

PEBBLE BEACH CONCOURS D'ELEGANCE®

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CELEBRATING THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF THE AUTOMOBILE

KING OF THE PEBBLE BEACH
ROAD RACES

1998's LOUIS VUITTON CLASSIC
CHINA RUN

The Remarkable Career of

DON WILLIAMS

THE FORD FAMILY LEGACY

WITH

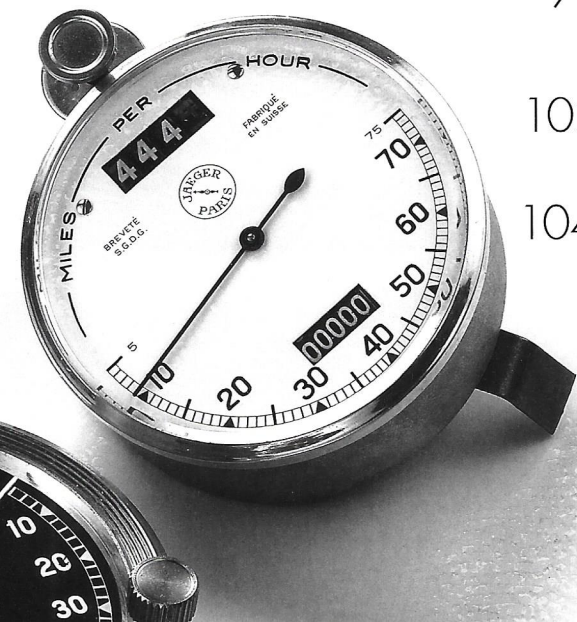
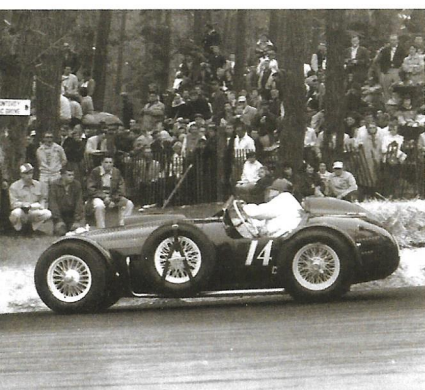
EDSEL B. FORD II

A VISIT TO THE
PORSCHE MUSEUM
IN STUTTGART

PEBBLE BEACH CONCOURS D'ELEGANCE.

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CELEBRATING THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF THE AUTOMOBILE™



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DON WILLIAMS

THE REMARKABLE CAREER OF A
NAVY BRAT TURNED CAR CONNOISSEUR

BY WINSTON GOODFELLOW

*“Fate takes you to the right place
if you have your eyes open.”*

With that simple statement, the owner of the Blackhawk Collection and President of the Blackhawk Automotive Museum sums up one of the most remarkable careers in the collector car universe. A self-proclaimed Navy brat, Don Williams was born in 1945, the eldest of three brothers. “I never finished a year of school in the same place until the sixth grade,” he says. “Guam, Virginia, Illinois, San Diego—we moved all the time. That helped make it easy for me to meet new people. It also made me very curious about what was around the next corner.”

