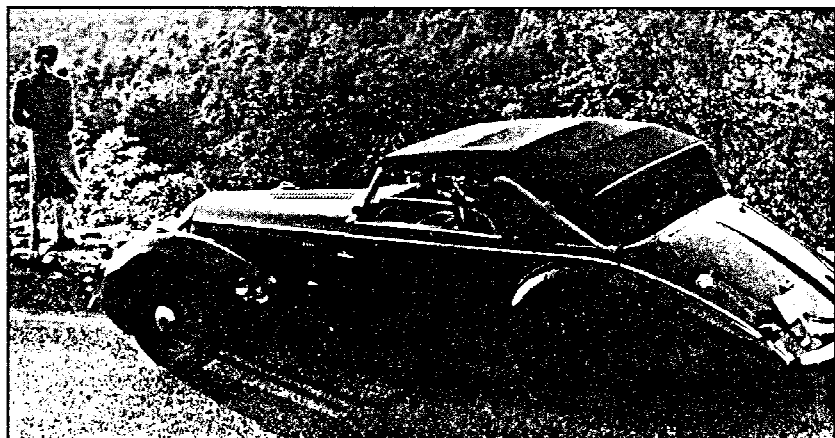


Escape Road

Barns and haystacks: Uncovering hidden treasures

By Roger Barlow

First of four parts



Barns and haystacks? *Barns* and *haystacks* in the Big Apple? What nonsense! Barns and haystacks are not very evident in Manhattan, Queens or even Brooklyn, now are they? And even if they were, surely they should be discussed in some agricultural journal rather than in a car magazine. Right?

Wrong. Remember, old and interesting automobiles have often been stashed away in just such places and sometimes forgotten. Men have devoted lifetimes to searching out barns and haystacks in hopes of unearthing a genuine automotive jewel.

Ladies and gentlemen who love motorcars, I come before you as one who has found not just a single golden automotive treasure but four of them...plus a veritable Kohinoor Diamond of a motorcar. And I truly did find them in the barns and haystacks of the Big Apple.

The barns of which I speak were by the 1930s no longer quaint wooden structures but large multi-storied brick warehouses. Barns of a sort they still were because one could store most anything in them, from hay and oats to old sofas and crates of books or, best of all, cars of whatever age. The first treasure I discovered in such a barn was in 1941.

I was paying a rare visit to the mechanic who looked after my 810 Cord. Sitting there in the back of his shop was what was to become the Automotive Love of my Life, a Figoni et Falashi-bodied Talbot-Darracq convertible. It had been brought into the country by a lady from Belgium who had fled from the oncoming Nazi invaders with only the possessions she could

pile into the car. She spent the last of her money booking passage on one of the last ships to carry refugees from Hitler.

In America the car had to be sold. It was a 1939 model with about 30,000km on its odometer. The asking price was \$2500. A lot of money in those days, for that sum would have bought two new Cadillacs. However, it was a fair price; her car had cost close to \$5000 when new and it still looked that way. As I was completely and devastatingly smitten, I sold the Cord to the mechanic ~~there~~ for \$1500, left a check for the balance and joyfully drove out onto West End Avenue in the most stunning car on the streets of New York.

Talbots or Darracqs or Talbot-Darracqs or Talbot-Lagos, badged according to the country in which they were destined to be sold, were built in the old Darracq factory in Paris that dated back to the turn of the century. I traveled there after the war to meet Tony Lago himself.

The Talbot-Darracq I found in the Manhattan barn was not only an elegant and exciting car to look at, it also handled superbly and was, over the next 12 years and an additional 110,000km, the most reliable car I've ever owned. The engine was a rugged 4.0liter six with pushrod overhead valves, two single barrel carburetors and a seven-bearing crankshaft. It had that fascinating and durable Wilson pre-selective gearbox and a unique independent front suspension that never required realignment in all the years I owned it. It would do a genuine 103mph, which very few cars could top in the '30s, its brakes

would have stopped a Greyhound bus and only needed relining once in more than 80,000mi. Whereas lesser cars squeaked and rattled on bad roads, the Talbot merely creaked opulently. In it I three times crossed the US, coast to coast, went round trip from Quebec to Key West, climbed Pikes Peak and visited the Salt Flats when John Cobb was there to set a World's Land Speed Record. Together the Talbot-Darracq and I safely negotiated the streets of New York and the first freeways of Los Angeles.

Louise, my wife, learned to drive in it and it played an important role in the film *The Arch of Triumph*. It was on the stage in Beverly Hills with *Jakabowski and the Colonel*, in a film with Danny Kaye and in another with Fred MacMurray. It was Clark Gable's car for a week when Louise loaned it to him while his first Jaguar was in the paint shop. I parted with it only in a futile effort to keep a financially distressed business alive for another week while hoping for a miracle that never materialized. I should have kept the Talbot.

Speaking of cars she should never have sold, Denise McCluggage put it very well a few months ago in *AutoWeek*. When people comment that she would now be rich if she had only kept the cars she had once owned, she replies, "If I had been rich I *could* have kept the cars I once owned!" Well said.

Now what about those other treasures I found in the barns and haystacks of Manhattan? What were they? How were they found? The next of those finds was actually two cars in the same haystack. Two Grand Prix racing cars! The fourth was a V12 Delahaye fitted with another spectacular example of Figoni et Falashi convertible coachwork. Bright red with white pigskin seats piped in red and never ever driven a single mile! Or even a kilometer. Hidden away all during WWII.

Oh, the Kohinoor Diamond of a car? A Bugatti Royale. Like the one that recently went for \$6,000,000. Only better.

Next week, and in the two weeks following, I will give you the whole story on all these fine cars. **AW**

Roger Barlow has had a lifelong involvement with automobiles. He has written about them since the 1930s, with articles appearing in Road & Track, Motor Trend, Car and Driver, The Autocar, etc. He was also a successful road racer and co-founder of the California Sports Car Club.