

Dealer brings back a touch of family history with 1936 car

By **JERRY F. BOONE**

SPECIAL WRITER

Erik Berkey figures that back in 1936 — the year his grandfather, Willis Berkey, opened a Chevrolet dealership in the community of Hubbard — the business sold maybe a dozen cars.

“When he opened the dealership, it was in the depths of the Great Depression and no one was doing a lot of business,” says Berkey.

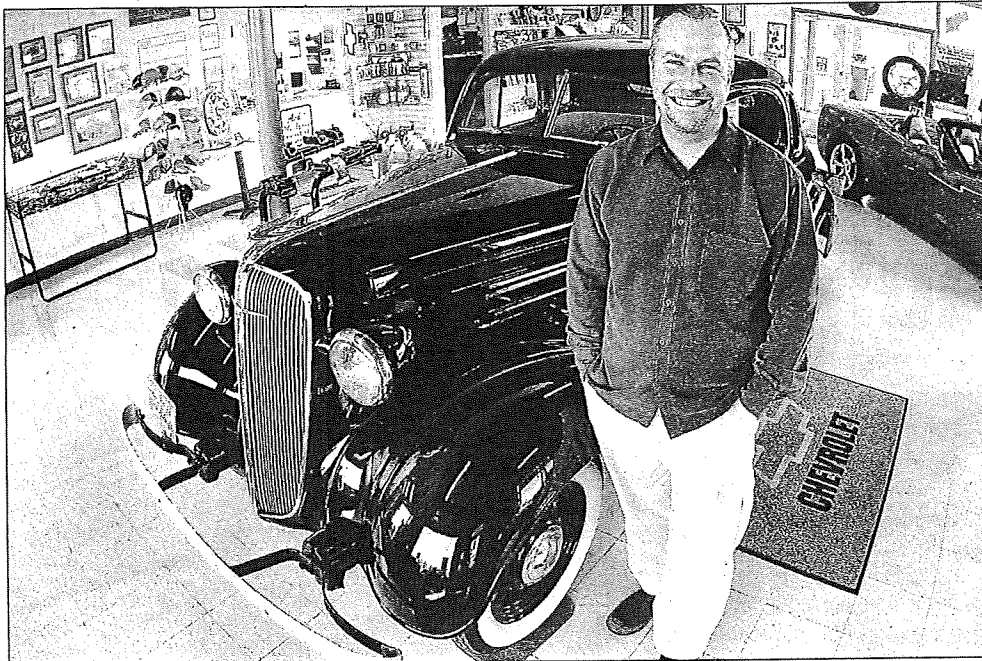
By the time the nation was into its worst economic downturn ever, Willis Berkey was already a second-generation auto dealer. His father, John, began selling cars in 1919 in nearby Woodburn.

Today, Erik Berkey sits behind the same desk his grandfather used more than 70 years ago. It shows the patina of tens of thousands of days of work, and thousands of deals closed on its solid oak surface.

The current co-owner of Hubbard Chevrolet reveres his grandfather and the history of the family-owned business, among the oldest auto franchises in Oregon.

“It was a time when dealers didn’t have a lot of inventory,” he says, describing how the businesses included gas pumps and a general repair shop.

Erik’s father, Jack, who took over the business from Willis Berkey, worked much like the company founder, closing deals with not much more than a hand-



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It took Erik Berkey a number of years to find a 1936 Chevrolet to put in the showroom of Hubbard Chevrolet. Berkey’s grandfather founded the dealership in 1936.

shake, and often allowing customers to pay for cars as they could afford them.

Berkey feels a need to maintain that link to the past — and keep alive how business was done back then. If you get put on hold when you call the dealership, the music is Erik’s grandmother singing the “See the USA in Your Chevrolet” theme from the Dinah Shore TV show of the 1950s.

“For years I wanted a 1936 Chevrolet to help illustrate how long we have been in business,” says Erik Berkey. “The problem

is that automakers weren’t selling a lot of cars back then, and a lot of those that were sold ended up becoming street rods in the 1950s.”

Finding a complete, unaltered one was a challenge. But he kept looking, spreading the word among friends and customers.

Then, two years ago, he found one in Mollala. The car, which had sat in a barn for about 20 years, was complete, in pretty fair condition, and available.

It even came with some of the original paperwork, signed over to Lola Samson, by his grandfa-

ther. “What are the odds?” he asks. “Not only is it a ’36 Chevrolet, but it was my grandfather who sold it his first year in business.”

Berkey bought the car for about \$10,000 and has doubled his investment in it. He had the body restored, repainted and new mohair upholstery installed. There is more work to do, as time and money allows.

Today it sits in the dealership showroom, within sight of the building where the business was founded.

The two-door shares the

showroom with a bright red Corvette, the high-tech, aerodynamic, ground-hugging, computer-controlled, fat-tired antithesis to the old coupe.

“This one has a heater,” Berkey says of the ’36. But there is no radio. The engine is a reliable 6-cylinder overhead valve, the transmission is a 3-speed manual and there are no turn signals. The steel body sits atop a wood framework.

The owner’s manual is only 36 pages long, and includes instructions on how to change the oil and grease the chassis.

The two-passenger “business coupe” was designed for doctors or sales people who seldom carried a passenger but who needed a trunk the size of a small cave for supplies and samples.

“The best part about the car,” says Berkey, “is the stories it generates about my grandfather and how he conducted business.”

His favorite is about the year Willis Berkey tried to persuade all the local farmers to order the same color green truck.

“He figured if everyone had the same color truck, none of the wives would know which of their husbands were parked at the tavern.”

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