



Great Garages

BILL HARRAH'S RIDES: THE NATIONAL AUTOMOBILE MUSEUM

by David M. Brown

If Bill Harrah had cast the dice for the future of his wheels, this would be the roll of his dreams.

The founder of Harrah's Hotels & Casinos and Harrah's Automobile Collection, the California native (1911-1978) was one of the 20th century's most famous car collectors. Opened in 1989, the National Automobile Museum (The Harrah Collection) in downtown Reno features more than 200 antique, vintage, classic and special interest vehicles beginning in 1892, most of them American-made vehicles from Harrah's great collection.

They include the marquee 1907 Thomas Flyer, winner of the following year's landmark New York to Paris Automobile Race; it is one of a handful of the most important American cars anywhere. Another, the futuristic 1938 Phantom Corsair, is among the world's most requested loan vehicles to concours, festivals and exhibitions.

Located along the Truckee River, at Lake and Mill streets across from the Renaissance Reno Downtown Hotel, The Harrah Collection, in four self-guided galleries, also features vintage clothing, automobile-related artifacts and an extensive research library covering 125-plus years of automotive history.

The 100,000-square-foot building opened November 5, 1989, and established international standards for automotive-museum décor, including overall automotive styling design and individual details such as the exterior metal skin in Heather Fire Mist, a popular 1950s car color, accented with

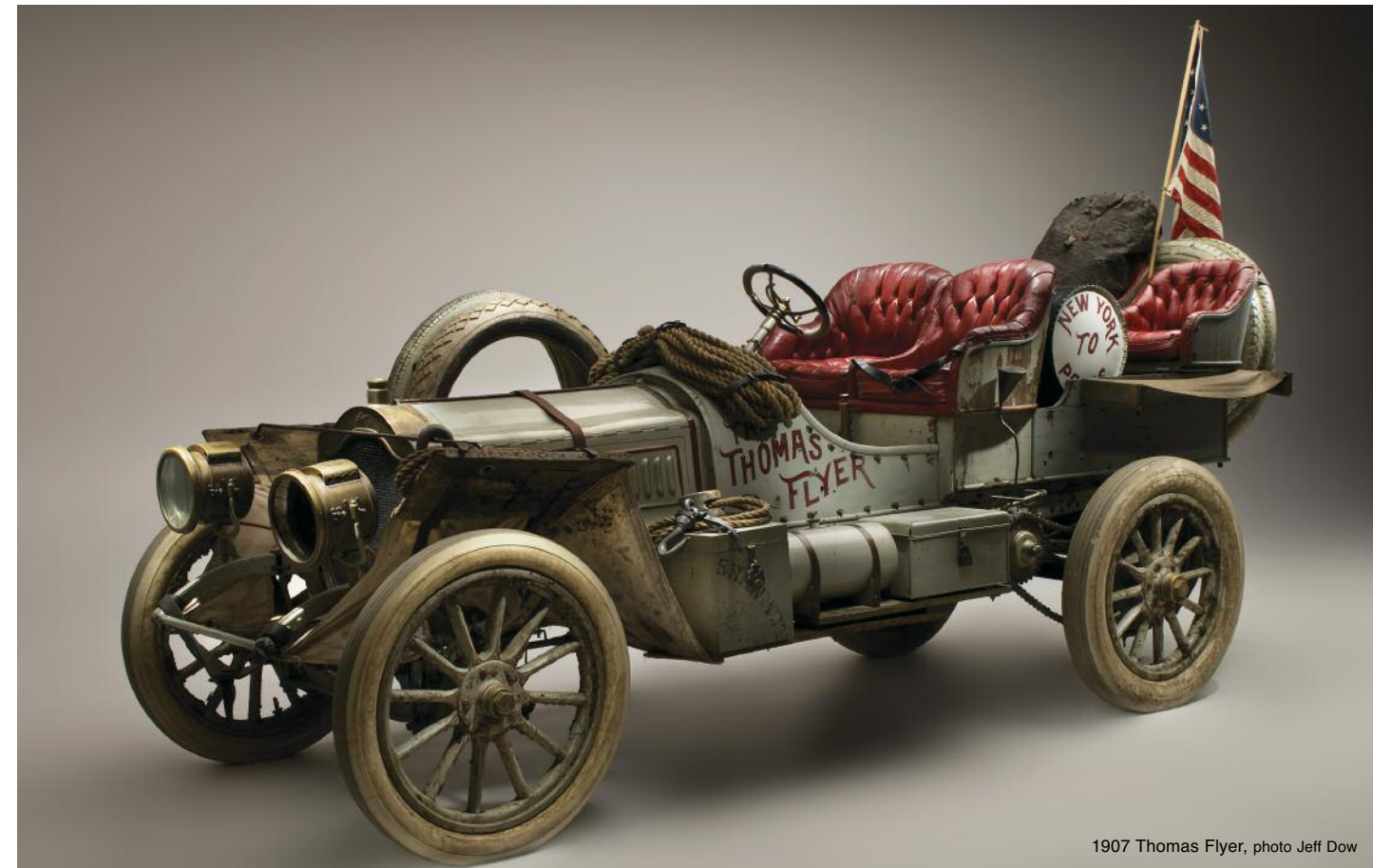
chrome trim and a reflective glass pyramid at the lobby. Visitors stroll authentically staged street scenes, depicting eras from the turn of the 20th century, with building facades, artifacts and the autos.

