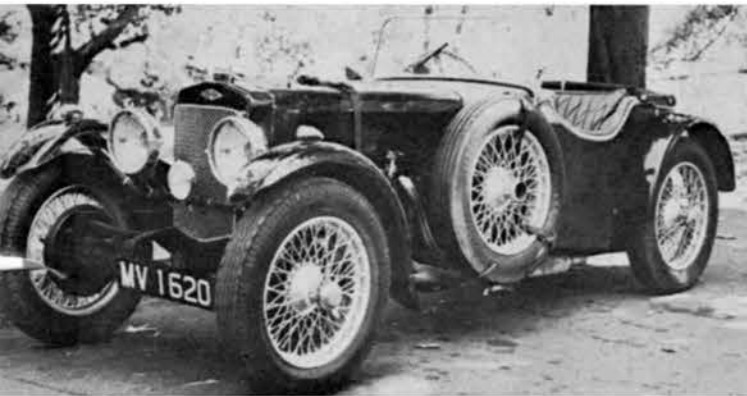
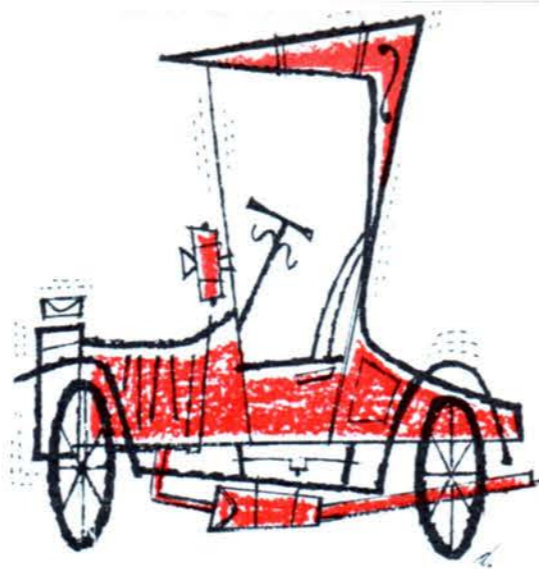


