Cover Story:
Cord-Auburn Health Center

Two of the most famous cars America ever produced still live, due to the business acumen of a millionaire philanthropist who has no interest in classic cars as such.

Photos by DICK ADAMS

TWO of the greatest cars this country ever produced fell victim to economic strangulation in 1936-37 when the E. L. Cord empire collapsed. The Auburn Speedster and front-wheel drive Cord apparently were destined to disappear from the American scene and become mere memories along with the 2,200 names on the roster of unfortunate automotive enterprise.

Today, although few examples of their greatness survive, the state of their health is assured by a mechanical clinic maintained almost exclusively for them. Here, the broken bones of their steel bodies and the worn out mechanical organs can be repaired or replaced by ‘surgeons’ who learned their trade on the original models.

The man behind this project is a veritable Santa Claus, having been born on Christmas Day 60 years ago. He is Dallas Winslow of Grand Blanc, Michigan—millionaire, philanthropist and business man who has no interest in classic cars as such.

His principal business today is a lawn mower manufacturing firm and the production of Roto-Tiller, a gasoline-powered hand garden tool. The largest Winslow plant is at Springfield, Ohio and nearly 300 names are on his payrolls.

But the beginning was in 1929 when he swung a deal for the parts bins of the Paterson automobile manufactured by the W. A. Paterson Co. of Flint, Mich. The Paterson’s 15 year history ended in 1923 but Winslow believed there were enough
Mechanic John McQuown grinds valve seats in new Cord block.

Butler, the upholstery artist.

Supercharged Auburn Speedster, is owned by Cal Grosscup of Auburn and was rebuilt at A-C-D shop.

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Paterson owners who would want factory replacement parts to make the investment worthwhile.

Stearns-Knight, Durant, Star and Franklin leftovers eventually were bought as they fell victims to bankruptcy or were discontinued. Then in 1938, Winslow bought Auburn’s supply when E. L. Cord’s empire collapsed. With Auburn, he also acquired Cord and Duesenberg and moved the automotive part of his operations into the 70,000 square foot administration building of the Auburn Automobile Co. and took the name Auburn-Cord Duesenberg Co. The main manufacturing plant at Auburn was taken over by the Warner gear division and Cord’s facilities at Connersville, Ind., is home to a kitchen utensil firm. Graham and Hupmobile parts bins came under Winslow ownership and were transferred to Auburn in 1939 and 1940.

The Auburn plant primarily was considered a service depot for Roto-Tiller but demands for the classics has grown so steadily that the business now is about evenly divided.

Having acquired the three ‘great’ names, Winslow began a careful survey of state records to ascertain ownership of known models. Armed with this vital information, the office force began mailing literature to owners assuring them that parts and service were still available. It was a ready-made market and one that had proved profitable in similar previous operations.

Just how profitable probably exceeded everyone’s expectations for the Cord and Auburn refused to die. The few that apparently were destined to end their days on junkpiles were eagerly snapped up by buyers who recognized their intrinsic value as pioneers of design. Thus, they escaped the fate of obscurity that ordinarily follows the discontinuance of manufacturing.

The end came in 1937 when the Securities Exchange Commission closed in on a stock manipulation deal at Auburn. But the handwriting was on the wall even earlier; mass production techniques had pushed the custom, hand-built car to the wall.

What E. L. Cord and Gordon Buehrig, the Cord designer, had wrought however, was a model that startled the world with its smartness and gave a chronic case of indigestion to their competition.

The 1936 Cord 810 model was revolutionary then and is an eyebrow raiser today. The chassis, as such, was missing. Only a half frame existed and that cradled the 125 HP Lycoming V8, carried the front suspension units and the transmission mounted ahead of the engine. This stub frame bolted into the body at the firewall. The body shell was of ‘unit construction,’ as it is now called.

Stylewise, the blunt coffin-nose, rakish windshield and fast back of the sedan, pontoon fenders, retracting headlights, absence of running boards and step down interior set patterns the industry has since adopted. In the convertible models, a top that was concealed when lowered and 5-passenger phaeton were the forerunners of the club coupe.

The front drive was not new—there had been other pull-instead-of-push cars manufactured in America and the front-wheeling L-29 Cord had won a few dozen styling prizes abroad when it was introduced in 1929. But, when it was running right, the 810 was good for nearly 100 MPH and turned in a phenomenal 20 MPG in fourth, or overdrive, gear. It had its faults: a weak transmission and sometimes obstinate shift system and the universal joints linking the drive train to the wheels didn’t enjoy the finest of reputations.

