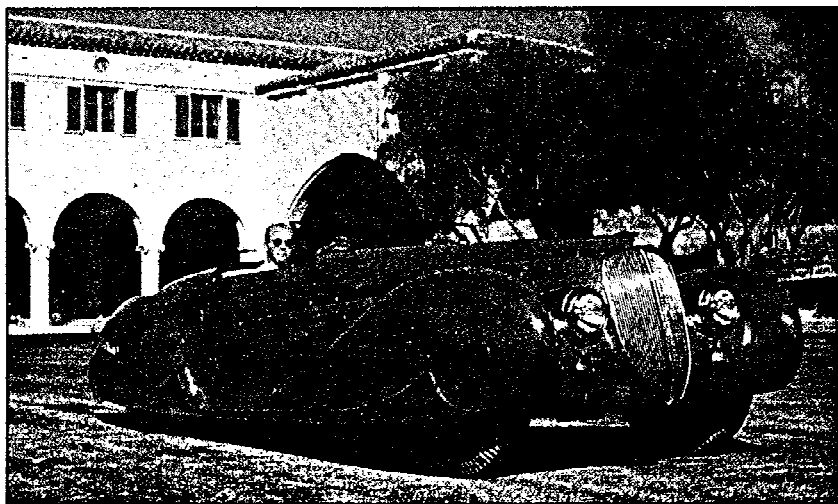


# Escape Road

## Finding the Figoni et Falashi Delahaye V12

By Roger Barlow

Third of a four part series



**L**ast week I told you about a pair of Talbot Grand Prix cars. The week before, a Talbot-Darracq convertible. Now to 1945 and the fourth car I discovered in a Manhattan "haystack".

Finding this one had less to do with luck than a good memory and simple detective work. I'd just been discharged from the Navy and was preparing for an assault on the Hollywood studios as a would-be director—not a very promising prospect for a documentary film maker. To maintain my spirits during the search I set myself up in the "foreign car" business.

I remembered visiting the New York World's Fair in 1939-40 and drooling over the display of cars in the French Pavilion...a couple of Type 57 Bugattis, a huge Renault limousine, a pair of Delages—and the new V12 Delahaye. The Delahaye was shown as a spectacular Figoni et Falashi convertible. A hole had been cut into the right side of the hood (then fitted with perspex) so that visitors could peer at its impressive V12 engine.

I was sure these cars had not been shipped back to France at fair's end as WWII was well under way by late 1940. So where were they now? None of their manufacturers had representation here except Renault, which maintained a purchasing office in New York. It apparently was under the sole control of a Miss Schmidt.

On the phone I asked her if any of the cars were still in the country. Yes, she said, they had all remained here. All had been sold but one. Which one? Why, the

smashing red V12 Delahaye with white pigskin upholstery (piped in matching red) and a windshield that cranked down into the scuttle as far as you wanted! It had been sitting, snug in its big shipping box for the past five years, in a hayloft of a warehouse on Seventh Avenue. No one had bought it because it couldn't run; that magnificent light-alloy V12 had no crankshaft or pistons!

With or without a working engine the car was sensational. I knew it would be just the bait to bring in all the car-minded in the film industry, even the Cadillackeys. I offered Miss Schmidt \$3000 for it, in the box, without even prying up the lid to see if what was inside was what was supposed to be inside.

The Delahaye arrived in February of 1946. My partner and I cased it out of its crate, washed off the dust and pushed it into the front window of the showroom we shared with Tommy Hamilton's Nash dealership in Beverly Hills, a couple of doors up from the William Morris Agency.

We waited. It was two weeks before the King of Hollywood, Clark Cable, came in to see it. Gable had heard about it while on location in Northern California. Roaring with good-natured laughter, he said, "It's the perfect whore's dream of a car...an elegant whore, of course...but could you imagine me going into MGM in that, or duck hunting with Coop!" We told him we hadn't acquired the Delahaye with the idea of *selling* it to him...only as a sure way for us to meet.

He liked that.

Despite its magnificently flamboyant body, that hemi-head Delahaye was actually a gutsy, high performance motor car when fitted with more sporting coachwork. Before the war the French government had offered a million franc prize to the French car maker that could build a car to cover 16 laps (200km) of the Montlhery road circuit at an average speed 10percent quicker than the fastest lap in the previous French Grand Prix. A V12 Delahaye, with Rene Dreyfus at the wheel, won the prize.

The "Million Franc Delahaye" made for titillating headlines, but the amount—about \$40,000—was far short of that necessary to fund a French effort capable of taking on the then-conquering Germans in Grand Prix racing—the original intent of the prize. Even so, the V12 Delahaye *did* beat the Germans at the next round-the-houses race at Pau, and that effort alone was worth a lot more than a million francs to French pride. During the next two years the unsupercharged, 220hp V12 Delahaye gave a surprisingly good account of itself against the German cars, which had over 450hp with which to play. The French cars finished in the points in numerous events, including a fourth for Dreyfus at Nurburgring in 1939.

So who bought our sexy but overweight Figoni-bodied Delahaye? Not a member of the Hollywood crowd, but a smallish, dignified, middle-aged businessman from the Midwest. He walked in one day, spent about three minutes looking it over, then asked the price.

"Ten thousand," replied my partner, Louis Van Dyke.

The little man reached into his inside jacket pocket and handed us a cashier's check in the amount of, yes, \$10,000! He smiled a sort of Calvin Coolidge smile and explained that that was just about what he expected to have to pay for the fanciest car in California. (Bear in mind that in 1946 \$10,000 was the equivalent of about \$80,000 today.)

Our customer didn't much care what engine we put in the Delahaye. We decided upon a V12 Lincoln with Eddie Edmonds heads and manifolding. We polished and chromed everything to impress all the folks back in Ohio.

I wonder where that Delahaye is today? In what barn? **AW**