



Sing Us a Song, Jimmy: The Story Behind a 1913 Peugeot at the Seal Cove Auto Museum

By Roberto Rodriguez

In today's superheated auction market, car collectors frequently see fine automobiles sell for tens of thousands and even millions of dollars. In the past, collectors believed that it was ungentlemanly to profit from the sale of their prized horseless carriages. There was even a time when one might simply be given a car, which calls to mind that old expression, "He got it for a song." This may have been the case with James Melton, former owner of the 1913 Peugeot in the collection of the Seal Cove Auto Museum.

Provenance puts a human face on the wonderful automobiles on display at the Seal Cove Auto Museum and helps to bring them to life. It helps that many of the automobiles in the collection were once owned by wealthy, influential, and fascinating people. James Melton was one such person. Telling the story of his ownership of the 1913 Type 150 Peugeot Skiff on display has always been a joy, and now the pleasure of interpreting Melton's ownership has taken a major leap forward. Additional research has added a new chapter to the Peugeot's history and answered a long-standing question: From whom did Melton get the car?

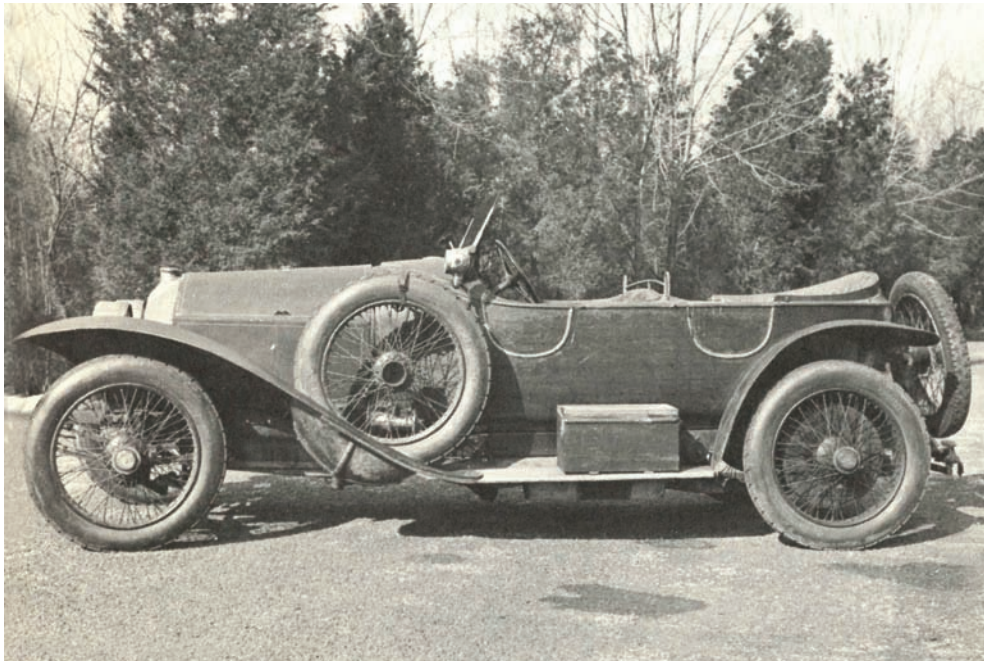
James Melton (1904–1961) was a popular tenor, a star in every sense of the word. His voice was heard on the radio and on phonograph records; he was seen

on concert tours, in Hollywood movies, and in performances at the Metropolitan Opera—he even had his own national television show!¹ What more colorful provenance could we ask for to intrigue our museum patrons and complement what most of our visitors say is the most beautiful car in the museum?

Impeccable Provenance

There is more to the story of the Peugeot's provenance, a tale that goes well beyond James Melton and his ownership. First, there is the car itself, a mahogany-bodied sculpture shaped like a skiff boat at its rear, crafted by the French coachbuilder Jean-Henri Labourdette. The first Skiff-Torpedo was created in 1912 by Labourdette on a 20 horsepower Panhard & Levassor chassis for the Chevalier René de Knyff. It was constructed using the same basic methods used in wooden boat building, with oak for the framing and mahogany fastened with copper rivets for the outer planking. The car caused a sensation, and soon after, other "skiffs" appeared, the one at the Seal Cove was only the third or fourth one crafted by Labourdette.²

In recounting the Peugeot's provenance, we must acknowledge the Seal Cove Auto Museum's founder, Richard Cushing Paine Jr. The Paine collection represents not only one man's love of automobiles, it also reflects an aesthetic wrapped in Paine's love of Maine and his roots in New England. Born near Boston to one of New England's patrician families, Richard Paine could trace his ancestry back to Robert Treat Paine, signer of the Declaration of Independence, and to his great-



