



GRANDPA'S MURPHY

■ John Ferrara in the 1933 Duesenberg Model J Murphy convertible coupe that his grandfather bought in 1955.

A Duesenberg between grandfather and grandson

At 40 years old, John Ferrara is just five years older than his grandfather was when he bought his 1933 Duesenberg Murphy convertible coupe in 1955. Earlier this year, John inherited that Duesenberg, and he's using the car exactly how his grandfather enjoyed it until his passing in 2009. One of John's first stops with the refreshed Duesenberg was the annual Auburn Cord Duesen-

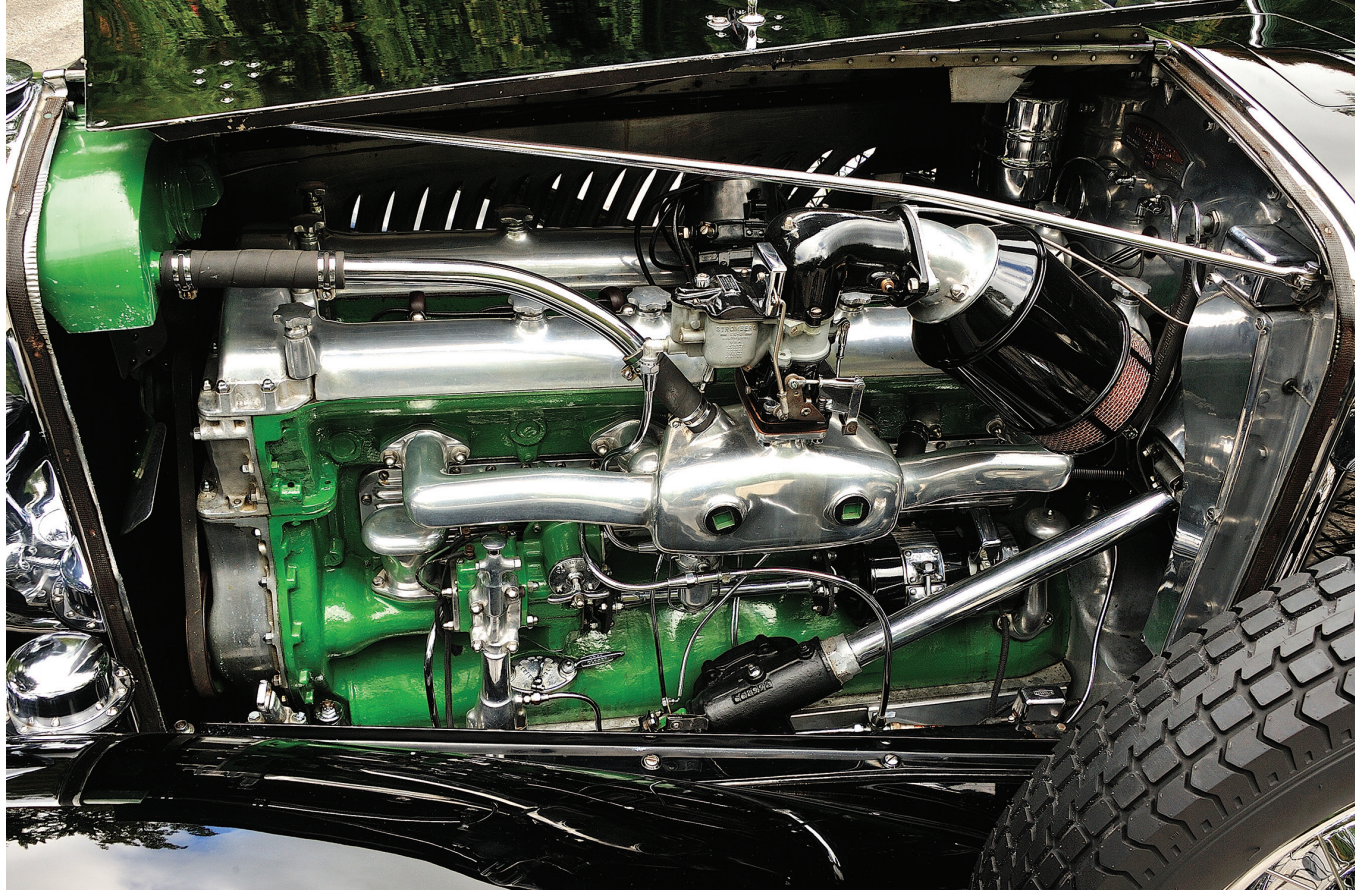
berg Club Reunion in Auburn, Ind., over Labor Day weekend. It was an event that John had occasionally attended with his grandfather, the legendary Al Ferrara.

