



# COVER CAR STORY: BOSTON BLACKIE'S ADVENTURES

By Joan Huffman



*On page 18, Mike and Joan Huffman's 1935 Auburn during the 2024 Revival AAA Glidden Tour®. The speedster under the Spanish moss in central Florida.*

Many have asked how my husband Mike and I acquired our 1935 Auburn 851 Speedster. Around 2000, he started seriously looking for an Auburn shortly after getting our Cord on the road. He had been watching auctions and networking even before that. When Mike contacted his friend from California, he got some names of people that might be interested in selling theirs. He wrote to three elderly gentlemen and asked if they might be interested in selling. Two contacted Mike and replied the cars would remain in their family. One said, "Not now, but maybe later." Mike kept in contact with him and eventually got pictures of the car.

It was exactly what we wanted: a car in good condition that could be back on the road without a complete restoration. In 2002, we got permission to come and see the car. It was in Coloma, British Columbia, in a heated storage unit. The last time Vern, the seller, drove the Auburn, it had an engine knock. Mike and I told him that we would be taking our tow vehicle and car trailer when we came to see it because we did not want to make two trips. Vern had owned the car for 46 years and he

was reluctant to sell it, even though he could no longer do the repairs the car needed. He did not want the car to go to a broker who would jack the price up and resell the car. Vern wanted someone to drive and enjoy it. It took three days to negotiate with him and finally purchase the car. There were tears in Vern's eyes as we loaded the car.

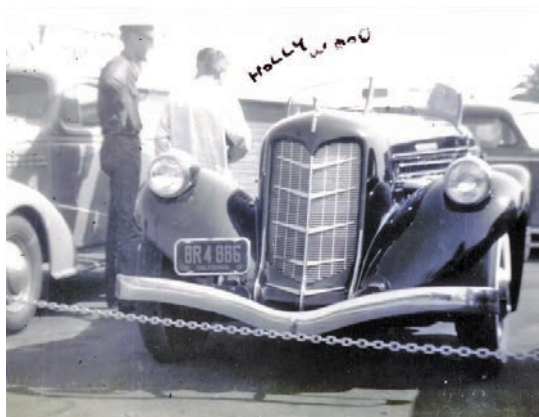
When Mike purchased the Auburn, the car had peeling paint on the hood, a noise in the engine, an old leather interior that was serviceable but not original, a red dash, and non-functioning gauges and clock. On the plus side, it had a nice rust-free chassis and body and came with a bunch of spare parts. The car had lived in California until 1956.

It was five years before Mike got it on the road. He totally rebuilt it mechanically. Mike also painted the hood, recored the radiator, rehung the doors, rebuilt all the accessories, including the water pump, generator, supercharger, differential, brakes, all wheel bearings, transmission, and instruments, and repainted the dash.



Our friend, Randy, who originally told us about this car, had a bunch of historic photos and letters from one of the previous owners. Copies were obtained and included a couple of pictures with *Boston Blackie* on the window. We researched the television show archives at the University of Wisconsin, and found it in the first episode from 1951. A previous owner made several modifications to the car for the television show. We were able to trace these changes because we have letters and photos from the fourth owner to the third owner of the restoration progress back to the original. There is also evidence of the changes made to the car. We also have photographic evidence it was at the first Auburn, Cord, Duesenberg Reunion in Auburn, Indiana, in 1956.

The Auburn's second owner was Asa Clark, the film editor of the *Boston Blackie* television shows. That's how the car got into the show. The production team must have felt they needed a bigger car because it was only used in the first episode.



*Boston Blackie's Hollywood days.*

2007 was the first year we had our Auburn on the road for tours. It was always going to be a tour car for us, not a show car. We had the speedster certified and judged at Auburn. It won the first primary there. We have driven it about 67,000 miles since we have owned it. It is Mike's preferred car to drive. I could not name all the places we have been with "Boston Blackie," but the most memorable was our trip across the country in 2011.

Mike and I began in April 2011 and went on an AACA tour in Florida, where a black snake slithered up our wheel during the tour of a carriage museum. From there, we started west and tried to avoid tornadoes and bad weather. Mike and I avoided highways and big cities as much as possible, but we hit snow in New Mexico and Yosemite. We joined a group of touring Durant automobiles in California and became an honorary Durant for a few days. After staying at a resort villa, Mike and I traveled up Highway 1 to Hurst Castle and Pebble Beach. One of the Durant owners invited us to their place, and I got my first sample of artichokes.

*This is the moment we discovered the snake in the Auburn!*



They showed us a field full of elk grazing like cattle. We drove through a sequoia tree and saw the redwoods in California and watched the seals at Seal Cove in Maine. We posted the whole trip on the Auburn, Cord, Duesenberg (ACD) website, and we had lots of followers who watched our progress. As I wrote about the day's adventures, it became a game for us to find pictures to post. This was our third cross-country trip with one of our collector cars. Sometimes I have to refer back to my photos to remember which trip and car we were driving. We traveled 9,700 miles in seven weeks on that 2011 tour.

