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**The New York Times**

## **A Used-Car Deal for the Ages: 30 Bugattis Sold for a Song**



*David Gulick*

*BON VOYAGE John Shakespeare's collection of Bugattis was loaded on a railcar.*

**By DON SHERMAN**

# **BUGATTIS are the French blue diamonds of the auto world.**



*Photographs*  
*A Trove of Bugattis*

New York Times May 20, 2010



*David Gulick  
Shakespeare in 1964 with his Type 41 Royale before it was loaded onto the rear of a railcar.*



*David Gulick  
A Bugatti Type 57 starts its trip to the Schlumpf collection in 1964.*



*The 1936 Type 57SC Atlantic that recently sold for more than \$28 million.*



David Gulick

## APPRECIATION

A Type 55 roadster, worth more than \$1 million today. Even as prices for vintage Ferraris made headlines, the Bugatti marque managed to hold the title of most expensive. A 1931 Type 41 Royale that sold at auction in 1987 brought nearly \$10 million, setting a record that stood for two decades.

This month, a 1936 Type 57SC Atlantic coupe that won the Pebble Beach Concours d'Élégance in 2003 sold privately for more than \$28 million, according to Katie Hellwig, a spokeswoman for Gooding & Company, the auction house that brokered the sale. But every now and then there are Bugatti bargains. In January, a 1925 Brescia Type 22 sold to a museum collection at auction for \$345,000. That car was a bit the worse for wear, having spent more than 70 years at the bottom of Lake Maggiore in Switzerland, the result of a dispute over import duties.

In glaring contrast was a little-known package deal, perhaps the used-car bargain of the 20th century. On a March day in 1964, 30 Bugattis were loaded onto railcars in a small Illinois town some 65 miles east of St. Louis. A motivated seller shipped his collection — to a buyer in France he had never met — for just \$85,000, including freight. Even when converted to \$600,000 in today's dollars, that was a giveaway.

The seller was John W. Shakespeare, a wealthy sportsman who dabbled in leisure pursuits that ranged from sports car racing to orchid horticulture. His father, William, the inventor of the level-winding fishing reel, had amassed a fortune manufacturing tackle. The younger Shakespeare, born in 1905, enjoyed health, wealth and a soap opera star's good looks. He studied mathematics and physics at Carnegie Institute of Technology and Harvard, and had interests in oil, real estate and auto dealerships. Collecting Bugattis was a dalliance slotted between water skiing and sky diving. The Bugattis' buyer was Fritz Schlumpf. He was a coal broker before becoming a wool monger and was a ruthless salesman. Starting in the 1930s, Schlumpf and his older brother, Hans, accumulated extensive woolen mill holdings in the Alsace region of France.

New York Times May 20, 2010

Two fellow Bugatti worshipers helped bridge the ocean between Shakespeare and Schlumpf. Hugh Conway, the registrar of the British Bugatti owners' club who was known as the Bugatti Pope, assisted communications on the Continent. Bob Shaw, a Bugatti club member living in Wheaton, Ill., coordinated negotiations on this side of the Atlantic. Fortunately, Mr. Shaw, now 79 and the surviving member of the group, kept copies of the correspondence that bounced between buyer and seller.

In 1957, while grieving the death of his mother, Schlumpf considered his legacy. As a tribute to chère maman and to the locale where Ettore Bugatti built his cars, Schlumpf envisioned a monument to automobiles in general and Bugattis in particular. When his growing car collection outgrew the family's villa, an unused textile mill was bought in Mulhouse, along with a grand hotel to accommodate visitors.

To fill the museum-to-be, Schlumpf sent a worldwide solicitation to Bugatti owners, seeking cars for sale. In 1962, that net snared Shakespeare, who had already expressed interest in selling his collection for \$105,000. Conway informed Schlumpf, who responded: "Your communication surprised me as much as it gave me pleasure. We are going to make this deal."

Schlumpf demanded an inventory of serial numbers as well as photos of the cars and spare parts, adding, "The price is too much. I would settle on \$70,000 if the cars are impeccable. While I'd like to inspect the collection, I don't have the time. There are a lot of bandits in this field so we'll have to send someone in whom we have complete confidence."

Mr. Shaw was that someone. A month after the initial contact was made, Shakespeare invited Mr. Shaw for an inspection visit, warning that five of his Bugattis were apart for restoration. Shakespeare pointed out that the casino owner and car collector Bill Harrah was interested in his crown jewel — a Type 41 Royale limousine — but that he might accept a loss on his investment if all 30 Bugattis could be kept together in an appropriate new home.