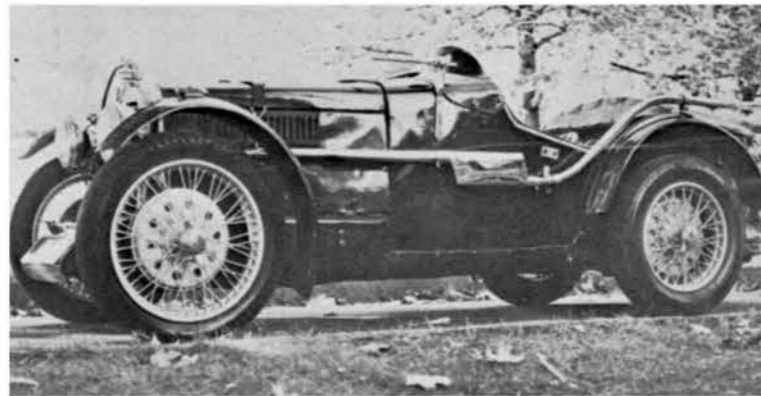
THE VINTAGE CAR STORE

by Ken Purdy

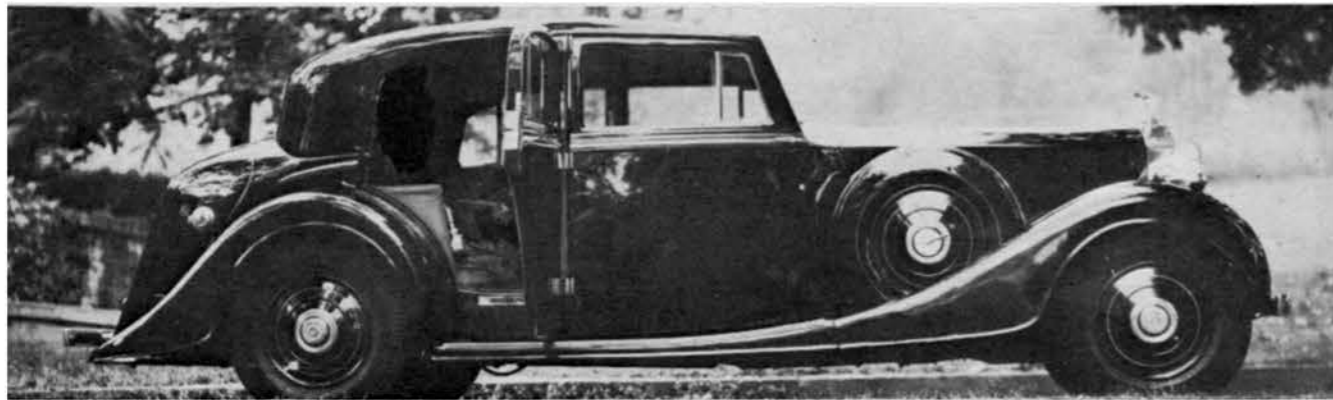
There's no need now to buy blind when shopping for a classic



Frazer-Nash TT Rep has locked rear-end because of chain-drive.



Truly vintage MG, built when sports cars had no doors at all.



"Sir's limousine awaits without, milord." For types more staid and settled, Potter offers this 1937 PIII Rolls-Royce.

ANOTHER stronghold of free enterprise has been breached—and a good thing, too. For the first time in U.S. history, a man is opening a store to sell nothing but vintage automobiles.

Since the first old-car enthusiast felt the blood rush to his head as he spotted an 1899 Mors rotting in a mews in Cheapside—this was in October, 1905, I think, and if I'm wrong, you prove it—the finding of desirable antique machinery has been on a strictly catch-as-catch-can basis. For many decades of course, when the world was caught up in the onrush of early automobilism, when every carriage-maker who could raise \$500 and hire a "mechanic" who could tell the steering wheel from the

other four declared himself a motorcar manufacturer, when the number of different marques ranged toward 3,000, old cars were a drug on the market. Few people cared for anything but new ones. There were those few, however, and the foundations of some of the major British and Continental collections were laid down early.

Passion for car-collecting grew slowly, with little hint, even in the 1920's and 1930's, of the fervor it would finally know. As late as 1934, a Mercer Raceabout in good condition was sold for \$75—and it was a tough sale, at that. But after World War II, the dam caved in with a rending crash, and the collectors began to collect

in dead earnest. As more and more cars were bought up, and as the peasants holding most of them grew craftier and more grasping, the chase naturally got harder. Publicity made things rough, too. Newspaper and magazine feature-writers were quick to jump on the subject, and quick to cite out-of-the-world prices. Collectors who had other interests, Jimmy Melton for example, spread the word so far and so wide that by 1946 there wasn't an oat-farmer buried in the backwash of Arkansas—that used to be a state, son—who didn't value the red and rotting chassis of the T-Ford hub-deep in the wood-lot at around \$1500, cash money.

Before you could think about buying

the stuff, though, there was the problem of finding it. Time was when a week-end in the shun-pike country would almost always turn up a car or two. You just drove around and poked your head in old garages and talked to the folks. Sooner or later somebody would remember that Jed Steeger had some kind of old car stashed away in his barn. You got a small boy to show you the way and set off, helplessly aware that long before your arrival, the bush-telegraph would have brought the word to Jed that a prime sucker was on the way, eager and loaded with folding.

Pickings were soon too thin for that method, though. The really wise men began to think up dodges like post-card circulars: They sent post-cards to every postmaster, say, in the state of Pennsylvania, offering a small reward for leads on old cars. They advertised in obscure country weeklies. They staked out country drummers, men with years of experience in selling rural store-keepers, and plied them with truth serum. They tried everything but kidnapping, and I'm not really sure that somebody didn't have a go at that.