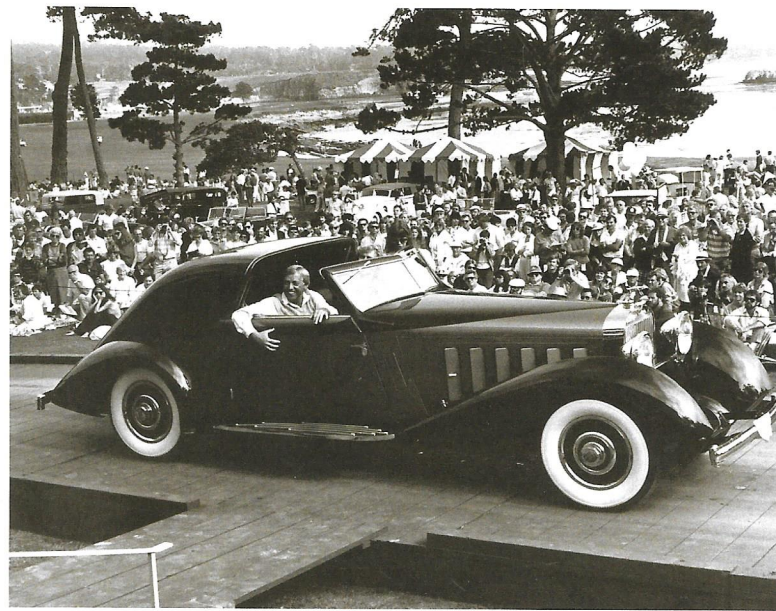
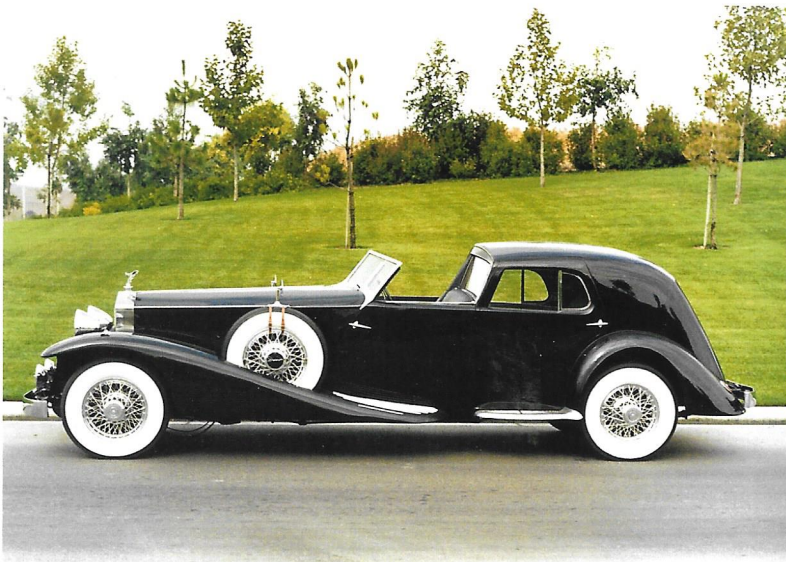
Williams had no clue then of the hand fate had dealt him. In the mid-1960s, working at a southern California aircraft manufacturing plant, he was a headstrong young man who didn't much care for his boss. One day, as he tells it, he “quit with a few choice words and walked out—not the best thing to do when you have a wife and kid and you are the only one working.”



Don Williams in front of The Lodge at Pebble Beach with the only 1934 Duesenberg J Weymann Tapertail Speedster in existence. Williams has shown more automobiles at the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance than any other collector.

THE LODGE





Top left: Known as the “Countess,” one of Williams’ favorite cars was the 1933 Rolls-Royce Phantom II Town Car designed by Howard A. “Dutch” Darrin for New York socialite Countess Dorothy di Frasso. Williams showed the Countess at the 1982 Pebble Beach Concours, where it won the Lucius Beebe Trophy. The rear compartment (shown bottom right) was fitted with matched maple veneer and plush upholstery on a par with one of di Frasso’s chic apartments. Top right: Howard Darrin also designed a pair of matching Hispano-Suizas, with coachwork by Fernandez & Darrin in Paris, for Anthony Gustav de Rothschild. This 1934 K6 Coupé Chauffeur—built in just six months—was intended for cruising around town while its counterpart was suitable for more formal occasions. Williams first brought this K6 to the Pebble Beach Concours in 1985 and again in 1986, when it won the Piper Trophy. Bottom left: Williams first competed at the Pebble Beach Concours in 1973 with this 1932 Alfa Romeo 6C 1750 Zagato Spider, which won the Gwenn Graham Trophy for Most Elegant Car.

Ironically, leaving that job was the first step on the path that would bring Williams to where he is today. He went to the unemployment office in search of another job rather than benefits: “They gave me an application for an electronics firm and asked if I had electrical skills, and I said ‘yes.’ I had worked as an orderly at a rest home and had plugged in a couple of lamps, so I figured that must qualify me.” While filling out the paperwork, Don noticed the firm’s name was Orb Electronics and he memorized its phone number. “I went to a pay phone outside and said the office had told me to call them.” He interviewed that same day and went to work the next morning, where “it didn’t take them long to figure out I didn’t know squat.”

