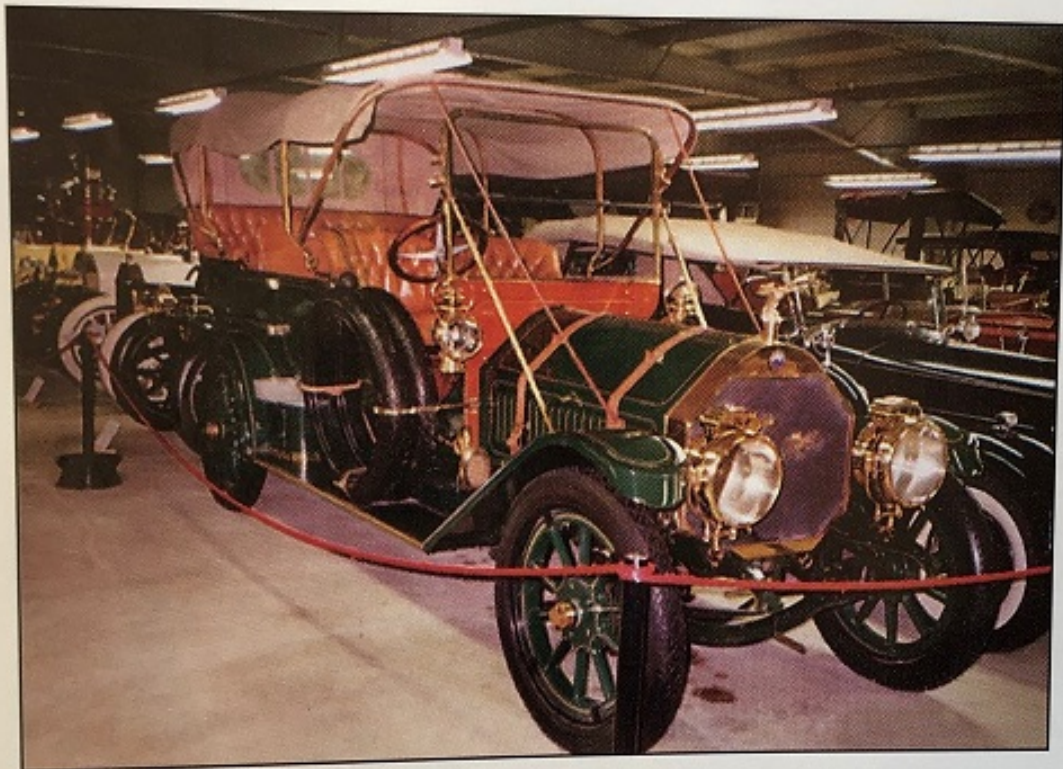


The Virtue of Chains



The Thomas Flyer today with a beautiful seven-passenger touring body.

by Earl Filter

At one time, years ago, there was a sort of "cult" of owners with chain-drive equipment. They generated a steady flow of banter, not unlike the Mercer-Stutz rivalry, about the virtues of chains.

Cameron Peck coined a phrase that was used frequently (always in good humor, of course) and generally it started some pretty warm discussions. He referred to "the chain-drive snobs" (although he was one) with a smile on his face. This activated Simplex, Locomobile and Mercedes' owners, as well as owners of other marques similarly driven.

At the time Walter Marr, Jr., was driving a 2-cyl. Buick (chain drive) as you know, and he turned loose his great sense of humor working over the big 4-cyl. chain drivers. It was fun listening to these owners and soaking up the information and humor.

Alec Ulmann, a walking automotive encyclopedia, would lecture on chain maintenance, Peck on the benefits of not having a typical rear-end system, etc. All of this led to my desire to own a chain-drive automobile, and, subsequently, the same fever struck a nearby friend.

My tale first.

I pursued every lead that sounded like chains, mostly leading to single-cylinder Cadillacs, curved dash Oldsmobiles and the like. Finally word came of a chassis, chain drive, with a 6-cyl. T-head motor. It was in a barn somewhere east of here, and to really pin it down, it was thought the owner's name was Smith!

Was it fact or fiction? Visualize the dilemma: Anything for a chain drive automobile, and here comes one in a barn east of here owned by a guy named "Smith". There was nothing to do but canvas everyone I could think of in the hope of locating Smith, if he existed at all. Finally, after months of searching, Smith was finally identified and located. In due course he responded to my appeals and invited me to visit.

He lived in a little town in a generally rural area.

Smith was waiting for me, and after the usual pleasantries escorted me to his barn. There it was as described: 6-cyl. T head and chains, no body but front fenders, hood and dash. He asked me if I'd ever seen a 6-70 Thomas Flyer—I hadn't—and told me of his plans to find a body and go driving.

