

My 1935 Auburn  
By Bill Winter



The Auburn Automobile Company was established in 1900, although it was not incorporated until August, 1903. The company evolved from the Eckert Carriage Company of Auburn, Indiana, when the sons of the owner got interested in the horseless carriages that were emerging. With the help of the carriage company's craftsman a prototype vehicle was running in 1900. The first production car was offered in 1903 for \$1,400 and approximately 100 were sold.

The company had its ups and downs, but under the leadership of E. L. Cord, sales reached over 20,000 in 1929. In 1930 sales fell to 11,357 due to the stock market crash and the fact that Auburn was in the final year of a three year body style. Auburn had its last good year in 1931 when the 8-98, designed by former Duesenberg body stylist Alan Leamy, was introduced. Sales were over 32,000. From there things went downhill; in 1932 only 11,000 cars were sold and sales fell to less than 5,000 in 1933.

In an effort to improve lagging sales Auburns underwent a major restyling in 1934 and added a welded all-steel body, and a new six-cylinder Lycoming engine, Auburn's first six since 1930. Sales improved over 1933 to 7,700, but the company

continued to lose money. As a further attempt to boost sales, the 1934 was restyled by Gordon Buehrig, also from Duesenberg, to give the car a more racy appearance. He redesigned the grill, hood louvers, and front fenders and achieved what many consider the most stunning Auburn ever. However, sales fell to just over 6,300 and dropped to only 1,250 in 1936. 1935 was essentially the last year of production for Auburn cars. 1936 Auburns are mostly rebadged 1935s that had not sold.

The 1935 Model 653 Auburns have a six-cylinder 209.9 cubic inch 90 h.p. engine and a 120-inch wheelbase. There is also a Model 851 with a Lycoming eight-cylinder 280 cubic inch 113 h.p. engine that could be purchased with a supercharger raising the horsepower to 148. The wheelbase of the 851 is 127 inches. Both engines have aluminum heads. The two models were available in three trim styles: Standard, Custom and Salon. The Customs and Salons have more elegant trim and came with a Columbia dual ratio rear end that cut the engine speed by one third. All trims were available as two door Broughams, Coupes and Cabriolets and four door Sedans and Phaetons. Closed cars came with broadcloth upholstery while open cars had leather. The MSRP for 653 Models ranged from \$745 for a Standard Brougham to \$1,182 for a Salon Phaeton. A Custom Phaeton similar to mine cost \$1,102. There was also a supercharged 851 Speedster with an MSRP of \$2,245; you could probably add two or three zeros to that for the value today.

Model 653 production began in Connersville, Indiana in August 1934. Detailed production records were destroyed when the company went bankrupt in 1937. With the help of Jon Bill of the Auburn Cord Duesenberg Museum I obtained some production information. By the end of November, 1934, 1,785 cars had been built. From December 1934 thru May 1935, the end of 1935 production, another 2,431 were built for a total of 4,216 for all 653 body and trim styles. Monthly production was highly variable so it is difficult to determine exactly when my car, the 3558<sup>th</sup> Model 653, was assembled, but March or April 1935 is probably a fair guess.

My car was shipped from Connersville to the Auburn dealer in Norway, Gustav Thrane-Steen AS, in 1935. According to the last Norwegian owner it was for the U.S. Ambassador to Norway, Anthony Joseph Drexel Biddle, Jr. Biddle was appointed Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to Norway on July 22, 1935. It seems reasonable that a new Ambassador would need a new car. My estimated assembly date seems to fit reasonably with Biddle's appointment to Norway.

The Ambassador was transferred to Poland in 1937 and the car went into the Norwegian public market. With the help of a Norwegian member of the ACD Club and a member of the Nordic Packard Club, I have found four registrations in Norway issued between 1937 and 1962, all in or around Oslo. Unfortunately, the detailed records containing the owner's names and exact dates of



registration have been lost. The "N" on the trunk designates that the car was registered in Norway. There is also a Norwegian Automobile Federation (similar to AAA) badge on the grill. There is no record of where the car was during the Nazi occupation of Norway from April 1940 to May 1945. My Norwegian contacts have told me that most people either hid their cars or the car's wheels so that the Nazis could not use them.

The car has a metric speedometer/odometer, European style turn signals and a



single side-mount spare, which was more popular in Europe than the dual side-mounts that were the norm in the U.S., except for supercharged cars that had the exhaust pipes on the left side of the hood. It is also equipped with STARTIX, an optional automatic starting system that works with the flip of a switch, much like many current cars, and will restart the engine automatically if it stalls. Other somewhat unique features include the

dual ratio rear end, a fold down windshield that lays flat over the cowl, a lock ignition on the steering column that also locks the steering wheel, and a ride stabilizer to minimize body roll on curves.

A Canadian citizen purchased the car sight unseen from the Norwegian owner in 1969 and had it shipped from Oslo to Toronto. Things got off to a rough start in Canada. When he went to pick the car up on the dock it had a frozen engine. There was no winch on the trailer and no one to push. The trailer was too narrow with its fenders on so they had to be removed. Finally, on leaving the dock the low trailer caught on a canvas hose attached to a pump and proceeded to drag both down the street. He then had a personal escort by a Department of



Agriculture employee at the dock who insisted the car be steam-cleaned to remove any dirt that might have contained anthrax spores. It was a rainy rush hour and not many steam-cleaning places were open but he found one and was finally on his way. When the car arrived it had the original paint, leather upholstery and artillery wheels, all of which were replaced during its stay in Canada.

