



CAVAC ROLLS ALONG

- DICK MCDONELL -

Photos by Dick McDonell and Malcolm Fischer

When invitations went out to Club members to view Howard Lengert's collection of vintage Rolls Royce and Bentley automobiles, a note was included to the effect that if the weather was dastardly on October 3, we should arrive with our daily drivers rather than the fine cars that qualify us as CAVAC members. October weather in Alberta, you understand.

As it turned out, the warning was irrelevant. October 3, 2020 was one of the nicest days of the extended summer, brightened by the colourful landscape that we only see in late September and early October.

Beautiful day, and it only got better when we began touring the collection.

Howard's farm is near Leduc, west of Highway QE2.

Not really much different than other farms in the area, if you ignore the airplane on a tall pedestal in the yard. Or the aircraft control tower next to it.

In addition to being a car buff, Howard is a pilot with one working airplane and two others just for show. As for the control tower, he explained that a few years ago the airport in Villeneuve was selling it, and someone else had the high bid. Howard called the fellow and learned that all he really wanted it for was the base building - he had no need for the tower. So Howard dug deep and bought it for \$250.

The plane on the pedestal is just the remains of a Cessna 150 that a friend flipped on a bad landing some years ago. All useable parts were stripped, and with the help of some friends and a crane it became a landmark.

But, to the business at hand. The first Rolls our group of 40 or 50 had a good look at was a 1986 stretch limo, originally owned by an Arab Sheik. Behind the front seat was effectively a small living room. Sheik Howard explained that the lengthening of the car happened after the original build, and it had been done so well that he was unable to find any weld marks on the body or the underside. Must be fun to parallel park though.





Next we were shown a 1953 rolling chassis. Dual exhaust and dual fuel pumps, with lever-action shocks that are electrically adjustable via a switch on the steering wheel hub. On this one Howard pointed to the differential as an example of Rolls Royce engineering - no fewer than 29 studs hold the assembly together.

Another example of over-the-top engineering was a huge 1923 Silver Ghost model. Among its many features are radiator mounts with grease fittings.



The car was built in a factory that Rolls had in the U.S. from 1921 through '31, and was one of the earliest cars to have 12V electrics.

A real eye catcher was a 1954 Silver Wraith with wicker side panels.



Before we left the farm, Howard showed us that his interest in things automotive is not restricted to antique British.

His own daily driver is a 2018 Tesla, which for our amusement he backed out of its garage stall while standing in the yard, simply touching buttons on his I-phone. Fascinating contrast, as only minutes earlier the discussion had centred on proper technique for crank starting an elderly Rolls Royce.

And no, Howard swears he is not the guy who was arrested a couple of weeks ago on Highway 2, "driving" his Tesla while fast asleep in the reclining driver's seat.



From there we conveyed to the Leduc West Antique Society grounds. There in the centre of the site is a tall modern building, with signage on the front stating that this is the showroom and office of Hooper Coachbuilders at 54 St. James Street, London.

Howard paid to have the building constructed as a tribute to one of his favourite Rolls Royce body builders, and as a place where he could display his collection. The building operating costs are covered by hall rentals for weddings, funerals, conferences and the like.

There were no weddings while we were there, but there were 14 of his best Rolls and Bentley cars.

Place of honour in the front foyer was held by a 1936 Phantom III, looking as pampered and pristine as any Rolls should be. But what a history. After living its life as a normal luxury car for 74 years, it was entered in the 2010 Peking-Paris rally, a re-enactment of the original 1907 event.



With the aid of a larger fuel tank and undoubtedly some other modifications, driven by Canadians Lloyd and Treacy Reddington it successfully completed the 14,400 kilometre route in 306 hours spread over 37 days.

Much of the route through Mongolia and Kazakhstan was on third-world paths that barely qualify as "roads."



The rally was organized by Endurance Rally Association, and if you poke around on their website, www.endurorally.com, or just Google "Peking to Paris," you'll come up with some great history and video.



To be sure, the cars in the Hooper Coachbuilders building are all gems, worthy of admittance to any car show or museum. With one exception, they are driveable. Howard has them licensed and insured, and once the 14th car passes its out-of-province safety check, they will all be ready to go.

Every car on display gives reason to pause. Be it the pizza-pan size headlights on one, the rumble seat on another that only a Cirque Soleil gymnast could possibly get into, or the sheer mass of a third, all have stories to tell. For instance I noted on one of the earlier models that yes, they did indeed use brushes to paint cars back then. On another I noticed tiny stars - not dents or chips - on the paint of the front fenders. I had to ask, and learned that stone hits on the underside of aluminum panels cause the stars. News to me, but by way of background, the only car I've ever had with aluminum fenders was an oval-track racer, and with that one we didn't pay much attention to niggling little things like stone hits.

Howard Lengert bought his first Rolls Royce on April 28, 1967. That car, and the 20 he has acquired in the half century since, form Canada's largest collection of the brand. All that dedication in accumulating and maintaining such a fleet has come to the attention of more than just local car clubs. On October 30 CBC Gem will be featuring Howard as part of its "Attractions of Life" series. The same documentary will be on CBC TV October 31 at 7:00 p.m.



Footnote: The modern Peking to Paris event is organized by a British company called Endurorally. Go to www.endurorally.com/events and there will be links to Youtube and other videos related to the rally.