"The museum is considered to have one of the finest horseless carriage collections in the world and is known for its many rare, experimental and one-of-a-kind automobiles," says Jackie L. Frady, president and executive director. "The elegant, handsome vehicles are as distinctive and individual as fine jewels: triumphs in styling, finish, luxury and quality."

'Right Stuff' Cars Stay Right in the Public Eye

After Harrah's death in 1978, Holiday Inn purchased the real estate and the car collection two years later but announced it was selling the cars, prompting protest from Nevadans and car lovers nationwide. The following year, Nevada Governor Robert List helped form a private nonprofit 501(c)(3) corporation and a Board of Trustees to oversee the development and management of the museum. Holiday Inn donated 175 cars and the research library.

Harrah collected cars with the "right stuff," each with a story. He loved Ford, Franklin, Packard and Pierce-Arrow automobiles, and his collection featured at least one model for each year of production for them: Fords, 1903 through 1977 (the year before his death); Franklins, 1903-1934; Packards, 1900 through 1958; and Pierce-Arrows, 1909 to 1938.



1907 Thomas Flyer, photo Jeff Dow

"Harrah's collecting goals included cars of which there were only one built or only one remained in existence, the first and last of a series, notable engineering features, remarkable history or notoriety or cars that had been owned by famous people," Frady explains.

The collection also includes unique designs, a papier-mâché body, foreign makes manufactured in the U.S., cars powered by gasoline, steam and batteries, economy models and luxurious designs for the wealthy. Also showcased are racers such as dragsters, Indy cars and jet-, battery- and steam-powered cars.

"The museum is more than a museum. It's a trip through more than a century of progress begun by tinkerers, inventors and dreamers who conceived the grand motorcar and those who have followed in their footsteps," she says. "It's like driving through a century in just a few hours."

"We are all tied to the automobile by history, by business, by emotion," Harrah once said. "The automobile deserves to be preserved and remembered."

This month, Frady shares some of Harrah's cars that help us do that, with admiration and joy:

•**1907 Thomas Flyer** — This is the very car that won the 1908 New York to Paris Automobile Race, with hard-won victory July 30, 1908, after 169 days traveling 22,000 miles (13,341

by land).

What's more, you'll see it restored as this history-maker looked after the sagebrush-and-snow trek across the largely unpaved United States, requiring 41 days alone from New York to San Francisco in winter, never before done by automobile, sometimes driving along railway roadbeds and helped by teams of horses to break up snow drifts.

After the boat trip, the cars traversed Japan, the first cars ever seen on the islands, and across muddy, cold Siberia, Manchuria, Russia, Germany and, finally, into France.

Sponsored by two newspapers, the New York Times and Le Matin in Paris, the world's longest automobile race began Wednesday, February 12, 1908, in Times Square, New York City, attended by 250,000 Lincoln's Birthday celebrants.

The six automobiles participating: American Thomas Flyer, 60-horsepower, 4-cylinder; French Motobloc, 30-horsepower, 4-cylinder; Italian Zusto, 40-horsepower, 4-cylinder; French Sizaire-Naudin, 15-horsepower, 1-cylinder; French De Dion, 30-horsepower, 4-cylinder; and the German Protos, 40-horsepower, 6-cylinder.

Days before the race, the E.R. Thomas Motor Company of Buffalo, New York, entered a showroom-floor 1907 Thomas Flyer, accompanied by mechanic George Schuster, who ultimately drove the car into Paris.

