The Richard C. Paine Jr. Automotive Charitable Trust’s 1911 American ‘Underslung’ Traveler

Research and Provenance
How a post card could confuse, and how a year can make a difference.

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With the American’s invitation to show at the 2014 Amelia Island Concours d’Elegance, further research into the car’s dating, model type, and provenance has been undertaken.

Dating the American has been confusing and misleading. Confusing because, depending on source, the car has been identified as being either a 1910, a 1911, or even a 1913 American. Misleading, because a year’s difference can totally change the model type, chassis type, and wheel base designations.

Although the car is identified as a 1911 American Victoria in the Richard C Paine Jr. Trust inventory, a post card, and other references when it was in the ownership of Briggs Swift Cunningham and his automotive museum, list it as a 1910 American Traveler.

If the 1910 dating were correct, and given the automobile’s 124” wheel base, the “Standard Catalog of American Cars, 1805-1942, 3rd edition” by Beverly Rae Kimes and Henry Austin Clark, Jr., would identify the American as being an American Tourist, with a regular chassis, and 4cyl., 50 hp engine.

(The 1910 Traveler in the JWR Automobile Museum is one of 300 total units produced that year, and only one of two in existence. Doors and other details are very different than the Trust’s American.)

A close examination of the 1910 American Tourist illustrated in the “Standard Catalog” (Photo credit WLB – William L. Bailey) reveals an underslung chassis, suggesting that the photo is either incorrect, or the Tourist was available with an underslung chassis in 1910.

Note the frame below the axles with the semi-elliptic leaf springs mounted above.

The company showed its first cars -- the conventionally sprung Touring and an "underslung" Roadster in 1906. Although the company produced both conventional and underslung models, it was the underslung design that would be its lasting legacy.

To make the car as low as possible, Tone essentially turned the conventional chassis upside down. Instead of placing the frame above the axles as other manufacturers did, he put the frame below the axles with the semi-elliptic leaf springs mounted above. This made the underslung car rakishly low for its day. To preserve ground clearance, huge 40-inch wheels were used and the engine was mounted on its own raised subframe. When the first underslung Roadster debuted late in 1906, its front fenders were about level with the top of the hood.

The underslung setup was widely credited to Harry C. Stutz, a practical engineer who later established a company producing cars bearing his own name. But, although Stutz designed the conventional chassis Touring for American Motor Car, and was with the company when the underslung Roadster was conceived, the Roadster's creator was chief engineer Fred I. Tone.

This 1906 American 5 passenger touring shows the Stutz designed conventional chassis.

The 1908 issue of Automotive Industries, Volume 18, describes the difference between the conventional chassis and the “under-swung” chassis in detail.

The frames employed in the touring cars consist of the side members and three cross-pieces, the former having a 5-inch vertical depth, a 1 3-4 horizontal web and manufactured from 3-16-inch stock; there is a rise in the side members of 2 1-2 inches in front of the rear axle, which is done to increase the possible range of action of the platform spring. Supporting the rear cross member, the center of which carries a triangular bracket, bearing upon the center of the transverse spring, are two long diagonal braces extending from the side members at a point ahead of the rear axle.
In addition to the three cross members already mentioned, the crankcase further acts as a tie for the front of the frame and the gear-set serves a similar purpose midway of the side members. The roadster frame embodies side members narrowed at the dash as well as a pair of straight supplementary frame pieces raised higher than the main frame members, and on which supplementary pieces are carried the motor and gearset. In this frame construction the forward springs are placed on top of the front axle with their rear ends carried in a fixture riveted to the upper side of the frame, and their front ends linked to the end of the frame. The semi-elliptic rear springs are revolvably mounted on the back axle with their forward ends connected to brackets on the upper side of the frame and their rear ends connected to a crossbar which passes completely across from sill to sill of the car.

Using the Trust’s 1911 date, the “Standard Catalog of American Cars, 1805-1942, 3rd edition” paints a very different picture for underslung and regular chassis 124” wb Americans. Note that both the 124” wb underslugs are Travelers and the regular chassis is a Tourist.

124” wb underslung Travelers.

124” wb regular chassis Tourist.