I informed him I had heard it was for sale; he said he'd never sell but would trade for an '09 Pierce Arrow 36-hp roadster, or, at least, most of one. This demand floored me. He assured me he meant it, and the first to show up with the required Pierce-Arrow got the Thomas.

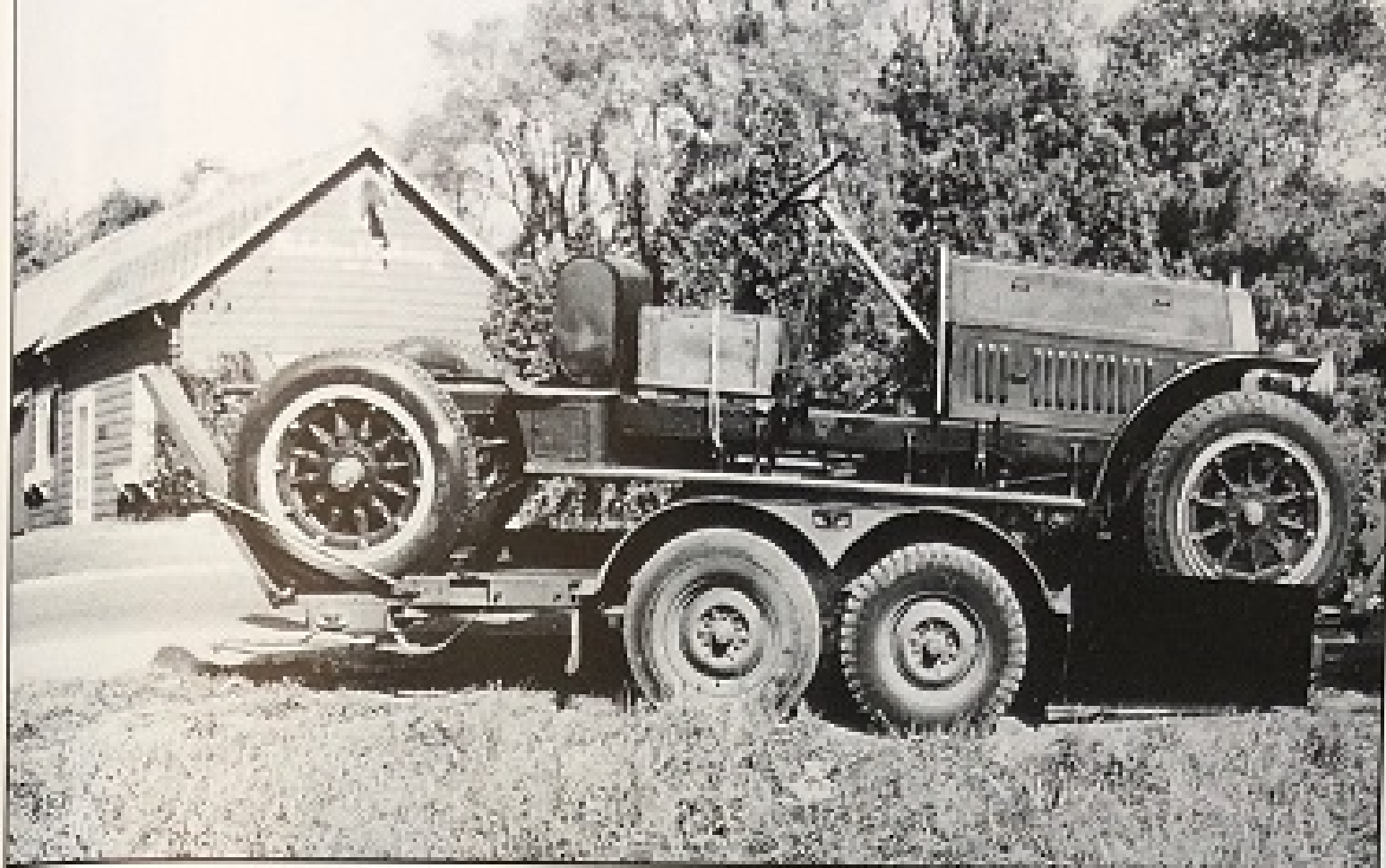
Now desperate, the search got underway. Inquiries at Barney Pollard's yard, Joe Gest's barns, Art Austria's emporium, etc., produced nothing.

Sam Bailey, the great Pierce-Arrow restorer in Philadelphia, advised to forget the idea; a suggestion I had heard before.

One day a well-known Mercer driver from Southern California listened to my story. He thought he saw most of a 36-hp Pierce-Arrow in Austin Clark's barns on Long Island, New York during a visit there. A phone call to Clark confirmed he had one. It was a roadster, but a basket case. Most important, yes he'd sell it, if I really wanted it. Clark didn't have a photo, but described it in detail.

I informed Smith that I didn't want to go to the trouble of getting Clark's car (or what was left of a car) deliver it and have him say no deal. He agreed—no matter the condition—as long as it was an 1909 36-hp Pierce Arrow. Clark guaranteed it was. The trade was made after solving the usual logistic problems.