But there the first of several “right people” entered his life. Orb was owned by Sam Bergman and Ilmars Kersels, and the latter liked the fact that Williams had the “guts to ask for the job.” Kersels changed Don’s position to janitor and taught him how to solder on the side. “I became quite good at it,” Don says. His employers also owned a toy company, one at the forefront of the slot car industry, and Don became its fifth employee. Regularly working 60 to 70 hours a week to get overtime pay—“they gave me carte blanche on when I could work”—Williams had a front-row seat to watch the rise and fall of America’s slot car craze.

As interest in slot cars waned in the late ’60s, Bergman and Kersels decided to open an “old car store” and asked Don if



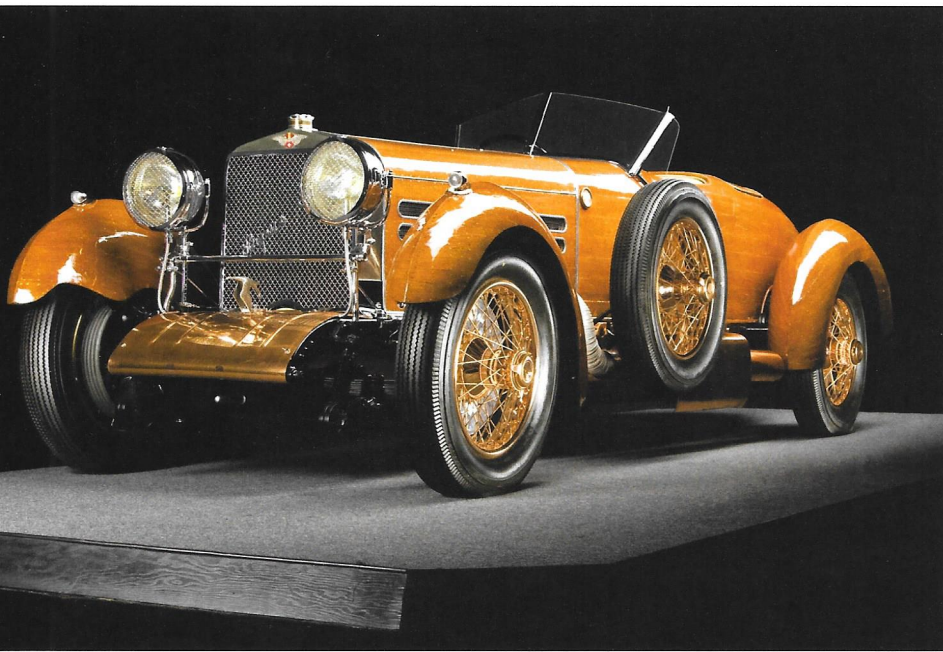
The Blackhawk Automotive Museum in Danville, California, opened its doors in 1988 in the week following the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance and each year hosts an open house the day after the Concours. This year, to mark its 25th anniversary, a gala celebration is planned for the weekend just prior to Pebble Beach Automotive Week.

he wanted in. “They were two of the pioneer car collectors,” he recalls. “And their master mechanic, Clyde Baker, taught me about working on cars on the weekends. That was all I knew, but I had always been good at sales, so I became the salesman at Old Time Cars.” Bergman and Kersels were absentee owners, letting Williams pretty much have the run of the place. He would arrive early, mop the floors, change his clothes, and get ready to sell.

The first car he moved was a 1930 Packard 745 Drophead Coupe Phaeton he had purchased for \$600. “You had to have an old car to be in the business, and it was all I could afford,” he reflects. “One day this guy comes in and asks about the Packard parked out back. I said, ‘That’s the owner’s car, and he doesn’t want to sell it.’ He asked what it was worth, and I told him \$2,000.” When the customer offered \$1,800, Williams went into an office, picked up the phone and pretended to have a conversation with the owner. “I came back to him and said, ‘I can’t believe this, but he’ll take the

\$1,800.’ I had just made twelve hundred dollars and thought, *this is better than working*. That’s when I fell in love with the business—only to later realize I didn’t have a ride home!”

