

BY MATTHEW LITWIN • PHOTOGRAPHY BY LUKE MUNNELL • RESTORATION PHOTOS COURTESY KEN DENNISON

Multi-Cylinder Majesty



This rare 1940 Cadillac V-16 Model 9033 Imperial Sedan is transformed from a neglected desert dweller into a graceful show winner

It goes without saying that a multitude of project vehicles, from the mundane to the uber-rare, can materialize through a variety of sources, sometimes unexpectedly. As a case study, we present the 1940 Cadillac V-16 Model 9033 Imperial Sedan pictured here, which would have been unknown to Scottsdale, Arizona, resident Ken Dennison had he not attended a Classic Car Club of America chapter meeting in June 2011.

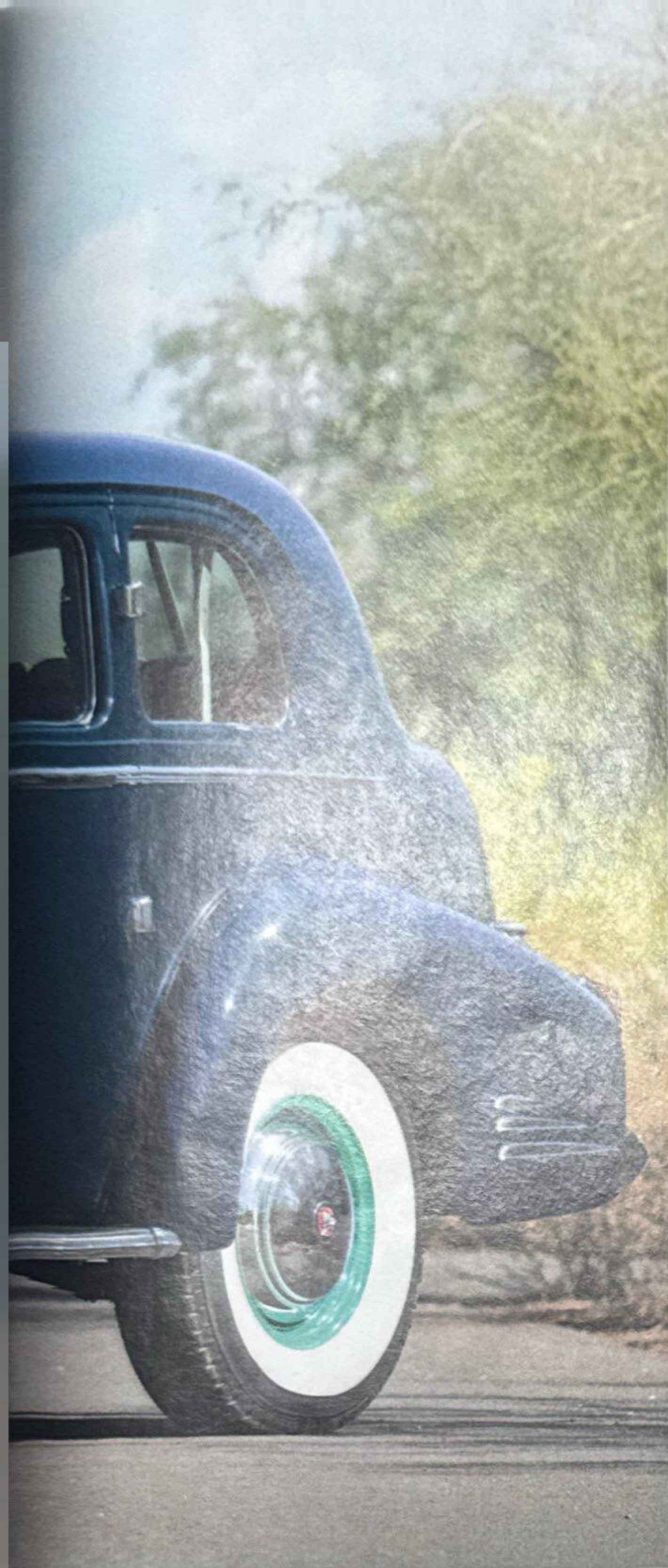
"I was sitting next to a fellow member, John Confer, and he happened to mention that he owned a V-16 Cadillac that he had intended to restore, but decided against it

and was instead selling it. I had recently completed the restoration of my 1935 Auburn 851 SC Cabriolet—and a Ford Model A pickup prior to that—and I found the idea of restoring a V-16 interesting, so I planned to go see the car at his place in Tucson and bring my nephew along...and a camera so that I could really study what he was offering later," Ken says.

