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THIS WEEK'S TIP
Selling your car soon? After you wash it, wipe the brake dust off the wheel covers and clean the tires with a tire gloss product, advises the Car Care Council.

THE OMAHA WORLD-HERALD MOTOR NEWS SECTION

My ride with 'Bentley Bill': An auto appraiser shares a special story

BY R.W. "BOB" RYAN

In my 20-plus years appraising classic cars, there are but a few extraordinary experiences that stand out. This is one of them.

It all started with a simple phone call in the fall of 2005. A client in Denver wanted me to appraise a Bentley in Des Moines, Iowa, for his elderly father-in-law. Apparently this man had failing health, and the car might be offered for sale. I agreed to take on this task and travel the several hundred miles to do it.

On a cool Saturday morning in September, with the tree leaves just starting to turn golden yellow, I traveled to Des Moines. On a hill next to a lake, I found Bill's home. Up the steep, curving drive and nestled in the trees, the home was amazing — a Frank Lloyd Wright-style with huge beams and windows.

I, however, was more interested in the stately Bentley that came into view as I followed the drive to the rear of the home. This was a magnificent automobile! A 1937 4.25-liter, two-door saloon, with a limited-production coach by Vesters of Brussels. It had a rare steel roof with sunroof. With its shining chrome headlights, big as wastebaskets, I was enthralled! I parked and walked over to see it: right-hand drive, the leather, the walnut paneling, that unforgettable old-car smell. I have looked at many high-end British cars. I knew right away this



PHOTO COURTESY OF BOB RYAN

Bill's 1937 Bentley.

was something special. This car had a character all its own.

I looked up to see an petite woman approaching, with a steaming cup of coffee in hand. She politely introduced herself as Bill's housekeeper, told me she was to bring this coffee to me and said Bill would be out to meet me shortly. I thanked her and returned to examining the Bentley.

A while later, I looked up to see an elderly man slowly working his way down the long sidewalk. With cane in hand and taking small, deliberate steps, he paused and waved to me. "I'm on my

way!" he said. I smiled and replied, "Take your time, sir."

I watched as he moved toward me. He was a gentle older man, balding, with a rich, warm smile. He could surely be anyone's grandpa. He finally made his way to the car, we greeted each other, and he began to tell me the story of his Bentley. Seems he had owned this car for many years — he bought it right after his college days. (His voice was strong and eloquent. I could tell right away this was an educated man.)

He asked if I would like to go for a "spin." I eagerly agreed. I watched as Bill struggled to get into the driver's seat. He actually had to lift his legs inside with his hands, one leg at a time. Once we were both inside, he fired up the engine and opened the sunroof. The morning sun shone through, and as he "raced" the engine, his smile grew bigger. "Let's go!" he said, jamming the Bentley into gear, and we were off.

As we moved down the drive, I witnessed an amazing transformation. Bill told me the tales of his many experiences over the years in this car. I could not help but notice that his frail legs now seemed strong. He shifted gears effortlessly, smoothly. He handled the huge steering wheel like he was a younger man. As we drove through the neighborhood of stately homes, he maneuvered this huge car with ease. It was then that it hit me: Bill

was this car, and this car was Bill. The two melded into one smooth-running machine. Bill's frailty disappeared — he was young again!

On returning to the bottom of his steep drive, he paused and explained to me, in a merry tone, that the owner's manual stated, "low gear need only be engaged when faced with a steep incline." After saying that, he engaged low and we "zoomed" up the drive, our hair blowing in the wind. He laughed, and so did I. We parked and Bill struggled to get out, using his cane to steady himself. We shook hands and I departed.

As I drove down the winding driveway, I realized what I had just witnessed. Bill exemplifies the special relationship between a man and his car. This car was part of Bill, part of his life, part of his memories. Bill loved his car and I really believed it loved him back. When he got into that car, it embraced him, lovingly curing his bad legs, giving strength to his weak arms. It carried him back to a younger, healthier time. I feel privileged to have driven with him. I will never forget Bill, his smile and his beloved Bentley.

For more than 20 years, R.W. "Bob" Ryan has been an independent auto appraiser, specializing in classic and collectible cars. Obsessed with cars since the age of 13, he has built, restored and collected numerous cars over the years. He lives in Omaha with his wife and three children. You can learn more about Bob at www.usaautoappraisers.com.