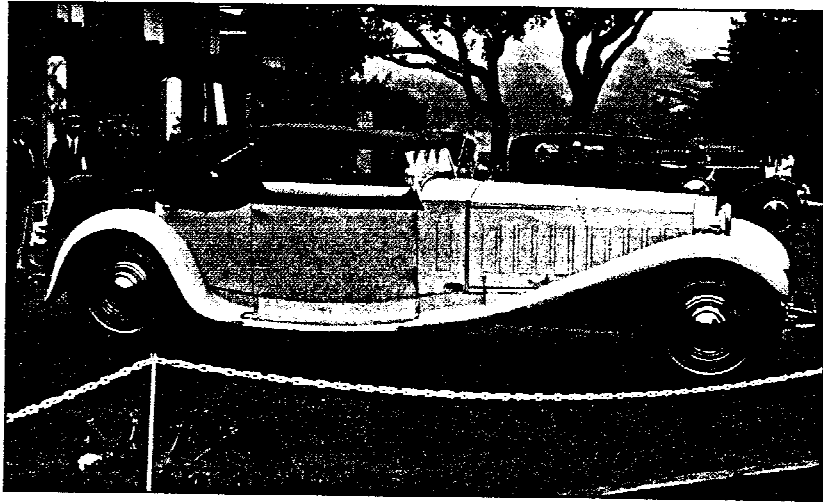


Escape Road

Passing up a bargain-basement Bugatti Royale

By Roger Barlow

Part four of a four-part series



Clint Lewis photo

Now we come to that gem, that Kohinoor Diamond of a motorcar, the Bugatti Royale. (Yes, in my rummages through the barns and haystacks of New York City, I once passed up a Bugatti Royale.)

It's interesting that no car has approached the record \$6,500,000 fetched by a Royale at the recent auction of the Harrah cars. Surely the fact that there were only six made has something to do with it, and the fact that the Royale was the most expensive car in the world when new. But beyond cost and exclusivity, the Royale had two factors going for it. First, it was not just another expensive motorcar, it was a *Bugatti*. No other marque, not even Mercedes, certainly not Rolls-Royce, had a more sporting and individualistic image. Second, the Royale abounded with unique and often bold engineering touches, whereas Rolls-Royce cars, of whatever period, were rarely innovative. (Sir Henry preferred the conventional in almost every circumstance, but executed such low-brow engineering to very high standards.)

It would take reams of text to describe the Royale's engineering exotica. Prominently mentioned would be its mechanically elegant but exceedingly difficult to manufacture tubular front axle, its cast alloy wheels and lovely horseshoe radiator. The massive engine, on a scale in keeping with the Royale's 170in wheelbase and weight over 7000pounds, was pure Bugatti; a straight eight with a single

camshaft, head and block in a single squared-off casting. However, it also *differed* greatly from previous Bugatti engines, almost all of which had been relatively small displacement units producing power at higher revs than most engines of the day. The first Royale engine displaced nearly 15liters! (The five subsequent ones were a mere 12.7liters.)

The engine was so big because its designers wanted enormous torque and horsepower at the very low engine speeds deemed appropriate for this first and only sedate Bugatti. The engine idled at about 300rpm. Its rpm maximum was a little over 2000.

Although Bugatti apparently intended the Type 41 for royalty (hence its name), no head of state ever acquired one. This, it seems to me, was more a reflection on the sad state of royalty than any shortcomings in the car.

And there it was—waiting in a barn in Queens, just across the East River, at the sunrise end of the 59th Street bridge.

The "barn" was the Brewster Building, where the famous Brewster bodies were built for both English and American-made Rolls-Royce chassis. That business had virtually ceased in the Depression years. By the time of the events being related, the building was little more than a deserted warehouse. On the ground floor, occupying only a part of it, was John Oliveau, who operated an exclusive service garage for some of the more exotic automotive machinery in the area. I visited

him a couple of times for advice on the care and feeding of my Talbot-Darracq.

I dropped in to see him for the last time the week I was inducted into the Navy. Oliveau was being evicted to make room for a manufacturer with a military contract. Not only did John have to vacate, he also had to remove the 10 or 15 cars he was storing for some of his customers.

"Barlow," he said, "How would you like to own the famous Blitzen Benz there on the far end...or almost anything else you see. Everything has to be out of here in a week...how about the big Bugatti here on this end? It's a real bargain."

There it stood, looming larger than life in the gloomy half-light of the dusty warehouse. Looking a bit the worse for wear (like most royalty in those days), an aura of sadness surrounded it; the same sadness that must have clung to the last dinosaur.

"Pay the storage, it's about \$350, and take it away so my biggest worry is over," he said. "Only you can't drive it. The block is cracked...though I'm sure it's to the outside and not into a cylinder."

No, I didn't buy one of the most interesting and important pages of automotive history for a mere \$350 that day. I didn't buy the Royale because I was still honeymooning with my Talbot-Darracq and didn't need or want another car. Moreover, I didn't know where I was going to store the Talbot, never mind a Royale.

All too soon I would realize that somewhere, somehow, war or no war, I could have found a truck to haul the Royale the 370miles to Virginia, where my wife's parents lived, where it could have been stashed away in a real barn, with mice and bird droppings, til war's end. Like the man who wonders why he converted to gas heat, I can sit and hold my head as I endlessly mutter, "Why did I not buy the Bugatti...Why did I not buy..." My regrets are less that I might have made a million dollars than that I lost the opportunity to drive the most fabulous motorcar of all time for a few thousand miles.

John Oliveau apparently did not find a safe haven for the Bugatti either. It ended up in a wrecking yard for some months before being rescued by Charlie Chayne, a General Motors vice president.

The car now resides in the Henry Ford Museum and, I suspect, even with a repaired crack in the block, could not be bought for \$10,000,000.

I'm not planning to make an offer. **AW**