Result of all this is that if you want, say, a nice vintage sports car today, you can reconcile yourself to the fact that you're going to have a tough time finding it by yourself. Your chances of finding one in the hands of the original owner, or even the second or third owner, are almost nil. You advertise, you watch the for-sale columns in the U.S. magazines, for a starter. Let's say you have your little heart set on a blower Bentley. After months of watching the ads in the commercial magazines, in the Sunday edition of The New York TIMES, in the columns of the club magazines, you turn one up: "Blower Bentley, 4½ liter, thought to be 1929 team car, 36,000 miles, absolutely mint condition, \$6500." The car is in Dallas, let us say, and you, of course, are in Dayton. What to do? Well, a pearl like this will not be long on the market, you know that. Better not chance a letter. You leap to the long-distance tube and spend six dollars to



Perhaps the grandest touring car ever built, this Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost is powered by the 40/50 dual ignition six.

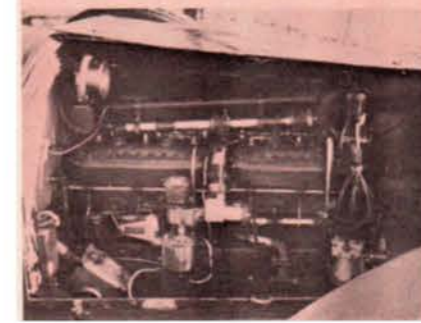


Photo: Bob Coogan

discover that the car is in storage in a garage, hasn't run for years, and is in the hands of people who obviously can just barely tell the difference between a Bentley and a Mack truck. You plead with them to hold the car for you for 48 hours. You have a pal in Houston, so you phone him—another six bucks—and ask him to run over to Dallas to get the Bentley for you. He is not notably enthusiastic, a circumstance that baffles you. After all, it isn't as if you were asking him to make a cross-country run. Dallas is just down the road from Houston, isn't it, 30 miles or so? Sure it is.

Two days later you hear from your buddy. The Bentley is on blocks, a good thing because generations of rats as big as beavers have shredded the tires. At one time, apparently, it had a fabric body, which may have been green in color, little hard to tell. There isn't an instrument, a light, or an unbroken pane of glass in the car. The engine looks like a '48 Merc., but may be a '49. No doubt about the steering-wheel, though. That's strictly Sears Roebuck. You send your chum a quart of scotch, and think how lucky you are. After all, you might have been stuck with the lump, and for the expenditure of a mere \$20, you beat the rap.

Even more exciting is the purchase of cars abroad. It's more exciting for two reasons: One, the cars sound glamorous and exciting; two, you stand to take a much worse licking, and that's exciting, like playing roulette at the \$100 table. You don't have to go to Paris or London, either. You can get hurt anywhere, and by mail. Consider the experience of a Bugattiste whom I know, I know him very well indeed, and he shall here be nameless. This worthy got a letter from Belgium one day, offering a Type 50 three-seat coupe for \$500. The 50 is a rare beast, there are only 12 of them listed in the Bugatti Register. The aspirant seller appeared to be an honest, horny-handed sort. He described the car in minute detail. He sent many photographs. A deal was arranged

and the money changed hands. When the car was off-loaded in Brooklyn, lo, it was exactly as described. There wasn't a scratch that hadn't been catalogued, not a *vin ordinaire* spot on the upholstery that hadn't been listed. A little water, a little *essence* and it went off like a rocket and ran 50 miles home, blowing off a Buick on the way. There were things wrong with it, but yes. The load was in the capable hands of Arthur James Hoc, the Duesenburg-Bugatti doyen, for a trifling 24 months or so, but nevertheless, it was a dandy \$500 worth. Our friend will still be running it, if he should live so long, when nobody can remember whether the '57 Cadillac fins went up, down or sideways.

What is the moral of the story? The moral is, if old Massa Archie Moore holds up the left for you to look at, can the right cross be far behind? Hard upon the to-be-expected expressions of gratitude from U.S. to Belgium, came another letter. The burden was this: "You think that 50 is something? Mon vieux, it is a lump, a nice lump, to be sure, but still a lump a crawling thing a fugitive from a Molsheim junkyard. But there is such a thing as a good Bugatti. Maybe only one, but there is such a thing—and I have it. A Type 57S. Mint. Better than mint. Flawless in every particular. An instant starter, even in the Arctic. Fast? When I come up behind an XK120 on the *pavé*, I restrict myself to third gear. After all, one must be sporting. When this car went to the factory the other day, Marco himself waved his hands helplessly. There was nothing to do with the car, nothing. A little air in the left front tire, that is all. Otherwise, perfect. No, beyond perfection. Now, for \$4000 . . ."