The technical details for the Trust’s American, documented when the car was in the Briggs Cunningham Automotive Museum, list the car’s rating as 60 hp. @ 1000 rpm. This makes the car a 1911 American Traveler Special on a 124” wb and underslung chassis according to the “Standard Catalog.”

Ad from 1906 shows standard chassis.

1909 shows a Traveler with an underslung frame.

It is indeed ironic that Henry Austin Clark Jr., who coauthored the “Standard Catalog of American Cars,” printed postcards identifying the car as a 1910 American “Traveler.” The postcard caption goes on to read, “The frame is located under the axles and the car is generally referred to as the American Underslung.” The caption continues, “Designed by Harry C. Stutz.” All to show how a post card could confuse, and how a year can make a difference.
The American Underslung Automobile & The American Motor Car Co.

American Underslung
The American Motor Car Co.
Indianapolis, Indiana
1905-1911

The American Motors Co.
Indianapolis, Indiana
1912-1915

The American Motor Car Co. of Indianapolis, Indiana made an American Automobile from 1905 to 1915. The original American was designed by Harry Stutz. When Stutz left The American Motor Car Co. in 1906, Fred Tone took over as chief engineer and designed the American Underslung.

Early American Motor Car Co. automobiles were made with a conventional chassis. A conventional chassis was very high on the wheels, the side rails above the axles. With an underslung chassis the rails were below the axles. The underslung models became a good selling point and by 1911 all American Motor Car Co. automobiles had an underslung chassis.

The first American Underslung was a two passenger Roadster shown right. Known as a Type 44 this American Automobile was equipped with a four cylinder engine that developed 35 horsepower. Wheel base was 105 inches with 36 inch wheels and tires.

In 1911 The American Motor Car Co. introduced the "Traveler" that was equipped with four cylinder 50 horsepower engines and 40 inch wheels and tires. This new 1911 American Underslung Touring Car was priced at $4250.00. By 1912 The American Motor Car Co. reorganized into The American Motors Co.
In 1912 and again in 1913 The American Motor Car Co introduced the "Scout" that sold for $1,475.00 and the $2450.00 "Tourist". The Scout was a two passenger Roadster equipped with a four cylinder engine made by Teetor-Hartley that was rated at 40 horsepower. Features included a three speed transmission, 105 inch wheel base, 36 inch wheels and tires, self starter, Warner speedometer, mohair top and the color was American wine with black fender.

Six cylinder automobiles were introduced for the final 1914 model year. Over the years the American Underslung went from "A Car For The Discriminating Few" to "American's Prettiest Car" and finally "America's Most Luxurious Car" with a hefty price and too few customers.


Motoring Memories: American Underslung, 1907 – 1913

AUGUST 17, 2007

Story and photo by Bill Vance

In the first decade of the 20th century automobiles began looking less like carriages and more like cars. They lost their high buggy wheels and tiller steering apparatus. Engines found a place in front of the driver. With improved roads and smaller wheels, automakers began building lower cars, and some companies carried the trend much further than others.

One of these was the American Motor Car Company, established in Indianapolis, Indiana in 1906. American showed its first cars, the conventionally sprung Touring and the "underslung" Roadster, in 1906 as 1907 models. Although the company produced both conventional and underslung models, it was the underslung design that would be the company's lasting legacy.
The underslung design was widely credited to Harry C. Stutz, a practical engineer who later established a company producing cars bearing his own name. But although Stutz designed the conventional chassis Touring for the American Motor Car Co., and was with the company when the underslung Roadster was conceived, the roadster’s father really seems to have been American’s chief engineer, Fred I. Tone.

To make the car as low as possible, Tone in effect turned the conventional chassis upside down. Instead of placing the frame above the axles as others did, he put the frame below the axles, with the semi-elliptic leaf springs mounted above them.

This made the underslung car rakishly low for its day. To preserve ground clearance, huge 40-inch wheels were used, and the engine was mounted on its own raised sub-frame. When the first dashing underslung Roadster arrived late in 1906 its front fenders were about level with the top of the hood.

The company extolled the safety virtues of the underslung design, emphasizing its stability and resistance to roll-over. With a centre of gravity just above axle height, sales literature claimed that the car could be tilted up to 55 degrees without rolling over. Compared with about 45 degrees for conventionally suspended competitive models it was an impressive feature.

