

CUNNINGHAM C-3 CONTINENTAL

Luxury in a High-performance Package



Rutomobile Quarterly than those of Briggs
Cunningham, and rightly so. Cunningham's heroic
effort to win the 24 Hours of Le Mans in the 1950s with
an American car and a team of American drivers excited
an entire nation and produced an authentic American
sports car. The Cunningham C-3, a production car,
made the Le Mans quest possible, briefly establishing
Cunningham as an automobile manufacturer.

BY LEIGH DORRINGTON PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAY TEXTER "He was a true sportsman. His competitors were never adversaries, but rather collaborators in a splendid game in which trophies went to the victors."

TEAMMATE DENISE McCluggage

ports cars entered by American Briggs Cunningham were still actively competing at Le Mans and dominating major American road races well into the 1960s. It is difficult today to fully appreciate just how influential Briggs Cunningham

was to postwar American sports-car racing (*Automobile Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 1). Many credit Cunningham's effort for directly influencing Ford's victory at Le Mans in 1966, and again in 1967 with two American drivers, right down to the famous stripes on the winning cars.

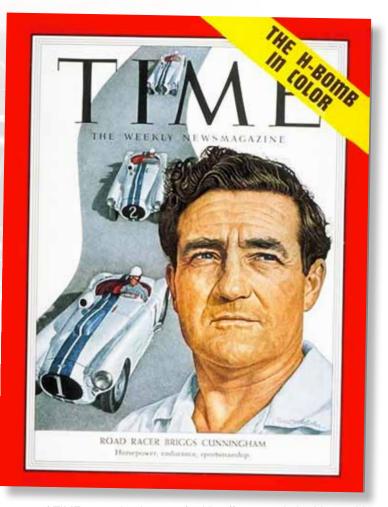
Briggs Swift Cunningham Jr. was handsome, athletic, enormously wealthy and sincerely modest. He was a fierce competitor in everything he pursued. In addition to mastering golf, tennis and auto racing, as a dedicated sailor,

he defended the America's Cup for the United States, sailing the *Columbia* in 1958.

While an engineering student at Yale, he met and became friends with 1915 Indianapolis 500 winner Ralph DePalma. He was lifelong friends with brothers Barron, Miles and Sam Collier, who founded the prewar Automobile Racing Club of America that later gave birth to the Sports Car Club of America.

Cunningham's first race car was a Frontenacpowered sprint car, set up with the help of DePalma and driven by local hot shoes. But the first race car built to his own design combined the chassis and engine of a 1939 Buick Century, the fastest American prewar production car, with a Mercedes SSK body, long before Carroll Shelby combined an American V8 with a lightweight English body.





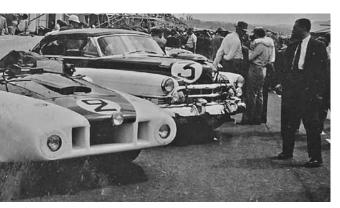
Briggs Cunningham was honored on the cover of TIME magazine in 1954 for his efforts to win Le Mans with an American car and American drivers. The illustration incorrectly shows three C-4R roadsters; two C-4R roadsters and one coupe were built and raced. Cunningham's first race car was a Frontenac-powered sprint car, which he owned but did not drive.

Cunningham drove the Bu-Merc, as the special was known, in the first postwar road race in the U.S., at Watkins Glen in 1948. He finished 2nd and soon embarked on his ambitious plan to represent America in the greatest sports-car race in the world, the 24 Hours of Le Mans.

His efforts at Le Mans and his team's ongoing domination of U.S. sports-car racing, with a succession of

Cunningham, Ferrari, OSCA, Jaguar, Lister, Corvette, Maserati, Porsche and other cars, established a standard of preparation and success still reflected in auto racing today. He continued to race sports cars until 1965, when he was 58. His goal was always to win the most important races against the toughest competitors.

