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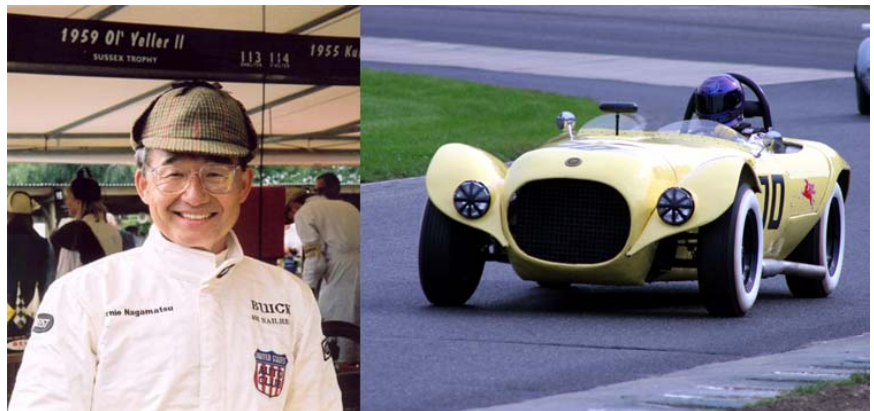
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Balchowsky's Old Yeller II Is In The Doctor's Hands

10/02/06 - © Andrew S. Hartwell

Those of us with gray in our hair and a half a step in our strides surrendered to the years, look back on the late 1950's and early 1960's as a treasured time in sportscar racing. In the odd moments when our memory cells are able, we conjure up images in our minds of some of the cars and the people who captured our imaginations way back then. Through the wonderful medium of vintage racing we are able to relive some of that magic today, thanks in great measure to the people who have taken care to preserve the cars of our youth.



Doctor Ernie Nagamatsu is one of the people we can thank for keeping alive one of the great cars of the past; the hand-crafted product of a very special pair of California natives. Max and Ina Balchowsky were the proprietors of the legendary Hollywood Motors shop located in southern California. Here they put many broken cars back together and helped many a lead-footed fellow get up to speed in their new rides. And Max and Ina also put together a series of sportscars they called 'Old Yellers'. These were original creations they designed, built, and helped get up to speed on west coast road racing circuits.

Of the nine cars to wear the moniker Old Yeller, perhaps the most remembered and most endearing of all was the second one, referred to simply as 'Old Yeller II'. (Its full name is the Old Yeller II Buick Special.) It had wide fenders, a huge nose, and a big 401 'Nailhead' Buick motor and was of course painted a bright yellow. It was simply like nothing coming out of the race shops in Italy, England or Germany at the time. It was practically a borderline hot rod with a dash of family sedan thrown in, courtesy of its big, wide, whitewall tires. Often referred to as a 'junkyard dog', it was nonetheless quite successful against cars with proper pedigrees, such as Ferraris and Maseratis. And in its time, it was raced by some of the biggest names in the sport.

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This note appears on the Old Yeller II website:

"In 1960 Old Yeller II was driven by many legendary drivers such as Carroll Shelby (Road America & Santa Barbara), Dan Gurney (Riverside International Raceway & Laguna Seca), Bob Bondurant, Billy Krause, Bobby Drake, Paul O'Shea, and Max Balchowsky."

Ernie Nagamatsu has been the caretaker of Old Yeller II for over 17 years now. Being a dentist by trade but a racer at heart, Nagamatsu has been taking steps to bring this bright yellow racer with the flaring front fenders and the big brute of a Buick motor back to the condition it first raced in, at the hands of Max Balchowsky himself.

We met Nagamatsu recently at the Rolex Vintage Festival at Lime Rock Park. His pride and joy was one of the cars featured in the 'Rolex Moments In Time' exhibit, situated on the midway. Nagamatsu actually had the car on the track for a few laps at speed before several mechanical maladies crept up, requiring the assistance of some very helpful people.

We spent some time talking with Nagamatsu about how he came to be the latest – and longest – caretaker of Old Yeller II, what he has experienced in his years of ownership, and the relationship he enjoyed with Max and Ina Balchowsky as both a friend and admirer.

