

Auburn Cord Duesenberg Museum

It's a Duesy!®



by
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Introduction



wenty five years ago - on July 6, 1974, to be precise - the Auburn Cord Duesenberg Museum first opened its doors.

The magnificent, Auburn, Indiana, art deco building certainly presents itself as a worthy historical vessel. And the cars. The *cars!* If beauty remains its own excuse for being, the automobiles alone justify the creation and existence of exhibits.

But there's more.

So *much* more.

Behind regal plate glass windows, behind elegant chrome headlights, lies a story. A true story draped with drama, tintured with tragedy and laced with enough U-turns to drive the plot of a Steven Spielberg feature film.

This book breaks the complex story into three subjects: the Auburn Automobile Company, its charismatic leader, Errett Lobban Cord, and the museum itself. Despite separate treatment, one common thread entwines each element:

Passion.

Passion to build cars. Passion to outdistance the competition - not once, but time and time again. Passion to preserve and celebrate what happened in a tiny town 70 years and more ago.

The personification of that passion, the fulcrum on which the other elements rest, is Cord.

Certainly there would have been an Auburn Automobile Company without Cord. But in all likelihood it would have died in 1924 - just another interesting but unremarkable story in car-crazy, early-twentieth century Indiana.

Possibly there would be an Auburn Cord Duesenberg Museum without Cord. But not in this building, and not featuring cars that annually draw 75,000 people from more than 35 foreign countries through its doors.

First Cord gave AAC a second life. Then he imbued its products with independence, originality.

Style.

Time enhances the seductive charms of Cord-era cars. And the company's untimely demise adds to the historical aura. Like the best of legends - the Titanic, James Dean - AAC died near the peak of its powers.

Its passing left following generations to wonder:

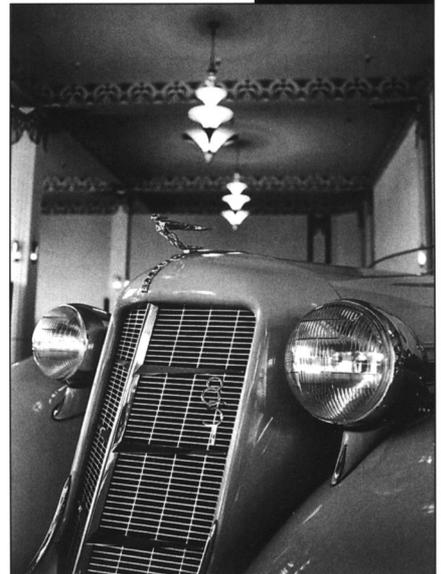
What might have been?

Which is where the Auburn Cord Duesenberg Museum comes in.

Housed in an administration building constructed when the company rounded its giddy apex, the museum serves as an ongoing passion for Auburn-related automobiles. The museum represents a repository of the hopes and dreams of a company.

The dreams that didn't come true.

And those that did.



THE HOME OF THE CLASSICS

Auburn Automobile Company

Small Town company created AUTO icons

The “Chicago Gang” wanted out of Auburn, Indiana.

The financiers with the Windy City nickname bought The Auburn Automobile Company in 1919. Why? The car maker appeared to be a solid investment in an emerging industry.

To reach profit goals, the group imposed modern efficiency methods on the small-town, family business.

Still, their bottom line sprung a leak.

By 1924, AAC – once again – had begun to sink.

Critics could charge that the Chicago Gang knew balance sheets, not nuts and bolts. True, perhaps. But if the money men failed to profit from building automobiles, they enjoyed plenty of company.

Since the turn of the century, the emerging industry had watched dozens of independent Indiana auto makers fall by the wayside. A town of 4,650 souls in 1919, Auburn alone could count itself as the incubator of at least eleven brands of cars.

The town’s largest auto factory, AAC had performed admirably as a small car maker – and stumbled predictably. It’s story followed a well-rutted road:

The sons of a successful carriage maker – Charles Eckhart of Auburn – grew enamored with the new technology known as automobiles. In 1900, Frank Eckhart, a traveling salesman for the family business, bought an Oldsmobile. About this time, he and his younger brother, Morris, began tinkering with automobiles in the Eckhart Carriage Company shops.

In 1902, Frank traveled to Chicago to buy a new Winton. Once there, he found the price too high.

Frustrated, Frank told a fellow traveling salesman that he knew how to construct his own automobile – if only he could get his hands on a differential and transmission.

With the off-hand remark, Frank unwittingly took an important step in this auto legend. The salesman happened to know vital contacts who could fulfill Frank's needs.

Supplied with technology, the Eckharts began building cars. In February of 1903, Frank displayed an Auburn prototype at the Chicago Automobile Show. By December, the recently-incorporated business officially known as "The Auburn Automobile Company," counted sales in the dozens.

