

Meeting Heroes



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This thought occurred to me one recent evening while I was reading about Henry Leland. After many delays due to health issues and moving back to New England, I finally resumed work on my Cadillac book, which I hope to publish by the end of the year. During my research of Cadillac history, every time I read some interesting fact on founder Leland, I was continually amazed by this man's incredible accomplishments. That's when I imagined just how fascinating it would be to go back in time and meet certain distinguished individuals in the automotive world who interest me most. To be able to sit and casually chat with them about how they went about executing the work that they became known for, and learning all the little details about the production process and other informative insights, would be absolutely fascinating. More than that, it would be interesting to learn about any other projects and/or future goals that they had had in mind, but never got around to doing.

While there are many automotive stylists, designers, engineers and CEOs, as well as customizers, hot-rod builders, and even race drivers that I would enjoy meeting, here's a short roster of the top individuals from my A-list.

Henry Leland

Between his engineering ability and steadfast desire for perfection, no doubt it would be highly inspirational to learn Leland's approach, methods and insight for building precision-made automobiles such as the Cadillac. Conscientious perfectionists like Leland are a rare breed, making a chat session with him all the more special.

John DeLorean

To learn the reasoning as to why he and his staff fitted a 389-cu.in. V-8 in an intermediate A-body Le Mans/Tempest and believed that it would be a big seller would surely be entertaining. And to discover all the details regarding building the press car, which faked out the media with its 421-cu.in. V-8, surely would be highly amusing to hear firsthand.

John Willys

If ever there was a great salesman and an industrialist with vision, it was John Willys. I would ask about his bicycle company and how he was able to get it off the ground and make it so successful, and then follow up with the same about

his car dealerships and how he went about creating such a successful empire. Additional questions would focus on his takeover of Overland, the creation of the Willys-Knight, and becoming the new owner of Duesenberg. I would also ask him what he would do differently to avoid bankruptcy.

Colin Chapman

I would love to know more about Chapman's obsession with lightness, and why he pushed the limits of his race cars to the point of breaking. His early Elite is considered one of the most beautiful sports cars ever conceived, and his Europa the most distinctive, so it would be interesting to learn what he liked and disliked about each. Discovering what his favorite Lotus racing car was and why, surely would be an engaging revelation.

Virgil Exner

Wouldn't it be fascinating to discover the inspiration for Exner's Forward Look style? I would also ask him about being head of the Advance Styling Group at Chrysler and talk about some of the more talented stylists who worked under him. Learning about his personal process for designing cars and where he got the inspiration for all his designs would be terrific. I would also want to know which Letter Car was his favorite, and why.

Elwood Engel

The Chrysler Turbine, 1965 Imperial, 1970 Plymouth Barracuda, and the 1961 Lincoln Continental all had the Engel touch. He was one designer who should have been given more credit than he received, so I would relish spending some time with him learning about his thought processes. I would also want to know about his time working under Exner, and the reason why he replaced the rear fins on Chryslers with his signature slab-side style. And how difficult was it to design the '61 Continental without making it look like a Chrysler, while still incorporating the slab-sided look?

Ettore Bugatti

I've always admired highly creative people, especially those who don't follow convention, so it would be a great honor to talk with Ettore Bugatti to hear about his design process and where he found the inspiration to create such beautiful automobiles. And just how much of the Miller engine did he really copy when he set out to produce his own engine? 🐞

Write to our executive editor at rlentinello@hemmings.com.