

Old Cars

WEEKLY NEWS & MARKETPLACE

Check the news, expanded ad links and subscription offers at www.oldcarsweekly.com

The parts department — Northwestern Auto Supply

By John Gunnell

Finding old car parts is getting more difficult, and in some cases, getting information about how to install or adjust old car parts is just as hard. Take a 1957 Buick Century with power steering and Cam-O-Matic windshield wipers as an example. Where can an owner get a power steering hose for this car? Or advice on adjusting and synchronizing the wipers? Northwestern Auto Supply in Grand Rapids, Michigan, turned out to be a good answer to both of these questions.

I first visited Sam Ashendorf at Northwestern Auto Supply back in 2001 during the Pontiac-Oakland Club International convention. At that time, I was looking for 1936 Pontiac six-cylinder engine parts and found about half of what I needed there. Later, towards the end of the engine job, I ordered a set of pistons from Ashendorf through the mail. He had them cut to the right size from his in-house machine shop and sent them to me. They fit perfectly.

Shortly after my visit, I wrote a

story about Northwestern Auto Supply and how it takes up two large, connected buildings that are filled basement-to-rafter with antique auto parts. But I never really thought of Ashendorf's store as a place to get imported car parts or as an antique auto research library.

Early in March, I was at University Motors, in Ada, Michigan, to attend a conference at which the British Motoring Trade Association was formed. Grand Rapids was just down the street, and I figured that it would be a good idea to stop at Northwestern to look for some MG TD parts and to get the needed Buick power steering hose.

Although Ashendorf said he did not have a lot of old parts for imported cars, he managed to come up with points, a rotor, a condenser, and a valve cover gasket for my '52 MG, as well as the power steering hose for the '57 Buick. This took all of five minutes and set me back about \$30. "It says 'Oldsmobile' on the power steering hose box," Sam pointed out, "but my parts catalog says it fits your Buick



Northwestern Auto Supply takes up most of a city block and is entirely filled with old car parts, from the cellar to the attic. (John Gunnell photo)

Century, too."

Mentioning the parts catalog triggered another thought. Ficken Wind-

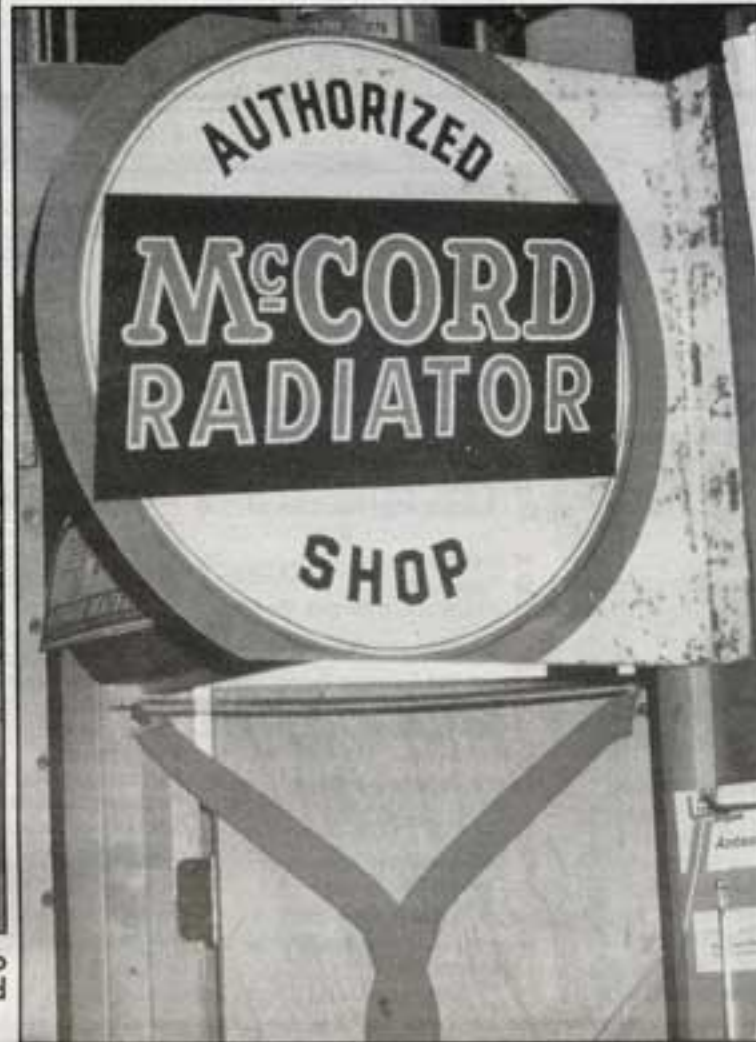
shield Wiper Service of New York had rebuilt the 1957 Buick wiper motor last year. It now functions perfectly, but getting it to work in conjunction with the dash switch and cable has been another matter. There were also some things about the Cam-O-Matic option that I needed advice on.

"No problem," said Ashendorf. "I'll get out a couple of my Trico manuals and make some photocopies for you." He took out several large black books and started flipping through them until he found instructions and illustrations covering the 1957 Buick Special and Century with Cam-O-Matic. In just a few minutes, I had all the information I needed, and at no charge!

As I left Northwestern Auto Parts for home, I noticed a brand new Auto Zone store about a block away. Perhaps that's why there were a lot fewer customers in Ashendorf's 1948-style auto parts store than there had been during my visit two years ago. This made me think that it might be a good idea to do some more mail-order shopping from Ashendorf while he still has all of those old parts. Let's see, the '48 Pontiac Streamliner needs some electrical items, the '53 could stand a tune-up, and I still haven't got the '36 back together yet, and it could probably use a few more parts for its rebuilt engine.

If you need some hard-to-get parts, try Northwestern Auto Supply at 1101 S. Division St., Grand Rapids, MI 49507, or just dial up Sam at 616-241-5611.

The business sells both current and vintage parts, and many of the customers buying parts for modern cars probably miss the historical significance of signs like this one below. (John Gunnell photo)



Sam Ashendorf was able to make photocopies from his Trico manuals to help me with adjusting my Cam-O-Matic windshield wiper system. (John Gunnell photo)