



Engineer, Enthusiast, Gentleman

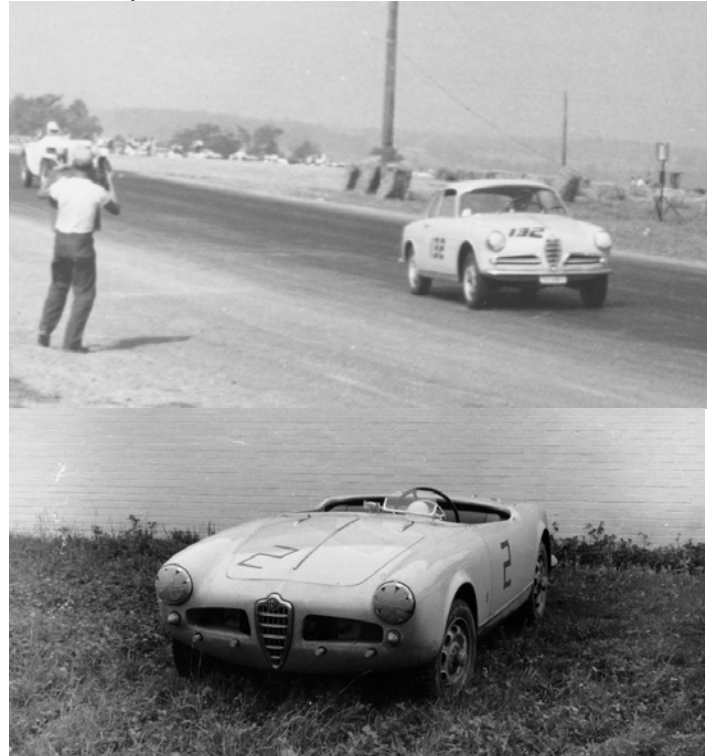
On August 12, 2008, the Alfa Romeo community became much smaller when Henry Wessells died. An engineer by profession, Henry began a half century long relationship with Alfa Romeo when he was introduced to the marque early in his career.

Alfa Romeos were an extreme rarity when he purchased his first, a 1900 Berlina, in the early 1950's. Through spirited drives through the Chester county countryside, he found that while less powerful than the Ferraris of that vintage, his sedan could nonetheless overtake them with superior road holding.



It wasn't long after, that he began a long history of bringing the latest Alfa Romeo had to offer to the United States. Often these were prototypes that he raced with flair, both on and off the track.

He was an active sports car racer during its golden age, the 1950s. In 1953, he drove a Siata in the Sebring 12 hours race where he dined with the likes of John Fitch, Reg Parnell, and Briggs Cunningham. During that time, he could be found racing his Giulietta Sprint brought back from Paris and perhaps the first imported to this country, at Watkins Glen, Bridgehampton or Brynfan Tyddyn. Or, you might catch him in his Giulietta Spider prototype, the third produced, purchased while shopping for some swim trunks as he and a friend were on their way to Florida for break.



Henry Walton Wessells III – 1926-2008

His career with the Budd Company, a pioneer in the fabrication of automobile and train bodies, allowed him to combine his passion for automobiles with his profession. He forged close relationships with many manufacturers but perhaps his most cherished was his relationship with Alfa Romeo. He worked closely with such luminary engineers as Carlo Chiti and Orazio Satta and enjoyed their friendships.



In 1957, he married Nancy Hunter. They left the reception together in a melee of tire smoke and roaring exhaust as his 6C300CM, formerly owned by Jo Bonnier, wasn't quite detuned for street duty.



He became the owner of a Tipo B when a colleague at work showed him an ad for one in a car magazine. Barely recognizable with the ungainly bodywork fitted to it by a previous owner, Henry brought it back to its original glory and raced it extensively in England. The Tipo B was fitted with external brake adjusting mechanisms so that they could be adjusted during pit stops. Once, he left the pits at Silverstone with the adjusters unlocked. Heading into a fast turn with no brakes, he saved the car from damage by putting it into a tire-smoking four wheel drift which was not only effective at slowing it safely but also made for a great photo opportunity.



His residence, Brookside Farm, in Paoli saw a remarkable collection of Alfas pass through its stable. These included an early low-nose Giulietta Sprint Speciale, a TZ-1 and a Harry Theodoracopoulos prepared Super. The latter met its undignified demise as it was t-boned by some non-descript American iron as Henry attempted to pull out of his driveway.