What Ken found waiting for him was a rare find indeed: a 1940 Cadillac V-16 Model 9033 Imperial Sedan that John had purchased from a Tucson-based used car salesman on April 4, 1953. As it sat under John's carport, the front end

of the car had been disassembled—both front fenders, the grille, and radiator were stowed inside the cabin, along with both running boards, spare tire covers, and rear fenders. The rest of the car was essentially complete, save for the driver's door panel, which had gone missing.

"The story I got from John was that someone from 'back east' had been on the way to California when this Cadillac overheated, so he traded it for another car and continued. Among the paperwork John had on hand was a copy of an old title that indicated the Cadillac had once been registered in Mississippi, so that



Restoration Profile



The business of driving the V-16 Imperial sedan was done in Cadillac's traditional luxurious cabin, featuring elegant simulated woodgrain trim and sophisticated instrumentation, though the split front seats were upholstered in durable leather.



Cadillac's V-16 engine was a 135-degree L-head design that boasted 431 cubic inches of displacement and 185 hp. The overall design was both shorter and 250 pounds lighter than the division's previous 90-degree V-16. Each bank of eight cylinders required its own Carter carburetor and distributor.

story seemed feasible. Regardless, John drove the wheels off it, everything from using it as a commuter to taking his kids to school. "There were 54,551 miles on the odometer when I decided to buy it from him on July 9," Ken says.

His first order of business was to legally transfer the V-16 sedan to his name, but it almost never happened. According to Ken, when he presented paperwork to officials at the Department of Motor Vehicles, he was told to have a seat because it would take some time. When two police officers appeared, it was obvious something was wrong. "The two officers approached me and said that the car had been reported as stolen. I said, 'It couldn't have been stolen since John had owned it 58 years.' They went out and checked the serial number on the car, came back in and had a discussion, and kept looking over at me. Meanwhile, I couldn't get ahold of John, and was

beginning to wonder if I just lost my money and the car. Finally, the older officer asked me what kind of car it was. Lo and behold, the stolen car was a different make and, oddly enough, had the same serial number. It made no sense, but in the end, I was able to register the Cadillac in my name."

That serial number, and the Cadillac's data plate, would prove to be invaluable just before the restoration began. Ken's research reaffirmed how rare his new project was. Just 20 Model 9033 Imperial Sedans were built in 1940, and the serial number, 5320009, meant his was the ninth V-16 built during the model year. Further research revealed that only five of the 20 Imperial Sedans are known to exist.

"When I had my Auburn restored, a lot of it was done at a friend's shop. It took a while to accomplish, and I really didn't want to wait that long again, so I decided that I would do most of it in my

garage. I dismantled the Cadillac down to the frame, and I must have taken 1,000 or more pictures that documented exactly how everything came apart so that I could put it back together later.

"There were only two areas of real concern: One of the front door posts had a bit of rot in the metal that would require some fabrication work, and it looked like someone had taken a sledgehammer to the trunk lid. I'm not proficient in bodywork, so I sent the shell and all the removed panels to the same shop that did the Auburn. They do nice work, and I thought if all they had to focus on was the body, then I could work on other components simultaneously," Ken says.

