



## Notes from the Archive

Seaver Center for Western History Research  
Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County  
November 2019

Welcome to Notes from the Archive, a publication of the Seaver Center for Western History Research, a section of the History Department.  
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### SPECIAL AUTOMOBILE ISSUE

With the advent of American automobile manufacturing, the city of Detroit became known as the Auto Capital of the World. Today Los Angeles is thought by many to hold that title. In 1897 the first appearance of a locally assembled car on an L.A. street was one test-driven from Broadway near Fifth onto Boyle Heights. The Seaver Center holds significant collections documenting early automobile enterprises.

### THE COLLECTIONS: Auto Manufacturing, Racing and Retailing

The Ralph Hamlin business and photograph collections are rich primary sources that document the earliest activities in Los Angeles relating to automobiles. Other collections are the Los Angeles Motor Car Company Business Records, 1908-1912; the Stutz Automobile Scrapbook, ca. 1913-1919; the Automotive Literature collection; the scrapbooks of Cadillac dealer Don Lee, 1916-1922; the Eddie O'Donnell auto racing photos, ca. 1913-1920; a photograph album of automobile camping trip, ca. 1914; an automotive photograph collection, 1904-1976; and the Mobil Gas company photographs, documenting fuel economy runs and the construction of service stations. Early auto periodicals include Horseless Age and Motor West.

Seaver Center has also preserved business records of several companies and individuals based outside of California: the Nash Motor Company (Wisconsin and Maryland); Darling Motors (Ohio); and the papers of inventors Charles E. and J. Frank Duryea, 1894-1944 (Massachusetts).



[Los Angeles to Phoenix Run, ca. 1912] from the Ralph Hamlin Collection (P-115-3-162)

The Ralph Hamlin collections were donated in 1975 by Hamlin's daughter. They detail Hamlin's bicycle and automobile retail businesses, particularly in the year 1905 when he became the local distributor for the Franklin car made in Syracuse, New York. Hamlin enjoyed bicycle and auto endurance racing, and his collections chronicle his participation in an annual race from Los Angeles to Phoenix, also known as the Cactus Derby, during the years 1908 to 1914. He eventually won the 1912 race competing in his 1911 Franklin. The winning vehicle, which today is owned by Mr. Ted Davis profiled below, appears to be the sole surviving vehicle from the Cactus Derbys.

Betty Uyeda, Collections Manager

#### Racing History in the William S. Hart Collection

by Kim Walters, Collections Manager

In working with the collection of photographs from silent film actor William S. Hart, I recently came across a folder: Automobiles-Racing event July 20, 1919. The images are of a race car "W.S. Hart Studio" driven by Lambert Hillyer who is accompanied by Marshall Neilan. Hillyer was an amateur race car driver, film director and screenwriter. He directed many of Hart's western films, and Neilan was an actor, screenwriter, film director and producer.



William S. Hart Collection (P-075-13-38a)

Upon further research I found that the race took place on a one-mile oval dirt race track once located on Slauson Avenue between Central and South Park Avenues (now Avalon Boulevard). The headline in the *Los Angeles Herald* for July 19<sup>th</sup> read "Big Actors' Benefit Fund Race at Ascot Speedway Sunday." There were seven events held including an auto-plane race between Cecil B. DeMille in his bi-plane and "race-car idol" Eddie Hearn in his big Hudson racing car. Lambert Hillyer did well as the driver for the William S. Hart Studio in the three events he raced: 1<sup>st</sup> place in the Australian Pursuit Race, 2<sup>nd</sup> place in the Pacific Coast Amateur Championship 25 mile race, and 3<sup>rd</sup> place in the 10 Mile Studio Race.

Studio portraits of actors and actresses are also contained in the Hart photo collection. One of the most fascinating women in the collection is Eva Mudge (Generva Delphine Mudge). Mudge started her career in vaudeville in New York City, then went on to perform with Wild Bill Cody's Wild

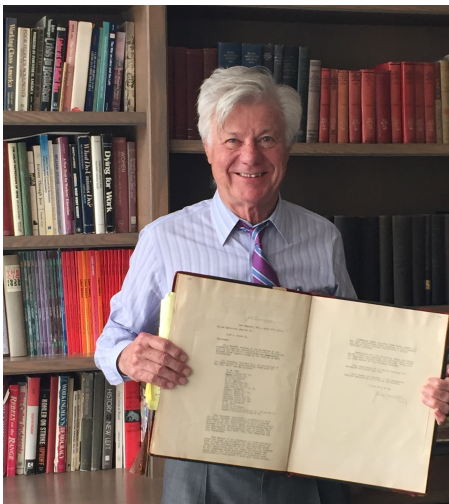
West show before coming to Hollywood to appear in silent films. She is listed in 1898 as the first woman in New York State to obtain a driver's license. She then went on to become the first women race car driver, racing a Waverly Electric in 1898 and later a Locomobile.



Eva Mudge, n.d., from the William S. Hart Collection (P-075-52-035)

## THE DONOR

Hamlin was instrumental in the formation of the Los Angeles Motor Car Dealers Association, and today the group is called the **Greater Los Angeles New Car Dealers Association**. The Association recently agreed to donate their historic business records dating back to 1905 to the Seaver Center for processing and preservation. Mr. Darryl Holter, the Owner-Operator of Felix Chevrolet, the oldest auto dealership in L.A., facilitated the transfer of this important collection to the Seaver Center.



Darryl Holter holding a volume compiled by the association

Presently over 800 photographs have been accessioned and digitized. They can be viewed at <https://collections.nhm.org/seaver-center/>. Many of the photos are of the auto shows through the years.



