

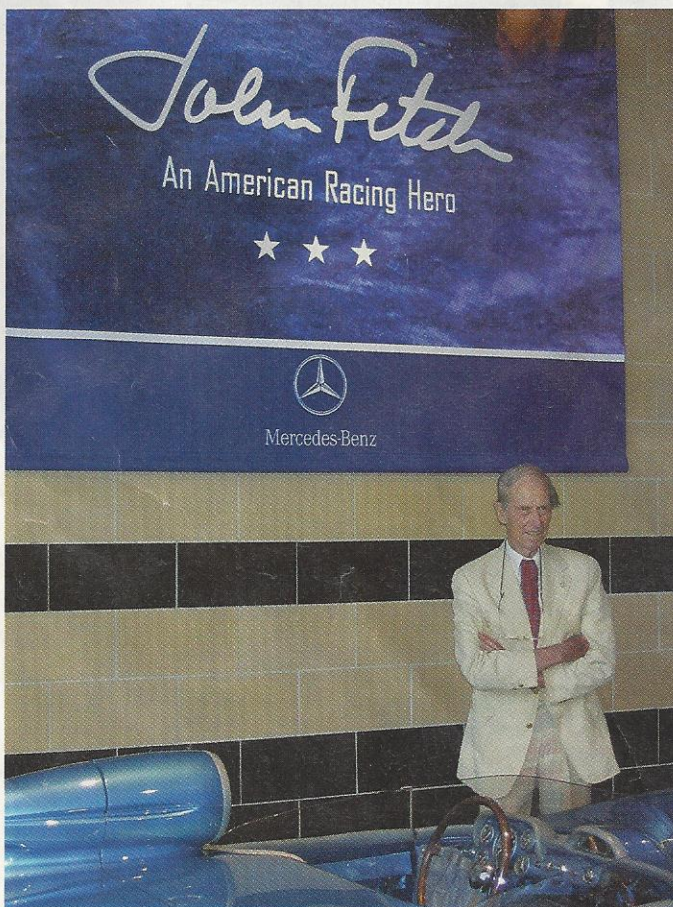
Museum Fixture

Saratoga exhibit covers the long career of JOHN FITCH

BY KEVIN A. WILSON



TO ANYONE younger—and most of us are—it seems like John Fitch has always been around. The 89-year-old American hit the acme of his racing career more than 50 years ago, when he was on the same Mercedes-Benz team as Stirling Moss and Juan Fangio, but he's been a fixture among us, a long-lived link to everyone and everything that mattered. Beyond racing, not only with Mercedes-Benz but also with Briggs Cunningham's team in Jaguars, Cunninghams and Corvettes, he has managed Lime Rock Park raceway, developed Corvair specials (Fitch Sprints) and pioneered safety technology for highways and racing tracks. Mix in a stint as technical advisor to the 1955 Kirk Douglas film, *The Racers*, and his ongoing pursuit—as an octogenarian!—of a speed record at Bonneville, and it's easy to see that Fitch is clearly a man to know about.



» John Fitch today (left) at the Saratoga Auto Museum exhibit opening with a Corvette he drove. Above, the 300SLR Fitch shared with Pierre Levegh at Le Mans in 1955; two hours into the race, Levegh crashed into the crowd. Fitch suggested the Mercedes team should retire, and it did.

He's been the subject of at least three books and innumerable magazine articles, and so it comes as a surprise that the current exhibit—*John Fitch, An American Racing Hero*—at the Saratoga Auto Museum is the first such exhibit devoted to his career. Open through Nov. 15 at the museum in Saratoga Springs, New York, the exhibit tells the tale through 14 cars and an array of artifacts. The museum has also published a second edition of his most recent book, *Racing with Mercedes*, in support of which Mercedes-Benz has lent two prizes from its collection, the 1886 Benz Patent Motorwagen and 1905

American Mercedes, in addition to racing cars. The exhibit is well worth a side trip if you're in the area, perhaps on a color tour of the Adirondacks.

After participating in the Monterey Historics last month, front and center at the museum is the Mercedes-Benz 300SL in which Fitch won the production class—fifth overall—at the 1955 Mille Miglia, an accomplishment overshadowed by Moss' overall win in the SLR. Fitch counts this GT class win as his greatest achievement in racing—even above his 1953 Sebring win, co-driving with Phil Walters, for Cunningham—because team manager Alfred Neubauer did not think he had any hope of pulling it off against a strong field of Ferraris, Maseratis and more. In truth, he's also deeply enamored of open-road racing like the Mille and the Mexican Road Race.

