

A honey of a Henney

Dolan breathes life into old hearse

Greenville, Tenn, 1927- Harold Atchley buys a brand-spanking-new Velie Henney Hearse for his funeral home.

The hearse rolls over the dusty roads of central Tennessee for 30-odd years, carrying the deceased of the south to their final resting spots.

North Chelmsford, today-that same hearse is parked in front of Dolan Funeral Home along Middlesex Street. It looks just as good if not better than the day Atchley drove it off the lot, said James Dolan, Sr., owner of the funeral home.

Dolan purchased the antique hearse about four years ago at a swap meet in Hershey, PA.

Dolan said he'd always wanted an antique motorized hearse to display at his funeral home, but for many years, all he'd come across were horse-drawn buggies.

"With the buggies you have to get horses and maintain them," Dolan said.

Dolan called a friend in Hersey and asked the Pennsylvanian to keep an eye out for his dream machine: "If you see a motorized hearse, get it," Dolan told his friend.

Dolan's friend spotted the Henney and faxed a photo to Dolan in Chelmsford.

The quality of the faxed image wasn't all that great, Dolan recalled.

"He faxed a shady photo," Dolan said. "I bought (the hearse) sight unseen."

Richard Blisard of Knoxville, Tenn., was asking \$12,000 for the 67 year old casket carrier, but after Dolan saw the hearse in person he drew the line at \$10,000.

"When I saw it I nearly croaked," Dolan said.

The hearse was a mess- a real fixer upper.

The frame was rusted, the paint was faded and peeling, parts were missing, the leather upholstery and roof were ripped.

Dolan said he hadn't expected the hearse would need so much work.

Discouraged, Dolan put the old car in storage. "It has been sitting in the barn since 1994," Dolan said.

Dolan didn't give the hearse another thought until the summer of 1997.

At that time, Tyngsboro resident Ed Smith visited Dolan's for a wake and took notice of the decrepit car. Smith took an interest in the Henney and asked if he could restore it.

Dolan took him up on the offer.

Smith, along with Tom Plourde and Dave Koziol, spent a year bringing the old automobile back to its 1927 glory.

Slowly but surely, the old hearse was reborn and its original parts were restored-the smooth dashboard, the wooden flower shelf in the back cargo hold, the ash tire spokes and the sterling silver-lined headlights. The rusty chrome bumpers were returned to their original brilliance. The brass window cranks were recreated, right down to the serial number, by a California manufacturer.

The thick leather roof was replaced. Dolan said he was surprised to learn that underneath the original leather was a layer of chicken wire.

The leather seats were also reupholstered.

Finally, the hearse received a coat of black lacquer paint to give it a smooth, glossy finish.

"They were ingenious in that they could use the original materials," Dolan said of the men who revitalized the hearse.

Dolan said the majority of the hearse's damaged parts were restored. Parts too badly damaged for salvage were replaced with pieces scavenged from other 1927 Henneys.

Work on the antique hearse was complete by the end of 1997, just in time for the automobile's 70th birthday.

"A lot of work was done," Dolan said. "I really was excited to see it finished."

The Red Seal six-cylinder takes a few seconds to heat up, but once the 80 horse-power Continental Engine hits its stride, it purrs like a big, black kitten.

"It runs like a champ," Dolan said.

Dolan spent about \$45,000 to restore the old car, although he could possibly sell it for three times that amount.

"I'm not interested in selling," Dolan said.

Dolan is happy just to use the antique as an expensive lawn ornament in front of his funeral home. He said passersby frequently stop to check out the ornate vehicle.

"The interest people show in it makes me feel good," Dolan said.

The Henney: Present and Future

The hearse has appeared at a number of antique car events and was awarded first prize at the Dracut Road Runners Classic Car Show.

Dolan said he doesn't expect the hearse to stay in its present pristine condition forever.

"I just noticed a scratch on it," Dolan said. "The finish is like glass so that is bound to happen."

Dolan said he didn't know much about Velie Henney Hearses or antique cars in general before he purchased one of his own.

"I've always liked old hearses," Dolan said.

"Buying one just seemed to benefit the business."

Dolan has since joined the Henney Hearse Club and corresponds with club members across the country.

"It's amazing the stories you pick up from other owners." Dolan said.

Dolan said he had to take a few lessons before he could drive the Henney. Smith, who worked to restore the vehicle, taught Dolan how to maneuver the 70-year-old car through the bustling streets of Chelmsford.

Nowadays, it's rare for Dolan to take the hearse out on a leisurely drive.

"It's worth too much for that," Dolan said.

The hearse had about 26,000 miles on its odometer when Dolan purchased it. The funeral director said he's only racked up another 50 miles in the past three years.

The antique status granted the car by the state of Massachusetts and Dolan's insurance company requires the hearse be used only as a showcase or in parades.

"I kid with the insurance company and tell them a funeral procession is like a parade," Dolan joked.

Dolan said customers have approached him and asked that the hearse be used in their funerals. But the Henney is not a working hearse, Dolan said.

Dolan said he doesn't know any tales about his prized hearse's southern roots. The Harold Atchley Funeral Home is still up and running in Greenville and the hearse's original owner is still living, but all Dolan's attempts to contact Atchley have been unsuccessful.

For now, the fully-restored Henney will be on display in front of the Dolan Funeral Home on the good-weather days and repose inside on the bad.

Dolan said it gives him a sense of pride to know he helped to restore the old car.

The funeral director's experience with the 70-year-old hearse has turned a non-car collector into an antique car buff. Dolan keeps an eye peeled for other antique hearses but admits the Velie Henney Hearse will likely be the lone star in his collection.

"I was looking at another one," Dolan said. "But my wife would probably kill me."