Yet, his Cunningham teammate, driver Denise McCluggage, described Briggs Cunningham in these







Above left: Cunningham's first Le Mans entry in 1950 included a near-stock Cadillac coupe (No. 3) and an aerodynamically bodied Cadillac (No. 2) nicknamed 'Le Monstre' by French fans. Above center: Cunningham's 1952 Le Mans entry included one C-4RK coupe and two C4R roadsters. Above right: Three C-2 Cunninghams were entered in the 1951 24 Hours of Le Mans and raced later at Elkhart Lake and Watkins Glen.

words when he passed away in 2003: "He was a true sportsman. His competitors were never adversaries, but rather collaborators in a splendid game in which trophies went to the victors."

AN AMERICAN TALE

riggs Cunningham's background has been told often. He was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1907. His father was well established in this city on the banks of the Ohio River. As a banker, Briggs Cunningham Sr. invested in the start-up Procter & Gamble Co. – Cooper Procter became Briggs Cunningham Jr.'s godfather – as well as real estate, railroads and Cincinnati's first telephone system, which was later sold to AT&T.

Cunningham biographers Dean Batchelor and Albert Bochroch wrote that an uncle, Ashton Heyl, introduced Briggs to speed. Heyl fitted a WWI surplus Hispano-Suiza airplane engine to a Dodge touring car.

Following his father's death in 1912, Cunningham and his mother spent summers in Southport, Conn., on Long Island Sound, where he became an avid sailor. He met Lucie Bedford, who shared his passion for sailing and whose father was an associate of John D. Rockefeller, the founder of Standard Oil.

Their shared interests and opportunities led to an early marriage. The couple famously spent an



The prototype of the Cunningham sports car, (s/n 5101) retrospectively referred to as C-1, was powered by a Cadillac engine similar to the 1950 Le Mans entries.

extended European honeymoon in 1929 and 1930 that included a 6C 1500 Alfa Romeo and a Mercedes-Benz SS delivered to the couple's Paris hotel by factory racing driver Rudolph Caracciola. They had their 6-meter sailboat shipped to France to compete in a series of races on the Riviera and won an award for Best

Open Car with the Mercedes at a Cannes concours d'elegance.

Returning to Connecticut and a stone manor house facing Long Island Sound, built while the couple traveled in Europe, Briggs Cunningham settled into the comfortable life of a sportsman. Sailing, tennis and golf filled the next decade, along with his friendships with the Collier brothers and other automobile enthusiasts.

The postwar return of road racing to America with the 1948 Watkins Glen Grand Prix, and the first postwar Le Mans race in 1949, won by Luigi Chinetti in one of the new Ferrari sports cars, took Cunningham's life in a new direction.

CUNNINGHAM SPORTS CARS

Priggs Cunningham's surprisingly good showing with the Bu-Merc in the first Watkins Glen Grand Prix came against an uneven field of prewar American and European cars, though the win-



ner was Frank Griswold in a thoroughbred Alfa Romeo 8C 2900B. Miles Collier won the second Watkins Glen Grand Prix in a Ford-powered Riley special. Cunningham led most of the race and finished 2nd, this time in a Ferrari 166 Spider Corsa, the first Ferrari racing car imported to the U.S.

These results led Cunningham to wonder why an American car and team also couldn't compete successfully at Le Mans. Looking to the success of the



Left: The dashboard of the first Cunningham sports car was significantly different than production C-3s. Above and Right: Cunningham's West Palm Beach, Florida factory was staffed by skilled workmen fully capable of building the chassis, engine, body panels and trim. (Below) Every top automotive journal of the day wrote enthusiastically about the new Cunningham sports car.





Bu-Merc and cars like the Ford-Riley, Cunningham made plans to enter a similar car at Le Mans for 1950. The car was a "Fordillac," a 1949 Ford powered by Cadillac's new overhead valve V8, created by the Long Island racing team of Bill Frick and Phil Walters, who raced under the pseudonym of "Ted Tappet." The pair's Frick-Tappet Motors constructed the car.

