

DALE ADAMS

Reviving the custom body era, one car at a time



BY JIM DONNELLY • PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM DONNELLY AND RICHARD LENTINELLO

Listen to Dale Adams, even if it's only for a few minutes, and you'll start recalling what the long-gone British novelist D.H. Lawrence remarked about people who dream during the daytime: They're dangerous. They can turn crazy stuff into reality. The rest of us simply wake up in the morning.

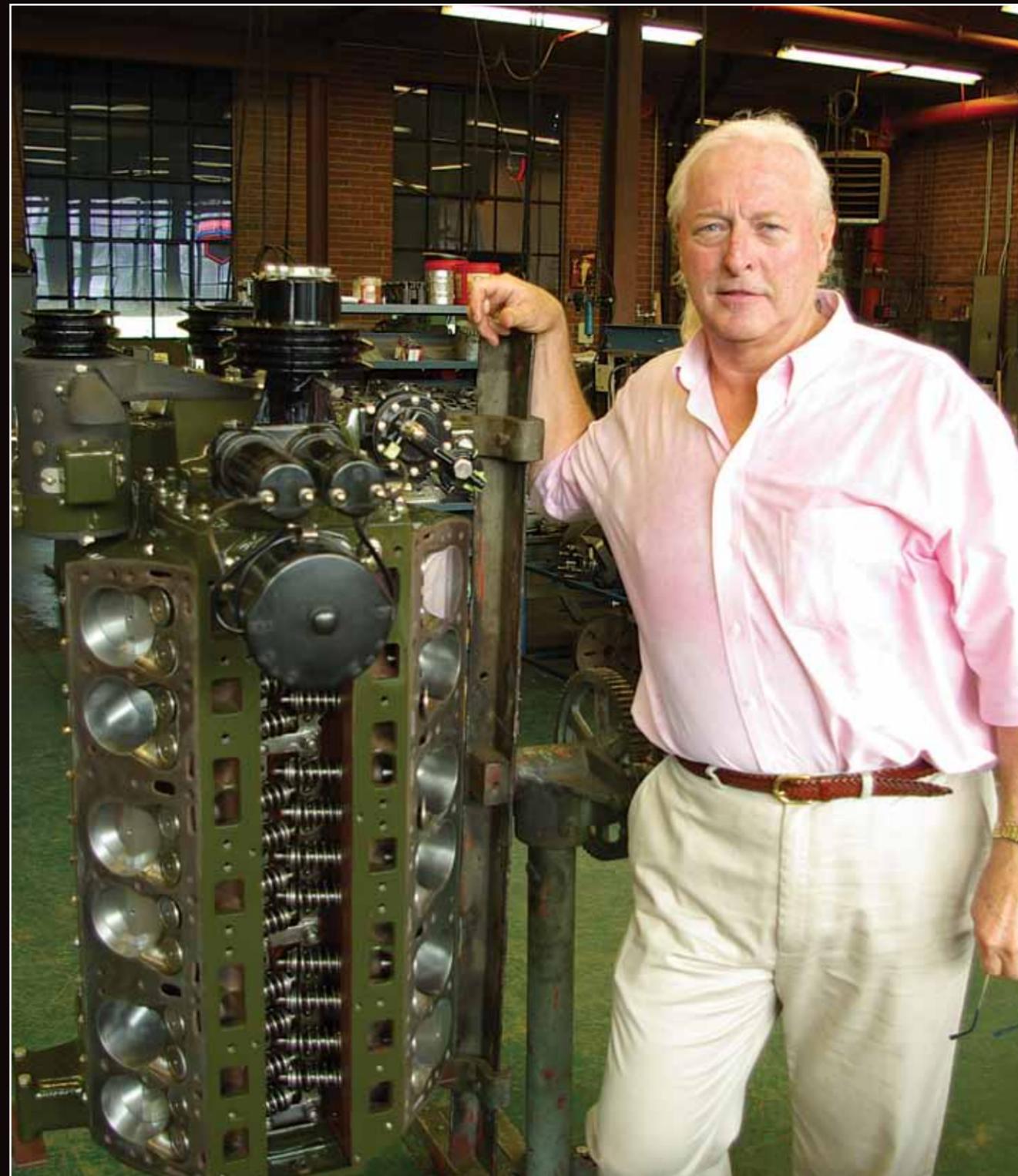
Just listen up for a while.

"The next thing I want to do is buy one of the Duesenbergs that have been rebodied that sell for next to nothing, and throw the body away," he opined. "I've already got a Duesenberg engine here in the shop that I have studied. As good as the cylinder heads appear to be, they don't lend them to anything that can be done with modern combustion chambers. So with an 11.0:1 compression ratio and a new cylinder head, I think I can get 450hp out of a Duesenberg engine, naturally aspirated (as opposed to a factory 256hp for an unblown Model J). You'd have to be able to see up inside the head to see how the chambers are made. They're four valves per cylinder, but I don't think there's any

way you could make a Duesenberg take over 7.0:1 compression.

