~ Life in LAMORINDA ~

Classic car pioneer to be honored at Orinda Classic Car Show

By John T. Miller

This picture of a 1936 Auburn Boattail Speedster was taken in 1970, during Bob Fisher's first mayoralty and at the time of the first Concours d'Elegance de Lafayette. This was the spirit of the Concours. Photo provided

Generations of classic car enthusiasts will pay tribute to the man who helped launch an appreciation for the pastime by presenting the Lamorinda Classic Car Pioneer Award to Bob Fisher.

As part of the 13th Annual Orinda Classic Car Show, this inaugural award will recognize Fisher for his contributions in establishing and nurturing the classic car culture enjoyed in the Lamorinda communities today.

While Fisher's impact on the classic car scene can't be denied, his imprint on the city of Lafayette is huge. He was the top vote getter of 20 candidates in Lafayette's incorporation election in 1968, served twice as mayor in 1970 and 1974, and was the youngest of 450 California mayors. He was Lafayette's first chair of the Mayor's Conference of Contra Costa County and was honored by the city as Citizen of the Year in 1976.

After earning degrees from Harvard College and Harvard Law School, and a Ph.D. from London School of Economics and Political Science, he became a professor of criminology at UC Berkeley for six years, president of John F. Kennedy University for 10 years and executive director of The San Francisco Foundation for nine years, among other career stints.

In an effort to bring prestige and notoriety to the "nondescript suburb somewhere east of Oakland on the way to Walnut Creek," as Fisher described the fledgling town, he invoked the spirit of the Revolutionary Way hero Marquis de Lafayette, "who was distinguished by an appreciation of beautiful things."

Fisher used his connections in the Rolls Royce owner's club to arrange the first Concours d'Elegance de Lafayette in 1970. Over 100 beautiful and classic cars from all over the world drove to the green at Stanley Middle School where they were showcased on their way from San Francisco to Napa.

Eventually, the Concours moved to Acalanes High School and became more of a car show, lasting for 30 years and generating proceeds for many local charities.

Fisher claims that his love of cars was born as a child from the memories of his father's job, managing General Pershing's motor pool in France during World War I.

"I could never afford anything until the late-'60s when I really started collecting cars," he laughs. "I never wanted to be a collector, but found it was easier to buy them than to sell them!"

He became a mentor, of sorts, to the next generation of enthusiasts, working with many of the high school students in the Lafayette Youth Commission and the Mayor's Class he taught at Acalanes once a week.

Dan Akol, a local car enthusiast who will be showing some of his classic cars at the Orinda event, recalls meeting Fisher when he was a teen: "We'd go over to his garage in Lafayette and he had a number of really beautiful top-line classic cars, including a 1909 Brush brass car. He told me to polish up the Brush and if it won first place I could drive his 275 GTB Ferrari to the senior ball."

An interesting side note is that long ago Fisher sold the Ferrari that Akol drove to the ball for about $10,000. Similar cars can now be worth up to $3 million.

Akol is not the only student who was the beneficiary of Fisher's generosity and influence. Many of them helped work in his garage, polished up his cars, and went to the ball in one of his classic automobiles. Quite a few of them ended up as collectors themselves.

Fisher said, "It's a very nice hobby that anyone can become involved in. You can buy a junker for a couple hundred dollars, fix it up, and have fun doing it."

Asked what it meant to be the first recipient of the Lamorinda Classic Car Pioneer Award, Fisher said, "The Concours d'Elegance de Lafayette brought together hundreds of volunteers annually for 30 years to raise needed funds for local charities, and offered a great number of hobbyists the chance to celebrate their appreciation for cars as exceptional expressions of both artistic and engineering creativity. It was my privilege to create this event and very gratifying to be the first honoree."

Fisher will be honored at the Orinda Classic Car Show, which will run from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 9 in and around Orinda Motors, 63 Orinda Way. This free event continues to delight car fans of all ages and benefits the "Seniors Around Town" transportation service, an Orinda Association program, The Educational Foundation of Orinda (EFO) and other fine causes. A pre-show dinner and party, "Dancing with the Cars," will be held Friday, Sept 8 beginning at 5:30 p.m. For more information, visit www.orindacarshow.com.

Classic cars at last year's show Photos provided

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