

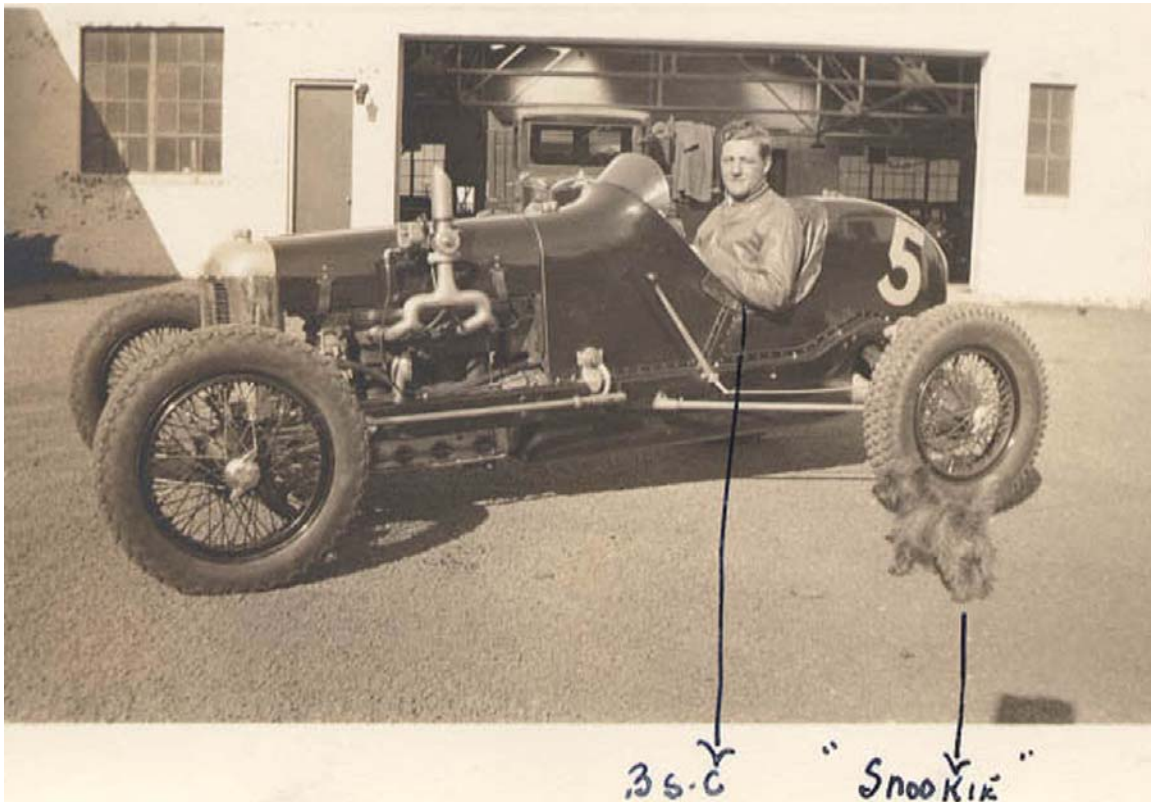
A Bugatti Experience Royale

By Tommy Milton III - Motorcar Consultancy du Monde auto@mcmwin.com



Briggs S. Cunningham was a remarkably ordinary man in his own mind. His accomplishments lacked the penultimate automotive achievements sought tenaciously beyond middle age when his peers had long since retired. He passed away during 2003, at 96, apparently a stranger to himself.

When asked in a private moment about any of his extraordinary lifetime achievements, he would most likely hang his head, shuffle a foot like a shy and remark "well, that was not much."



Briggs and his pets. Dreaming of events yet to pass. The photo made at Greens Farms, home in Connecticut about the time the Bugatti Royales were being built.

Without much applied scholarly effort Briggs "just bought cars that I liked." He never gave the creation of the world's preeminent automobile collection much studious consideration. Once retired from active racing the cars became objects to keep his mind casually occupied for a few hours each day. Some were treasured objects that kept him in contact with memories, other mere passing fancies.



