

Re-creating HISTORY

BILL MILLIKEN'S CHRYSLER LE MANS REPLICA. A VERY SECRET GARAGE FOR SOME VERY SPECIAL CARS.

WORDS AND PHOTOS: ROGER MEINERS



Bill Milliken relaxes in the Garage with his project.

Bill Milliken brokers garage space to crazy people—car crazies, that is. He is a noted commercial real estate broker in Ann Arbor, Mich., but he'd rather do this. And while he is at the garage, which is owned by a friend, he gets to spend a few hours wrenching on his cars.

The garage houses all sorts of classic and vintage collector cars. It is a highly private venture. None of his clients wants visibility. So their cars are hidden under cover most of the time, except when they are taken out for exercise, or unveiled once a month on First Saturdays, when the owners and their guests get together to kick tires and tell stories. That's about all we can say about Milliken's second job. But we can talk about one of his cars.

It's a 1927 Chrysler Model 70 that pays homage to the historic Detroit vehicles that made history at Le Mans and other endurance races from 1925 to 1931. The racing program was not a factory effort. It was more like European recognition of Chrysler's burgeoning engineering prowess. Grand Prix drivers Louis Chiron and Robert Benoist, among others, independently purchased these Chryslers because



This intricate work of art graces the car's dashboard. Not much is known about this icon.



(Top) The number 8 gives tribute to the 3rd-place car at Le Mans in 1928. **(Above)** The Chrysler roadsters are posed in 1928 in the town of Le Mans before the race. Car number 8 is the model for Milliken's re-creation.

they recognized the car's potential for racing success. Car features included hydraulic brakes (almost a world exclusive); engines with seven main bearing crankshafts and pressure lubrication; hydraulic shock absorbers; and state of the art suspension design with low un-sprung weight.

These Chryslers did very well at Le Mans, finishing seventh in 1925; third and fourth in 1928; sixth, eighth and eleventh in 1929; and they won their class in the 24-hour race at Spa in Belgium more than once.

Milliken inherited the Chrysler project from *Automobile Magazine* art director Larry Crane, who decided he'd rather have a more modern piece to drive. Crane got the car from his colleague, Kevin Clemens, the magazine's tech editor. Clemens had planned to run it in the 2000 Around the world in Eighty Days tour, but gave that idea up when Mercedes-Benz gave him sponsorship money to take his 1959 Mercedes 220S instead.

When Milliken acquired the car from Crane in 2003 it was in paint, but not finished mechanically—and had no interior finishes. Milliken enlisted the help of Rod Rice, an automotive instructor at Washtenaw

Community College in Ypsilanti, Mich. Together they got the engine running. Then the car went to a restoration shop, where the running gear was put into shape. While there, the brakes were "modernized" to a Plymouth internal-expanding shoe design from the thirties to replace the external bands that Chrysler used in the twenties. A new windshield was fabricated almost from scratch.

The interior is the most recent addition—made from hides Crane acquired when he owned the project. The leather is an exact match to remnants of the original upholstery Crane discovered still attached to the seat bottoms. The wiring harness is the last item scheduled. It will be fabricated in the coming months.

There is an interesting original dash plaque on the car—at least from the time when Clemens picked up the car in North Dakota more than ten years ago. Milliken does not know its significance, and would be grateful if anyone recognizes it.

There are other Chrysler Le Mans recreations around, including two in metro Detroit. Ex-Chrysler engineering VP Francois Castaing has one that he races, and the Walter P. Chrysler Museum recently



The cockpit is lined with leather matched to fragments of the original upholstery that were found under the seats. The W.P. Chrysler Museum's history of the 1920s and 1930s racers is on the passenger's seat.



The 218.6-cu.-in. inline six produces 68 horsepower.



The Garage is filled with anonymous classic cars. The owners do not want its location to be revealed.

completed another that is very similar to Milliken's. "Museum people came to the warehouse on our First Saturdays to inspect—and photograph—the car," he says. "For a while we discussed working on some aspects of our projects together (placing a collective order for wire wheels, for instance) but, in the end, the respective budgets we were working with kept us from forging much of an alliance on the cars."

There are at least two other Chrysler Le Mans car recreations in the rest of the world. Martin Swig has a car on the West Coast and Ray Jones has one in Australia. Swig, Jones and Castaing raced theirs at the Monterey Historic Automobile Races in California a few years back. Milliken would like to drive his on the track someday, too. For more on the famous Chrysler racing cars of the Twenties and Thirties, see *Chrysler in Competition, European Road Racing 1925 to 1931* by Ray Jones and Martin Swig. It's available at the Walter P. Chrysler Museum or on line at chryslerheritage.com. You can also go there to get a 1:18 scale die cast replica of the Museum car (which should also do as a replica of the Milliken Chrysler, as they are both tributes to the #8 Stoffel-Rossignol racer that placed third overall at the 1928 Le Mans). ■