
1935 Duesenberg Model SJ

Lot sold	USD 0	Drive	LHD
Year of manufacture	1935	Condition	Used
Lot number	035	Location	
		Exterior colour	Other
		Car type	Other

Description

THE DUESENBERG SSJ

One of Two Short-Chassis, 400-Horsepower Special Speedsters

In 1926, Errett Lobban Cord acquired the Duesenberg Motors Company, an Indianapolis firm specializing in finely engineered road cars. More than anything else, Cord bought Duesenberg for its reputable name, which carried with it an air of international prestige and a genuine motorsport pedigree. After all, cars built by Fred and Augie Duesenberg had won both the Indianapolis 500 and the French Grand Prix.

Having secured Duesenberg, Cord set out to build his pièce de résistance - the most powerful, expensive, and exclusive automobile the world had ever seen. In 1928, he unveiled the magnificent Duesenberg Model J, a 265 hp luxury car whose chassis alone cost \$8,500. His timing could not have been worse.

The stock market crashed in 1929 and America was plunged into the Great Depression. Cord's sprawling automotive empire, which included Auburn, Cord, Duesenberg, and many other subsidiaries, began crumbling. To make matters worse, Fred Duesenberg, the visionary behind the Model J, died in July 1932.

In May 1935, Duesenberg management notified their remaining employees that production of the Model J would not continue. Since its introduction, just 428 Model Js had been sold and the company still had 22 unsold cars on its books. These figures fell far short of Cord's original goal of selling 500 examples of the Model J per year. Desperate times called for desperate measures. A master

promoter, Cord decided to make use of his Hollywood connections. He hoped that building two special Duesenbergs and placing them in the hands of Gary Cooper and Clark Gable – the most famous celebrities of the day – would generate enough publicity to sell the remaining Model Js.

With this directive, Harold Ames, president of Duesenberg Inc., tasked chief designer J. Herbert Newport Jr. with creating these new “special speedsters,” which were to be built on a shortened 125” wheelbase – the only two such chassis ever built. Today, these short-chassis speedsters are more widely known as the SSJs – an appellation coined in 1951 by J.L. Elbert, author of *Duesenberg: The Mightiest American Motor Car*.

One of Newport’s original concepts for the SSJ was a thoroughly modern, streamlined roadster that bore little resemblance to any previous Duesenberg. This design featured aerodynamic pontoon fenders, a rounded radiator shell, tear-drop step plates, and bi-plane bumpers. In *The Duesenberg*, the book he co-authored with Louis William Steinwedel, Newport recalls the development of the SSJ:

“Final designs were sometimes reached only after much trial and error (i.e., customer disapproval). In the process of creating the final SSJ roadster for Gary Cooper, this more modernistic approach was tried and rejected in favor of the more classic design which finally emerged.”

Newport’s final proposal for the SSJ was instantly recognizable as a Duesenberg. Not only did it incorporate the classic radiator and fenders, it featured a distinctive bodyline that recalled LeBaron’s sweep-panel phaeton, one of the most popular body styles for the Model J. The design also incorporated external exhaust pipes, a rear-mounted spare, and a rounded tail section, with no trunk or rumble seat, giving the SSJ the appearance of a traditional European sports car.

Central Manufacturing Company of Connersville, Indiana – one of the many businesses Cord acquired during the 1920s – constructed the SSJ’s sporting, lightweight coachwork. Although Central built these two bodies for Duesenberg, they have been attributed to “LaGrande,” a fictitious entity created to make the Midwestern subsidiary sound more dignified.

The SSJs were powered by the ultimate Model J engine – a supercharged straight eight with twin carburetors and special cast-aluminum “ram’s horn” intake manifolds. Only three Duesenbergs ever left the factory with this outrageous 400 hp engine: the two SSJs and Ab Jenkins’ Duesenberg Special, known as the “Mormon Meteor,” for which two engines were supplied. With more than four times the horsepower of a contemporary V-8 Ford, the SSJs were the most powerful production cars built before WWII. It wasn’t until the late 1950s that a car with so much power was seen again.

Completed in late 1935, the SSJs were virtually indistinguishable, apart from their colors and taillights. That December, E.L. Cord’s son Charles, who was then working as a salesman for the factory’s Los Angeles dealership on Wilshire Boulevard, personally delivered the SSJs to Gable and Cooper.

E.L. Cord had hoped that the arranged sales of the two SSJs would prove to be a successful publicity stunt, one that might save Duesenberg from the brink of collapse. But despite his extraordinary efforts, the spectacle drew little attention; no photo or film is known to survive that show Gable and Cooper with their Special Speedsters.

