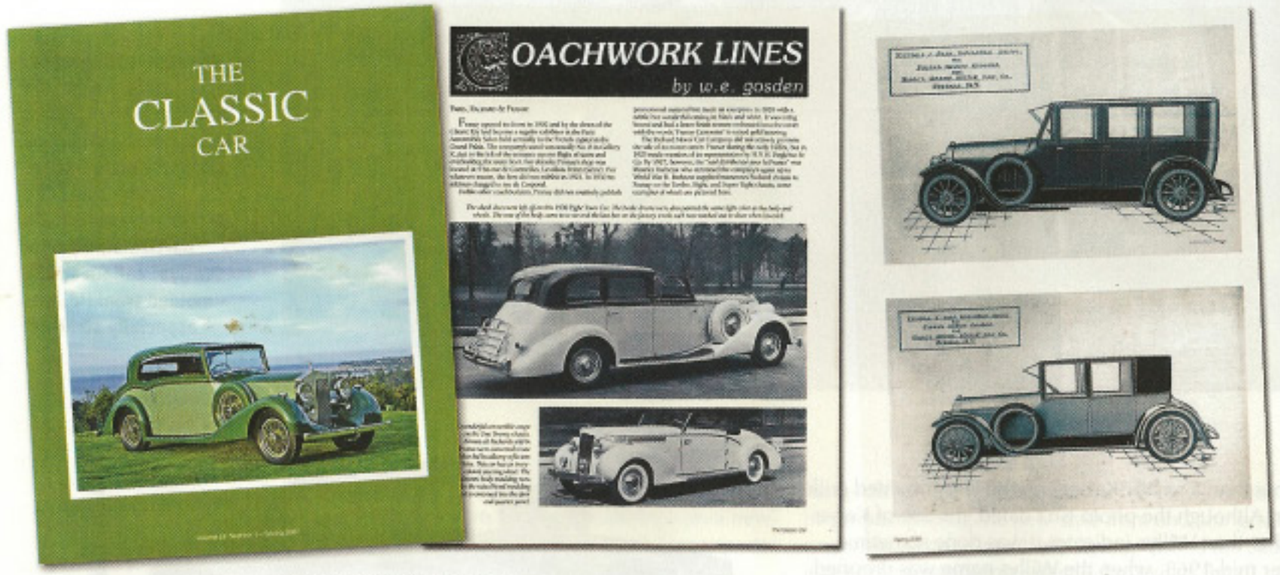
# WALTER E. GOSDEN

## *The Classic Car Club of America's beloved coachwork historian*




**BY MARK J. McCOURT**
PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHARD LENTINELLO
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The Classic car world is a better place because Walter E. Gosden once chose old cars over Beatles records. Now a respected historian and coachwork specialist for the Classic Car Club of America, this understated New Yorker has been a lifelong automobile enthusiast. Walt, as he's called, has educated and entertained CCCA members with his writings and, through his thorough research, has illuminated the fascinating history of luxury automobiles built between World Wars I and II.

"My parents brought home a TV set in the early 1950s. The networks would show Cagney's gangster movies from the 1930s, and I enjoyed watching them because I liked their jazz music," Walter remembers. "Those movies were also my introduction to cars: I'd look at our family car, a 1949 Pontiac station wagon, and then I'd look on the TV and see those Twenties and Thirties cars. To me, cars with running boards always looked better, even though many were boxes on wheels. That excitement stuck with me, and I can still look at a car with running boards and get a thrill. It sounds crazy for someone who is 61 to feel like I did back then, but nothing's changed."

Years of viewing those images on the small black-and-white TV screen came to a head when Walter was a young teenager. "I wanted to get a car with running boards. It wasn't really that I wanted to drive—I just wanted to own a stock, original, non-street-rodded car with running boards.

"My parents told me to save my money," he continues. "So I got my allowance of a quarter a week, and saved my Christmas and birthday money. I didn't go out and buy comic books—I was determined. In 1963, I found a 1931 Plymouth four-door sedan that wasn't running, and hadn't run since 1936. My father, Jack, was a brick mason, and was somewhat mechanically inclined; he agreed that it was a solid car. I had the $400 for it, and my folks said, 'We can't say no, because he saved his money.' So I bought it. Of course, the relatives said, 'You bought what? And you towed it home on a rope?' " he laughs.