Photograph of the Peugeot when in Melton's collection, published in an appreciation of antique cars and featuring examples from the James Melton Autorama written by James Melton and Ken Purdy in 1954. *Courtesy of Margo Melton Nutt*

grandfather Charles William Eliot.³ For those who follow the history of Mount Desert Island, the names of Charles William Eliot and his son Charles Eliot have special meaning. Eliot senior was the president of Harvard University and an early summer resident. His son, a landscape architect, made the first proposal that much of the island be saved from development and opened for public use. When the younger Charles Eliot died of meningitis, Charles W. Eliot took on his son's dream and organized the Hancock County Trustees of Public Reservations. He recruited George Dorr, and later, John D. Rockefeller Jr., into the effort that ultimately resulted in the founding of Acadia National Park.⁴

Richard Paine obtained the Peugeot in 1965 when he purchased a collection of forty-one automobiles from Dr. Samuel Scher, a respected plastic surgeon and well-known automobile collector from New York. Scher had, in turn, acquired the Peugeot from

James Melton's widow not long after Melton's passing in 1961.⁵ Melton, Dr. Scher, and Richard Paine establish the impressive provenance of the Peugeot. However, a question still remained: Who owned the car before Melton did?

Enter Billy Leeds

Luckily, Melton refers to the Peugeot in his autobiography, "Bright Wheels Rolling," including a photograph of the car "before restoration" and the tantalizing words, "[this car] was given to me by Mr. William Leeds of New York City."⁶ The question then became: Who was the William Leeds of New York City?

An email to James Melton's daughter, Margo Melton Nutt, received the kind

reply, "The name Leeds is unfamiliar to me, but I checked my father's Rolodex (yes, I still have it!) and there is a card for William B. Leeds and a phone number."⁷ William B. Leeds, Jr., was born on September 19, 1902 to the "Tin Plate King," William B. Leeds Sr., and Nonnie May "Nancy" Stewart. Leeds Sr. had established his fortune from the tin-plate industry in the nineteenth century, becoming one of America's richest men. To say that young Leeds led a privileged life would be an understatement. He became known in the popular press as "The World's Richest Boy," or "Poor Little Rich Boy."⁸

When William Leeds Jr.'s father died in 1908, young William became the heir to some forty million dollars, a billion dollars in today's money. His mother immediately moved him into an estate in Montclair, New Jersey. By 1912, the Montclair estate was staffed with nearly twenty servants, two detectives to follow William Leeds Jr.'s every move and to deter kidnappers, and a French car with a chauffeur and footman. As for Nancy Leeds, she left her son in the hands of the servants and detectives and traveled to London to try her luck marrying a royal. Her hope of becoming a princess came true when she married Prince Christopher of Greece in 1920 and changed her name to the Princess Anastasia of Greece and Denmark.⁹

By 1920, young William Leeds was a busy globe-trotting teenager. He became a fixture in the gossip columns as the dashing adventurer, "Billy" Leeds. In 1921, he traveled to Greece to be with his mother, and within two days of his

arrival became engaged to the seventeen-year-old Princess Xenia of Greece after knowing her for all of twenty-four hours. They wed on October 9, 1921.¹⁰

"Billy" and Princess Xenia Leeds could not take a step without its being reported in the press. The gossip pages recounted nearly all of their activities, especially when the couple entertained celebrities. In February 1927, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported, "wealthy men were purchasing such weapons as the Thompson 'sub-machine gun,' the most portable and handiest of the high-powered machine guns, to protect their estates. Among such purchasers is William B. Leeds, son of the late 'Tin Plate King.'"¹¹ Leeds's friend Ernest Hemingway coveted the Thompson, and Leeds eventually gave it to him, an act that establishes his generosity with his associates.¹²

Another example of Leeds's thrilling lifestyle comes from the *Alton Evening Telegraph*. On July 9, 1928, the paper reported a fire on Leeds's yacht and his quick action to save his life and the life of actress Adele Astaire. According to the paper, "Leeds and Miss Astaire ... had just entered the boat to take a trial spin. He started the motor. The backfire ignited gasoline seepage in the hull of the craft. The boat almost immediately was enveloped in flames." Acting quickly, "Leeds picked up Miss Astaire, who had collapsed, and lifted her to the landing stage. Then climbing out himself he pushed the Fan Tail out into clear water. An explosion occurred a moment later and the boat was destroyed." Fortunately, neither Leeds nor Astaire was seriously injured.¹³

The Leeds' only child, a daughter named Nancy Helen Marie Leeds, was born on February 24, 1925, but their marriage was doomed. With their life of constant travel, and as William was spending an increasing amount of his time with his ever-growing fleet of boats, rumors of a divorce began to appear in the papers. And finally, a headline in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* on February 2, 1930 read, "Xenia Leeds Divorce Ends High Romance."

