

Vintage Shop:

The Original COACHCRAFT

Bill moved the business out of Hollywood after experiencing the LA Riots of 1992—where he had to defend all the beautiful cars there with a shotgun.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY TOM STAHLER



IS IT POSSIBLE FOR A SHOP to have more provenance than the cars they service and restore? In the case of The Original Coachcraft (yes—that one) formerly known as Coachcraft Ltd. in Hollywood, just might be possible. Three surviving generations of the Stoessel family, of the famed coach builder, continue the craft and benefit their customers with practical and historical know-how.

Vintage Shop: **The Original Coachcraft**



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As one walks among the beautiful cars being serviced, fixed and restored in the 80-year-old legacy shop relocated from Hollywood into several indiscreet buildings on a side street in Fillmore, California, they would be inclined to drool, right into history. The cars present during our visit included a 1960 Austin-Healey Le Mans factory race car, a fully accessorized Porsche 356 Cabriolet, a Porsche 912, a 1940s Cadillac, a 1960 Porsche 1600 Roadster and Mike Hammer's 1954 Lincoln Capri two-door hardtop Carrera Panamericana race car—among many others. It is clear the company lends that provenance and experience to maintaining the classics and restoring the next ones.

The late-Rudolph Stoessel, a German immigrant, known to his friends as 'Rudy,' with business partner, famed 1920s Mercedes race driver Adolph Rosenberger, created custom cars, driven by the rich and powerful. They designed and produced the famed "Continental Kit" luggage racks of the late 1940s to 1950s, along with many other mid-century car accessories. They also manufactured exhaust systems for trucks—all from their legendary "Old Hollywood" location.

Coachcraft Ltd. began in 1940 on Melrose Avenue in "Tinseltown" when Rudy Stoessel, who had been a coach builder for both Pierce Arrow and Packard/Darrin, struck out on his own. He had recently sold manufacturing rights, which he had developed at Darrin for custom Packard cars. Stoessel had found ways to streamline manufacturing of body panels that proved to maintain the quality, while reducing the costs involved in production by producing the panels several at a time.

A family business through and through, a mid-summer, Saturday visit to Fillmore, in the valley north of Los Angeles, proved to be a trip in a time machine to a more gilded age of

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people and their cars. Three of the four generations of the Stoessels were present and hard at work. Bill moved the business out of Hollywood after experiencing the LA Riots of 1992—where he had to defend

all the beautiful cars there with a shotgun. The cars, however, nearly play second fiddle to the museum-like offices, where the history—and personalities—are well presented in photographs that are neatly displayed. Add to that, the stories told by second-generation proprietor, Bill Stoessel. In 2007, the Amelia Island Concours saw the significance and had a special display featuring numerous Coachcraft customs.

When Packard bought the manufacturing processes and equipment, they wanted Rudy Stoessel to move to Indiana to oversee the process. He refused to leave the left coast as he had a new house and a new child (Bill). With the proceeds of the sale and investment from Rosenberger—who had just settled with Porsche for his shares in the Stuttgart automaker, he opened the shop.

Adolph Rosenberger had been the first angel investor and salesman for Porsche Engineering when Porsche was just a room with drafting tables. Long before the 356s and 911s we love so much, Rosenberger helped Ferdinand Porsche get his first business off the ground. Despite his heroism on race tracks in the 1920s and 15% interest in the brand-new Porsche venture, Roenberger, as a Jew, had been imprisoned, then forced out of Germany by Hitler. He ultimately found himself essentially starting over in the United States. When he met Stoessel he put his settlement monies into the new Coachcraft business.

One of the most iconic rides they produced was the 1941 Mercury "Stengel." Banking heir Peter Stengel commissioned Coachcraft to build him a custom car to his specifications. Powering this unique custom beauty was a flathead V8 with Eddie Meyer high-compression heads topped off with two Stromberg 97 carburetors. The car sold in 2018 at RM Auctions' Petersen Museum sale for \$252,000.

There are an awful lot of fragile egos in today's specialty car world. Bill Stoessel, son of Rudy, and second generation proprietor, is not one of them. The feisty, big-hearted 80-year-old grew up working in his dad's shop and honing his craft. Coachcraft custom cars attracted a well-known customer base when Bill was a kid. He



is proud of the shop's history and has many great stories to tell. As Bill explains, "Around 5 or 6 p.m. most days, you could find a number of guys having cocktail hour at a makeshift bar, set up on my dad's workbench." These guys were the big stars of the day. It wasn't unusual to see Gary Cooper, Clark Gable, George Burns, James Darin, Clarence Dixon from Dixon Cadillac; Bob Estes of Lincoln-Mercury; and occasionally, even the infamous Mickey Cohen, who developed the Flamingo Hotel in Las Vegas with Bugsy Siegel.

"Dad built a bullet-proof car for Mickey. He was a very nice man. He treated me like the son he never had," recalls Bill Stoessel.

Even Henry Ford II was a customer of the shop. He was introduced to the shop by Gary Cooper find out the after he saw the 1941 "Stengel" Mercury — he wanted a custom built on a Lincoln Continental chassis. Other past and current customers of the shop include Bill "Hopalong Cassidy" Boyd, rocker Neil Young and other well-known car collectors.

The heavy lifting on the many interesting cars that come to Coachcraft, these days, is done by Bill's son, Anthony Stoessel, the third generation restorer who had learned the craft in a family way at the feet of his famed grandfather. "I had hung around the shop since I was five, playing with grandpa. My first summer working at the

shop was when I was 14. My first project, beyond sweeping the floors, was a Ferrari dash. I had to remove it and label everything, then reassemble it when the car had been painted."

Bill's older son, Rob, works for ABC studios doing transportation dispatch for the shows General Hospital, Grays Anatomy and Jimmy Kimmel Live. Rob says, "It's a family business so I am here to help." Noah, Rob's son is a senior in High School and is learning the business. He was under a car doing frame-work when we met. He has enlisted in the Marines upon graduation, and currently runs parts for a Hollywood-based NAPA store, but enjoys coming to the shop and learning.

The restorations are done from passion and skills passed down from generations before, However as Rob Stoessel says, "Its gratifying, however, Grandpa used to say there is nothing better than having the check in your hand and seeing the taillights go down the driveway."



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