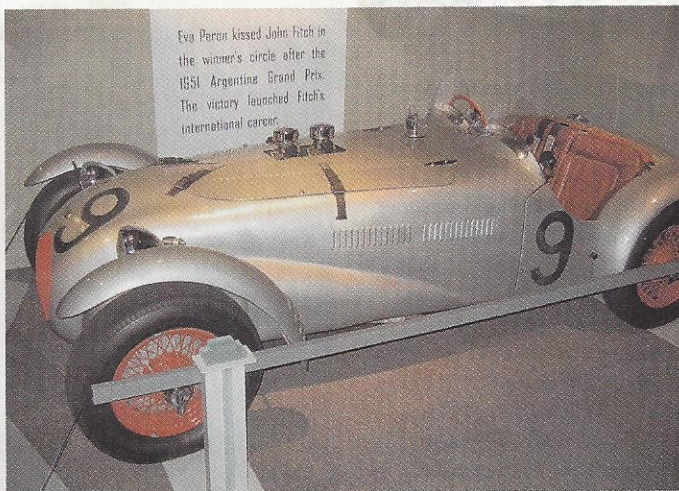
John Cooper Fitch was born Aug. 4, 1917, and raised in Indianapolis. You might have expected that he'd turn out to be an oval racer; as the stepson of a Stutz executive, he first saw the Speedway in the 1920s from the passenger seat of a Bearcat lapping the famed Brickyard. Cars were a big part

of his youth, but he says the racing bug didn't really bite in Indiana.

"Somehow, I was immune to that whole oval-racing scene," he recalls now, his lanky frame perched on a sofa in a hotel suite at the Sagamore resort, with Lake George as a backdrop out the window behind him. His age shows, but the long, sharp-featured face posed above the ascot at his neck is still instantly recognizable, the hawk-like eyes still sharp and alert. The face and ascot together suggest the oft-made, but mistaken, impression that he's a product of the Eastern aristocracy. Another reason that mistake is often made: He once dated a Kennedy (Jack's sister Kathleen, nicknamed Kick) while hanging out in Palm Beach with the president-to-be.

"At the time, he was like me—just another banged-up war veteran, trying to figure out what to do with his life," Fitch recalls. This was before Fitch met Elizabeth, whom he wed in 1949 and who can still be found at his side.

Fitch's family had moved east to Rye, New York, around the end of his first and only year in engineering school at



Lehigh University. He never finished school, giving in to wanderlust, first traveling to New Orleans where he picked up a Fiat Topolino, and then sailing to England where his interest in sports car road racing was ignited when he attended the last big race at Brooklands in 1939.

He enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corps in spring 1941 and was eventually assigned to P51 Mustang fighters and sent to Europe. The two war experiences that Fitch says stood out were shooting down a Messerschmitt ME-262, the German jet plane ("They were about 100 mph faster than our P51s," but he got lucky and

» Fitch's first international race victory came in this Allard-Cadillac (above) in Argentina. As SCCA national champ, he'd been one of 10 Americans invited to the race by Juan Peron. By 1953, he was co-driving with Phil Walters at Le Mans in the Cunningham C5-R (below). They finished third, behind Jaguars driven by Duncan Hamilton and Stirling Moss.



LAT PHOTOGRAPHIC/KEVIN A. WILSON

JOHN FITCH

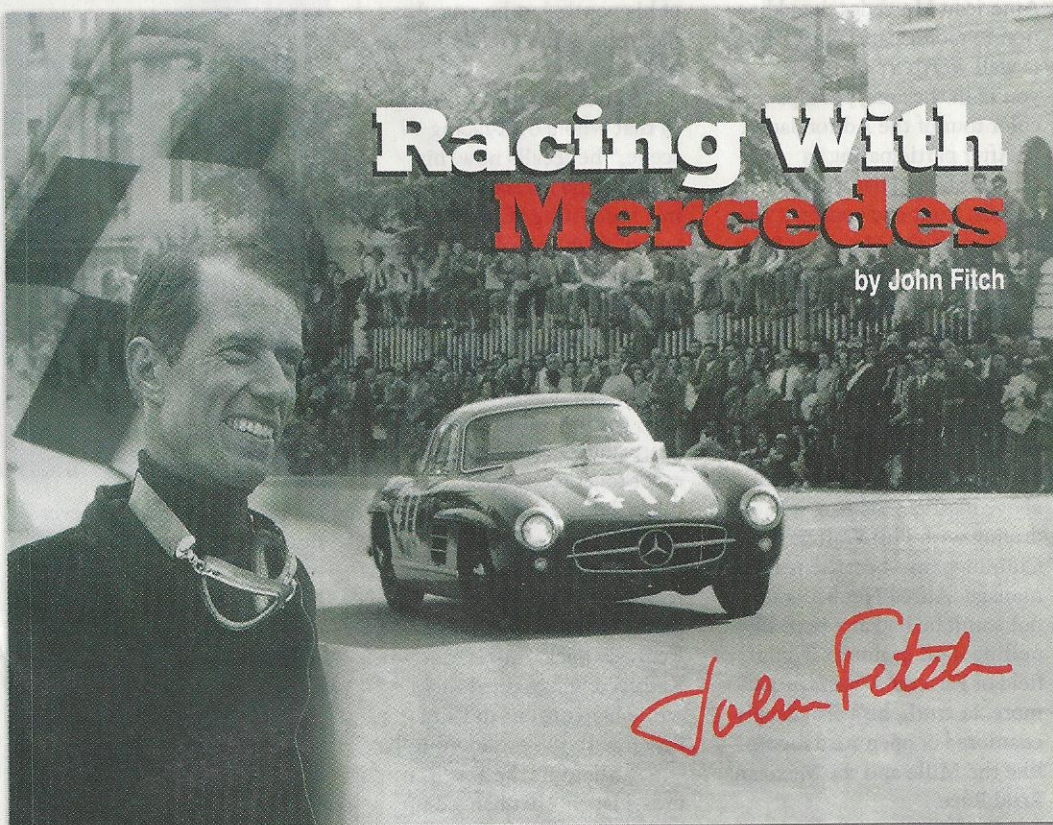
caught one as it was taking off) and being shot down himself while strafing locomotives. He spent the last two months of the war in Europe as a prisoner of war and it was an ugly time, all the more remarkable that he'd be driving for Mercedes-Benz only seven years later.