The underslung was powered by a huge 6.4-litre (392.7 cu in.) four-cylinder engine rated at 40 horsepower by the formula of the Association of Licensed Automobile manufacturers, not the brake horsepower method that was becoming more popular. For 1908 an additional enlarged 50 brake horsepower (44.1 ALAM) engine of 7.8 litres (476.2 cu in.) was made available.

There was a strong publicity incentive in those days for cars to demonstrate their speed and durability in competition. In 1908, American Motor Car entered one of its larger-engine underslung Roadsters in the Savannah Challenge Cup Race held in Savannah, Georgia, an American racing Mecca of the era.

Alas, a low centre of gravity alone wasn’t enough. A car also needed prodigious power to compete with the monsters of the day. The underslung simply lacked the muscle, and it qualified slowest, and finished last. But this didn’t dissuade the company from offering a 1909 roadster based on the 1908 race entry, and unabashedly calling it the Speedster.

At about this time the two-passenger underslung models were joined by a four-passenger underslung named the Traveler. Of the many open and closed models that the company produced, such as the Gadabout and Wayfarer, the Traveler would be the star of the line-up.

For 1910 the engine was given pressurized lubrication, and a bigger engine with an enlarged cylinder bore was added with horsepower increased from 50 to 60. More improvements were made for 1911, but by this time it was becoming apparent that the company was in financial trouble. It was reorganized and the name changed to American Motors Co.

A decision was made in 1912 to switch all models over to the most distinguishing features the company had, the underslung chassis. To capitalize on this, the cars became officially known as American Underslungs. The Traveler also got a six cylinder engine.

A proliferation of models issued forth under the new company but this couldn’t overcome the fact that the enterprise was over-extended and inefficient. For example, its relatively small production was divided among three factories.
For 1913, the year in which Fred Tone left to pursue other automotive interests, Underslungs were available with electric starters and lights, which had been introduced by Cadillac just a year before.

In an attempt to stave off the inevitable, some 1914 Underslung models were introduced in April, 1913, and were very handsome cars indeed. Unfortunately receivership arrived in November, 1913, and another interesting and innovative car left the scene. The reasons for the Underslung’s demise seem linked to questionable management practices, and a concentration on high quality, expensive models, except for the smaller 1912 Scout roadster, when the marketplace was moving to cheaper utilitarian cars like the Model T Ford. That, unfortunately, would be the epitaph for many of the grand old marques. The American Underslung was an intriguing design, but its one outstanding feature, its unorthodox low-slung suspension, wasn’t enough to save it.


1910 American Traveler, Chassis #2050 Engine # 1936 - JWR Automobile Museum.

1911 American Traveler, Peterson Museum.

W.C. Fields in his 1909 American.

1914 American Model 644
The Richard C. Paine Jr. Automotive Charitable Trust’s American on display at the Seal Cove Auto Museum.

Serial number is 2465, Engine no., 2051.

There are approximately 30 Americans that still exist of all types that were produced.

American Engines were built by the Light Inspection Car Company (LICC). LICC later became Teetor Hartley. When Teetor Hartley got out of the engine building business in the mid 19teens it was renamed Perfect Circle. Unfortunately none of the engine records have survived.

A list of existing cars was put together by Walter Seeley in 1971 and it was published in the Antique Automobile magazine. His list has since been updated to show cars that have been located since 1971. The list had some of the serial numbers for the existing cars but it is not complete. Based on the serial number of the Anderson/Cunningham American it would have been a 1911 Model Year car. A couple of other characteristics of the car help to confirm this dating. The 1911 cars were the first to have an enclosed cowl with a front passenger door. The 1910 cars had no front doors.

It is not a 1912 Model year car because electric cowl lamps integrated into the body were introduced in 1912. The fact that the car originally had gas headlights indicates it is not a 1913 Model Year car. By 1913 American had adopted electric headlights on its cars.