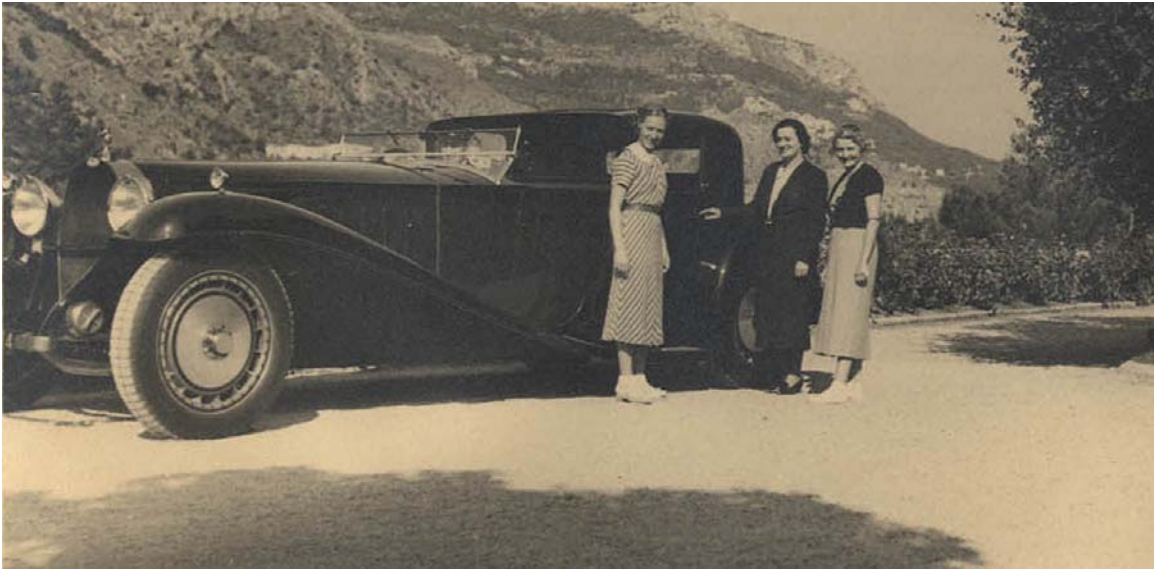
The Royale Berlin de Voyage, purchased by Briggs for D. Cameron Peck at the time he purchased the Kellner Coach for himself. One of several snapshots made when the cars were first unearthed in 1949 at Bugatti's home, where he secreted his treasures through WWII behind a false wall.

The ownership of a world class collection such as Mr. Cunningham's, approximately 75 vehicles owned, 25 on loan, tens of thousands of rare parts, tens of thousands of books, magazines and files with paper and photographic records, is a burden of preservations and maintenance. Those responsibilities take the fun out of ownership. One becomes a custodian consumed by menial tasks. It often happens that people of Briggs wealth and stature become surrounded by folks who may not have the boss's best interests in mind or heart.

If one happened to drive to the Cunningham Museum in a lovely, but ratty old pre war car, Briggs face would light up like that of a boy on Christmas morning. His delight may have been the result of a simple pleasure with no supplementary responsibility.

What follows is a personal account, one man's eye-opening experience with the former L'Ebé Bugatti, Briggs S. Cunningham, T-41 Bugatti Royale Kellner Coach.

I must confess that my image of this car was colored by Briggs reiteration of his one and only driving experience at the wheel of the grand machine throughout nearly 50 years ownership. "I collected the car with much enthusiasm at the New York docks on its arrival from Marseilles and drove it home to Greens Farms, CT. I was so disappointed by its road manners that I never drove it again, not once. I arrived home without incident, phoned Alfred (Momo) in NY to request that he arrange to collect the car. I asked that he paint over all of the yellow accent in my favorite blue color and see if they couldn't do something about the handling."



