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# Walter Miller

From an early age, he had a drive to buy and sell automotive literature

By Jim Donnelly

Photography by David Traver Adolphus



**“When are you going to** finally get rid of all that paper junk about cars? Look at what you’re turning this house into, the Wreck of the Hesperus, making it look like a house of ill repute. It’s a fire hazard. It’s going to bring in termites. The place is going to collapse. Who cares about stuff about cars? Get rid of this junk, get off your one-track mind and start thinking about things that responsible people think about.”

For many of us who were subjected to a Luddite parental diatribe such as

that, the next occurrence was usually seeing your beloved automotive literature getting tossed into a trash truck’s hopper and carted off to the landfill (assuming the episode happened before recycling was mandatory just about everywhere). Walter Miller escaped that unpleasant experience, in part because his parents were tolerant of cars, but to a much greater degree because he had already shown an innate, precocious grasp of business fundamentals at an age when most youngsters were plopped in front of

the black-and-white portable giggling as splattered cream pies dripped from Soupy Sales’ face.

Miller was cranked by car literature, but he embraced it more as a marketable resource for car people than a press-to-the-breast keepsake for himself. And let’s be grateful for it: If you’re one of the kids whose collection rolled away inside a stinking orange rig, Miller can finally dry your tears.

“I really never got into it so much to accumulate automotive literature for



Where can you find signs for Pantera and Rootes in such proximity? Only at Miller's

myself, as I did to identify things that I could buy and sell," was how Miller began his story. "When I was 5 years old, I was already into selling rare coins, and then I got interested in pretty much anything that was historic, and after that, I really got into cars. By the time I was, maybe, 14 or so, I thought that with the automotive literature, it was something I could use to try and make some extra money here and there."

Miller's early instincts proved to be remarkably accurate. Today, his Syracuse, New York-based archives of salable literature—and in the interests of accuracy, we should note that Miller's primary focus is on factory-produced sales brochures, artwork and paint guides—today totals more than 2 million individual items, spread among three buildings jammed with fireproof filing cabinets covering some 15,000 square feet, and managed by a dozen of Miller's employees. Miller is one of what you might call the Big Four of automotive-literature specialists based in the United States—the other three being Faxon's Automotive Literature of California, Bob Johnson Auto Literature of Massachusetts and Robert C. McLellan of Texas. In his orbit, Miller is considered as much a prominent figure as noted European archivists such as Karl Ludvigsen and Eoin Young.

That's lofty status gained from the humblest of beginnings. Miller's father was the founder and owner of Charles Chips, then based in Syracuse, a door-to-door seller of premium potato chips and other specialty snack foods, which is

now owned by a southern California conglomerate. In earlier days, light-tan Charles Chips trucks were familiar sights in the Northeast as their drivers plied their routes, making stops at homes for biweekly deliveries of chips packaged in large round tins, which are collector's items in their own right today. From the age of 8, Miller would ride through Upstate New York as a driver's helper aboard Charles Chips trucks. As he remembers today, "I was 6, 7, 8, and the driver would stop at somebody's house, and I'd buy old copies of the Saturday Evening Post for something like 5 cents, then take them home and cut the car ads out of them and save them. That's kind of how I got my start."

Business was good. By age 14, a good three years before he was eligible for a New York State driver's license, Miller owned his first car, a 1936 Plymouth coupe, and was restricted to driving it up and down his family's driveway. In those years, Miller had already enlisted his parents as willing aides to his entrepreneurship; they'd take him to huge New York car shows including those at Binghamton, Dunkirk, Norwich and Syracuse, where he'd prowl the vendor aisles looking for treasures amid countless boxes of old ads and company handouts. As a young teenager, he was already a well-established advertiser in *Hemmings Motor News* (and obviously, still is) offering literature for sale.

Miller obtained a bachelor's degree at the State University of New York at Binghamton and a master's degree from

McGill University in Montreal, both, appropriately enough, in business studies. Once he received his MBA in 1977, he was admittedly a bit at loose ends in terms of a career goal.

"All my life, I was always oriented toward business, but I never really thought my business would be in automotive literature. After McGill, I thought I would probably go to Detroit and try to become an automotive executive. But by then, I was starting to look at the literature thing as a real business in and of itself. I'll never forget, the first two years I was in it after I graduated, it took me those two years to buy enough material to fill up my first four-drawer filing cabinet. Today, I buy those fireproof cabinets 40 at a time. Right now, I've got about 500 of them."