"1996 was the first time I went, and we took the Duesenberg Model A, the Schutte[-bodied roadster]," John said. "He took me out of school to go. He was a god there. They loved him in that town. They really did."

John isn't exaggerating; his grandfa-

ther always held court among the faithful who returned to Auburn each fall to see and talk Auburns, Cords and Duesenbergs. Although diminutive in stature, Al Ferrara had a personality larger than life, especially when talking "Duesenberg," often with animated hand gestures. Al knew the ownership history of nearly every Duesenberg as he'd been tracking them since the 1950s, and he'd share that history, often under the lit





■ After it debuted in late 1928, Duesenberg ads for the Model J touted the Fred Duesenberg-engineered straight-eights could propel the cars to 88 mph in second gear, but that wasn't the whole story; in third gear, they'd go well past the 100-mph mark. The Ferrara Duesenberg is powered by engine J-428.



■ The Duesenberg Murphy disappearing top convertible coupe interior featured a cozy leather seat for two passengers and walnut or mahogany on the doors with chrome-plated bronze hardware. The Duesenberg instrument panel featured an engine-turned, oxidized nickel surface around an ammeter, brake pressure gauge, oil pressure gauge, tachometer, split-second stop clock, 150-mph speedometer, gas gauge, altimeter/barometer and temperature gauge. John Ferrara keeps a pair of driving gloves on the brake handle.



■ The Murphy convertible coupe's elegant lines and tasteful proportions made it a favorite when new and today. Duesenberg sold 50 Murphy convertible coupes, making it the most common body style on the Model J chassis. About half of those Murphy convertible coupes had the fully disappearing convertible top, which originally added \$900 to the price and brought the grand total in the \$15,000 range during the 1930s. The ALFIO license plate on the Ferrara Murphy disappearing top convertible coupe is for Saint Alfio, for whom Al Ferrara was named.

street lamps outside the famed Auburn Hotel. Al didn't keep tabs on Duesenbergs just for the fun of it — there was a chance he might add another to his stable of thoroughbred motorcars. At the time of his death, there were no fewer than eight Duesenbergs in his garage, echoing the Duesenberg tag line “eight in a row, ready to go,” a reference to the car's straight-eight engine.

Each Duesenberg in Al's collection had impeccable lineage, but it was his first Duesenberg, the black Murphy convertible coupe featured here, that was his favorite.

“Of all his cars, I think Grandpa loved the Murphy the most,” John says. “When I think of Grandpa and his cars

and the ones he enjoyed the most, that one I think he loved the most. It screams ‘him’ more than any other one. When he lived at home with his mother — they used to have a duplex, and his mother lived on the other side — his mother saw this car. So, man, almost 70 years this car has been in the family. It's like an heirloom.”

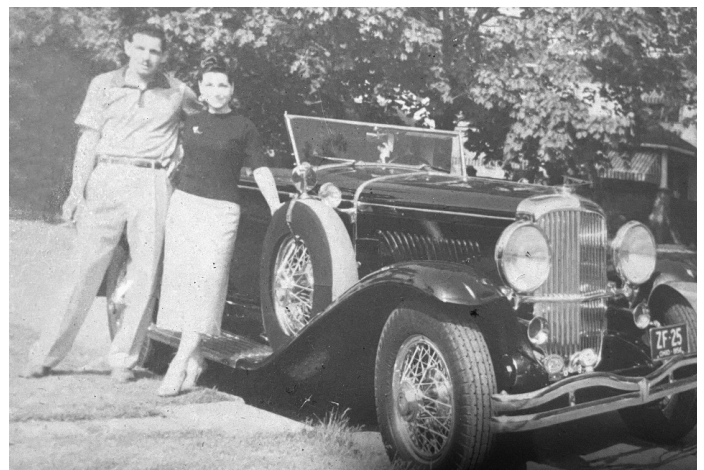
John had a chance to witness the celebrity of his grandfather on those occasions he'd go to Auburn or a concours, but on an average day, Al was John's boss at Ferrara's Imported Foods. There, in the family Italian food market that Al opened in Cleveland during 1959, John developed a deep bond with his grandfather. Even outside the store's brick fa-

çade, Al and John appeared to be more than relatives; they were friends with inside jokes, and who's eyes would meet with a sparkle of familiarity that can only be shared between two people toiling together behind a busy deli counter day after day.