With the body in capable hands, Ken sent the engine and transmission to reputable area experts for thorough examinations. While the three-speed manual transmission was given a clean bill of health and was later detailed, the



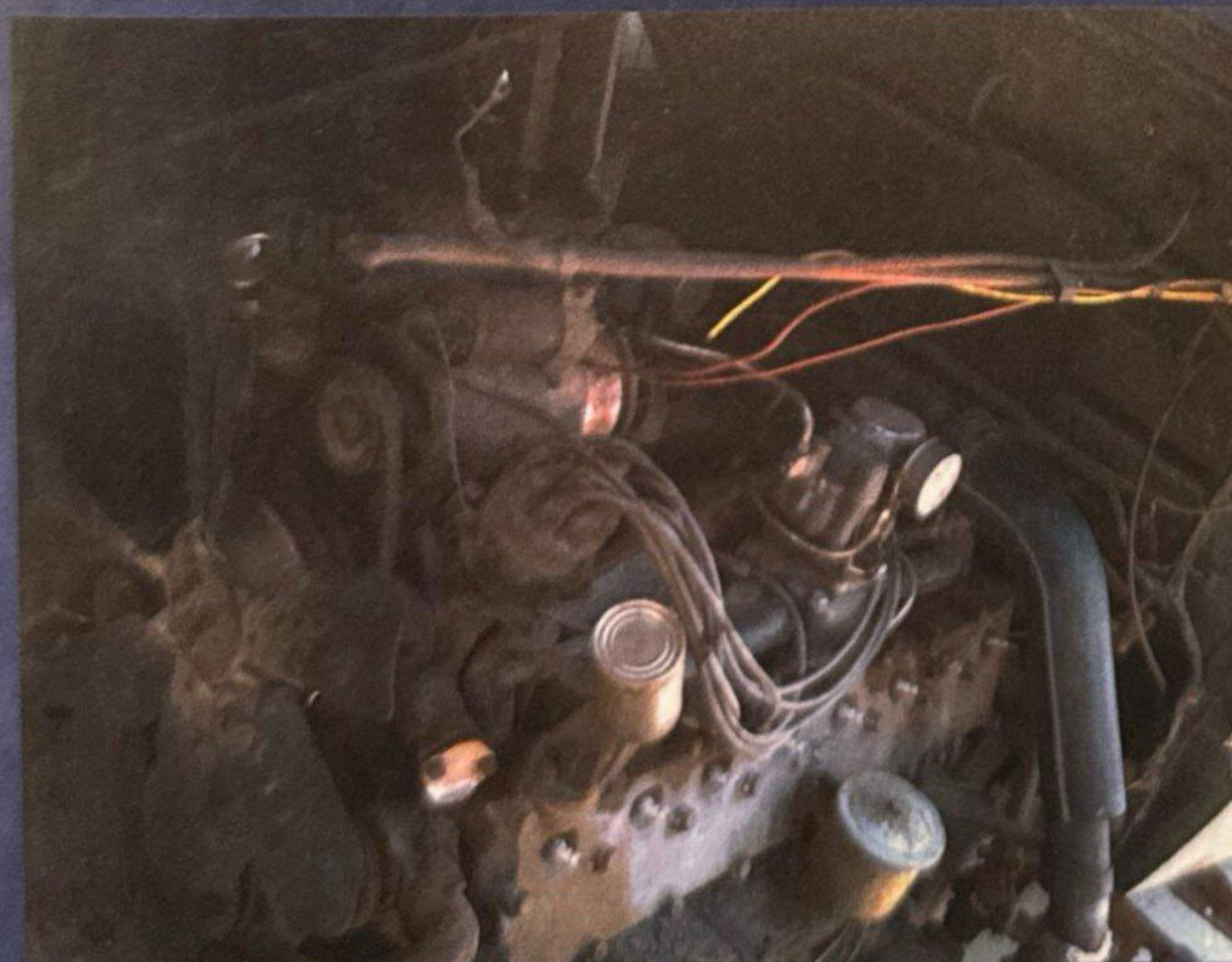
With the help of friends and fellow Classic Car Club of America members, Ken was able to separate the Cadillac's body from the chassis.



Ken's first view of the 1940 Cadillac V-16 Imperial sedan as seen in the two images above. It was parked under a Tucson, Arizona, carport and partially disassembled, its paint badly sunbaked and covered in desert dust.



During disassembly, Ken uncovered a factory ink stamping, "40-9033," that further confirmed the Cadillac as being a 1940 model 9033.



