

The Preservationist

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The Alfa Romeo 8C 2900B MM at Elkhart Lake

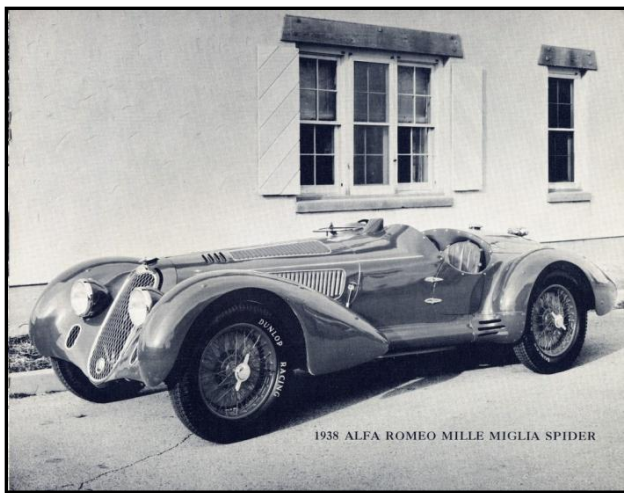


Alfa Romeo 2.9B MM, chassis 412030, on the streets of Elkhart Lake in the Elkhart Lake Cup Race September 1952. Entered by Jimmy Magin and Robert Brumder, James Feld, Brooks Stevens' brother-in-law, is behind the wheel.

Few of the over 130,000 spectators at the 1952 Elkhart Lake open road races could have guessed that the Alfa Romeo 2.9MM that thundered around the 6.5 mile circuit in the Elkhart Lake Cup race would go on to become one of the most valuable collector cars in history. The car, chassis #412030, had both a storied past in sports car racing history and an as yet unknown future in vintage car collecting the telling of which reveals a story that to this day defies the imagination of sports car enthusiasts worldwide. Herein lays the tale of this iconic car.

In The Beginning - Alfa Romeo 2.9 series cars were produced between 1931 and 1938. Less than 40 2.9s were built on both the long wheelbase "A" chassis and the short wheelbase "B" chassis. From that small number, four stood out above the others; all made in 1938 for the Mille Miglia the 1000 mile open road race of the same year. They were the classic Alfa Romeo 8C 2900B MMs. With sweeping Mille Miglia bodywork by Touring and a cockpit nestled behind an immense hood in front of a very short rear, they possessed nearly perfect symmetry for their time.

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The classic lines of the Alfa Romeo 2.9 mm.

The power plant was an 8C 2900B engine, a straight eight created by mounting two four-cylinder alloy blocks on a single crankcase. The design featured dual overhead camshafts, dual magnetos, dry-sump lubrication and twin Roots-type superchargers feeding Weber carburetors. The suspension was all-independent with swing-axles and wishbones in both the front and the rear. Power was fed to the rear wheels through an un-synchronized manual transmission. To make it easier for the driver to “heel and toe” when down shifting, the clutch pedal was on the left and the brake pedal on the right with the accelerator pedal located in the middle between them.



The centrally placed accelerator pedal.

In 1938, Alfa Corse, the in house racing team for Alfa Romeo, took over the activities of Scuderia Ferrari along with many of their personnel, including Enzo Ferrari as team manager. Four 8C 2900B cars were built and prepared for the 1938

Mille Miglia, chassis numbers 41230, 41231, 41232 and 41233. The engines of three of the cars were tuned to 225 bhp but one car (chassis 412031) was tuned to the Tipo 308 Grand Prix formula producing 295 bhp. Chassis 412030 was assigned to Carlo Pintacuda who led for most of the race. However, as luck would have it, his brakes faded near the end and he was passed by the 295 bhp car (chassis 412031) driven by Clementi Biondetti who finished first in the race. Pintacuda finishing second giving Alfa Corse a one two finish. The other two 8C 2900B Mille Miglia roadsters 41232 and 41233 did not finish the race.



The Alfa Romeo 2900B cars entered in the 1938 Mille Miglia. Enzo Ferrari was the team Manager.

In 1939 and 1940 Alfa Corse sold Alfa 412030 twice, first to Count Giovanni Medici and then to noted racer Count Carlo Felice Trossa neither of whom raced the car. By February of 1940 the car was back in the Alfa stables where it was used as a practice car for the 1940 Mille Miglia. It appears to have resided here until the cessation of hostilities.

Post-War Racing - Following the war Alfa importer Frank Griswald possibly with some help from Luigi Chinetti, imported Alfa 412030 to the United States where the car was offered for sale at \$13,000. West Coast millionaire Tommy Lee whose collection already contained three other 2.9 Alfas (412007, 412018 and 412028) purchased the car.