At last a chain-drive chassis was in my garage. It was a giant and made its neighbors look like dwarves (later identified to be one of the few 6-90's built, but I could never verify that). After the usual tinkering I was able to drive it.



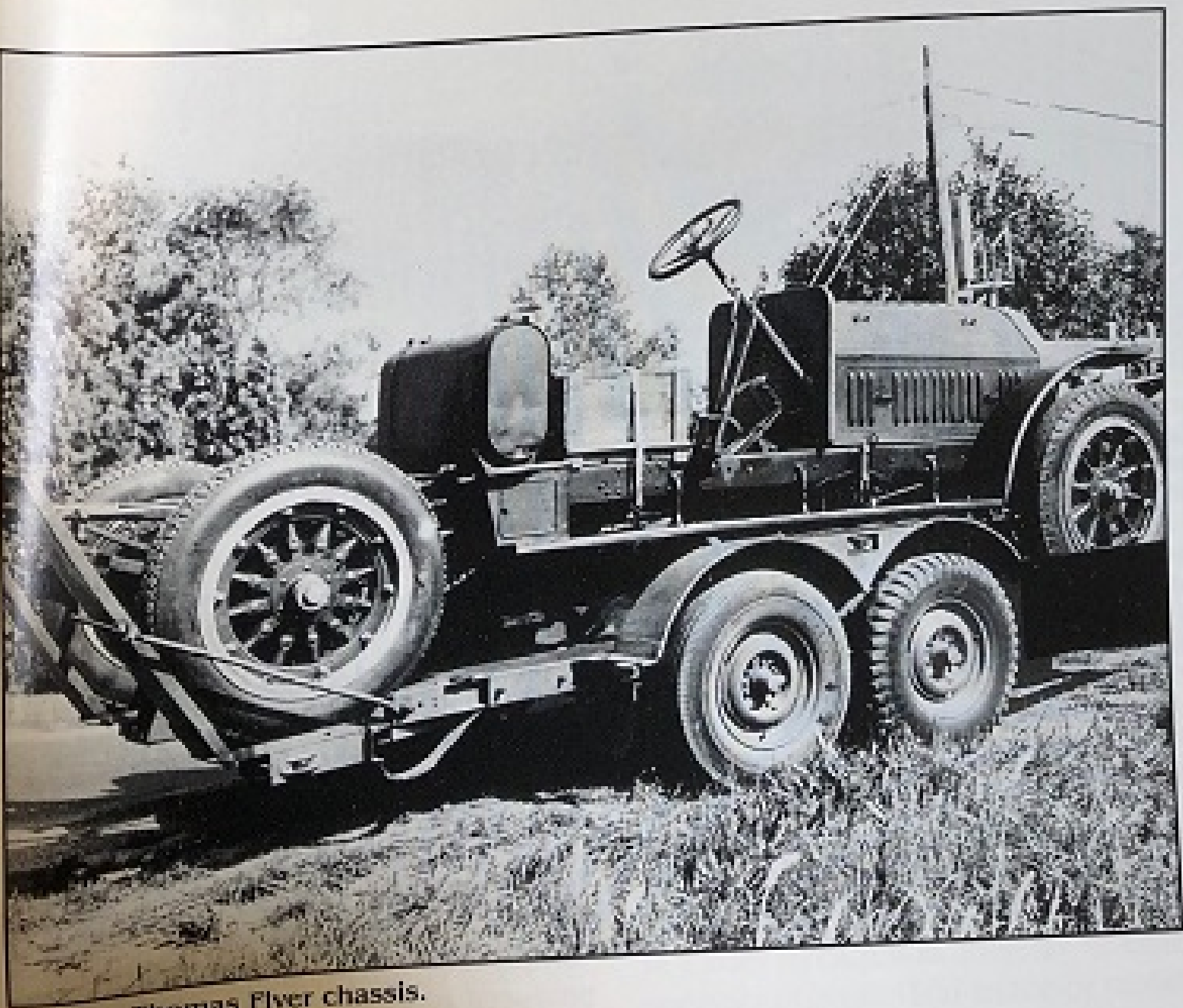
1911(?) Thomas Flyer chassis on trailer at Smith's place ready to go home.

After searching, an appropriate body was found.

After two years a new round of dicker-ing got underway. By this time I was fed up, not with chains, but with the project. Ultimately, body and chassis met, but the whole works left my care. Today this great project can be seen resplendent with its seven-passenger touring body in a well-known antique-auto museum.

The Pierce-Arrow? It's now living in Pennsylvania doing its thing.

I haven't lost my love for chains, but I don't miss the Thomas! In fact, I was glad to see it go. Have you ever felt that way about a car? □



1911(?) Thomas Flyer chassis.