

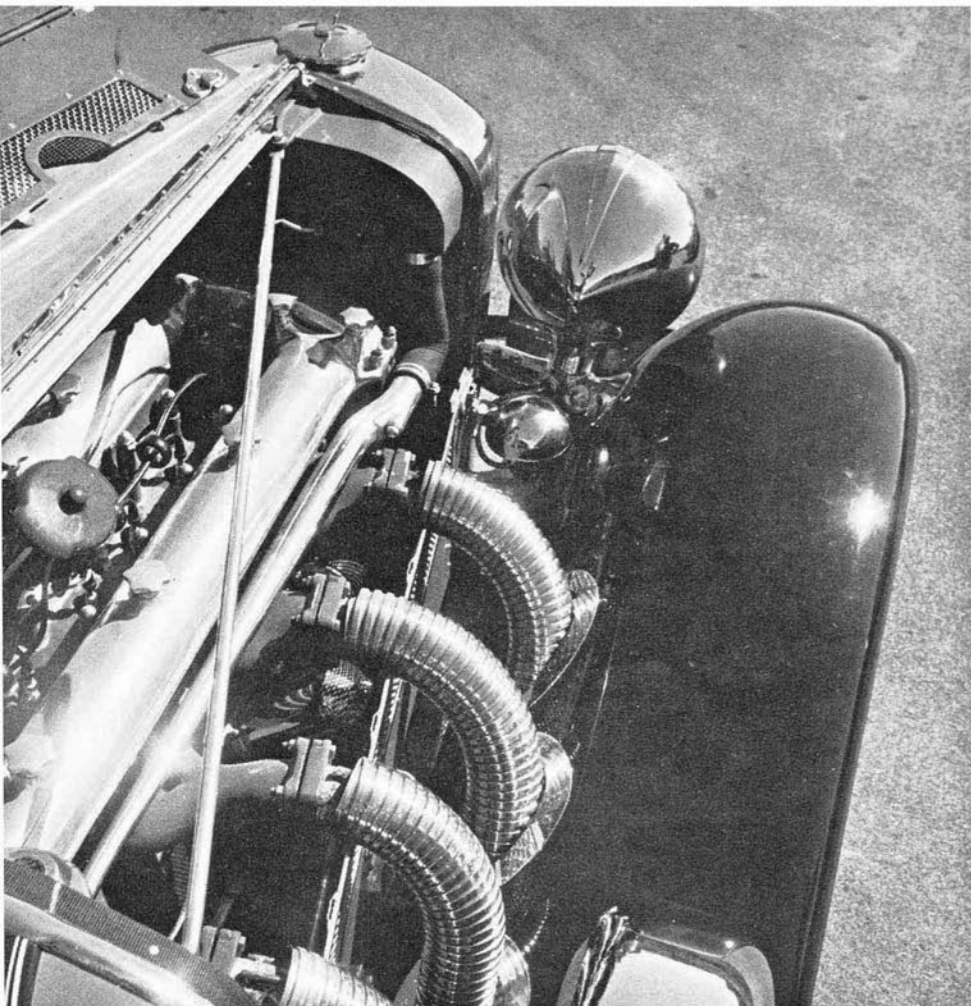
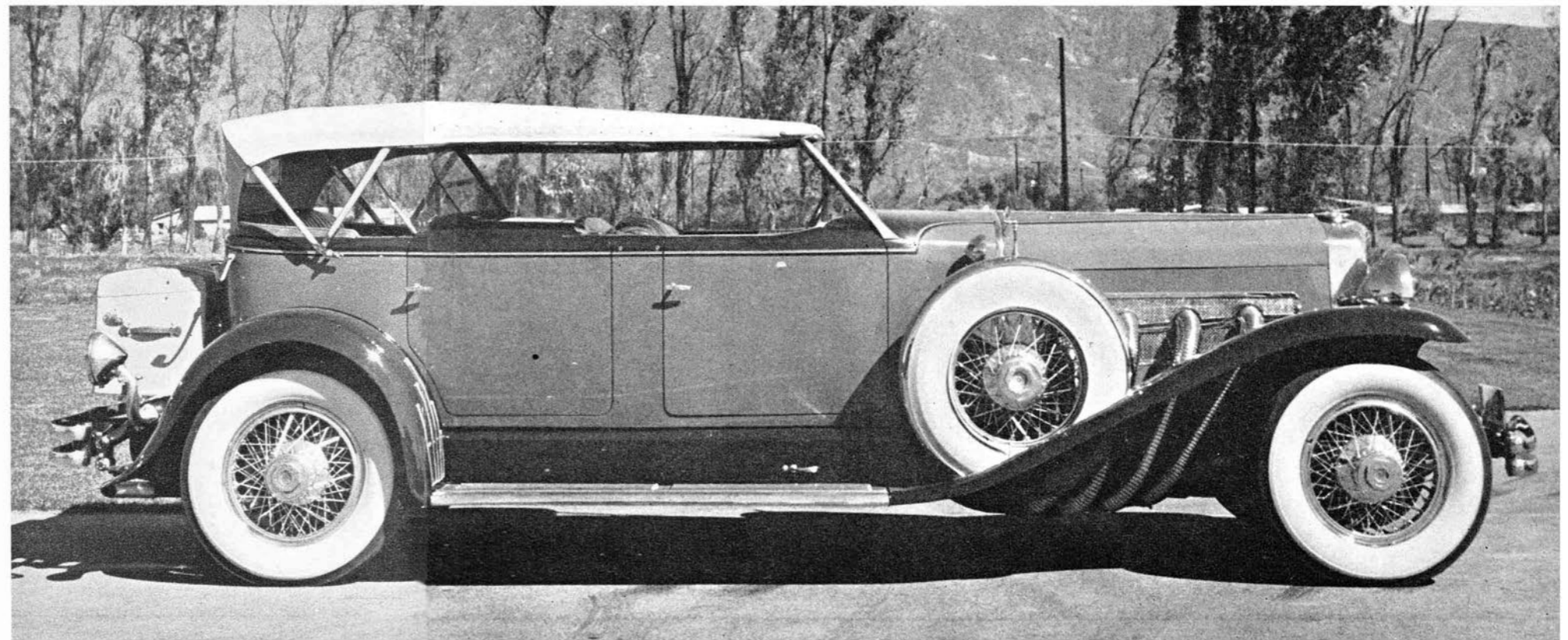


CAR LIFE CLASSIC

DUESENBERG MODEL J 1929 Cowl Dual Phaeton

BY WIM VAN DER GRAAF

[Full-color reprints of the Duesenberg centerspread available for \$1, postpaid, from Car Life, 834 Production Pl., Newport Beach, Calif.]



