

# NORTHWESTERN AUTO PARTS

*The New Old Stock Parts Store*

BY TOM BROWNELL

One of the best kept secrets in the collector car hobby, though not intentionally so, is Northwestern Auto — a source of electrical and mechanical parts for domestic cars, trucks, and tractors back to the 1930s. Sam Ashendorf, Northwestern's owner, says that his father turned the supply business (which also stocks parts for modern cars and light trucks) in the direction of collector cars. Today, Northwestern's supply of vintage auto parts fills two off-site warehouses as well as the basement of the parts store which is located on Division Avenue in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

I first discovered Northwestern Auto Supply several years ago when I was overhauling the engine of my 1949 Studebaker pickup. I'd had a machine shop turn the connecting rod journals on the crankshaft to smooth damage that had been done to the number five crank throw by a bent rod and now I needed to find an undersized rod bearing set. Local auto parts stores told me they could still order the standard size bearings, but undersize were no longer available. Someone suggested Northwestern Auto. I called and sure enough, they had the correct connecting rod bearing set in stock. The price actually turned out to be a little less than I would have paid were the bearings still listed in my local auto parts store's catalog.

I came back to Northwestern Auto a year or so later when I needed a carburetor rebuild kit for the same truck. The counter clerk at Northwestern disappeared for a few minutes into a rabbit warren of parts shelving and reappeared with the kit. Again the price was competitive to what I would have paid had I



*From the counter area, Northwestern Auto gives the appearance of any home town auto parts store stocking parts and accessories for modern cars. But Northwestern's parts stock also includes three warehouses of new-old-stock parts for collector cars back to the 1930s.*

*The store on Division Avenue in Grand Rapids, Michigan, stands alone on its block and the name painted across the front of the building makes the parts store quite easy to spot.*



been able to buy the kit as current stock. I knew Northwestern had old parts, but what I didn't know until a recent visit was the extent of the parts stock and other services for collector vehicles.

To acquaint me with Northwestern's range of parts and services, owner Sam Ashendorf led me on a tour of the building. From the counter area we walked first through a storage area lined with shelves holding freshly rebuilt starters, generators and fuel pumps. "This is one of the services we provide," Sam explained. "Older fuel pumps have tin-impregnated diaphragms that crack and need to be replaced. We rebuild those pumps for customers and also install new diaphragms in the new-old-stock pumps that we take in as we buy out old inventories. Likewise, we also rebuild generators and starters, and that's not all." Next, Sam led me into the machine shop where blocks are bored, crankshafts turned, and engines rebuilt.

I recognized a Model A Ford block on the floor. "Do you install counter-balanced crankshafts in these Model A engines?" I asked. "No," Sam replied, "we rebuild engines to factory specifications. And we do pour babbit bearings," he added.

From the machine shop we descended the stairway into the store's basement. Here, except for the aisles between rows of shelving, every square foot was packed with parts. In many aisles boxes and parts were stacked on the floor in front of the shelving. "There are two other warehouses full of parts like this," Sam reminded me. The first line of shelving we came to held pistons. "These are odd lots," Sam explained. "If someone needs a piston we can most likely find a

match here. The shelves ahead hold complete piston sets," he added.

Next we came to boxes of unidentified castings and mechanical parts. Sam explained, "If someone is looking for an odd part, they can send us a sample and we'll look for a match here." This could get time-consuming, I thought, but my experience with the staff of Northwestern Auto shows that they are more concerned about finding the customer's needed part than they are with how long finding the part takes.

Further shelving contained parts books. "This is our library," Sam stated. "If a customer needs a set of piston rings for a 1937 Oldsmobile, here's where we make a match. We'll let customers use these books, too, to find out what parts they need for their car and we'll even photocopy pages for customers for a nominal fee."

As Sam took me past his stock of brake parts, I decided to test his store's inventory by asking if he had any of the odd three-piston wheel cylinders used on medium duty International KB series trucks in the late 1940s. "You mean these?" Sam responded as he reached into a nearby bin and pulled out what looked like a stubby cast metal tube with a spigot projecting from its circumference. "I've got the rubber parts for these cylinders, too." With no more effort than reaching into a bin, Sam Ashendorf had produced a part that owners of KB model International trucks I've known have given up trying to locate.

Northwestern Auto doesn't stock any sheet metal, trim parts, or glass, but they do have virtually every imaginable type of mechanical part from suspension pieces to engine, transmission, and

driveline components as well as electrical parts in abundance — and not just for US makes, but also for British, French, German and Japanese cars. All parts are manufacturer's new-old-stock or original aftermarket replacement stock. Northwestern continues to purchase dealer inventories so its parts stock is not static. "We stock anything and everything mechanical that's related to vehicles," Sam explains, "including some airplane parts."

Besides walk-in purchases, Northwestern does a large volume mail order business and ships parts all over the US and Canada, as well as overseas. If you call in a request for an obscure part that requires some searching and research, the counter clerk will take your phone number and call you back. Except for long established customers, Northwestern's policy is to ship parts pre paid or UPS collect. The parts desk also has a fax number so customers can order parts by that method if they desire.

Sam Ashendorf is a car collector himself, owning a 1958 Gogomobile, a 1929 Studebaker President, and a 1956 Lincoln. "I go for unusual stuff," he says. "My problem is like everyone else's," Sam quips. "When I get home at night I'm too tired to work on my cars." But he has no problem finding parts. And he's looking forward to the day that his Gogomobile is ready to take to area shows. "Almost no one knows what it is," Sam adds.

To contact Northwestern Auto about your collector car parts needs, you can write Northwestern Auto Supply Co., Inc., 1101 S. Division, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49507 or call (616) 241-5611. The fax connection is (616) 241-0924.