The car had minor modifications, including wooden planks attached to the sides for tracks in mud and snow, or

1908 NEW YORK TO PARIS RACE



Start of Race

Six cars lined up at New York's Times Square before a cheering crowd of 250,000 spectators for the start of the 1908 New York to Paris Race on February 12, 1908. The line-up included an American Thomas Flyer, German Protos, Italian Züst and three French cars, a De Dion, Motorbloc and Sizaire-Naudin.



Snow Drifts

The racers battled winter for more than two weeks from the start of the 1908 New York to Paris Race. Teams shoveled snow for miles and hired teams of horses to break up giant snow drifts. The picture shows deep snow encountered on the way to Chicago.



Thomas Flyer in Utah

In Utah, the trail was stark, cracked and littered with animal skulls and broken wagon parts. During rough stretches, the 1907 Thomas Flyer drove on the tracks of the Union Pacific and Southern Pacific railroads during the 1908 New York to Paris Race.



Thomas Flyer in Japan

It was a 350-mile tortuous drive across the 90-mile width of Japan. Pictured is the 1907 Thomas Flyer in the narrow streets of Japan. Occasionally, it was carried around corners and tugged or lowered by ropes on daunting grades.



Thomas Flyer Fording River

On many occasions throughout the 1908 New York to Paris Race, the teams crossed flooded waterways, rivers and shallow streams.



Thomas Flyer in Paris

Large crowds greeted the American team in the streets of Paris. The American 1907 Thomas Flyer won the 1908 New York to Paris Race after 169 days and approximately 22,000 miles, arriving in Paris on July 30, 1908.

a temporary bridge, spare tires and a large frame mounted overhead to which canvas could be strapped like a covered wagon. "Holes had also been cut in the floorboard so heat from the engine could warm the driver's feet," Frady adds.

Harrah purchased the Thomas Flyer in March 1964, hoping to restore the car to the condition it was when it won in 1908. More than 40 restoration experts completed the project in six weeks, which was awarded a top Gold Star by Harrah's Automobile Collection.

Schuster's help was solicited. He was 91 and living in New York and wrote a candid letter stating that he doubted the original 1907 Thomas existed and believed Harrah had not purchased the original car.

"In the letter, he noted that the right rear motor leg had been broken at the frame pocket and he had bolted a boiler plate patch across the break. The left frame was cracked in two places and had been patched with a piece of angle iron," Frady says. And, indeed, staff found evidence of these repairs; with this, Schuster agreed to come to Reno.

Still dubious on site, he watched the dismantling of the Thomas Flyer and noticed a flywheel repair he had made in Siberia — a repair he had forgotten about. He finally agreed that this, indeed, was the car he had driven to victory more than a half century earlier.

Extraordinary care was given for materials authenticity, using as many of the original parts as possible, finding some, fabricating still others such as the toolbox and gasoline tank. The paint on the car was carefully matched to an original paint chip.

To ensure the car looked as it had at the end of the race, soiled, battered and triumphant, Harrah's Automobile Collection consulted with Walt Disney Studios' Special Effects Department in Hollywood about an aging process. That group advised, among other procedures, driving the newly restored car through rough roads, sanding weak springs to suggest wear and treating leather with a dull finish plastic or lacquer to remove the shine from exposed areas.

The victory was variously impactful. "It dramatically increased the prestige of American-made automobiles. With the Thomas Flyer's successful crossing of the country in winter, it shifted the mindset of a nation. Automobiles could be a year-round mode of transportation and could be an efficient, reliable means of long-distance travel," Frady says. "And, it stimulated the building of roads across the United States and the development of the many businesses and services that make up 'roadside America.'"

•**The 1927 Lincoln Coaching Brougham** — In 1922, Henry Ford bought the Lincoln Motor Company; immediately, every Ford dealer in America became a sales agent, providing the luxury car the most outlets in the world.

He put his son, Edsel, in charge, and he focused on design.

"Coachbuilt showcars of that day often put forth advanced or special body designs, often with custom themes and striking colors," says Michael Lamm, an author and director of the Ironstone Concours d'Elegance, held annually at the Ironstone Vineyards in Murphys, California.

"Showcars were, in essence, early concept cars, the idea



1927 Lincoln Coaching Brougham, photo Jeff Dow



1937 Airomobile Experimental Sedan



being to attract wealthy buyers and their chauffeurs, who usually recommended which makes and models families should buy.”