RALPH POOLE PHOTOS

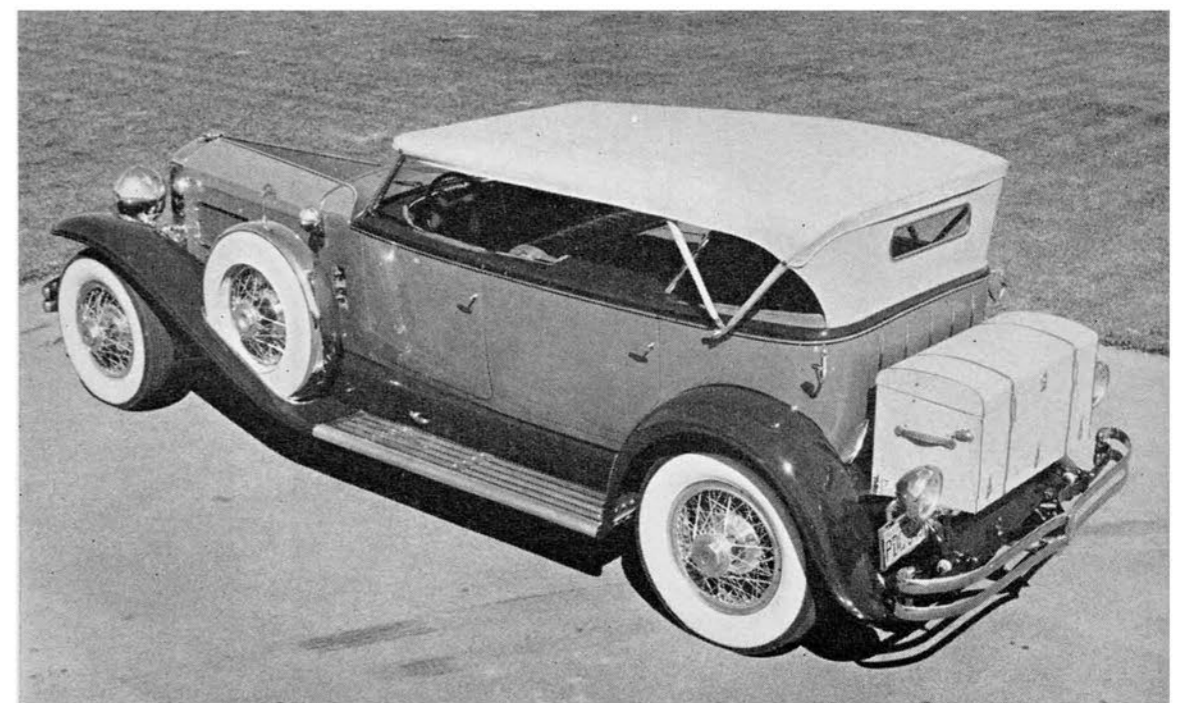
IN EVERY WAY, the Duesenberg story is a two-sided affair. The achievements of the Duesenberg car, undoubtedly without equal among American classics, are a lasting memorial to the two Duesenberg brothers, August and Fred. This is also the story of two eras in American motoring as illustrated by our *Car Life Classics*.

Most Duesenberg enthusiasts recognize the 1928–1936 era as the period of greatest achievement for Duesenberg. Perhaps it was. The die for the magnificent Model J and SJ motor cars was cast, however, as far back as 1894. It was then that Fred Duesenberg took a job with an Iowa farm implement dealer and started to develop his love

for mechanics. It didn't take long for Fred's magnificent obsession with speed to exhibit itself. In 1897 he started building and racing his own bikes. These early Duesenberg speed records are obscured by history, but Fred was only getting ready for bigger and better things to come—at the Indianapolis 500. With Fred's engi-

neering abilities and brother Augie's keen interest in Fred's endeavors, it was only a matter of time until the Duesenberg Motor Company opened its doors, in 1913.

This was the beginning of an era that will always be remembered for its speed and competition performance. The second era, marked by Cord's