"Back in the late 1960's or very early 1970's I was playing tennis with a guy (he drove a rare Osca with a special Max-Buick motor!) who was one of Max Balchowsky's buddies who would go with Max to the races, back when Max was still driving. He told me I have to meet Max because he is a really interesting guy. Soon after I met Max he and I became really good friends. And I can say that because, the way you knew you were a friend of his was you never got a bill from him for work he did on your cars. But it was a double edged sword because you had to figure out how much you owed him and then if you didn't pay him enough he would get insulted! He was like an off and on switch at times. You didn't know how he was feeling some of the time.

"Max had a knack for keeping people off guard. You never really knew if he was joking or not. Billy Krause – who raced several versions of the Old Yeller – was once asked if anyone ever really knew who Max was and he said, 'No. No one ever really knew who he was.'

"I do wish more people knew about Ina, however. She welded. She was a crew chief. She set up the chassis and she tuned the carburetor. She adjusted camber and caster. The chassis was amazing for that time. You could adjust everything. Ferraris out of the box didn't allow for too much adjusting. But Ina knew just what to do to set up the chassis. She even drew the chalk lines on the floor of the shop for the Old Yeller II chassis. In the Hot Rod magazines from 1951 through 1958 two people were often pictured in articles. Those two people were Max and Ina Balchowsky. Max did not leave out Ina.

"As for me, I'm just a guy who likes motorsports. I appreciate rare cars, cars that took a lot of time and effort to build. I remember in high school I did a report on the La Carrera Panamericana and in that race there was a Mercedes 300SL. I eventually wound up buying one – a 300SL Gull wing Coupe - for \$5,500! I bought it because I had studied it and I just felt it was one of the really rare cars out there. That purchase ended up getting me started on a journey into collecting and racing special cars. But I used that 300SL as my daily driver back then."

Nagamatsu is an active vintage racer but his wheel time comes in a 1964 Shelby Cobra he also purchased with Max's help. Old Yeller II is simply too valuable a part of history to be subjected to a rigorous season of racing, even if it is in a sport run by gentlemen who wish to wring all the fun out of their prized possessions without ever denting the fenders.

"Many years ago I stumbled onto a reasonably priced four cam 1964 Porsche Carrera that I got for a hard to believe price of \$3,500. Max had this Cobra that showed up at his shop every so often and I told him I would really like to try driving one someday. This guy who loved boats had it and I got to drive it after all. Max talked to the guy and I bought it. I sold the Porsche for \$11,000! This was after driving it for 5 years! Man, I thought I had made a killing! But I jumped into the Cobra for about \$15,000 and I am still racing that one today.

"At the Goodwood Revival Meeting, Indy driver Lyn St. James and I teamed up in the Cobra to run in the Tourist Trophy race, running a half an hour apiece. My Cobra is only one of two with an original Le Mans hardtop, made by AC. Dave McDonald drove it once but they took it off because he couldn't see and it was too hot in the car. The top became like a trophy and one of the FORD family guys had it. I bought it a few years ago. Of course we had the top on the car when we ran in the Tourist Trophy because they call the cars 'tin tops' and you had to have a top to run that race. The top I have is only one of two original tops and the other Le Mans hardtop (39PH) was in the pits next to us and was the one actually used in the Le Mans race. Both of the aluminum hardtops are really, really rare."

Nagamatsu also owns a special Porsche that logged many miles in SCCA competition, and all at the hands of just one man.

"I have a unique SCCA racer that is called the Kilpatrick Speedster. It is a 1958 Porsche Speedster but it is unique in that it was raced for over 33 years straight by one man. General Kilpatrick was his name and he started racing in 1963. I was attracted to this car because I knew his daughter and the year before he died – he suffered a cerebral hemorrhage while preparing the car for a race at Sears Point – she told me that he had said if anything happens to him that I should have the car. . I am not exactly sure why he mentioned my name to her but she contacted me and asked me if I wanted to buy the car. I bought it and raced it a few times but I soon learned the other guys racing in Porsches are pretty fast! Their motors are stronger and I just couldn't pedal fast enough. There is no substitute for cubic inches! That is what Max always used to say."