Edsel Ford consulted with John B. Judkins, owner and president of J.B. Judkins & Son, Lincoln’s premier coach-builder, and his chief body designer, John F. Dobben. Of course, Henry, always monitoring Edsel’s performance, suggested a theme based on the Concord stagecoaches, which ran on New England’s major routes as late as 1912, built by the Abbot Downing Company in Concord, New Hampshire.

“The elder Ford had a warm spot for Concord coaches because very early versions transported some of his heroes, including George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette, and also because he owned one,” Lamm says. This was displayed at Wayside Inn, the Sudbury, Massachusetts, property that Ford bought in 1923.

Dobben, made five sketches of the Ford Concord coach, and the Fords chose the design of the car. Built in late 1926 by Judkins on a 1927 Lincoln Model L chassis, The Model L used Lincoln’s 90-horsepower V-8. Edsel named the body style the English Coaching Brougham and priced it at \$8,789, about \$116,000 today.

After its showing in New York in January 1927 with another Lincoln, the English Coaching Brougham was shipped to Chicago, then to Los Angeles, where the father of aspiring Hollywood starlet, Ethel Jackson, bought the car for her.

In 1931, the Macmillan Ring Free Oil Co. acquired the car from Jackson and used it to promote the musical radio show, the Beverly Hill Billies, decades before the famous TV series starring Buddy Ebsen.

“After ferrying Beverly Hill Billies to various gigs, the Lincoln fell into disuse until 1962, when Bill Harrah bought it,” Lamm says. “He had the car restored to its original glory during 1964 and, the next year, entered it in the Pebble Beach Concours d’Elegance.”

•**1937 Airomobile Experimental Sedan** — This one-off futurist car was conceived by Paul Lewis in the early 1930s.

In 1936, he contracted with former Franklin Automobile Company engineers Carl Doman and Edward Marks to build a prototype, aerodynamically styled by John Tjaarda, designer of the Lincoln-Zephyr.

The car is reminiscent of Dr. Porsche’s Volkswagen, but the originators of the Airomobile were not familiar with it. Volkswagen engineers studied it in the spring of 1937.

In April 1937, the car was ready for testing and promotions and was driven 45,000 miles throughout the United States to raise capital. The Airomobile attained up to 80 miles per hour and averaged 43.6 miles per gallon of fuel, but grubstake money could not be found, so this is the only example.

Harrah’s Automobile Collection purchased the Airomobile in May 1968 from a collection in Rochester, New York. Modifications had been done, and the car was in very poor condition.

Fortunately, existing original engineering drawings helped with the research and restoration. Rancho Aura Vincit in Tucson, Arizona, under the direction of Thomas H. Hubbard, restored the car in the mid-1970s.

Those involved in the design and creation of the Airomobile were also consulted, including Marks; Doman; his son, Dave Doman; Francis Savage, another former Franklin engineer who worked on the Airomobile project; and a Mr. Gerst, former chief draftsman at Franklin.

Mrs. Carl Doman, wife of the co-founder, had several yards of upholstery from the bolt used on the Airomobile, and this sample allowed the restoration team to locate a close match for color and texture.

“Dave Doman was absolutely certain that he had ridden in a bright red-orange Airomobile as a child, even though the car had been painted black and several remembered it as black, including his mother,” Frady says.

During restoration, Hubbard confirmed the bright red. “This turned up on the inside and edges (under where weather strip would have been) on the luggage compartment door,” he wrote. “The pictures of the car taken in spring of ’37 when it first was run do support this.”



1934 Dymaxion Model 2 4-D Transport, photo Jeff Dow

The Airomobile has toured often: at a national Franklin meet in 1970 in New York State; the International AutoShow in Toronto, February 18-27, 2005, and the Detroit Auto Show, January 10-18, 1976, when Harrah’s Automobile Collection also toured its one-of-a-kind 1925 Julian Sport Coupe, and two rare antiques, a 1899 Orient and 1908 Bugatti Petit Pur Sang, “Small Thoroughbred,” the first production Bugatti.

•**1934 Dymaxion Model 2 4-D Transport** — This one of three was created by the inimitable Richard Buckminster ‘Bucky’ Fuller (1895-1983), poet, artist, engineer, architect, cartographer, mathematician, sailor, philosopher and inventor of the geodesic dome and the Dymaxion™ House. The design was completed with naval architect Starling Burgess and Anna Biddle, the financial supporter, from the socialite Philadelphia family.