John started at Ferrara's Imported Foods, a true family business, at the tender young age of 14. Each day, John clocked in with his uncle, Frank “Chick” Ferrara, and several of his great-aunts and great-uncles. From the day John started work there — and every day since — there has been an old black-and-white photo hanging in the store that was shot shortly after his grandfather bought the jet-black Murphy con-



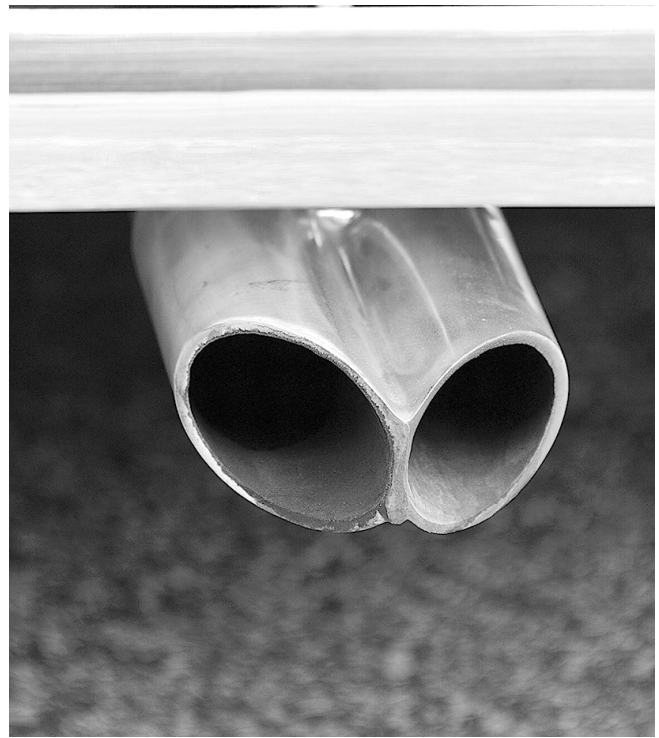
■ The Ferrara Murphy convertible coupe pictured in St. Paul, Minn., in 1955, just before it was purchased for \$5,000 by Al Ferrara. (Byron Olsen photo)



■ Al Ferrara and his wife, Fran, with the Murphy convertible coupe around 1956. For decades, this photo has hung in their store where their grandson, John, eventually began working when he was 14 years old. John refreshed the car to its appearance in this photo.



■ A 1954 ACD Club topper next to the standard Duesenberg taillamp of the Ferrara Murphy. In 1954, Al Ferrara owned a Cord 812 and attended an ACD Club meet. When he saw a Duesenberg Model J at the meet, he told his wife he needed to buy one. This is the first Duesenberg they purchased after that experience.



■ E.L. Cord charged Fred Duesenberg with making the world's best car, and Duesenberg met the challenge by engineering that machine with the Model J. A car with the Duesenberg's stratospheric price tag requires more than superior mechanical features, and the Model J had it with such touches as its two-port exhaust tip.

vertible coupe. While John can now see the actual car in vivid color parked in his garage, that old framed photograph of it remains etched into his psyche.

"That picture always hung in the store, above the bread slicer, so as a kid, I am always staring at this picture while I am slicing bread, and while you're slicing bread, you've got time to look around," John jokes. "So this picture hung above the bread slicer with the car's top down, with grandma and with grandpa holding a cigarette with the blackwalls. That picture was all over the place. It was at home, at the store...."

When his grandfather died, the store and the cars went to John's Uncle

Chick. Before his passing earlier this year, Chick sold most of the cars, but left the store and the remaining cars to John. John says Chick rarely drove any of the cars, so he's been having the vehicles from his grandfather's collection reawakened, and one of the first was the Murphy convertible coupe. John went into that awakening with a plan.

"I remember Grandpa driving this one the most," John says. "I just always remember him driving this one so much. Just to shows and on Sundays, but I always remember that one picture of it with the top down and the blackwalls. My thought was always to get the car back to that picture."

Once the title was in his name, John set about ensuring the long-dormant Duesenberg was roadworthy. He had a restoration shop rebuild the water pump, address the fuel system, polish the paint, tune up the 420-cid straight-eight and change the battery. To match the photograph hanging above the bread slicer, John replaced the wide whitewalls his grandfather had eventually installed with blackwalls.

"I know Miles Morestatter, who did all the work for Grandpa, he was not too keen about me putting the blackwalls on it," John says. "He said, 'Your grandfather wouldn't have been happy. He used to say, 'If you can afford a Duesenberg,



■ A 1956 photo with Al Ferrara (left) and Al Thurn (right). Thurn was also an early Duesenberg enthusiast, and the two men often corresponded over Duesenbergs during the 1950s and beyond.