Lee had the front fenders removed and painted the body two-tone cream and metallic brown. He christened the car the "Don Lee Mobil Special" to honor his father; radio and early television pioneer Don Lee. Tommy Lee, who could not drive himself do to medical problems, hired drivers and raced the car at the Pikes Pike Hill Climb and the Watkins Glen Grand Prix. When Lee mysteriously committed suicide in 1950 the car was placed for sale with International Motors in Los Angeles.



Phil Hill behind the wheel of the then red Alfa Romeo 2.9B MM at Pebble Beach in 1951.

The next owner of Alfa 412030 was a young mechanic by the name of Phil Hill who scraped together enough money to buy the car from International Motors for a reported \$3,650 (*approximately \$33,000 in today's money*). Repainted red and with the fenders refitted, Hill drove the by then thirteen year old car to victory in the Del Monte Handicap event at the 1951 Pebble Beach road races. At the end of the season, Hill sold Alfa 41030 to Milwaukee businessmen James F. Magin and Robert C. Brumder for a reported \$4,000. Phil always remembered that of all the cars he had owned the Alfa was the one he wished he had been able to keep.

The new owners had the car repainted again, this time blue and campaigned it at the nearby Wisconsin racing venues. In September of 1952 the car was entered in the 1952 Elkhart Lake Cup race with James Feld behind the wheel. Feld, who was married to Brooks Stevens' sister, had driven Stevens' Jaguar XK120 in the 1950 Elkhart Lake races and between 1953 and 1955 drove the Excalibur J in eleven other races. (*Ralph Knudson drove the J car in the Elkhart Lake Cup race.*)

Alfa 412030 was by then fifteen years old and beginning to show its age.



A rather grainy newspaper photo of Alfa 412030 in the Elkhart Cup Race on Wacker's Wend approaching the turn at CTHA.

Wearing the number 104 on the side, the car started sixteenth on the grid, fell back to twenty fifth at the start, but by lap twenty-two had moved up to the fifteenth place. Unfortunately, the car only completed twenty five laps of the thirty lap race, an inauspicious ending to the racing career of one of the great pre-war race cars.

The car remained in the hands of the Milwaukee owners throughout the 1950's but was more of a hobby car, no longer a competitive race car and not yet a true collector car. In 1955 the owners advertised it for sale in Road and Track for the best offer over \$3,500 but found

no takers. By 1960 Magin planned to move to down-town Chicago and having no room to store the car, the owners of Alfa 412030 decided to donate it to the Brooks Stevens Museum and take the tax deduction.



Alfa 412030, still wearing the Magin/Brumder blue paint job as it appeared in the Brooks Stevens Museum.

The Vintage Collector Period - In 1967, Stevens commissioned a partial restoration of the car by Keith Heller of Chicago and had the car shown in the Concours d'Elegance at Pebble Beach. Alfa Romeo 412030 had nosed its way into the heady world of vintage collector cars. Apparently unsatisfied with partial restoration, Stevens commissioned a ground up restoration by Richard Simonsen in 1971. The restored car was repainted red and shown at the Montreal Motor Show in 1972.

In 1975 Stevens loaned his car to the restoration shop of Phil Hill in Santa Monica so that a copy of the fenders could be made for Alfa 412031, the Tipo 308 tuned car owned by Dr. Fred Simeone of Philadelphia. With permission from Stevens, Hill had 412030's engine rebuilt and entered the car in the 1975 Monterey Historics at Laguna Seca. Returned to Stevens, Alfa

412030 resided in his collection occasionally being shown at car shows and meetings until the early 1980s increasing in value year after year.

In 1982 dedicated Alfa collector Bill Serri, acquired the car from the Stevens Museum. Although no one seems to recall the transfer price, an Alfa 8C 2.9 roadster auctioned by Christie's at Pebble Beach in August 1999, brought \$4,072,000 which may give some hint. At the time it was one of the ten most expensive cars ever auctioned. Serri hoped to enter the car in the Mille Miglia Retro but was never able to do so. He did, however, spend a fair amount of time behind the wheel on east coast back roads and freely admitted that he had collected more than a few dents along the way.

In 2004, after Serris' death, Ralph Lauren purchased the car from Serri's estate for a reported \$14,000,000. Lauren commissioned his long time collaborator Paul Russell to restore the car to its original 1938 Mille Miglia configuration. The restoration was one of the most detailed, and authenticated in restoration history. When completed Alfa 412030 was perfect in every detail.