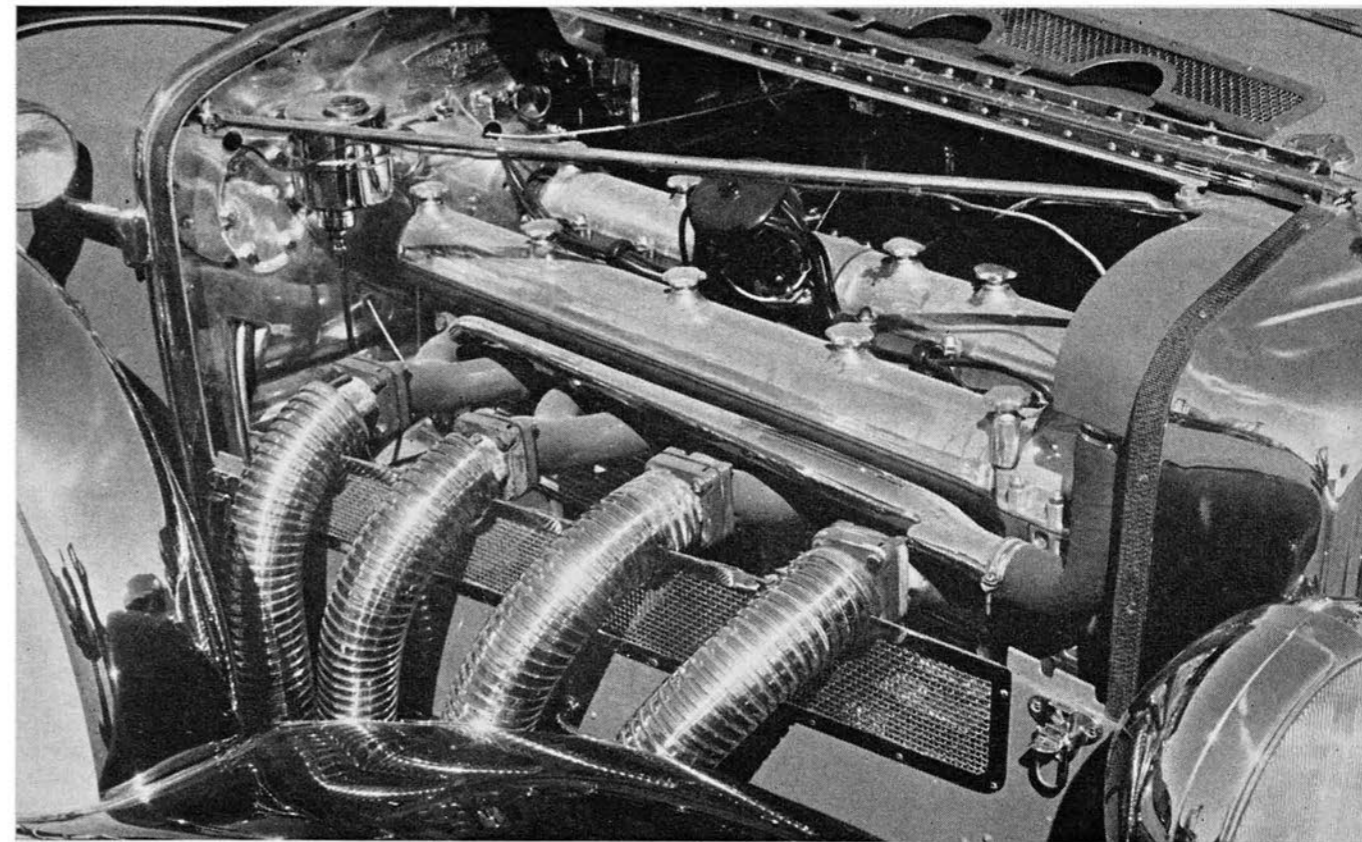
DUESENBERG MODEL J

purchase of the Duesenberg Motors Company in 1926 and the introduction of the 1928 J Model, is best re-

membered for its elegance, size, stock performance . . . and price.

1913 to 1928—August and Fred Duesenberg didn't waste any time building their legend from their motor shop in St. Paul, Minn. In May, 1914, Eddie Rickenbacker entered the Indianapolis 500 with a 1914 Duesenberg (the term may not be strictly correct)

and placed tenth. Duesenberg was rolling. It wasn't long after that when the Disturber IV became the first boat to break the mile-a-minute barrier. Aboard were two specially built 12-cyl. Duesenberg engines developing no less than 2400 bhp. Soon, Duesenberg-developed engines were found on land, at sea and in the air.



