

John D. Rockefeller's 1917 Crane-Simplex

By Steve White

Until now, I've resisted the urge to attend early morning cruise-ins at the height of winter. But news of a very special appearance of some museum cars all the way from Tacoma, Washington, was just too much of a temptation. So, at 6:30 am on Saturday, December 31 (New Years Eve), I picked up co-conspirator, Bill Winter in my 53 Olds and headed to Katie's Cars and Coffee at Great Falls.

As we neared our destination, I expected to find few fellow car guys crazy enough to brave the dark and cold of New Years Eve morning in their precious collector cars. After all, aren't you supposed to drain the fluids and put the cars on jack stands in the heated garage until the spring thaw/? So, you can imagine my surprise as we arrived to find a parking lot full of so many of the same wonderful machines one sees there during more temperate seasons.

After finding one of the last good parking spots, Bill and I made our way to where the cars from the LeMay America's Car Museum were positioned. From the promotional material, we expected to see three red postwar cars: A 66 Mustang, a 57 Nomad, and 61 Chrysler 300G. These cars were on a scheduled stop from a meandering course to their final destination: The 2017 North American Auto Show in Detroit where they would on display for the entire event.

We looked, but saw only two red cars: The Nomad and 300G. We learned that the Mustang had blown out its transmission fluid shortly after leaving Boston. A disappointment, for sure. But wait, sitting alongside those two red cars was something remarkably different. It was a magnificent black behemoth that dwarfed everything around it and commanded the attention of everyone nearby. Unannounced, this magnificent brute from the teens was also part of the Museum's caravan, but unlike its companions, which were being driven, this one was following safely behind in the comfort of an enclosed trailer pulled by the caravan's combination tow rig/chase truck.

In 1917, if you were looking for a suitable gift for your father, John D. Rockefeller, Sr., on his 78th birthday, it would have to be something special, something few others in the world could afford. And it would have to be something that made a grand statement about his station in life. So, what could be more appropriate than one of the most exclusive car brands in the world? And that exact car was the big surprise of the day: A stunning 1917 Crane-Simplex.

Like Duesenberg, a generation later, the buyer of a Crane-Simplex bought the chassis and had a custom coachbuilder create the body. The bare chassis was priced at \$7000. Remember, that's back in 1917 when a dollar was a dollar.

John D.'s car is fitted with a sporty Brewster-built touring car body sitting atop a 144 inch wheelbase chassis. The body is finished in black and fitted with tucked and rolled pleated red leather upholstery, which matches the body's pin striping. Striking and tasteful at the same time!

A lucky staff of six from the museum is responsible for meeting a demanding timetable of stops every day of their long journey. Moreover, they bear the heavy burden of caring for their precious charges. And, of course, they also represent the museum to the public.

We were greeted by Valerie O'Shea, Executive Assistant to the Museum's CEO and Concours Club Manager. We also met Dale Wickell, who serves as mechanic and truck driver.

When Dale kindly opened the hood of the Crane-Simplex, it revealed another dimension to this marvelous car. Sitting in the engine compartment is a beautifully finished gigantic in-line six-cylinder engine, displacing 564 cubic inches. The integral cylinder block/head is cast in two three-cylinder sections, which are mounted atop an aluminum crankcase. We were told that the crankshaft is so massive it had to be installed using a cherry picker. The intake manifold is gleaming copper with a gorgeous brass updraft carburetor feeding the fuel mixture. It is all so very artful and quite powerful for the day, producing 110 horsepower. It must have a ton of torque.

The restoration of Mr. Rockefeller's car was completed just in time to make the trip, which included a homecoming to New York City where the tycoon made his home and Crane-Simplexes were built. The timing, of course, coincides with the 100th anniversary of the car.

Later that day, Bill and I received an email with photos from Bill Holmes, who had also been there, but was smart enough to wait until sunrise. I hope there were more than just the three of us from the Bull Run Region who came out to enjoy this great event. It took hours for my feet to thaw out, but who's complaining!





1917 CRANE SIMPLEX



This Crane Simplex Model 5 (chassis no. 2358), with its custom body by Brewster & Co. NY (body no. 1874) was an imposing luxury automobile in its day. It featured all the amenities and convenience items one might expect in a car costing 10 to 15 times the average American's annual salary. A line from a Simplex Automobile Company advertisement tells the buyer, "To those who demand the utmost in smoothness, flexibility and luxurious comfort, this car is dedicated." The Simplex built racing and touring cars, but was best known for its high-priced luxury cars that were enjoyed by an elite clientele.



This particular Crane Simplex was ordered by John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (1874 - 1960) as a present to his father, John D. Rockefeller, Sr. (1839 - 1937), for his 83rd birthday.

Rockefeller, Sr. was an American oil industry magnate and founder of the Rockefeller Foundation.



SPECIFICATIONS / OPTIONS

BASE PRICE Chassis - \$7,000
Body - \$2,500

ENGINE 564 cu. in. 6-cylinder, 400-hp, 1.9:1

HORSEPOWER 48-hp

PRODUCED Approx. 500 (1915 - 1918)
This car is no. 219 in the series.

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