

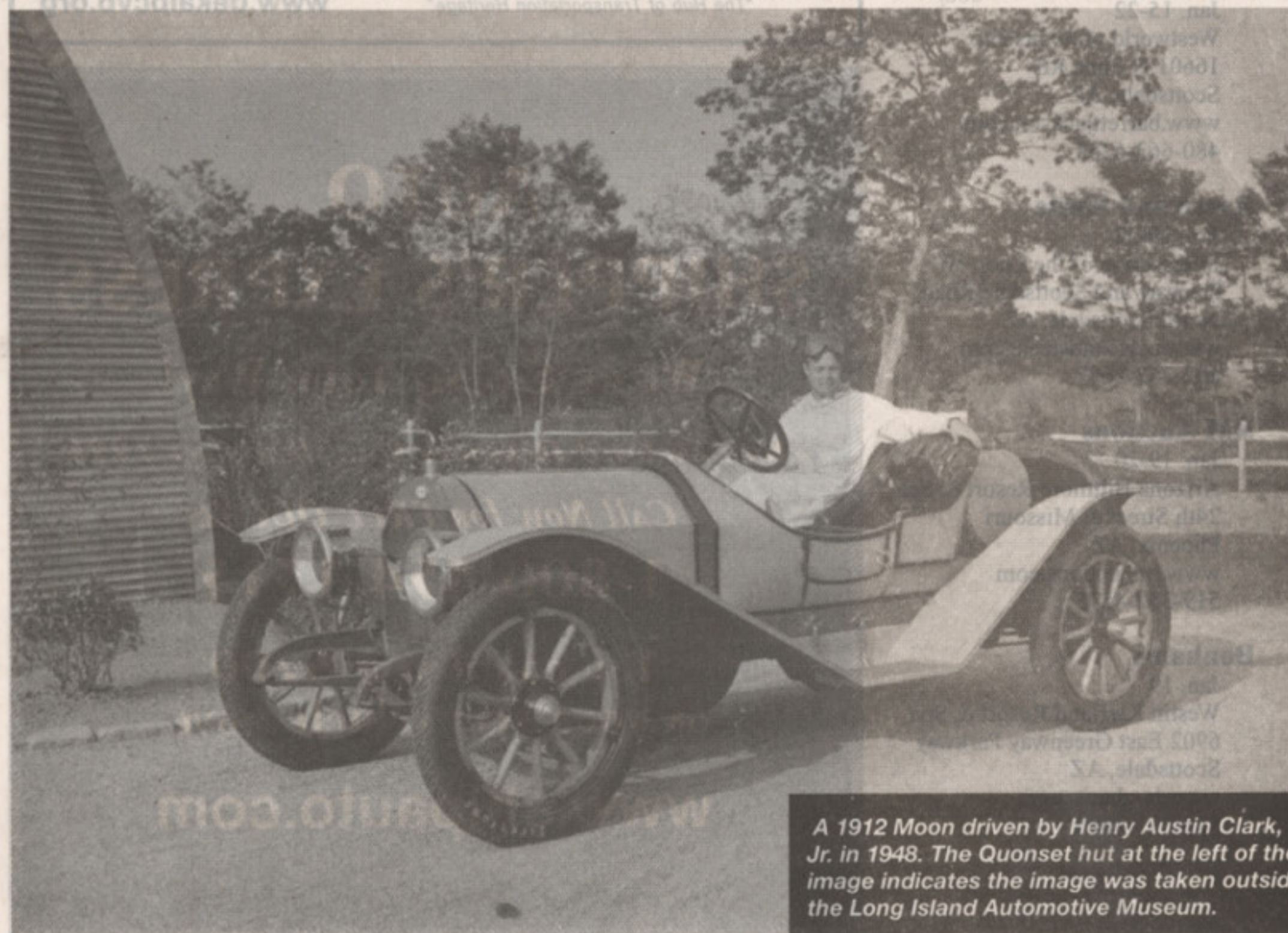
# Always Austie

Remembering old car hobby  
icon Henry Austin Clark, Jr.