From then on, “every time Bergman came in with something new, I’d get the books out. I’d learn everything I could about the model and marque. I didn’t want to be dumb with these ‘old people,’ these 40-year-olds I was selling to.” Early influences from that intensive reading included Robert Gottlieb’s columns in *Motor Trend* on classic cars—“Bob became a customer and friend and was a ‘deal junkie’; he taught me a lot”—as well as *Automobile Quarterly*. In fact, “*AQ* set my goal,” Williams says. “The publication started a number of years before I got into the business and had a lot of the greatest cars ever made in it, owned by people I’d never met. The cars had no value in the 1960s, so these wealthy people were great car guys, like D. Cameron Peck. They had oil in their blood, and wanted the best from whatever era they liked. My goal became to touch all of those cars once.”



André Dubonnet, whose wealth stemmed from the fortune he inherited from the aperitif firm founded by his father, commissioned this 1924 Hispano-Suiza H6C Boattail Skiff for the 1924 edition of the Targa Florio. He specified that it was to be built of Tulipwood to be light and fast, which it was: Dubonnet finished in sixth place overall.

Williams brought the Tulipwood Hispano-Suiza to the 1986 Pebble Beach Concours, where it won the Alec Ulmann Trophy for most significant Hispano-Suiza on the show field.



Williams learned another lesson from the transaction: “The collector car trade is not only a business, but a hobby. Everybody I’ve ever met has really wanted the car they bought, and Wayne *wanted* that car. I didn’t know it at the time, but Howard was the first one to give him his break.”

As more and more landmark machines passed through Williams’ hands—“my *AQs* had paper clips throughout them”—another “right person” greatly influenced him. “Once a week, coach-builder [Howard A.] ‘Dutch’ Darrin would come to my store in Santa Monica for lunch. He was part of a great era, and he had gone to France to become famous before setting up shop in southern California. It was an honor for me as a young man to meet people like this. He liked sharing, and I just soaked it in. Other designers would also come in and tell stories, but Dutch was the one who

One such machine was the Howard Hughes Duesenberg, which was in the Old Time Cars showroom in 1970. “Wayne Newton came in and wanted to know what he could buy it for. I was pretty brash in that part of my life, so I told him ‘The price is there and it’s \$42,500.’ He said, ‘Don’t I get a discount?’ I said, ‘If I came to your concert, you wouldn’t give me one.’ It was so simple that he said, ‘Okay, I’ll take the car.’”

That sale served as Williams’ introduction to the rumor mill. “I didn’t tell anybody, just my wife. The next morning I got a call from the Duesenberg guru himself, Ray Wolfe, who was back East, congratulating me on setting the world’s record for a used car sale. I asked him how the hell he knew, because I didn’t talk, and the owners wouldn’t talk. In one day the news had traveled across the country—and this was before computers and e-mail.”

taught me how to walk around a car, to see its beauty and lines. Very few cars have passed what Dutch called the ‘360-degree test’ of slowly viewing every corner, looking at every line and never finding an ugly angle. He also told me to put mirrors above a car to see if it was still beautiful. This got me more into the design aspect of cars, rather than the power. Beautiful is beautiful, and ugly is ugly, and all the great cars just seemed to be beautiful.

“The Countess Rolls is my favorite car. It’s the one Dutch focused on when showing me how to really look at a car. He said it was the only car he did that turned out better in the metal than in the renderings. Obviously, the more I looked at the car, the more I believed him. And I chased that car for years. Jimmy Brucker owned it, and I couldn’t get it.

Alfa Romeo commissioned the famed coachbuilder Carrozzeria Bertone in Turin to design the world-famous aerodynamic prototypes known as the BAT cars. The moniker is an acronym for *Berlinetta Aerodinamica Tecnica*, and each example was a study on the effect of streamlining on a standard Alfa 1900 Sprint chassis. Designed by Franco Scaglione for Bertone, the BATs debuted at the Turin Auto Show in successive years: BAT 5 (top) in 1953, BAT 7 (middle) in 1954, and BAT 9 (bottom) in 1955. Each year the BAT concepts were greeted with much acclaim and although the cars were a little too extreme to make the production line, facets of their aerodynamic styling were incorporated in the stunning Scaglione-designed Alfa Romeo Giulietta Sprint Speciale built between 1959 and 1966. The BATs were first shown as a group at the 1989 Pebble Beach Concours, and the trio now graces the collection of the Blackhawk Museum.



