





BY DONALD FARR

Adapting and Surviving

Steve Hall is guiding the Mustang Owner's Museum through the challenges of downsizing and COVID

The Mustang Owner's Museum downsized into this building earlier this year. It currently occupies the two rear units with hopes to expand into the entire building early next year.



Less than two years ago, on April 17, 2019, the Mustang Owner's Museum opened to much fanfare during the Mustang's 55th Anniversary Celebration at Charlotte Motor Speedway. Located just up Highway 29 from CMS in a beautiful, brand-new 35,000 square-foot building, the museum celebrated Mustang ownership with nearly 50 cars on display along with examples of Mustang memorabilia, toys, and literature. Barely a year later, MOM co-founder and director Steve Hall was facing a double-whammy dilemma: enthusiast scrutiny for moving so quickly into a smaller building and, in March 2020, COVID-19 shutting down the state of North Carolina. The move turned out to be a blessing in the face of COVID, allowing the museum to continue operating by adapting to ever-changing COVID restrictions. During the shut-down, the museum hosted cruises and other safe activities to keep MOM relevant until North Carolina allowed museums to reopen in September.

During a recent visit to Charlotte, I stopped by to check out the new facility and chatted with Hall about overcoming the challenges of operating a museum during a pandemic. The Mustang Owner's Museum is located at 4005 Dearborn Place in Concord, North Carolina, just down the street from and within view of the original location.

MT: How have you worked through COVID?

SH: It has been difficult, obviously. Since we'd already made the move to the new location, we took the opportunity to create the museum that I had envisioned from the beginning. At the first location, we appreciated the size, space, and newness, but I couldn't do the museum the way I wanted it. I wanted to make it more about Mustang owners. Of course, having cars from Mustang owners on display is a big part of that. But I



If you visited the original MOM site, you'll remember this "barn find" display with a survivor hardtop, VIN 211, that was built on the first day of Mustang production. During our October visit, the area was decorated for Halloween, complete with skeleton horse.



The billboard behind this 2000 Cobra R, 1995 Cobra R, and FR500 track car came from Jim Chism, director of the 40th anniversary show in Nashville. "With the building being 20 years old, some of the walls didn't look very attractive," says Hall. "Well, that 20 x 50 wall is covered by the 15 x 45 banner."

also wanted owners, when they visit, to be engaged. This is their man cave. I didn't want a typical museum that was just displays and cars. I really wanted that car-hobby mentality. So while we were closed due to COVID, we took it upon ourselves to say, "Okay, we've got a blank canvas, what can we do with this?" I started at the basic level. Even though this building is only 20 years old, we were able to have the floors redone and new lights installed. We really upscaled everything. The building had been painted prior to us moving in. From there, we realized that a guy's man cave needs banners and TV screens. The only thing missing is the lounge chair.

MT: When did you make the move across the street into the smaller building?

SH: We started in the middle of December and opened here on January 2. There were financial reasons for the move and also personal reasons. Some people said I must have had a crystal ball because, obviously, if we had been in the larger building when COVID hit, there would be no Mustang Owner's Museum. Financially, there was no way. Although we had no history for what January or February business would be, our numbers were just as strong as October and November when we were over there. However, social media didn't like that we moved. Some thought we had a beautiful building and were disappointed that, as MOM members, they weren't part of the conversation about the move. A lot of people thought we had the entire building but we only had about 40 percent. Originally, we had hoped to have a stand-alone museum. But when someone is building something for you, you're really along for the ride. We tried to work with it and it just didn't work out.

MT: You're currently occupying two units in the current building. Any chance of expanding into the third unit?

SH: We've been told that the current lease for that unit runs out at the end of this year and we hope to take it over. I can't guarantee anything but my target date is National Mustang Day next year. We've got our fingers crossed. Once we have the entire building, we can display as many cars here as we did in the original building. That's important for me. I want to have 45 cars on display. We'll also have a small room in the back of that space where we can accommodate gatherings, presentations, and meetings.

MT: You mentioned engaging visitors. What have you done to accomplish that?

SH: We've spent the past six months adding cases and displays. A lot of volunteers helped us while we were closed for six months. We made space so visitors can sign a wall, an idea that I admittedly stole from Shelby American. We have an international cabinet with things given to us by foreign clubs and individuals. We also have a map with pins to show where our visitors come from. We've added a racing section and a classic section. When we hopefully get into the third unit, our goal is for that to become the main entrance. When you first come in, we'll have special collections on display, like one of every year Bullitt or Pace Car. We'll keep the racing section going. Not everybody owns a race car but everybody likes to look at a race car.