By Geoff Gehman

**T**he Long Island Automotive Museum was one of the landmarks along the Montauk Highway in Southampton, N.Y. It was a big blue building that resembled an airplane hanger with three humps. Behind that bulky steel facade was every conceivable classic car: primitive, elegant, sporty, crazy, exotic, erotic, extinct. Inside that cavernous garage my heart raced and my imagination soared.

One of my favorite vintage vehicles in those Quonset huts was the 1907 Thomas Flyer that won the 1908 around-the-world race from Times Square in New York to Paris. I couldn't believe that such a basic automobile — basically, an open-air wagon with a steering wheel and a motor — traveled nearly 22,000 miles in 169 days. Another top choice was a Pierce Silver Arrow made for the 1933-'34 Century of Progress International Exposition in Chicago. I was less impressed by



A 1912 Moon driven by Henry Austin Clark, Jr. in 1948. The Quonset hut at the left of the image indicates the image was taken outside the Long Island Automotive Museum.



the pedigree than the sleek, smart body. The recessed door handles, the tapered back, the front fenders that stored spare wheels: here was a piece of moving sculpture. The adventure continued around the grounds. For no trip to the Long Island Automotive Museum was complete without cruising the backyard dirt road in an antique hook-and-ladder fire engine that spewed smoke. Cranking the window-rattling siren made me feel like the captain of the resident fire department.

For me, the museum was a candy store. Somehow, it makes sense it was owned and operated by an heir to a Cuban-American sugar fortune, a man with a sweet tooth for classic cars. Born in 1917, Henry Austin "Austie" Clark, Jr. acquired his first early auto, a 1915 Ford Model T, as a Harvard freshman. After leaving the U.S. Navy, where he served as a radar technician in World War II, Austie began collecting vintage vehicles in earnest. By 1948, he owned 35, some of which he exhibited in his new Long Island Automotive Museum.

Austie was a detective with flair. He found that 1933 Pierce Silver Arrow in a salvage yard in Cicero, Ill. He bought it because it was stylish, because it was one of only six made that year, and because he could easily polish its provenance. The holes in the trunk, he loved to say, were made by bullets fired by gangsters employed by Al Capone, the car's original owner and Public Enemy No. 1.

Austie doubled as a canny archaeologist and an uncanny psychologist. "My father amassed his collection, in large part, because widows wanted these hulks hauled out of their garages," says his son, H.A. "Hal" Clark III. "He had all sorts of stuff, from the ridiculous to the sublime. He had 17 cars that no one knew existed."

In his heyday, Austie owned some 250 autos and countless other motorized devices (e.g., a gas-powered pogo stick). What separated him from other collectors was his role as a one-stop shop. His museum hosted "The Iron Range," a flea market of rare parts, many made of brass from the brass era. His house in Glen Cove, Long Island, was a museum of rare books and catalogs, photographs and postcards, paintings and trophies. Visitors could read car magazines owned by Kaiser Wilhelm in a pair of bucket seats from a Locomobile. Today, they can see most of Austie's archives at

the Henry Ford Museum. Austie filtered his encyclopedic knowledge into "The Standard Catalog of American Cars: 1805-1942," a bible for collectors and historians. He was the chief researcher for writer and good friend Beverly Rae Kimes, an acclaimed auto authority who shared his fondness for driving the corkscrew turns between fact, fiction and fable. He strained his love of interviewing, editorializing and yarning into "Young Nuts and Old Bolts," a 1972-1978 column in *Old Cars* newspaper (now *Old Cars Weekly*).

Austie's many lives were shared by Dave Brownell, founding editor of *Old Cars*, former editor of *Hemmings Motor News* and boon companion. Brownell edited Clark's columns, traded information with Clark on auctions and appraisals and raced Clark's cars. He even bought one of Clark's cars, a 1924 Bentley 3 Litre. From his Vermont home, Brownell recalled Austie as a 120-mph rogue and shared several of his notable experiences of Austie.

#### Austie encounters

"I met Austie in 1967 in Manhattan at an auction of vintage auto memorabilia," Brownell said. "All he did was basically outbid me on every piece. Afterward I said to him, 'You're Henry Austin Clark.'"

