

# CONCOURS WEEK

## Simplex: The big, the bold and the simply beautiful

By LISA CRAWFORD WATSON

**YOU CAN** tell a lot about a person by his car. Back in the day, circa 1909 to 1915, if you pulled up to the country club in a Simplex, you needed no other introduction. People understood your class, your credentials and your capital.

The car's 598-cubic-inch, four-cylinder engine, with a double-chain-drive chassis under a custom-built light-roadster body, was a paradox of size and speed — a big ol' brute that became one of the fastest cars on the market. A prestigious car, built without concern for cost, it was priced high to ensure elite ownership. And yet, by 1920, the Simplex had slipped into obscurity.

Monterey native Johnny Crowell has owned two Simplexes. The first, acquired in the early 1970s, burned up in a fire. The second, a 1914 50 HP Holbrook Seven-Passenger Touring car, took 10 years to track down. He's already driven it in the Pebble Beach Motoring Classic, which starts in Seattle, climbs Mt. Hood, and motors down the coast of California to the Concours d'Elegance. And Crowell is bringing it to be presented, among seven other Simplexes, at this year's 63rd annual automotive beauty pageant.

Because Simplex never built a body, no two cars looked the same, Crowell points out. But other traits they all had in common.

"With that big engine, they were notoriously fast, quite expensive, and a handful to drive — not for the faint of heart," Crowell said. "They go like heck but stop poorly, which can be exhausting but a lot of fun. They were extraordinarily heavy but extremely fast for the day. I have a number of early cars, but these are the best."

Crowell finally found his latest Simplex on the East Coast, with a provenance of only three previous owners. Considering the age of car, he found this unusual.

Crowell's car will be joined at the Concours by a 1912 Simplex 50 HP Holbrook-bodied Toy Tonneau Tourabout, which Thomas L. Powels encountered in the early 1940s and purchased in 1973. It has remained in the Powels family ever since.

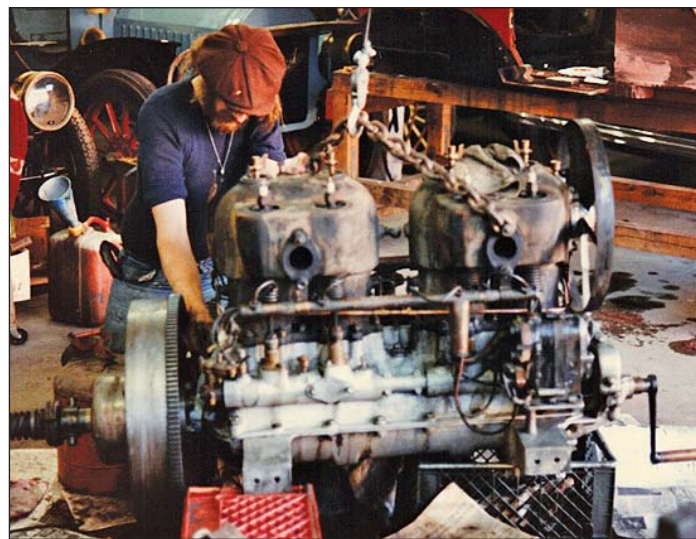
"My Simplex was originally a \$5,000 graduation gift for a student at Yale," says Crowell, "which is equivalent to a \$250,000 car today."

The student shipped it to Europe, where it was used heavily until the beginning of World War II, when it was shipped back to the United

See *SIMPLEX* page 37Cd'E



(Right) Leland Powels working on the engine of his 1912 Simplex 50 HP Holbrook-bodied Toy Tonneau Tourabout in the 1980s. The restored car (above) will be among a collection of Simplex vehicles at this year's Concours d'Elegance.



PHOTOS/COURTESY LELAND POWELS

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