

Jewel celebrates 50 years of cars

By David Nordby
 The Brillion News

BRILLION – Outside of Jewel Meetz’s home, collector cars fill a large driveway visible from Highway 10. Inside is a long, steep rampway that leads to the lower level of a garage that houses multiple more.

It’s unmistakably the home of someone who is passionate about cars of yesteryear. In Meetz’s case, that passion turned into his livelihood.

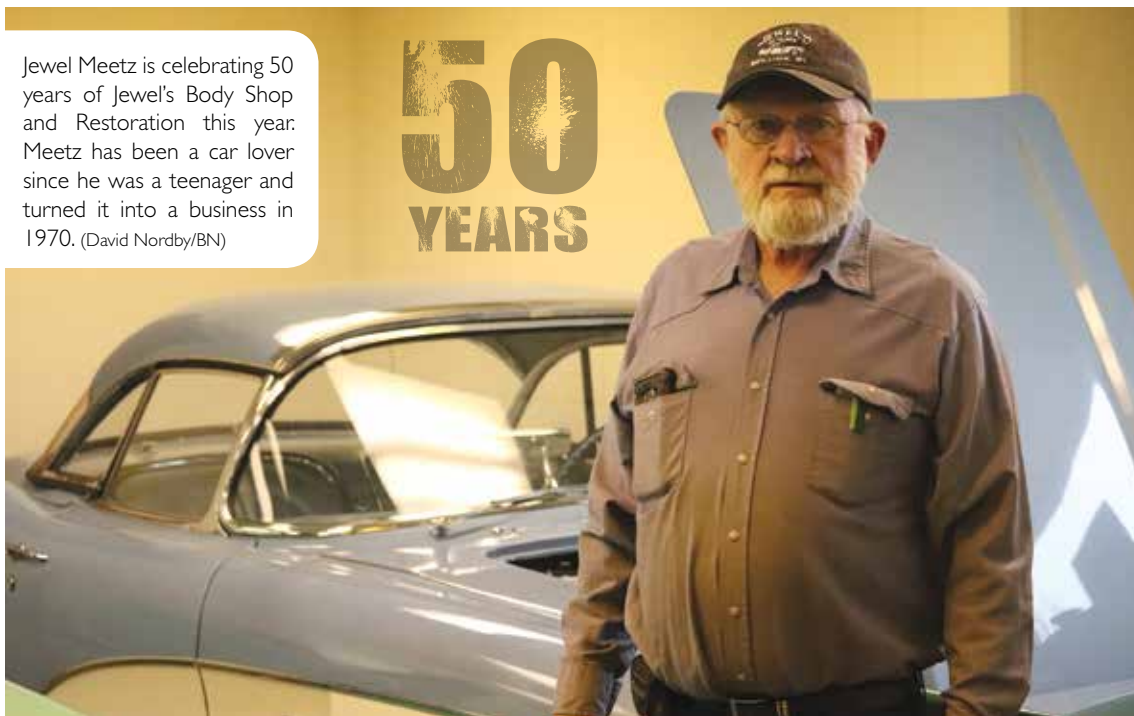
Jewel’s Body Shop and Restoration is celebrating 50 years of existence in 2020. Jewel and his wife Judy opened the shop in a two-stall block building with a five-by-five office space in 1970.

One of his first projects was painting Elliot Zander’s ‘29 Pierce Arrow. Soon, Meetz restored his own ‘55 Thunderbird and quickly fell in love with Ford Thunderbirds.

When he was a teenager Meetz owned a ‘50’s Thunderbird, which he drove for many years. He says he drove that like a regular car. His second one was the one he nurtured.

“We just liked the old cars ... I lost

Jewel Meetz is celebrating 50 years of Jewel’s Body Shop and Restoration this year. Meetz has been a car lover since he was a teenager and turned it into a business in 1970. (David Nordby/BN)



my license going too fast or something, then I had my buddies drive the T-bird around. It was a lot of fun back in the day,” Meetz said.

Cars were fun, but classrooms

weren’t, Meetz says. He spent one year at Brillion High School before entering the workforce.

Meetz worked at the Chevrolet shop in Brillion before eventually

transitioning to his own company.

“I always enjoyed working on old cars, any kind of cars, back in the day,” Meetz said.

Meetz’s

The restoration business quickly grew, but so did responsibility for Meetz when they entered the wrecker business, responding to accident scenes.

“You think back on all the different accidents you went to. People get killed and you have to stretch the car back apart. Back in the day there was none of this equipment that they have today, so you have to try to get the person out of there. It was a job. You didn’t think about (anything) but doing your job,” Meetz said.

The wrecker service lasted more than a decade, but Meetz eventually became focused more solely on restoration work.