"The one and the same."  
"I was chasing a number of the things you bought."

"Oh, are you an automotive art collector?"  
"A budding collector."

"Oh, you must come back to the house and I'll show you some things you probably haven't seen."

"So I went out to Glen Cove and spent a delightful afternoon with him. I bought a couple of pieces at very, very reasonable prices."

"That's how our friendship began. It was worth losing out to him."

"Another time we were going into the city to an auction of auto memorabilia from the estate of [auto journalist] Ken Purdy. Ken was a guy who interested a lot of people in old cars and cars collecting with his enthusiasm. He had a very romantic way of talking; one of his books was called 'Kings of the Road.' Austie's wife Waleta — 'Wally' — could be tough; he nicknamed her 'The War Department.' Before we went to the auction she told Austie, 'You've got enough stuff here; don't you dare bring anything

home.' And he said: 'Yes, dear,' which was always his response to her. Austie was an inveterate collector. So, of course, we loaded that car with so much stuff it was dragging. After we stopped at every topless place on Queens Boulevard — he was a collector of pulchritude, too — we came back to Glen Cove at midnight and hid stuff in the cellar so Wally wouldn't see it right away.

The next morning, Wally asks Austie, 'What did you buy at auction?' 'Nothing,' he says. And she says, 'Well, you must have bought something, because there's something wrong with the rear springs.'

"Austie used to hold these gatherings in the backyard of his house in Glen Cove. It was a wonderful microcosm of terrific automobiles and terrific people. I remember one time they had to go out and rescue Charles Addams (cartoonist, vintage car collector and Clark friend) because his Bugatti had crapped out on the Long Island Expressway."

"So they brought it back to Glen Cove and somebody started fiddling with it. And 'Gggggaaaaa!' Somebody said, 'Wait a minute,' and stuck his hand in the carburetor and pulled out an honest-to-God butterfly. It was blocking the air intake. He started it again and this time it turned over: 'Gggggaaaaa — vrr-room!' And I said to myself: 'Only a Bugatti could be stopped by a butterfly.'"

"The Thomas Flyer, that was the crown jewel in Austie's collection, in a way. Yet he could never get George Schuster to actually verify that was the car that he drove when he won the around-the-world race in 1908. That was one of the great collecting frustrations of Austie's life."

"I'd say my favorite vehicle of his was his [1911] Mercer [Type 35] Raceabout. It was designed by Finley [Robertson] Porter, a Long Islander who said he wanted to make great cars for the public. It's probably one of the great genius designs of the early 20th century. The steering is pinpoint accurate. The balance of those cars, the performance — they were the Corvettes of their time. It's one of my dream cars."

"Austie was always a grand host. One year he hosted the Pioneer Automobile Touring Club for brass-era cars. I didn't have a brass-era car so he lent me his Mercer for five days. We were doing demo laps at the [Bridgehampton] Race Circuit and I was trying to be very



careful and take care of Austie's car and this guy [Bill Campbell] in a [1910] Stevens-Duryea — a great, lumbering car — chops me on the corner. Well, that got my dander up and I went by that Stevens-Duryea like it was tied to a post. And I looked at the sweep hand on the speedometer and it was 94 mph — the highest speed in any segment. "Well, I told Austie I was a bad boy. And Austie looked at the speedometer and he smiled and he said, 'You weren't a bad boy. You were a good boy.' Anybody else would have torn their hair out. His attitude was, 'Did you enjoy the car?' And, boy, did I ever!

"He loved his Model T fire chief's car. He loved fire engines, probably as much as cars. He had this bright idea he wanted his own fire department, so he started the Sandy Hollow Fire Company. He appointed his friends as captains with badges. I was disappointed that I never became an honorary captain. I'd pester him, but he never gave one to me. I know plenty of people who dodged speeding tickets, because they had that badge.

"Austie was always holding these sales of old parts, rusty parts, bits for cars at the museum. They were called the Iron Range or Early Iron and they went back to the '50s. It was never a formal announcement: you just sort of found out through the old-car gravevine. There were a lot of old, decrepit chassis — a bunch of skeletons of early cars — hanging around the back of the museum. If they weren't so old, it would simply be a junkyard.

