



Less car salesman and more Indiana Jones, Chuck Crail tracks down the most exclusive collectible cars in the world — and brings them to market.

On the quiet side of a long-dead starlet's Hollywood home, a Bugatti is slowly rotting away. In Hollywood's golden age the car, like the starlet, was an absolute beauty. Now covered in garbage, a tree growing through its front seat, what's left of the amazing automobile looks as if it's trying to hide itself for shame.

Chuck Crail doesn't like the tree in the front seat, and he doesn't like the collapsing frame and withering body. Mostly he doesn't like the fact that the owner, a man who lives in the long-dead starlet's home, refuses to sell the car. The man is not a car salesman. Not like Chuck. Chuck Crail is that and more, and the Bugatti... Well, the Bugatti is just a damn shame.

"Technically I'm supposed to be a car dealer," says Crail from his home on California's Central

Coast. "My license says I'm a dealer of used cars, but that's somewhere between a Broadway play, car dealing and a treasure hunt."

Crail deals in expensive collectible cars. Specifically, he deals in impossible-to-find pre-WWII European cars: Rolls-Royce, Bentley, Alfa Romeo, Jaguar and the like. He likes cars that haven't been in the marketplace in decades, ones that are known to exist but which have essentially disappeared from view. To track them down (the "treasure hunt" part of his job) Crail uses skills learned over nearly 40 years on the job: searching old car club directories for leads, word-of-mouth networking, writing letters, and travelling to the ends of the earth. If you're looking to buy a collectible car — or if you want to make a little room in the garage and unload that cumbersome 1938 Lancia Astura — Charles Crail is your man.



THE MAN

"In 1953, my sister had a boyfriend and he was in the Korean War," says Crail. "I was about 12 or 13 years old. He went away to war and left a '53 mercury parked at our place. We lived on a hill, and the car was always parked facing downhill. My buddy and I would sneak out at night, crank the wheel, roll it down the street and drive all night. We'd drive the hell out of that car, spin it out... When the night was over, we'd drive down the hill, pull it up against the curb and lock it up. That was driving school."

The son of LIFE magazine photographer Schyler Crail, Chuck followed his dad into photography as a cameraman, graduating from the University of Southern California and going to work in the movies and then TV. He worked on various projects, including "The Sand Pebbles" and "Hogan's Heroes." Then, after filming a documentary on the Watts Riots for CBS, Crail and a friend found a UK journal advertising used Rolls-Royces and Bentleys for cheap. A trip to the UK wasn't far behind.

"We bought a '38 MG for \$100, a mint

"Mark VI Bentleys started at \$250, maybe \$1,000 for a 20/25 Rolls-Royce. I'd buy four cars and bring them back to California... Eventually I started selling them."

original 1933 Rolls-Royce for \$1,000 (plus \$200 to get it home) and when I got back I drove it down to Universal [Studios], where I was working. Sold the Rolls for \$4,000, made some money, and that was it."

Crail stuck with the camera job, working on "CBS Reports," the precursor to "60 Minutes." Eventually, though, he longed to move into movie production. You need money to buy scripts, he'd had good luck with the Rolls-Royce, and so back to England it was — again and again.

"I'd go to England, spend about three weeks," he remembers. "Live on \$15 per day,

look at maybe 30 cars and take the best I could get... Mark VI Bentleys started at \$250, maybe \$1,000 for a 20/25 Rolls-Royce. I'd buy four cars and bring them back to California. Wash them, clean them, polish them, then drive them to the studios and do my studio work during the week. Eventually, I started selling them."

Word got around. First studio execs and actors turned to Crail for luxury cars. Then it was Diana Ross, Nelson Rockefeller, Ringo Starr and more. In 1972, Crail stopped the late King Faisal in front of the Saudi embassy in London and made a successful offer on the King's Phantom V, selling it moments later to a dealer in St. Louis. Likewise, he once purchased a 1932 Phantom II that was kept in the owner's living room. Part of the price included replacing the wall that had to be torn down to get it out.

By 1975 it was official: Crail was a car salesman — but not just any car salesman. In September of that year, People magazine

Crail in a 1953 Ferrari Berlinetta; the bright face of a 1926 Rolls-Royce Phantom I; Charles Robinson Sykes' beautiful "Spirit of Ecstasy" hood ornament



Grooming kit, cocktail set, custom luggage and more; it didn't get better than this Rolls-Royce in 1926

did an article on Crail proclaiming him, "the world's most exclusive used car salesman, operating by appointment only out of a small office above Hollywood's Sunset Strip."

