

F.A.H.P. News, December 27, 2010

James Melton (1904–1961): In some ways, James Melton was the mid-20th-century equivalent of Jay Leno. A prominent entertainer, his passion for collecting early automobiles brought all of us with similar interests into the spotlight. He, like Leno, loved steam cars, and he owned numerous Stanleys and at least one White.

In the days leading up to World War II, Melton was a tenor with the Metropolitan Opera Company. His good looks and flare for publicity took him to Hollywood, where he appeared in several “short subjects” and all-star extravaganzas. The photo of his Stanley Model 70, now owned by Bob Nydam, appeared on magazine covers and old-car publications, with its modifications such as Model A Ford wheels and bumpers and a huge heavy Stanley script painted across the front of the hood. In that photo with Melton behind the wheel were Edgar Bergen, America’s prime ventriloquist, and his side-kick, Charlie McCarthy (Bergen also owned a Stanley). In the late 1940s, Melton developed top connections with the automotive world when he landed a contract with the Ford Motor Company to broadcast its weekly radio show. He used these contacts for the benefit of his friends in the antique auto hobby, and twice he arranged for Detroit and the Ford facilities at Dearborn to host the annual Glidden Tour revival (1946 and 1953). My father, Homer Kratz, and I attended the 1953 event in our Stanley Model 735.

James Melton was not only the most prominent name in early old car collecting, but he was active in AACA and VMCCA, serving as president of the former in 1951, the year before my father held that position. About 1950 he opened an old car museum on Route 7 north of Norwalk, Connecticut, a few miles from his home in Westport. He seldom missed a tour or national meet in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In February 1948, at the AACA Annual Meeting held at an armory on North Broad Street in Philadelphia, he displayed his newly restored 1903 White steamer, one of the first built with a condenser. He and his wife and young daughter drove to the Spring Meet at the Yorklyn Gun Club in 1951 in a fancy, new sports car, either a Jaguar or a Triumph. My father had just restored his 1908 Stanley Gentlemen’s Speedy Roadster, and he and Melton rode up and down the hill several times with Melton behind the wheel (I questioned my father’s judgment, as the actor was known to scorch boilers and tear up engines, but all went well). One year at the AACA Fall Meet at Devon, Melton decided his steam car friends needed a nice lunch, so he commissioned me to go with him to a nearby delicatessen to secure fancy sandwiches. While we were waiting in the shop for our order, another customer recognized my companion with “Aren’t you James Melton?” The singer ignored him; he did not say “yes” or “no.” The “News” of 11/22/10 told of Melton’s participation on the 1957 Glidden Tour.

My father and James Melton became good friends, and they traded back and forth, everything from antique cars to miniature locomotives to small carousels to “cigar store” Indians. Our Cagney locomotive, as well as another 4-4-0 nine-inch-gauge train came to us as well as a Stanley Model 71 (this car has been owned for 40 years by Jim Keith). A big 1907 Model G White speedster and a 1917 Second-Series Packard Twin Six Clover Leaf roadster went to Melton. The latter transfer took place on a cold winter day. Melton took the train from New

York to Wilmington, where my father had asked me to meet him with the Packard. He arrived with a heavy fur coat and numerous undergarments, took delivery of the open car, and drove home over the New Jersey Turnpike.

What we didn't know was that James Melton was living far beyond his means, as he was no longer performing on a regular basis. Having moved his unsuccessful Connecticut museum to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, it failed again, and most of the collection was sold to Winthrop Rockefeller, soon to become Governor of Arkansas. Some months after this last transaction, the IRS slapped a tax lien against Rockefeller on all the cars in the purchase. It was rumored that Melton jumped from a tall building in Manhattan in 1961 to end his life. My father had some correspondence with Marjorie Melton after his death; she wanted to make sure my father had received what was agreed to. There was no problem; all the deals between the two were amiable and completely satisfactory.

Work Night Holiday Celebration

Last Tuesday night was the final work night for the year, and the Steam Team enjoyed a get-together before the holidays, with delicious treats of a railroad theme created by Rose Ann Hoover (see photo below) for all the volunteers to enjoy. Another treat for the evening was a visit from Ruth and Tom to wish all an enjoyable holiday. It was good to see Tom recovering well from his recent illness. Thanks to all for an enjoyable and successful year.

Work nights will resume January 4, 2011; meanwhile, we wish everyone a very Happy New Year!