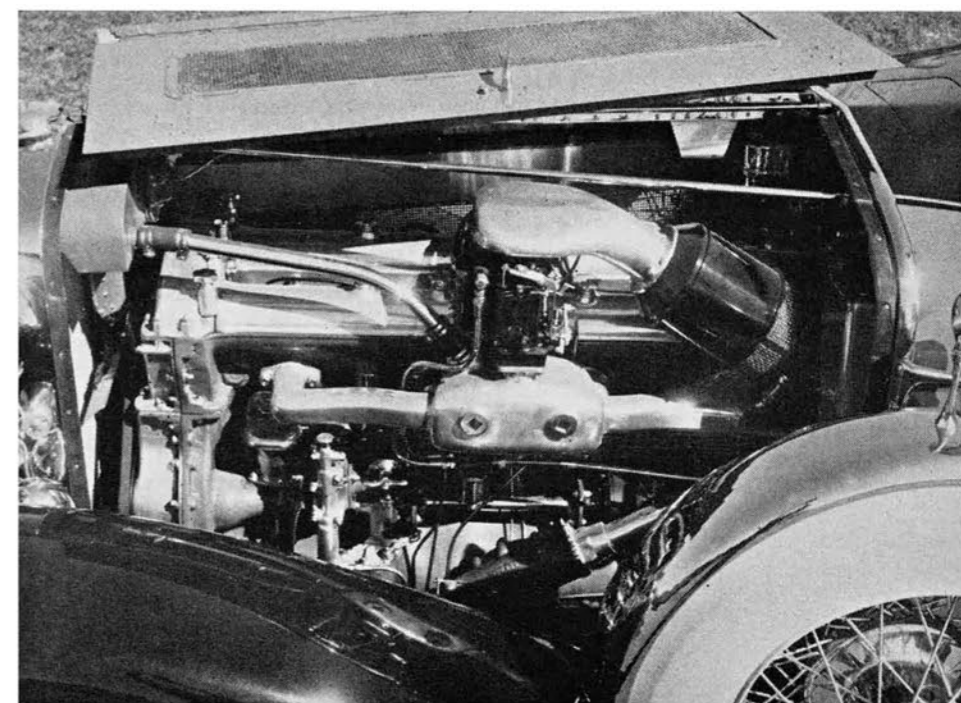
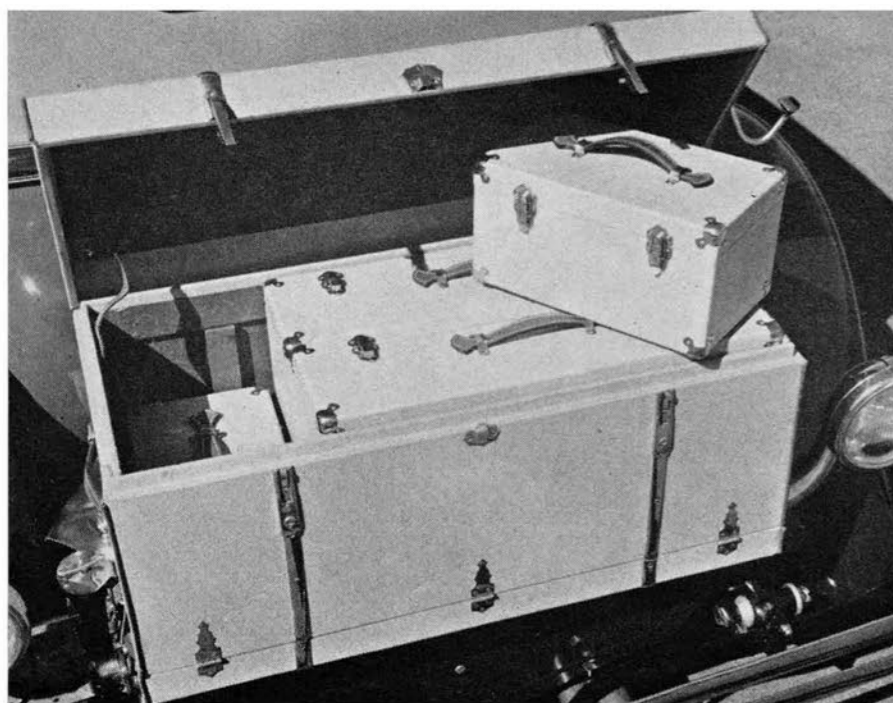
Duesenberg Motors moved to Elizabeth, N.J., to handle war contract work. King-Bugatti aircraft engines were made by Duesenberg. Rochester Motors was licensed to produce Duesenberg engines for Kenworthy, Meteor, Revere and Roamer cars. Lycoming built Duesenberg engines until 1935 and even as late as World War II

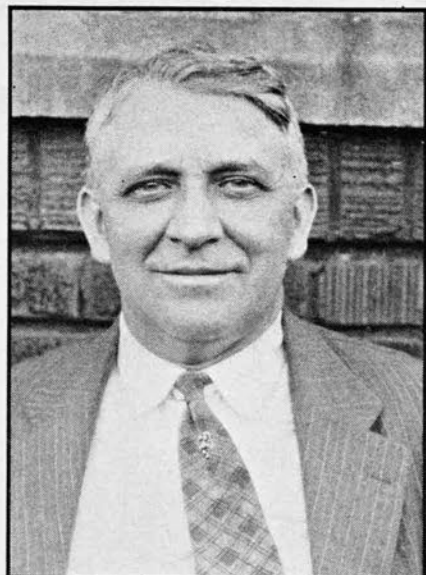
Pratt & Whitney is reported to have used four Duesenberg engines to test aircraft superchargers.

Recognition and acceptance were not Duesenberg problems.

The war effort didn't slow Fred Duesenberg's drive for competitive racing. Since 1913, Dusenbergs had run, and finished, in every Memorial

Day Classic (except 1919). By 1919, Fred and August Duesenberg were building race cars again. Their efforts were rewarded with third, fourth, and sixth places in the 1920 Indianapolis 500. In 1920, too, a Duesenberg with twin-mounted 8-cyl. Model A engines broke the world land speed record at Daytona Beach. This record, set by





INDIANAPOLIS MOTOR SPEEDWAY

FRED DUESENBERG, the mechanical genius behind the cars, started as a bike racer.

Tommy Milton, stood for seven years. (See August 1963, CL.) Jimmy Murphy outdistanced a field of Europe's finest to win the 1921 International Grand Prix at Le Mans, France. Thus Duesenberg became the first and only American automobile to receive such honors at Le Mans.

By this time the Duesenberg facilities had been moved to Indianapolis, Ind.—where else—where Duesenbergs were soon to dominate the 500. The "Power of the Hour" kept rolling along on the strength of the first production straight-eight built in the United States—the Model A. The name Duesenberg became almost synonymous with the Indianapolis Speedway when Joe Boyer brought his Duesenberg home first in 1924. His average track speed was an impressive 98.5 mph. Pete DePaolo made it two

in a row for Duesenberg in 1925, setting a new track speed record of 101.13 mph and becoming the first to break the 100-mph average mark. Duesenberg again got the checkered flag first in 1927 with George Souders aboard, averaging 97.5 mph.

It's interesting that during this period the Duesenberg brothers only produced 650 Model As. The pictured Duesenberg Model A of 1922, with engine No. 1128, represents the era of speed. Like all Duesenbergs, it was, and still is, a thing of aesthetic and mechanical beauty.

1928 to 1936—The glory of the second era of Duesenberg supremacy in American motoring was earned on the Indianapolis Speedway and other tracks throughout the world. But it took Emmet Lobban Cord, who at the age of 29 had just pulled the ailing Auburn out of its financial doldrums, to give Fred and August the time and wholehearted backing to develop "The World's Finest Motor Car." In many experts' opinion, that is exactly what Fred and August Duesenberg did.

The Cord purchase was first announced in October, 1926. It took two more years for the effects to show. When they did, it was Dec. 1, 1928, and Duesenberg had selected the Auto Salon opening in New York for the occasion. The new J stood out against a background of Europe's best: Hispano-Suiza, Isotta-Franschini, Mercedes-Benz, Minerva and Rolls-Royce. American chassis exhibited at the salon included Cadillac, Chrysler 80, Franklin, LaSalle, Lincoln, Packard, Pierce-Arrow, Stearns-Knight and Stutz.