Shakespeare's interest in sports cars escalated after he moved to Centralia, Ill., to oversee business interests. Beginning with a Porsche 356, he progressed to Ferraris and co-drove his 375MM with Luigi Chinetti in the 1954 Carrera Panamericana. Two years later, his purchase of a Bugatti Type 55 roadster led to a headline in The St. Louis Globe-Democrat, "Centralia Man Buys Biggest, Costliest, Rarest Car in the World." Shakespeare acquired the prize of his Bugatti cache, a Type 41 Royale Park Ward limousine, for a price reported to have been less than \$10,000 and drove it 250 miles home from the Chicago docks. Describing the drive to Mr. Shaw, Shakespeare noted a major shortcoming: its 5,000-pound weight proved a little tiresome to slow down and stop with the car's mechanical brakes.

Mr. Shaw's inspection report after visiting Shakespeare's collection in early 1963 was disheartening. "The storage garage is a converted foundry," he wrote. "Most of the cars are housed in a portion of the building with a dirt floor, broken windows, leaking roof and nesting birds. The better cars are parked in an adjoining heated shop with a concrete floor. Every car is in some state of disassembly and nothing has run for at least 18 months."

New York Times May 20, 2010

The news didn't dissuade Schlumpf. One month after receiving it, he raised his bid to \$85,000 and began making arrangements to pay for the cars. The hope was that the cars could be shipped by spring.

While preparing the Bugattis for departure, Shakespeare's mechanic discovered that the Royale's huge straight-8 engine block had cracked. Schlumpf's suggestion was to simply weld the iron casting.

A year of bickering ensued. Shakespeare threatened to break up his collection. Schlumpf accused him of "blackmail" and threatened to seek amends through 10 institutions, including "the American tribunal and court of justice." Finally the rancor subsided; buyer and seller came to terms. At 8:30 a.m. on March 30, 1964, a Southern Railway System master mechanic, R. R. Ray, guided Ettore Bugatti's electric-powered plant inspection car to an upper berth on one of the three open auto carriers parked on a rail siding adjacent to Shakespeare's Hoffman, Ill., shop. A photographer for The St. Louis Post-Dispatch, David Gulick, captured a wan smile on the seller's face when he gazed at the Royale's radiator mascot, a rearing elephant, one last time. After a rail journey to New Orleans and an ocean voyage to Le Havre, France, the 30 Bugattis were trucked to Mulhouse.

Schlumpf greeted their arrival armed with a whip to shoo away the curious, according to "The Schlumpf Obsession: Inside a Legendary Treasure House" by Denis Jenkinson and Peter Verstappen.

During the next dozen or so years, Schlumpf surreptitiously converted his businesses into a spectacular collection of cars restored by a team of artisans. When disgruntled mill workers seized the factory buildings in 1977, they discovered a remarkable site: 600 shiny automobiles, including 122 Bugattis, parked on white gravel, three restaurants — seating for 1,200 patrons in all — and 845 reproduction Venetian bridge lamps sparkling from the roof pillars.

The Schlumpf mills fell into receivership and the brothers retreated to Switzerland. Tried in absentia for tax issues, they were convicted of several crimes, assessed fines and sentenced to four years in prison, though neither served a day behind bars. Before he died in 1992, Fritz enjoyed only one more visit to his collection.

Shakespeare suffered an equally cruel fate. In 1975, he was found murdered in the basement of his Illinois home. Suspects in 10 states and three foreign countries were questioned, but no motive was discovered and the case remains unsolved.

At least most of the Shakespeare-Schlumpf Bugattis live on in peaceful repose at La Cité de l'Automobile, Musée National, Collection Schlumpf in Mulhouse. In 1981, the French courts liquidated all of Schlumpf holdings. The museum opened to the public the following year.

New York Times May 20, 2010

The messy story of Shakespeare's collection does not end neatly there.

In 2008, 62 cars from the original Schlumpf holdings in Mulhouse, known as the reserve collection, were bought by Peter Mullim, a California businessman who was assembling a museum of Art Deco cars and decorative art in Oxnard, Calif. About half of the cars were sold by Mr. Mullim and the remainder — including six Bugattis once owned by Shakespeare — were shipped to the United States.

Instead of restoring these cars to concours condition, the Mullim Automotive Museum will leave the patina accumulated during decades of neglect to preserve factory originality. The museum also owns the Type 22 Bugatti fished out of the Swiss lake; it will also remain in as-received condition. In a telephone interview last week, Mr. Mullim said that the museum was hoping to display the recently sold 1936 Type 57SC Atlantic beginning in August.

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*note: Mullin (in the original article) changed to Mullim, per thanks to Ed Levin.*