Success did not arrive overnight. The Eckhart family annually weighed whether to continue its automobile adventure. Fate, however, clearly had cast its lot with mechanized mobility. As Auburn models began to look less like carriages and more like a new breed of machine, profits confirmed Frank's vision.

In 1909, the Eckharts moved their auto operations from the carriage company complex – east of the Cedar Creek bridge on the south side of Seventh Street – to the 1885-era Auburn Foundry and Machine Works complex.

At that site they built an administration building. (Today, with its second story removed, the building is all that remains of the foundry complex; the structure serves the Auburn Street department and sets just south of the bend where Ensley Avenue connects North Main and South Wayne streets.)

With each new Auburn model, engines, prices and autos themselves increased in size. With the Eckharts' new facilities, the potential for automobile production rose as well.

But storm clouds appeared.

Frank and Morris seemed at odds. Charles wrote to his elder son, " ... if [Morris] insists on [being] dissatisfied it might be better if we sell out."

Then on Sept. 30, 1915, Charles Eckhart, the patriarch of the family business, the heart and soul of the community, died in his Auburn home.

An era had ended.

In 1918, its sales held captive by World War I economic conditions, the family closed The Auburn Automobile Company.

Finally, on Thursday, June 26, 1919, a group of Chicago financiers – including chewing gum magnate William Wrigley, Jr., – bought the Eckharts' controlling interest in the company.

* * *

The "Chicago Gang" began an immediate makeover.

They envisioned a lean, modern, money-making machine. As a harbinger of their new efficient order, the financiers scratched "The" from the company's official business name.

But efficiency, in this case at least, did not serve as a code word for tightened purse strings. The financiers – who for the most part would run their business from afar – made one point abundantly, redundantly clear:

"In financial strength, and ability to exercise the magic force of ready money, the Auburn Automobile Company is one of the strongest in the industry," noted an in-house publication, "The Auburn Magazine." "There are always ample funds available to take advantage of favorable purchases for a long time ahead."

With a whiff of their ready cash to revive it, and a dose of modern, paperwork to quantify it, the new owners expected the company to roar back to life.

Yet, after initial success in 1919 and 1920 (ironically, due mainly to the Beauty Six, a model brought to production in the last gasps of the Eckharts' reign), the Chicago Gang's profits fell.

The struggles couldn't be blamed on company ownership alone. Production of all types suffered following World War I. Conversion to a peacetime economy mired the country in recession.

In addition, fierce competition for scarce parts and raw materials did not favor small automakers. Big car manufacturers ranked first on suppliers' priority lists. Due to their large-quantity orders, they received huge discounts – allowing them to undercut small competitors' prices.

Leadership at AAC during this time, however, definitely did not rise to the challenges. Except for cosmetic changes, company products offered few innovations during the Chicago Gang's reign – certainly not enough to induce reluctant buyers to part with their money.

Sales of Auburn autos fell in 1921, and 1922. A slight rebound raised hopes in 1923, but still the company bled red ink.

The financiers grew desperate.

Their deep pockets fed the company for five years – giving it a longer life than the majority of regional automakers. How long, though, could they afford such charity?

Big manufacturers were buying smaller companies – but not those tucked in a rural corner, with a brand name virtually unknown outside a small area.

It didn't take financial genius to foresee dissolution around the bend. The Chicago Gang wanted out.

Sounds like the end of the story, doesn't it?

Hardly.

It's just the beginning.

* * *

Errett Lobban Cord hit Auburn like a tornado.

The super car salesman from Chicago wrested an unusual arrangement from the Chicago Gang: if he turned the operation around and paid off the financiers' original investment, the company would be his.

If the Chicago Gang's cash five years earlier provided the company with a breath of fresh air, Cord's arrival in 1924 administered the shock of a defibrillator.

The company jumped back to life.

Seven hundred unsold Auburn autos sat on company back lots. Inventory held parts to make another 700. Cord ordered the unfinished cars assembled. He dressed up the old stock with eye-catching, light, bright paint jobs. Then he slashed prices, selling blocks of the cars to dealers at huge discounts.

With capital gained from the quick liquidation, Cord made changes beneath the skin.

One grain of auto-making knowledge had irritated the young man for years. Like its comparatively-priced competitors, AAC powered its products with four and six cylinder engines. Eight cylinder engines could be found only in prestige automobiles – cars selling for prestigious prices.

Yet Cord knew Lycoming Manufacturing Company in Pennsylvania sold 8-cylinder engines for just slightly more than six-cylinder counterparts. Why, he wondered, couldn't an automaker offer a reasonably-priced model featuring the bigger power plant?

So, in the fall of 1924, AAC introduced a line of 8-cylinder powered cars

sold at prices the average man could afford.

Still, E.L. courted the wealthy. Working from the blueprint of a dream car he planned to build, Cord instructed AAC engineers and designers to imbue Auburn's English Coach model with traffic-stopping features. The plan: get all types of customer into AAC showrooms for a look at this glamorous star; if they can't afford an English Coach, sell them a lesser model.

