



Briggs Cunningham in his famous Cadillac "Le Monstre" race car in 1950. I believe this car was in his Costa Mesa museum when I visited in 1983.

Meeting Briggs Cunningham at the copier

Briggs Swift Cunningham II was born Jan. 19, 1907, into a wealthy family, which afforded him the ability to partake in his passions of driving and building race cars and other fast machines, as well as collecting them.

I met Cunningham at a copy machine in 1983 while visiting his automotive museum in Costa Mesa, Calif. Cunningham was making copies of drawings that appeared in *Old Cars*, but to tell the story from the beginning, let's start a year earlier in Germany.

One opportunity leads to another

Prior to 1982, Canada was the only country I had ever been in besides the United States. That year, the owner of a Swiss advertising agency put a deal together with a European oil company to sponsor an auto show that was to travel to different cities in Germany. The big feature of the show was the inclusion of some rare cars owned by Americans, and I was able to attend the show. While there, I met a number of well-known people such as Delahaye expert Jacques "Frenchy" Harguindeguy, Dr. Lonnie Hammargren (who later became the Lieutenant Governor of Nevada) and Christine Eisenberg.

Eisenberg planned and organized all of the automobile and special auctions for the British auction house Christie, Manson & Woods International. During the trip to Germany, we took a bus trip into East Germany and passed the Berlin Wall, which still stood at that time. Eisenberg's late husband had worked as a physicist in the United States and for some reason, the East Germans had his name on a list. Guards at the wall called Eisenberg off the bus to ask her some questions. Naturally, this shook her up and when she finally got back on the bus, she took a seat next to me and we talked. While calming her, I said I would come to her next auction.

That next auction was on April 10, 1983, at the Los Angeles Convention Center. It was billed as a sale of "Racing Cars and Classic Cars" and the headline attraction was a grouping of six cars owned by Gene Storms, a West Coast investment broker. They included a 1929 Mercedes SS, a 1930 Packard 745 convertible victoria, a 1930 Packard Custom Series 740 Sport Phaeton, a 1931 Chrysler Imperial convertible victoria, a 1931 Chrysler Imperial dual-cowl phaeton, a 1932 Marmon Sixteen seven-passenger phaeton and a 1933 Duesenberg La-Grande SJ phaeton. The Duesenberg sold for \$325,000, which was the world-record price for a Duesenberg at that time.

Another notable car assigned to the auction was a blue 1927 Renault twin-cockpit tourer that was discovered in France in 1973 being used as a fire truck. The car was restored in England and was being sold to benefit Briggs Cunningham's car museum.

Eisenberg had brought together this amazing assortment of cars and she did it in a unique way. Eisenberg always wrote personal notes on the finest writing paper to each of the car owners, in long hand, asking them to bring her a special vehicle to sell. She understood the cars, their values as pieces of automotive art and the minds of the people who collected them. Each of the classic car owners respected Eisenberg's professional expertise and cherished the personal attention she gave them. She was a one-of-a-kind person and, of course, she was a good friend of Briggs Swift Cunningham II.

The copier incident

When I arrived in California a few days before the auction, I visited Eisenberg's home office in Pasadena and she told me that she had arranged for me to visit the Briggs Cunningham

Automotive Museum in Costa Mesa. It was only the second time I had been on the West Coast and I was no wizard at navigating southern California freeways, but somehow I found the right roads and arrived at the museum. It was located at 250 Baker Street in the city, and I recall it being in a type of industrial park.

Since this was long before GPS, I drove around in circles until I heard the roar of what sounded like a race car. I followed the roar to its origin and saw a tiny blue car speeding around in the parking lot. No, it was not Briggs Cunningham, but I was in the right place. The man in the cockpit of the Type 37 Bugatti was John Burgess.

Burgess was a car enthusiast and artist who had first met Cunningham during the 1940 New York World's Fair and came to work at his museum 26 years later. It was Dick Ford, a former U.S. Air Force mechanic who brought them together again. After retiring from the military, Ford was introduced to Cunningham by Dean Batchelor of *Road & Track* magazine and was hired as the second employee at the Briggs Cunningham Automotive Museum.