The fully restored Alfa 2.9 MM #412030 on display at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

In the spring of 2005, Alfa Romeo 8C 2900 Mille Miglia #412030 was shown

in the "Speed, Style and Beauty: Cars from the Ralph Lauren Collection" exhibit at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. That fall Alfa 412030 won Best in Class when Alfa Romeo was the featured marque at the Pebble Beach Concours. During the 2006 Goodwood Revival, Phil Hill was once again behind the wheel of Alfa 412030, driving a few laps during a tribute honoring his racing career. More recently, in the spring of 2011, this marvelous Alfa was one of the cars featured in the Art of the Automobile exhibit at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris.

Only two of the four Mille Miglia cars have survived in their original racing form; chassis 412030, the Pintacuda car in the Ralph Lauren Collection and chassis 412031, the Tipo 308 tuned Biondetti car owned by the Simeone Foundation in Philadelphia. They are the crème de la crème of collector cars and are perhaps the most valuable pre-war race cars in the world.

Alfa 412030 has come a very long way since it thundered around the Elkhart Lake Historic Race Circuits. At the time, who would have ever guessed what the future held for this magnificent car... or for that matter what the future may as yet hold!

A special thanks to Bob Birmingham, Robert "Robo" Brumder, Clyde Morter and Fred Egloff for their contributions to this article. Our research was greatly aided by Simon Moore's great book "The Immortal 2.9". Go to http://paulrussell.com/rPortfolio/alfa/38_2900/ to view a detail slide show presentation of the Paul Russell restoration on the lower right side of the page.

Spring Dinner Report

Eighty-one Society members and their guest turned out for the first meeting of the year held at the Siebkens Resort on Thursday, May 14th. Members exchanged stories and caught up on the winter's news during the cash bar cocktail mingle.



The David Uihlein Special on display courtesy of Mrs. David Uihlein and her grandson Andy Kuehn

The David Uihlein Special with its unique engine, a 1500cc MG bottom end and the Uihlein twin cam head on

top was on display for all to admire. (See Volume 23, Spring 2014, of the Preservationist for more on the Uihlein Special.)

Following the cocktail mingle the Siebkens' staff served a delicious full course Tuscan Pork dinner that was enjoyed by all.

To open the evenings program the family of Jim Jeffords, Milwaukee native, Corvette racing legend and former Road America Board member,

who passed away in 2014, presented a tribute to his life and career. Bill Wuesthoff recalled Jim as a skilled and aggressive race driver. George Bovis described Jim's contributions as a long-time member of the Road America Board of Directors of and as an advertising and median executive who among other things produced the Road America programs and yearbooks for many years.



The Jeffords family left to right are Kathleen Trefort, and Kerry, Pat and Janice Jeffords with photo portrait of Jim

Jim's son, Pat Jeffords, concluded the tribute with personal recollections of growing up in the Jeffords home giving us a more intimate glimpse of Jim as a much loved father. Jim's contribution to racing in the late 50's and early 60's will long be remembered.

The main program for the evening was presented by author and well known racing history enthusiast Bob Birmingham. Bob related stories and personal recollections based upon his book "Mis-Shifting". Among them were stories about his attendance at the 1952 Elkhart Lake Road Races, Brooks Stevens and the Brooks Stevens museum, Bob's long friendship with Augie Pabst, and his own driving instructor and well-known racer of the 1950s and "60s, Ernie Erickson. Bob's knowledge and stories enthralled the crowd and made for a more than an entertaining evening.



Bob autographs his book for long time HRC member John Janty

After the program Bob remained to shared stories and autograph copies of his latest book for members and guests.

July Dinner Event

The July Dinner Event is planned for Thursday, July 16th concurrent with the Elkhart Lake Summer Vintage Festival and the Hawk International Challenge with Brian Redman



Vintage Races at Road America. The event will be hosted at the Victorian Village Resort. As usual, a cash bar will open at 5:30 and dinner will be served at 7:00.

The program will highlight the original Carrera Pan Americana road races held in Mexico from 1950 to 1954 and the “pro-rally” revival series held from 1988 to the present. The current Carrera Pan Americana is run in stages divided into “transit” stages and “speed” stages. These speed stages are



A vintage Studebaker in one of the "speed" stages of the modern Carrera Pan Americana.

held on close mountain roads and modern highways. Race participants may travel as fast as their skill, their car, and the road conditions

warrant. They are truly the last open road races being held on the North American continent.



the guest speaker for the program will be Gerie Bledsoe. Gerie has participated in the modern Pan Americana for sixteen years (1999-2014). In 2002, he finished first in Historic C and eighth overall. Gerie publishes the Carrera News each month distributed to over 1600 subscribers. He also handles applications and entries for the modern Pan Americana.

It is hoped that Herschel McGriff, winner of the first Carrera Pan Americana open road race in 1950 will be an honored guest at the event adding to the program and festivities.

Announcement and Reservation forms will be in the mail in June. Mark your calendars now as this is an event that you will not want to miss.