Los Angeles Auto Show, 1935 (GC-1375-14-005)



Los Angeles Auto Show, 1968-69, Concept Car, Buick Century Cruiser (GC-1377-12-018)

## THE RESEARCHER

Ted R. Davis and his daughter Stacey flew out from Oklahoma in September to wade through the extensive Hamlin collections. Ted was preparing for his lecture "Inside the Cactus Derby" at the Phoenix Art Museum on November 9<sup>th</sup> as part of their Legends of Speed exhibit.

Davis is a mechanical engineer and an avid collector of antique cars, bicycles, motorcycles and race cars. He owns an antique car restoration facility, an electronic contract manufacturing company, and he manufactures antique Packard replacement parts. He is also an automobile and bicycle historian, and in his spare time he enjoys racing vintage IndyCars.



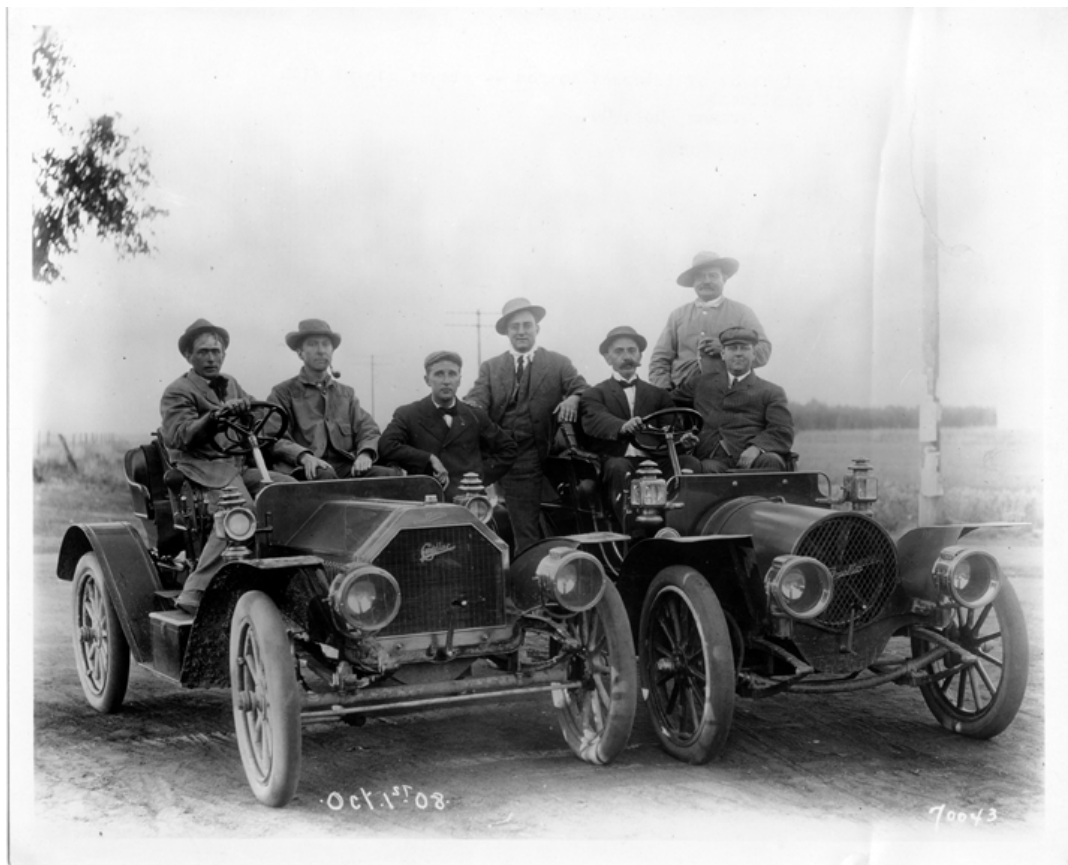

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## THE AUTHOR

Darryl Holter is an historian, executive, and founder of the Figueroa Corridor Business Improvement District. It is of no coincidence

that his involvement with Figueroa Street and its reputation as Auto Row led him in part to embark on a new book, *Cars Come to California: Early Auto Retailing in Los Angeles, 1900-1925*. His research draws upon many archival materials, periodicals and other primary and secondary sources in the large Transportation holdings located at the Seaver Center.



Ralph Hamlin Collection (P-115-4-116)

Darryl Holter explained that the key finding in his research is the vital role that local auto dealers, as opposed to auto manufacturers, found ways to sell automobiles to a mass market of consumers. Very few scholars have explored the role of local dealers, but Holter's research shows that the early dealers provided the capital for manufacturers to assemble cars; built the facilities needed to sell the cars; created payment plans to sell cars on credit when no auto finance companies existed; offered service, repairs and parts before any factory warranty programs were established; started the Los Angeles Auto Show in 1907; and helped to create a new regulatory for the automobile including rules of the road, speed limits, car safety, traffic issues, and car and driver licenses.

Holter is an Adjunct Professor of History at USC and has written books on the French economy, labor relations in Wisconsin, and Woody Guthrie. He is also co-owner of Chevalier's Books, serves on the Board of Directors of the Los Angeles Review of Books, and chairs the Program Committee for the newly merged LA World Affairs Council and Town Hall. He is also a musician who has recorded five albums and is a member of the American Federation of Musicians, Local 47.



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## The Collections

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Over 370 general collections  
Over 290 photographic collections

## Digitized Collections

[Search over 29,000 images](#)

The collections are a part of the History Department of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.  
The Seaver Center opened in 1986 through a generous grant from the Seaver Institute.

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