The Mustang Club of America's display—part of its MOM sponsorship—made the move from the original building to the new building. It includes MCA history boards, MCA Mustang Hall of Fame members, and a video slide show of MCA activities. At the time of our visit, Mike and Lorie Williams' 1975 Mustang II was on display.

MT: Are you still rotating cars?

SH: Absolutely. By National Mustang Day next year, the majority of cars will have been rotated. The ones we'll keep are the ones where I don't think we can find a better replacement. The barn find car was built on the first day of production, number 211. It's kind of hard to find something to replace that. Of all the cars here, the Mansell World's Fair convertible is probably the most important. When Lee Iacocca talked to reporters about the Mustang at the World's Fair in 1964, that car, VIN 004, was there. It will probably always be on display at the museum.

MT: How do you find the cars? Do owners offer their cars or do you look for them?

SH: A little of both. Sometimes people will send us an email. Our website home page has a link to a form for donating or loaning a car or memorabilia. That's the best way for the public to contact us. Last month, I saw a couple of cars at the Northeast Georgia Mustang Club show and spoke to the owners to see if they were interested in displaying at the museum.



During our visit, the first unit was dedicated to racing Mustangs, from replicas to actual track cars along with related posters and a video of the 1970 Trans-Am.

MT: Is there a time period that the cars are on display before rotating them out?

SH: It depends. We suggest six- to eight-months. That allows us to have two car rotations every year. Of course, if an owner shows up and says he needs his car right then, he'll get it. I'll be disappointed and, at the same time, I'm thinking, what can I replace it with? Sometimes we'll agree to six-months but the owner ends up wanting the car to stay longer because momma is using the garage space for something else. We appreciate them taking the time to bring us the car and share it with MOM visitors, but we want to display other cars.

MT: Do you still have the brick program?

SH: Yes. We pulled the bricks up from the original site and we have a great location for them over here. We have a landscaper who has a Shelby on display here. He has volunteered to do the work. He's already started prepping the area. Once he finishes the prep, we can start laying the bricks. Sadly, the company that produces our bricks got shut down by COVID and they are struggling right now. New bricks are starting to trickle in and we hope to have them all laid by the end of the year.

MT: During the COVID shut-down, you kept the museum in the spotlight by organizing cruises, right?

SH: Phase two in North Carolina was pretty stringent compared to other states, so we couldn't be open. We did know that we could do a cruise. We couldn't do our planned cruise to the Woodward Dream Cruise but we could still do a local cruise. There are over 100 car clubs within a 50-mile radius, so I started sending emails and making contacts. We came up with the Carolina Cruise for all makes. We did it for three reasons. One was to give car guys some kind of activity. Two, we wanted to make an economic impact on the area. And the car clubs could sell event merchandise to raise money for their charities. As long as we stayed within the phase two guidelines, the cities of Concord and Kannapolis gave us the permits. We ended up with around 900 cars cruising from Charlotte Motor Speedway to a brand-new minor league baseball park in Kannapolis. I was told that 60-65 percent of the cars were Mustangs. Next year we're going to do a spring and a fall cruise. If we're in phase three, both the track and the ballpark will become more actively involved in the event.

MT: What are some other events that you have planned for next year?

SH: We're going to create National Pace Car Day which will be the Saturday before the Indianapolis 500. That way, we'll recognize all the Mustang pace cars. This past Saturday, we did a National Bullitt Day—October 17 is the day that the movie premiered in 1968. We'll have another National Bullitt Day next year. So we'll be doing things for owners who are passionate about their particular Mustang model—Bullitts, Pace Cars, Boss 302, Mach 1, etc. We want to celebrate the birthday of the Mustang but then we also want to break it down into subsets. As many as we can, we're going to try to find a day that is significant or relates to the car. We're talking with the MCA about an MCA Day here. It'll be open to MCA members and to the public. The idea is to give something back to the members and hopefully, at the same time, attract some new members. We also created a Gale Halderman Memorial Virtual Car Show. I told John Clor that I wanted to keep Gale's name alive. We're also going to be doing some things with his museum to help them raise funds to keep it going now that Gale is no longer with us.



As with the original building, the new MOM facility includes a conference room/library with Mustang books, literature, and magazines. The "Grabber Orange" walls are appropriate.