Now it happened that our American friend had a buddy who badly wanted a 57S hard-top coupe. He had vetted a couple in this country, both dogs. He looked at the pictures of the Belgian 57S, a thing of beauty with its pigskin upholstery, pipe-organ exhausts, original carriage-makers' plate, and so on. He offered

(Continued on page 64)

Outstanding sporting piece of "store", this Frazer-Nash Tourist Trophy Replica features outside shift, spartan look.



Photo: Bob Coogan



Astound your TC-owning friends by driving this 75 mph, 750 cc MG C-type, otherwise known as Monthery Midget. Only 45 were ever made, in 1931-32.



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STORE

(Continued from page 27)

\$3500, and, lucky man, he had a deal. A few weeks later, the thing came off the boat. After an hour on the end of a rope, it started. At 45 miles an hour, a medium brake application would throw it three feet to the right. The clutch was of a clutchness that took a dollar's worth of rubber off the rear tires with every start. At ten-minute intervals, the engine-room burst into glorious flame. It steered like a Mark I Sherman tank—before they had the bugs out of it. In short, it was a disaster. Two years and three shops later, it was a pretty good 57S—and it had more than \$8500 in it.

What is the moral of the tale? It is as stated above. Or, put another way, if the man with the walnut shells lets you guess right the first time, lock up your wallet, because he has plans for you.

Speak it softly, but it is not only the wily Continental types who will do you. The British know a thing or two, as well. In dealing with the British, for example, you need to know a whole new vocabulary, really a code. For example, the phrase,

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"nice runner." This means bring your own basket. Or, "late property titled owner." This means that for 400 quid you can put the seat of your pants where the very late (he died in 1929) Lord Bumblebottom put his. To expect more—that the car should go, for example, is virtually to accuse yourself of stupidity. But why go on?

That was the situation, then, coz, in the Fall of 1957. For the man setting out to buy a nice piece of vintage machinery the phrase *Caveat emptor* was not only a guide, it was a way of life. Nowhere in this broad land could you shop, for say, a 30-98 Vauxhall as you would for a Ford Ranchwagon. You were on your own, like an Eagle Scout parachuted into Red China to ferret out the secret of the new sweet-and-sour lobster recipe, and with about as much chance of getting out alive.

It was at this time, September to be exact, that Leonard Potter, a director of the Half-Way Garages in England, decided to come over and set up a vintage machinery store for the colonials. One could only wonder why no one had ever thought of it before. Mr. Potter had thought of it before, of course. He had thought of it for some years. A connoisseur of vintage machinery, he was a long-time competitor, too. He won the Monte Carlo rally in 1948—that is, he had it won when he went out to the *parc fermé* for the regularity run. Then he discovered he had left the key to the car in his other suit at the hotel. At that he finished third.

From 1946 to 1950 Potter was associated with Rodney Clarke, who has been building Connaughts lately, in the firm of Continental Cars, one of the best British shops. Continental did a considerable amount of trade with Americans, as did Half-Way Garages later on, and it occurred to Potter that if fine cars could be shown here in the flesh, rather than by photograph, business might be done. Accordingly he picked out some choice machinery, put it on the boat, rented a house in Haverstraw, a long-reach suburb of New York City, asked his wife to pack the trunks, and took off.

When I saw him, three weeks after his arrival, he had four cars with him, two more on the water, and others racked up in England. I was impressed by three things: (1) Potter's choice of cars; (2) The flawless condition they appeared to be in; (3) Their prices.