■ The Ferrara Murphy convertible coupe in 1958, after Al Ferrara added sidemount covers, whitewalls and a light-colored convertible top. The car remained in this configuration until 2022.

you can afford to put whitewalls on it.”

“But I am so happy I put the blackwalls on,” John says.

To further make the car appear as it did in the '50s, John had the side-mount covers removed and dropped the car's convertible top.

“I never actually remember my grandfather ever putting the top down in the Murphy,” John says. “I always put the top down, and it hasn't been up since. To me, it's a completely different car when its top is down. I mean, it's a disappearing top, man — put it down!”

It's a bit ironic that John prefers the Murphy as it looked in that old photograph from before his time, rather than how he remembers seeing it and experiencing it with his grandfather. And the two shared many experiences with the car, but for John, none tops his first drive behind its giant, three-spoked black steering wheel with the top raised.

“The first time I drove this Murphy, I was probably about 20 years old,” John recalls. “Grandpa let me drive the Murphy; it was the first Duesenberg I ever drove. He rode with me. We were going up this hill by his house and he told me to hit it — he wanted me to hit it. I just hammered on it, throttle down, and I cracked a spark plug in half. He was dying laughing, and I was terrified for my life! I thought I had broke something so [important]. We go back to the house and he takes the spark plug out and puts another in it, and we went back out. It was, like, the greatest day ever. Huge, huge

memories.”

Now when John drives the car, the experience is slightly different — the top is down so he can feel the wind in his hair, and with the side-mount covers removed, he can see the tread on the sidemounted tires when he looks out to turn. Yet he still feels his grandfather riding next to him. It's not necessarily the grandfather he remembers from that first drive; it could also be the grandfather in the prime of youth pictured in that old black-and-white photo — the grandfather who once used to tear around the streets of Auburn in a Duesenberg.

“When I am driving this Murphy, it's like I am reuniting with my grandpa so much, and it slows me down in life and makes me enjoy life so much and enjoy him. It's just fun.”

So far, John's highlight of fun in owning the Murphy was taking it back to the place where his grandfather was best known outside of Cleveland.

“I took the Murphy to Auburn and had so much fun driving it around town,” John said. “I burned half a tank of gas in the town of Auburn and it was the funnest part ever. The smiles you bring on people's faces when they see you driving an old car, it's unbelievable.”

John may not realize it, but as we understand it, those smiles in Auburn weren't simply from people seeing an old Duesenberg on the road — some of them were from people thrilled to see a Ferrara behind the wheel of a black Murphy convertible coupe again.

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THE ELEGANT MURPHY CONVERTIBLE COUPE

After E.L. Cord's Auburn Automobile Co. purchased Duesenberg Motors Co. in 1926, he charged its cofounder, Fred Duesenberg, with engineering the greatest automobile chassis in the United States, and it became one of the greatest in the world. The Model A that had been the brothers' first passenger car was modified to the Model X until the Model J that Cord had charged Fred with building was ready.

The Model J chassis made its debut in the fall of 1928 with deliveries following in early 1929. Duesenberg built the chassis and supplied fenders, bumpers, a hood, radiator shell and lamps designed in-house by Alan Leamy, Jr.; bodies were to be built by the best coachbuilders in the trade. As the Auburn Automobile Co. had once ordered sample bodies from the Walter M. Murphy Co. coachbuilding company, then copied the design for some production Auburn models, an arrangement was made to catalog Murphy bodies for the Model J chassis, as well as order and install Murphy bodies for inventory. As a result, Murphy was the most prolific coachbuilder on the Model J chassis, and its beautiful convertible coupe was the most common body type to appear on a Model J; of the 481 Duesenbergs built, 50 of them were Murphy convertible coupes. Half of the Murphy convertible coupes were of the disappearing top variety, while the collapsed top was somewhat visible on the earliest 25.

John Ferrara's Duesenberg is one of the later Murphy convertible coupes with the disappearing top. The body was originally on chassis 2463 with engine J-454, but before Al Ferrara bought the car in 1955 from Archie Walker Motors in St. Paul through an ad in The New York Times, the body had been moved to chassis 2525 with engine J-428, which were originally under a Rollston convertible victoria bought new by Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney. Today, the Ferrara Murphy convertible coupe remains on chassis 2525 with engine J-428.



■ An elegant Fran Ferrara with the family Murphy convertible coupe in 1962.



■ Today, John Ferrara has the Murphy convertible coupe looking as it did when his grandfather was pictured with it around 1956.