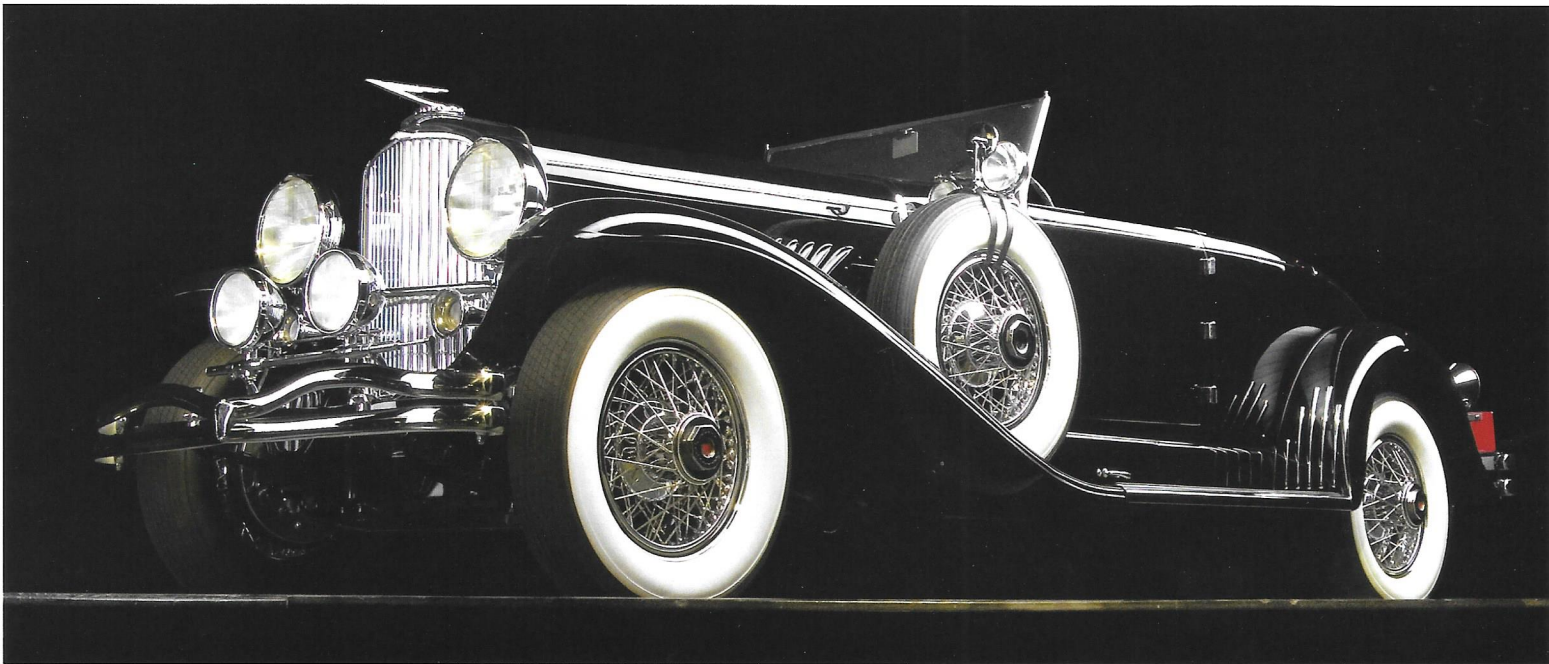
We were good friends, and after 10 or 11 years of calling him a couple times a year and asking ‘Are you going to sell me the Countess?’ one day he said, ‘Well Don, today is the day. It’s \$183,500 and if you don’t want it, I have two other people who will write me the check.’ When I asked him how he came up with the price, he said, ‘I’m going to buy the avocado ranch next to our avocado ranch, and that is what it is costing me to buy it.’”



Like Brucker, Williams had a very successful several-year run supplying cars to the movies—“For *Chinatown*, Roman Polanski wanted cars that were in perfect condition to his eyes, with nothing later than 1938.” Williams also had substantial involvement with the earliest collector car auctions in California and Arizona. Over four-plus decades, he saw the hobby transform from one of local interest to today’s international arena, where a number of cars have achieved “asset class” status, much like art.