The purchase of his Plymouth introduced Walter to a new world of collectible automobilia and, in turn, fostered his growing interest in art and design. "After I got my car, I'd go over to my friends' houses, and they'd show me different things that they had picked up for their own cars. One guy pulled out an original sales catalog for his car. My eyes bugged out. The catalogs done between the wars were primarily artists' renderings; the bold advertising and Art Deco typeface and layouts just blew me away. So there I was, 14 years old, and was like, 'Art Deco? Airbrushed? Wow!' I suddenly decided that Beatles records were okay, but this was really fun—I'd listen to the Beatles on the radio instead. And I started to


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**Walter handled his own body and mechanical restoration work for years, but these days, he prefers to leave the heavy lifting to the professionals. His Classic coachbuilt 1931 Franklin Victoria Brougham and 1940 Buick Roadmaster Convertible Sedan, seen here, are joined by a 1933 Chrysler Royal 8 Convertible Coupe and 1936 Packard 8 Club Sedan—all are regularly exercised.**

collect magazines and sales literature, because it captures time and puts you right back there."

Walter pursued an education, and later a career, in art instruction, and his interest in vintage automobiles continued to grow. "I bought a 1930 Franklin Airman four-door sedan, because my friends had Franklins. That car didn't run, but the Plymouth still did, although I soon physically outgrew it: I got too tall, and no matter how I adjusted the seat, I couldn't drive it anymore.

"I was about 23 and out of graduate school when I learned about a 1931 Franklin Victoria Brougham with body by Derham that was for sale. I saw that car in early 1950s club magazines, but it had sold and disappeared for years. When it appeared again, I felt I had to own it. I sold the Plymouth and the Franklin Airman, and I got a loan for the balance from my folks.

"This was right around the time I joined the Classic Car Club of America. To me, this is a multimarque organization trying to preserve an era, just like the Horseless Carriage Club does. I was introduced to the CCCA by an older friend, Guy Roese. He'd taken me to my first CCCA Grand Classic, in Morristown, New Jersey, in the 1960s. At that time, I was familiar with the four-cylinder Plymouth, but he pulled up in a 1940 Cadillac 75 formal sedan that blew my mind.

"Guy fostered my love of original cars. Back in those days, the thought was not to keep cars original, but to restore and repaint them to win trophies, even if a car's original paint was all there, but thin in spots. He taught me that you don't repaint them, you clean and preserve them; even if the upholstery is a little worn, leave it alone. He was artistic as well, and he was an excellent mechanic; he could fix anything. He drove his Classics in good weather and bad, and didn't believe in competing for awards."

**Through his work with prominent automotive historian Henry Austin Clark Jr., Walter met and worked with other notables like author and *Automobile Quarterly* editor Beverly Rae Kimes.**

In addition to introducing the young man to the greater world of CCCA-defined Classic cars, Roese imparted a life lesson that Walter would later teach his art students. "I admired his patience and the way that he'd look at things. He would puff on a corncob pipe for a while. We kidded him about that, but he was thinking about how to solve a problem, and then he'd go and do it," he muses. "I later told my art students, 'You look but you don't see, and you listen but you don't hear. I'm not here to teach you to be a good artist; I'm here to teach you to hear what you're listening to and to see what you're looking at.' I approach my research the same way. I gather my facts, walk around with an issue in my head for a time, then sit down and write."

It was a giant in the automotive history world who fostered Walter's meticulous research style: Henry Austin Clark Jr. "I worked for Austin when I was in college, and he became my mentor," Walter told us. "His library, which was located in Glen Cove, Long Island, New York, was the largest private automotive library in the world; he had a 20 x 30-foot building attached to this house with floor-to-ceiling stacks, and the entire basement of his mansion was filled with international periodicals, full runs of *Autocar*, the British *Motor*, the American *Motor, The Automobile, Motor World, Omnia* and more. As much as I was helping him in his library, being exposed to those materials was an education for me, and he opened my eyes to European classics of that era. He was always very encouraging."