After an engine rebuild he drove the car and even pulled a camping trailer about 12,800 miles prior to 1993. He also made several improvements. From 1993, when he had a second engine rebuild, until I purchased it from him in 1998 he only drove it about 800 miles because he had more interest in several other cars that he owned, including a 1933 Auburn 8 cylinder Cabriolet.

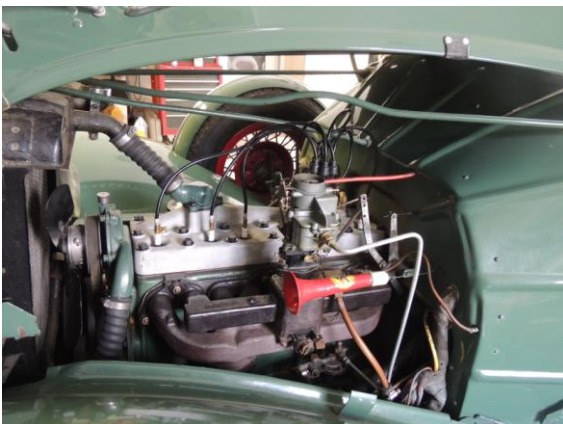


The way I found the car or the car found me was a little unusual. A neighbor's son was to marry a young lady from Canada and our neighbors had a reception for friends to meet the bride-to-be and her family. My neighbors knew that the bride's father and I both had an interest in antique cars since I had just restored a 1951 Chevy and had a 1948 Dodge business

coupe sitting in the driveway. While I was speaking to her father he mentioned that he had two Auburns. I told him I had wanted an Auburn since I had seen a supercharged 851 Phaeton at a broker's in Staunton, VA about ten or fifteen years earlier, but could not afford it. I also wanted a car that was older than me since I was tired of working on cars that were younger than me and were called antiques. He said he was willing to sell his 653 Auburn. My wife and I went to Dorchester, Ontario and looked the car over, drove it a little, discussed the price and I agreed to buy the car if he would deliver it to Falls Church.

The car was delivered on a hot August day in 1998 and I took it for a spin. It died about a block from my house. It didn't take too long to determine that the problem was a shorted capacitor, although to this day I can't remember how I found it so quickly. Fortunately, the deal included several boxes of extra parts, including some capacitors.

I drove the car around Falls Church until about December 1998 when I put it up for



the winter. In April of 1999 I got the car back on the road and a neighbor, who was a World War II Navy veteran, asked me to drive some other veterans in the Falls Church Memorial Day parade. That's when I learned something about Auburn aluminum heads. I got to the end of the parade and the car started to run rough and backfire. I managed to get the few blocks to home and into the garage. The

car sat all summer and over Labor Day weekend I went to the annual Auburn Cord Duesenberg Reunion in Auburn, Indiana. There I learned that blown head gaskets were a fairly common occurrence because the aluminum head expanded more than the steel head bolts, compressing the gasket even after the normal seating. One fellow told me he kept a torque wrench in his car at all times. I was still working at the time and I just let the car sit in the garage until 2009.

In 2009 I had the head milled and replaced the head gasket. I also had to replace the rear axle seals that had dried out and rebuild all the brake cylinders that had rusted. I had the gas tank cleaned and polymer coated at Gas Tank Renu. In 2010 I had the carburetor and fuel pump rebuilt with ethanol-tolerant gaskets and diaphragm, and replaced the exhaust system with a correct stainless steel system. For the next few years I enjoyed driving the car and took it to a few shows.

Then I decided to try to make it look prettier in 2014. I got all the chrome to the plating company in January but didn't get it back until late May. It took me until about the end of June to get everything put back together. When I finally changed the oil and started it the car ran nicely until I suddenly had steam billowing out of the exhaust. The next day I pulled the head and found a small hole in the head right through the middle of the number one combustion chamber into the water jacket. That was two days before we were to go to Norway for three weeks. When we got back I was able to get the hole welded and the head milled again but glass beading the head showed that there were small cracks by two of the spark plug holes. After some searching I found A.H.M. Performance in Baltimore that does metal stitching (a cold repair). They stitched the cracks and installed steel inserts for all of the plugs. I drove the car a little in the fall of 2014 and took it the Rockville show special display of orphan cars in October.

In the spring of 2015 I decided to add an electric fuel pump while I had it up on jack stands and had the gas tank drained. I was also able to obtain a newly cast T-56 aluminum head. About two days before the parts arrived I discovered that I had a detached retina and had immediate surgery. I was unable to do any work on the car for about three months, so it sat until August once again. It is now all together with a spanking new head and hopefully ready to roll for the next few years.

The car has never had a full restoration. It was rewired in Norway sometime in the 1950's. The top was replaced in 1983, the interior redone in 1992, the engine was rebuilt for the second time in Canada in 1993 and the body repainted in 1998. The car has been driven about 1,800 miles since the engine rebuild. I stored the car from 1999 until 2009 and drove it about 1000 miles from 2010 to



2013 but it has been a garage queen for the last two years.