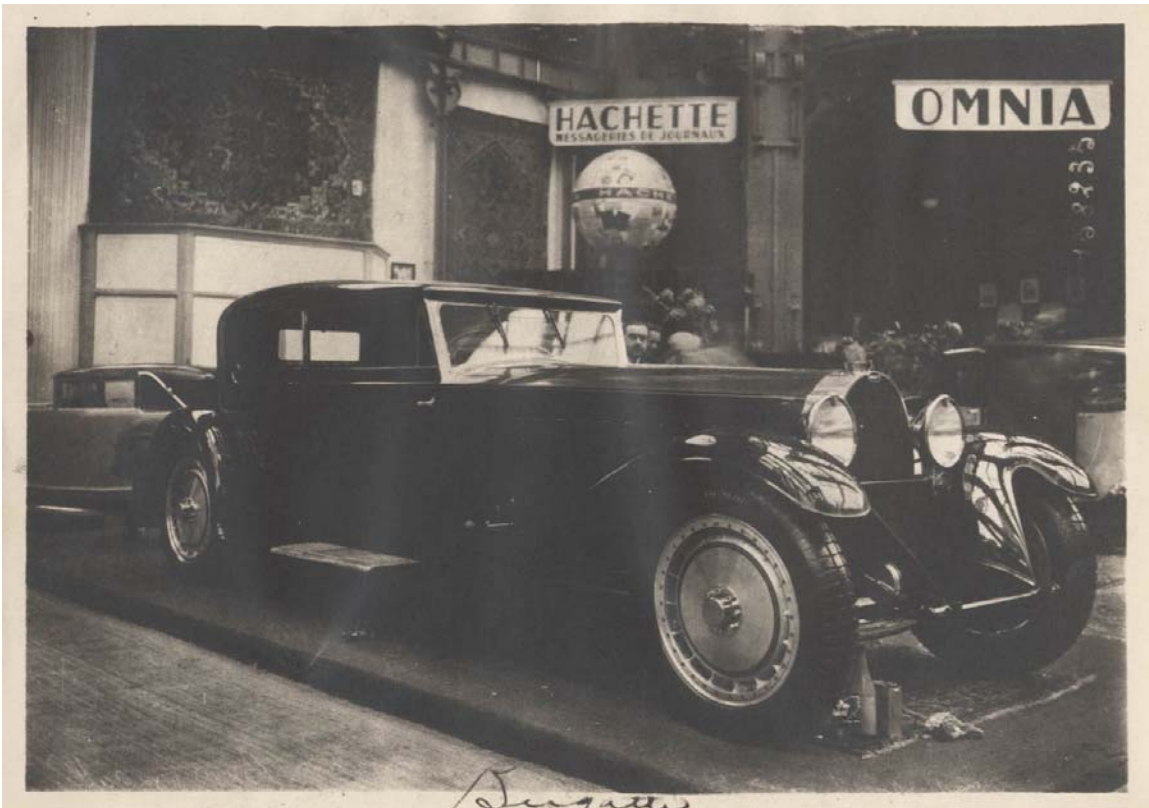
The Bugatti women alone on the road in the Royale Coupé Napoleon. Photo from L'Ebé Bugatti's personal scrapbook to Briggs on the day he took delivery of the Kellner Coach and Berlin de Voyage.

Much has been written about the Bugatti Royale cars over the years. Most no more than a rehash of ancient secondhand tales.

This writer, a third generation automotive enthusiast, mechanic, engineer, racer, had occasion to ride in the Cunningham Bugatti Royale many years ago. The museum policy called for routine exercise of vehicles. It was a special treat to drive around Costa Mesa or the Museum's five acre parking lot in various cars with John Burgess, the Cunningham Museum Manager. John held court and entertained listeners with great tales from his vast automobile racing and repair experience. John told some tall tales embellished by time and other stories of incredible value and meaning to those of use to young to have been on the scene in his day. John's dedication to the Museum chores was not what it might have been due in part to a perpetual tug of war that undermined operations. Briggs was more concerned about providing for his grandchildren as his father provided for him, than devoting resources to the museum collection.

When cars were exercised Mr. C, as he was known by his staff, would stand by in the shade of a beloved parking lot tree and watch with bemused wonder while one of his magnificent cars drove round and round the five acre lot. An innocent viewer might have wondered if he was just a bystander, an elderly gentleman dreaming of days gone by, opportunities missed.

I read many things over the years about Ettore Bugatti and his Royale, "the car made for Kings." Neither technical descriptions nor prose prepared me for extensive, exhaustive driving experiences in Briggs' Royale Kellner Coach made during a nine month period.



