



DAVE LEONARD, Original Parts Group

# From Swap Meet Booth to Manufacturer of GM Reproduction Parts

by Tara Baukus Mello



**W**hen Dave Leonard started his business, he was selling used GM parts at swap meets. Over the years, Original Parts Group (OPG) has morphed into the industry-leading manufacturer of GM reproduction parts, providing almost anything a car builder or restorer could want for GM cars from the mid-'50s through the late-'80s.

After growing up in a family that was always doing "car stuff," Dave decided to follow in his

father and older brother's footsteps and pursue the auto parts business. "My dad had a battery recycling business and my brother Jeff founded Classic Industries," explains Dave. "I'd been in a band, but quickly realized that I was never going to make a living, so I decided I'd pursue my other love—cars."

In 1982, Dave started buying used GM parts



OPG manufacturer's the majority of products it sells including die-cast mirrors, door handles, armrest pads, many chrome items and a wide array of GM-licensed products.

from salvaged yards and reselling them at swap meets. In the beginning, it was part-time work since he was at the mercy of the set times of the various swap meets. Soon, however, Dave realized he could easily expand by selling mail order. He took out ads in Hemmings and Cars & Parts, became a reseller of new GM parts and rented a small garage to store his stock. Initially, he called the company Chevelle Classics, since he wanted to specialize in GM A-body cars.

But just one year later, GM started discontinuing parts and Dave decided to start manufacturing his own replacement parts. While it was a bit of a leap, it was definitely a great business decision, though the next few years were a bit bumpy as he got things off the ground. "Money was tight and I didn't want to ask anybody for help. Work and home were synonymous. I actually slept on a cot in the shop, right next to my parts," Dave remembers.

By 1985, however, things were on an even keel. The company had about six employees and the product line now included over 5,000 parts and accessories. Dave "splurged" and moved into his own apartment. Over the next couple of years, he continued to build the business, investing in tooling, creating a comprehensive parts catalog and adopting a network of computers and a management system to keep track of what was becoming a gigantic database of parts.

"What a lot of people don't realize is that we







Over the years OPG has become an industry-leading manufacturer of GM reproduction parts, providing almost anything a car builder could want for GM cars from the mid-'50s through the late-'80s.

are the source for most of our parts, not just a reseller. We are a reseller for some brands, such as Edelbrock and Baer, but we produce the majority of the items we sell," he says. Among the products they make are die-cast mirrors, door handles, armrest pads, many chrome items and a wide array of GM-licensed products.

By 1987, the company had products for every GM A-bodied vehicle and sales had tripled. Dave and his now 20 employees moved into 7,000-square-feet in Huntington Beach, California. New products it began manufacturing included reproduction lenses and injection molded interior parts as well as

aluminum and chrome moldings and trim.

In mid 1988, they started expanding the product lines to GTO, Cutlass, El Camino and Skylark among others and, in 1990, Dave changed the name to Original Parts Group to more accurately reflect its products and mission. "We went from being a buyer originally to a top supplier with over 30,000 products by the mid-'90s that were focused exclusively on GM A-bodies," says Dave.

The tremendous product expansion led to the company's sixth move; this time to 16,000-square-feet. Still, OPG quickly

outgrew that space and Dave moved the company again in 2003 to 54,000-square-feet. In 2008, after outgrowing the space yet again, Dave decided it was time to build his own facility that would have plenty of room for expansion. OPG moved to its current location in Seal Beach, California, which features 200,000-square-feet of space. "I wanted to focus on creating a facility that was so modern and world-class that we could serve our customers most effectively," he says. While



The company built its own 200,000-square-foot facility in Seal Beach, CA, which has this welcoming showroom for customers.

some manufacturing is done at this facility, the emphasis is primarily on distribution. "At any given point, we have about 80 percent of our products in stock," Dave says.

The new space provided plenty of room for OPG's 130 employees, a large R&D and product test area as well as a storage area for the 50 cars that are



With over 80 percent of its massive inventory in stock at all times, customers who are in the local area can easily stop by OPG's parts counter and pick up what they need.





OPG's headquarters features a top-notch distribution system complete with conveyor belts and other automations.

with his family, including his wife Jennifer, five-year-old daughter Sarah and a son that was on the way when this article went to press. There's a bit of family time mixed in with work, too, as his two adult sons work at OPG. Cliff, age 22, works in marketing, while Will, 21, is a computer programmer who

OPG's fleet it uses for product development. "About a dozen of those cars are fully restored and ready to be driven at any time," Dave says. "I usually take them out on the weekend."

Focusing on GM A-bodies just wasn't enough for Dave and his crew. In 2009, OPG expanded into vintage Cadillacs and Buick Rivieras. "I obtained all the old manuals and guides for the cars and then sort-sequenced the data so it can be accessed easily. We started by focusing our

OPG has about 50 cars it uses for R&D, including about a dozen fully restored cars that Dave tries to drive most weekends.



Two years ago, OPG added product lines for vintage Cadillacs and Rivieras. With over 5,000 products offered, this is now its fastest-growing line.



products on the wear-and-tear parts that people would need replaced," says Dave. Currently, the Caddy and Riviera lines are OPG's fastest growing lines with over 5,000 products already available. "Both (Cadillac and Riviera) are really hip cars that are starting to gain in popularity since they are reasonable and easy to restore," says Dave. "And when they are complete, they are a pleasure to drive."

With all his focus on OPG, Dave doesn't have much spare time, but he does still find time to drive his '65 Chevelle convertible, play guitar in a small jazz band and spend lots of time

works in the IT department.

"I really enjoy what I do. I love this business," he says. "There's a certain artistry about the cars of the '50s, '60s and '70s and I love the idea that we are helping to keep these cars alive." 🇺🇸

