

Dreaming of a Duesenberg

One Collector Seeks to Capture the Cars that First Caught His Eye



Roger Willbanks crosses the awards ramp with his 1929 Duesenberg J Derham Dual Cowl Phaeton at the 2000 Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance.

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In 1947, a Duesenberg was often the car of dreams. For then-10-year-old Roger P. Willbanks that was certainly true.

"It was definitely an over-the-top car for its day, especially in terms of its performance," explains Roger. "The mechanics—the engine—were beyond belief! It had multiples of the power of any other passenger car in production at that time."



Roger P. Willbanks in his 1929 Duesenberg J Derham Dual Cowl Phaeton

Growing up in Denver, Colorado, Roger knew of the Duesenberg marque only as it existed in the pages of books. But one day in 1947 that changed.

"I was riding my bike through my South Denver neighborhood when I saw a car I had not seen before," says Roger. "Strangely, on a residential street, I saw my first Duesenberg!"

He wanted a closer look, of course, so he parked his bike and went over to the car, being sure to examine it from a safe distance.

"I got as close as I could without touching it," says Roger. "I moved over the whole exterior at about a distance of six inches."

After some time, a man startled Roger from his trance-like state and asked him if he knew anything about the car. Roger responded, "Yes! It's a Duesenberg with 265 horsepower!"



The man was surprised and impressed by the adept, young Duesenberg fan, and let Roger sit in the driver's seat of the car. "That vision of the dashboard in front of me stayed with me in the following years as I went on to finish grade school, high school, college, and eventually the army," says Roger.

Just over fifty years after Roger's initial rendezvous with the car, a 1929 Duesenberg Model J Derham Dual Cowl Phaeton was put up for auction. Roger instantly recognized the elusive Phaeton, and knew that he had to have it. "I was delighted with the idea of caring for the very Duesenberg that inspired me at such a young age," he explains.

After researching the history of his now prized Duesenberg, Roger discovered that William A. M. Burden of the famed Vanderbilt family was the original owner.

Roger's 1929 Duesenberg J will appear on the 2018 Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance competition field in the Duesenberg class.

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The Duesenberg is not the only childhood dream Roger has turned into a reality; his collection also includes a car that he first spotted at age five.

Roger's father brought him and his older brother into downtown Denver one evening.

"After parking the car, I noticed two large spotlights in the sky—something I recognized from the movies, but I quickly realized we were not seeing a film," Roger remembers.



Under the hood of the 1929 Duesenberg J Derham Dual Cowl Phaeton



The 1941 Chrysler Thunderbolt at the 1997 Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance

They soon walked into a large conference hall brimming with people. "My brother put me on his shoulders so I could get a better view—and then I saw a car," says Roger. "There in the center of the crowd was a red and chrome hard-top convertible. It had a chrome strip that went around it and a very smooth body that, together, made it look like a floating spaceship."



The 1941 Chrysler Thunderbolt crossing the awards ramp at the 1997 Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance.

"The Thunderbolt certainly demanded a special term, as nothing like it had ever really

been seen before. The design and ingenuity are what made me believe that Americans could make the best cars in the world."



The Thunderbolt at the 1997 Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance.

Written by Noah D. Thanos

The car was the 1941 Chrysler Thunderbolt, a concept car released just before the U.S. entered World War II. "At the time, I don't believe they even had come up with the term 'Concept Car,'" explains Roger, "but the Thunderbolt certainly demanded a special term, as nothing like it had ever really been seen before. The design and the ingenuity are what made me believe that Americans could make the best cars in the world."

Roger was captivated. He credits the Thunderbolt with cementing his love of cars. As with his Duesenberg, Roger was later presented with the opportunity to acquire that very Thunderbolt when it went up for auction in 2008. It too is now in his collection. Roger believes that nurturing a love of cars in people of all ages is increasingly important, and he hopes that his cars will help inspire the next generation of automotive enthusiasts.

Roger's unusual car stories show that dreams can in fact become a reality—twice even!

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