“Back before GTOs were even one to two million dollars, nobody was buying them,” he reflects. “That was a lot of money then, and the cars had to jump through many eras to get to where they are now, where the entire world has joined in. The Japanese came in during the ’80s, and I was the only American there and really stood out. In the ’90s, there really weren’t collector car buyers in the Middle East, and now there are a number of collections over there and Kuwait has hosted a concours.”



Clockwise from top left: Don's first sale upon starting work at Old Time Cars was his own Packard 745 Drophead Coupe Phaeton, and he still has a huge affection for the marque. The 1930 Model 745 Deluxe Eight pictured here is one of several Packards on display at the Blackhawk Museum; another rare and exquisite automotive star at the museum is this 1937 Mercedes-Benz 540K Special Roadster, one of six still known to exist of the original twenty-five built. This one was first delivered to Mitropa Motors in New York City, where it sold for \$12,000; this Duesenberg Model J Murphy Convertible Coupe was originally built for aviation millionaire Howard Hughes and has a one-of-a-kind extended windshield to accommodate the height of its famously reclusive owner. In the 1960s, Don Williams sold the car to William Harrah, who in turn gave it to Wayne Newton as a gift for the singer's performances at Harrah's Hotel and Casino.

Williams competed at the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance for the first time in 1973, when he showed a 1932 Alfa Romeo 6C 1750 Zagato Spider that was named Most Elegant Car, and he hasn't missed a show since.

That was soon after Lorin Tryon and J. Heumann had been named Co-Chairmen of the event. "They had what I called the 'separation of powers of the two friends,' because Lorin was basically the selection committee—he was the pied piper who went out looking for cars at shows such as Hershey, Auburn and Hillsborough—and J. was in charge of all of the logistics and the all-important judges. Sometimes J. would also pick some of the cars, but they really didn't cross over into each other's territory too much.

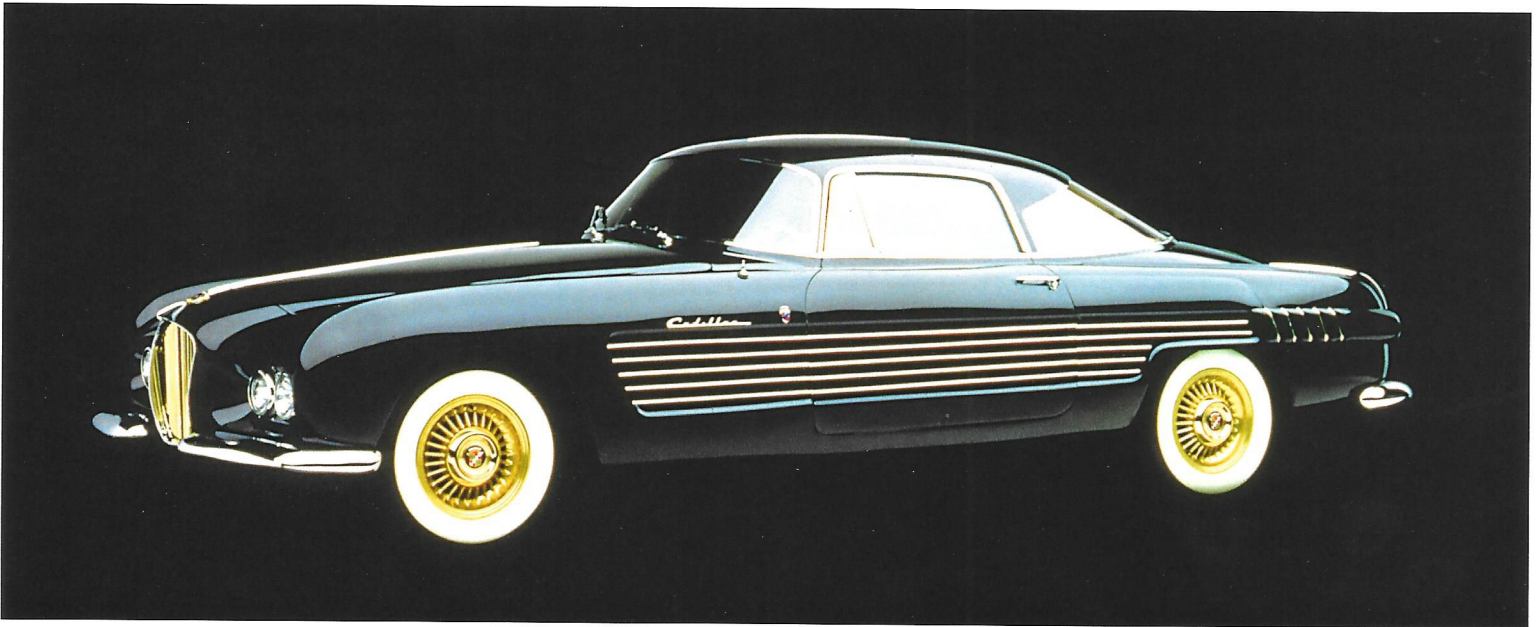
"Through their efforts, Pebble evolved from a northern California show to a California/western show, and from a western show to a national show. The evolution from '72 to '79 was phenomenal, and it was really fun to be around, and see the camaraderie. Lorin and I were partners for about two years during that period, and he was a silent investor with me for much longer than that. I introduced him to [his wife] Dolores, and played a bit of matchmaker with them. I also offered him advice on some cars. He wanted to make sure a replica or phony car didn't enter and win at Pebble."