The new Duesenberg Model J was the talk of the year in spite of the fact that coachwork by Murphy, Holbrook and Le Baron was not completed. Deliveries were not actually made until



April of 1929. *Country Life* has this to say, in part, about the new Duesenberg 265-bhp sports model in its February, 1929, issue: "... This car has a body that looks like a little boy's dream. The engine is old Fred Duesenberg at his best. ... It does go—one hundred and twenty odd miles an hour—all the models look as though they'd do two hundred and forty. That was the keynote of the Salon this year—flash, speed."

Even today, our *Car Life* Classic 1929 Duesenberg Dual Cowl Phaeton Model J with body by Murphy bears out such statements. It should be noted that this Duesenberg, from Harrah's Automobile Collection, Reno, Nev., has 1933 modifications. The engine number, J-264, indicates that this was the 164th engine built out of a grand total of less than 490 by 1936. According to J. L. Elbert's book "Duesenberg, Mightiest American Motor Car," engine numbers started with J-101.

The new J Models were offered complete with chassis in the client's choice of 142.5-in. and 153.5-in. wheelbase. Gordon Buehrig, who was later to design the 1936 Cord, was in charge of all factory design from 1929 to 1933. He put meaning behind the company's statement that: "Dues-

enberg maintains a custom designing and body engineering organization second to none in the world." In addition to custom factory design, 14 different coachbuilders produced a total of about 380 custom bodies for Duesenberg, Inc. Such names as Murphy, Willoughby, Derham, Rollston, Le Baron, Judkins, Weymann, Walker, Brunn, Holbrook, Castagna, Hibbard & Darrin, Bohman & Schwartz, Dietrich and Locke further improved Duesenberg's already established reputation as "The World's Finest Motor Car."

If Duesenberg coachwork was truly custom, how did the motor car retain its identity? Even before the first Model J chassis was finished, advance blueprints were sent to select coachbuilders for design sketches. Duesenberg established the design criteria and made sure they would be followed. Pre-designed radiator shells, lamps, hood, fenders, running boards and bumpers were supplied with each completed engine and chassis. Even more factory control was exercised in 1931 when Phillip A. Derham of the Derham Custom Body Company was hired to coordinate factory requirements, coachbuilders' prerogatives and customers' desires. That Derham must

have been a diplomat of the highest order is evidenced from the unsurpassed Duesenberg styling that emerged from under such constricting circumstances. It's a fact that Duesenbergs looked like Duesenbergs. As time passed, more and more bodies were delivered to the factory in Indianapolis, where Duesenberg prestige could be quality controlled.

The highly regarded advertising campaign, "He Drives a Duesenberg," played heavily on prestige. It was admirable for its restraint. The temptation to mention just a few of the distinguished Duesenberg owners must have been great. Glowing praise arrived daily from such Duesenberg owners as: King Alphonse XIII of Spain, Gary Cooper, Marion Davies, John D. Dodge, Ester Dupont Weir, Paul Whiteman, Clark Gable and P. K. Wrigley. Wrigley's 1931 Duesenberg is still in existence and can be seen at the Poll Museum, 3 miles south of Holland, Mich., on U.S. 31. Clark Gable's 1936 Roadster is now in the collection of Briggs S. Cunningham. Clark Gable's car was an SJ, supercharged to develop 320 bhp. According to the factory, its engine would throttle down to 3 mph, accelerate from a standing start to 100 mph in 20 sec., do 104 in second gear and hum along at a top speed of 129 mph. And this was a production engine!

Our 1929 classic sports a body by Murphy of Pasadena, Calif. While factory records are inconclusive, about 125 Murphy bodies were sold to Duesenberg, almost one-third of the total Duesenberg production. The remarkably clean lines of Murphy bodies were years ahead in design. It took Duesenberg customers to recognize their beauty for what it was.

Rollston bodies, such as the 1935



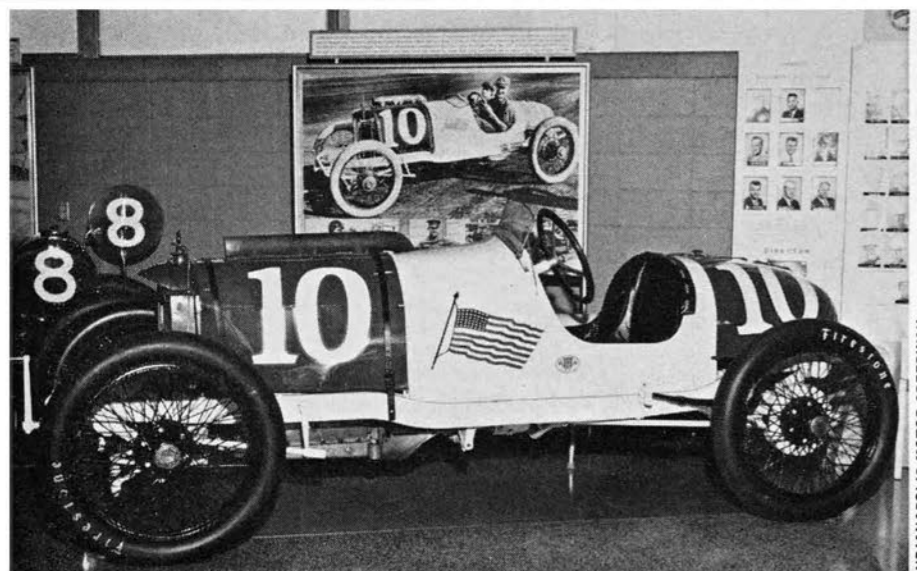
INDIANAPOLIS MOTOR SPEEDWAY

AUGUST DUESENBERG was the administrative specialist but inspected every car built.