"I was basically going to go to the junkyard and buy a fairly late-model BMW DOHC straight-six and duplicate that combustion chamber shape. You've already got a bottom end that's just a monster, but then you add a better squish area, better breathing, a little better camming, and cast the cylinder head so it's identical to stock on the outside. You'd have the power plus 650- or 700-lbs. ft. of torque, easily. It'd be a monster," Dale went on. "Then, the body I'd want to build would be similar to the Bentley Blue Train Special. Prettiest little thing you ever saw. I want to do something like that on a Duesenberg chassis with a really hot engine. I'd probably use two original-style Stromberg carburetors, but no blower. You don't need it. With the new cylinder head, if I can rev it to 6,000 RPM, I bet I could get 1 horsepower per cubic inch, plus the bottom end would take anything you can throw at it."

Getting all that? If you've got to chase the Bent-



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Custom coachwork is all about visualization. Tracings of long-wheelbase masterpieces eventually turn into more detailed design drawings. Paper, architectural drawing tools and plain dead reckoning are used to sketch out fender curves and other bodily sweeps. These can then be translated into wooden patterns, upon which metal's beaten into shape.



This is an example of the incredible stuff that passes through Dale's shop. It was produced by the De Tamble Motor Company of Anderson, Indiana, which built perhaps 2,000 cars between 1908 and 1913. It's now being made to run as it should.



In this Ohio shop, things mostly happen in pieces, not necessarily as an integrated whole. Main bearing caps and bolts for Packard V-12s are cast and machined. Axles, brake and hub assemblies are renewed. So are Packard V-12 cylinder heads during a buildup.

ley angle, like we did, the Blue Train appellation refers to a 6½ Litre Bentley fixed-head coupe built in 1929 for the legendary Bentley Boy and Le Mans hero, Woolf Barnato. Its Gurney Nutting bodywork featured a chopped roof so low at the rear that the single back seat had to be mounted sideways, plus wild cycle-type fenders with kickups. The car takes its name from a series of highly publicized speed contests against a French overnight luxury express called *The Blue Train* that ran between Calais and the Riviera, although Bentley researchers now believe the Barnato actually drove a different 6½ Litre, though also with Gurney Nutting coachwork.

A wild notion, especially for somebody who's orbited at the very apogee of historic automotive restoration, where any perceived inaccuracies or other forays into personal interpretation can get you screamed at by a self-styled purist, or worse. Dale's had a folio of those experiences, and yet, despite undisputed mastery of restoration's technical arts, he is insistent about doing his own thing. He hasn't cashed a check on a full restoration in 15 years.

From his appropriately Art Deco works in Kent, Ohio, he's trying to revive the august practice of building truly customized automobiles for the most discriminating, and financially secure, of buyers. It's already taking place.

"It's a little out of character for me, because I fight so hard to get everything correct, correct, correct. But there's another side of me, and that is the artist side. The cars we've done before are just chassis. No cars have died to do what we've done here. We haven't thrown away something to do it."

As a craftsman and a shop owner, Dale has acquired everything he needs to do, well, anything. He was born in the Western Reserve region of Ohio, but grew up in Massachusetts when his father, an executive who was frequently transferred, moved the family there. Dale built a hydroplane from plans in a handyman magazine when he was just 14. Growing up in New England, he developed a fancy for British cars and first owned a used MGB. Next came a Jaguar XK120. By then, Dale was a college student, and begged his way into a job with

Glenn Pray, who had revived the Auburn-Cord-Duesenberg Company in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in the early 1970s, and was building re-creations of the great Indiana cars. At 23, Dale hand-created an Auburn dual-cowl phaeton that became the prototype for a new Pray line.

All the while, he was practicing with dolly hammering, planishing, rolling, shrinking and other metalworking skills. Still with Pray, Dale paid \$600 for a Jaguar E-type that had been demolished in a rollover accident. He restored it well enough to win a national first prize. This was all a form of orientation for Dale, who then later served an apprenticeship with master Massachusetts metalsmith Fay Butler, whose command of fabrication using the Yoder power hammer is beyond dispute.

"I've been doing this for over 40 years, and I've studied what's good, bad and indifferent," he said. The doing began in 1976, when Dale started building a reputation to the point where serious collectors began to pay him serious attention. Among them, he assigns the foremost rank to the late Tom Lester, a mechanical genius who largely invented modern die-casting and co-founded (with the great Phil Hill, among others) Lester Tire, long the standard among seekers of vintage rubber. Lester was an acclaimed old-car person, very much into premium pre-war stock, having owned 500 cars at various points. Dale's entrée into concours-level work essentially dovetailed with his meeting and befriending Lester.