In 1981, a chance meeting with real estate magnate Ken Behring vaulted Williams to the top echelon of the collector car world. "A very lazy Rolls-Royce salesman sold Ken a

new Corniche convertible. Ken also wanted a Silver Wraith limo for a club he planned on building, but the salesman said, 'I don't deal with that old stuff.' An acquaintance of the salesman was a friend of mine, who told him, 'I have a friend in Arizona that just bought one.' So Ken came down, and I sold him the limo and three other cars at the same time. Ken ended up inviting me to come to northern California and partner with him. At the time, I had five investors in Colorado who wanted to invest in cars. Ken said, 'Why do it with five guys when you can deal with one?' I said it was a lot of money, and he said, 'You worry about the quality, I'll worry about the money,' and a great partnership was formed."

tanked, saw a diamond and the way it was lit, and thought it was just beautiful." The goal was to have the museum resemble a jewelry box, with cars presented like diamonds. They would be singularly displayed and gorgeously lit on black marble and granite floors, with no competing artifacts and nothing on the walls. Says Don, "I think in many ways the great cars *are* like jewelry, with the chrome and colors and a variety of finishes. We try not to talk about values, because it takes away from the beauty of the car. When people ask 'How much is that car worth?' I say, 'What does it matter?'"

By the time the museum opened in 1988, Don was a staple at the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance; over the years he has



This is one of only two Cadillac Series 62 Coupes designed and built by Carrozzeria Ghia in 1953 (the other one was finished in red). Built on an American luxury car chassis, these flamboyant Italian-styled coupes were the epitome of car design at the time. One of the pair was featured on the cover of *Road & Track's* January 1955 issue. *R&T* noted that the "Ghia-bodied Cadillac on our . . . cover shows that aerodynamic lines, easy to create on a small car, can be adapted to the large American chassis. The cost is high but the result is gratifying." That gratifying result caught Don Williams' attention, and he says it was this shape that opened his eyes to the beauty and creativity of postwar design.

Williams now had the means to acquire any car he wanted, and he went on a purchasing spree that may well be unrivaled: Mercedes, Duesenbergs, Hispanos, Delages, Bugattis, Ferraris, Rolls-Royce and many more, seeking out only the best, most beautiful and rarest examples of each. "My *AQs* started getting two paper clips: silver for cars I still wanted and gold for those I had touched," he says. "It didn't matter if we had the car for one minute, one day, one month or a year. I wanted to have touched it."

Not long after Williams and Behring first teamed up, the idea for the Blackhawk Museum was born. The flash point for the facility's unique, artful presentation occurred when, as Don so eloquently puts it, "In France we passed a jewelry store half

shown more cars at the event than any other collector. He laughs recalling, "One of the big things I was infamous for was running out of gas on the field. I also burnt two clutches on Isottas going up the ramp. I've had pretty much everything happen that could go wrong, with Lorin and J. on the microphones saying, 'It can't be happening again!'"