In the late 1960's, Henry became the owner of yet another prototype Alfa, a 33 Stradale. Picked up in Italy, he gave it some exercise at Monza as well as on the Autostrada, where he remarked that it could be driven with fingertips as it approached 300kph. Back in Paoli, it kept its plugs clean with blasts down the new route 202 which was under construction. Those came to an end when he had to explain these trips to a local police officer.



During his twenty-plus career at Budd, he was awarded many patents, mostly for innovations in auto body construction. For several years, he was their technical representative in Europe which allowed him to live there with his family and pursue his passion on the circuits of England and Italy. He once remarked that in England GTV-6's made excellent tow vehicles for race cars.

Henry Walton Wessells III – 1926-2008



Back home, he became the custodian of a rare 1933 6C1500GS testa-fissa, bringing it back to its proper body configuration. As a founding member of the VSCCA, he frequently gave the 6C exercise at Summit Point, Lime Rock, Pittsburgh and other venues.



In 1980, Henry retired from the Budd Company, which allowed him to pursue his lifelong passion with even more vigor. He provided expert advice to anyone who asked.

He was instrumental in the discovery and recreation of the famous Biggs 8C2900. In that instance, he helped identify the twisted, rusted remains of what was left of that 2900 when it was burned in a barn fire. From those ashes, and the remarkably undamaged 8C crankshaft, a new 2900 was built. (He also noticed the bits of a Testa-Rossa in that same pile, which also went on to become recreated.)

Henry's most ambitious Alfa Romeo project started when he acquired another 6C3000CM; he had sold the "wedding car" years before. The new 6C had been rebodied by Boano after its racing career was over. It then passed on to Argentinean dictator Juan Peron. Later, it worked its way to the United States where it eventually found its place in Henry's garage. He drove and raced the car spiritedly but unfortunately damaged it heavily in the 1984 Pittsburgh Vintage Grand Prix. Although he was unhurt, the car was in need of extensive repair. This gave him the perfect excuse to put the car back to its original glory. So, bent car was shipped to Europe where Henry and

several fabricators went to work recreating the original Colli bodywork. Working from photographs and what documentation he had, a complete body buck was built to make the panels. When it was completed, it was nearly as it was when it left Arese in 1953 with the exception of its perfectly smooth bodywork. Henry wasn't able to convince the fabricators to leave the panels with hammer marks! Refurbished, the 6C was back on the road and racing circuits, participating in the Mille Miglia and other vintage events.



1900 enthusiasts remember Henry as an invaluable resource. Recently, he restored and owned a beautiful 1900CSS which was a winner at Radnor. He was active in the 1900 registry and was their Technical Editor of their newsletter. He organized the 1900 owners' convention in Paoli in 2003 which was coincident with the 100 Cars of Radnor Concours, featuring Alfa 1900s.



In 2004, Henry was the keynote speaker at the AROC National Convention in New Hampshire. There he recounted his fifty years of passion for Alfa Romeos. A couple of years later, he gave a reprise at a monthly meeting of the Old York Road Sports Car Club.

For as long as anyone in the DVAROC can remember, Henry and Nancy invited the club to Brookside each fall for a fabulous picnic. There, he opened up his garage which housed his ever-changing collection of Alfas. Until a year ago when he could no longer drive, he could be found piloting his Alfetta GTV, Milano, Giulietta Spider or 1900 in events or even for everyday errands.

Henry Walton Wessells III – 1926-2008



Henry's modest and generous demeanor belied his stature. He lived a wonderful life and made significant contributions to automotive technology, the historical understanding of Alfa Romeos and the advancement of vintage sports car racing in the United States. All that aside, Henry would have likely cited his most proud accomplishment as being his four sons.

On August 25th, scores of his friends and admirers gathered at the Simeone Foundation Museum to remember him. With a backdrop of some of the most significant Alfa Romeos in history, his sons and closest friends shared their recollections of Henry's life.

Henry will live on through his historical archives, which will be located at the Simeone Foundation, his collection of Alfa Romeos, which are in the careful hands of like-minded enthusiasts, his stories, his writings and photographs. But mostly, Henry will live on through our memories of him. He was an engineer, enthusiast, gentleman and a friend. We can imagine he and Fangio dicing their Alfas among the clouds. Godspeed, Henry.