He'd taken up road racing in 1949, first at Bridgehampton in an MG-TC and then in his own Fitch Model B Special, the "Fitch Bitch." It used a Fiat 1100 chassis and a Ford 60 V8 that had been set up for a midget racer.

By 1951 he was the first SCCA national champion and won his first international race, in Argentina in a Cadillac-powered Allard J2 that had been written off in a crash—he repaired the car himself (its frame was bent). He has a standing joke he uses in speeches—"Evita [Peron] presented the trophy, kissed me, and died soon after."

He drove a Chrysler Saratoga in the Mexican Road Race that year, too, for Carl Kiekhaefer's team, but the car broke on the first day. The Argentina win really set things in motion. Fitch won the 1952 Seneca Grand Prix at Watkins Glen in a Jaguar C-Type and started racing for Briggs Cunningham's team. The Allard, a similar Chrysler and the C-Type are all at the Saratoga museum, as is a Cunningham C4-R.

There is also a '52 Mercedes-Benz 300SL roadster like the ones Fitch convinced Rudolf Uhlenhaut to enter in the Mexican Road Race. Fitch had set fastest lap in the Cunningham during the 1952 Le Mans race and afterward congratulated Uhlenhaut on the Mercedes team's win with a car developed from parts initially designed for a luxury sedan. "He seemed to appreciate the compliment and said, 'We are doing a test at the



» To accompany its exhibit, the museum has published a second edition of Fitch's book, *Racing With Mercedes*.

Nürburgring on August 4, come and drive it.' "

Fitch had never been to the 'Ring, but raced a Porsche 356 in a support race leading up to the German Grand Prix. Come Aug. 4 (Fitch's 35th birthday) he turned some quick laps in this test. Afterward, he told Neubauer that he felt the car could do well in the Mexican Road Race. But this was August and the race was in November—Neubauer said it was impossible that Mercedes could compete in such a short time.

On returning home, Fitch sent information about the race—temperatures, top speeds on the long straights and so on—and received a telegram in return telling him to report to Mexico. That was the start of his time as the only American racing for Mercedes-Benz.

He was teamed with Pierre Levegh for the 1955 Le Mans, and it was Fitch's suggestion that the team withdraw after

the tragic accident that saw the car launched into the crowd at that race and his co-driver killed along with 80-some spectators. "National sensitivities after the war were still too sensitive," he says now.

This event awakened in Fitch an interest in safety that still preoccupies him. At the museum is an example of the Fitch Inertial Barrier he developed to absorb energy in a crash—yellow barrels filled with varying amounts of sand. The system is often seen guarding bridge abutments on the Interstates and earned Fitch the first-ever Lifetime Achievement Award from the World Traffic Symposium. There is no counting how many lives have been saved by these barrels over the past 35 years, but Fitch counts the invention as his most significant achievement.

And here we've run out of space and time without discussing Fitch's experience with

the early Corvettes, his Corvair endeavors or his hopes of mass producing the Fitch Phoenix, which employed a Corvair engine and transmission (the only prototype is in the exhibit). He is still campaigning for wider use of his designs for a displaceable guardrail, and still has his eye set on that Bonneville record he has been pursuing with car owner Bob Sima for several years now. (Asked if he isn't too old for such a thing, he replies, "I don't see why ... there's nothing to hit, and it's too slow to fly.") They seek to do better than 170 mph with Sima's hot-rodded 300SL and may make it back to the salt this October; or maybe not until next year.

It might make a better story if he does it after he turns 90. But it would be just another footnote to a life fully lived. ■

For more about the exhibit visit www.saratogaautomuseum.org or call (518) 587-1935.