

Memories of Henry Austin Clark, Jr. And The Long Island Automotive Museum

By Frank Wemple
Photos courtesy of Walter McCarthy

Grace Gluck's article about Henry Austin Clark, Jr., and his Long Island Automotive Museum in the Winter, 2010, issue of the "Metropolitan Skyline" brought back many fond memories of Austie and his collection. Grace asked me to share some of them with Metro members, so here goes.

My association with Austie Clark goes back to my early childhood. (Actually, he preferred to be called Austin, but many of his friends and my family called him Austie, so that's what we'll call him in this article.) Austie's family lived in Flushing on Long Island where my mother was also born and raised. The Clarks and the Wallers (my mother's family) knew each other and both attended St. George's Episcopal Church on Main Street in Flushing where my grandfather was Rector. One of my grandfather's successors as Rector of St. George's, Dougald Maclean, was my godfather and he married Austie and Wally (her name was actually Wallita).

Ever since my mother was a small girl, she and her family spent summers on eastern Long Island and after my parents were married we shared a pre-Revolutionary War house in the rural farming community of Sagaponack with my mother's older sister's family. Sagaponack is southeast of Bridgehampton and is not far from Southampton where the Long Island Automotive Museum was. Naturally, we made a couple of visits to Austie and his museum every summer. I think it's safe to say that Austie was primarily responsible for infecting me with the antique car virus which has no known cure.

The museum had an American LaFrance fire engine that had bench seats in the rear and rides were available for the kids (and adults, too!). Austie or a friend of his would drive the fire engine along the dirt roads that wound around the property behind the museum. The kid who was lucky enough to ride in the front seat got to crank the siren and I was that lucky kid on more than one

Right: The opening day of the museum in 1948. Austie is in the center with his three children - two boys and a girl. The helicopter was used to film a special parade from the air.



Above: The wedding of Austie and Wally (Wallita) on June 17, 1944.

occasion. I suspect there was some favoritism involved. One time when I was 9 or 10 years old Austie was about to take his Pierce-Arrow Model 66 Runabout out for a ride and he asked if I wanted to go along. (Silly question!) The Pierce had a small seat mounted outboard from the passenger's seat on the left and I wanted to ride in it. My mother, quite understandably to me now, would have none of that and she announced that if I wanted to go, I would ride "inside" with Austie. That Pierce is currently owned by CCA member Bill Ruger who had the





Above: Austie and his Mercer Raceabout in front of the museum in 1952. Note the "modern" cars in the parking lot.



Above: The sign in front of the museum in 1952. Austie is admiring the pretty young lady sitting behind the wheel of his Simplex (nc). Austie frequently put pretty young ladies behind the wheel in his photographs.

outboard seat removed and the main seats moved back so people with long legs (like Bill and me) can actually drive the car.

The last summer in Sagaponack for my family was 1956, although my aunt, uncle and cousins continued to rent the old house every summer until my aunt died in 1974. After I got my driver's license in 1963, I made regular trips out there and almost always stopped at the museum to see Austie (and the cars, of course!). On one of those visits in the early Seventies Austie took me for a thrilling ride in his

Mercer Raceabout over the narrow, twisting roads north of the museum. He drove at speeds considerably above the speed limit and sitting on what was not much more than a bare chassis, it seemed more like rocket speed. At one point, we roared, with the cutout open, past a modern Cadillac and Austie had a couple of choice unprintable words about people who dared get in his way.

On some of my visits in the Sixties and Seventies, I had the distinct pleasure of accompanying Austie and other



*Above Center: This is the way Austie found many of his cars. This picture was probably taken in the Fifties.
Left: This is the way I often saw Austie's desk. (Yes, there really is a desk under all that stuff). This picture was not staged!
Right: Austie sitting behind a relatively neat desk in his Winter Office.*



