

Henry Austin Clark Jr.



OTHER PEOPLE COLLECTED CARS, but only a few of them did so with equal ambition and an eye toward significance matching that of Henry Austin Clark Jr. The legacy of Clark, who died 20 years ago, is vaster and more varied than most collectors can dream. He bequeathed upon the world of cars an unbelievably huge and priceless trove from the automobile's earliest years, hailing from everywhere in the world. Those who saw it regularly are still staggered by its scope.

Just maybe, Clark's early obsession with recorded music was a hint of what he might do once he turned to documenting cars. He was born in 1917, a child of impressive wealth, growing up in the Flushing neighborhood of Queens, in New York City. His father was treasurer of the Cuban American Sugar Company, which processed vast amounts of cane sugar under the brand name of Jack Frost—a huge neon sign adorned one of the company's refineries on the city's East River.

The younger Clark first proved to be something of a Marconi imitator, a

true prodigy in the growing technology of radio. Clark's longtime friend and library curator, Walt Gosden, recalled that early in his life, Clark made some friends among liquor deliverymen, so to speak, who used his radios to monitor marine patrols along the creeks and marshes of Flushing Meadow. Clark would have still been a precocious kid then.

In 1951, Clark moved his family to a manor community, Meadow Springs, in the exclusive town of Glen Cove. The younger Clark went to Harvard, studied law, and graduated as a classmate of John F. Kennedy.

According to Gosden, Clark used to say that his last true paycheck came from the federal government in 1945, once his war service was completed. He inherited a huge block of Jack Frost stock and received big checks simply for showing up at board of directors meetings. Clark very much preferred his other pastime during his college years: indulging his heart-pounding love of swing and jazz, becoming a dealer for RCA's Bluebird Records and prowling the Manhattan jazz clubs

at night, selling vinyl from the trunks of various cars, including his 1939 Buick, for artists ranging from Earl "Fatha" Hines to Rudy Vallee. Clark probably bought his first older vehicle, a Model T Ford, at age 11, and soon went on to acquire a two-cylinder Autocar truck.

Clark's favorite make was Simplex. Most people don't realize that Clark also bought the company, acquiring the right to resume production of these distinguished cars, which tells us a lot about his tastes. He served as vice president of the Bridgehampton race circuit on eastern Long Island, and after getting his collection up to around 50 cars, established a place to hold some of them, the Long Island Automotive Museum in Southampton. At any given time, some 40 to 70 cars were displayed there, led by the actual Thomas Flyer that had won the 1908 New York-to-Paris race, which Clark had rescued from a junkyard.

He was also one of the first collectors attracted to trucks. Walter recalls Clark buying a 1912 solid-tire Alco in the Bronx and trying to drive it to Southampton, making it a fair distance across Long Island before it threw a connecting rod.

The museum remained open from 1948 to 1980; the old-money types in town wouldn't let Clark put up signs advertising the collection, which was gradually sold off at auction. His more significant legacy was the gigantic library he amassed, which, following Clark's death in 1991, was acquired by The Henry Ford. According to Gosden, his librarian, "He had a fairly extensive mansion and the entire basement, floor to ceiling, was unbound periodicals: French, American, British, *Motor*, *Autocar*, *Horseless Age*, you name it. Then he put a building on the back of the mansion that was approximately 25 feet by 40, for the bound periodicals, sales catalogs, things like that. Then he had the indexes for everything.

"He was really good friends with Charles Addams, the cartoonist (the TV sitcom, *The Addams Family*, was based on his drawings), who was a real car guy, too," Walt told us. "When Austin had a wake after he closed the museum, Charles showed up wearing a black armband. I thought that was really classy." 69