

PRIMITIVE ART

By Steve White

How's this for an idea? Take a lightweight British roadster and fit it with a big American V8. Oh, you've heard that one before? But, while you're probably thinking of the Shelby Cobra of the 60s, I'm thinking of the car that proved the concept more than a decade earlier: The Allard.

Sidney Allard started his Ford dealership in London before the war. Not satisfied just selling cars, Sidney wanted to build and race them. At his small factory in Clapham, using readily available Ford chassis and driveline components, he built several and personally drove some in competition.

After the war, Sidney wanted to expand his idea with cars that held commercial promise. But raw materials like steel and aluminum were rationed by the government, which favored the export products so badly needed by the war-torn economy. So, Allard set his sights on the U.S. and its exploding interest in sports cars and road racing. And he got his raw materials!

Like before the war, Allard made maximum use of the Ford parts bin, pre-1949, that is. He improvised a clever front swing axle by splitting and hinging the Ford I-beam unit in the center. The rear end was the old banjo-type differential housing, adapted to employ inboard brakes and de Dion suspension with coil springs; some cars were equipped with quick-change units.

The steel ladder frames were simple and lightweight as were the aluminum roadster bodies. What I'm describing is the J2 model, which appeared in 1950 and updated about two years later by the J2X. These cars had no top or windows, nor even side curtains. And the oncoming wind was barely deflected by dual windscreens known as Brooklands. Allards sold in Britain were usually fitted with Ford/Mercury flathead V8s. Common practice was to use a Ford manual three-speed transmission, often with the taller Lincoln Zephyr gears.

Success in Britain soon aroused the attention of enthusiasts across the Atlantic. And it wasn't long before J2s were being exported to the States. They arrived minus engine, giving buyers the choice of many power plants. Flatheads were still popular, but the new OHV V8s first introduced in 1949 added spectacular choices for the competition-minded buyer. The 331 ci Cadillac engine proved most successful, especially when modified.

We were Californians and my car-crazy genes were inherited from Dad, including the racing chromosome. We attended dirt track and paved oval events for stock cars, midgets, sprints, and Indy cars. Then, in 1949, we attended California's first postwar road race held at Buchanan Field near Concord. I recall the main event being won by a prewar BMW-Fraser-Nash.

In 1950, we attended the inaugural races at Pebble Beach and watched future Formula 1 World Champion, Phil Hill, in a Jaguar XK-120, take first in the feature race. We returned in 1951 and witnessed a different outcome with a J2 Cadillac-Allard winning the big race, beating Phil Hill in his pre-war Alfa-Romeo. That race was my first exposure to Allards, but more was in store.



Future Formula 1 Champion, Phil Hill, heading toward victory at Pebble Beach in 1953 in his 250 MM Ferrari. When the story's author drove this car in 1986, it set in motion a bucket wish item that would not be completed until 2015.

The winning car became a legend. Driven by Bill Pollack, it won a long string of victories over about three years, including the 1952 Golden Gate and Pebble Beach races we attended. That Allard and its driver were the subject of a must-read autobiography by Pollack, entitled, Red Wheels and White Sidewalls: Confessions of an Allard Driver.

Driving a new Ferrari 250MM, Phil Hill beat Pollack in the 1953 main event at Pebble Beach. Years later, in 1984, Judy and I attended the Monterey Historic races at the invitation of our friend, Rick Busenkell, who then owned that car. This was our first opportunity to meet Phil,

who drove his old car in a reprise appearance. Then in 1986, when I went to Los Angeles to purchase a Ferrari Daytona, Rick met me in his vintage Ferrari and offered me the keys for an exciting drive across town to lunch. I didn't know at the time, but a future bucket-list wish was emerging.

The Ferrari-Allard Wars of the early 50s revealed two radically different design philosophies. Ferraris were about finesse. They used their handling and braking prowess to advantage, while Allards employed brute force to achieve success. It was fun watching the Allard's split front axle create negative camber when weight was transferred forward under braking and then go to positive under acceleration. But the entertainment didn't make for the easiest car to drive, and it took a masterful driver to bring these cars home safely to the winner's circle. Pollack was such a driver.

Just this past year, I hinted to a friend my desire to complete that bucket list item begun when I drove the ex-Phil Hill Ferrari 30 years earlier. This meant driving the ex-Bill Pollack Cad-Allard, which now resides in the DC area.



The story's author, Steve White, prepares to get a bucket wish list punched by driving away in the 1950 Cad-Allard made famous on the West Coast by Bill Pollack. The car now resides in the DC area.

Voila! My friend took the bait, which led to a thrilling ride and a punched bucket wish stub. But the experience also proved costly: I set my sights on getting an Allard, but fewer than 100 each of the J2s and J2Xs were built. Translation: Priceless!

Luckily, a company called Elite made a run of replica J2X kits in the 80s and I got a lead on a car. The heart of the kit is the fiberglass body, replicated to match the original in appearance and dimensions, but heavier. Besides the ladder frame, not much else came with the kit. Making a complete car from it required about 20 years of effort by its talented builder. For an engine, he chose a race-built Chevy 350 small block. And he cannibalized a 70s Olds to get the rear end and its suspension. The transmission is a TH350 automatic, instead of the manual I would much prefer.



This Elite-built replica Allard J2X, titled as a 1953 model, now resides in the author's garage awaiting better weather.

It's not quite ready for prime time, but, once the weather warms up, I'll try to get this piece of primitive British art on the road.

Meanwhile, back east...