The legendary V-16 engine appeared as though it had not run in years. Note that the spark plug wires are not connected to the plugs and tin foil prevents contaminants from entering the carburetors.



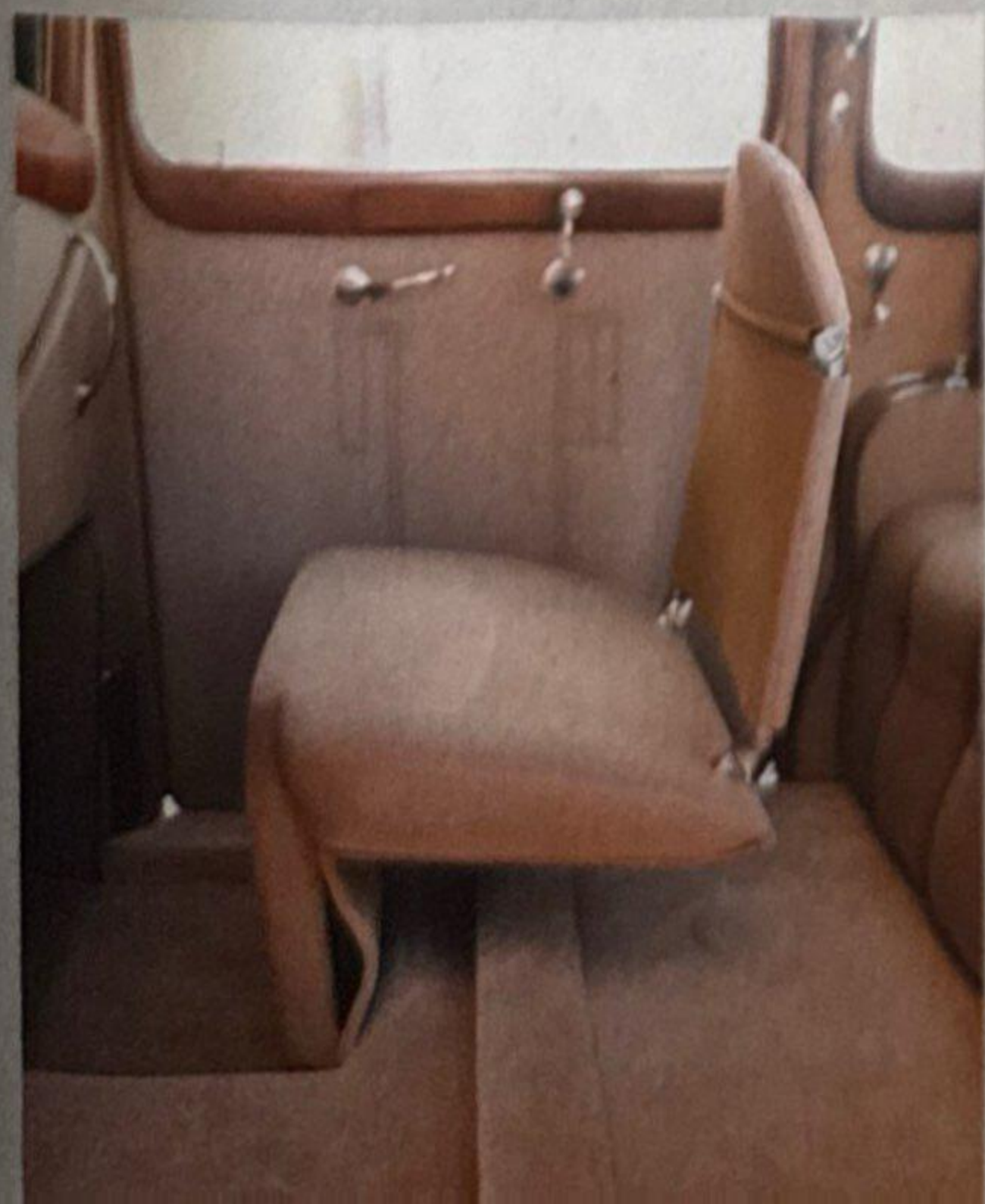
Afterwards, the chassis was rolled into Ken's garage, where he could begin its total disassembly. Here, the three-speed manual transmission has just been separated from the V-16 engine.

engine was all but clogged with decades of sludge. Fortunately, no damage was found; the engine was merely cleaned, reassembled, and later detailed. Simultaneously, the chassis, most of the suspension system, and differential were media blasted and powdercoated.