When Cunningham learned the entry would be refused because the car did not come from an acknowledged manufacturer, he turned directly to Cadillac. Cunningham's first entry at Le Mans in 1950 (Automobile Quarterly, Vol. 3, No. 4) included



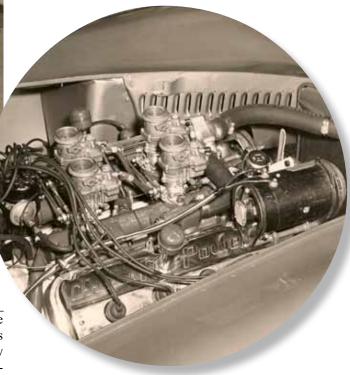
Above: The integrated roll bar on this chassis indicates that it is s/n 5206, the only coupe bodied in West Palm Beach. After the first car, all Cunninghams utilized Chrysler's 331 cu. in. Hemi with a log manifold designed and built by Cunningham. two Cadillacs, one a slightly modified Coupe de Ville

and the other, nicknamed "Le Monstre" by Le Mans fans, on the same chassis with an aerodynamic body designed by Grumman aircraft engineers. Both cars finished the race in 10th and 11th positions, respectively.

Cunningham returned to the U.S., acquired Frick-Tappet Motors, and moved the operation to his winter home of West Palm Beach, Fla. He established the B.S. Cunningham Company in September 1950, with Phil Walters as general manager.

Team Cunningham's 1950 Le Mans race with the two Cadillac entries provided much valuable experience. Primary among these lessons was the realization the team would need to design and build its own car to accomplish the goal of winning the 24 Hours. Le Mans rules also required that the car come from an acknowledged manufacturer, meaning Cunningham would need to build and sell automobiles in addition to racing them.

Development of the Cunningham sports car began shortly after Le Mans, and a complete running prototype was ready in the spring of 1951. Led by Cunningham, Walters, Briggs Weaver and designer Bob Blake, the



team produced a sturdy, attractive two-seat roadster.

"The first details have just been released of a new American sports car which is being produced in modest numbers in West Palm Beach, Fla.," wrote The Motor in 1951. "Built specifically to be suitable for participation in the Le Mans 24-hour race and other sports-car events, yet to be suitable also for



B. S. CUNNINGHAM COMPANY

Competition Motor Cars

1402 ELIZABETH AVENUE WEST PALM BEACH, FLORIDA, U.S.A. November 19, 1951

Mr. Anthony Simeone, M. D. 2037 E. Allegheny Avenue Philadelphia 34, Pa.

Dear Dr. Simeone:

Thank you very much for your inquiry of November 6 and your kind congratulations. We are enclosing a leaflet which we believe will give you some of the information you desire about the Cunningham Sports Car.

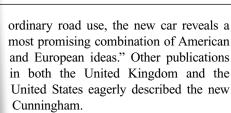
We are now in limited production on the Model C-3; the same model that won the Elkhart Lake Road Race and the International Grand Prix at Watkins Glen, New York, Either a Sports Roadster or a hard top Coupe may be ordered. The Sports Roadster is priced at \$8,000 and the Coupe at \$9,000. All prices are F.O.B. West Palm Beach, Florida, Federal and local taxes not included.

Due to the demand for these cars and our relatively small production, we have found it necessary to request a 10% deposit with each order, and schedule deliveries in strict accordance with the order in which they are received. A confirmation of your order will be sent you specifying the anticipated delivery date. If you decide to cancel your order at any time, the full amount of your deposit will be returned immediately.

Thanking you for your interest in our cars and trusting that we may be favored with your most valued order, we are,

Philip F. Walters

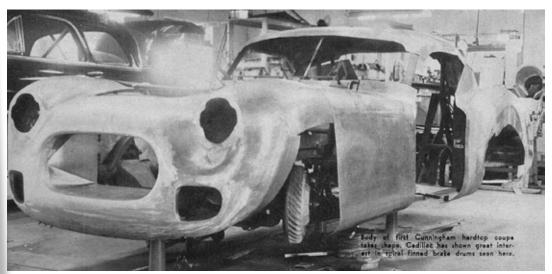
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Specifications of the car included a tubular frame with a 105-inch wheelbase and independent front suspension utilizing Ford and Mercury components. A sophisticated De Dion-type axle and suspension were utilized at the rear. A

Cadillac engine similar to the 1950 race engines prepared by Bill Frick and Phil Walters powered the first car, retroactively referred to as C-1.