One car Lester owned was something most of us have never seen, a 1914 Peugeot 150. Peugeot was a serious sporting piece in those years, just coming off Jules Goux's victory in the third Indianapolis 500. The best known of these cars, fewer than 50 of which were built, had sport phaeton

bodywork. "It had had a restyling of the original body that was just awful. It may not even have been the original body, because the level of workmanship was as bad as anything I've ever seen. The fenders looked like they'd come from a sheetmetal shop that made ductwork for furnaces. Tom had one of his guys sketch out how we wanted it to look and that was how we built it. That car's still around."

Dale was much earlier in his career, looking like a young Jon Bon Jovi, at a different location in eastern Ohio, trying to salvage the mess from pre-Great War France. For his part, Lester applied preternatural skill after starting out with only a wasted crankcase and the connecting rods. Dale's photos show him hand-forming the coachwork framing from ash and fitting the outer sheeting. Was it a completely accurate representation? Not likely. But it did win the AACA's Pamphilon Award for exceptional pre-1916 cars, and it still goes on tours even today.

"Within three years, I was doing work at 27 or 28 years old that was better than anything Tom was doing in his own shop, so for a while, he started using me exclusively," Dale said. "The thing that got me into the machining was that I just had a little Bridgeport and a little South Bend lathe, and Tom said it wasn't fair for me to be working by the hour on this little equipment, and he said go pick out what you want and you can pay me back. That's how I got my machine shop started. In this business, if you don't have a mentor or a patron, you just don't make it. The thing about Tom was, he let me do a good job."

Dale worked for Tom until 1983, then expanded his customer base, including adding a Cleveland-area collector who consigned him two Packards, prime early contracts for Dale Adams



This is a comfortable way to do shop work. The Bone floor creeper, made of molded plastic, is a main enterprise for Dale.



Custom bodies require special components underneath. One such project cooking in Dale's mind would combine a pair of 1934 Graham superchargers with a stoutly modified version of the shop's specialty, a rebuilt Packard V-12. The frame in the foreground, with lightening holes that would do any early dragster or dry lakes car proud, is another element.

Enterprises. One provided a 1911 Mercedes 38/70, originally owned by Samuel P. Colt, which had been destroyed in a fire. Then came the car that made Dale, crumbled him like a piece of zwieback, but ultimately made him whole again.

Long story short, the automobile was a different 38/90 from 1911, which existed only as a rolling chassis, lacking even a carburetor. It had originally been in the Stetson family, of headgear lore. As the mid-1990s neared, the owner commissioned an unbelievable restoration focused on a re-creation of the spectacular Jean Henri-Labourdette wooden skiff body that was supposedly original to the car. Photos subsequently located of the Stetson car, however, showed it with a steel body. The restoration involved laying precise layers of mahogany strips over an ash frame formed using a hand-carved clay buck and holding them in place with 2,700 brass rivets. The radiator shell and other brass pieces were formed by hand from sheet.

The skiff became the hit of the ensuing car season, cleaning house at Meadow Brook, Pebble Beach and Hershey, plus in Europe. The problem, as Dale saw it and as was later reported on extensively by the *Plain Dealer* of Cleveland, was that the Mercedes was being presented as an original Labourdette-bodied wooden skiff. Which it wasn't. In the lawsuit that followed, Dale claimed that he had been defamed by his client, a result of bad blood over what he saw as the car's misrepresentation. The jury awarded Dale nearly \$3 million for loss of business and defamation. It was the story of the year among high-end collectors. In late 2011, incidentally, the car sold for \$2.1 million.

Effectively, it also ended Dale's career of taking in straight restoration jobs. "I haven't finished a car since 1996. Nor will I ever do it again. I'm not ever

going to be a hired gun again. I refuse to be treated that way anymore. I've won over 300 first places, 15 AACA National First Place awards, but I haven't shown a car competitively since 1996."

Instead, he became a specialist. In 1994, Dale developed the Bone, a molded-plastic roll-around creeper, now joined by the Tail Bone creeper seat. They're made from plastic pellets pushed into a 700-ton press, which make the creepers and wheels. The caster frames are stamped down the road in Twinsburg, Ohio, so the product is truly 100 percent American. Annual Bone output is about 25,000 units. Dale Adams Enterprises is also one of the recognized leaders in V-12 Packard engine restoration, machining pieces that include valvetrain parts and crankshaft main caps.

At this stage, though, Dale himself wants to be an artisan, a builder of true custom cars. Not restorations. Two are being created now, both to go on Packard chassis with 161- and 164-inch wheelbases and fully one-off bodies: one a boattail roadster, one a cabriolet with dual rear spares. One body was recently being formed over wood-strip patterns, taking maybe 120 hours to shape, weld and grind a single fender. A decklid was being test-fit by hand. A radically drilled-out frame awaited nearby. A pair of 1934 Graham centrifugal superchargers were ready for fitment to the Packard V-12.

"I don't make my living doing cars anymore. I'm not interested in ever being a professional restorer again. These Packards I'm building will kind of cross over into both worlds, custom coachbuilding and hot rodding, with the souped-up, high-performance engines. They're something that somebody could have had back then if they wanted it. Now, I want to build these custom cars and sell them when they're done as my own original art." 🐦