

# RAYMOND DIETRICH AMERICAN DESIGNER OF CLASSIC CARS

By David H. Ross

Dietrich and LeBaron are names which are legendary in the automotive world. Although the companies graced by those names are long defunct, the man who founded one and co-founded the other—who created the legend—is very much alive and resident in Albuquerque, New Mexico, today. In the twenties and thirties his name was practically unknown except to connoisseurs of fine cars. Raymond Dietrich was perhaps the foremost designer, and Dietrich Incorporated one of the most outstanding coachbuilders, of what are now called “classic cars.” Today, many who collect automobiles, as others collect stamps, books or antiques, eagerly seek a car with a body designed by Dietrich. There is no mistaking a car of his design—its flowing, uncluttered lines give it an air of elegant simplicity achieved by few others.

Raymond Dietrich, born in Brooklyn in 1894, left public school at the age of twelve. His father apprenticed him as a vignette engraver with the Heilman Lithographing Company, a subsidiary of the American Bank Note Company. There he worked 60 hours a week for four years at three dollars a week. But engraving proved to be too much of an eyestrain so, in 1910, he went to work for the David H. Schmidt Company in New York City, manufacturers of piano hammers. While there, to supplement his wages and to pay for night classes in art school, he played semi-pro baseball as a pitcher. He received \$50 a game if he lost and \$100 if he won.

By 1910, automobiles were beginning to appear on the streets in numbers—and to fire Raymond’s imagination. The urge, the compulsion to design finally led him, in 1913, to apply for work at Brewster and Company, one of the most prestigious coachbuilders in America. He was hired at \$9 a week as an apprentice body designer. William Brewster, president of the firm, took an interest in Raymond and sponsored his further education at the Andrew Jackson Technical School in Manhattan. There he studied sheet metal development and body construction, graduating as a body draftsman and engineer. Concurrently, he took special courses in geometry and calculus at the Cooper Union Institute.

Upon graduation from the technical school in 1917, Raymond joined the engineering department of the Chevrolet Motor Company in New York. As a designer and assistant body engineer, he originated a perspective drawing/assembly system to teach untrained personnel. A year later came a request

from William Brewster to return to Brewster and Company and assist in the development of a new car body program. When, after a lengthy discussion, Brewster finally raised his offer of a suitable salary to \$75 a week, Raymond accepted. It was there Dietrich became friendly with another young designer, Thomas L. Hibbard.

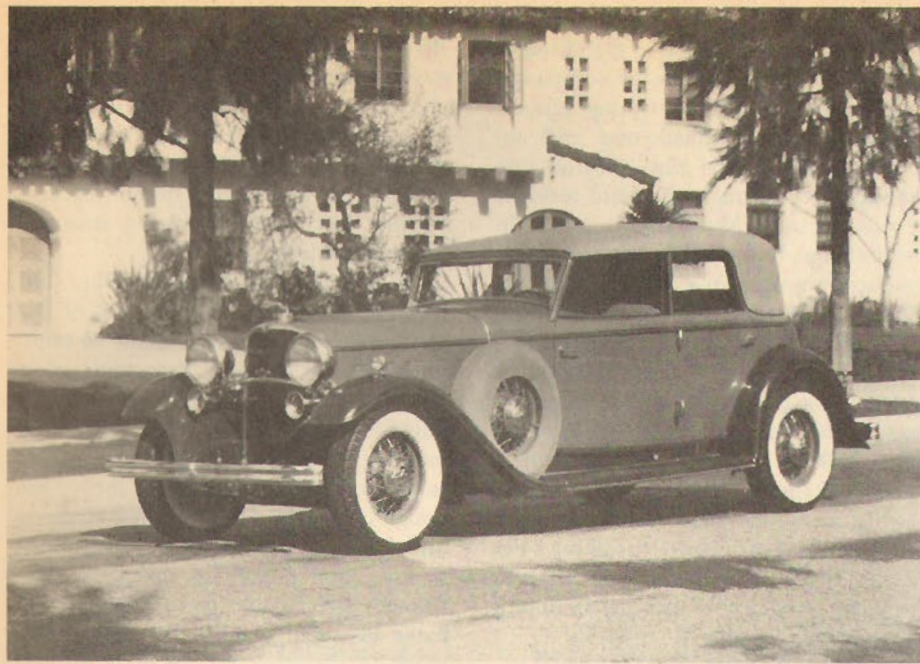
The two worked closely together, but they were not content because of the restraints imposed upon them to tailor their designs to the “Brewster” look. Both men were imaginative, both had a flair for line and proportion, both were bursting with creative talent and wanted an opportunity to express their own design concepts. They planned on going into business for themselves and began to save their money to that end. They thought they would be in a position to make such a move in 1921 or 1922. But in 1920, Mr. Brewster got wind of their plans. He was furious. He called them into his office—when they walked out, Raymond Dietrich and Tom Hibbard were no longer employed by Brewster and Company.

Their first concern, in starting out for themselves, was to find a suitable name for their enterprise... a name which would convey a feeling of dignity and prestige, one that was euphonious and would be easily remembered. They finally chose to establish the name *LeBaron Carrossiers*. They also needed a smart address and, though they could scarcely afford it, they were fortunate to obtain space at No. 2 Columbus Circle in New York.