Coming back to the bright yellow jewel in his collection of historic automobiles, we asked Nagamatsu to review some of the history of Old Yeller II since the days Max and Ina first sold it.

"I have owned Old Yeller II for about 17 years now. I knew there was a story behind the car because Max had given me many of the artifacts related to the car over the years.

"The previous owner, Dave Gibb, restored and raced it a little bit but he wanted to sell it. He realized that Old Yeller II was a difficult car to drive and he preferred to race his Austin Seven instead. He put the car on the market for big bucks, listing it in the Hemmings periodical, but he knew that I was a good friend of Max and that I had all the programs, trophies, dash plaques, and lap charts and so on for the car. I even had letters, invoices, photos, and more about the car ...and about Max including business at the legendary Hollywood Motors garage and his racing history.

“Dave Gibb, over a period of about a year and a half or more, kept calling me to see if I was still interested. He wanted a lot of money and I just couldn't get it all together. Finally, at the last minute he called me and said, 'Ernie, we are friends. A guy is coming from Santa Barbara with a trailer. This is what he is paying. Do you want the car? If you do, you have got to tell me today.'

I replied, 'The check is in the mail!'

“When I was thinking about buying the car I got real interested in its history and started interviewing people about it. I interviewed Haskell Wexler, the famed cinematographer who won an academy award for 'Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf'. He was the silent sponsor of several Old Yellers. Max used to let him drive the cars on the street. I interviewed him, and others, to try and get a feel and a fix for what the Max Balchowsky story really was. This was all before I bought the car from Dave Gibb.

“I contacted every driver and owner of the car since Max first sold it. I missed only one along the way. And many of them sent me photos of the car when they owned it. One guy, Chuck Baldwin, out of Chicago, bought the car in 1961 and raced it at Elkhart Lake and in the Indianapolis area. From him, and from others, I have been given trophies and photographs, and, well, everyone who has been connected with the car has been very benevolent.”

History buffs of every age have welcomed the appearance of Old Yeller II at venues across North America and Europe. Nagamatsu has come to find the experience of being the car's shepherd as rewarding – or more so – than actually driving it.

“What I have to keep grappling with is the adulation people feel for this car. I always say it is a people's car. I mean, it was known to have the support of the fans from the hot rod groups and the drag racing groups. It is a blue collar, American motor underdog. It was sort of like a worker's car and we have tried to keep it that way to insure the legacy. We let the children sit in the car during the breaks from racing and it makes the parents so proud. We hand out pins and cards on the Old Yeller II and we try to be around the car most of the time.

“In the last five years things have happened that just overwhelmed me as the interest in the car has been enormous. For example, in 2000 at Goodwood, we were one of the few American cars invited. One of the key people who run the Festival of Speed came to me and said they wanted me to be a part of the opening festivities. I said 'sure' and then the Head Marshal came and I followed him to the point where he had me back the car between two other cars. I looked around me and, oh my GOD! On one side of me was the great yellow Renault Turbo with famous Rene Arnoux, and on the other side was a Formula One Ferrari with legendary F1 driver Jean Alesi! Old Yeller II was one of only nine cars picked to participate in the ceremonies! This scruffy 'junkyard dog', with the wide and bright white sidewall tires was sitting in between two significant and honored purebred race cars! I simply could not believe it!

“That weekend, in the London Times, Lord March was quoted as saying that the Old Yeller II was one of his favorites! The special one hour Documentary on the Old Yeller II that has been aired on Speed Channel many times has expanded the legacy of the car throughout the world.

Nagamatsu has been one very busy owner what with the car making appearances at such vaunted venues as the Rolex Vintage Festival at Lime Rock Park and the Rolex Monterey Historics at Laguna Seca, the Goodwood Festival of Speed in England, and soon, down under in Australia. For a homemade 'American Special' that was born in a California garage, Old Yeller II has certainly seen a lot of the world.