J Rollston Convertible Coupe owned by Allen R. Thurn, were not as numerous as the uninhibited Murphy design. Some of the most outstanding Duesenberg bodies, however, were among the 40-plus produced by Rollston of New York. Rollston also built the last Duesenberg body—a 1938 Duesenberg delivered in February, 1940. This last Duesenberg was regarded by its owner, R. Bauer, as the best he had ever seen... and Bauer had seen and driven just about every luxury automobile with a claim to that name. The car can now be seen in Pettit's Motoring Memories Museum in Natural Bridge, Va.

An example of the Derham body is Gary Cooper's 1931 Tourster, engine number J-431. The car, now owned by Duesenberg historian Ray A. Wolff of Wauwatosa, Wis., is one of the ap-

EDDIE RICKENBACKER drove this Duesenberg to 10th place in the 1914 Indianapolis 500, one of the most important early successes for the company. Car is now in Indianapolis museum.



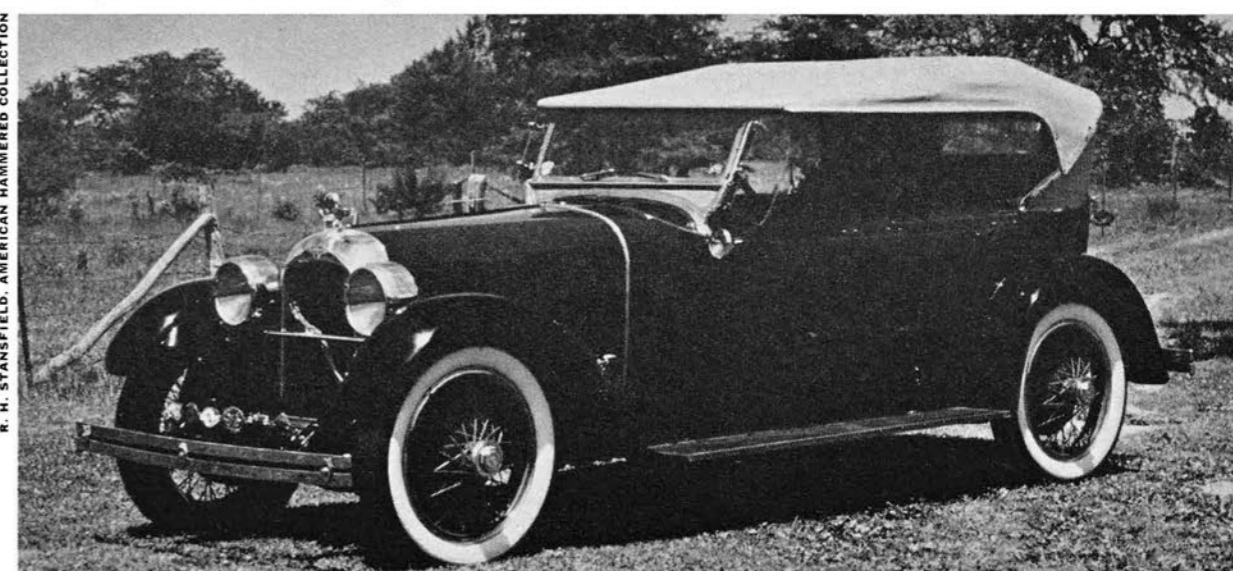
INDIANAPOLIS MOTOR SPEEDWAY

ONLY AMERICAN car to win Le Mans race was '21 Duesenberg, driven by J. Murphy.

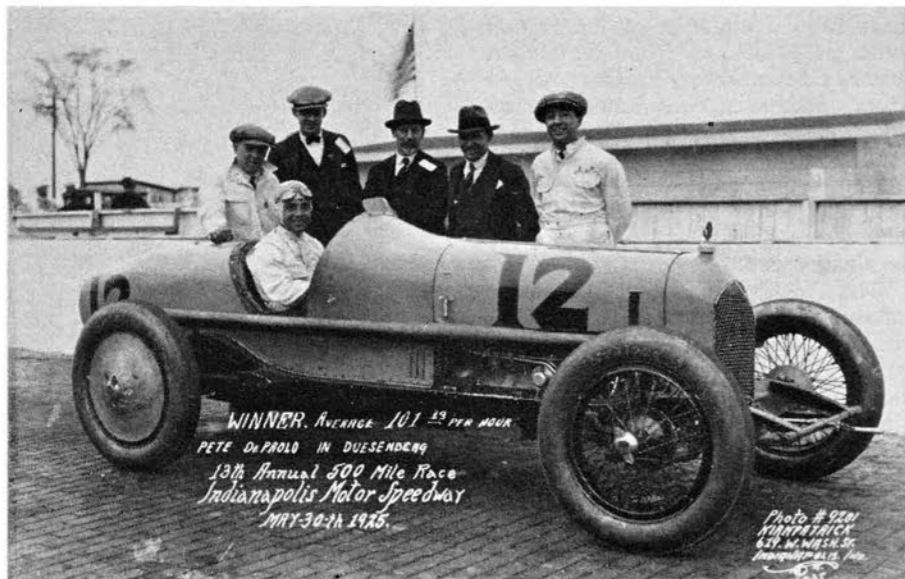


INDIANAPOLIS MOTOR SPEEDWAY

THIS 1922 MODEL A Duesenberg, now owned by J. B. Nethercutt, originally cost \$8500 and is representative of the best efforts prior to the introduction of the J and SJ.