The Kellner Coach on the Bugatti stand at the Olympia Motor Show circa 1932. Photo a gift to Briggs from L'Ebé.

To be polite, the Bugatti Royale was a marketing disappointment in its day. That history coupled to occasional parking lot rides with John Burgess at the helm and this writer dismissed the car as a technical failure, which clouded any ability to appreciate it's extraordinary aesthetics among other attributes.

I was fortunate to be involved with the Cunningham Museum sale to Miles Collier in 1986. My relationship with each of the Cunningham cars and the T-41 Bugatti Royale Kellner Coach leave me a changed, penitent man.

I spent nearly two years coordinating activities at the Cunningham Museum after the sale to Miles Collier. Among numerous responsibilities, I was instructed to study the collection and prepare a long term plan to include repatriation of some portion of the purchase price. The Bugatti Royale became central to those plans.

Months of market study and interviews with a variety of specialists ensued. A plan was eventually hatched to market the Royale through Christie's, in a specially orchestrated sale of "Ten Important Motorcars." This sale was to be held within the Royal Albert Hall, London. This would be the first and perhaps only time in history that anything other than musicians graced the stage at this venerable facility.

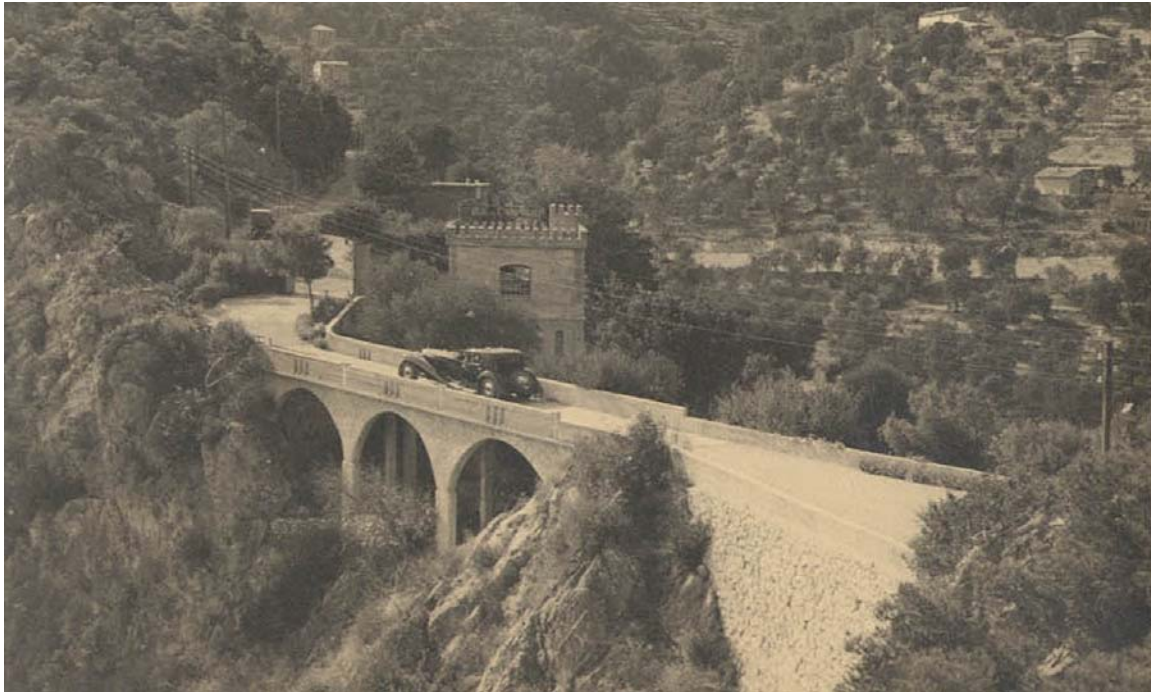
The former Cunningham Royale was prepared in the Museum shops under the direction of Richie van de Water, the Museum's accomplished head mechanic. Thorough mechanical inspections, adjustments, engine tune up, fluid changes and various other technical preparations were undertaken. Richie was responsible to see that everything was prepared for a worldwide road show with nothing left to chance.