E.L. thought BIG. Almost immediately, he pushed the company beyond its self-imposed regional borders. AAC began weekly advertisements in the popular Saturday Evening Post. Overseas, ACC dealerships began to sprout.

Meanwhile, E.L. kept his eye on the calendar. In January of 1925, just six months after his tenure began, the New York Car Show would take place. Like a debutante ball, new models just *had* to attend this show.

E.L. applied additional design elements of his dream car to two new ACC lines (the 6-66 and 8-88). Their resulting rounded radiator shells would give Auburns a signature look for years to come.

Then Cord ordered the cars outfitted in original styling and distinctive color schemes. One color started at the hood ornament and followed graceful lines – much like the wake behind a boat – to the back of the car. Side panels and doors wore a second color, separated by a molded, raised ripple of metal.

The effect?

Auburns looked younger, more seductive. The company completed two prototypes just in time for the show.

Dealers took one look and swooned.

By November of 1925, Cord's first full year with the company, AAC had eliminated its debt and paid back the Chicago Gang for their original investment, plus interest.

On Feb. 2, 1926, Cord, just 31 years old, ascended to the company's presidency and complete control.

* * *

The pace of success only increased.

Like a chess player setting up future moves, Cord began assembling an empire. He invested in a dying Connersville, Indiana, automobile complex and modernized its manufacturing space. Factories there soon belched out Auburn bodies. Eventually, the complex would produce complete cars in

greater numbers than the Auburn plant.

On Oct. 7, 1926, Cord bought an Indianapolis car company known for quality, staid styling and inspiring performance. Duesenberg Automobile and Motors Corp. remained a separate business entity, but its fortunes – and name – became intimately tied to AAC.

In 1928, a new Auburn body design accelerated further ahead of the competition. People on the street, when seeing a distinctive car that defied convention, instinctively asked, "Is that an Auburn?"

Then in 1929, Cord rocked the industry with two completely new lines.

Some experts today contend the Duesenberg Model J fulfilled Cord's cocky, lofty ambition – to build the best car in the world. With engineering ahead of its time, packed with power, and built on a scale that dwarfed other mere autos, the Model J strode like a titan onto the Roaring Twenties scene.

No two Model Js looked alike. Custom coach shops built each body by hand. The resulting automobiles represented royalty on wheels.

And only a king's ransom could buy one.

But the Model J faced serious competition for the envy of the auto world – not from an outside automaker, but from a baby sister brand. Also in 1929, AAC introduced the first front-wheel-drive production car. To do so, the company won a technology race waged by several cutting-edge automakers.

Such an accomplishment deserved its own brand name. A name representing innovation, daring, a leader of the pack.

A name pulling the industry, not pushing.

The name chosen fit perfectly:

Cord.

The front-wheel-drive Cord (today referred to as the L-29) set new stylistic and performance standards. Designers originally tried to hide its protruding guard, which protected the front-wheel-drive mechanism. The car's namesake, however, ordered the unique look enhanced. He then made sure the front fenders flared way up – to allow the curious to peak beneath.

Front wheel drive eliminated the drive shaft, a mechanism running beneath a car to provide power to its rear wheels. The result: the new Cord sat sensuously low to the ground. Designers, who continually sought ways to make cars look longer and lower, responded with an explosion of creative body styles.

The results overcame car lovers.

Despite the furor, AAC measured its trend-setting cars' success in qualitative, rather than quantitative terms. Although the front-wheel-drive Cord sold for far less than a Model J Duesenberg, both remained out of the reach of the general public.

Cord encouraged elitist brands. He believed showroom lures, embodied most elegantly by the impractical and highly stylized Auburn boattail speedster, boosted all sales.

The public bit.

AAC products became associated with the newest and the best: the newest and best technology, the newest and best performance, the newest and best style.

To polish this image, Auburn ads showed its cars in front of expensive homes, country clubs and other symbols of fine living. Although Auburn models remained reasonably priced, the public connected the company with wealth, prestige and privilege.

The image did boost sales – as long as the public lusted for upper class status.

Winds, however, were shifting.

In October of 1929, the stock market crashed.

AAC drove ahead, full steam. Some of its greatest accomplishments lay before it. An iceberg, though, lurked beneath the surface.

* * *

After profits fell for the first time under Cord in 1930, the company roared back in 1931.

As other car makers – including the big manufacturers – gasped for breath, AAC introduced another trend-setting body style. The Auburn and Connersville factories struggled to stay up with demand. Profits climbed to a record high.

Then, from that lofty height, a free fall followed.

America, stepping painfully over the broken shards of its economy, turned against wealth, prestige and privilege – the very qualities AAC products symbolized.

On comic pages and movie screens, a new breed of hero appeared: poor, simple-minded and honest. In contrast, villains invariably came from wealth. Riches in Depression-era America became synonymous with greed, shady deals and elitism.

False airs of wealth became stylistic anathema to the times.