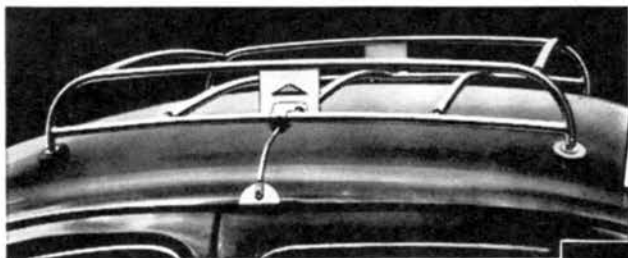
His intention is to bring in nothing that is common-place. For example, one of the first four cars is a Montlhery Midget, a rare specimen anywhere. I have not seen another in this country. Only 45 of them were made, in 1931-32. The Montlhery, also known as the C-Type, was a racing two-seater a tiny little thing, 746 c.c. engine, 8-inch cable brakes. It was a famed record-breaker in its day. It's an esthetically delightful car and it's good for about 75 miles an hour. Potter's specimen was restored at the factory and appears to be as near as no matter to mint. The proud owner had, unfortunately, given the restorers *carte blanche*, and was shaken to discover that he had spent 750 pounds. He had to sell it under distress conditions. The car is priced here at \$2000—less than the cost of the restoration.

There have never been many chain-drive Frazer-Nash cars in this country. I've seen

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only two. A good 'Nash rarely appears even on the British market, owners being notably clannish, and many of the cars having been badly flogged anyway. Potter is showing a Tourist Trophy Replica. Potter considers this one about as good as any he has seen. It's a good deal better than any I have seen. Its accelerative performance is roughly equivalent to that of a Porsche and its top speed is not far short at 95. It has a Lockheed brake conversion which removes one of the make's tricky habits: a tendency for wrap-around servo action to lock the front wheels. The solid rear axle takes getting used to, of course, and it eats tires, but it offers enchanting handling characteristics once you know it, and the gear-changes, since only dog-clutches are involved, are delightful. Everything on the car is new: paint, upholstery, chrome, top, curtains. \$2000.

For types more staid and settled in their ways, Potter's Vintage Store will offer a 1937 P III Roll-Royce limousine, 80,000 miles, one owner, chauffeur-maintained (and what a hustler that boy must have been!) at \$4500. I never saw a better Rolls-Royce in the 12-cylinder version. There's a 1938 4 1/4 liter Bentley, too, as beautifully-maintained a 20-year-old car as ever came down the road, for \$3950.

Still aboard ship when I saw Potter was a Silver Ghost Touring car which I imagine will be bought at dock-side if the word gets out, and Peter Hampton's famous hybrid Bugatti, the only Bug of its like in the world. Hampton must have put the equivalent of \$10,000 into this car, a hard-top coupe. He built it to prove his contention that Bugatti should have made, before the War, a blown four-cylinder passenger car. (He did build one, but it was not for sale, it was made as a wedding present for his daughter Ebee.) Hampton put a Type 39A blower on a Type 40 chassis and mounted a 55 coupe body. He upholstered the result in grey leather, put eight Jaeger-type instruments into the new walnut dash, fitted an electric heater and a few extras: 10-inch headlights, trunk light, foot-operated Cicca horn, silk blind on the rear window, Tapley meter, complete tool kit, battery cut-off switch and so on. It turns up 90 mph, cruises at 75 and idles at 500 rpm. It will sell for about \$2500.

Because it would be obviously impractical, Potter does not plan to maintain a really large stock of vintage motor cars. If his plans work as he expects them to, he'll always have a few choice specimens on hand. But he is prepared to deliver almost anything on demand. If, for example, you cannot be happy until you've had a Morgan Super Sports Three-Wheeler with a J.A.P. engine hanging out in front, Potter will find one for you, have it thoroughly gone over by competent engineers in his own employ in England, restore it to any degree you like, and deliver it here for a previously agreed-upon price. Also, he will undertake to find cars within your own price range. If you specify, for example, that you want an Invicta, but that you don't want to pay more than \$750 for it, he'll find a \$750 Invicta for you if there is one.

Seems a great idea to me. The stuff is there, ready to roll, and it's the right stuff. Now, in Willy Frick's often-quoted phrase, all you need is the money.

Ken W. Purdy

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