut next to the boarded-up motel. Poking around further at the offices of the local newspaper, The Mineral County Independent-News, I learned that the dealership in question was called Bill Hawks AMC Jeep and it operated for some years in the 1970s and '80s. I was even able to find an ad from 1975 introducing the then-new 1976 AMCs and Jeeps, including the Pacer.

In talking with the staff there, I learned that Mr. Hawks lives now in Scottsdale, Arizona, and there was, until recently a GM dealership – now a military museum – and a Ford dealership, now an electrical supply house. I felt like quite the detective and automotive archeologist. I can also tell you, that if you ever have the chance to visit Hawthorne, you can get both a great meal and your E-mail with free WiFi at Maggie's Steak House, right on Main Street.

Heading south on US 95, the towns were few and far between but I struck defunct automotive dealership pay dirt twice more, in Tonopah and Goldfield. In Tonopah there were closed Chevrolet and Ford dealerships, both with original signage still intact while in Goldfield, which has a real Wild West atmosphere, the faded painted sign on the side of a yellowing building told me that the Brown Parker Company once called the building home.

Oh, one more thing – you don't have to look too hard to see a number of brothels along US 95 as you head south, a colorful reminder of this unique aspect of Nevada's history.

What did this trip tell me? Those rural new car dealerships are a dying breed in this era of manufacturing and retail consolidation. That another important part of small town America is withering away, where the owner of a new car dealership is an economic pillar of the community, is now on his way to extinction. But what it really told me is that when it's cooler in the late fall, around SEMA Show time in late October, early November, that this would be a great trip to make in a classic musclecar, great photo opportunities to exploit. Any readers up for a road trip? ■