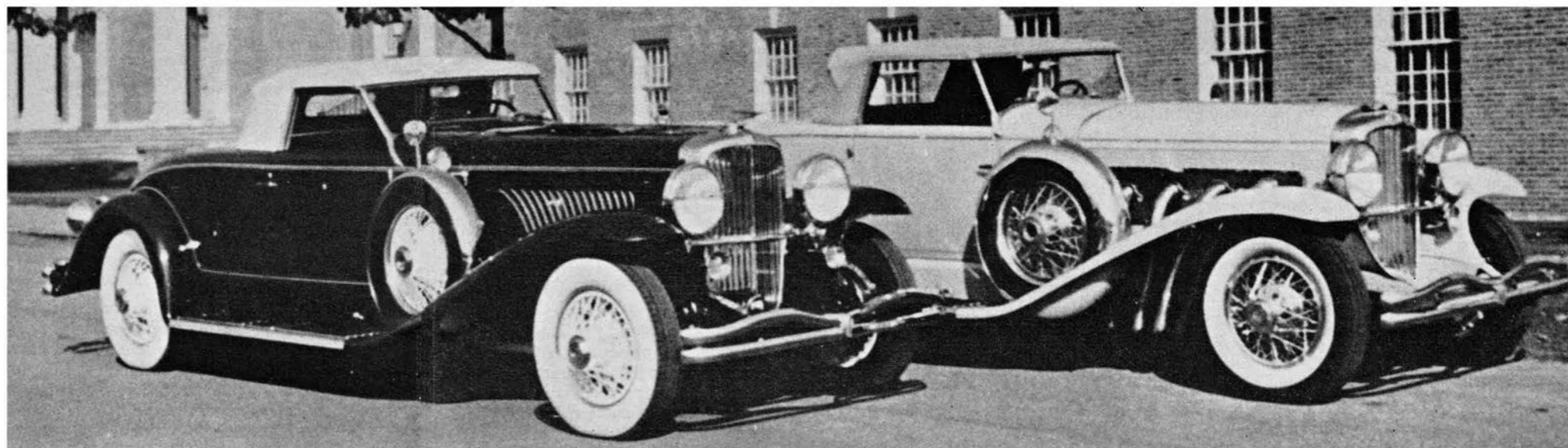


R. H. STANSFIELD, AMERICAN HAMMERED COLLECTION



A DUESENBERG WON the Indianapolis 500 in 1925, with Pete DePaolo at the wheel. It was the first car to average more than 100 mph. Fred Duesenberg is second from right.

INDIANAPOLIS MOTOR SPEEDWAY



SIMILAR-LOOKING Duesenberg convertible coupes are three years and one model apart. The car at left is a '35 Model J with a Rollston body, the one at right is a '32 SJ with a Murphy body. Both cars are owned by Duesenberg fancier Allen R. Thurn.



proximately 40 Derham bodies built in almost every classification.

Fortunately, as could be expected of such an unusual car, a disproportionate number has survived. Few car owners had better reasons to preserve their treasures. The extensive use of aluminum and aluminum alloys in the engine and body also has contributed greatly to the life of many a neglected Duesenberg. Aluminum was widely used by Fred Duesenberg in the differential housing, the oil pan, pistons, rods and external engine parts. It was also used in the body, the firewall, the dash and even the spare tire mounts.

The use of aluminum was an important factor in holding curb weight down into the 5250 to 6750 lb. area.

Just one of the many mechanical innovations that contributed to the unmatched performance and light weight of the Duesenberg 265-bhp engine were aluminum alloy Ray-Day pistons. They were years ahead of the industry. A split skirt was attached to the head with long bosses, measured to expand and contract at exactly the same rate as the cast iron cylinders. The result was an absolutely perfect piston fit whether the engine was cold or hot or just warming up.

How did the Model Js and SJs compare with their contemporaries? One Duesenberg was worth, in price, about 35 Chevrolets or Fords. This, of course, is only on the basis of the price being paid for each. I doubt very much

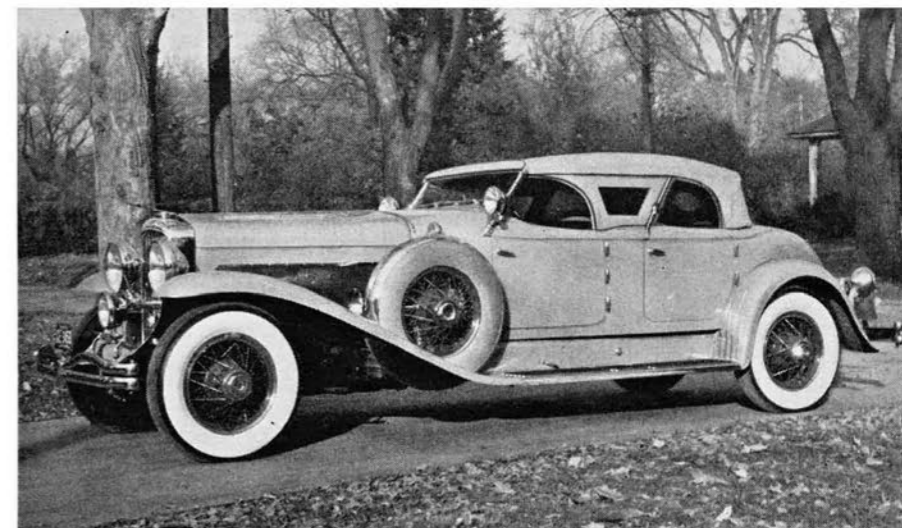
if any Duesenberg owner would have traded his pride and joy for any number of other cars. Price couldn't mean much to Duesenberg customers or they wouldn't have been Duesenberg customers. It was its unequalled performance and elegance that counted most. Much has been rumored about the prices asked and paid for Duesenbergs. According to factory records, no Duesenberg was ever sold for more than \$25,000 and most sold for a "modest" \$8500 for the engine and chassis plus the cost of the coachwork. The total ranged between \$14,750 and \$17,750. In terms of today's inflated dollar, this would amount to from \$50,000 to \$60,000.