Today, Crail's office is in Montecito and the car detective work has reached expert level, but the job essentially remains the same. Recent sales include a 1926 Rolls Royce Phantom I Grand Luxe Torpedo Phaeton 4-door; a 1929 Bentley 4½ Litre Thrubb & Maberly Four-Seat Tourer; a 1930 Rolls-Royce Phantom I Riviera Towncar; and a 1953 Ferrari 250MM Berlinetta, the latter going for a cool \$2.4 million. All of them were in great condition, all of them difficult finds.

THE MARKET

The "Broadway" part of Crail's job involves good old fashioned marketing, necessary because, despite the fact that it trades a limited commodity, the collectible car market is as volatile as the stock market, even among top marques. Take, for example, the 1970 Daytona Ferrari. Brand new, Crail says the car would have set you back about \$8,000. By 1980, he says the value had dropped to \$5,000 or so. Shortly thereafter, something shifted.

"I had one with 6,000 miles on it in 1984," says Crail. "I sold it to a real estate developer for \$103,000, and he sold it in 1989 for \$1 million. The guy who bought it for a million sold it in 1993 for \$470,000."

Not exactly stable. Fluctuations in price are determined by a number of factors. Among them, market awareness of a particular vehicle (the BMW 507 was all but forgotten

"If they're 40 now and they have \$1 billion today, when they're 70 they don't want one billion U.S. dollars. These guys want stuff."



Crail at home on California's Central Coast

until Crail revived the market after the late '90s); demand, which can be based on ego, whim, nostalgia or just about anything; and, of course, supply.

THE SELLERS

Crail recently made an offer of \$10 million on a rare Alfa 2.9 roadster. The owner doesn't want to sell. Or maybe he does. As Crail says, the \$10 million isn't really the point for this owner.

"It would be like if you went out gambling and you had \$400 on the table. If you come home with \$600, you're not going out on the town over it. And if you come home with \$200 you're not going to go into a funk. There are people who can go to Vegas and \$10 million in a night isn't going to tip their canoe one way or the other. This \$10 million car... Today, you can't have one. It's always been one of the quintessential 'Oh my God I can't believe this!' cars. There's only maybe seven in the whole world. The owners... You can name them all. This one guy probably makes \$1 million a minute, so it doesn't mean anything."

So why would this person potentially sell his car? That's the question Crail has to answer, and just part of the poker game he plays wrestling impossible-to-get cars back into the marketplace.

THE BUYERS

When Crail makes a \$10 million offer on a car, you can bet he's already lined up a buyer. Besides rock stars, vice presidents and actors, Crail says the vast majority of his clients are serious investors, many of them in real estate. That said, "there's a new phenomenon in the

last five years, and that is 'new cash money.' For example, a Russian guy who's involved in a pipeline or something. Suddenly he's got a billion dollars and he's nervous about Russia



It's the little things that count: Detail of a diver carved on a mother of pearl Rolls-Royce running light



and he wants money. There are Russians right now going to Germany and buying collectibles, paintings, cars, furniture... If they're 40 now and they have \$1 billion today, when they're 70 they don't want one billion U.S. dollars because they believe dollars are going to shrink. These guys want stuff."

THE EXPERIENCE

So what do collectors do with their expensive autos after they've bought them?

"For the first 25 or 30 years [of my career], it was the guy that put it in the glass case, took it to the Concours d'Elegance and had it sitting out on the lawn," says Crail. "But there's a new kind of collector now."

More and more, classic car rallies and tours tied in with luxury hotel stays and five-star meals allow collectors to actually drive their expensive rides. "You'll see people in million-dollar cars, a guy in a Testa Rossa that costs \$15 million, then you'll see guys in there with an E-type Jaguar or an XK120, driving it, partying," says Crail. "There's the Mille Mille, which is a recreation of the Mille Mille race, the Silver Ghost tours, the Colorado Grand Car Rally... I would say now there are probably as many people driving and rallying cars on tours as there are people who just show."

Of course, not everyone with a classic

"I would say now there are probably as many people driving and rallying [collectible] cars on tours as there are people who just show."

collectible wants to drive it. Some owners don't even want to show it — or even see it. For example, there's a Bugatti rotting away under a tree in Hollywood. Unlike the long-dead Starlet who used to own it, the car could be resurrected, restored, collected and even driven. To that end, Chuck Crail would very much like to buy it. And then one day, when it is again a thing of beauty, he'd like to sell it to you ■

See what Chuck Crail has to offer and find out more about the man and his cars at www.charlescraill.com