"I put the chassis back together, complete with the engine and transmission, and delivered the assembly to the shop, where they lowered it onto the frame for me using their lift. The body tag easily identified the paint color that the factory applied, Cavern Green, which looks black until you get it into the sunlight. The body prep below the paint is critical. You'd never know they did any fabrication work on the door pillar, or that the staff cut the X-brace off the backside of the decklid to bang out the dents, then welded the brace back into place. It saved me the effort of finding a new trunk lid."

The wheels were a different story. "I suspect John painted them black years ago, because when I removed them at the start of the restoration, I found the original green paint on the backside. I cleaned and polished the best one so that it could be color matched. To this day I'm not sure what the color's name is, but I find it striking," Ken says.

Back in the home garage, Ken rerouted a new wiring harness obtained from Rhode Island Wiring, while new front leather and rear fabric upholstery was delivered from multiple sources. "I found a gentleman who had done upholstery work prior but retired due to health issues. He was keen to do the job for me, but with



the understanding he had to take his time. He came over for four hours, three days a week, to stitch everything together and reinstall it with me," Ken says.

While the restoration seemed to be drama-free, there were a few hiccups, the first being hubcap seals. According to Ken, "There's supposed to be a rubber seal around the edge of each and it wasn't being reproduced. Even Steele Rubber Products didn't make it. I had enough pieces of the originals that allowed me to make a pattern and Steele put me in touch with a guy in California that could make a die. It cost \$110 for the die alone, so I spread word among the 1937-'40 Cadillac community that I was having a batch made, and if we all chipped in it would help defer the cost to all of us. Each seal ended up being about 4 feet long per wheel. Not long after we received our orders, someone broke into his shop, stole his dies, and put him out of business."

Another issue was discovered when Ken started the Cadillac's V-16 for the first time. "It felt like it wasn't running right. At idle it would run nicely, but when I manipulated the throttle linkage the engine almost died. It would hesitate and not operate smoothly at a higher rpm. I kept pulling the distributors and having them checked, and then recheck the dwell, separation, and timing. There are two timing marks on the harmonic balancer, and everything needs to be just right—once you get the hang of it, it's easy to set everything and keep the engine running right, but I was completely stumped.

"Out of desperation, I found some-



Separating the driver from passengers is a single-pane roll-up window that provided superior conversation privacy.