Through his membership in the CCCA and his association with Clark, Walter met other luminary automotive historians like *Special Interest Autos magazine* founder Michael Lamm and the late Beverly Rae Kimes. "Beverly Kimes was there doing research as the editor of *Automobile Quarterly*. We began chatting, and she asked if I'd contribute something to *AQ*. She knew I'd written for club magazines, and in

speaking with me, she could tell I had the knowledge and the ability to put words together. I agreed, and it was through this writing that I came to focus on automotive coachwork, because of my interest in artwork.

"The recent history between the two wars is probably one of the hardest things to document, because things weren't really written down in that period like they were prior to 1900. Back then, few people cared who designed and built the bodies. Now, those craftsmen are gone. So I want to learn who supplied the hinges, and who made the springs for the seats. I'm researching this industry, finding pieces to the puzzle and learning how they fit together.

"I very much look at things from an artist's viewpoint, which is probably why trophies and awards aren't part of my lexicon when it comes to collectible cars. They are beautiful objects, and they make you feel good. A love of art, styling, design and color attracted me to cars, and back then, you could custom-order a Pierce-Arrow with a seat made to your measurements, and personally approve a rendering of the body style and colors of your choice. This was artistic integrity, but it's largely gone today."

Custom coachwork became Walt's specialty, and he's been publicizing his findings and research through his column, "Coachwork Lines," published in the CCCA's quarterly magazine, *The Classic Car*. "I've always felt it was very important to share information. A lot of people are collectors, but they don't have the ability to do research or to write things. Those of us who can have to be responsible and get the information out there for everyone else. Hoarding information makes my blood boil," he says.

The coachbuilt, Derham-bodied Franklin that so enthralled Walter is still in the Gosden family garage, after 38 years and some 50,000 miles. Keeping it company are a 1933 Chrysler Royal 8 convertible coupe ("My friend Stan Marcum restored it magnificently, and it's the only restored car I've ever bought"), a 1936 Packard 8 Club Sedan ("It's a work in progress") and a 1940 Buick Roadmaster Convertible Sedan ("I like the GM look from 1936-'41, and I admire the overhead-valve straight-eight Buicks; for the era, it was and is a fast car"). All of these cars are regularly driven when the roads are not salted.

Buying and restoring coachbuilt cars is different than doing the same with factory-built models, Walter explains. "It's okay to buy a non-running example, but be aware that coachbuilt cars most likely did not use the same interior hardware—window cranks and door handles—as factory-bodied cars. Classic and coachbuilt cars had a lot of structural framework made out of seasoned or kiln-dried ash, and if this wood is rotted, it will take a custom cabinetmaker's skill to replace the framework, which can be costly. Their interiors were made with fine cloths and leathers that were costly when new, so replacing them will also cost a lot, too, and exterior trim can be very difficult to restore if it's badly pitted."

Despite these coachbuilt cars' advancing age, Walter feels strongly that they will continue to ignite people's interest. "An entire generation is starting to let go of the treasures they saved back in the 1940s and 1950s, things that have been hidden in garages and attics for 65 years. All of a sudden, there is new stuff to be discovered, and new generations, like my 16-year-old son, are finding Brass cars and Classics as interesting as cars built in the 1960s, '70s and even the 1980s. Younger people will realize that they don't have to be intimidated by a car with running boards, which doesn't have pollution equipment or vacuum-formed plastic moldings. They were steel and wood; you don't need high-tech machinery to work on old cars."

When asked for the advice he might offer new enthusiasts, be they young or old, Walter is quick to reply: "Enjoy it at whatever level you can. Listen to somebody else, even if it's not about a car or era you're interested in, because you can learn something. Don't worry about whether you can win an award or not. Spread the word—this is a great way to have a good time, and it has been for me for almost 50 years. Take the car seriously, but not yourself.

"Automotive history is good, but it can also be very dry. Some books that have been done by academics can be like reading a writ from a trial. Automotive history has to be a good read, because that will motivate people and promote what we're trying to promote –it's supposed to be fun. Yes, a collector car is an investment, but for most of us, it's an investment in well-being."

**Fifty years of collecting classic car and coachbuilder literature, images and other ephemera has made Walter's files among the most complete in the industry. He has a multitude of original factory photographs to illustrate his quarterly CCCA column, "Coachwork Lines."**


**Walter's longstanding fascination with coachbuilders, both in America and abroad, has prompted him to collect the body and sill emblems that were once attached to those custom-built automobiles. This collection includes defunct coachbuilders from England, Germany, France and the U.S.**