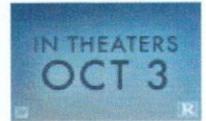


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COLLECTIBLE CARS | NYT NOW

An Original Dodge, Direct From the Founder's Family

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Collecting

By **LARRY EDSALL**

GROSSE POINTE SHORES, MICH. — A price guide for collector cars might tell you how much an all-original, option-packed, low-mileage 1964 Dodge Custom 880 convertible should sell for. What that book cannot tell you is the value added by the provenance of a particular car — its history of ownership and experiences.

Not that any such convertible from the top of the Dodge line car might ever be considered an ordinary example, as only 1,058 were produced in a year when Dodge, then celebrating its 50th anniversary as an automaker, built more than a quarter-million cars and nearly 100,000 trucks.

What makes this '64 model special and perhaps worth more than the roughly \$40,000 cited in price guides (other than it starts and runs smoothly and that its power options, including the convertible top, still work) are the remarkable owners.

The first owner was Anna Thomson Dodge, whose husband, Horace E. Dodge, was one of the founders of the Dodge Brothers, which became the Dodge division of what is now Fiat Chrysler. The second owner is Mary Wilson, whose husband, Ralph, the founding owner of the Buffalo Bills football team, died in March. The team is set to be sold to Terry Pegula, owner of the Buffalo Sabres hockey team, and his family.

Making the car's history even more fascinating are the stories now re-emerging of how each woman came to own this Dodge, now 50 years old, in the year when the Dodge brand celebrates its 100th anniversary.

According to documents that Ms. Wilson, the current owner, received with the car, Horace Dodge's widow took delivery of the car on December 27, 1963. Her son Horace E. Dodge Jr. had ordered the car as a Christmas present for his mother — in fact, he ordered two cars, one for his mother and one that he planned to drive the next summer in Europe.

But the son did not live long enough to see his mother sit behind the wheel of the big white convertible. Nor, it appears, did he ever drive the car he ordered for himself. He died in a Detroit hospital in December 1963; his mother, in her 90s, hurried back from her winter home in Palm Beach, Fla., but didn't arrive in time to see her son while he still was alive.

Mrs. Dodge was a native of Scotland who became one of the wealthiest women in the world. Both her husband and his brother, John, died in 1920, after contracting influenza while attending the New York auto show.

Five years later, Mrs. Dodge and her sister-in-law sold the brothers' company for \$146 million, at the time the largest such cash sale in American history. She also received \$1.4 million a year tax-free because of her husband's investment in municipal bonds.

In 1929, despite the Depression, Mrs. Dodge tore down the Rose Terrace home in Grosse Pointe Farms suburb on Lake St. Clair and built a larger, more elaborate Rose Terrace II that was considered one of the country's finest residences. Much of the furniture and art from the house can be seen at the Detroit Institute of Arts and the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles.

Mrs. Dodge's sister-in-law, Matilda, and Matilda's second husband, the lumber baron Alfred Wilson, also built a noteworthy residence, Meadow Brook Hall, in the northern Detroit suburb of Rochester Hills. They later donated that residence and 1,500 acres to Michigan State University, which established a satellite campus that eventually became Oakland University.

Anna Thomson Dodge died in 1970.

In 1994, DuMouchelles, a Detroit art and estate sales specialist, held an auction in which Lot 1001 — tucked into the catalog between a sterling silver ring and sterling sauce ladles double struck in a George IV King's pattern, circa 1926-27

— was a 1964 Dodge 880 Custom Convertible with 7,862 original miles and still on its original tires.

Most of those miles were believed to have been driven in Florida, where Mrs. Dodge's attorney had it parked alongside her late son's new Dodge in the garage of her Palm Beach home in January 1964.

A DuMouchelles auction receipt shows that a winning bid of \$13,000 bought Mrs. Dodge's car; the full price was \$14,950, including the auction house's commission on the sale.

Mrs. Wilson notes that, in fact, she was not the buyer of the car; her future husband was.

"I was at DuMouchelles to buy a few antiques, but this car was right there when you walked in," Mrs. Wilson said. "I thought, 'This is the coolest car.'

"I said 'Ralph, this is a great car.' He said, 'O.K., Mary,' and he bought it for me. Mrs. Wilson clarified: "It was our first year of dating. He didn't deny me anything."

Although she had not seen the auction catalog, Mrs. Wilson said she was aware of the car's history in the Dodge family and that she had a great appreciation for Detroit's automotive heritage. At her home here she also has a Cadillac and her most cherished vehicle, a 1967 Chevrolet Camaro convertible. In Buffalo, she keeps a customized Chrysler PT Cruiser that she and her husband used to drive to Bills games.

"I have a 1967 Camaro convertible," she said. "It was the first car I ever bought, when I was a high school teacher in San Antonio, Tex. I've driven it all over this country, and I still have it."

While the Camaro will be passed down in her will, Mrs. Wilson is selling the Dodge as she reorganizes after her husband's death.

"It's an incredible car with a pretty cool history," she said. "I hate selling it, but I just need to get rid of some things.

"The feeling I have when I drive that car is, well, you remember, when the cars used to come out in September and it was a big deal," she said. "They would be in the showrooms and also in the ads."

Yes, I remember, and I know the feeling, because I drove Mrs. Wilson's '64 Dodge Custom 880 convertible.