Some said it was Princess Xenia's obsession with the professed Grand Duchess Anastasia Nikolaevna of Russia that led to the Leeds' divorce after only nine years of marriage. Princess Xenia had taken in the woman who claimed to be Grand Duchess Anastasia of Russia's royal family, the Romanovs. Xenia and the real Anastasia were cousins. In 1928, Xenia became aware of the woman, and invited Anna Tschaikovsky (later Anna Anderson) to stay at their estate in Oyster Bay. William Leeds despised the woman, finally ordering her to leave his home. All of this drama finally drove the Leeds apart, and the divorce happened shortly thereafter.¹⁴

Eventually, William Bateman Leeds Jr. would remarry. On July 11, 1930, newspapers reported that William B. Leeds had staged a heroic rescue at sea. Leeds rescued a twenty-four-year-old telephone operator, Olive Hamilton, whose rowboat overturned while she was trying to get a close-up look at his yacht. A romance was kindled, and a lifelong relationship was underway, though they would not be married for another six years. Gossipers speculated that Hamilton had deliberately tipped the boat, anticipating the achieved result. Hamilton was an attractive woman, well-suited for the world of Billy Leeds.¹⁵

When Leeds married Hamilton for a second time in 1936—due to the doubted legality of the first ceremony "performed by the captain of his yacht in a squall at sea May 23"—every paper from *The Tampa Times* to *The Marshall News Messenger* carried the Associated Press story:

County Judge W. F. Blanton performed the ceremony at the modernistic white bungalow of Mr. and Mrs. Sailing Baruch on Dilido Island in Biscayne Bay. Baruch was best man ... The Leeds plan to sail for Bimini and Bermuda today aboard the big white yacht and

then proceed to New York in time for the Louis-Schmeling fight.¹⁶

On November 20, 1936, several newspapers carried a story about the just-published *1937 Social Register*. As punishment for marrying a telephone operator, Leeds's name was ignominiously dropped. A few months later, Leeds announced that he would make his yacht, *Moana*, his full-time residence. His fifty-four-acre Long Island estate, called Kenwood, would be auctioned off. He also announced his intention to sell his seventeen-room Beekman Place apartment. The yacht was more spacious than either land residence.¹⁷

With the outbreak of World War II, interest in the glamorous lifestyle of the rich dwindled. The public's appetite for gossip and the comings and goings of high society, was eclipsed by news of battles, the brave, and the dead. During the war years, and into the post-war era, the names of Billy and Olive Leeds appeared in newspaper gossip pages less and less frequently. By the time of Leeds's death in 1972, a new generation would have paid scant attention to his sad obituary:

A funeral service will be held in Charlotte Amalie, Thomas, in the Virgin Islands today for American tinplate heir William B. Leeds, a leading playboy of the 1920s who sailed a 254-foot yacht and married a Russian princess. Leeds, 69, who was known to the international set as "Billy," died at his estate,

The Richard C. Paine Jr. Automobile Collection Charitable Trust's 1913 Type 150 Peugeot Skiff as it looks today on display at the Seal Cove Auto Museum. Photograph by Jennifer Steen Boober



Wintersberg Peak, Friday afternoon (Dec. 31, 1971) of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Friends said he had been seriously ill with cancer.¹⁸

Leeds's Generosity

When recounting the Peugeot's provenance to our visitors at the museum, a few old-timers will fondly remember James Melton's beautiful voice; many locals will regale me with stories about Richard Paine; a few car collectors will know the name Dr. Samuel Scher; and on very rare occasions, an avid yachtsman will talk of Billy Leeds. For the majority of visitors, these names mean nothing—at least, not until they see the car, hear the

story of its ownership, and imagine times gone by.

We do not know exactly when Leeds acquired the Peugeot, or when he gave it to James Melton, but we do know that he owned a fleet of cars. *Society Circus* by Helen Worden stated that "William Leeds has had as many as one hundred Lincolns in his garage at Oyster Bay."¹⁹ Could the Peugeot have been hiding among the Lincolns? It is very possible that the car was originally purchased for Billy Leeds by his mother when he was twelve years old, and was stored in the boathouse at the Oyster Bay estate along with all of his other automobiles.

At some point, James Melton saw the car and it was given to him. I like to think that he sang a song, as he was known to do, and was given the car as a thank you. Recounting another car in his collection, Melton wrote: "The owner said he'd give it to me on one condition—he wanted me to sing 'The World

Is Waiting for The Sunrise' while he accompanied me on the piano."²⁰ William Bateman Leeds was generous to a fault, not just giving his "Tommy Gun" to Ernest Hemingway but also sending a boatload of medical supplies to Pitcairn Island in the dark days before Pearl Harbor, supporting a leper colony in Tahiti, and donating an entire ambulance corps to the British when they were fighting Germany during World War II. Can you just picture Billy Leeds saying, "Sing us a song, Jimmy," and then handing him the keys to the rare and beautiful Peugeot?

Roberto Rodriguez's career spans forty-six years as a museum professional. Prior to the Seal Cove Auto Museum, he was the Executive Director of the Revelstoke Railway Museum in British Columbia, and before that, the Manager of the Precision Valley Corvette Museum in Springfield, Vermont. He has also served as the Executive Director of the Fort at No. 4 Living History Museum in Charlestown, New Hampshire; Executive Director of Park-McCullough House in North Bennington, Vermont; and Executive Director of the American Precision Museum in Windsor, Vermont.

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