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THE THOMAS TOUCH
DESIGNING THE FUTURE OF FORD

ROCK MEETS RACING
IN NICK MASON'S GARAGE

DREAM CARS COME OF AGE
The lasting impact of the GM Motoramas

DR. DUESENBERG

By Jonathan A. Stein

The building is low, plain and unmarked. There's nothing to suggest that the façade conceals a shrine to the cars of the Duesenberg brothers and Errett Lobban Cord. Glass cases hold treasures, while art and drawings hang from the walls. The office wouldn't seem so small if it weren't packed solid with automotive books, file cabinets and hundreds of drawing tubes. Those files contain more Duesenberg lore than all other collections combined, and tall, white-haired Randy Ema is the keeper.

It All Started with an Auburn

In August 1948, Randy Ema was born into an Orange, California, family that valued cars as little more than transportation. Like most boys, Matchbox miniature cars and plastic model kits were part of the toy chest, but Randy was 15 before cars held more than a passing interest.


One day Randy wandered over to ask car collecting neighbor Steve Warner about a couple of old Auburn 12s he owned. As he remembers, "I'd been driving by with my parents for years, fascinated by the old cars in the driveway. It took me years to get up the gumption to knock on the door." Before long Randy was a regular visitor, cleaning and polishing the big cars. Mesmerized by the Auburns (a sedan and a convertible sedan), Randy wanted to know more. But in 1963 there was virtually no material available and Randy had to dig deeply. As he admits, "43 years later, I'm still digging."



RANDY EMA WITH A 1929 DUESENBERG J BARKER TOWN CAR

IT'S ALL IN THE DETAILS WITH RANDY EMA





Randy was still only 15 when he bought most of a 1927 Auburn 6-66, “for which I traded my first car—a ’35 Packard 120.” The ’27 was followed quickly by a 1931 Auburn Brougham, which Ema describes as “a nice car with original paint and upholstery.” He became the historian for the Auburn-Cord-Duesenberg Club the following year. Finally, in the fall of 1969, Randy made his first pilgrimage to the marque’s birthplace in Auburn, Indiana, for the club’s annual reunion, where he surprised the old-timers with his knowledge and ability to spot unusual parts.

Despite the age difference, Randy became good friends with aviation mechanic and former Duesenberg owner Tom Corn, who owned an Auburn. Corn provided the supervision and mechanical instruction needed to teach Randy how to rebuild engines, transmissions and chassis components. Tom Corn and Steve Warner weren’t the only folks to mentor the young enthusiast. Both Marshall Merkes, who had the rights to the Duesenberg name and held the remaining Duesenberg patterns and parts stocks, and Glenn Pray, the Auburn-Cord-Duesenberg Company president who manufactured new Auburns and Cords, took a shine to Ema. According to Pray, even as a teenager Ema was “truly a historian and expert.”

Following high school, Randy attended California State University in Fullerton, where he earned a history degree and polished his research skills. While his contemporaries dreamed of ’Cudas and Corvettes, Randy finished the mechanical restoration of his Auburn Brougham. After graduation, Randy continued his history studies at night, but says, “I couldn’t work enough to earn the money I needed and keep up with the graduate work. After three semesters, I just had to let it go.” Before he “let it go,” Ema had started a graduate thesis on E. L. Cord and had traversed the country conducting oral history interviews with scores of former Cord Corporation and ACD employees.

Meanwhile, beginning in 1971 Randy had worked part-time at Renick Cadillac in Fullerton, helping to

maintain and restore several Duesenberg Model Js, thereby laying a foundation for his future career. Although Ema had first ridden in and detailed a Model J years earlier, he “jumped at the chance to learn their

“Randy has a PhD in Duesenberg: it’s also a passion for him.”

—Jay Leno

inner workings. It was obvious to me from the beginning that the engineering and sophistication of the Model J was far superior to anything else.” However, the job that conflicted with graduate school was at British Motor Cars in Anaheim. In his first two months on the job in 1972, Randy was the top salesman, but then “the dock strikes hit and we couldn’t get cars” so he transferred to the service department. After BMC there was a stint at tractor maker J. I. Case before managing a Maserati dealership and then a Lamborghini franchise. His next position took him closer to his true love when he spent six months cataloging materials in the *Road & Track* library. After a two-year interlude on the family farm, in July 1976 Ema rented a 1,600-square-foot building in Anaheim and opened a restoration shop.