This highly streamlined car used a rear-mounted Ford V-8 to drive the two front wheels. The single rear wheel steered similarly to the rudder of a ship. “Because the rear wheel pivoted 90 degrees, the car turned on its own axis, giving the driver the sensation of meeting himself coming and going,” Frady explains.

One of the most radical features of the Dymaxion design was that it was mounted on two frames, hinged at the front; one frame carries the engine and drive chain, the other the rear-wheel mount, suspension and steering. Innovatively, Fuller and team included no rear windows but a periscope, anticipating today’s rearward cameras. Top speed was an excellent 120 mph and fuel consumption between 25 and 30 mpg.

During 1933 and 1934, two other Dymaxions were built:

the first, sold to the U.S. Bureau of Standards in Washington, used in advertising and destroyed in a fire; the second, purchased by the great conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra, Leopold Stokowski, which was conscripted to promote WWII war bonds and possibly scrapped during the Korean War.

The car was found in a back yard of a Mesa, Arizona, home. Clarence Campbell, Peter D’Agastino and Lester Loops were engineering students at the University of Arizona in 1968 when Buckminster Fuller gave a lecture there. “The professor talked about the Dymaxion automobile and believed one of the three Fuller produced was still in existence,” Fray says.

The three students saw the Dymaxion in the Arizona back yard, where it had been for at least 20 years. An animal had made it a comfortable albeit rusty home; BB gun shot holes had punctured the windows; the engine cover was off; and most of the dashboard instruments were boxed on the floor. Eventually, the owner, Theodore E. Mezes, relented to sell it for \$3,000 to the students on August 19, 1968.

The young men lent it to the Museum of Modern Art in New York for “The Machine” exhibit, and the Chicago Museum of Transportation and Industry for a traveling exhibit in exchange for minor exterior cosmetic work.

The Dymaxion was then placed in storage until 1978 when Bill Harrah purchased the car for \$20,000 on February 14, 1978. This was one of the cars Holiday Inn donated to the Museum in the 1980s (Source: The Buckminster Fuller Institute, bfi.org).

•**1936 Mercedes-Benz Type 500K Special Roadster** — Only 29 of these gorgeous droptops were built, and about five are



1936 Mercedes-Benz Type 500K Special Roadster, photo Jeff Dow

known to exist. This 500K was purchased in 1936 at the London Automotive Exhibition by Princess Nina Mdivani, wife of Denis P.S. Conan Doyle, son of Sherlock Holmes creator, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

The newlyweds drove the 500K on their honeymoon, through England, France, Switzerland, Italy, Austria, Sicily, Algeria and Morocco, starting at St. Donat's Castle in Wales, where they were married. The castle had been purchased by William Randolph Hearst in 1925, who hosted them.

Mercedes-Benz automobiles are products of Daimler, the oldest automobile firm in the world, a partnership of German entrepreneurs Karl Benz and Gottlieb Daimler.

In America, Mercedes-Benz automobiles of the 1920s and 1930s were extremely popular, so much so that, excepting Rolls-Royce, more were imported into the United States than any other foreign car, says writer and editor Bob McQuitty.

In 1932, the 500K series began production at Daimler-Benz Aktiengesellschaft in Stuttgart-Unterturkheim, Germany, with coachwork by the great Sindelfingen company. The price was an extraordinary \$10,780, an especially exalted tag during the Great Depression in the United States and Europe.

The 500 references the 8-cylinder engine displacement, 5,018 cubic centimeters or 500 deciliters (304.2 cubic inches), and the "K" is for Kompressor (supercharger). Despite its 4,500 pounds curb weight, the 500K accelerated quickly to a top speed of 100-plus mph.

Sturdy, dependable and assembled with superb craftsmanship, the 500K model was shown at the leading European International Automobile Exhibitions in Brussels, Geneva and London.

Doyle said a magazine began a photographic series depicting

the most beautiful cars ever produced by each of the world's top ten automobile manufacturers, and the 500K was voted first, making it the most beautiful car in the world.

Alan McCarroll, working for the U.S. government as the controller for the European Exchange System in Nürnberg, bought the car for \$300 in 1953, even receiving a letter from Doyle, commending him "on having acquired a real thoroughbred" and wishing him equal luck with the car.

The McCarrolls, including wife Gladys, and Pat, his daughter, moved to Mexico City. While they were house-hunting, McCarroll had no place to park the car safely, and the Mercedes showroom in Mexico City invited him to leave the car in their window next to a new red '60s Mercedes, which McCarroll did until he found a secure home for the classic, McQuitty says.