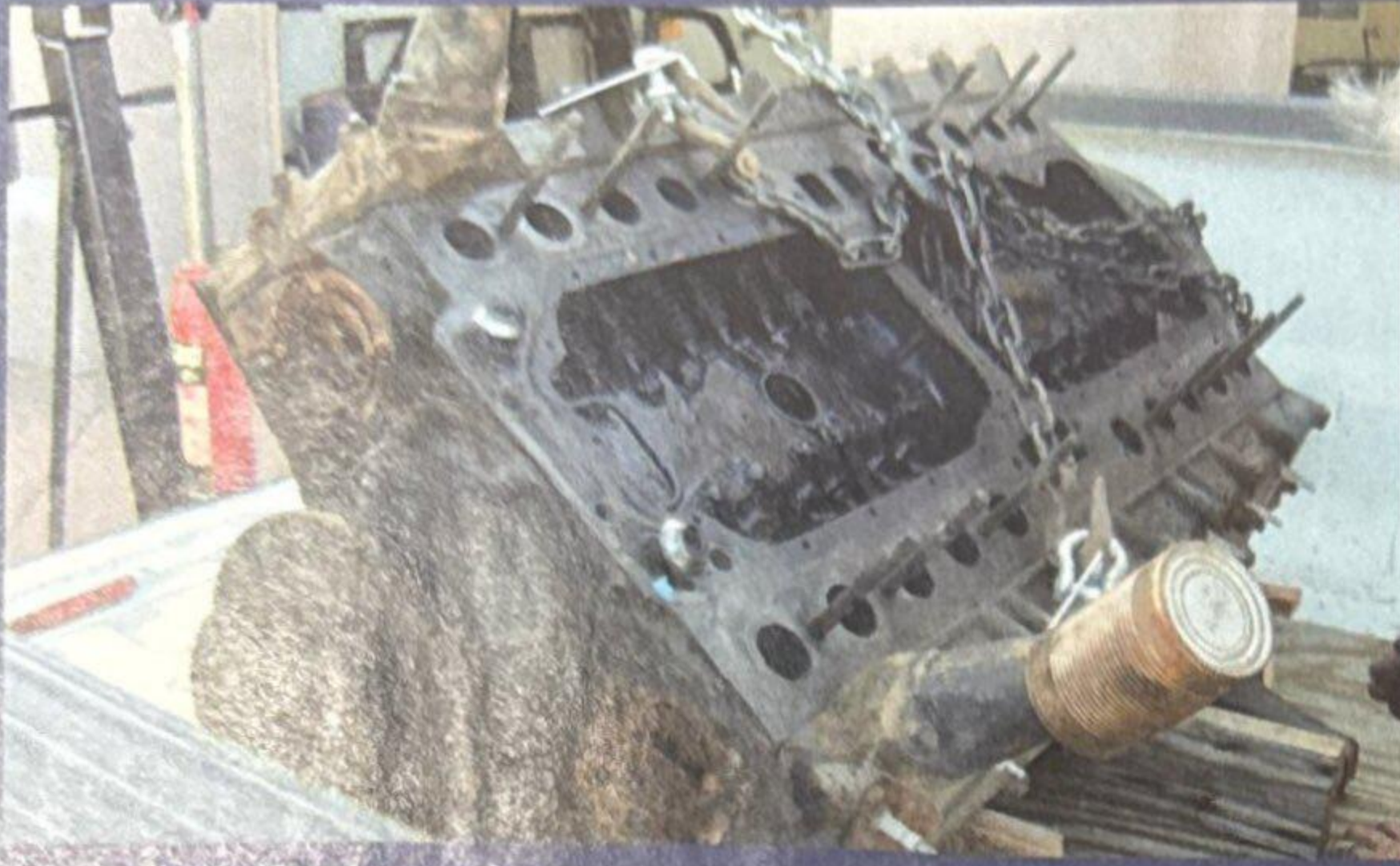
one who had an old Sun machine. Come to find out, I had six brand-new spark plug wires that had somehow separated when I pulled them through the tubes that went down from the distributors, which keeps the plug wires off the engine. It's a tight fit for eight wires in each tube. The Sun machine told me exactly which spark plug wires weren't conducting electricity properly. That V-16 ran like a banshee when I replaced the bad wires. It purrs like it should. When working on an engine, you usually work on it at idle, not at high speed, so the Sun machine was invaluable."

Those small issues did little to hinder what would prove to be a six-year restoration. Looking back at the process, Ken is satisfied with the outcome.

"I wasn't in a rush. There were times I'd be working on something, and I'd be in that garage until my wife dragged me out. Other times I'd go in, just look, sit, and just think. It helped me keep the Cadillac as factory original as possible. I think I've probably done more than most people, because even the etchings on the windows were redone using patterns



Cadillac's V-16 Imperial Sedan is listed as a seven-passenger vehicle, made possible through the provision of two collapsible jump seats, which themselves are finished as elegantly as the rest of the rear passenger compartment.



Due to its heft, the engine was removed from the chassis in pieces. Doing so exposed a tremendous amount of sludge. According to Ken, "It was horrendous, but thankfully none of the internal components were damaged. The engine was merely cleaned and reassembled."



With the restored body shell secured to the chassis, further reassembly can begin in earnest. Note that the front seat frame has been fitted, as have the running boards.