Trade-in value of the Duesenberg has held up extremely well. One used 1929 Duesenberg could easily be traded today for several new Cadillacs,

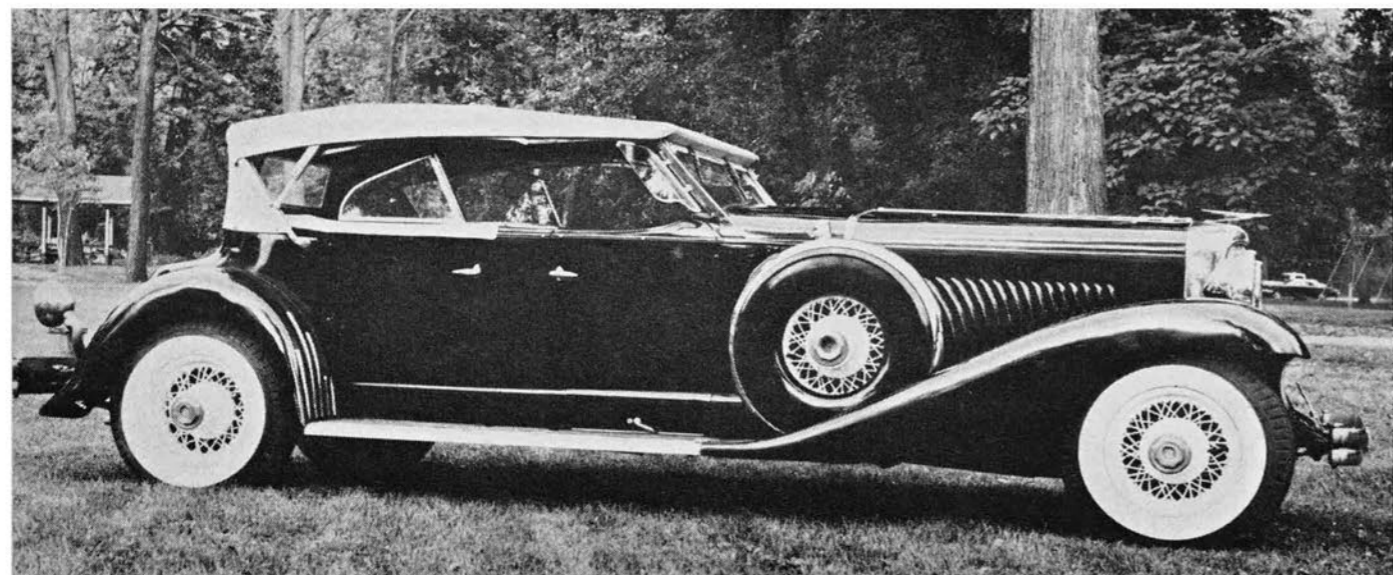
Lincolns or Chryslers. However, few, if any, Duesenberg owners would even consider such a trade.

The Duesenberg Models J and SJ were the achievement of August and Fred Duesenberg and the dream of E. L. Cord. Cord did assemble the best of motordom's finest in his Auburn-Cord-Duesenberg organization, but when it became necessary to sell the Auburn and Cord facilities, the end for Duesenberg was also in sight. It came in October, 1937, when the Marmon-Herrington Company of Indianapolis purchased the Duesenberg shops. The spirit of Duesenberg moved to Auburn, Ind., to join the other corporate orphans, Auburn and Cord. The Auburn-Cord-Duesenberg service depot then established is still in existence today, providing service to its select clientele.

MAGNIFICENT MODEL SJ Torpedo Phaeton has Weymann body, was CL Classic in April '62.



MAGNIFICENT 1931 Derham Tourster-bodied Model J is now owned by Duesenberg historian Raymond A. Wolff, once belonged to movie star Gary Cooper. Extensively restored in 1961, it is on the long, 153.5-in. wheelbase. Only eight such Toursters were made.



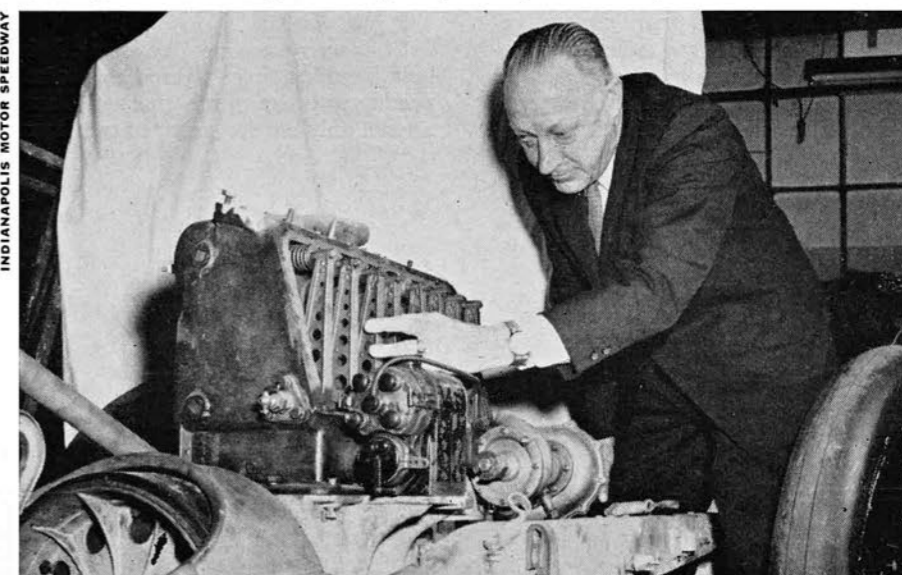
RAYMOND A. WOLFF



VANITY FAIR

UNDERSTATED advertising helped give cars an enviable reputation; note this '34 ad.

RESTORATION OF Rickenbacker's 1914 racer was done under direction of Indianapolis Speedway Museum Director, Karl Kizer (below, with car). Note walking-beam valve actuation.



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