If you have ever seen the 1935 Auburn Speedster, you know there is no trunk. So, how do you pack for such a trip? There is a golf door and a small amount of space

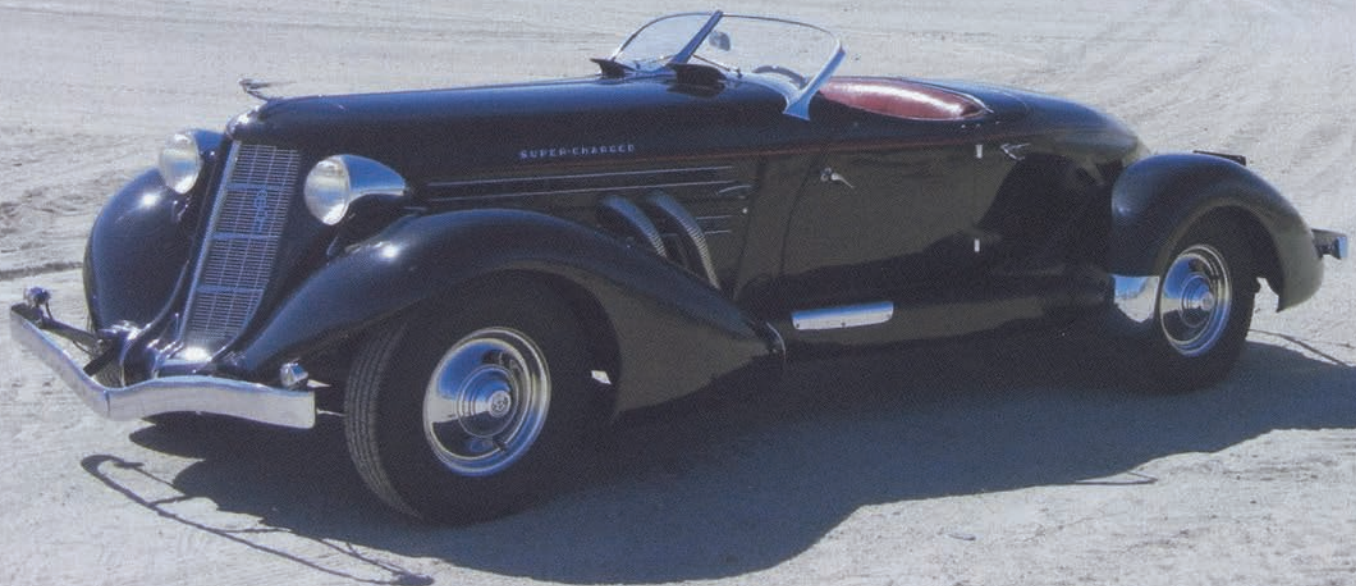


*It's top down in Auburn, Indiana.*

behind the seat back, which is easily removed. In that space, Mike usually has a couple of tool bags and a small box with spare parts he might need on the road. He changes oil regularly while on the road, so there is a pan, oil, car wash, and rags. The

top and spare tire also take up space. What's left is where we pack our clothing for the trip. I use several "Hagerty" bags, which I have equipped with zippers to pack my stuff. Mike has a small duffel bag. You can't push the luggage too far back because if it gets behind the tire, it's in neverland. You need to be able to layer your clothing and prepare for cold and hot weather. We wash clothes about every three or four days. Tide pods are easy to carry and don't take much room. There are usually laundry facilities in the hotels.

*At the Bonneville Salt Flats in Wendover, Utah.*





*Above left to right: The Auburn plays in Yosemite snow! Driving through the Chandelier Tree in Leggett, California.*

*Below: Mike and Joan with Boston Blackie on the first day of their 2011 coast-to-coast tour in Milford, Indiana. They have created two photo books chronicling their adventure. One of the books includes this picture.*





*Above: Craig Haberle navigated for Mike on the last day of the 2024 Revival AAA Glidden Tour® in Thurmont, Maryland.  
Below: Highway 1 on the California Coast.*

We prepare for most situations on the road. Most of the time Mike can fix problems without too much delay. But every once in a while, there is something serious. A few years ago we were coming back from a tour in Las Vegas, Nevada, via a southern route because it was late in the year. We arrived in Scottsdale, Arizona, and booked our hotel for the night. As we drove to a restaurant for supper, an axle broke. The tow truck hauled Boston Blackie back to our hotel, but they would not let us leave him there for a few days. There was a U-Haul rental place about a block away. Their trailers were not large enough for the speedster, but they were kind enough to let us park it there while we rented a car to drive home and get our tow vehicle and trailer. Mike and I drove the rental car home, loaded it in the trailer, drove back to Arizona, unloaded the rental car, picked up the Auburn, and drove home. Because of the lateness of the year, the weather had turned, and it was not a fun drive back.



Usually our trips are uneventful. For example, on one of our cross-country trips, all Mike had to do was replace one set of points. The top is difficult to put up and generally needs a crowd to supervise. At least when it rains or snows, we have had enough practice to get it up without too much of a soaking. That is if we stop before an outright downpour! With the side curtains on the Auburn it isn't easy to see out. The only time they go up is if the temperature gets below 40 degrees. Mike is tall, so most of the time, it's top down. We have replaced the top. Our interior seats had gone from a nice patina to ratty, so we replaced them a few years ago. The paint is mostly original from 1960. It has some chips but still looks good from a galloping horse 20 feet away. Mike and I hope to put many more miles on our Auburn.

*(Photos by Joan and Mike Huffman and Tracy Lesher)*

