

Bill Tilden 1935-2013

by Richard M. Langworth

U.S. Coast Guard Base, Gloucester City, New Jersey, July 1965: A call from the Ops office—"Sir, there's a civilian here asking for you. He's driving the weirdest car I've ever seen." It was Bill, of course. We clicked from the start. Within a week he hired me off to north Philadelphia to help strip the oddly attractive, faux lizard skin upholstery out of a rusty old car. It turned out a bad mistake—we'd junked an ultra-rare 1951 Kaiser Emerald Dragon. They built maybe six....

Bill's automotive tastes were catholic, ranging from the E-type Jaguar he bought new and raced—probably the oldest in the hands of its original owner—to a 1941 Cadillac Sixty-Special, several Continentals and late-model Mopars, which he acquired as "future collectibles" from Chrysler, where he then worked, building dealerships. It was Detroit's heyday, Chrysler was rich and powerful, and more often than they knew, they helped finance our travels in search of relics.

Bill's wife Marilyn was resigned to his addiction, though she never forgave him for the clapped-out 1949 Frazer convertible with which Bill decorated their home in Dunwoody, Georgia. "Have you seen that Gahonkis?" she said on my first visit. "So help me, if he doesn't get rid of that thing I'm going to leave it out on the street for the garbage men."

The Frazer was restored, which eased her opinion, especially when he sold it. But that was Bill, who had a soft spot for derelicts, orphans especially. He was down to under fifty ("I'm only keeping the cream") when he was taken from us.

Our greatest collaboration was on my first book, *Kaiser-Frazer: Last Onslaught* [until then] on Detroit, which was a good job because of Bill. As historians, we were just in time. Many of the K-F principals were aging or infirm. The book made good its claim ("an intimate study of the American car industry") because Bill helped me find many of them: Henry McCaslin, chief engineer of the front-wheel-drive Kaiser; Ralph Isbrandt, who gave the revolutionary '51 its remarkable handling; designers Buzz Grisinger, Alex Tremulis and Bob Robillard, who had, with others, taken K-F styling so far above the mainstream. The book sold 7500 copies in two printings. Bill sold several hundred himself!

Time is running out and I haven't told you the half of it: of cruising the Packard Proving Grounds at 140 in Bill's E-type (ka-pow! went one of his Atlas Bucrons; we stopped to find a fist-sized hole in the tread), or in his retrofitted stick-overdrive Packard Caribbean; touring the bars and dives of the Florida panhandle, in search of some old automotive duffer; entertaining Austin Clark at the Dearborn Inn; Bill driving Brooks Stevens' Excaliburs at Indy; meandering Hershey looking for Nash dealer signs....

And that's all you have when a friend dies. Just memories. It's not enough, really, but it's all you get, and soon we're gone too, and the memories with us. He meant so much to so many, that this can only be symbolic tribute for us all. But I have no hesitation or lack of breath in this valedictory fanfare: He was always on the good side: he loved the cars, and the people who built them; he was all that was good in our world; fare thee well, my gifted, true and many-sided friend.

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