

Lake Placid man wants to restore, drive historic electric car



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SEBRING --

When he's done restoring the 1980 Comuta-Car he bought from the **Sebring Historical Society** in March, **Howie Kubsch** plans to drive it around the Lake Placid area, where he lives, to run errands. This wedge-shaped car that definitely stands out may not have air-conditioning, power windows and power seats, but it can go up to 40mph and is environmentally-friendly.

The last time this historic electric car, which was made here in Sebring, had license plates was in 1999. The historical society ended up with the vehicle in September 2006 when **James D. Adams** of Haines City donated it to the group.

Because of a lack of storage space, they sold it to Kubsch, who plans to fully restore it with the help of parts that Dr. Bill Jernigan of Sebring Animal Hospital donated.

The vehicle will be the featured car at the Saturday Night Cruise during the Sebring Centennial celebrations in October.

Some may not know it, but the first licensable two-passenger electrical cars in America were produced right here in Sebring and are still sought after by classic car enthusiasts.

Robert G. Beaumont, who originally owned a Chrysler-Plymouth car dealership in New York, envisioned a low-cost electric vehicle (EV) as a solution to the fuel rationing and long gas lines that were prevalent in the United States in 1973.

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So, in 1974, when a Florida backer offered to set up a plant for the venture at the Sebring Air Terminal, Sebring-Vanguard Inc. was founded.

Beaumont worked with designer Jim Muir to create the prototype, the Vanguard, also called the EV Coupe. It was based on a golf cart produced by a Georgia company named Club Car, but that original vehicle only went about 26 mph. When modifications and improvements were necessary, they designed the CitiCar.

The CitiCar was a two-seat, wedge-shaped vehicle, made with durable, lightweight ABS plastic bodies. Its top speed was 35 to 40 miles an hour. It could travel between 40 to 50 miles after being plugged in to a 110-volt outlet for six hours. They were sold for about \$3,000, and came in a choice of five different colors: red, yellow, orange, blue and beige.

Described as a very basic people mover, the CitiCar cost only about 1 cent per mile to operate.

"Everybody heard about what we were doing...and they came flocking to us like we were the salvation of the world," Beaumont was quoted as saying in an article at the Sebring Historical Society.

A later model, known as the Transitional CitiCar, had a larger 6HP motor and an improved drive train.

Beaumont's last design was the **CitiVan**, a larger vehicle with an extended wheelbase, swing-out side doors, and a hatch-back window. Less than 20 of these vehicles were ever produced.

Sebring-Vanguard Inc. became the sixth largest auto manufacturer in the United States in 1975. During the little more than two years the cars were in production, approximately 2,600 vehicles came off their low-tech assembly line.

"The company and the technology were way ahead of their time," said Sebring Regional Airport Executive Director **Mike Willingham**.

But by 1977, interest in electrical vehicles waned as fuel became more accessible; the company went bankrupt.

Vanguard's existing parts and the production line were auctioned off. Though the business was sold to a New Jersey mobile-home manufacturer, **Frank Flowers**, he refused to pay the additional \$800 for the rights to the name "**CitiCar**."

Flower's company, **Commuter Vehicles Inc.**, continued production of the electric vehicles under the name **Comuta-Car** and **Comuta-Van** at the airport facility through 1982.

Flowers increased the length of the vehicles, moved the batteries and installed more powerful engines.

Another fuel shortage in 1979 helped sales, with more than 4,000 vehicles selling for an average of \$6,500 each.

The less popular **Comuta-Van** was originally built as a limited edition postal vehicle with right-hand-drive, but the government contract was not renewed.

After production of the **Comuta-Car** and **Comuta-Van** was halted, the existing stock was sold as home-assembly kits. **Glen Stevens** of **EVPerformance.com** in Rogersville, AL bought up the last of the stock in the early 1990s and still offers technical manuals and parts to **C-Car clubs** and enthusiasts.

There have been some attempts to reintroduce electrical vehicles, like the ZZipper three wheel EV by **Sebring Autocycle Corp.** and Chrysler's early attempt at an electric conversion of their Dodge Colt, but none of those efforts were as successful as the C-Cars.

Kubsch, who is a member of the C-Club, a nationwide organization of owners of the original CitiCars, **Comuta-Cars**, and **Comuta-Vans**, will also hold its "**C-Car Meet of the Century**" at the **Kenilworth Lodge Oct. 18-20**.

For more information on C-Cars and the C-Car Club, search "yahoo groups – C-Cars" or visit: autos.groups.yahoo.com/group/c-car.

Kubsch, who is still shopping around for a modern-day electric car, has two other C-Cars, which he is hoping to restore and use.

He's attracted to the cars for their historical value and feels that owning electric cars makes a lot of sense – they use electricity that is generated here in the United States, hence reducing our dependence on foreign oil.

He also commends **Robert Beaumont** for being the first person to realize that most car travel is local – while we should have a car for those long road trips, we should also own a cheaper, energy-efficient basic car for those short commutes, he said.

That's what Kubsch wants his C-Cars to eventually become.

"It doesn't have to be fancy," he said. "It just has to be environmentally friendly."

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