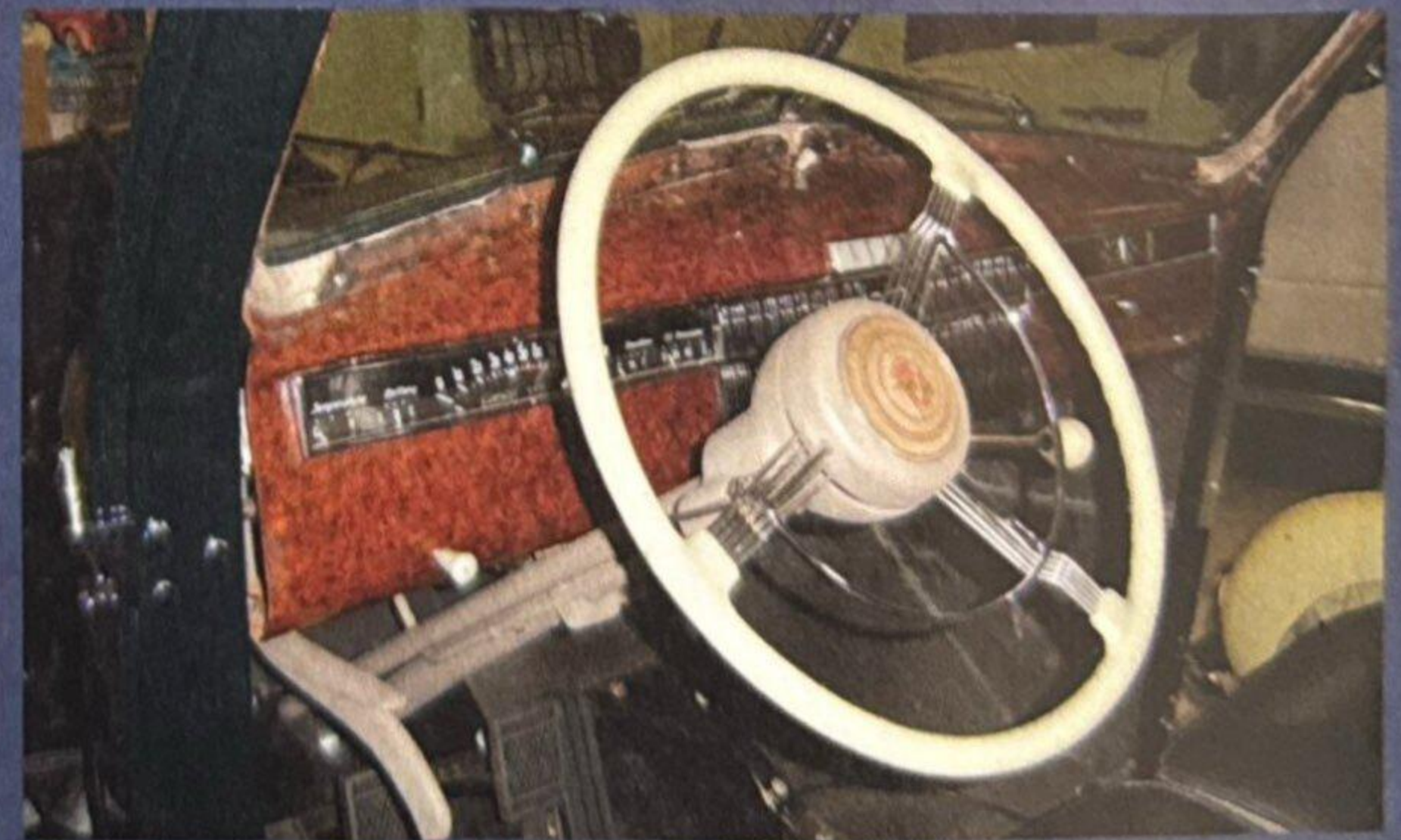
Meanwhile, minimal fabrication work that the body required was already completed and the shell was being prepared for primer and paint stages.



The Cadillac's V-16 engine is nearly ready to be started for the first time. Note tape tabs that kept track of plug wires, and the L-shaped chrome tube in which the plug wires are routed. Doing so inadvertently caused six wires to separate (internally), which would prevent the engine from functioning properly.



