

Who's Got The Bowl?

Everything would have just fine if great-grandson Edsel Ford II hadn't discovered the family blunder of the century. He has been hunting for his great-granddaddy's punchbowl, the ground zero symbol of the family empire. Seems when great-grandma Clara passed away the kids did what most kids do – they took the stuff what they wanted and got rid of everything else. Figuring they'd make more at auction where the general public might bid up prices to own stuff that once belonged to Henry and Clara Ford, Parke-Bernat Galleries of New York City was engaged. What the kids, the estate executors – Henry II, Benson and William -- failed to recognize, what had faded from the entire Ford family consciousness, was where the cut glass punchbowl came from. They had no idea that the lap of luxury in which they sat was made possible by the spectacular piece of glass auctioned off as Lot Number 20 for a paltry \$70. The Ford family had forgotten its roots. They had moved on.

What "The Garden Shop" bought at high bid on October 17, 1951 was a racing trophy miraculously won by 38 year-old rookie racer Henry Ford that helped launched the familiar blue oval motoring giant. A search was begun by Ford Racing and The Henry Ford Museum to find the lost punchbowl during 2001, the 100th anniversary of the company's founding. Had they started in my dining room the search might have been brief. I own, if not the very punch bowl, then its identical twin.

Here's the back story:

Ten laps around a one-mile dirt oval 111 years ago turned a highly publicized and well-attended automobile event into a race that changed the world. Eight thousand curious members of the public spun the turnstiles at a horseracing track in Grosse Pointe, Mich., on Oct. 10, 1901, to watch more than a dozen automobiles compete. So popular was the race that the courthouse closed for the afternoon! The racing, as it turned out, got a bit boring until Alexander Winton from Cleveland, the celebrity manufacturer and hot shoe of the day, was defeated by little-known mechanic and tinkerer Henry Ford who had only paid his entry fee the night before.

It was Ford's first race as a driver and the same thing for his car. Called "Sweepstakes", the frame was made from ash that held a 539 cubic inch two-cylinder engine rated at 26 HP. Thanks to the FoMoCo for the photos. Winton's entry, "Bullet"

claimed 70hp.

Ford's pitiful driving skills saw him slow in the corners, lift off the throttle and fall behind by as much as a fifth of a mile until the lap 7 of a 10 lap main event. Incredulously, Winton's Bullet began to slow, sputter and smoke allowing lucky duck Ford to pass Winton right in front of the jam-packed, boisterous grandstand winning by a wide margin.

Winton's granddaughter, Charlotte, now 83 and living out west told me during a phone chat, "Grandfather was annoyed with losing because his car had run almost all the heat races and Henry Ford had only competed in a couple and had not worn out his entry."

Ford's win brought him the investors he had hoped for and Ford Motor Co. opened 20 months later in June, 1903. I don't recall the 100th anniversary search, despite my involvement with the Ford Racing at the time when a new pick-up was prepped by Spal USA and driven by Ford Assistant Chief Engineer Mark Bill to a new 202 mph class record in the modified pickup class at Bonneville. Then, this month last year, I was casually reading the New York Times auto section and came upon a story about the renewed punchbowl search. The accompanying picture made me sit bolt upright.

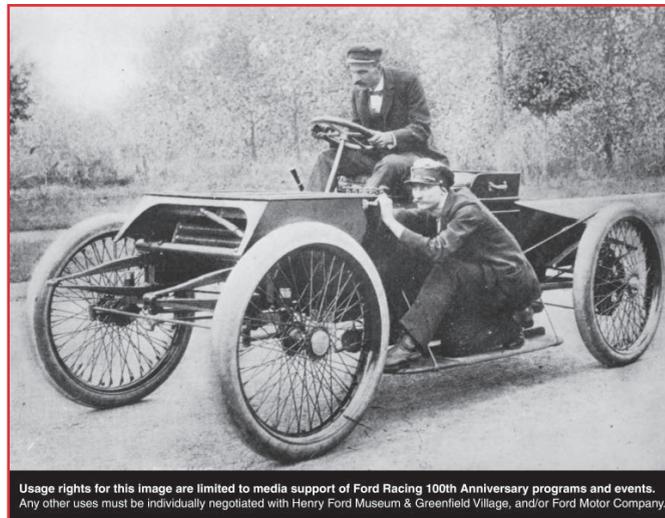
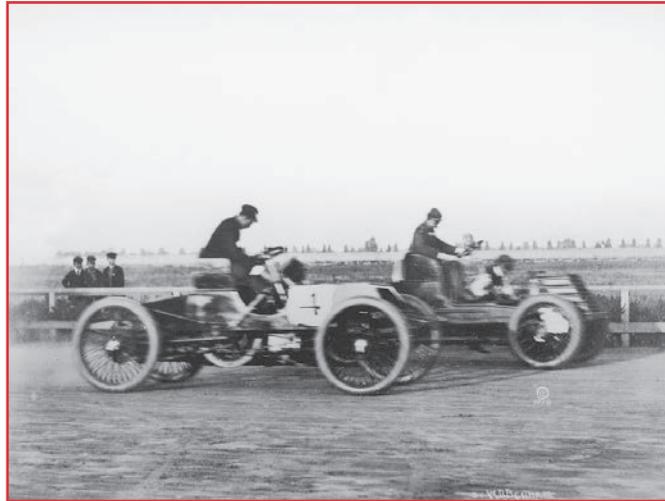
Take a look for yourself: the photo, taken by Henry himself, is how Clara served drinks at home. The color photo is the 20 pound bowl parked in my dining room. Edsel II neglected to tell people that it was a two-part punchbowl. Where was the stand? Did someone break it? A someone like the first little Edsel perhaps?