"The last Iron Range I went to, Austie had a radiator shield from an SS Jaguar just sitting in the corner. 'Austie,' I said, 'How much is the SS Jaguar?' "That's not a Jaguar, that's a '32 Chrysler." "No," I said, "that's an SS Jaguar." "Don't argue with Uncle Austie." "Alright, how much is the '32 Chrysler?" So I bought it and sold it to a Jag guy.

"It's a privilege to know some people, and that's the way I felt about Austie. I mean, the depth of his knowledge was awe-inspiring. He had a steel-trap mind when it came to finding stuff and minutiae. And the resources he had in that library were just mind boggling. Well, he couldn't have had a 'Standard Catalog' without it; that book did more for the history of the American auto than anything else. And he was never one of these guys to throw his weight around. If you made a mistake, he wouldn't jump all over you. He knew better than most people, and he was content to know.

"There was no pretense about him. Here he is, the son of a wealth, living in the private enclave of Glen Cove, has a summer home in Southampton — he could have been a hideous snob. Instead, he was one of the great guys. Believe me, there are an awful lot of cars that wouldn't be on the road if it wasn't for his parts. He just wanted to see those cars get back on the road. And he was so generous. He had all this literature, all this ephemera, and he donated the whole shooting match to the Henry Ford Museum. In his own quiet way, he had a real mission for the preservation of automotive history. That was

his work, that was his job. I think he always enjoyed what he was doing. He enjoyed it so much, he wanted everybody else to enjoy it, too. And there's nothing wrong with that.

"I learned so much from him. One time he told me, 'You know and I know these early cars don't start a damn. So lesson number one, when you're guiding one of these cars, is try to keep it rolling. Don't stop unless you absolutely have to.' Because it's much more difficult to go through the gears than it is to keep the car rolling.

"The other thing he taught me is you shouldn't take yourself too seriously. Life should have some fun to it. When Austie died, my ex-wife had a very trenchant observation. 'You know,' she said, 'his entire life was one long fraternity party.' That about sums him up. If you liked cars and you liked an occasional drink and you liked to have a good time, you were his guy.

"I remember one time we were on the Glidden Tour, staying at the Lake Placid Hotel, I remember I was using Austie's Mercer. And Wally told Austie, 'Our neighbor just lost the presidency of the Chase Manhattan Bank.' And Austie says, 'It serves the sonofabitch right — he could never make a decent martini.'

"I just about fell on the floor. That's just about pure W.C. Fields; that's such pure Austin Clark."

#### Postscript

Austie's grand venture, the Long Island Automotive Museum, had an inglorious end. In 1980, he closed the three-bay Quonset hut to the public after decades of declining revenues. He blamed his fall from grace on the Town of Southampton's refusal to let him advertise on billboards around town. He apparently didn't benefit enough from the extra traffic on the Montauk Highway after the 1972 opening of Exit 72 on the Long Island Expressway, which enabled motorists to bypass Riverhead and race faster to the East End.

At that time, Austie auctioned many of his vintage vehicles. Being a ringleader, he naturally served as his own auctioneer. Brownell watched the sale with Charles Addams and another Austie crony. "We started making side bets about which cars would make the most money," Brownell said. "And Charlie Addams was really good. He won two-thirds of the bets. He cleaned our clocks."

Austie died in 1991, three years after Charlie Addams expired in one of his cars. By then, the Southampton museum was a wreck; today, it's a dead mausoleum. The Quonset hut has a rusty façade, broken windows, graffiti and a gap-toothed sign that reads, "LONG ISLAND MUSEUM." The parking lot is a grove of rogue birch trees. It seems entirely fitting that nearby is a company that sells funeral monuments.

Photos courtesy of the Walter McCarthy Collection, as posted on VanderbiltCupRaces.com.

To get a copy of Henry Austin Clark's masterpiece book *Standard Catalog of American Cars 1985-1942*, visit [www.shopoldcarsweekly.com](http://www.shopoldcarsweekly.com), or call 888-258-0929.



Henry Austin Clark, Jr. with a Model A Ford at the "Iron Range" after the museum closed.