With mechanical work underway, Robert Elmer, Briggs' step grandson cleansed, polished, treated and generally spruced the old car up such that it might "put its best foot forward" during a global promotional tour and Royal Albert Hall auction extravaganza.

Opinions of value for this fantastic relic ranged from \$6,000,000 to \$14,000,000 at the time! We were as anxious to see that the Royale was prepared for awe inspiring introductions during the ensuing months. The car was to make marketing appearances in Manhattan, Paris' Bois de Boulogne, London, and Donington Park Circuit leading up to the November 1987 Christie's auction presentation.

Not wanting to deviate from Briggs' Museum policies, we towed the car on an open trailer from Costa Mesa to Monterey Bay/Pebble Beach area, a distance of nearly 400 miles. Other Museum staff prepared the tow vehicle and trailer while Richie and Robert worked on the Royale.

On the appointed day with some fanfare, Richie and I embarked northward on California Highway 101 toward Monterey, all smiles, off together on an adventure royale. For those not familiar Highway 101, it presents California scenic beauty at its best. More important to this tale, it is particularly mountainous much of the way.



The Bugatti women on the road in the Royale Coupé Napoleon. Scrapbook photo from L'Ebé to Briggs when he took delivery of the Kellner Coach and Berlin de Voyage, 1949.

We suffered an ignominious beginning in spite of meticulous preparations. Ours was a pitiful spectacle. The brakes on our tow vehicle were used up by the time we reached lunch at the Madonna Inn, San Luis Obispo. We pulled into the parking lot only to hear the egregious sound of metal on metal brakes. Our thorough preparations had not been so complete.

Brake repair parts are not easy to come by in a small college town on a Saturday afternoon. The only remotely amusing, redeeming memories of this day are the delightful, mysterious copper urinals at the Madonna Inn. You will have to see those yourself.

Acquisition of brake repair parts required enterprising effort. Taxi rides, cash tips and other resourceful efforts finally unearthed parts that would allow us to limp north, arriving much later than planned. Brake rotors, bearings, seals and pads were installed at the Madonna Inn parking lot. An audience of bemused, inquisitive tourists, 100 degree temperatures and a \$10,000,000.00 car on an open trailer! We appeared to be a couple local, yokels changing brakes in a parking lot. With brakes given a band aid repair job, we set off cautiously to the largest hills on the great northern passage.

To say that much rested on our safe arrival in Monterey with a Bugatti Royale in tow would be an understatement. Imagine sweating palms, pounding hearts and other nerve wracking manifestations. Christie's London staffs; video crew, still photographers and journalists were flying in from England with arrivals at Monterey starting the next morning, comings and goings were to continue for ten days. The Royale would be demonstrated, video taped and photographed in and around the Monterey Peninsula and Pebble Beach for marketing purposes. Miles of film was exposed and the Royale was driven countless miles.

Months had been invested conducting in house research, doing diligence, negotiating contracts with Christie's, The Pebble Beach Company, City of Carmel, local police agencies and others so roads could be closed and various and sundry laws bent to suit our purposes. Here we were, away from unexpected break down repairs at the Madonna Inn, limping along absolutely insecure at the moment about our safe, timely arrival at Monterey!

Richie, my intrepid copilot and partner in crime was smiling and cheerful the rest of the drive north in spite of the parking lot tow vehicle brake repairs. While I worried about safe passage, long, treacherous downhill runs, foolish fellow travelers, and cracks in the pavement. Now that our armor had shown a chink I worried incessantly about our multi million dollar charge on an open trailer behind a suspect tow vehicle. I was irritable, annoyed, chock-a-block with trepidation.

Hours later than planned we arrived at our Carmel hotel, the great car safe and sound, drivers somewhat worse for wear. We off loaded the Royale and parked it out of doors in the hotel parking lot, where it spent nights for the next ten days! For those who asked prying questions, we gave stock answers; "It's just an old car." "What's it worth?" "Nothing much." "Where do you get tires?" "Don't know it's been so long."