I unearthed the auction catalogue that stated the bowl was sold with a "conforming spreading stand" and a ladle. Ok, that meant the kid didn't break it, the stand matched the bowl but ladle did not.

Henry's bowl had small imperfections. So does mine. I don't have the ladle. My pal told me he once had a ladle, but didn't know what happened to it. The pattern of cuts, although breathtakingly spectacular in my opinion, was nothing special for the era that saw many companies register and patent its specialized intricate patterns.

"Strawberry diamond and fan was a

very common pattern for the American brilliant period, many companies cut that pattern," said Craig Carlson, collector and researcher of American brilliant cut glass in Arizona, "However, what makes it odd is that this common pattern was on such a large bowl which would have



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mainly been for wealthy customers who would have wanted something more special."

Carlson and I thought it reasonable the race promoters likely wanted to spend as little as possible for the trophy and ordering a common pattern would have kept labor costs at a minimum. The same thought was put forward by Jane Spillman, Curator of American Glass at the Corning Museum of Glass in New York.

"I think it's going to be impossible to tell for certain if your bowl is the same one owned by the Fords, but if the measurements match there's a good possibility. That's because a punchbowl that large in that very simple pattern is relatively unusual," she wrote to me.

The only known size reference appears in auction catalog stating the

bowl was 15 inches. Mine is 14 and a bit more depending on which ruler I use. Still, the experts with whom I have consulted have said that it is quite possible the catalog measurement given was an estimate and fractions are often rounded up.

While we are speculating, how about this? There might be some motorsports karma connected to old Henry's bowl: that the bowl chose its owners and not the other way around. The bowl was selected by Charles Shanks, one of the race promoters, who was also Winton's sales manager and used the punchbowl to entice his boss to enter a race where no real competition was expected. The promoters needed Winton as a "headliner." It was by pure luck Henry Ford and his Sweepstakes racer won the day – all because Winton's Bullet spun a bearing and the pit crew neglected to fill the oil reservoir.

Bought by a woman a half-century later who brought the punchbowl home to California from a New York shopping trip in the 1950s, it was her son that would grow up to etch an indelible legacy in off-road racing. That racer sold it to me. Of course, my punchbowl can easily be just another punchbowl of the same type that simply managed to survive. Another cut glass collector, Greg Randall,

sifted through about 4000 pages of ads looking to match the punchbowl blanks. He seems to think the Ford bowl resembles the Libbey No. 211 blank, but could not be certain and he also thinks my bowl might be a different blank. All he had to go on were three photos: Ford's and two from me.

"The cups in the Ford picture are not cut in strawberry diamond and fan, but a similar pattern," he said with certainty, "The photos, as you noted, were poor, 1930s resolution, but it looks like the cups match a pattern known as Penrose by Hawkes."

It was common back in the day for a cut glass trophy to be ordered special for an event making that pattern and size

unsellable to anyone else for a particular period of time. It's doubtful that was the case with the Ford punchbowl because of the common pattern and was more probably bought off the shelf.

It comes down to survivability. I spent months looking for a punchbowl the same size and shape as Henry's and mine without success. The man I bought it from has distinct personal memories of the punchbowl on prominent display in his family home during the '50s and '60s. His socialite mother hosted many parties that were often covered by the local newspaper. Beyond that he remembers little else except that his mother cherished the punchbowl. What did he care? As teenager growing up the '50s his focus was on cars not mom's parties!

"The punchbowl was treated with indifference by Henry and Clara because they both knew it was never intended for them in the first place," offered Nicholas Sinacori, author of the newly published book "Horse Power, Men and Machines" that identifies the shift from horse to automobile racing in the Detroit area.

"Everyone knew the bowl was chosen for Alexander Winton. Instead of a cherished object from his first race, in my opinion Henry looked at it as a 'so what' object."

Not so fast. On camera, Edsel II says in a video that Winton designed the bowl and it was not simply picked off the shelf. Of course it would have been Shanks who did the designing based on his boss' tastes and tempered by the promotion budget. Did "E II" tip his hand, or was he just dead wrong? Did Clara and Henry dis-

pose of it long ago because they wanted to get Winton's presence out of their home? Both could be true. We may never know. What I do know is that I have the best darn nightlight on the planet when I light the votive candle inside the bowl for stunning nighttime glow.

The Ford folks rebuilt Henry's Sweepstakes car from little more than a junk pile. I'm thinking if they don't locate THE punchbowl, I'd let them borrow mine for awhile. Think how nice it would be to see the two together in a diorama recreating such a significant day in American motorsports history. **GG**