By November 2011, the frame had already been painted and much of the restored suspension system had been installed. A keen eye will spot the transmission held in place temporarily.



By April 2013, much of the driver's portion of the cabin has been restored, including the brilliant steering wheel, elegant woodgrain instrument panel, and leather front seats.



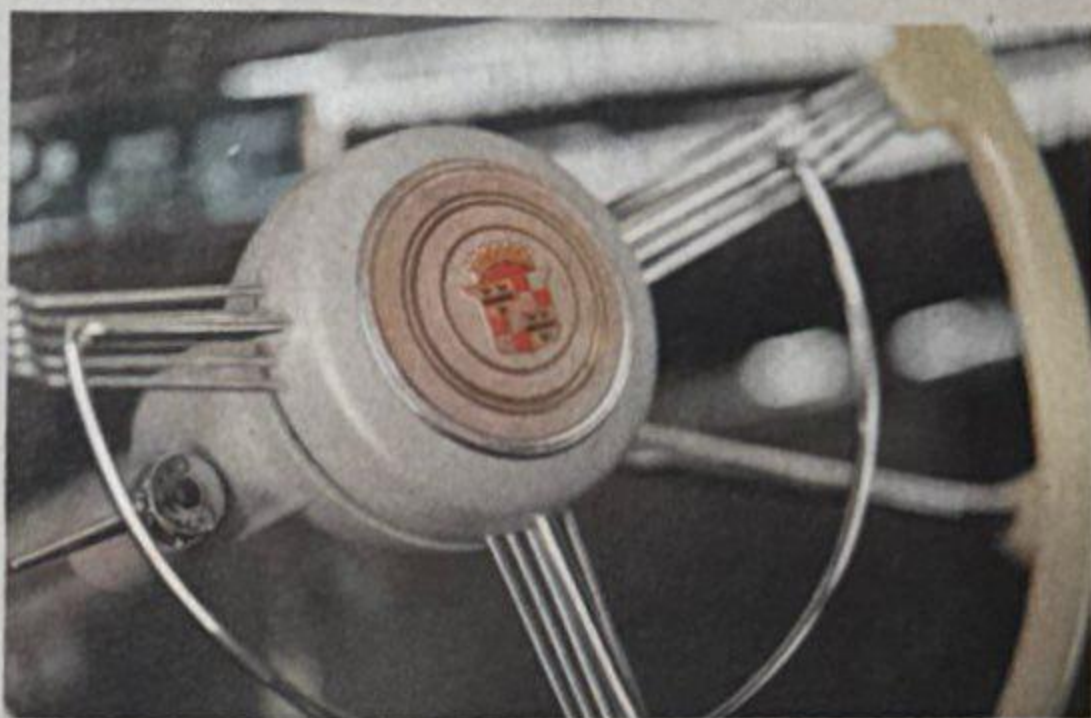
from the originals. The cloisonné centers on the hubcaps match what the factory did, and all 50 pieces of the grille were rechromed individually. When everything was done, I ended up with one big washer left over: I have no idea where it goes, and I probably never will. Usually, you need more of this and more of that, so I think I did pretty good.

"When the car was finished, I drove it to the CCCA Grand Classic that was here in Scottsdale, and it was awarded first place primary. I was pretty happy with that."

A key word spoken by Ken was "drove," and driving the Cadillac is something that he does regularly since, including to and from the 2023 Arizona Concours where we first met him. Driving

also allows Ken to express a perspective from the behind the wheel and pinpoint a needed mechanical improvement.

"It runs well and drives like a boat. I swear if you were to drive over the Grand Canyon you wouldn't even feel a bump. When we were going to the Grand Classic, we had my wife and my nephew's wife in the rear cabin, and with the divider rolled up I couldn't hear them, they couldn't hear me, and they couldn't hear anything from the outside—no road noise, or traffic, or anything. Recently, I felt like it was getting harder to steer. The car weighs nearly 5,500 pounds after all. So, I just had the steering box rebuilt with all new needle bearings and seals, and I expect to see a nice improvement." 🚗



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