Always Austie

Remembering old car hobby icon Henry Austin Clark, Jr.

By Geoff Gehman

The Long Island Automotive Museum was one of the landmarks along the Montauk Highway in Southampton, N.Y. It was a big blue building that resembled an airplane hanger with three humps. Behind that bulky steel facade was every conceivable classic car: primitive, elegant, sporty, crazy, exotic, eeri...
Austie encountered

"I met Austie in 1967 in Manhattan at an auction of vintage auto memorabilia," Brownell said. "All he did was basically bid on me every piece. Afterward I said to him, 'You're Henry Austie.' He said, 'The one and the same.' I was chasing a number of the things you bought." He added, "Oh, are you an automotive art collector?" "A budding collector." "Oh, you must come back to the house and I'll show you some things you probably haven't seen." So I went out to Glen Cove and spent a delightful afternoon with him. He bought a couple of pieces at very, very reasonable prices." "That's how our friendship began. Irregular" Porter, a Long Islander who said he was worth losing out to him, "saw of it, he wanted to make great cars for the people of America." "Another time we were going into the public. It's probably one of the great events of the century to an auction of auto memorabilia," said the editor of [auto journal]. "The steersman is part of the public, K. Purdy. Ken was a guy who interacted with the balance of those cars, and the people who bought them. He said they were the Corvettes of their time." "Austie's wife, a mobile Touring Club for brass-era cars. He was a good man. He didn't have a brass-era car so he lent me his Department. Before we went to the auction, we held for five days. We were at the Cher. It's a long story, but you dare bring anything to Race Circuit and I was trying to be very..."
careful and take care of Austie's car and this guy [Bill Campbell] in a [1910] Stevens-Duryea — a great, lumbering car — chops me on the corner. Well, that got my dander up and I went by that Stevens-Duryea like it was tied to a post. And I looked at the sweep hand on the speedometer and it was 94 mph — the highest speed in any segment.

"Well, I told Austie I was a bad boy. And Austie looked at the speedometer and he smiled and he said, 'You weren't a bad boy. You were a good boy.' Anybody else would have torn their hair out. His attitude was, 'Did you enjoy the car?' And boy, did I ever!

"He loved his Model T fire chief's car. He loved fire engines, probably as much as cars. He had this bright idea he wanted his own fire department, so he started the Sandy Hollow Fire Company. He appointed his friends as captains with badges. I was disappointed that I never became an honor captain. I'd pester him, but he never gave one to me. I know plenty of people who dodged speeding tickets, because they had that badge.

"Austie was always holding these sales of old parts, rusty parts, bits for cars at the museum. They were called the Iron Range or Early Iron and they went back to the '50s. It was never a formal announcement; you just sort of found out through the old-car gravevine. There were a lot of old, decrepit chassis — a bunch of skeletons of early cars — hanging around the back of the museum. If they weren't so old, it would simply be a junkyard.

"The last Iron Range I went to, Austie had a radiator shield from an SS Jaguar just sitting in the corner. "Austie," I said, "How much is the SS Jaguar?"

"That's not a Jaguar, that's a '32 Chrysler.

"No," I said, "that's an SS Jaguar."

"Don't argue with Uncle Austie."

"Alright, how much is the '32 Chrysler?" So I bought it and sold it to a Jaguar guy.

"I try to have the privilege to know some people, and that's the way I feel about Austie. In my mind, the depth of his knowledge was awe-inspiring. He had a steel trap mind when it came to finding stuff and minutiae. And the resources he had in that library were just mind-boggling. Well, he couldn't have had a Standard Catalog without it; that book did more for the history of the American auto than anything else. And he was never one of these guys to throw his weight around. If you made a mistake, he wouldn't jump all over you. He knew better than most people, and he was content to know.

"There was no pretense about him. Here he is, the son of wealth, living in the private enclave of Glen Cove, has a summer home in Southampton — he could have been a hideous snob. Instead, he was one of the great guys. Believe me, there are an awful lot of cars that wouldn't be on the road if it wasn't for his parts. He just wanted to see those cars get back on the road. And he was so generous. He had all this literature, all this ephemera, and he donated the whole shooting match to the Henry Ford Museum. In his own quiet way, he had a real mission for the preservation of automotive history. That was his work, that was his job. I think he always enjoyed what he was doing. He enjoyed it so much, he wanted everybody else to enjoy it too. And there's nothing wrong with that.

"I learned so much from him. One time he told me, 'You know and I know these early cars don't start a damn. So lesson number one, when you are guiding one of these cars, is try to keep it rolling. Don't stop unless you absolutely have to.' Because it's much more difficult to go through the gears than it is to keep the car rolling.

"The other thing he taught me is you shouldn't take yourself too seriously. Life should have some fun to it. When Austie died, my ex-wife had a very trenchant observation. "You know," she said, "his entire life was one long fraternity party. That about sums him up. If you liked cars and you liked an occasional drink and you liked to have a good time, you were his guy.

"I remember one time we were on the Glidden Tour, stay-at-home captain. I was sitting at the Lake Placid Hotel, I remember I was using Austie's Merc and Wally told Austie, 'Our neighbor just lost the presidency of the Chase Manhattan Bank.' And Austie says, 'It serves the sonofabitch right — he could never make a decent martini?"'

"I just about fell on the floor. That's just about pure W.C. Fields; that's such pure Austie Clark."

Postscript.

Austie's grand venture, the Long Island Automotive Museum, had an inglorious end. In 1998, he closed the three-bay Quonset hut to the public after decades of declining revenues. He blamed his fall from grace on the Town of Southhampton's refusal to let him advertise on billboards around town. He apparently didn't benefit enough from the extra traffic on the Montauk Highway after the 1972 opening of Exit 72 on the Long Island Expressway, which enabled motorists to bypass Riverhead and race faster to the East End.

At that time, Austie auctioned many of his vintage vehicles. Being a ringleader, he naturally served as his own auctioneer. Brownell watched the sale with Charles Addams and another Austie cronie. "We started making side bets about which cars would make the most money," Brownell said. "And Charlie Addams was really good. He won two-thirds of the bets. He claimed he cleared our clocks."

When Austie died in 1991, three years after Charlie Addams expired in one of his cars. By then, the Southampton museum was a wreck; today, it's a dead musemme. The Quonset hut has a rusty facade, broken windows, graffiti and a gap-toothed sign that reads, "LONG ISLA MO IV M!" The parking lot is a grove of rogue birch trees. It seems entirely fitting that nearby is a company that sells funeral monuments.

Photos courtesy of the Walter McCarthy Collection, as posted on VanderbiltCupRaces.com.

To get a copy of Henry Austin Clark's masterpiece book Standard Catalog of American Cars 1965-1942, visit www.edgesoldcarsweekly.com, or call 809-256-0929.