

F.A.H.P. News, January 27, 2014

Henry Austin Clark Jr. (ca. 1920-ca. 1990): Soon after World War II, one of three or four most prominent names in the antique automobile hobby was “Austie” Clark. A native of Glen Cove, Long Island, his family had made a fortune from sugar plantations in Cuba, and much of Austie’s inheritance went into the purchase of fine antique cars and their restorations. He and his family also owned a summer residence at Southampton, Long Island, and by the early 1950s, he had opened an antique automobile museum near that affluent community. Probably 75 early cars passed through his ownership, including at least five steamers.

Everyone who was active at all in either the Antique Automobile Club of America (founded in Philadelphia) or the Veteran Motor Car Club of America (founded in Boston) knew Austie Clark, as he was very active in the hobby, attending tours, meets, and meetings wherever they were held. He was an amusing public speaker and was sought after to put on an illustrated program for many regional events. Once I got him to do just that for the Historical Car Club of Pennsylvania, where he attended a Saturday luncheon meeting held at Howard Johnson’s on Baltimore Pike near Providence Road in Media, Pennsylvania. While he provided laughs from the audience throughout his talks, much of his humor was based on his alleged heavy drinking. I have known other comedians like that (remember Dean Martin?), but they were seldom drunk.

Like James Melton’s museum attempts at Norwalk, Connecticut, and Boca Raton, Florida, Clark’s Southampton museum failed to attract enough business to be successful. Thinking he needed to be in a more prominent location, he leased a building on Times Square in Manhattan and opened an antique auto museum there. It was a colossal failure and closed in a year or so. In 1959, Fidel Castro took over Cuba, and the family’s sugar plantations were confiscated, so much of Austie’s income was terminated. By the mid-1960s, Austie had closed his Southampton museum and began selling off cars to help retain his lifestyle, but he kept several fine cars until his death.

In the 1950s, polio was still a crippling disease infecting thousands of people annually. The March of Dimes was the prime organization fighting polio, and all sorts of events were held to draw attention to its annual campaign for funding. Austie approached the national organization, and suggested that an antique car tour from Boston to Los Angeles would draw attention to the March of Dimes. Since the campaign was always in the winter with the climax on Franklin D. Roosevelt’s birthday on January 30, the tour was planned for the weeks prior to that date. It left Boston about January 2, 1956, and terminated in Los Angeles right around January 30. The idea was that antique car collectors from all parts of the country, wanting to participate, could join the published route for one day or one week or anything in between, but an authentic Pony Express Mail Pouch would be carried in an antique car for the entire distance. The “News” of May 9 and 16, 2005, tells of my participation with our 1915 Stanley Mountain Wagon. Austin Clark himself was the only one who made the entire trip, driving a 1929 Lincoln touring car he bought in Boston at the beginning of the tour.

In the spring of 1964, just before we opened our second Holiday Inn near I-95 at Ogletown, I bought some photographic prints from Clark to decorate the walls of our restaurant, which we named the “Horseless Carriage.” A good amateur photographer himself, he ran a small business furnishing original photos from the early 20th century and color prints of excellent drawings by Peter Helck, the primary American artist depicting early racing cars in action. I made an appointment to meet Austie Clark at his museum, but when I arrived, he was not there. His attendant phoned him and learned he had forgotten the appointment. Embarrassed, Clark gave instructions to his “man” to show me around Southampton and suggested that I come to his home in Glen Cove, where his photos could be observed prior to my placing an order. All worked out well, I looked at some great pictures and placed my order. We had dinner together, and I returned home that night. In a few weeks, Austie delivered everything to the Holiday Inn. Some of these pictures are still on display in our Museum.

Work Report: Due to inclement weather, both work sessions were canceled last week. Activities are expected to resume on Tuesday.