Ford had worked with John Burgess at Edwards Air Force Base and arranged his visit to the Cunningham collection while it was stored in a warehouse. Cunningham gave Burgess a tour of the cars, many of which he was familiar with since he had even worked on a few. The two men immediately bonded and from then, they worked closely to preserve the cars in a museum setting that reflected their shared visions.

It was Burgess who started me on a tour of the museum in April 1983. He showed me cars such as the *CERV1* Corvette, Cunningham's two Bugatti Royales and the cars that Cunningham himself had built to race at Le Mans in quest of winning the checkered flag with an American entry. Burgess was an engineer as well as a mechanic and artist, and I saw cut-away cars and portions of cars that he found absolutely fascinating. The collection also had a wonderful restoration shop in which the boattail 1927 Renault was being spruced up for auction. Workers in white shop coats made the two-tone blue car look new.

I can't recall exactly when my tour of the museum began, but I know that it stopped, temporarily, just before noon when Burgess looked at his watch and then shot a glance in my direction. "Mr. Gunnell, we have to stop at this point for awhile," he explained. "Every noon, I go back home and have lunch with my wife; I have never missed and I don't plan to do so today. You can wait here. Make yourself comfortable in this office and I will be back just after 1 p.m. to continue."

A short time after Burgess left, a man with white hair came into the office. He was carrying a copy of *Old Cars*. He said "hello" and then went to a copy machine and started running off copies of a drawing in the publication. Artist Bob Temple, who worked at Studebaker in the '60s, had completed a drawing for LeRoi "Tex" Smith, the publisher of *Old Cars* at the time. This particular drawing showed a car made from parts of different cars and was a challenge to the readers to identify

the origin of the car's components. The car in the drawing was identified as the Pick-Nit Automobile, since it was intended for nitpickers to pick apart.

After running off the copies, the white-haired man introduced himself. "My name is Briggs Cunningham," he said. I stuttered out my name and reason for being there and then I screwed up enough nerve to ask Cunningham what he was going to do with all the copies from *Old Cars*.

"Oh, we're going to have a contest for the guys in the restoration shop," he said. "Whoever does best at figuring out which cars the parts came from is going to win some kind of prize."



I immediately offered to supply the prize. Just before I left for California, I had taken the photo engraving plates for the "Best of *Old Cars Weekly* No. 4" to the printer in nearby Stevens Point, Wis. The new book contained all the best stories we had published in 1981-1982. "When I get home, the first copies of BOCIV will be coming off the press," I told Briggs. "I will go up to Stevens Point and the very first copy down the conveyor will be sent to you for the contest."

This offer must have been appreciated, because when John Burgess returned, the three of us completed the tour of the museum together. A few days later, I saw Briggs Cunningham

for the second and last time. He a guest at a pre-auction party that Eisenberg hosted at her home. Other people I recall in attendance were Burgess, General William Lyon (who bought the Duesenberg at the auction), several Harrah's Collection staff members, Dean Batchelor, Lorin Tyron of Pebble Beach and photographer/writer Dennis Adler. Indeed, Eisenberg knew all the big collectors and Briggs Cunningham was one of the greatest on her list.

A few weeks after returning home, I received a letter that was handwritten on the Cunningham Museum's distinctive blue stationery. It was dated May 20 and read, "Dear John, Many thanks for the first copy of 'Best of Old Cars No. 4' you kindly sent me. I haven't had time to follow up on the 'Pick-Nit' car quiz as yet, but will try to do so this coming week. I will be in touch about the winner. We have just been swamped lately and everyone is working overtime trying to get things done. Sorry to be so late with this letter, and I appreciate your kindness very much. It is a great idea putting the 'best' in book form. Now, I can dispose of my old, old copies. Best, Briggs."

Later, I received another hand-written letter on the same type of stationery dated July 1, '83. In it, Cunningham stated the contest had not yet been decided as he had been traveling. I do not recall ever hearing who won the contest, but I will never forget meeting John Burgess and Briggs Cunningham and how cordially Cunningham followed up with our conversation.

After leaving the Briggs Cunningham Automotive Museum, my next stop was the "round hotel" on Sunset Blvd., in Los Angeles, where I met ace public relations man Joe Molina for the first time. Back then, Molina was just starting out, but that's another story for another installment of "Met the Press."