In 1911 American was offering cars with underslung and non-underslung chassis’. The company literature would have listed the car as an American. The buyer would have had to option to purchase a car with or without the underslung chassis. In early 1911 the company was reorganized and the name of the company changed from the American Motor Car Company to American Motors Company. Shortly after the organizational change they dropped the non-underslung cars and starting referring to the cars as American Underslung. Technically the Anderson/Cunningham car would be an “American”, however, only one non-underslung chassis car still exists (was in the Paine collection, sold in 2008 auction) and, since the Trust’s car is a 1911 “American,” it is perfectly correct to refer to it as an American Underslung.

The reference to the reorganization of the company came from Walter Seeley’s 1972 magazine article. He states as follows: “Official notice of reorganization was made in a letter dated February 2, 1911 from the factory to their dealers, simply stating that the entire business of the American Motor Car Company had passed into the hands of the American Motors Company, a corporation, which would materially add to the facilities of the old company.” Seeley’s article appeared in the July-August 1972 Antique Automobile Magazine. Seeley was able to obtain a great deal of original American literature and photos from F. F. Tone who was the son of the designer of the American Underslung. He also restored four of the existing Americans that were originally purchased by the same family. A copy of the article resides in the Seal Cove Museum’s archive.

The Anderson/Cunningham car is a definitely a Traveler. The Tourist designation was used for the non-Underslung cars up until 1911. After discontinuing non-Underslung cars the name Tourist was used to designate the smaller lower priced American Underslung touring car introduced in 1911. Seeley notes that the cars were named Traveler after General Robert E. Lee’s famous horse.
Provenance:

1. Larz Anderson, purchased the American and had it shipped to Brussels, Belgium, in 1911 where he was serving as US Minister to Belgium. While in Belgium, Anderson had the car equipped with a custom built windshield, manufactured by Vanden Plas. (The standard model was delivered with no windshield, the top being held by straps.) Anderson also had the car fitted with electric lights. (Vesa Accumulator Co., Chicago ~ Paris). The American’s top is unusual, being a short Victoria style, positioned by landau irons that extend only over the rear seat. To this a short fabric top would have snapped from the front to the windshield, and to complete the weather proofing, side curtains were used. The top would have been a custom order by Larz Anderson, and supplied by the American Motor Car Co.

2. With Larz Anderson’s death in 1937, the American’s ownership passed to his widow, Isabel Weld Perkins Anderson. (When Isabel was only five years old, she inherited $17 million dollars from her grandfather William Fletcher Weld, making her the wealthiest woman in America.) The monogram on the American’s middle pillar reads, “Captain Ginger ~ In Virtue Vis.” Captain Ginger was the principal character in a series of children’s books written by Isabel Anderson between 1910 and 1911. (In addition to the Captain Ginger series, she also wrote books that concern her family specifically, several travelogues, and volumes of poetry.) Although we cannot date when the monogram was applied, or the date of the American’s last paint, we do know from photographs that the car has remained unrestored since at least 1948 when acquired by Briggs Cunningham.

3. In 1948, prior to her passing, Isabel Anderson sold the American to Briggs Swift Cunningham. Cunningham, active in the VMCCA, entered the American in the 1949 and 1951 Glidden Tours. The American was kept and displayed at the Briggs Cunningham Museum, Costa Mesa, California, until its closing in 1986.

4. In late December of 1986, Briggs Cunningham sold his 71 car collection to Miles Collier and the Collier family. The American was part of this purchase. (Collier’s father, C. Miles, and Uncles Sam and Barron, Jr., had been close friends of Cunningham and indeed had gotten him started in sports car racing.)

5. With the reorganization of the Collier Automotive Museum in 1994, and creation of the REVS INSTITUTE, the American was donated by the Collier family and came into the Richard C. Paine Jr., collection. On October 8, 2013, the Seal Cove Auto Museum’s mechanic, Cordell Snow, with the assistance of Jim Phelps, Paul Slaunwhite, and John Harding were successful in starting American’s engine.