In the spring of 1964, Mr. McCarroll entered his "Ivory Idol," so named because of its then color, in Mexico's first Concurso de Elegancia del Automovil. "It placed first, and the officials of the Concurso asked Mr. McCarroll to never again enter the car in competition because no one else could compete against its beauty," he adds.

Arkansas Governor Winthrop Rockefeller purchased the car for \$10,000 and, in October 1964, he opened the Museum of Automobiles in Petit Jean Mountain, Morrilton, Arkansas, displaying the Mercedes-Benz. Harrah's Automobile Collection purchased that collection in 1975, and in 1982, Harrah's Hotels and Casinos donated the car as part of the Harrah Collection, where it has been restored to its original Inca silver.

•1938 Phantom Corsair Experimental Six-Passenger Coupe — In 1936, 22-year-old Rust Heinz, of the Heinz 57 Varieties



1938 Phantom Corsair Experimental Six-Passenger Coupe, photo Jeff Dow

family, bought a new Cord 810 sedan. Dreaming of becoming a car stylist rather than a ketchup heir, he drove the Cord and sketched his dream car.

Living in Pasadena with an aunt who looked favorably on him and his design ambitions, he called on the great coach-builder, Bohman & Schwartz, to build it. "Maurice Schwartz himself agreed to hammer out the aluminum body panels," writes Michael Lamm.

"[Heinz'] drawings showed a long, sleek fastback coupe, and what impressed Maurice Schwartz was that the body shape had no design precedent. He'd come up with a totally original body shape."

The Phantom Corsair, named by Heinz, had no traditional envelope body with uninterrupted "through" fenders, four fully skirted wheels, no discernible grille, no ornamentation, no chrome or door handles. "The design was all of a piece, and the form, in fact, was the design: very unusual for that day of fussy art deco and faux streamlining," Lamm explains.

The Cord offered the powertrain in a nice package on a sub-frame: the 125-bhp Lycoming V-8, 4-speed pre-selector gearbox and front-wheel drive.

The A.J. Bayer Co. in Vernon, Calif., fabricated a chassis to weld to the Cord's front subframe, and Schwartz then made up the full-sized wooden hammer forms for the Corsair's aluminum body. Schwartz also fabricated a full bellypan to aid aerodynamics.

"The Corsair body, due to its extreme width, overhung the frame rails by a substantial margin, but intentionally so," Lamm writes. "The side-to-side overhang allowed the skirted front wheels to turn at fairly normal angles, and it also allowed four-abreast seating on the front bench. The fourth passenger sat to the driver's left."

Heinz created a brochure and priced the replica Corsairs at a massive \$14,700; a luxe Packard Six cost \$888. All details

were top of the line: The doors opened with electric push-buttons, the hood opened and shut with electro-hydraulic rams, the rear cabin walls had built-in cabinets with aluminum tumblers and a crystal decanter, and the instrument panel used the 1936 Cord gauges and others. Heinz even planned for a shortwave radio and thermostatically controlled air-conditioning.

To publicize the Phantom Corsair, he got a part for it as the "Flying Wombat," co-starring in the 1938 film *The Young in Heart* with swashbuckling Douglas Fairbanks Jr. and gorgeous Paulette Goddard. He also displayed the Phantom Corsair at the 1939 New York World's Fair.

Until 1942, the car was in a Queens warehouse and then was sold to a few owners, including in 1947 to car builders Joe and Andy Granatelli in Chicago. In 1971, Harrah's Automobile Collection bought the Phantom Corsair and restored it to its pristine 1937 configuration.

In its last concours at the Goodwood Festival of Speed, Cartier 'Style et Luxe' in England, July 14, 2013, the 1938 Phantom Corsair Experimental 6-Passenger Coupe won Best in Class, Streamlined Sophistication, The Epitome of Pre-War Automotive Art.

The National Automobile Museum is open daily, except Thanksgiving and Christmas, Monday–Saturday, 9:30 a.m.–5:30 p.m., and Sunday 10 a.m.–4 p.m. Adult admission is \$12; Senior (62 and older) \$10; Youth (6–18), \$6; Children (5 and under), free. Discounts are available for AAA members, active military and veterans and for groups of 10 or more paying guests. The museum is available for banquets and special events to as large as 1,200 guests. See automuseum.org.

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