Subsequent Cunninghams were powered by Chrysler's new 331ci engine with hemispherical combustion chambers. Cadillac had shown little interest in development of the Cunningham sports car, and Briggs Cunningham turned to Chrysler chairman K.T. Keller, whose son had attended school with Cunningham. An agreement was reached for Cunningham to purchase the new engine from Chrysler's Industrial Division, which built engines for applications such as genera-

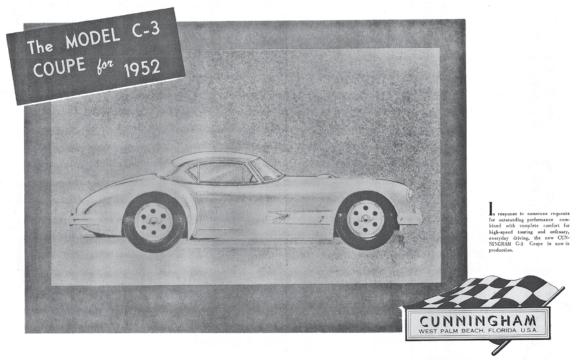


Above: The WPB-built C-3 coupe closely resembles the C-2 and proposed C-3 body styles. The whereabouts of this car is today unknown. (Left and Below) Dr. Anthony Simeone, father of current collector Dr. Fred Simeone of Philadelphia, expressed early interest in purchasing a C-3 and received this reply from Phil Walters.









Above: The first advertisement for the Cunningham Model C-3 also showed the C-2-based coupe design. Right: The first C-3 Brochure also listed extensive competition options and costs.

tors, pumps and turbine aircraft engine starters. This process proved to be easier than diverting engines from Chrysler automotive production.

The Motor described the Chrysler "hemi" as "the most powerful unit in large scale production in the world." The Chrysler engine produced 180 hp in production trim. Cunningham modifications, including higher compression and four Zenith carburetors mounted on a Cunningham-produced log manifold, raised power to 220 hp. The 3-speed Cadillac transmission was retained with a 2-speed rear axle.

Three Cunningham C-2 sports racing cars (s/n 5102, 5103 and 5104) raced in the 1951 24 Hours of Le Mans. The prototype (s/n 5101) also traveled to Le Mans as a demonstrator and as a spare if needed for the race. Had it not been for the unannounced entry of the new Jaguar C-type, the Cunninghams likely would have been the class of the field.

In the race, one car (5102), driven by George Rand and Fred Wacker, retired when the 2-speed rear axle continued to jump out of gear. The second car (5103), driven by Briggs Cunningham and George Huntoon,

also retired after experiencing steering problems. Phil Walters and John Fitch drove the third Cunningham (5104). This car ran as high as 2nd for six hours of the race before suffering engine problems related to the French-supplied gasoline. However, it managed to finish the race 18th overall and still 1st in class. The prototype was not raced. All four cars were returned to the U.S., where the prototype continued to serve as a demonstrator and remained in the possession of Briggs Cunningham.

Enthusiasts clamored for the Cunningham sports car promised to the public. Following European tradition, the three cars raced at Le Mans were refurbished following the 1951 season, fitted with road equipment, and sold through Roger Barlow's International Motors in Los Angeles. No additional Cunningham C-2s were built.

Photographer Jerry Chesebrough was dispatched by *Road & Track* magazine to accompany the cross-country drive transporting the three C-2s from Florida to California. The images he shot in Cunningham's West Palm Beach shop provide rare clues to historians.