In 1937, the 812 was introduced and represented little or no styling changes but the 125 HP engine was boosted to 175 by adding a supercharger that made speeds of 110 MPH possible. The price was $2,900 at a time when a small Cadillac could be bought for $1,700 and the Lincoln Zephyr for $1,300. Only 1,146 Cords had been sold when the roof fell in.

The Auburn, for years a powerhouse on the American road, assumed the stature of an elephant in 1932 with a V12 powerplant. This lasted three years, giv-
1937 Cord with non-blown engine also belongs to Grosscup and was reconditioned at A-C-D.

ing way to a straight-8 to which a supercharger was attached in 1935. Thus was the Speedster born, only to be cut off a year later when depression era sales fell off.

Parts of the Duesenberg, America’s mightiest motor car, are the only ones Winslow has sold in a block. With very little activity in this field and with few items available, they were sold to Marshall Merkes of Winfield, Ill. Merkes, who owns two or three Dueses, had been the steadiest A-C-D customer for this line. The oldest auto parts now in the plant are for a 1920 Hupp and 1926 Auburn.

Winslow catapulted to national prominence in 1950 when he began giving employees, of one year’s service or more, a new Ford. The company retained title to the automobiles but tied no strings to the employee’s use of it. Philanthropy, however, began long before; Winslow had been supplying hearing aids, dentures, medical attention, etc., for his workers for years. He’s one of the original share-the-wealth advocates—but with a difference, he’s sharing his.

Six of the 51 employees at the Auburn plant are regularly assigned to the restoration section and four of their names were on the original Auburn-Cord payroll when Winslow took over.

Dwight Batdorf heads up this crew—perhaps the most skilled specialists in the country on those two automobiles. Batdorf does double duty, being an expert on the sometimes cantankerous vacuum-electric transmissions used on the 1936-37 Cord. Two members of Batdorf’s staff have a service total of 82 years—Ralph Butler, a modest man who is an artist with needle and fabric, runs the upholstery shop and has been with Auburn for

42 years and Russell Silberg, a veteran of 40 years, handles the body work. Ora Shoudel, so familiar with the engines he probably could assemble one blindfolded, is a comparative newcomer, having carried his toolbox into Auburn’s plant only 27 years ago.

Current demand for A-C-D services is mostly concerned with the 810 and 812 model Cords. Total production in their two years ending in 1937 was only 2,320 and Plant Operations Manager Veale estimates the 1,800 Cords still in existence include a number of the 4,429 L29 models sold between 1929-32. At that, the A-C-D people insist they have enough parts to continue servicing the cars for 10 years.

Auburns, too, receive considerable attention, especially the Speedster models—most of which carried a dashboard plaque attesting that Ab Jenkins had driven the car at more than 100 mph. Veale contends 8,000 Auburns are still active but the majority are of the less desirable body styles than the coveted Speedster.

The connoisseur of these automobiles—and of the Graham, Hupmobile, air-cooled Franklin, Durant and even the latter-day Tucker—is found in all sections

First step in rejuvenation is removal of engine.
of the country and often in foreign lands.
A-C-D officials are in a position to note an
ever-increasing interest, attribute interest to
car clubs, especially those concerned with
classic cars, higher per capita incomes
which permit the indulgence of such hobbies and periodicals devoted to
automotive topics.
Some of A-C-D's best customers are
famous, others are well-to-do and many
obviously are able to buy only one part
at a time as they affect a restoration
within the confines of a limited family
budget.
The company has overhauled one Cord
shipped from Hawaii — perhaps the
greatest distance shipment — and factory
personnel still recall the sweet-faced young
California girl who nursed a very
sick and weary-looking Speedster into the
garage two years ago and hovered over it
like a mother until it was restored to
health.
And there was a captain in the British
Navy who made a trans-Atlantic phone
call to ask immediate delivery of a L-29
part and a similar restoration, on an auto-
mobile that sold for no more than $3,300
new, was worth $3,600 to a Texan.
There has been the tragic-comedy side
also: the Ohio enthusiast who wrecked his
Cord 20 miles from the plant after taking
delivery on a completely rebuilt sedan;
the husband who asked for two receipts;
each for half of his total bill, so his wife
wouldn't know how much he had spent;
the real estate man who was unable to
pay the $3,700 tab and forfeited a near
perfect Cord and the magician from
Quebec whose magic failed him when it
came time to settle accounts with A-C-D.
In those cases, since company policy is
cash, the A-C-D people sell the car for
whatever it will bring and they seldom
lose.
The town of Auburn, too, has its few
who are loyal to the home product. A
number of Auburns are in evidence and
storage bins have an ample supply of
bearings, pistons, rings, rods, timing gears
and chains and other engine parts al-
though superchargers and their gears are
very scarce and are sold only on an ex-
change basis. Universal joints, connecting
the front wheels with the differential
ahead of the powerplant are manufac-
tured by Bendix on standing order and
A-C-D retails about 200 of these yearly.
The very thin aluminum cylinder heads
are cast by an outside contractor and the
heavy duty wheels required by the front
drive system are turned out by the Gore
Wheel Co. of Fort Wayne.
The headaches for A-C-D and a large
bill for the customer often can be laid to
body work necessary to restoration. Body
components are scarce — stripping a Cord
and selling the parts separately can swell
the bank account more than disposing of
many '53 automobiles — and usually are
hand-formed when replacement is
required.
The factory salvage doors, hoods, and
the pontoon fenders although they may
be little more than a pile of rust. These
partially destroyed sections are rebuilt,
with new metal being grafted into place.
 Needless to say, it's expensive.
Auburn residents are as accustomed to
seeing Cords, Auburns, Grannas and
Huppmobiles as they were in the days
when the plant was operated by E. L.
Cord. Many of the cars destined for the
full treatment arrive on flatbed trucks or
in railroad cars and many of those chug-
ing in on their own power threaten to
collapse before reaching the driveway to
rejuvenation.
Once inside the plant, Batdorf's men
take over. The car is stripped, upholstery
ripped out, the engine and transmission
dismantled and body paint removed.
When the mechanical ailments have been
diagnosed and repaired, reassembly begins
and finally the car is pushed into the
modern paint shop. Meanwhile, upstairs,
Ralph Butler has been busy reupholstering seats, side and door panels and stuff pads in broadcloth or leather. Butler uses the original patterns that were bought with the parts bins. When the springs have been replaced or retied, foam rubber padding goes over them before the finish fabric is fitted. A complete upholstery job—and Butler works alone—usually requires four weeks; its share of the bill is approximately $350 but it's quality workmanship and can't be distinguished from the original.

