

C U N N I N G H A M

James Cunningham, Son & Company of Rochester, New York was world famous years before the first horseless carriages began chuffing American roads. Although builders of sleighs, tally-hos, victorias and carriages of all kinds, the company was best known for its hearses and ambulances. Wrote an admiring reviewer, "In no other country are the remains of the dead borne to the grave in such costly vehicles as are the departed sovereigns of this 'land of the brave.'" A Cunningham was upper echelon in price from the beginning.

At the turn of the century the third generation of Cunninghams entered the family firm and became enthused about that new-fangled contraption that moved under its own power. Like many carriage makers, Cunningham initially built only the coachwork

for its cars, purchasing engines and most drivetrain components from industry suppliers. By 1910, however, a Cunningham had become pure Cunningham. And by 1916 the firm joined the Cadillac bandwagon in offering a V-8, a big 442-cubic-inch unit developing 90 hp at an unruffled 2400 rpm. Ralph De Palma drove a light boattail version 98 mph at Brooklyn's Sheepshead Bay in 1919, and a small series of Cunningham speedsters followed. But most of the Rochester products carried heavier, more formal coachwork during these years when the Cunningham was becoming inalterably identified as a carriage-trade car. "The most prestigious V-8 of the era," one historian has written. Commented another, "It is hard to avoid running out of superlatives."

With the dawn of the Classic Era, four-wheel mechanical brakes were

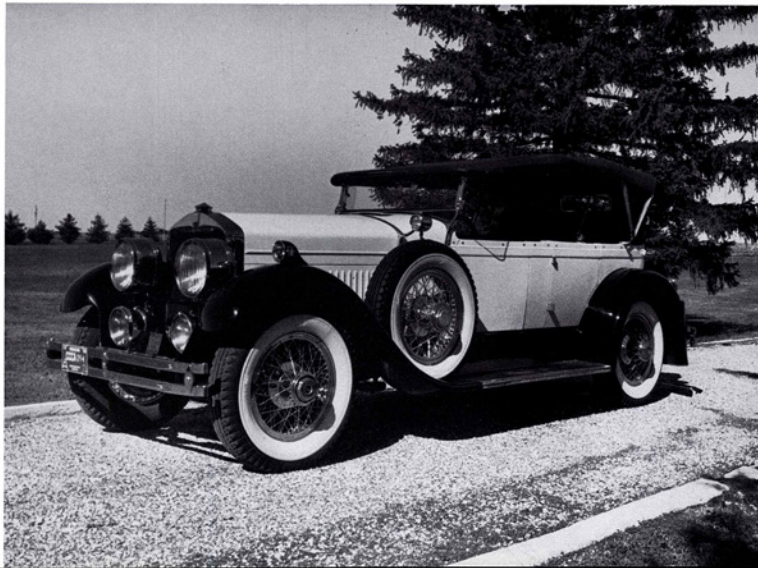
fitted to the V-8 Cunningham's two (132- and 142-inch) chassis. Prices ranged from \$6,000-\$8,000. Some 800 craftsmen were producing about 650 vehicles (including hearses and ambulances) annually. The practice of annual model revisions was eschewed in Rochester, however, as was a dealership and authorized repair station network. There were Cunningham dealers, many of them undertakers who were clients for the firm's traditional product; other purchasers ordered their cars direct from Rochester. The factory saw to the Cunningham's continued good health after delivery, the company routinely dispatching a mechanic to ailing cars.

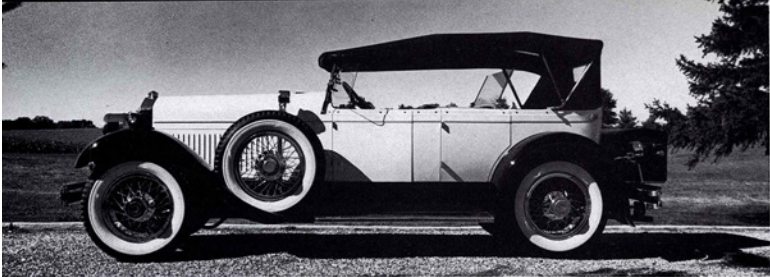
It was in coachwork that the Cunningham star shone most brightly from first to last. Fenders and hoods were sturdy steel. The body was whitewood and ash, iron braced and covered with hand-shaped sheet aluminum. Painting was a painstaking process: a coat of primer, two of lead, five of rough paint stained and rubbed, two of

1928 Cunningham Series V-7 Dual Cowl Phaeton.

Owner: William S. Abbott of Jerseyville, Illinois.

Photo: Jerry Manis





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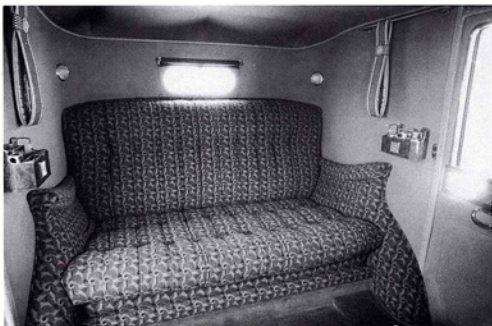
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color, no fewer than three of varnish, followed by enameling. Overkill in attention to detail was a Cunningham byword.

The crash of the stock market on Wall Street was a sound that echoed ominously in the Rochester factory. Within a few years Cunningham had discontinued automobile series production for ambulances and hearses exclusively. Though most people couldn't afford a Cunningham anymore, they still got sick and died. The firm continued in a small way applying custom coachwork to manufactured chassis if a client so requested. The last Cunningham body was built in September 1936—nearly a century after James Cunningham had built his first quality carriage.

Few Cunninghams survive today. William Abbott has owned his '28 Dual Cowl Phaeton for seventeen years. Henry Uihlein's '29 All Weather Cabriolet is a recent addition to his collection, and he is enormously enthusiastic about it: "Elegance, class and craftsmanship—the Cunningham was the most expensive automobile built in the United States in the late twenties and was rightfully called the American Rolls-Royce. The accessories in my car are either original French Baccarat glass or sterling silver. The woodwork is all hand inlaid walnut in pattern, and fantastically beautiful. This car is a quiet Classic to look at, but it makes a lasting impression. Cunningham is still in business today, manufacturing non-automotive parts. The legacy the company left in the field of fine automobiles is one of excellence in taste and quality of construction—and is tellingly demonstrated in the Cunninghams which have survived. They tell the story better than words."



Engine and rear compartment in Henry Uihlein's '29 Cunningham. Photos: Cindy Lewis