In addition to the three Le Mans C-2s, repainted and readied for delivery, three unfinished cars are also shown together on the Cunningham shop floor. One is a nearly complete roadster (s/n 5205), next to a second car receiving a coupe body (s/n 5206). The third is a chassis, with a caption reading: "Chassis at right will be sent to Italy for coachwork." The destination was Carrozzeria Vignale.

Carrozzeria Vignale

arly postwar Italian manufacturers like Ferrari produced chassis to be bodied by one of several coachbuilders. Carrozzeria Touring was most closely associated with the earliest Ferraris, while Pinin Farina (later one word) and Scaglietti bodied



Above: Many early Vignale craftsmen worked part-time after full-time jobs at Farina and other carrozzeria, providing a very high level of quality. Below left: Vignale's 1950 Abarth 205 predicted later themes, (Below right:) including this Ferrari 212 and the Cunningham C-3.

more Ferraris than any other coachbuilders prior to the modern production era. But in a brief period from 1950-1954, Carrozzeria Vignale was the premier coachbuilder on Ferrari chassis.

Alfredo Vignale was born in Turin in 1913 into a family of uncles and brothers who were coach painters and metalworkers. By 17, Vignale was a full-time assistant metal former at Stabilimenti Farina, owned by the elder brothers of Battista "Pinin" Farina. Vignale rose to the position of foreman of metal formers at Farina and made plans to open a shop in Turin in 1939 before the start of the war put an end to the venture.

Vignale returned to Stabilimenti Farina following the war, where he was reunited with Giovanni Michelotti. Michelotti was a talented draftsman who had come to Farina while he was still a teenager, prior to the war. Michelotti was already recognized as one of the "most boldly inventive" freelance stylists in postwar Italy.

Carrozzeria Vignale opened its doors in Turin in 1946 with Michelotti collaborating as a freelance designer on many projects. Vignale's great fortune, in addition to his talent and his association with Michelotti, seemed to lie in his connections with the





Farina family and an introduction to Enzo Ferrari.

Carrozzeria Vignale was immediately assigned the construction of three aerodynamic coupes on Piero Dusio's Cisitalia 202, designed by Pinin Farina. The Cisitalia 202 Gran Sport was a trend-setting postwar design that combined straight-through flush fenders with a simple front end, predictive of Pinin Farina's early Ferraris, and a modern envelope body.

The influence of the Cisitalia can clearly be seen in the lovely Vignale-bodied Abarth 205 Berlinetta from 1950. According to Vignale historian Marcel Massini, Milanese car dealer Franco Cornacchia introduced Alfredo Vignale to Enzo Ferrari in the same year. Registro Vignale lists 30 different chassis bodied by Vignale during the firm's history from 1946-1968, but the greatest early designs were largely created for

Ferrari. These included examples of both racing and production cars between 1950-1954, when Briggs Cunningham was competing at Le Mans and when the Cunningham C-3 was being planned and produced.

The Michelotti-Vignale Ferrari designs, typically executed in single or small numbers, allowed the designer and coachbuilder to explore shapes, extravagant use of colors and details in ways that were sometimes more characteristically American than European. Vignale also displayed a willingness to adapt recognizable forms from one design to another. Various Vignale-designed Ferraris and the Cunningham C-3 are such an example.



Above: The second Cunningham C-3 brochure showed the dramatically restyled Michelotti-designed Vignale coupe, bearing a strong resemblance to the Vignale Ferrari 212.



CUNNINGHAM C-3

he Cunningham C-3 was planned as a customer version of the C-2 and announced in the same year.

Briggs Cunningham told John Bentley of *Motor Trend*, "We don't intend to build two separate types of car, one for racing and the other for touring. Our policy is to concentrate on one model, readily adaptable to both purposes."