Perhaps the most significant Mustang on display at MOM is this pre-production 1964 1/2 convertible, one of the 12 used on the Magic Skyway at the Ford Pavilion during the 1964 New York World's Fair. Purchased in 1965 by Dr. John Mansell, the historic car is on loan to the museum by the Mansell family.



To accompany the Mansell Magic Skyway Mustang, Steve Hall commissioned the build of this scale replica of the Ford Pavilion at the 1964-65 New York World's Fair.



Need access to an original Ford Parts & Services catalog? You'll find a couple of them in the MOM library.



Various displays can be found along the museum walls. This pair features a variety of Mustang-related models and games.



Mustang t-shirts, caps, and other apparel are available in the MOM lobby.

MT: You're also promoting National Mustang Day nationwide?

SH: Yes, that has actually done very well as far as engaging folks. In 2021, we'll do a National Mustang Day over the April 17 weekend.

MT: How is day-to-day for visitors?

SH: It's picking up. COVID had an impact. Of course, we weren't allowed to open until the travel season was over. So we're kind of on the downside of the tourism time of year. We were really busy at the first of September. I wasn't expecting that. Over the last couple of weeks, it's started to pick up, especially when we do something on weekends. Mondays are slow, Tuesdays are better, and it builds toward the weekends.

MT: Are you open every day?

SH: Right now, we're open every day. When the time changes on the first week of November, we may go back to closing on Mondays and Tuesdays. However, the last two Mondays were busy so we might stay open seven days through the winter season. We'll see. People can check the website for our current operating hours and they can also call to hear a message.

MT: We get your email blasts and looks like you're starting to ramp up promotion.

SH: We're starting to reengage on Facebook and Instagram. One thing we have missed this year is the international visitors. We had a large contingent of foreign visitors last year. We miss them because we enjoy hearing their stories and learning about their clubs and activities. As time goes on, we expect to see more people. The virus is going down for a lot of states but we don't know when it is going to peak, which is concerning. Car people are tired of sitting at home. They're limited in what they can do. So we're trying to keep our doors open and do small events. We don't want to over-sell our numbers right now. I don't want to get to the point where the city comes in and says, "Well, Mr. Hall, we traced some infections back to the museum so you're closed for two weeks." I feel for the businesses and for the people who have no income. I know that pressure, I really do. It's not easy.



You may remember this 1969 Trans-Am replica from the 55th Anniversary show in 2019. Owned by Innovative Technologies, the Mustang is a tribute to the Trans-Am Boss 302 that was driven by Sam Posey at Lime Rock during the 1969 season.



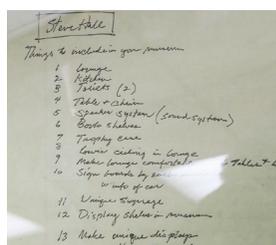
MOM members can submit a photo of their Mustang for this video slide show visible in the second unit.



A world map in the MOM library keeps track of where visitors came from.



Great Mustang stories can be found at MOM. The original owner of this 1968 J-code fastback purchased the car during "Senior Transportation Day" at the U.S. Naval Academy after turning down a pitch for a Shelby GT350. The "sales representative" was Carroll Shelby.



Early on, Steve Hall asked original Mustang designer Gale Halderman for advice. Halderman responded with this list of "Things to include in your museum." Number three is "two toilets."



A well-used vintage Mustang pedal car lets older enthusiasts relive their childhood.

MT: You still have your membership program, right?

SH: We do. We lost a few members while we were closed. Now that we've reopened, some of those members are coming back. Members can come to the museum for free, anytime and as many times as they want. There's even family, senior citizen, and military plans, all priced accordingly. They also get to come to most of our events for free. They can bring their car for free. We're hoping that non-members will see that they can save money by becoming a member while supporting the museum at the same time. Members also vote for our Hall of Fame. We also give them some bonuses. For example, Art Hyde gave me about 30 magazines from 1994 when Mustang won *Motor Trend's* Car of the Year. We also got the letter from Ford that went with the magazines to Ford employees. We sent an email out to members asking if they had a 1994 Mustang and to send us a picture. In exchange, we sent them a copy of the magazine. We also get tickets to the Charlotte Autofair so we'll send out an email offering them to museum members. We like to have the members see the value in what they are getting.

MT: With COVID, you're fortunate to still be here.

SH: A lot of businesses have closed. A lot of museums, sadly, are not going to reopen. We decided that we wanted to make MOM better and more engaging. So we're excited about where we are. One thing we're going to do next year is have a lot of engaging events. We want to give people a reason to come to the museum. //