

A Short History & Timeline

1940 COACHCRAFT "YANKEE DOODLE" ROADSTER

Compiled by the current owners

1937-1938 The University High School auto shop class in West Los Angeles, California undertakes an ambitious project. Starting with an Essex chassis, the platform for a short 91" wheelbase car is constructed. The center section of an Essex frame is lap-welded with the narrowed front and rear sections from a wrecked V-8 Ford. All running gear (suspension, steering, and drive-train) comes from the Ford donor car. Auto shop teachers Bill Forrester and Jim Cooke supervise.

1939 The owner of the completed project, a mature appearing nineteen year old Westwood resident named Seward Allen (University High School, Class of '38), commissions Coachcraft on Melrose Avenue in Hollywood to build a custom body for the car. This is apparently done without his parent's knowledge or consent while Seward is attending USC.



S. Allen, 1938

Strother MacMinn related to restorer Bob Mosier in the 1980's, after the car's rediscovery, that the design of this car was a "committee affair" with "no single father". Builder Rudy Stoessel of Coachcraft, his crew, MacMinn, Frank Hershey, and a group from Bohmann & Schwartz frequently met afterhours at a tavern near Coachcraft for libations when Hershey and MacMinn were in town from Detroit. The design of the car "was done on the back of cocktail napkins", according to MacMinn. Coachcraft did not employ a designated automobile designer; master craftsman Rudy Stoessel would experiment with these ideas on the car following these "get-togethers".



A nineteen year old Seward Allen being "fitted" in car during construction in 1939-1940. Note the floor pan well below the chassis rail.

At some point Seward's father became aware of the project. After threatening legal action, he came to see the car, and ended up agreeing to pay for its completion. The resulting vehicle was of power hammered, all steel construction. It featured a low "step-down" body design with the floor pan sitting between and below the body rails eight years before the Hudson Hornet. The car was also one of the earliest American cars to feature unibody construction as the body was welded to, and an integral part of, the chassis. The car was finished in a soft metallic navy blue with an orange pigskin interior. The original grill was a sectioned unit from the wrecked Ford. At the time, Coachcraft was located next to Salter's Machine Shop on Melrose. Early speed equipment found its way onto the car.

Stylistically, there were design touches such as the padded dash and cast bronze windshield that reflect Rudy Stoessel's earlier association with Howard "Dutch" Darrin. Mostly, however, it was a forward-looking design that looked like nothing else in 1940. What it *did* do is accurately predict in size, shape and stance the sports cars of the 1950's and early 60's such as the Jaguar XK120, Porsche 356, and MG and A.C. automobiles. It also foreshadowed Carroll Shelby's concept of dropping a performance Ford V-8 in a light sports car body by some twenty-two years. For this and other reasons, Strother MacMinn later called the 1940 Coachcraft Roadster the "First true American custom sports car". Cost of the body build and speed equipment: \$1500.00

War Years Seward Allen joins the U.S. Army Air Corp as a commissioned officer in November 1941, while finishing at USC (Allen made the Air Force his career, retiring as a Lt. Col in 1964, a veteran of WWII, Korea and Vietnam). Postwar, Allen ships the car to a series of overseas duty stations, and it is during this era that the jaunty car acquires the nickname "Yankee Doodle Roadster".

1948-1949 The roadster is returned to Coachcraft for re-paint following a tour in Alaska. Updates are made. The Ford grill is replaced with a Frank Kurtis-like unit, and the hood is modified to accommodate the change. The dashboard is redesigned and the instrument gauges replaced with a single instrument cluster from a late '40's Ford. The original color scheme is retained and the speed equipment is made current. The car is made available for sale. Whether these modifications were initiated by Seward Allen or were a "condition of purchase" is unknown. However, the work was done at Coachcraft and paid for by Seward Allen, per their archived financial records. Ted Johnson* buys the car and becomes the second documented owner. During Mr. Johnson's ownership the car is frequently referred to simply as the "Coachcraft Special".