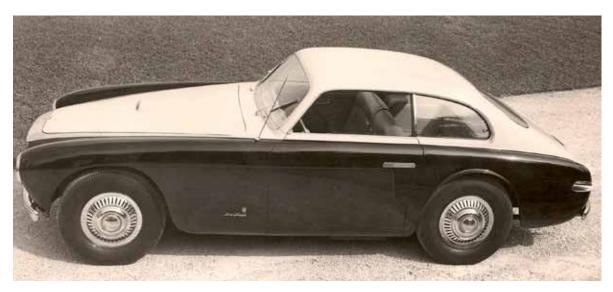
A brochure and price list published by the B.S. Cunningham Co. in November 1951 for the 1952 Cunningham Model C-3 offered a sports roadster priced at \$8,000 and a coupe at \$9,000. Extensive "Engine Racing Modifications" were also listed including polished valves, higher compression ratios,

high-rpm connecting-rod bearings, an eight-quart oil sump and oil cooler. "Chassis Racing Modifications" included racing tires and tubes, shock absorbers, brakes, quick-change wheels, racing bumpers and grille screen and hood straps.

An ad headlining "The Model C-3 Coupe for 1952" read, "In response to numerous requests for outstanding performance combined with complete comfort for high-speed touring and ordinary, everyday driving, the new Cunningham C-3 Coupe is now in production." The automobile illustrated in the ad closely resembled a C-2 with a tight coupe roof and bright side trim. The rendering was the work of Alexis de Sakhnoffsky, better known as a designer of prewar classic automobiles.

By the end of 1951, however, the estimated cost including labor to build a complete Cunningham C-3 in West Palm Beach had climbed to around \$15,000. The C-3 could not be commercially viable when a Ferrari sold for just over \$10,000. The roadster and coupe shown on the shop floor in late 1951 became the only C-3s completed in West Palm Beach.

Neither the complete records of Cunningham nor Vignale have survived intact, so it is impossible to know exactly how the next step came about. But a solution



emerged to build the C-3 chassis at B.S. Cunningham Co. in West Palm Beach and body the cars at Vignale in Turin. It would be a very different automobile.

A brochure produced in February 1952 showed a restyled Cunningham coupe, closely resembling a Vignale-bodied Ferrari, above Michelotti's signature. The brochure identified the car for the first time as the Cunningham Continental Coupe and announced that the new car combined "American Engineering with Italian Artistry ... the famous Cunningham C-3 Chassis are now alternately fitted with the finest Italian coachwork of breath-taking beauty!" No mention was made of a cabriolet version or the option of a Model C-3 bodied in West Palm Beach.





The first Vignale-bodied Cunningham C-3 also shows the similarity to the Vignale Ferrari 212. Both the West Palm Beach-built coupe and this car were sold to Carl Kiekhaefer of Mercury Marine. The two cars were numbered s/n 5206/5206X by the factory leading to some amount of confusion later.

Specifications for the Cunningham C-3 were little changed from the C-2. Power was 220 hp with four Zenith carburetors on the Cunningham log manifold as standard equipment. A choice of either the 3-speed Cadillac gearbox or a Chrysler fluid drive semiautomatic gearbox was offered for the first time. The biggest change from the C-2 was the substitution of a coil-spring rear suspension for the C-3 in place of the De Dion rear suspension that was judged to be both unsuitable and too expensive for the production car. Cost of the coupe was listed as \$9,000 FOB West Palm Beach or New York.

Twenty Cunningham C-3 coupes and five cabriolets were constructed at Vignale, plus the two West Palm

Beach cars. This number has been a source of confusion over the years. But a Cunningham Register compiled by B. Bruce-Briggs provides a list of every complete car based on B.S. Cunningham Co. work order numbers, confirming each of the 27 total cars.

Certain trademark styling details that mark other Vignale designs found their way into the Cunningham C-3. Some of these define the shape of the C-3 while others are details recognizable in other Vignale-bodied cars. The most expressive lines of the Vignale character in the Cunningham are the front fenders, grille, headlights and side profile, all of which are similar to those on certain Vignale-bodied Ferraris.

Each Cunningham C-3 was individually finished

to the buyer's or factory's specifications. Most notably, these included the selection of exterior colors. Two-color combinations were common, and several cars were originally painted in three colors. The color selection extended to the faces of dashboard instruments, where two exterior or complimentary colors were used. This unique feature lent an additional air of coachbuilt luxury to each C-3.