In the early '90s, responding to a changing marketplace, Williams turned his attention to postwar design. "I had researched the prewar era for so long that I pretty much had most of it in my head, and in 1991 my collection had nothing but prewar cars in it. Today, in 2013, I have only one prewar car. One of the greatest lessons I ever learned from Sam and Ilmars is that your target audience is between 40 and 60 years old;

some people will be younger, some will be older, but most are 40 to 60. It doesn't matter what field you go into, because that is probably the age where people reach the peak of their earning power. And at a certain point, I realized that times had changed, and the 40- to 60-year-olds were different people and wanted different cars: a 40-year-old today wants the 30-year-old car he saw when he was 10 years old, the car he dreamed about.

“The first postwar car I ever got was a '53 Cadillac Ghia. I saw the car and it was absolutely stunning to me. It passed most of Dutch's 360-degree test, and it was unrestored, so I could visualize it restored, the colors and everything. After that '53 Cadillac, I got into a Ghia mode. The Bertone Alfa BATs—the first time I had a chance to buy those was 1991, but I thought the price was too much money. It wasn't, and I just missed them that time. I didn't miss them the next time, and I paid a heck of a lot more then. I look at a car's aesthetics more than I do its mechanics, and I think the three BATs as a group are the best example I've ever seen of artistic exercise over a period of time.”

There is, of course, always at least one that gets away. “A car I once tried to get but didn't was a Mercedes Autobahn Kurier owned by a family in Barcelona. The car was a present from the German government to the family patriarch, a doctor who had saved a German military officer's eyesight. I tried everything to get that car. The family—although they kindly allowed me to sit in it once, which was akin to owning it for those few wonderful minutes—wouldn't even talk to me about selling such a family legacy.

“Years later, Arturo [Keller] called and I asked him, ‘Is there anything I can get for you?’ He said, ‘Well, you can get me an Autobahn Kurier.’ And I said, ‘Thanks a lot. There are just three of them.’ He said, ‘You told me you could find anything.’ Amazingly, about a year later, I actually had an opportunity to buy the Barcelona car. Obviously, the market had changed and it was not cheap; it was beyond my consumption rate at that time. Later came one of my favorite magic moments. I did not know that Arturo had purchased the very same Autobahn Kurier, and then I watched him drive the car down to the

Pebble show field in 2006, after Paul Russell had restored it. All I could see was that black car coming down that road with Arturo's white teeth smiling at me. He knew the reaction he would get out of me. I was as happy as if I had bought the car myself.”


Don relishes memories of various “sideline bouts” unique to the Pebble Beach Concours: “For years, I prided myself on being the first one on the lawn Sunday morning. Then I heard Bob

Atwell was known for being the first, so my goal was to beat him. But it's no fun to challenge someone unless you tell that person you are doing it. I did that, and Bob went by my room at 3:30 in the morning and raced his engine just to let me know he was out there and I never would beat him. *That* is what Pebble is about—that type of camaraderie.”

Don still shows cars at the event each year.

“I don't chase the featured marque anymore,” he says. “But I try to show at least one car a year. And if Sandra [Button] needs something, I'm there. If she needs a specific Duesenberg or Mercedes, I'll bring it. I don't care that much about the competition anymore. I care about what is on the lawn and being there and

enjoying everybody's cars. That's much more fun than being too competitive; you can only do that for so many years of your life, and then you have to enjoy it. You have to keep your eyes focused on the people and the cars on the lawn—that is where the beauty is, hearing a first-time exhibitor talk excitedly about their car. I really don't care who wins, for the true winners are all the cars on the field.

“The Blackhawk Museum is an extension of what I have seen at Pebble over the years. From day one, its presentation has been a reflection of what we learned there. The Pebble Beach Concours puts the best examples of the different marques out for people to share. That is basically what we are still trying to do at the museum, but on a more permanent basis.” 

The Blackhawk Museum will hold its 25th anniversary gala celebration the weekend prior to the Pebble Beach Concours. Enthusiasts from around the globe are invited to the 25th Anniversary Open House the Monday following the Concours.