Appreciation to:
Walter Seeley, deceased August 7, 2013, author, and a member of the Horseless Carriage Club since the early 60’s. In 1956, he applied for an AACA Chapter in Jamestown that was approved the following year.
F.F. Tone, deceased, son of underslung engineer Fred T. Tone.
Lawrence W. Berman – Cunningham Motorsport Historian.
Mark Patrick – REVS Institute (Provided copy of Cunningham Museum notes on the car)
Robert Mcanlis – Senior Member AACA (Provided contact names of current American owners and information about the Trust’s American).
Alan Woolf – American owner and researcher, currently restoring a 1914 American Underslung. (Since the passing of Seeley and F. F. Tone, Mr. Woolf is now considered as the most knowledgeable expert on Americans.)
Canada’s T Eaton Co., produced jigsaw puzzles from the early 1970’s to the mid-1990’s.

References and images of the Trust’s American and confusion over its date of manufacture.

http://www.sciencephoto.com/media/78450/view

Caption reads, “Among the classic antiques was this handsome 1910 American Underslung driven by Briggs Cunningham. It was designed by Harry Stutz.” (1949 Glidden Tour) Photograph appears on page 130 of the February 1953 issue of POPULAR MECHANICS. (Coverage of 1952 Glidden Tour) http://books.google.com/books?id=x9wDAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=Glidden+Tour&hl=en&sq=X&ei=I-NuUqKuLo4AORpoHgBA&ved=0CCMQ6AEwCDjSAQ#v=onepage&q=Glidden%20Tour&f=false


Detail of EATON jigsaw puzzle showing the American. The ‘CLASSICS’ puzzle identifies the American as being a 1913 American Underslung Model 644. No reference is given regarding where, or when, the photo was taken, but safe to assume the Briggs Cunningham Museum.

Seal Cove Auto Museum Collection, acquired October 7, 2013.
This postcard identifies the car as a 1910 American “Traveler.”
Seal Cove Auto Museum collection.

The photograph was copyrighted in 1972 by Henry Austin Clark, Jr., and is one of a postcard series produced by Clark showing automobiles in private collections and museums at that time.

September 1983 calendar identifies the car as a 1910 American Underslung.

Caption, “courtesy Briggs Cunningham Automotive Museum, Costa Mesa, CA.”

These notes from the Briggs Cunningham Automotive Museum, kindly supplied by Mark Patrick of the REVS Institute, show date the American as 1910.
These notes, also supplied by Mark Patrick of the REVS Institute, are part of the Collier Automotive Museum’s observations about the American. They correctly identify the car as being a 1911 American Underslung.

The Larz Anderson Museum lists...
http://larzanderson.org/about/history/the-collection

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<th>395</th>
<th>1911 American</th>
<th>Victoria</th>
<th>Underslung</th>
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<td></td>
<td>VIN # 2465</td>
<td>Horsepower:</td>
<td>Notes: Engine# on right side of engine block. VIN on plaque under seat.</td>
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The Trust’s inventory identifies the American as 1911, Victoria, Underslung. This would be in keeping with the deed of gift from the Collier family.
Custom built windshield built by Vanden Plas and installed while Larz Anderson served as Minister to Belgium October 1911 until September 1912.

Electrified cowl light – VESA Accumulator Co. Electric cowl lamps integrated into the body were introduced in 1912.

On October 8, 2013, the Seal Cove Auto Museum’s mechanic, Cordell Snow, with the assistance of Jim Phelps, Paul Slaunwhite, and John Harding were successful in starting American’s engine. Lever in the Gas open position as the engine comes to life.

The crest on the door reads, “Captain Ginger ~ In Virtue Vis” surrounding Mrs. Anderson’s monogram.
The only mystery that remains is why did Briggs Cunningham believe the American to be a 1910 Traveler instead of a 1911 Traveler, and where did the “Victoria” designation come from? The most probable answer is that the car was ordered in 1910 and delivered in 1911. Although a majority of the car’s features, such as the full cowl enclosure on the driver’s side, and a door on the passenger side, were introduced in 1911, other details such as having the shift lever outside, and having the steering on the right side, are characteristic of 1910 Americans. The manufacturer’s plate, located on the middle of the front seat platform, reads, “THE AMERICAN – AMERICAN MOTOR CAR CO. – INDIANAPOLIS.” The American Motor Car Co., identification places manufacture prior to the Company’s name change to American Motors Company in 1912. The car number, #2464, and engine number, #2051, also appear on the plate. Although the Company was reorganized in February of 1911, existing parts stock would have been used up to the public announcement of the name change in 1912.