More than Just the Cars

When he first opened his doors, Randy didn’t have all the tools or equipment he needed, but he “had the library.” His first major restoration was of a 1931 Auburn 8-98A Convertible Sedan for Tom Kemp. The engine and chassis had already been rebuilt, but he hired a metal man and did much of the assembly himself. When it came time to paint, Randy decided to tackle the job himself. After reading an article on painting in *Old Cars Weekly* or *Cars and Parts*, he went down to the paint store and bought the materials. That first paint job came out so well that the Auburn took a Second in Class at the Pebble Beach Concours d’Elegance in 1978, followed by two best of show awards at the ACD meet.

Although Ema never advertised, he immediately had more work than he could handle. From the start he also had the opportunity to maintain several Duesenberg Model Js, which helped him become more familiar with that particular model. As more Model Js passed through his shop, his need for information and parts increased. His first Duesenberg Class win at Pebble Beach came in 1979 for Dr. Robert Grant; Randy Ema Inc. was clearly on the map. Just weeks before that first class win, the volume of work had triggered a move to a 7,500-square-foot facility nearby. A few years later, the company moved to Orange. Despite the larger quarters, Randy Ema Inc. has never employed a large staff. Randy is

OPPOSITE: LINING A WALL OF EMA'S SHOP ARE CANISTERS WITH THE ORIGINAL VELLUM PART DRAWINGS FROM THE FACTORY.

RIGHT: A BANK OF 18-INCH FILE CABINETS HOLD THE OWNERSHIP FILES FOR EACH DUESENBERG MODEL J.

BELOW: THE RESTORATION OF RANDY'S RED 1933 AUBURN 12-165 SPEEDSTER OFTEN TAKES A BACK SEAT TO WORK ON HIS CLIENTS' CARS—LIKE A 1929 DUESENBERG J KIRCHHOFF CONVERTIBLE SEDAN AND A 1931 DUESENBERG J F.R. WOODS TOWN CAR.



assisted by two restoration mechanics, a full-time master painter and an office manager. He subcontracts the metalwork and upholstery.

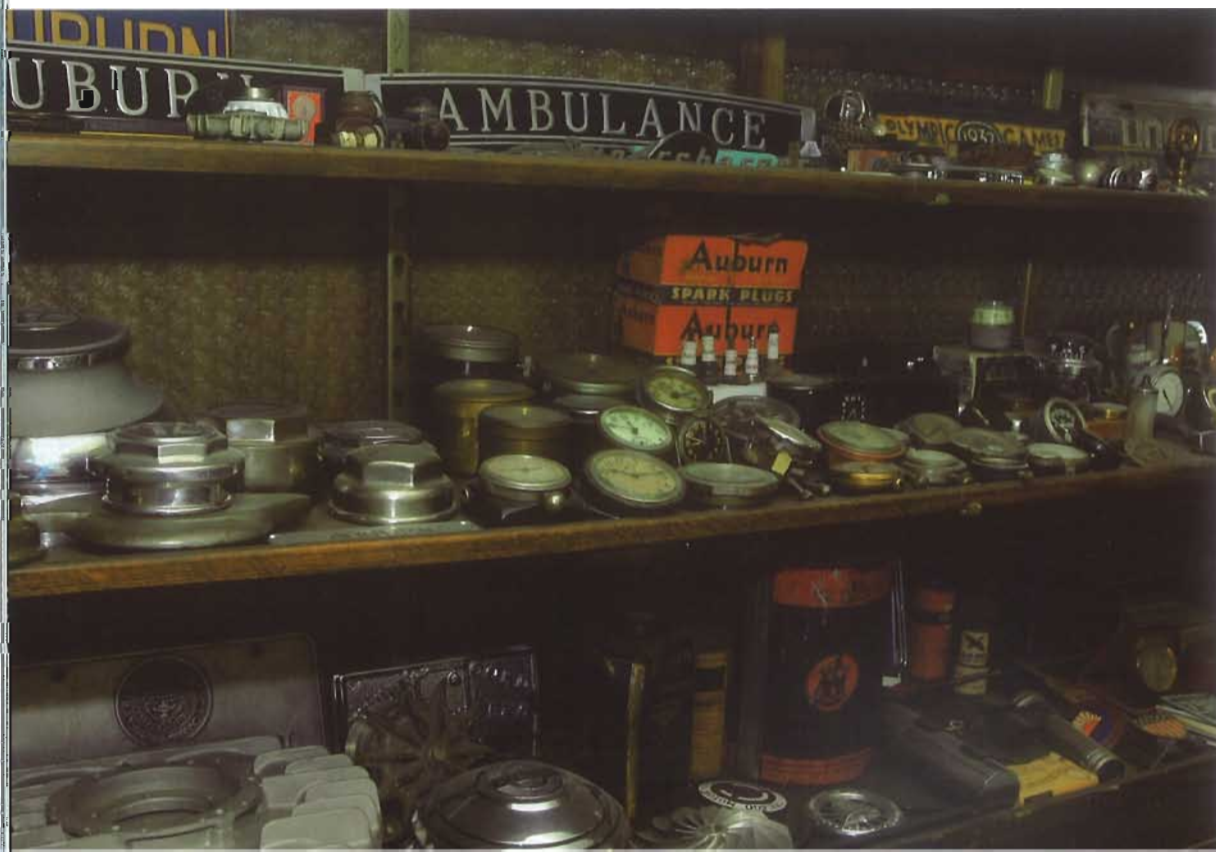
Long before the Internet, Randy needed Duesenberg parts to feed his restorations. He'd peruse *Hemmings Motor News*, stroll the aisles at flea markets like Hershey, and collect anything he could find that pertained to Auburns, Cords or Duesenbergs. He was soon able to readily identify virtually any ACD part no matter how forlorn its condition. Randy's archival collection increased greatly in 1981 when he persuaded old friend Glenn Pray to sell his Auburn, Cord and Duesenberg literature and drawings. Approximately three years later, following the death of Marshall Merkes, Randy was able to acquire a huge stock of parts and related materials.

By the late 1980s, Ema had amassed thousands of drawings, patterns and photographic negatives and prints pertaining to the three Indiana marques. And as his file cabinets multiplied exponentially, he continued to build a comprehensive automotive research library. "I basically have most of what's left of Duesenberg," he says. "I have 28,000 original parts drawings and another 12,000 copies made by the factory in period—all dating from 1913 to 1937." Other than the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Hall of Fame Museum, which has 2,000 small parts

drawings for the race cars, and the Auburn-Cord-Duesenberg Museum, which has 300 factory copies of Model J drawings, there are no other major collections.

The Ema archives encompass original Duesenberg purchasing records, correspondence files, vendor files, assembly notes, parts notes and 1,800 factory negatives pertaining to all three ACD marques. An important part of Randy's legacy consists of files on all 481 Duesenberg Model Js, which take up 16 legal-size filing cabinet drawers. Off the top of his head, Ema can tell you that 378 of the cars remain—and he has seen all but five. Although the J and SJ models are his focus, Ema also maintains files on every Duesenberg Model A he has encountered, and two file drawers are packed with materials pertaining to the race cars. He also has every catalog and sales brochure the company published, beginning in 1914. Although the last Duesenberg was completed 70 years ago, the Ema collection still includes some unused old stock parts as well as all the remaining Model J casting patterns and tooling.

Ema's ACD materials take up considerable space, but they also constitute a working archive. The factory drawings and patterns enable Randy to cast or machine parts for the cars he is restoring. Other Duesenberg restorers and owners often come knocking on his door for that very reason, but Ema says



OPPOSITE: THE ENGINE OF THE 1929 DUESENBERG J BARKER TOWN CAR

LEFT: A DISPLAY CABINET WITH ACD COLLECTIBLES



he has now stopped supplying reproduction parts to others because he is hard-pressed to keep up with his own workload.

A PhD in Duesenberg . . .

Over the years, that workload has included approximately 50 Duesenberg Model Js, many of which came through the shop for general service and repair. During the 31 years that Randy Ema Inc. has been in the restoration business, the company has garnered six Pebble Beach class wins with Duesenbergs, another with a Crane Simplex, as well as many other class and special awards.

After Jay Leno bought his first Duesenberg in the late 1980s, he turned to Ema because he was looking for the best person to restore it. “The real key if you’re going to restore something is to find people who have a history with the marque,” says Leno. “Randy has a PhD in Duesenberg; it’s also a passion for him.”

Leno now seeks Ema’s advice and inspection on many cars, noting Ema “is a huge antique car enthusiast” and “is well versed in other marques.”

For collectors like General William Lyon and Bill H. Lyon, Ema is the only choice; they have come to rely on his advice for the care and feeding of all of their 13 Duesenbergs. “When we acquired the Murphy Disappearing Top Torpedo Convertible Coupe about 10 years ago,” recalls Bill H. Lyon, “we decided he was the only one we wanted to do it. We started the restoration five years ago and coincidentally the car was ready for 2007”—when Duesenberg was being featured at Pebble Beach.