Richie and I treated ourselves to a gourmet dinner with extras that evening, expensive wine to satiate tired, apprehensive nerves. We retired to an anxious night's sleep.

In the coming days, weeks and months I was to live under extreme pressure to demonstrate the Royale without a hitch such that we might consummate a record setting public sale. Keep in mind that as of 1987, multi million dollar automobiles did not often come to sell at auction. We were respectful of the great car while at Monterey, while some readers may view some of our actions as cavalier.

Have you ever considered driving a \$10,000,000 car in everyday service, leaving it parked outside overnight, flying it from LA to NY via Cleveland, then on to London, Paris, back to London, and more?

Try to imagine the difficulties with insurance coverage or the odd roadside incident. There were many things about our marketing activities Lloyds of London just didn't need to know as far as we were concerned. Such as rush hour drives in the rain, in the dark of night through central London to demonstrate the car for a secretive buyer flown in from the Continent for an hour or two, or tire squealing hot laps at Donington Park Circuit in front of International media, this writer driving with his recently fractured forearm in an abbreviated cast hidden within a coat sleeve, which required serious negotiations with the hospital Chief of Staff, that being an altogether different story!

We used the Royale at Monterey for our daily transport for nearly two weeks. We drove a car full to daily meals, photographic events, journalist appointments, and sightseeing. The great old car was on the move day and night.

At first, other than mind numbing pressure and furtive ego boosting prestige provided by our multi million dollar livery, the car was a huge disappointment and worrisome on the local roads. Driving around town was scarcely manageable. The car was lethargic. Driving on the expressway to and from the Monterey Airport was magnificently terrifying! The car was

not able to pace freeway traffic. I thought but did not vocalize, "no wonder Ettore's marketing efforts failed." More than 11 litres under the bonnet and we were not able to travel at expressway speeds!

Of six Royales produced, this gem does not have a speedometer. Not that we needed one. We certainly had no worries about speeding tickets.

To be kind, history tells us this particular Royale was made for Ettore's daughter, L'Ebé. Ettore believed that anyone driving such a car should not be concerned with his or her rate of speed. I didn't have to worry either. We could not keep up. I was genuinely worried about getting hit from behind. We struggled down the road while little old ladies passed us by in a blur.

Initial driving impressions diminished my optimism for successful sale. I drove an Allis Chalmers tractor on a working farm as a boy that behaved with more panache than this Bugatti Royale. Here I am responsible to demonstrate a car we plan to sell for millions. I need this beast to put its best foot forward. It seems a hopeless case from the moment we get the Royale out on the open road.

Richie and I brainstormed every conceivable avenue in a search for speed and performance in a desperate search to circumvent the inevitable. We were at a loss to figure out what might be done so that journalist's on their way from England might enjoy an outrageously impressive ride or drive in the Royale. I needed a sedative.

My grandfather, Tommy Milton, the first two time Indianapolis 500 winner, told me that Jules Goux, Rene Thomas and other European drivers and riding mechanics of his day drank champagne for nourishment during pit stops. They polished off cases during six hours of racing! Can I possibly get away with this; either to sedate myself or cloud the senses of journalist's whom we need to pen radiant prose?

The Cunningham Royale did not perform. We needed a miracle. We settled into two days of still photography in and around the Pebble Beach enclave while I schemed any means to circumvent my dilemma. I awaited arrival of Christie's handpicked journalist's with tremendous trepidation. These men were to be driven around the area at their whim. We needed them to be so impressed by the Royale that their glowing prose would guarantee a multi million dollar hammer price when Robert Brooks gavel was to fall on Lot 10 many months later.

Many of you Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance visitors may know a small hill, a cut off of the 17 Mile Drive leaving The Lodge at Pebble Beach in the direction of the Highway 1 gate. By this time I was having nightmares about that little hill. I had driven up this particular hill countless times in old cars entered for the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance. It is short, perhaps steep, nay a stout little hill.

The Royale would not go up The Hill in low gear with a quarter mile running start. I was stunned. What was I to do when Doug Nye and Nick Baldwin arrived, prose poised and ready?



Not driving, just dreaming!"

Two pillars of the British motoring press on their best behavior in America. They've come to road test a multimillion dollar automotive art treasure and to pen glowing prose.

"Argh, I'm to be eaten alive by this Pacific Serpent."

"Look mum, I'm actually behind the wheel."



Richie and I worried and reviewed every possible solution. Was one sticky valve adjuster the culprit? We tried every conceivable inspection, adjustment and trick in the book, in secret, during the next couple days, to no avail. We went to great lengths to excuse ourselves with the car, tools and tricks in hand. Nothing helped. My already low opinion of Ettore Bugatti, the great designer, engineering genius, plummeted. The man who purchased and copied cars of the great Harry Miller was in fact a failure, as I suspected all along.

With no other avenues to pursue, we decided to attempt an end run at the two British journalists. A last chance stroke of genius. I insisted they drive the car and without special permission from Lloyd's. A chance any of us who leap at, right? Not so. Their perception of the Royale's extraordinary value stopped my scheme dead in its tracks. Neither Doug nor Nick would drive the Royale out of fear. Their united refusal "What if I prang this spectacular treasure?"

Assurances that we could fix it if they broke it fell on deaf ears. I resigned myself and suffered extremely embarrassing moments when they asked for demonstrations over hill and dale.

With five people and equipment piled into the car, including Doug, Nick, a video cameraman, still photographer and intrepid pilot, Richie left standing alone on the roadside all smiles, we motored off. It was not long before the Brits want to go up The Hill, "to see what this majestic, elegant motorcar was made of."

It was pitiful. We ran out of steam and stalled half way up The Hill. The Brits crossed themselves and attempted an immediate mass evacuation looking very much like Keystone Cops while I did my best to hide my embarrassment, gather my wits and roll backward down The Hill in spite of pitiful rearward vision and fleeing colleagues.



Enough of that, we did many other types of driving during the balance of their stay. Would you believe the Bugatti's performance seemed to improve as days and miles passed? During yet another trip to the Monterey Airport to pick someone up, the Royale actually seemed to hold its own in freeway traffic. Another highway demonstration for Doug and Nick south on Highway 1 and we actually passed several cars while traveling uphill!

Was this an illusion? Is there actual truth to the alleged effect of an "Italian tune up?"

We finished shooting still photos literally in the dark of night days later. Photographers were instructed to do anything imaginable to "get the shot."



Bob Masters, Christie's ace photographer seen undercover here asked me at the end of a long day if we might remove the rear seat so that he could attempt seating himself with camera and tripod far enough away from the dashboard to attempt night photos on a lonely road, with lighting only from the yellow Marchal headlamps and dash lights in the dark of night! All smiles, the two of us motored off into the night in search of yet

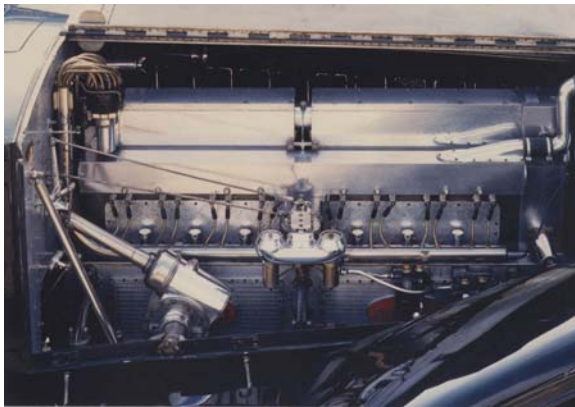
another "million dollar shot."

Fortified with fine food and fine French wine we "got the shot" after hours of late night work. As we departed our lonely location not far from The Hill I asked myself "dare I attack The Hill on the way back to our hotel?" With nothing to lose Bob and I gave it a go. I roared back from the forest of Pebble Beach to our Carmel hotel, screaming as I approached Richie's door on foot having put the great old car to rest for the night, "Richie, the car made it, the Royale went up The Hill with power to spare!"



