

Sheriff to unveil classic police cruiser at Friday's car show

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Del Norte County Sheriff Erik Apperson has been rebuilding engines as long as he can remember, from motorcycles to trucks. Although there was that occasional mishap during his early days growing up in Crescent City.

"I blew up my first mini-bike motor when I was 8 years old. When I was age 9, I learned a Briggs & Stratton cannot run off of rocket model fuel," Apperson said. "That's probably why the older I get, the more attention I put to brakes."

The public can witness the unveiling of Apperson's latest project this Friday during the "Sea Cruise" event ... it's a 1950 Dodge Coronet.

Apperson said he's always been a fan of Crescent City's classic-car show, now in its 28th year. "The first couple I went to, I had to sneak out of the house," he admitted.

Early in his law-enforcement career, Apperson said, he paired with “Sea Cruise” to fundraise for a local scholarship - the Del Norte County Scholarship Foundation - so graduating students could enter public safety careers, be it as police officers, firefighters or other emergency response personnel.

He raises the money taking photos for classic-car owners in a staged police pullover. This year, Apperson wanted to stage those pullovers by using a tribute to the classic patrol car. He found the perfect vehicle in Gold Beach.

Over the years, Apperson said, he’s built several motorcycles and even had a couple of them win best of show and best of class awards. He’s always working on some sort of car, he said, like a 1968 Ford or his 1961 Galaxy.

But in this 1950 Dodge Coronet, he’s found something special.

“The most interesting thing was, as I was working on it a friend of mine discovered its original build sheet. It came off the line of the Los Angeles Plymouth factory 69 ago years to the day, Oct. 4,” which is the date he plans to unveil it here.

Before making his purchase, Apperson researched police and sheriff department histories through photos and written records. He learned that the 1950 Dodge Coronet actually was a fairly common law-enforcement vehicle.

“Back in the day, patrol cars were not always black and white. Departments bought whatever color they could get and splashed Police Department on the side,” he reported.

After he acquired the car, Apperson had plans to clean it up, paint it, then apply the polish. But as he got to know the car, Apperson said, he looked at the patina (the brown film on the car’s metal after years of oxidation) and knew he couldn’t touch that 70-year-old paint.

“My goal became to make it look like the (Del Norte Sheriff’s Office) took it out of service and it was discovered in a garage last week,” he said. So, he enlisted some friends to pitch in, from fabricating to pinstriping.

Apperson said the engine is a popular one — a flathead, six-cylinder gyromatic. The car still had its original braking system; its current tires may be only the second set its ever had, he said.

After getting its electrical system running, Apperson outfitted the car with some period-correct lights and siren.

He said the completed Dodge is the epitome of a “rat rod,” a classic car cobbled together with whatever you have on hand in the garage. “A ‘rat rod’ is not really a term, but just what you did to it,” he said.

“This particular car lends a lot of respect to the rural community’s spirit to build something. I couldn’t have done it without a lot of help.”

Apperson gave a shout-out to those who lent a hand in bringing the 1950 Dodge back to life: Affordable Tow, Cathi Christensen, Nate Trimm, Jon Maxwell, Kyle's Auto Repair & Restoration, Jason Haban, George's Auto & Diesel Electric, Redwood Welding and California Auto Image.

“I think it’s beautiful,” he said. “It should be something the community can be excited about. My intention is to have it out quite often. I want kids to be climbing through it, adults to reminisce. I want us to enjoy it as a community.”

Apperson plans to be part of the Show and Shine event Friday night from 4-6 p.m., then lead the Blues and Cruise drive around downtown at 6 p.m.

He hopes the staged traffic-stop photos Saturday on Front Street raise as much as \$2,000 for the Del Norte County Scholarship Foundation.