“Every year it seems we are doing something major with the car. By that I mean we are either working to return it to its former condition or we are showcasing the car at some premier event. We don’t run a regular vintage race schedule because we have been trying to get the car back to original condition. Right now it is more historically accurate to 1959 than at any time in its 47 year life. We are working on getting the handling better and we have new brakes and a new steering column going in. But we just never seem to have enough time. Right now, the car is in a container on its way to Australia for the "Tasman Revival Meeting" races to be held December 1-2-3, 2006.

“I’ve raced a lot of different kinds of cars, including Formula race cars, but I really have to pay attention with this car. It’s a handful. We will get there soon, and the car will be better. I did crash it one time. It was at Goodwood. One time a crew guy got in the car and went around a little bit and when he got out he said, ‘How do you drive this thing?’ I said, ‘Carefully.’ The car wanted to step out and, sure enough, as I was going through a high speed turn the rear just stepped out. The car rotated several times and I went backwards across the grass at high speed. I slapped the rear on the right and then slapped the front. It bounced off the tires and took a big crunch. That ended our day at Goodwood.”

The crash ended his day but Max’s foresight so many years ago helped keep Nagamatsu from ending his time with Old Yeller II (and the rest of us.)

“Max told the reporters way back when that he built the car so the front would crush in, or crumple, when an accident happened. Max drilled the upper Jaguar A-arms and had shortened non boxed lower A-arms so the component could crush back in the event of impact. He proved his design himself once when he hit an Armco barrier at Riverside. Afterwards he told the reporters, ‘See, I told you. It will only cost eight bucks to fix this thing.’ Max curved the Chrome Moly tubes to go around the driver so as to have some room in the event of a ‘T-Bone’ crash at the side of the car. Way back then, he was talking about safety well in advance of everyone else.

“Max had his shop near the Frank Kurtis shops where they built sturdy and solid cars for Indianapolis in the 1950’s. Those cars were too rigid and solid. If you hit something you would die in the impact. At Goodwood, that front right tire just crumpled back along with the folding of the front suspension and protected me from hard impact.”

We too are very thankful Max and Ina Balchowsky gave safety such serious consideration when building Old Yeller II. Nagamatsu will tell you he is often reminded of how much others are also thankful the car still exists and is being lovingly cared for by a fellow ‘car nut’ with a sense of history.

“A lot of fans know a lot about the car. Many of them know so much because of the documentary that ran on Speed Channel. They know little stories about the car and I think they really appreciate seeing the car in person. At Lime Rock recently, time after time people would come up to me and shake my hand and thank me for bringing the car to the track. That gives me goose bumps. Some of them hold my hand tight and I think ‘I really am a steward of this piece of history’. I am reminded that I have to be a responsible owner and also be the one to answer all their questions.

“I think people who don’t already know the history of this car want to know about its legacy. And what I have also found is that many people have their own story about this car. At the Monterey Historics Festival this year, one guy was watching me while I was talking to some people and he came up to me and asked if I was Ernie. I said yes and he took my hand, held it tightly and said,

'When I was a kid in Michigan, I spent my allowance on Road and Track magazine. I know everything about this car and followed it every month as it raced in 1960. The gentleman was emotional when he said, 'To see it in person has just made my weekend'. I thought, 'Oh my GOD! Here is this guy who gets to see his hero – in this case, a car – come to life.'

With the will of the fates in our favor, many more sportscar fans will have the opportunity to see this remarkable car 'come to life' in the future. In the loving and capable hands of Doctor Ernie Nagamatsu there is little reason to think Old Yeller II won't be around for some time to come.

"I'll probably never sell it because it is so much fun. I do want to get it handling better though. You know, we are only caretakers of things in our lives. We may have a deed, a document, or a pink slip but that only means we are caretakers of that specific thing in our lives. We do our best when it is our turn and we do try to enjoy the ride!"

And we are very glad Nagamatsu is letting us all go along for that ride.