As the days passed and the highway miles accumulated, the Royale's performance actually improved. On the day Doug Nye and Nick Baldwin were to embark for England with only enough time to make their publication deadlines if they completed their writing chores aloft, we were able to take The Hill, starting from a dead stop in high gear at its base. That's 1:1 direct drive for those who are not aware. We roared up and over the crest with five people in the car! Ettore Bugatti's redemption was at hand. We drove around in circles to drive up The Hill repeatedly so all could be suitably impressed by the achievement.

We ran out of gasoline during our last minute dash to get Doug and Nick to their plane. Out of gas, we rolled silently off of Highway 1, rolled through a red traffic signal, and pushed the last 100 yards into a filling station. Once again we looked like the Keystone Cops scrambling out of the rolling car pushing toward the filling station with passer by vociferously enlisted to our aid. Fueled with less than a full tank to save time, we passed every car in sight to make their plane in the nick of time!



The Royale's driving performance improved remarkably as mileage increased during demonstrations in coming months. Much more than engine performance improved. The entire organism began to come alive. Sensitive hands, feet and derriere felt the chassis come alive. We blocked stretches of the old Pebble Beach road racing circuit and filmed the car tearing along at near racing speeds. Richie and I continued to nurture the car with lubricants, cleaners and subtle adjustments. As the car improved, I came to understand, to

explore and to appreciate the Bugatti's inconceivable and astonishing capabilities and limits. A vehicle of these immense proportions, an engine conceived to power locomotives, a vehicle designed to convey Kings and Heads of State that performed like a sports car. I was born again, obligated to speak righteously of the Man and the Machine!

Imagine my delight as we drifted through corners employing opposite steering lock at 50 mph speeds with a car full of enchanted



journalists on rural dirt roads high up in the Del Monte forest.

While this is an enormous, heavy car, it performed with remarkable neutral handling characteristics when pushed to the limit. Driving on the dirt roads with aggressive throttle application, a touch of opposite lock brought back memories of a misspent youth on rural Midwestern roads and race tracks.

Imagine a \$10,000,000 one of a kind art treasure, an automotive icon in a four wheel drift at 60 or 70 mph on asphalt. It happened for me time and again. I was fortunate to be able to demonstrate the Royale at Donington Park Circuit months later. I enjoyed a delightful day of high speed demonstrations around the complete circuit. Tom Wheatcroft, the Donington Park Circuit owner, will never forget it, I can assure you. It was miraculous, pushing the mythical car around Donington Park Circuit with a newly fractured, aching left arm.

Believe it or not, the three ton wonder drove like a svelte sports car when pushed to its limits once reinvigorated by use. You can't imagine my surprise and delight. Experiences at speed in this grand car were memorable, to say the least. I am sorry my opinion got in the way of enlightenment. I am a changed man. I have the utmost respect for Ettore Bugatti, Jean, Rembrandt, Carlo, the factory technicians and present day worshippers.

The agility with which this great car, the T-41 Bugatti Royale Kellner Coach, intimidated and devoured the most challenging roads at Pebble Beach, the Monterey Peninsula, Donington Park Circuit, central London and elsewhere is nothing short of extraordinary. While the pressures and responsibilities were tremendous, my enthusiasm for the job at hand prevailed. To say that I am blessed by these experiences would be an understatement.

The car would be a delight to drive in any type of Grand Touring event. If asked to pick any car for a cross continent trip, the T-41 Royale would be at the top of my list. Heck, a trip to the grocery store would be magnificent.

I doubt that anyone will ever again be offered such an opportunity. We may have taken liberties in the course of consummating a successful plan. Circumstances dampened our enthusiasm and terrified us momentarily. At the end of the day those of us fortunate to have a hand in this exercise certainly enjoyed an experience of a lifetime. I hope this was not our final opportunity.

Those who own and control treasures such as the Kellner Coach Bugatti Royale owe a debt to history and to their contemporaries to see that others are left to tell stories such as mine, from first hand experience. Automotive art icons may be all of that, but they are also living, breathing machines that deteriorate and die when left to a static existence, just as human beings do.

To those of you who proudly persevere and protect the memories and Bugatti family treasures left in your care, please accept my appreciation and my respect. You do history a great service.



To the memories of those who came before and leave us better people.

Mr. C with Kellner Coach, summer 1987. God bless you and thank you.



The author and the car, Japan 1992.

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