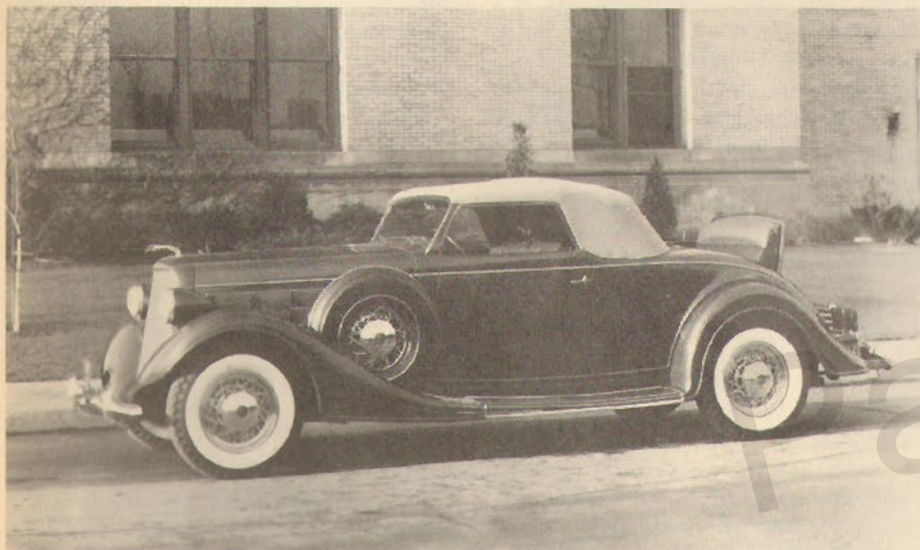
Weeks of work went by, moving partitions, painting, eating bologna sandwiches, sweating and borrowing from Peter to pay Paul. They were trying to sell their services as designers, acting for their customers as an architect acts for his clients. But the idea was new to the custom coachcraft trade, and they made little progress. It was discouraging. Yet there was a need for the type of service they offered. Of the multitude of custom coachbuilders in the country at that time, only a few employed designers. Body engineers, yes. But designers, no.

Finally they were approached by a Mr. Parvis who represented the Packard factory branch in New York. He had heard of them, and of the type of service they offered, through his contacts at Brewster and Company. Parvis commissioned them to develop a design and full-size working drawings for a seven-passenger limousine body that was to be built by Fleetwood in Pennsylvania. Parvis wanted a design created

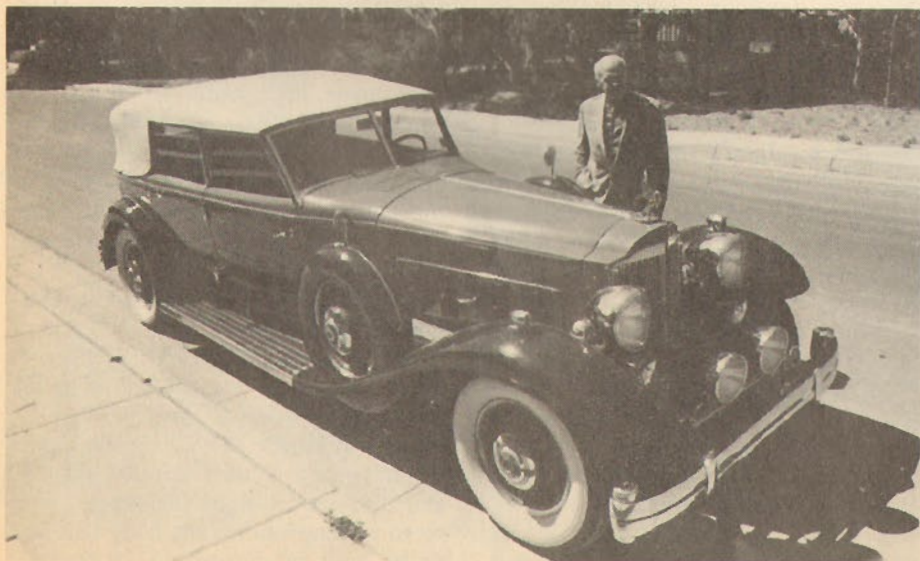




*Dietrich sport berline body on 1931 Lincoln.*



*Convertible roadster with rumble seat on 1935 Lincoln.*



*Dietrich with the Jolson Packard.*

# DIETRICH

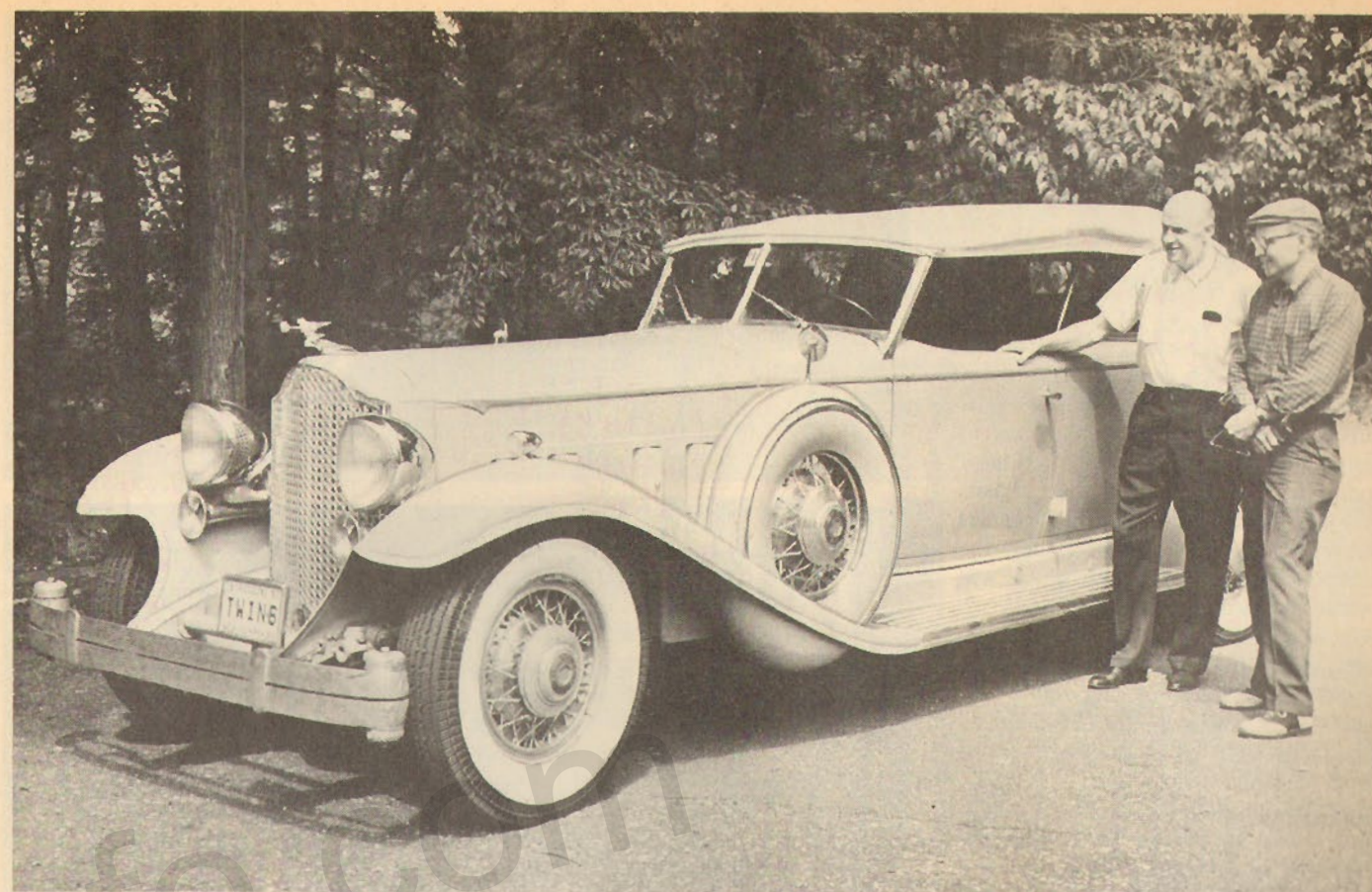
and working drafts made which would remain the property of this Packard branch, and from which a body could be built at any time by any of the custom coachbuilders. He paid \$50 for the design and \$400 for the working drawings.