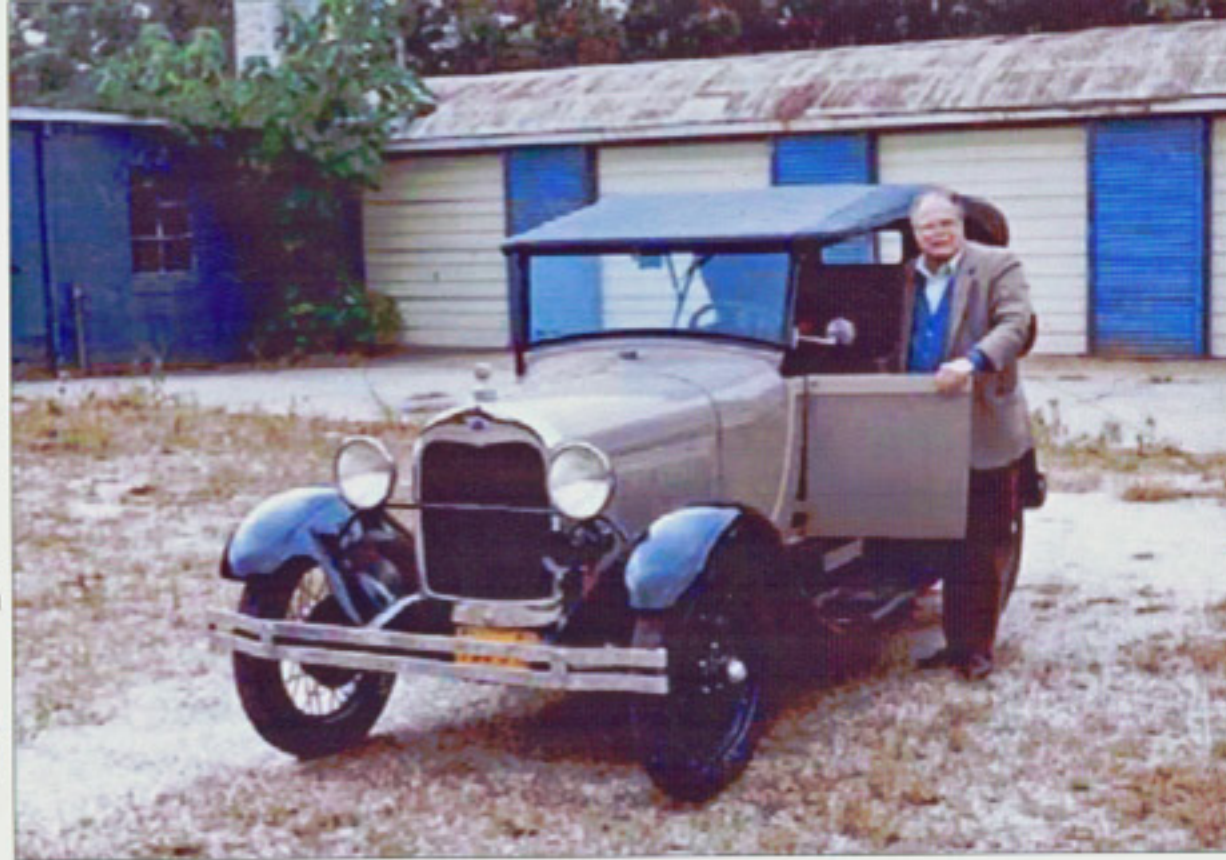
friends, often in an old car from the museum, to his favorite lunchtime watering hole, John Duck's Restaurant in Southampton. There was always lively discussion and Austie frequently had some choice comments about whatever good looking young ladies might be in the vicinity. Naturally, most of the discussion centered around old cars and the spirits flowed freely. Austie was very generous and he almost always picked up the check no matter how many people might be in attendance. One time, however, Walt Gosden and I were able to enter into a conspiracy with our waitress so we could get the check. Austie grumbled loudly and threatened never to tip that waitress again, although we (including the waitress) knew he was all bluff. Austie would never pass up the opportunity to generously tip a pretty waitress!



At this point some of you dear readers have realized that the museum was open to the public at least into the Seventies and you are no doubt wondering why Grace's article stated that the museum closed to the public after the 1963 auction. Grace got her information from two articles in "Old Cars Weekly," both of which said that after his auction in 1963, Austie closed the museum to the public and kept only a small collection of his favorite cars. However, while Austie may have sold a number of cars at the 1963 auction, there were still many left and he undoubtedly acquired more over the next decade. During the Sixties and Seventies the museum was definitely open to the public and the main building was always full as was the L shaped row of garages behind the museum where the fire engines and other cars were displayed. There were several storage buildings on the property that held additional cars and Austie sometimes rotated some cars between the museum and the storage buildings.

During this time period I also visited Austie at his house in Glen Cove which was known as the museum's Winter Office. Austie's desk was indeed a marvel to behold and I can honestly say that I have never seen such clutter in my life! There were times when the desk was so overgrown with papers and other stuff that he would pull out the center drawer and put a piece of plywood over it to use as a writing surface. However, the plywood would soon become inundated and Austie would then be forced to clean up the desk (sort of). Despite the astounding clutter, Austie always knew what was in the piles and he was able to produce some truly first class antique automotive articles and publications in this environment.

Having inherited a very large Cuban sugar operation from his father, Austie had the wherewithal to stock the museum with cars and to keep it going even if admissions didn't cover his expenses. Unfortunately, Fidel Castro ended all that



when he nationalized the sugar industry in Cuba. Austie kept the museum open for awhile by declaring his losses as deductions on his income taxes, but the IRS soon put a stop to that by declaring that he could only claim that deduction for a limited number of years in a row. Consequently, Austie was forced to close the museum in 1980 and he sold the bulk of his collection in two or three auctions.

I attended the first auction which I believe was in 1980. It was sad to see cars that I had known for so many years go across the block. Austie was the auctioneer and he provided interesting commentary about each car. He also provided a couple of kegs of beer on ice, perhaps to help loosen up people's wallets. I confess that the beer slightly helped alleviate my depression.

After the museum closed and most of the cars had been sold, Austie periodically opened the buildings for friends to pick through his extensive parts collection. These were known as Iron Range Days. If Austie didn't like you or thought you might resell parts for a profit, he wouldn't sell you anything no matter what you offered. If he liked you and thought you would not take advantage of him, he was likely to sell you what you wanted for a very reasonable price and sometimes for no price at all. At lunch time he would declare the place closed and all would troop over to John Duck's for lunch and libation.

The badly deteriorated and overgrown museum grounds are still owned by the Clark family. 📷



*Top: Henry Austin Clark, Jr. at the closed museum. This picture was likely taken in 1991, shortly before Austie's death.
Left: The sad state of the museum in 1991, eleven years after it closed. The site is much more deteriorated and overgrown today.*