Although they handle 10 to 12 complete Cord restorations annually and an additional two or three Speedster jobs, an even busier facet to the A-C-D business is the constant drain on their parts supply by enthusiasts who do their own restoration—either because they can't afford to plunk down from $500 to $3,000 in one piece or take enjoyment in the work.

A-C-D's bank is always open to these enthusiasts and the correspondence file is voluminous. Classic car fanciers are a clannish bunch and the word has gotten around that A-C-D is the one place where almost anything needed can be obtained. The first letter places the writer's name on their mailing list and, periodically, the office force reminds the owner or would-be owner that service and parts are available.

A-C-D, on occasion, also has acted as the middle man in introducing an owner who wishes to sell his treasure and a purchaser. Knowing the location of most of the Auburns and Cords in the country, this isn't difficult—in fact there are three or four times as many potential buyers as cars available. When they act as 'broker', there is no charge for the service.

Curiously enough, with the Cord-Auburn fever rising rapidly, A-C-D does no scavenging for parts although they occasionally purchase Cord blowers. During the war, however, they bought Lycoming V-8 blocks and found so many in junkyards and private garages that the plant rebuilt an average of 50 to 70 monthly.

With the boom in Cords and Auburns, the parts bins of the later model Graham and Huppmobile are visited comparatively seldom. Company officials expect that business to pick up later when the 30,000 Grahams and 23,000 Hups of all models still rolling begin to slip into extinction. Since the 1939 Hupp Skylark and 1940-41 Graham Hollywood were made from modifications of the Cord body dies although fitted with rear drive, it is likely to assume that they also will enjoy a renaissance. This revival of interest is already being enjoyed by the air-cooled Franklin, which ended 32 years of production in 1934 with demand for parts and service increasing monthly.

Rebuilt Graham engines are already available at $169 for the 6-cylinder model and $198 for the straight-8, both on an exchange basis. Prices are the same for the Hupp powerplants. As with Cord and Auburn, the price is for a 'skeleton' engine: only the block, crankcase, crankshaft, piston and rod assemblies. The customer supplies cylinder heads, fuel and water pumps, manifolds, flywheel, carburetor and electrical equipment.

Service for one of the latest victims of automotive bankruptcy—the widely hailed, rear-engined car introduced by Preston Tucker in 1947-48—also is available at A-C-D. Over and above Winslow's penchant for buying up parts with possible future appeal there was another tie-in here. The early model Tuckers used the Cord transmission and Tucker's success in his search for these gearboxes probably contributed to the scarcity of parts that exists today.

Factory personnel don't expect too much of the Tucker service acquisition because too few of the automobiles were made. But the previous purchases of interesting-looking bearings, gears, pistons and assembled parts have proved that the financial ill of one firm can be a boon to another. Dallas Winslow, undoubtedly, has made a profit; his foresight has been a bonanza to the Speedster and Cord owner. Both, however, owe it all to two automobiles that refused to die.

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