

'Brute on the road'

1912 Simplex shown at Concours d'Elegance was Ferrari of its day



A 1912 Simplex 50 HP Holbrook Toy Tonneau at Sunday's 2013 Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance / Jay Dunn/The Salinas Californian

Written by **Eric Coyne**

For **The Salinas Californian**

PEBBLE BEACH — Leland Powels stood out at the 63rd annual Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance like a modern-day pirate among a sea of captains of industry. Sprawled across the front seat of his 1912 Simplex 50hp Toy Tonneau Runabout, his long, wavy silvered hair flowed out from beneath a cloth cap, oversized goggles perched on the cap's brim. Powels smiled sagely as the occasional spectator would spot the unusual brass mascot placed atop the Simplex radiator — a grinning skull and crossbones.

"Aargh!" A young boy snorted at Leland, somehow managing to snarl out a pirate greeting and smile at the same time while giving Powels a big thumbs up.

"People love the skull," Powels said, giving a thumbs up back. The skull has been a fixture on his Simplex for more than 30 years — a mystic symbol he found appropriate for a big brass car he drives with aplomb whenever he can. "The skull is a sign of an adventurer."

Powels says his Simplex came into his father's life during a great adventure with a dear friend, when the two men drive a World War I 3-ton dump trucks from Southern California to Idaho and back in the late 1940s to buy the Simplex and cart it home — only to have the truck break down in the Tehachapi mountains only 40 miles from their journey's end.

Challenged by adversity, the men unloaded the old Simplex — which they had never tried to start — and towed the stranded dump truck the rest of the way up the mountain with the brawny Simplex, one of the most powerful [cars](#) of its era.

"This car is a brute on the road, but get it up to speed and she steers great and really goes great!" Powels said, adding he could never part with the car he restored years ago, working side by side with his father as they completed all the relevant tasks themselves — mechanicals, paint and even doing their own upholstery.

Simplex was the Ferrari of its day, a high powered exotic that cost an astronomical amount and performed magical tasks on the road — the master of any highway its wheels touched. Once the toy of captains of industry and the upper class, the Simplex is now a rare bird indeed, with only 46 thought to still exist.

Pebble Beach officials acknowledged the Simplex marque with its own featured class during this year's Concours d'Elegance, a class that drew a row of immaculate automobile titans ranging from a 75-horsepower Simplex speedster to regal touring cars.

But only one Simplex sported a skull, and a driver with the attitude to challenge the next bend in the road like a pirate chasing a prize sail on the horizon.