1950-1951 The car makes its car show debut at the 1st Los Angeles Motorama held at the Shrine Auditorium in November 1950. It is pictured in *Motor Trend* in February 1951. It is featured on the cover of Motor Trend's *Custom Cars* magazine No. 101, and profiled on pages 74-75.

1952 The car appears at the 1952 Motorama held at the Pan Pacific Auditorium in Los Angeles, and is an award winner. The Porsche 356 debuts at the show as well.

1953 Featured in *Auto Age* magazine's article on custom cars, February 1953. Also, featured article in *Honk* magazine (renamed *Car Craft* magazine after eight issues), September 1953.

Right: Period photo of 1940 Coachcraft Roadster, award winner at the 1952 Motorama, shown next to 1952 Porsche 356 Cabriolet that debuted at the event.



1954 Ted Johnson places the car for sale on commission at Coachcraft Ltd., now at their Santa Monica Blvd location. The car sells within a few months and fades from sight. (Seward Allen's son Fred relates that his father unsuccessfully tried to buy the car back from someone in Palm Springs area in the 1960s.)

*Opposite page: photos by Burt Chalmers. This page, right: the Yankee Doodle in **Honk** magazine, as photographed by author Lester Nehamkin. Below: A line-up of Coachcraft cars in front of the shop in April 1954. The 1950's Mercury, Buicks and Cadillac are parked to best show off their custom-built continental kits and roof racks by Coachcraft. The '38 Mercedes 540K and Mercer Raceabout are examples of early restorations. The 1941 Mercury Coupe and the 1940 Coachcraft Roadster are both examples of Coachcraft custom bodies. Photo by B. Chalmers.*



1983 The car surfaces in Palm Springs upon the passing of its long time eccentric owner. He wills the Yankee Doodle (among other automobiles) to sports car enthusiasts Bob Hammel and Bill Binny. The car is intact, worn, but otherwise is in solid original condition. Strother MacMinn is contacted, and puts the new owners in contact with Rudi Stoessel and his son Bill.

1984 Bob Hammel (now the sole owner) sells the car to Bill Stoessel, son of the Yankee's builder, Rudy Stoessel. Bill relates the car was always his favorite of all the cars his father constructed. The car returns to Coachcraft Ltd. on Santa Monica Blvd., which is still operating as a family enterprise. Rudy is reportedly taken aback by the purchase price of the car. Later in 1984, Bill reluctantly sells the Yankee Doodle Roadster to Coachcraft Ltd. client Larry Harvey. Rudy Stoessel is reported by Bill to be greatly mollified by the profit Bill is able to turn.



Above: the car as rediscovered in 1983. Photo by B. Hammel.

2002-2004 After years as a "back-burner" project, the car is turned over to Bob Mosier for a complete restoration to concours condition. The car is kept in its 1948 configuration. It is in the same color scheme and finishes as built in 1940. It has been maintained in concours condition ever since.

2004 Featured car at the 2004 Thousand Oaks Car Classic, on the theme "California's Contribution to the Automobile". Cover and featured car in *Collectible Automobile* in an article on custom cars by Coachcraft, October 2004.

2006 Won a Design Showcase Award at the Art Center Car Classic in Pasadena.

2007 Won "Most Elegant" in class at the Amelia Island Concours d'Elegance.

2009 Shown at San Marino Grand Classic by special invitation (not judged). On display at the Automobile Driving Museum in El Segundo, CA as part of a special "Coachcraft" exhibition.

2011 Shown at the Palos Verdes Concours d'Elegance in the "California Design" category, winning 2nd in Class.

For more information, visit www.1940coachcraft.com

* Ted Johnson would state in period interviews that the car was designed and the body buck built in 1940. However, he claimed the car was never actually constructed until his ownership in 1948. This exists as an alternate history of the car. Nevertheless, construction photos, independent oral histories from the Allen and Stoessel families, S. MacMinn (via Bob Mosier) as well as period Coachcraft financial records seem to refute this version of events.