Al Moss, founder of Moss Motors, was the first west coast dealer for Allards. But in the early years, I believe most Allards were imported to the east, where the postwar sports car racing scene was off to a head start. Fortunately, Road and Track magazine covered major SCCA road racing throughout the country, which is how I stayed abreast of this emerging national sport. And that's how I learned about and followed the adventures of one Erwin Goldschmidt of New York City and other movers and shakers in the east.

Jacob Goldschmidt was a fabulously wealthy Jewish-German banker in prewar Berlin. By the mid-30s, he saw the handwriting on the wall and moved his family to England, where his son, Erwin, received the finest education and became enthralled with sports cars. Following America's entry into the war, Erwin joined the U.S. Army and eventually transferred to the OSS, the rich and elite often chose to do their duty in WWII.

Following the war, when Erwin moved to New York, the SCCA was a restricted WASP organization unaccepting of Jews. So, he joined the unrestricted Motor Sports Club of America and developed his driving skills in this backwater of the sport. But he knew that the SCCA was where the real action was and persistently tried to break down the barrier. After proving himself to a sympathetic SCCA leader, Erwin got the sponsor he needed to join. But he had to jump through many hoops, including some unusually demanding driver-skills tests, before he was grudgingly accepted.

Ever more serious, Erwin purchased an early J2 Cad-Allard in which he enjoyed some early success. Now, he was anxious to enter it in the September 23, 1950, Watkins Glen races, a major SCCA-sanctioned event.

He entered the Allard in two races that day. The first was the 15-lap, 100-mile Seneca Cup Race in which he placed second overall behind Phil Walters in a Healy-Cadillac. It's worth mentioning the third place car, a Riley-Mercury Special driven by Miles Collier. Miles and his brother, Sam, were old-money, old-school SCCA members, who may have been just a little annoyed by this Jewish upstart, a story which plays out in the next race, the feature 15-lap, 100 mile Watkins Glen Grand Prix.

The Collier Brothers were deep into motorsports, having founded the prewar Automobile Racing Club of America (the precursor to the SCCA), began the import of MGs, and raced at LeMans in 1950 driving for motorsports icon Briggs Cunningham in a Cadillac. For the 100-mile Watkins Glen Grand Prix feature race, their close friend, Briggs Cunningham, would lend Sam his red Ferrari 166 Inter. Briggs, himself, would be driving his Cadillac-powered Healey-Silverstone. Another interesting entrant was TV star, Dave Garroway, driving his prewar Jaguar SS100. Zora Arkus-Duntov was in a Ford-powered Allard. Three drivers would be behind the wheel of J2 Cad-Allards entered: Tom Cole, Fred Wacker, and Erwin Goldschmidt. A total of 33 cars were entered and 26 started.

(It's worth noting that the power of the big V8s had a brutal effect on the Ford manual 3-speed gearbox. Gears and/or cases were often swapped out after a race in order to be sure of completing the next one. And there were few better options. But Fred Wacker did find an alternative, that being the GM Hydramatic, which could withstand the punishment. I believe there was more than one Allard so equipped. So, while automatics are not ideal for road racing, they are better than a Did Not Finish. (DNF). While on the subject of Wacker, he was involved in the fatality of a juvenile spectator at the 1952 running of the Watkins Glen Grand Prix. This incident led to the end of the open road racing course there.)

Next comes the stuff of legends. Who knows what Sam Collier was thinking as he pressed hard to catch the leader, Goldschmidt, early in the race, but we can speculate. It would seem that his Ferrari Inter with its tiny V12 of about 130 horsepower was vastly outclassed by the Cad-Allard's 275 and didn't stand a chance. But Sam didn't get the memo. In any event, he would pull all the stops to keep Goldschmidt from repeating the trouncing his brother took in the earlier race.

Apparently overdriving in a futile attempt to catch Goldschmidt, Collier, running third, hit a spot of gravel, lost control and crashed at high speed. He died shortly later at the hospital. It was a blow to the racing community and to his brother, Miles, who withdrew from serious racing. He would die four years later from polio.

The legend suggests that antisemitism may have propelled Sam to his death. Who knows? It is interesting, though, that not only was Goldschmidt an OSS veteran, but both Collier brothers

were, too. One would think that a common bond to such an prestigious wartime organization would have overcome such feelings.

The Collier brothers didn't die without leaving behind some very important automotive legacies:

Founded the Automobile Racing Club of America, the forerunner of the SCCA

Imported MGs after the war

Memorialized by the SCCA with the prestigious Collier Trophy

Obtained racing rights to an airfield in Florida and established the famous 12 Hours of Sebring

And the Collier Collection stands as one of the finest repositories of rare and fine automobiles in the world. This collection was started in California by the brothers' close friend, Briggs Cunningham. When he died, it was moved to the Collier's home area in Naples, Florida.

Goldschmidt would continue to win races with his J2 Cad-Allard, and, as those cars became obsolete, he would graduate to more exotic machines. From 1950 to 1954, he entered 20 races winning three outright, plus two class wins, five second and three third place finishes. In 1954, he ventured to the internationally competed Nassau Trophy Road Races and came away with a third place finish in a Ferrari 375 Plus.

Another Allard driver of some repute was Zora Arkus-Duntov, who drove a Ford-powered J2, I would like to know if this car was equipped with the famous Ardun heads he developed for the flathead V8. Earlier back in England, Arkus-Duntov drove for Sidney Allard as part of the company team. But his lasting reputation was later burnished as the "Father of the Corvette."