You could say that by specializing in factory literature, Miller occupies his own niche within a niche—a very precisely defined sub-genre of the old car hobby. Oh, to be sure, he's a car guy—his personal collection includes a 1913 Cadillac and a 1917 Packard touring car. Until recently, he also operated his own museum, The Museum of Automotive History, one of the world's largest privately held collections of automobilia. The museum is now in the early stages of being relocated to Lowell, North Carolina, outside Charlotte, mainly because Miller's sites in Syracuse are simply out of space. Other literature vendors may specialize in other, similarly narrow areas of the business, such as old books on automotive history or shop manuals from years gone by. Miller's operation used to be a little broader in scope, but he sold what he estimates were 10,000 automotive history volumes and something on the order of 150,000 old car magazines so he could concentrate more closely on factory items.

Besides the obvious places in car-collector magazines, Miller runs his own advertising in some unusual venues. Because a lot of his inventory comes from the liquidation of estates and private collections, he advertises in publications as diverse as the *New York Law Journal*, gun collectors' magazines, journals that cover rare books and art, and reviews of military history. He also frequents rare-book and antique shows and auctions all over the country. A fair amount of his inventory acquisition is unsolicited, occurring when attorneys whose law practices specialize in wills or estate planning contact him, attempting to gauge his interest in a literature collection that a client is interested in liquidating. That's how Miller recently acquired the entire contents of a private auto

museum's library whose owner had died. Miller had the whole collection shipped to Syracuse aboard a rented tractor-trailer rig, then hired 10 local college students to unload and catalog it.

"My ideal collection find comes from a guy who from the time he was a kid, starting writing away to the car companies asking them to send him catalogs and such, and just kept doing it for the next 50 or 60 years without a letup, doing it with every spare minute he had, and then storing and filing away everything in perfect condition," Miller said.

For that reason, Miller's materials tend to be of uniformly high quality, rather than tattered, finger-worn or stained. In keeping with the times, he has set up a well-organized website (www.autolit.com) with extensive search features. Given the enormity of his inventory, Miller can most likely find you anything you need, often at impressively reasonable prices. A factory sales catalog for the full 1951 Mercury line will cost you somewhere in the neighborhood of \$25, and Miller estimated he has at least 25 copies of that catalog in stock. Brochures for the 1929 Auburn are more scarce and expensive at around \$75, but Miller still has around a half-dozen of them in hand.

A much more rare sub-specialty of his are catalogs from coachbuilding firms of the '20s, '30s and '40s, mainly because the exclusivity of custom bodies dictated that few of the catalogs were ever printed. A brochure from even the more prolific firms such as Brewster or Derham can easily command \$500 to



We especially love the sign for Walter, the great builder of all-wheel-drive trucks

\$1,000. A similar catalog from a really exclusive firm, like Saoutchik, will likely start at \$5,000 and go from there.

Miller's clientele is genuinely global in scope.

"Today, about 40 percent of my business comes from outside the United States, and that's a number that's actually still going up. One advantage of advertising in *Hemmings* is that it has been around for so many years that it has readers in probably something like 100 countries. My typical order, I'd say at least 75 percent of them, is for sales literature,

with the rest mostly involving things like parts manuals or posters. I also get a fair number of calls from restoration shops, looking for paint chips, or in many cases, for the correct owner's manual for a car they're restoring.

"In recent years, Ferrari literature has been really expensive, which started about 20 years ago when the Ferrari market went crazy. But some of that literature can still cost into the many thousands of dollars," he said. "Today, the same thing is happening with literature for muscle cars. It just goes hand in hand that when the car goes up in price, so does the literature. A lot of it, though, is the person who just collects literature, who just likes Cadillacs or Lincolns or Porsches and just wants to buy everything he can on that particular marque. Or it could be a guy who owns a 1963 Chevy Nova, or is restoring one, and wants every piece of literature he can find on that one car—sales brochures, owner's manuals, shop manuals, paint documents."

As is the case with countless other businesses, Miller's has been revolutionized by the Internet, which has created new international markets for his wares that might have languished unsold eternally before Web technology existed.

"More and more people are buying online, and the things that are really obscure and used to be really hard to sell, we're now seeing much more of a call for them," he said. "Now, you can use Google or some other search engine, and just enter the name of the make and 'literature,' and it just pops up, even if it's some practically unknown car or truck that was once made in Poland." ❧



Miller is the Source for vintage owner's manuals; you gotta love the '53 Dodge Coronet

# ANTIQUE AUTOMOBILE LITERATURE