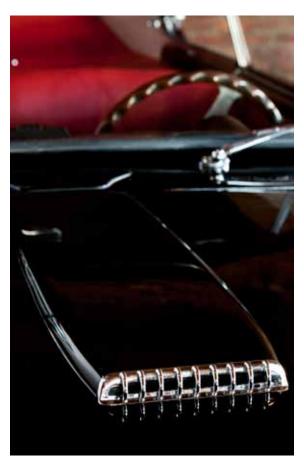
Other interior details included an elegant etched design found on the hand-finished steering wheel and the narrow trim that runs horizontally across the dashboard and continues on to the door panels. Trim,

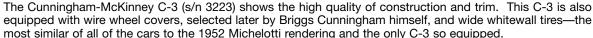


Above and right: The only Cunningham C-3 that has remained in family ownership is this black coupe, built originally as the factory demonstrator. This is also the only car equipped with a single 4 bbl. carburetor and special air cleaners, instead of the Cunningham log manifold and four carburetors.









to Cornett's Bridge on the early Watkins Glen road course. One C-3 was registered to the du Pont family. Another, a cabriolet, was sold to Nelson Rockefeller who was governor of New York State and vice president of the United States under Gerald Ford. The Harrah Collection subsequently owned two C-3s, both coupes. A C-3 cabriolet is on display at the Elliott Museum in Stuart, Fla., near West Palm Beach.

One C-3 coupe (s/n 5214), owned by collector Chuck Schoendorf, appears to be the only example ordered with the intention of racing. Unique features

on this car include a heavy-duty front stabilizer bar, brake scoops, hood straps and a 40-gallon gas tank. Antonio Chopitea of Lima, Peru, originally ordered the car, and it was also the only Cunningham originally sold outside the U.S.

Only one car has remained in the uninterrupted ownership of the Cunningham family, a coupe (s/n 3223), painted black with a red leather interior. Used as the C-3 factory demonstrator, it underwent a number of modifications before it was registered in 1954. Early records indicate this C-3 was to be fitted with a

including door pulls finished with wood or metal, is also seen in other Vignale-built cars.

The driver and two passengers were seated on a pleated-leather bench seat. Door panels and a generous rear package shelf were also finished in matching leather, and most C-3s were fitted with luggage straps. The trunk contained a 20-gallon gas tank, spare tire and a smaller luggage space.

Among original C-3 owners listed in the register were Carl Kiekhaefer of Mercury Marine and "Cornett" – likely Denver Cornett, who gave his name

Chrysler engine, Cadillac 3-speed manual transmission and bucket seats. At some later time, this car was modified with a bench seat, stock 1954 Chrysler Hemi with one 4bbl carburetor and a PowerFlite automatic transmission, the only Cunningham so equipped, and the only C-3 with power windows.

This car was originally registered to Briggs Cunningham. He gave the car as a gift to his daughter Lucie Cunningham McKinney, perhaps explaining some of the later modifications. The car remains in the Cunningham-McKinney family.

The C-3 did not accomplish the intended purpose of establishing B.S. Cunningham Co. as a successful automobile manufacturer. All of the chassis were completed between July 1951 and January 1953, but sales of the cars continued until late 1954. A handful of cars were renumbered with later serial numbers. Price, even at \$9,000, was most likely the reason, but the Cunningham C-3 delivered on all other intentions.

Most significantly, perhaps, the C-3 was included in a landmark 1953 exhibit at New York's Museum of Modern Art as one of the 10 most beautiful cars in the world. The Cisitalia was also included.

It would not be unfair to say that the C-3 has been underappreciated in comparison with Cunningham's magnificent racing cars. That has changed, and a number of C-3s have changed hands recently or undergone expensive restorations in anticipation of a 2011 Cunningham Gathering in West Palm Beach alongside the race cars.

Briggs Cunningham remains a touchstone of American racing history. The Cunningham C-3 is a fitting tribute to his unwavering commitment.