“We kind of got more into old cars than crash work. Once in a while we’ll do a crash job here yet, but mostly it’s restoration,” Meetz said.

The restoration work was a more reliable income, Meetz said.

“When we went to shows and took first place, that’s when we knew, okay, we must be doing something right. It just kept going. We always tried to do the best job we could,” Meetz said.

Customers came from all around the country, including what Meetz believes could have been putting a top on Kirk Douglas’ car, as his name was on the license plate.

“It wasn’t Kirk Douglas that brought it to our shop. It was a great big fancy rig. They just dropped the car off and said they’d be back in a week and paid cash and picked it up and off they left,” Meetz said.

Meetz used to pick up cars in other states but does less of that



Jewel Meetz (left) stands with Andy Kleist (center) and Sean Bastian. Both are expected to help carry on Jewel’s Body Shop when Meetz retires. (David Nordby/BN)

now. Road trips for shop workers included Michigan, Illinois, Kentucky, Florida and Canada.

Meetz worked for many years in chroming, too.

“Chrome was getting expensive, so we bought out a chrome shop in Appleton, then I bought out another building and started chroming and I used that myself and my sons worked for me,” Meetz said.

In 2004, he sold the chrome shop to his son Terry, where he still has multiple family members working with him at Custom Plating Specialist in Brillion.

Meetz’s family members, Andy Kleist and Sean Bastian, are two of his current employees. Bastian has surpassed the 35-year mark. Meetz’s other two current employees are Connie Meetz and Ray Callahan.

“I think about retiring. I’m going to see how they can handle it, how they can do it, if they can pay the bills and everything,” Meetz said.

Meetz still gets to his shop a little after five each morning and works until 4:30 p.m. He has recently cut out Friday afternoons and Saturday mornings.

“It’s nice to be able to continue his legacy,” Kleist said. “Just constantly learning something ... That’s what I like, learning new things and just following in his footsteps.”

Then there is the process of restoring itself.

“I just like taking them from looking like they’re going to the junkyard and resurrecting them,” Bastian said. “It’s a process. Everybody finds it really fascinating and so do I. I grew up on a salvage yard, so that’s where I started.”

Cars carry sentimental value to owners. One currently in the shop is from a war veteran who is finally getting his car that he’s dreamed about since he was 14.

“To be able to present his dream car to him and see the customer’s reaction is a good feeling,” Kleist said.

Cars come from all over the country, with the business all coming from word of mouth. Meetz chuckles that despite not advertising nearly anywhere, or even being on Google, people are able to find him.

For good reason, as Meetz’s shop reproduces convertible top frames for the T-birds. Those have been



Meetz has worked on restoration projects that have taken up to three years to complete. (David Nordby/BN)

sent to Canada, Germany, Uganda and all over the United States.

“We’re the only one that makes that (original) top, so anybody that needs a top, you have to buy it from us,” Meetz said. “Some of them are making a tubing top that isn’t as good as ours.”

Meetz said it costs \$100-150,000 making the molds for the tops.

“There’s probably 10, 12 molds, so it’s not cheap,” Meetz said.

Meetz is pondering selling the molds to other T-bird workers around the country as he transitions to retirement.

“It seems like all of our customers end up being friends, so we always keep talking back and forth. We meet them at car shows and national shows,” Meetz said.

The connections he’s had with clientele is strong. Meetz says he enjoys hearing about their lives, such as the client who helps build airplanes for the government.

“To meet all these different people ... it’s something,” Meetz said.

A full restoration project takes up to three years to start and finish. Smaller services last a few days.

“I’m just glad we got onto something that we could stick with and keep trying to get better and better,” Meetz said.

Meetz says that despite his love

of cars, it is still a job.

“You have to get it done in a reasonable amount of time,” Meetz said.

The look of cars is ever-changing. Some last the test of time, while others cycle back into popularity.

“There are some cars that kind of fade away for a while but then they come back again. Different people will start liking them,” Meetz said.

Restored cars can sell from \$40-60,000 and up depending on different variables, Meetz said.

He currently owns around 10 cars himself, a number that has dropped in recent years.

“I think I’ve got four or five little (T-birds), I’ve got a big (T-bird), a ‘54 glass top, a newer T-bird,” Meetz says, rattling off his possessions.

His favorite is still his ‘55 Thunderbird, the second one he bought as a teenager and took care of.

With more years of work in his rear-view mirror than ahead of him, Meetz knows cars won’t ever fully leave his life, even in retirement.

“I’d probably still putz around with cars at home or somewhere. I’d probably just restore it myself at home and get it done whenever I get it done,” Meetz said.

The shop meanwhile will move into a new era, or as Meetz says it’s “to be continued.”