

## CHANCELLOR OF THE EX-CHECKER

**T**HERE ARE NO TAXICABS, OFFICIALLY, IN MIDDLEFIELD, OHIO. The town, some 35 miles east of Cleveland, is largely an enclave of the Amish, whose black, horse-drawn buggies dominate the blacktop thoroughfares, shuttling black-clad passengers at a plodding, un-taxi-like pace. A mile or two past the 76 gas station, though, out on Old State Road, a yellow checkerboard, emblematic of that once-definitive New York City taxi breed, incongruously covers one wall of a lone garage. Out beyond this garage, on an acre or so of unkempt, ragged land, 190 Checker cabs in various colors and widely varying states of disrepair stretch on for about as far as any eye might care to see, rusting nobly, their meter flags forever lowered.

Since 1986, Ben Merkel has tended this unlikely taxi oasis as Twilight Taxi Parts, an open-air sanatorium for the aged and infirm Checker cabs of America. He has amassed vast quantities of mismatched Checker chassis, Checker hoods,

Checker carburetors, and, of course, Checker jump seats—all as complement to his own core collection of whole and nearly whole Checker taxis. Merkel serves Checker collectors and a handful of active New York City hackies, helping keep the endangered Checker species, for now at least, alive and on the road.

Merkel, a bright-eyed, determinedly boyish 38-year-old former travel agent from Cleveland, has a simple explanation for his Checker fascination: "They're underdog cars." It's clear, though, to hear Merkel describe individual Checkers he has known since his *first*—a big, white 1965 Marathon bought back in 1977 for \$600 (and still in his possession)—that we are talking love here, taxi love, profound and eternal.

"My top five Checkers?" asks Merkel. "Wow! That's like trying to pick the five favorite children out of the orphanage. Let's see—the new one's always a favorite, 'cause it's so fresh. Bought it right from the factory just before they stopped building 'em, in 1982. Then, I guess I'd say the Checker pickup truck from Portland, Oregon, and the oldest baby, my 1937 that was cut up and turned into a tow truck. Oh, and the U.P.S. Checker I bought recently in Canada.

"My stretch limousine! Of course. Owned by this wealthy lady in New York City who lived on Park Avenue and used to go to the opera in it. Gray, padded top, with a moon roof, oval opera windows. It's got an interior right out of a bordello."

The first Checker cabs, according to Merkel, were built in 1922 by Morris Markin, owner of a Chicago trouser factory, shortly after Markin foreclosed on a loan he'd made to a local builder of cab bodies. Markin seems to have wound up the Citizen Kane of taxicabs, controlling throughout the U.S. several major fleets, which various Markin family members ran as a ready market for the cabs that Morris Markin built, for the parts he distributed, and for the auto insurance he sold.

Initially, the only thing that distinguished a Checker from any other cab was Markin's checkerboard emblem. In time, though, his chief rival, John Hertz, cashed out on cabs to pursue enduring prosperity in the rent-a-car game; other manufacturers foundered, and Markin's Checker finally was left the only eight-passenger, purpose-built cab in America. The last Markin-family Checker rolled off the assembly line on July 12, 1982, although Checker still exists, a maker of parts for Chrysler and General Motors.

Several months ago, Merkel began living at Twilight Taxi Parts full time. "If the Checkers didn't actually break up my marriage," he acknowledges, "they surely didn't do it any good." Merkel has also curbed his Checker-buying appetite of late, admitting that "for at least four years, I scoured the country for *anything* Checker. Now I only buy cars of a special value or significance—an unusual color combination, the last of a fleet, or a last surviving example."

It is clear that Merkel is most deeply affected by the waning number of active Checker cabs on the New York City streets. "Yeah, it's down from fifteen a few years ago to ten and fading,"

he says with sadness. "This guy in Long Island City, Raffaele Pepe, is the last local mechanic who services them. I don't know what'll happen when he's gone.

"There's the Checker Parade on July 11, though," Merkel adds, brightening quite a bit. "Across the 59th Street Bridge. This British collector's arranging it. He's convinced all these Checkerheads to haul their cars into town and celebrate with him—cars from all over. I'm even coming in from Middlefield. Probably the last hurrah for Checkers in New York City." Merkel sighs, gazing out over his vast Checker-cab pasture.

"What're you gonna do?"

BARRY SINGER

Ben Merkel and a few of his closest friends, about 350 miles west of New York City.