Lyon says Randy “under-promised and over-delivered” and they were very happy with how the Murphy Torpedo turned out. At Pebble Beach, it won a brutally competitive Duesenberg class. It also came tantalizingly close to Best of Show, which



was won by the 1935 Duesenberg SJ Special known as the Mormon Meteor. As a bonus, the Murphy Torpedo came away with the Elegance in Motion Trophy sponsored by *AutoWeek*.

Over the years, Ema has undertaken his share of challenges, but he says the restoration of that Murphy Torpedo (J302) was his toughest restoration to date because the car had suffered from both neglect and scavengers. Ema also restored Bruce Meyer's Murphy Convertible Sedan, turning it from a disassembled and incomplete car into a Pebble Beach Class winner. "Every car presents its own set of challenges," says Ema, "but we have an advantage because we have the factory drawings and patterns."

When asked what car he'd most like to restore, Ema admits that he has already completed it: the Walker Coupe, which is one of Leno's seven Duesenbergs. Ema says he was excited by the Walker because "it was a one-off design that was well ahead of its time and was so obscure that no one had ever seen it."

Ema may be best known for his Auburn and Duesenberg work, but Cords also hold a special place for him: "They fascinated me more than anything when I was 15." Ema has been working on Cords since he first opened his doors. Most notably, for years he maintained Cord's family car, which was a 1937 supercharged Beverly that had never been out of the family. He has handled the full restoration of a 1931 L29 factory cabriolet, as well as extensive mechanical work and the routine servicing of a variety of L29s, 810s and 812s. One of Ema's favorites is a cream phaeton sedan that he drives everywhere.

Despite all the awards his restorations have earned, Ema insists that he doesn't relish the competition.

"My satisfaction is that I like to be authentic," he says. "I want each car to be exactly what it was when new. If the owner wants to restore for competition, we'll do it for competition, but, personally, I want to go for authenticity and function."

Despite the many cars he has restored, Ema doesn't think of himself as a restorer. "I'm a historian," he insists. "The history of the car and the history of the engineering appeals to me more than the technical specifications themselves. I'm also fascinated by the people who owned them and what they did with the cars during their ownership." He adds that part of the appeal of being around these cars is gaining a greater understanding of the era in which they were created.

He particularly values the relationships he has built with fellow historians, whether they focus on Duesenberg or other marques. He has shared much research with DuPont and Mercer historian Stan Smith, as well as Lincoln authority Jack Passey. He enjoys these and many other relationships because "we can achieve so

THIS COLLAGE OF FRED DUESENBERG'S PERSONAL ITEMS INCLUDES HIS PICTURE, HIS POCKET WATCH, HIS RACING CAR PLATE FROM AAA, A NOTEBOOK AND HIS 1931 CALENDAR.



“My satisfaction is that I like to be authentic, I want each car to be exactly what it was when new.”

EMA REFERENCES SOME
FACTORY PHOTO ALBUMS.

much more when we work together.” As Glenn Pray explained, “We share information and parts and do it because we like each other.” Chris Charlton, who restored the 2007 Pebble Beach Best of Show–winning Duesenberg SJ Special, says Ema “provided a lot of information, drawings, photographs and access to his files.” And after the car’s win, Ema graciously praised it as “an unbelievable sensation”—both in its day and today. “We’ve competed against each other for a long time,” says Charlton, “but when the show’s over we always shake hands and remain friends.”

Although Ema is indelibly associated with the Duesenberg marque, his personal automotive tastes are eclectic, ranging from a Chicago Electric and an Isetta to a Ferrari 250 GTE and a 1926 Bugatti Type 40. However, he’ll never forget his collecting roots, which is why 11 of his 28 cars are Auburns. He also has a Duesenberg Model A and three Cords. Ema’s taste in cars is almost always driven by design or nostalgia, not by horsepower. In fact, he admits to having bought his Ferrari “because of the sound one made when my neighbor, Righteous Brother Bill Medley, would regularly scream by our house at all hours.”

When he closes the shop at day’s end, Ema doesn’t leave his work far behind. Returning to the early 20th century Tudor home he shares with wife, Diana, he’s surrounded by the same rugs, china, furniture, paintings, photographs and watches that graced Fred Duesenberg’s home. Even the couple’s giant schnauzer is named after Fred’s younger brother, Augie.

When asked what really motivates him, Ema flatly states, “When it’s all said and done, all I’ve got is my name—that’s what’s most important to me.” Of course, it’s an added bonus when people recognize that the cars he restores are both benchmarks of originality and are ready for owners like Jay Leno to drive their doors off. 