Now they had something more than just an idea to sell, and they were successful in selling original designs to agencies of imported European cars—designs which the agencies could show as suggestions to their customers. These designs, in the form of side elevations of the car scaled one inch to the foot, as was standard practice in the trade, were sold for a fixed fee of \$25. When the customer selected a design, the agency and the customer would commission a coachbuilder to engineer and build the body. Often, an agency would buy a design and have the body built and mounted on the chassis for showroom display and sale.

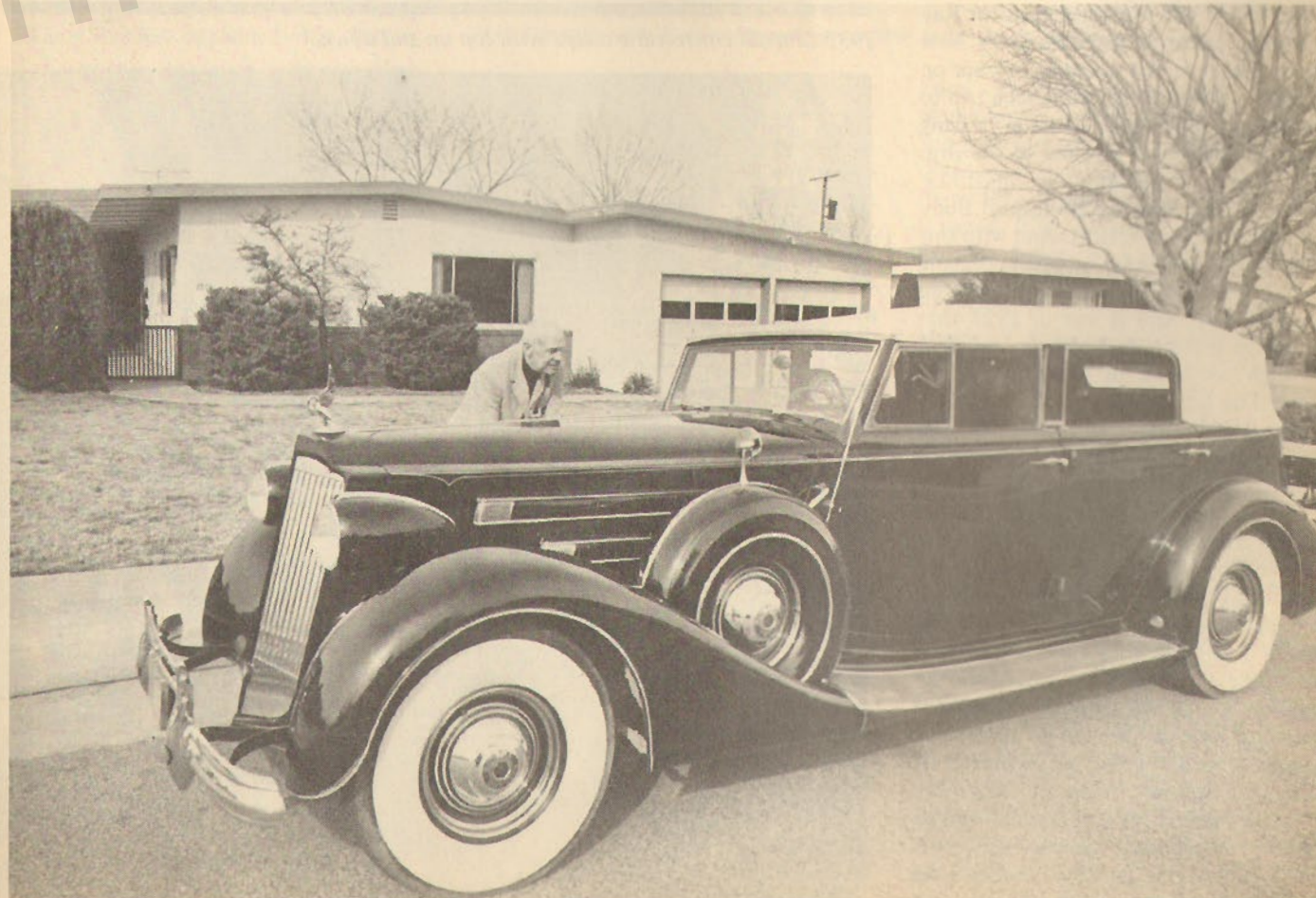
They soon realized, however, that this arrangement left something to be desired. Designs were not being executed as they were drawn. Often the coachbuilder would superimpose his ideas on the original. The customer would be disappointed, and the car agency would complain that the finished body had lost some of the originality and taste of the original design.

This led them to supplying complete working drafts for placement with the coachbuilder, and to providing supervision of construction. A fee was charged, based on a percentage of the cost. This put full responsibility for adherence to the original design with LeBaron, and it enabled them to create a recognizable LeBaron style.

As their business grew, they were increasingly approached by customers directly. Sometimes the customer was interested in a particular body style but didn't want to expose himself to a car agency until he had seen sketches of the body on a number of different chassis—imported and domestic. LeBaron could afford this accommodation because, when the decision was made, LeBaron would be commissioned to make the working drawings and supervise construction. Often the car agency, in addition, would pay a commission for having been alerted to the sale. In the early days, LeBaron did business this way with Paul Ostruk of Consolidated Foreign Motors (who imported the Minerva), John Eustis of Rolls-Royce,



*Dietrich with two of his Packard Twelves; above, a 906 sport phaeton owned by Dr. Richard Dewey, and below, a convertible sedan with partition glass.*





# DIETRICH

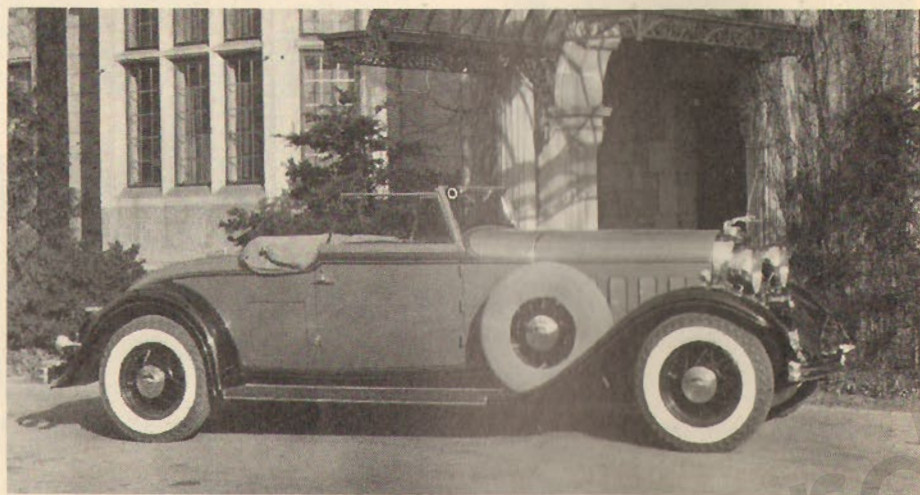
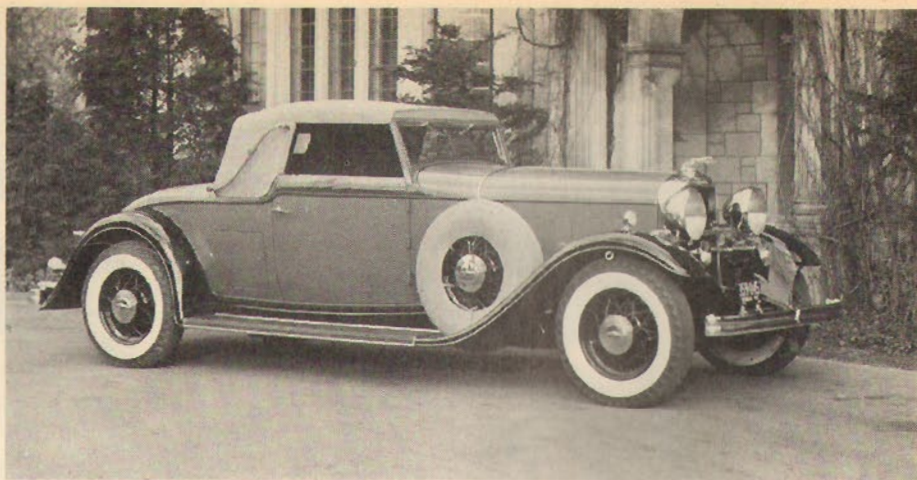
Parvis of Packard, Ted Jackson of Locomobile, and other agencies of imported and domestic cars in the luxury class.

In 1922 LeBaron was invited to exhibit in the New York Salon for the first time. Four cars were entered: Minerva, Isotta-Fraschini, Lafayette and Peerless. In 1923 LeBaron was inundated with requests from the agencies of European and domestic luxury cars to design and supervise the construction of bodies to be mounted on their chassis for the Salon. Most of the agencies wanted their cars shown under the LeBaron banner, but each exhibitor was limited to the display of four cars.

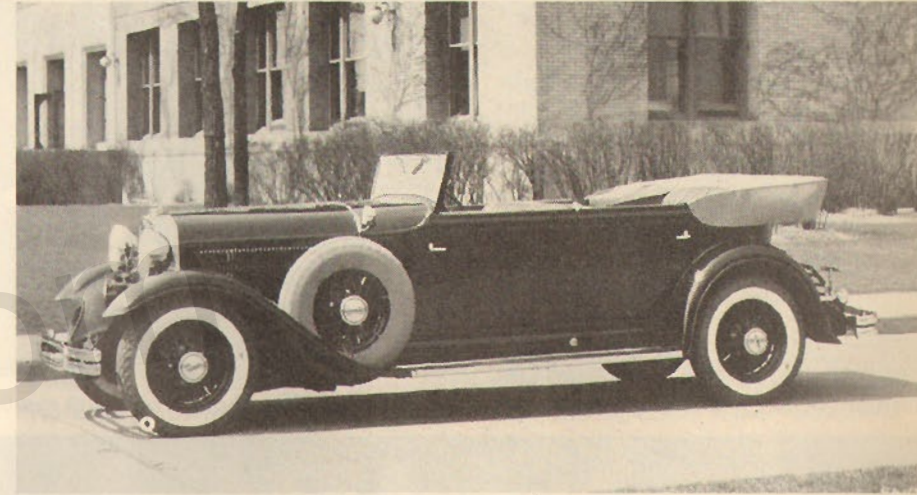
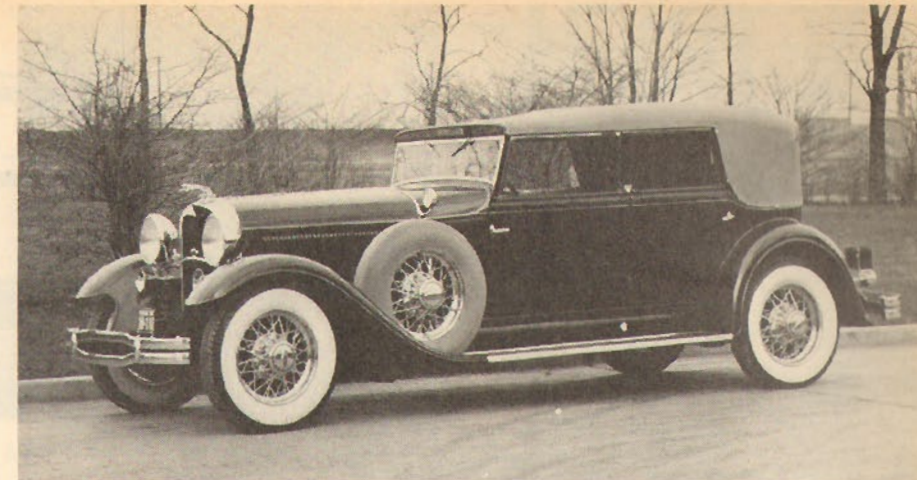
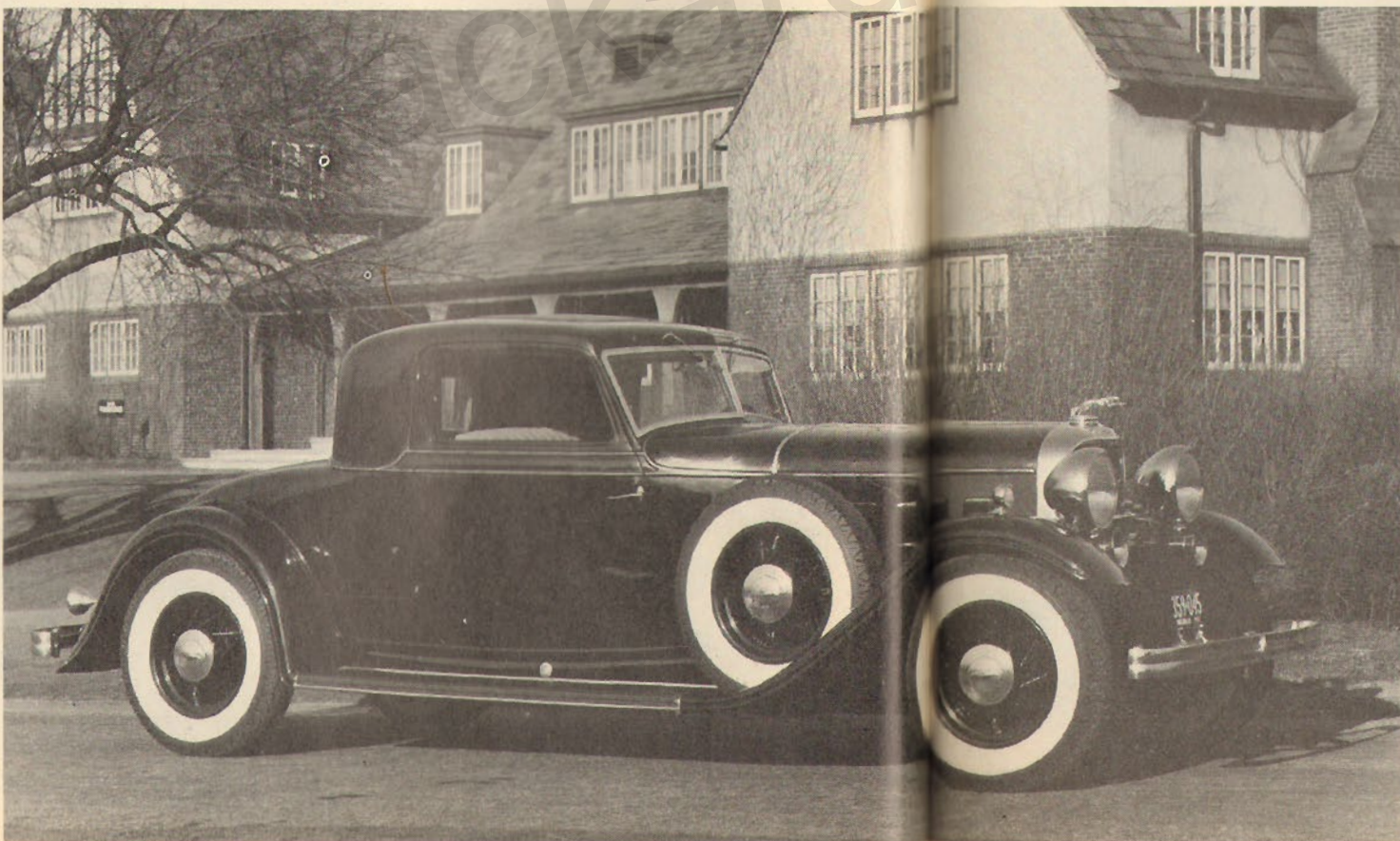
Upon request, the directors of the Salon permitted LeBaron to exhibit cars under the names of Raymond H. Dietrich of LeBaron and Thomas L. Hibbard of LeBaron as well as under the name of LeBaron itself. In addition to these 12 cars, others of LeBaron design were shown by the European agencies. Seven of the domestic cars shown were Locomobiles designed by Ray Dietrich at the request of Ted Jackson, vice-president of Locomobile.

The year 1923 was significant for Ray Dietrich. LeBaron dominated the New York Salon in the number of cars on display. Tom Hibbard, while on a trip to Europe, resigned from LeBaron, leaving Dietrich the senior member of the firm and head of design. In mid-1923, LeBaron took over the Bridgeport Body Company in Connecticut. And with this acquisition, LeBaron Carrossiers became LeBaron Incorporated and a full-fledged coachbuilder. And it was in 1923 that an active interest in LeBaron, and Ray Dietrich as head of design, was expressed by Edsel Ford.

LeBaron received an order for the design and construction of a sport phaeton on the Lincoln chassis early in 1924. A little later came an order for an enclosed-drive sedan. Both orders were initiated by Edsel Ford. Still later, the Lincoln Division of the Ford Motor Company commissioned LeBaron to design and build four cars for the New York Salon and four cars for the Chicago Salon. The order stipulated that the cars were to be shown under the names of LeBaron and of Raymond H. Dietrich, designer. And in December 1924, an agreement was entered into to design and engineer sample bodies for the Lincoln. This agreement was arrived at in negotiations with Edsel Ford.



1932 Lincoln convertible coupe with top up and down.



1931 Lincoln with Kelsey-Hayes convertible sedan body, top up and down.

Allan Sheldon, president of the Murray Body Corporation, asked Ray Dietrich to meet him in Detroit in January of 1925 to discuss the possibility of moving LeBaron to Detroit. The Murray Body Corporation was one of the three largest body companies in the industry—the others being the Fisher Body Company and the Briggs Manufacturing Company. Like the *couturiers* of Paris, the custom coachbuilders of America, such as LeBaron, created high-fashion in body styles. In the garment industry, the dress manufacturers copied the designs of the *couturiers*. In the automobile industry, the car manufacturers copied the custom coachwork in styling the production models.

Most of the custom coachbuilders were located in the New York, Pennsylvania, New England area. Derham was in a suburb of Philadelphia; Brunn was in Buffalo; Fleetwood was in Reading, Pennsylvania; Judkins and Waterhouse were in Massachusetts; and Brewster, Demerest, Holbrook, LeBaron, Locke, Rollston and Willoughby were all in New York City or State. But the center of the automobile industry was in Detroit, and Detroit's production men wanted to bring design to Detroit.

The meeting took place in the Detroit Athletic Club, where Dietrich was greeted by Sheldon and his attorney Ryan. Sheldon explained that Murray

was building production bodies for Lincoln and that Edsel Ford would like to see LeBaron tied in with Murray in Detroit to build custom and semi-custom bodies. A financial arrangement and available facilities were described by the two men, and Dietrich was requested to discuss the plan with his associates. Back in New York, however, his associates in LeBaron—Ralph Roberts, Jim Hinman and "Pop" Steward—did not want to move, and their combined interests outweighed Dietrich's.

Ray Dietrich returned to Detroit in February to meet with Sheldon, Ryan and Edsel Ford. Although Ray was disposed to move the LeBaron operation to Detroit, his associates were not. Thereupon Sheldon stated the Murray Body Corporation was willing to finance and equip a plant in Detroit to build custom and semi-custom bodies under the name of Dietrich Incorporated. Sheldon offered Dietrich 50 percent of the stock, a handsome salary and a drawing account to head the operation.

Fixed head coupe on 145-in. wheelbase Lincoln V-12.

Edsel Ford promised that Lincoln would order several designs of custom and semi-custom bodies. The offer, and the opportunity for growth, were more than Ray Dietrich could resist. He resigned from LeBaron and moved to Detroit. Later, he sold his interest in LeBaron to Ralph Roberts.

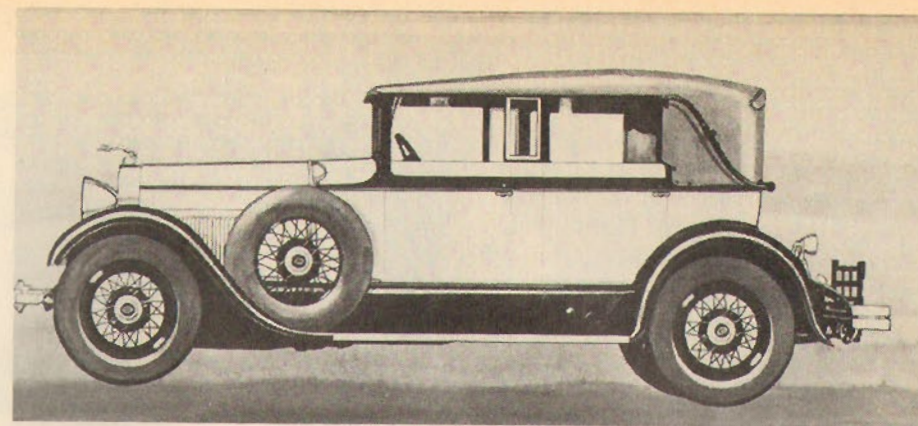
Dietrich Incorporated was launched in March 1925, in a plant at the corner of Russell and Colby Avenues in Detroit. The initial contract was with the Lincoln Division of the Ford Motor Company, and it stipulated deliveries were to be effected within six months. First, however, the plant had to be set up and staffed. Equipment was no problem, but shop personnel with the necessary skills and experience simply didn't live in the Detroit area. To get the operation off the ground, master craftsmen were recruited in the East and moved to Detroit. Apprenticed to these craftsmen were men hired from the advanced design and experimental departments of the Detroit automobile companies. These men had the basic skills to support the craftsmen and to achieve the high standards of work demanded in custom coachbuilding.



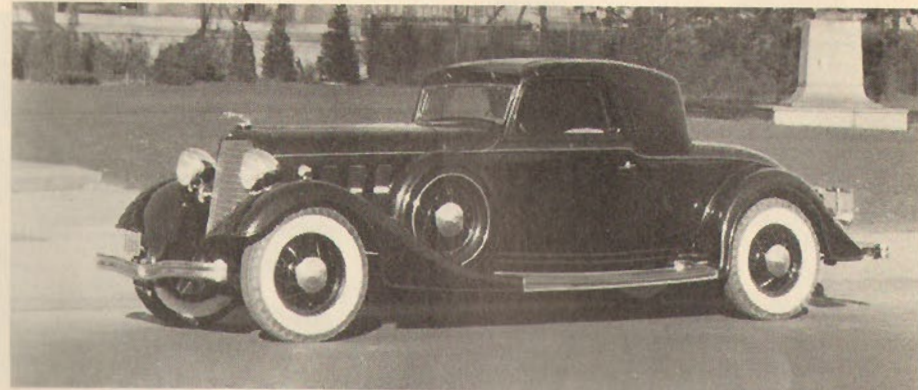
# DIETRICH

Lincoln provided a steady flow of work, as promised by Edsel Ford. Soon Packard branches were showing interest, and former LeBaron customers were approaching Dietrich Incorporated for the design of custom bodies. To build sales, however, Dietrich Incorporated needed a top man who thoroughly understood the trade, the position of the direct factory branches and dealerships of the manufacturers of luxury cars, and the clientele for custom bodies. On the recommendation of Alvan Macauley, president of Packard at that time, Dietrich hired Jack Jarvis as sales manager. Within nine months, sales increased to the point where existing floor space in the plant was inadequate. A suitable building which could be leased for immediate occupancy was located at 1601 Clay Avenue.

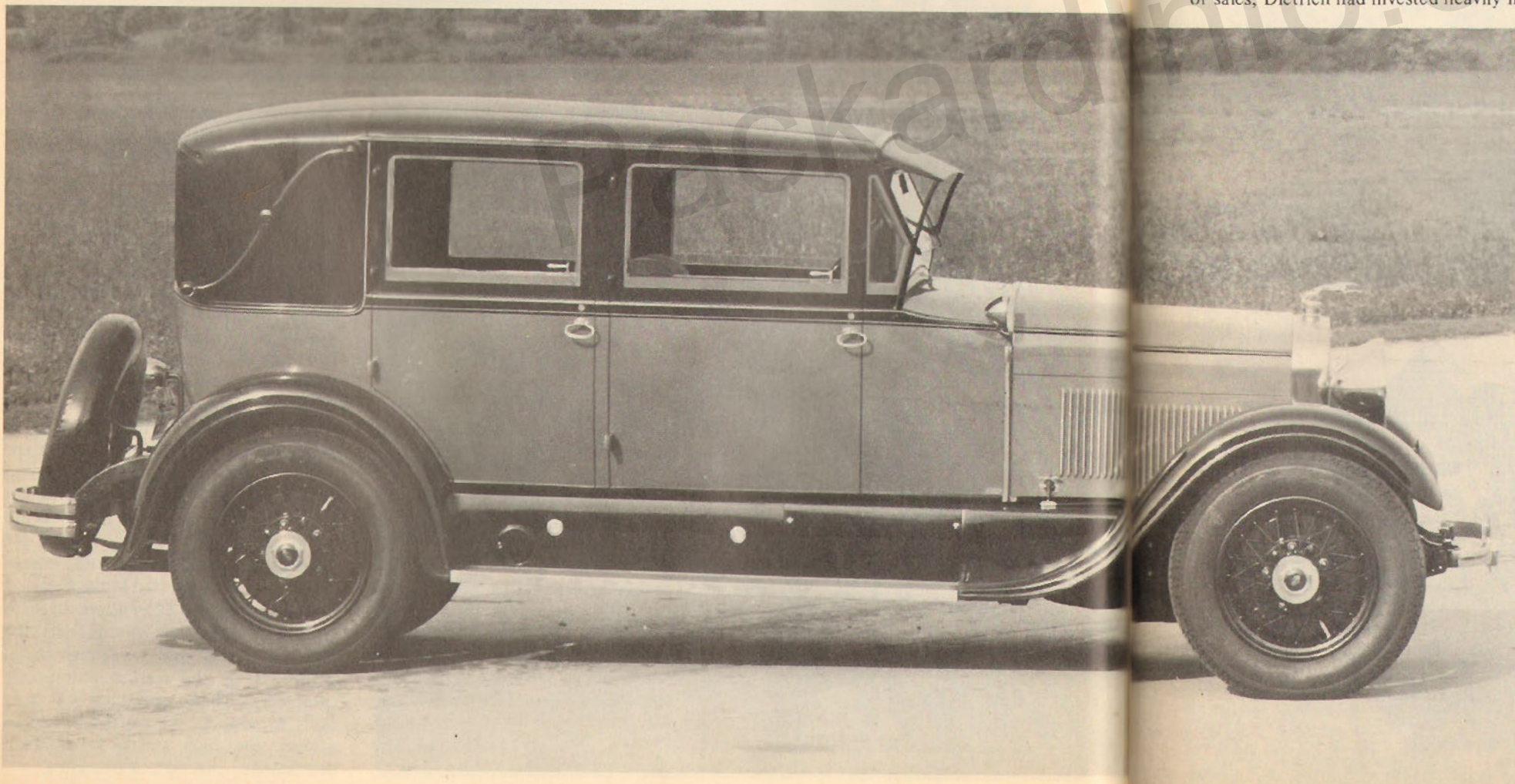
The move to larger facilities could not have been more timely. Lincoln had increased its requirements. Jarvis had induced Packard branches in different parts of the country to place orders for custom bodies for showroom display. In



A page from the 1928-29 Lincoln catalog.



1934 Lincoln fixed head coupe with rumble seat.



Raymond H. Dietrich. (Photograph from the Automobile Collection, Craven Foundation.)

view of the orders received from factory branches, Dietrich sought to interest Packard in presenting a special line of Dietrich bodies in the sales brochures which the company supplied to its branches and dealerships. Perhaps it would be well to explain that in the twenties most, if not all, of the automobile companies maintained direct factory sales outlets (branches) as well as franchised dealerships in the principal cities across the country.

But the proposal was rejected. Dietrich was reluctantly permitted to buy three chassis at dealer's cost on which to mount custom bodies at his own expense, and to show these cars in Packard branches. The chassis were furnished with a two/four-passenger rumble seat coupe, five-passenger convertible sedan and close-coupled sport sedan bodies. Jarvis took the cars on an extensive tour, and they were displayed in the showrooms of Packard branches and dealers across the country.

The tour was an outstanding success. Jarvis returned from the last showing in San Francisco minus the three cars and with 150 *bona fide* orders from all over the country. In anticipation of a volume of sales, Dietrich had invested heavily in

assembly jigs and fixtures to make the bodies on a semi-custom basis. But neither Dietrich nor Jarvis was prepared for the almost overwhelming demand for "Dietrich Packards" that followed. Two months after Jarvis' tour was completed, Packard had received orders for 175 chassis to be delivered to Dietrich Incorporated for custom coachwork. After much hemming and hawing, Packard executives also expressed a desire to feature a special line of Dietrich bodies in all Packard sales brochures and advertising!

Again Dietrich Incorporated was faced with space problems. Orders were pouring in from Packard branches and dealerships, and from Lincoln for semi-custom bodies. In addition, orders for full-custom bodies were coming in from individual patrons all over the country. Many of them were celebrities. A custom convertible sedan body was mounted on a Packard chassis for Al Jolson. William Randolph Hearst ordered three cars: One was for Mrs. Hearst and one for Hearst's long-time companion Marion Davies—neither of the ladies, however, knew of the other's car. Custom bodies were built for Gloria Swanson and John Barrymore; for Charles Chaplin, Dolores Del Rio and

Flo Ziegfeld; for Mrs. J.W. Riddle and for Edsel Ford. As a result, the plant in Detroit was bursting its seams. It was impossible to expand because the facilities were on leased property. Yet relief had to be found if they were to continue to accept the volume of work that was coming in.

Hearing of their difficulties, and probably feeling slightly concerned because of the effect delayed deliveries might have on Lincoln commitments, Edsel Ford helped resolve the problem. The Ford Motor Company owned the plant in which the Leland Lincolns had been made, but they were not using it. And, although the sale of any property was contrary to Ford policy, Edsel made the plant available to Dietrich Incorporated on a land contract basis with yearly payments approximately equal to the rental on the Clay Avenue property. The move to the new location at Hamilton and Holden Avenues was made in December 1926.

In 1927 Ray was invited to meet with H.H. Franklin at the Franklin plant in Syracuse, New York. Out of that meeting came a contract to design, draft and build prototype bodies for Franklin's production models. In addition, Dietrich Incorporated was to create a line of custom and semi-custom bodies

1929 Lincoln five passenger berline body.



## DIETRICH

Continued from page 75

for Franklin. Production coachwork of Dietrich design was to be built by the Walker Company of Amesbury, Massachusetts under Dietrich supervision. Then Dietrich Incorporated was approached by Myron Forbes, president of Pierce-Arrow. Forbes commissioned Dietrich to design and build, in lots of twenty, a line of semi-custom models. This was the first time Pierce-Arrow had ventured into semi-custom group ordering, though many custom bodies had been ordered from Dietrich in the past by different Pierce-Arrow dealers. The semi-custom line included a convertible sedan, convertible Victoria and formal towncars.

And in 1927 Dietrich received a commission from Lincoln to design and build a show car to be exhibited with other American models at the *Concours d'Elegance* in Paris. The car was to be shown as a custom Dietrich design under the Lincoln banner. It was a singularly complimentary assignment, for they were invading the sacrosanct design world of Europe—a world for which all custom designers and coach-builders had great respect. Ray chose to create a sporty two/four-passenger rumble-seat convertible coupe. His associates were aghast, and heated controversies developed, but Ray insisted the design would bring Dietrich Incorporated more distinctive recognition than any of the other American entries. And he was right. The car was awarded a Certificate and Gold Medal for first honors in its class, and *best in show!* It went on to be exhibited in Milan and Monte Carlo, where it was awarded a loving cup large enough to swim in. Also in early 1927, Walter P. Chrysler commissioned Dietrich to create custom and semi-custom bodies to be included in the Chrysler Imperial line.

In 1928, Dietrich Incorporated was at the apex of its career. But the stock market crash of '29 was soon felt in the custom coachcraft business. Being a luxury trade, it was one of the first to be affected. In 1929 the Murray Body Corporation absorbed Dietrich Incorporated. And in 1932 Ray Dietrich went to work for the Chrysler Corporation in Detroit, creating exterior designs for all passenger car and truck models.

During the Second World War, Ray originated production methods for manufacturing such items as a 45-ton tank retriever, radar field units, mobile Signal Corps units, bomb clusters and

tank track shoes. In 1949 he organized his own company in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The 1950 Lincoln, designed by Ray as Harry S. Truman's Presidential parade car, was built by Dietrich in Grand Rapids: This was the car used by Soviet Premier Krushchev during his visit to the United States. In 1951 this company planned a complete engineering program in Detroit for such design-and-build projects as a gas turbine to be built by Lincoln-Mercury Motors and a jet engine being developed by Westinghouse. The company was dissolved in 1952 when banks refused to loan money on orders for government work, and capital was exhausted holding manpower in reserve for contracts that were slow in materializing.

Since then Ray has designed house trailers, fiberglass bodies for the Sterling Engine Company of Buffalo, New York, office equipment and musical instruments.

"I can't play a note," he comments, "but I can see and feel the materials. When I design an instrument I think of two things. First, it has to catch the eye of the musician; then it has to look good while he is performing. I don't change the do-re-me-fa-sol; I couldn't and I don't intend to try. That part of it is a mathematical and engineering problem. The scale stays the same, but I work on the lines of the instruments, using the same criterion which goes into all of my designs: no clutter, elegance and simplicity. That's the essence of the thing."

Dietrich has designed many things but his big triumphs have been in the design of custom and semi-custom bodies for

automobiles. Today most of these are either owned by collectors or placed in the Greenfield Museum in Dearborn, Michigan; Harrah's Automobile Collection in Reno, Nevada; or other automotive museums around the country.

In 1954 Ray gained the ultimate tribute from the exclusive Classic Car Club of America. Buck Hill Falls, Pennsylvania, is the site of the annual meeting of the Classic Car Club of America. And on January 11 Dietrich was presented with a gold model of one of the classics. It acknowledged fifty years in the field of automobile design. It was the first one ever given, and probably the only one that ever will be given.

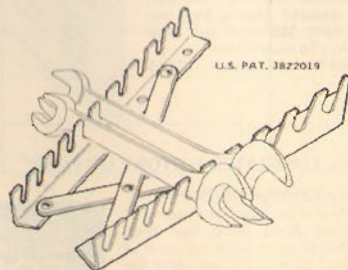
In 1974 Raymond Dietrich was the recipient of the Distinguished Service Citation awarded by the Automotive Organization Team Hall of Fame for his outstanding contribution, leadership and dedication to the automotive industry. Similar awards have been issued to Henry and Edsel Ford, Thomas Edison and Walter P. Chrysler, but Raymond Dietrich is the only automotive body designer to be so honored. ■

### SWAP MEET SCHEDULED

The Swap Meet organized by Harrah's Automobile Collection of Reno, Nevada, will take place this year at the same site as last year, the Reed High School in Sparks, immediately to the east of Reno. The dates are June 24 through 26; applications for registration are available from Harrah's, P.O. Box 10, Reno, Nevada 89504, and must be returned prior to June 18.

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