Though Cord’s Hollywood production was a flop, and Duesenberg became extinct, both SSJs survive today as automotive icons – the ultimate expressions of America’s greatest motorcar.

A STORY OF CONNOISSEURSHIP

The History of J-563, From 1935 to Present Day

In December 1935, Charles Cord presented Gary Cooper with this Duesenberg SSJ, identified by chassis no. 2594 and equipped with engine J-563. Duesenberg had built the two SSJs on spec and loaned them to Cooper and Clark Gable for a period of about six months. At the end of the term, the stars were offered these cars at the factory’s cost, approximately \$5,000. By all accounts this was an incredibly favorable deal, as Model Js typically retailed for \$15,000. Gable ultimately decided not to purchase his SSJ, so Duesenberg sold it to Georgie Stoll, an MGM music director. Cooper, however, greatly admired the powerful and stylish car. He bought this SSJ from Duesenberg, sweetening the deal by trading in his Derham Tourster against the discounted purchase price.

While it is known that Gable's SSJ was originally finished in Yukon Gold and Chocolate Brown, the original color scheme of Cooper's car has been the subject of some debate. This is likely the result of a color change that took place soon after delivery, as described in the Atlanta Constitution on December 15, 1935:

"Gary Cooper went home the other night with a new Duesenberg car in a sort of sand color. The next day he brought it back. His wife, Sandra Shaw, didn't like the shade. So there's a new paint job being done in a dark, dark green, with silver trimmings."

The exact duration of Cooper's ownership of the SSJ also remains a mystery. Several early images of J-563 place it in Los Angeles during the late 1930s. In fact, during this period, both SSJs were photographed at Bob Roberts' famous car dealership at the corner of Ivar and Selma, less than two miles from Paramount Pictures.

What is definitively known, however, is the name of the Duesenberg's second owner - Reese Lewellyn Milner. Reese Milner was born in 1916 to a prominent Los Angeles family residing in Berkeley Square, a glamorous, palm-tree-lined enclave southwest of downtown. Milner's mother, Winifred, was a member of the family that founded Lewellyn Iron Works, a firm that supplied much of the metal used to build Los Angeles at the turn of the 20th century.

Reese, known to his friends as "Bud," was a fabulously wealthy young man. He attended Stanford University, ran Milner Oil Company, and was active in his family's real estate holdings, which included the expansive Rancho La Vista in Ojai, California. In 1946, Milner married Ann Miller, the 500-taps-a-minute dancing star of Hollywood musicals.

Milner was in his early 20s when he owned the 400 hp Duesenberg and kept it for only a brief period before selling it to a Stanford classmate, Robert Stanley Dollar Jr. of San Francisco. Born in 1915, Dollar Jr. was, like Milner, the heir to an incredible fortune. His grandfather was a captain of the timber industry, and his father was the president of Dollar Steamship Lines, one of the world's largest corporations. In the late 1920s, Dollar Sr. purchased the Wychwood estate on Lake Tahoe's north shore and indulged in his passion for boating.

Dollar Jr. earned a distinguished racing record at Lake Tahoe in the 1930s and achieved a degree of international fame for his participation in European races like the 1935 Spreckels International Trophy, held on the River Seine in Paris.

A connoisseur of speedboats, he acquired and campaigned legendary racers such as Mercury and Baby Skipalong. In 1948, he built the boat of his dreams, Skip-a-Long of California, an aluminum hydroplane powered by a 2,000 hp Allison V-12 aircraft engine.

It is fitting that Stan Dollar Jr. would own a car like the SSJ - a powerful and sporting machine with a distinguished pedigree and provenance. A photograph of J-563 taken during Dollar's ownership was published in Fred Roe's classic *Duesenberg: The Pursuit of Perfection*; it reveals that the car's rear fenders were slightly modified prior to WWII.

Stan Dollar Jr. sold J-563 around 1940 to Ernest Kahl, a resident of Alameda, California's exclusive Gold Coast neighborhood. When the US Army deployed Kahl in 1941, the Duesenberg was sold to Glenn B. Shepard, a California citrus farmer and boat racer. In the mid-1940s, John Seelinger, a San Francisco-based mechanic and broker, refinished the SSJ in a two-tone color scheme, rebuilt the engine, and sold it to Donald Baldocchi, an industrial designer employed by Cornelius Sampson and Associates.

In late 1948 or early 1949, J-563 was sold to John Troka of Chicago, a Duesenberg enthusiast who bought and sold an estimated 75 Model Js. Soon after, the SSJ was acquired by pioneering collector D. Cameron Peck of Evanston, Illinois. Peck, who already owned the Gable SSJ, had a worthy new owner in mind for this rare, short-chassis Duesenberg - his f

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