We should also consider that in 1948, when Cunningham acquired the car, much of the American’s history had been forgotten; thirty-five years had passed since the Company’s bankruptcy and closing. Also, in those early post-war years of car collecting, legends grew (“Designed by Harry C. Stutz”), and an extra year or two of age helped make one’s car even more of an antique. (An unrestored 1905 Maxwell on display at the Seal Cove Auto Museum sports a hood with ‘1902’ emblazoned along one side. The car was identified as being a 1902 model for years, until examination and research proved it to be of later manufacture. Sure looked good in a parade though, to pass it off as a 1902.)

The ‘Victoria’ designation is more of a mystery since no ‘Victoria’ model is listed as ever having been manufactured by the American Motor Co. The car’s unique landau top most likely led to the ‘Victoria’ designation, being the term first used for open carriages named after Queen Victoria and, later, for automobile body styles and automobile model designations. Special modifications were undertaken by American Motor Co., for its patrons, and Larz Anderson’s purchase of one of their cars would certainly have received special attention.

This Company photo shows a 1910 American Traveler with a special body and swing-out seat, giving credence to custom modifications being done on order.

Research data about the history of the American did not exist until Walter Seeley published his work in the July – August 1972 issue of ANTIQUE AUTOMOBILE. Seeley’s interest in Americans was based on his passion for Americans, and his desire to obtain one of the Deemer Underslungs.

Mr. Deemer was a huge fan of the Americans; having purchased four of them in three years! When Mr. Deemer passed away in 1959 at the age of 89, all 4 cars were still in his possession. His two sons inherited the cars and kept them stored in a converted brewery. In 1960, Walter Seeley began an inquiry about purchasing the cars. He was told they were not for sale, but the sons wanted a restoration performed on the cars. After many conversations, a deal was struck between the men. Mr. Seeley would restore the earlier three cars in exchange for Deemer’s 1910 model. A self-described ‘amateur hobbyist’, Mr. Seeley set off to do the restorations. He was able to contact Fred Tone’s son, who procured many factory documents and photographs. This truly was a labor of love, as the first car took six years to restore to absolute authenticity. The 1910 Traveler, Mr. Seeley’s ‘payment’, took the restorer 17 years to finish for himself, and is now owned by the JWR Automobile Museum.

The September - October 1980 Vol. 44 NO. 5. Issue of ANTIQUE AUTOMOBILE has a 10 page article on Deemer, Walter Seely, and the four Deemer cars with many photos of the cars and the restorations.

Another, more recent, history of the American appears in the 1983 Automobile Quarterly, Volume 21, Number 3, article “American Underslung and Otherwise” by Dave Emanuel. (Copy in the Seal Cove Museum’s library).
Roster from “A Car For the Discriminating Few, The American Underslung 1905 – 1914” by Walter Seeley

Richard Paine’s other American.

The Trust’s 1911 Underslung when owned by B. Cunningham. Note Victoria body style.

1906 American Tourist ‘Roi des Belges’ Touring car. This Harry Stutz designed American is the only surviving regular chassis model known to exist. It came into the Seal Cove Auto Museum collection through Richard C. Paine’s purchase of the Dr. Samuel Scher collection in 1965, and was later sold for $612,000 in September of 2008 at the Bonhams’ auction held at the Owls Head Transportation Museum.

Detail clearly shows a standard chassis with the leaf springs mounted below the frame rails.
Briggs Cunningham was obviously proud of the American's connection to Larz Anderson; the Connecticut license plate, issued to Cunningham in 1948, read LARZ.

Last note: Don’t forget the golf clubs when next out touring in the Underslung.

Conclusion: The Richard Paine Jr., Automobile Charitable Trust’s American, on exhibit at the Seal Cove Auto Museum, is a 5 passenger 1911 American Traveler Model 50, with an underslung chassis. It sports a custom Victoria style top, custom Vanden Plas windshield and a 60 hp, 4 cyl. engine. The car was ordered by US diplomat Larz Anderson from the American Motor Car Co., in 1910, and delivered to him in 1911 to Belgium where he was serving as US Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary. (Minister is a rank below being an Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary).