

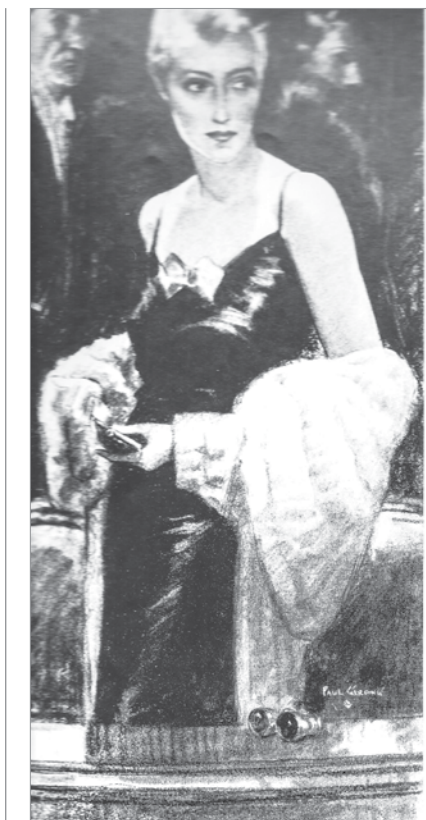
HERE'S TO YOU *Mrs.*
Robinson

by **RON VERSCHOOR**

Photos provided by DWIGHT SCHOOLING
 AND RON VERSCHOOR

The character of Mrs. Robinson in Mike Nichols' 1967 film "The Graduate" was brilliantly portrayed by Anne Bancroft, and while the character's first name was never revealed, the house in which she lived was located on north Palm Drive in Beverly Hills. Just 1.6 miles northwest of that location is the estate of the original Real Housewife of Beverly Hills: Mrs. Virginia Robinson.

Virginia's husband Harry Robinson inherited his father's Boston Dry Good Store at Spring and Temple Streets in downtown Los Angeles and expanded operations as an upscale department store, renaming it the J.W. Robinson Company. Robinson's was an important part of the Southern California retail landscape for decades, surviving a number of ownership changes before the last Robinsons-May stores closed in 2006.



*She drives a
 Duesenberg*

Photo top left:
 The Robinson Estate
 on Elden Way in
 Beverly Hills, California.

Today, the Robinson's six-acre estate on Elden Way operates as the Virginia Robinson Gardens, providing a glimpse into the lavish lifestyle they enjoyed.

Harry and Virginia married in 1903 and traveled extensively following their wedding. The couple purchased the six-acre parcel of land two blocks north of Sunset Blvd. and Virginia's father Nathaniel Dryden, an architect by trade, completed the house "in the Italian style of architecture" in 1911 at a cost of \$25,000. The Pool Pavilion or guest house, was added in 1925 and "throughout the years of their residency, the Robinsons added onto and altered >



Photos clockwise from top left: View of the main residence from the west gardens; Porte-Cochere flanked by two addition garages; The Pool Pavilion was built in 1925; Garages at the Roberson Estate; Steps through the Palm Garden.



various design elements of their estate. They remodeled and expanded the galleria and partially enclosed the loggia. Harry and Virginia added the Staff Quarters and a men's tennis court as well. They also built more garages as their fleet of cars grew."

From these impressive grounds, the Robinsons entertained frequently and Virginia earned a well-deserved reputation for style and grace.

Mrs. Robinson was known as the first lady of Beverly Hills and her triumphs as a hostess are legendary. Her diverse guests included royalty such as the Duke and Duchess of Windsor to Hollywood stars like Marlene Dietrich and Fred Astaire; her neighbors were Glenn Ford, Lillian Disney and Elvis Presley. She sipped champagne cocktails with Sophia Loren and challenged Charlie Chaplin to a spirited game of tennis — all with her signature elegance and class.

— THE VIRGINIA ROBINSON GARDENS WEBSITE

Harry Robinson died in 1932 but Virginia lived there until her passing in 1977 at age 99. Virginia made arrangements for the property to be donated to the County of Los Angeles, who currently maintains and operates it in partnership with the Friends of Robinson Gardens.

A wall near the garage shows three classic cars that were part of the Robinson fleet. These are identified as Model J Duesenbergs, and while the Robinsons did own three Model Js, one of the photographs mistakenly shows a Classic-era Cadillac town car. CCA member and V-16 authority Christopher Cummings believes this is a 1929 or 1930 8-cylinder Cadillac and the confusion is most likely attributed to the presence of a Duesenberg hood ornament on this car.

The three Model Js were:

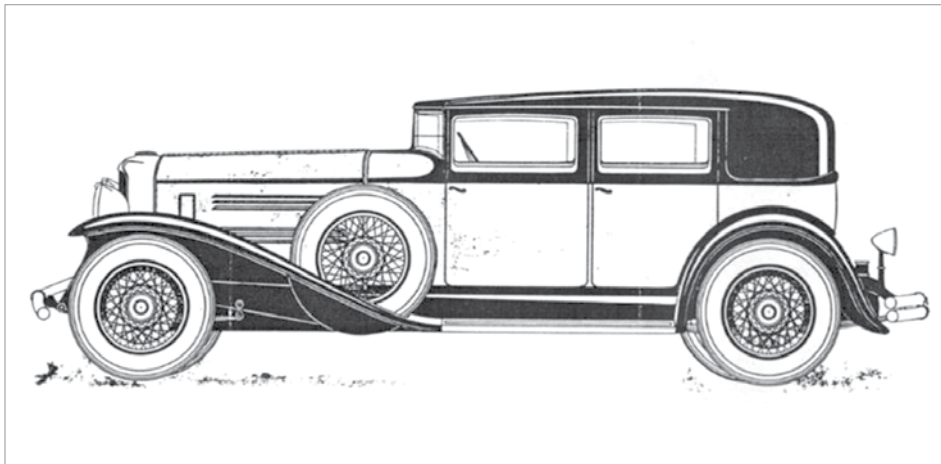
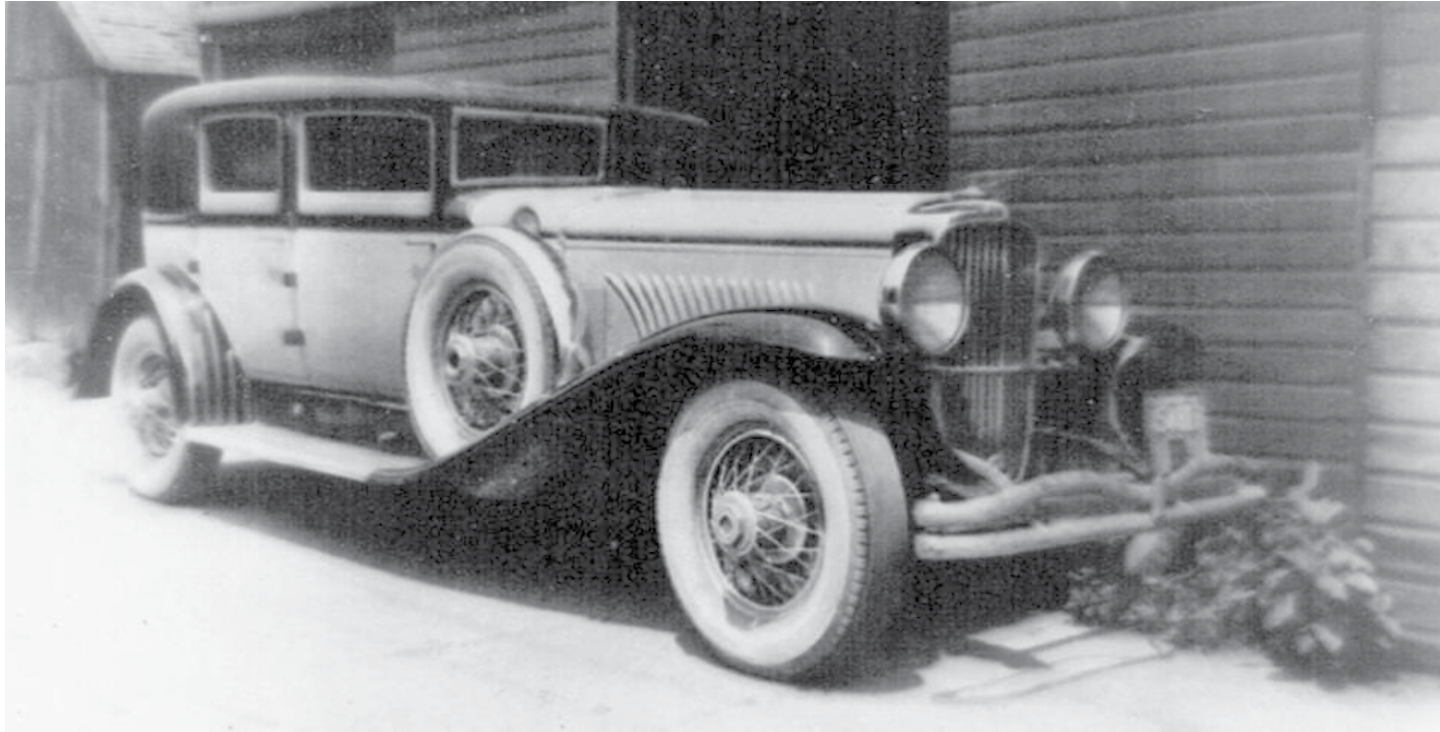
- > J-114, a Derham Town Car
- > J-171, a Derham Five-Passenger Sedan
- > J-108, a Murphy convertible coupe

When compiling his book "Duesenberg: The Mightiest American Motor Car," J.L. Elbert corresponded with original owners, asking them to share their experiences with the Model J. This brief description comes from "Mrs. H.R. of Beverly Hills":



Virginia Robinson loved Duesenbergs. She purchased three of them in 1928. The first was a town car (shown here). Another was a convertible coupe, later used in the movie "The Guy Who..." and driven by Ginger Rogers.

Photos from top: J-114; J-108; Cadillac Town Car with Duesenberg hood ornament.



I am happy to talk of our Duesenbergs—we have had four—three special bodies. My husband’s white car, a green sports sedan—with the back seat higher than the driver’s—and two town cars... My most beautiful town car I still use daily.

The confusion about the number of Duesenbergs the Robinsons owned is understandable as the three Model Js were preceded by various Model As. How many they owned is still uncertain, but correspondence with Duesenberg sleuth Ray Wolff in 1959 suggests there may have been as many as four Model As in the Robinson garage. A letter written by Virginia and dated March 8, 1959 states:

On tax bills, we find specific reference to the following: 1922 coupe; 1924 sedan and 1924 sedan coupe (since these occur on different tax bills, they may refer to the same car); 1924 town car – A19776, and

Photos this page from top: J-171 in the mid-1930s; J-171: Derham Five-Passenger Sedan.

1923 town car (these also occur on different bills, and also probably refer to the same car); and a 1926 sedan 5P-46-03. We find no numbers other than the two shown, which may be license numbers, and numbers in sequence which may be tax roll numbers.

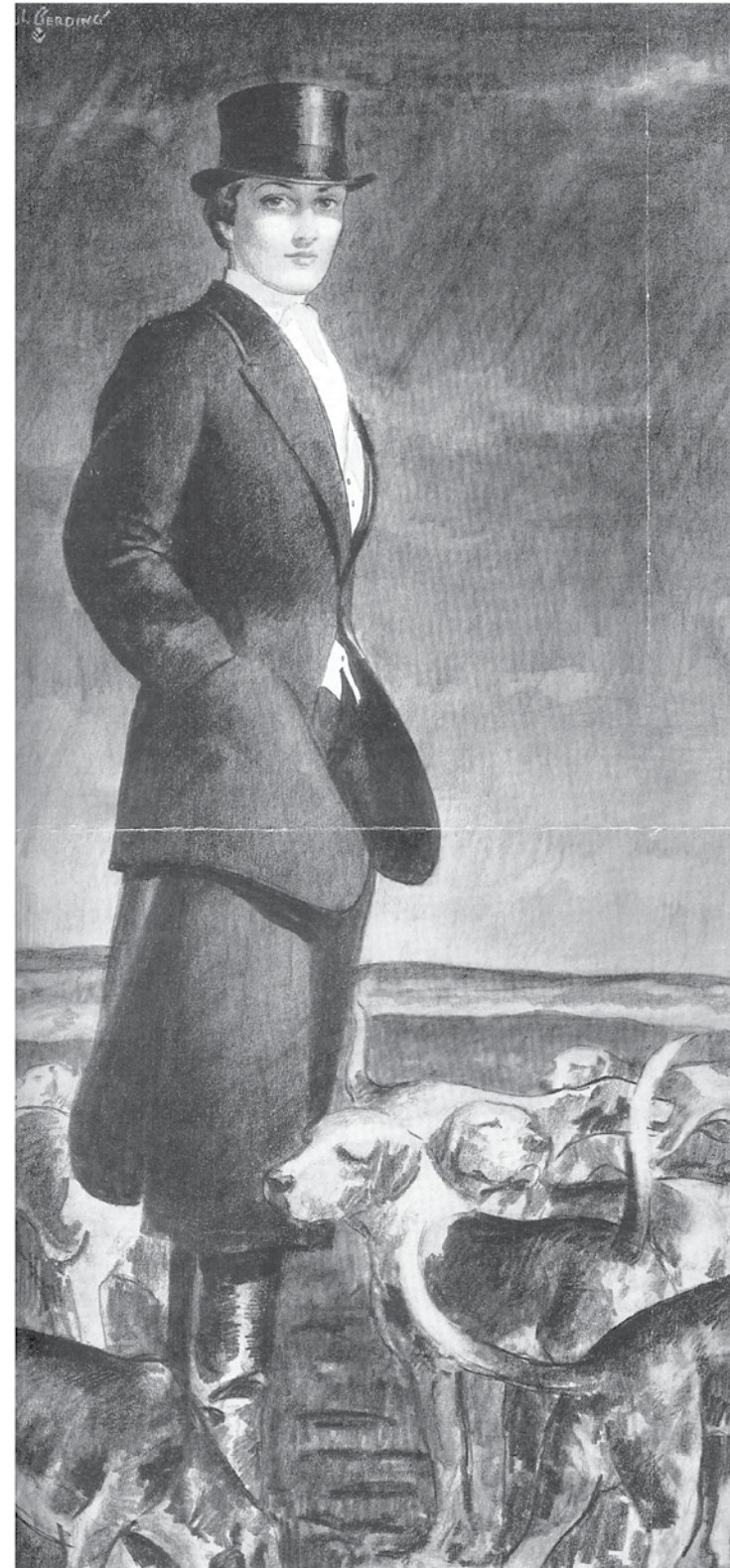
Along with J-171 (sedan), J-108 (coupe) and J-114 (town car) the four possibilities listed above make a total of seven Duesenbergs. Sorry we could not find more complete information.

*Yours truly,
Virginia Robinson*

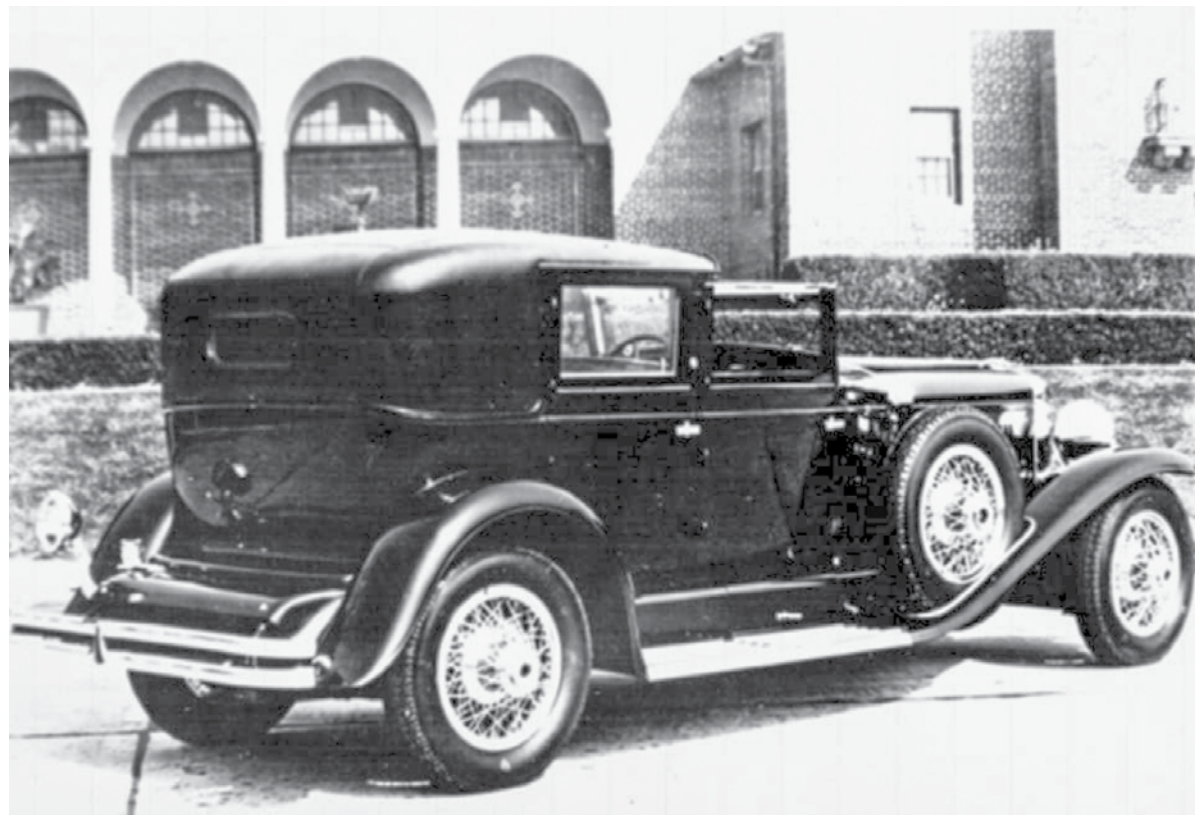
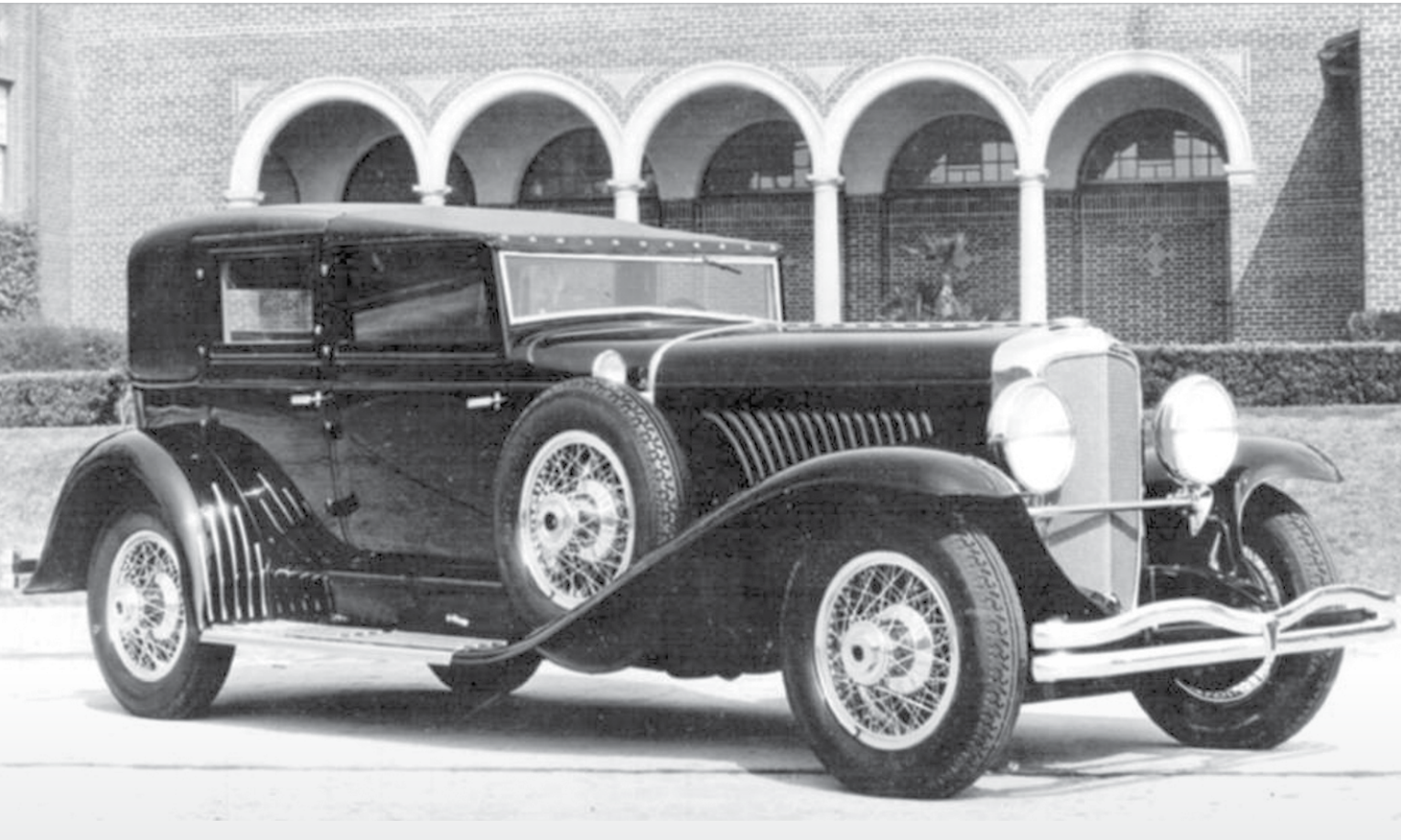
The Model Js

J-171: There is not a great deal of information about this car but Dwight Schooling shares that chassis 2193 carried body number 2151, a light green Derham Sedan, which was sold on June 21, 1929. This was a short-wheelbase chassis and the body featured a V-windshield and center-hinged doors. The previously cited letter by Virginia Robinson did mention this car in passing.

I have had my files checked for further information concerning our Duesenberg automobiles, and find a note to the effect that the insurance on the 1930 sedan was cancelled on June 8, 1933, which indicates the possible date of sale of this automobile. >



*She drives a
Duesenberg*



Photos this page:
J-114 Duesenberg
Model J Derham
Town Car when new.
Does anyone know
the setting?

Dwight also shared this image and information:

Sold through a Seattle dealer, maybe Reginald Parsons to L.E. Adams of Olympia, Washington in June 1933. In August 1940 it was owned by Duesenberg dealer John Troka and in 1946, the car was wrecked when owned by Roland Smith of Aurora, Illinois. The body was scrapped and the car was sold as parts.

J-114 and chassis number 2137 was a Derham Town Car and the favorite of Virginia Robinson. This was a short-wheelbase chassis with Derham body #2102. Painted black, it featured a flat windshield and rear-hinged doors. It is one of two short-wheelbase Derham town cars to this design.

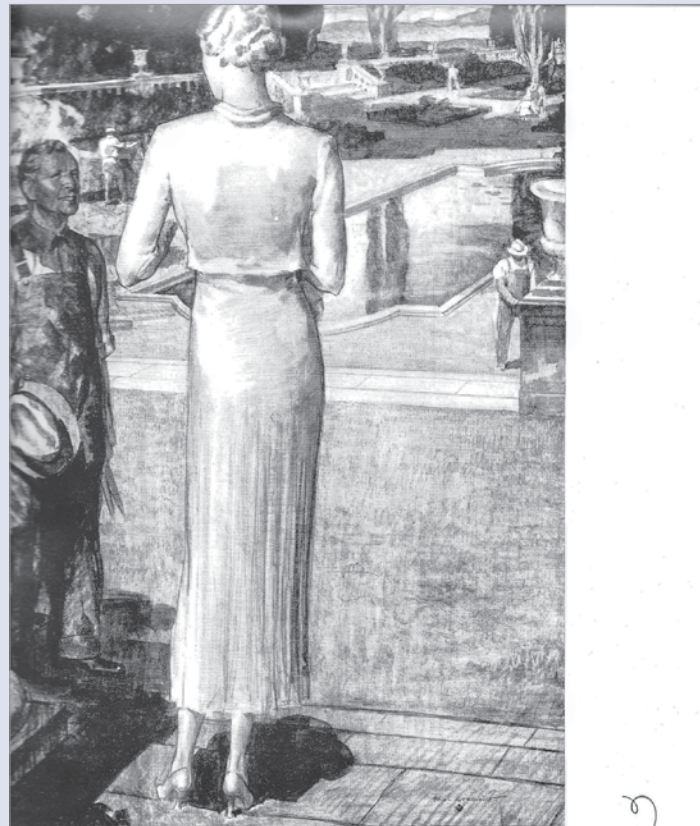
A picture of this car appeared in the Summer 2007 issue of *The Classic Car* in an article written by Pierce Carlson who reported:

For two weeks in 1951, I was the thrilled owner of this early Duesenberg. I had paid \$500.00 for it, received a bill of sale, test drove it around the block and was waiting for the title before I actually drove it away. Two weeks later I was told that there was a problem with the title and they gave me the money back. There was no problem with the title. The used car lot had taken a higher offer, as I learned later. I am still angry. I was, briefly, the second owner of Mrs. Robinson's 1929 Derham town car. The Robinsons owned a prominent L.A. department store and the car

Photos from top:
J-108, Murphy
Convertible Coupe
show at the 2011
Pebble Beach
Concours d'Elegance;
J-108, Ginger Rogers
and Fred Astaire in
"The Gay Divorcee."

always chauffeur driven. The paint had been polished right down to the primer. Everything was original but a spare wheel had gone missing. It was said this car had been ordered for W.R. Hearst, but, when delivered, he had difficulty getting through the small rear door and refused to take delivery.





She drives a Duesenberg

Photos from top: Attendees of the 2008 CCCA Annual Meeting saw J-108 when it was part of the Ken McBride collection; The Lady of the House in her Garden.

“ HERE’S TO YOU MRS. ROBINSON, YOU WOULD HAVE BEEN THE IDEAL SPOKESWOMAN FOR THE “SHE DRIVES A DUESENBERG” ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN. ”

This car survives and is believed to be part of a collection in Utah.

J-108 is perhaps the best known and most interesting of the Robinson Duesenbergs. Chassis number 2134 was sold in April 1929 equipped with what is believed to be the first Murphy convertible coupe body. This was body number 802, painted white, as was its chassis, and featured a severely raked windshield, a disappearing top and a raised molding running down the center of the rear deck.

J-108 appeared in the 1934 RKO Radio Pictures film, “The Gay Divorcee” starring Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire and from the late 1940s until the mid-2000s, it passed through a series of owners in the Pacific Northwest. In 2006, it appeared at Art Center College of Design “Car Classic” as part of a themed exhibit of Pasadena-designed automobiles. Participants of the 2008 CCCA Annual Meeting also saw J-108 while touring Ken McBride’s collection in Seattle. Today, J-108 is back home in Los Angeles as part of the collection of a prominent land developer who has entered the Los Angeles political arena.

Here’s to you Mrs. Robinson, you would have been the ideal spokeswoman for the “She Drives a Duesenberg” advertising campaign.

> Docent-led tours of the Virginia Robinson Gardens are available by reservation on the Gardens website, www.robinsongardens.org