

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, December 11, 2017

Curtis L. Blake (1917-): My friend in the antique car hobby is 100 years old. Much of the information in this article is taken from *Hemmings Motor News* of about 5 years ago, for which I thank the editors.

Curt Blake and his older brother Prestley, now 103, founded the Friendly Ice Cream Company in Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1935. Both liked antique automobiles, but Pres eventually gravitated toward Rolls Royces while Curt liked Fords and high-end cars, of which he owned about 75 made before World War II. At first, he restored his cars himself; in later years his cars had top restorations done by the best shops. Curt and his family used his cars on many Glidden Tours and on three "Trans-Con" tours in 1968, 1972, and 1976.

The brothers' parents, Herb and Ethel Blake, also liked automobiles. Owning mostly Model T Fords in the 1920s, they did the mechanical work themselves. If it was time to grind the valves (about every 1,000 miles), Ethel would remove the cylinder head and get the car ready so Herb could grind the valves when he came home from work at 5:00. Before bedtime, the car would be back together and ready to go again.

Curt bought his first car in 1928 at age 11, a 1921 Model T chassis for \$2.50. By the time he was 16, he owned five cars and two motorcycles. When the brothers started their first ice cream shop in 1935, they bought a 1930 Model A Ford touring car for \$40. In 1936, it was traded in for a new Ford V-8 phaeton with heater, radio, and white sidewall tires. The cost: \$620. The following year they traded for a similar '37 model and also bought a 60-H.P. V-8, which they didn't like because of deficient power. In 1939, they bought two new Ford convertible sedans and then two '40 Mercurys. In 1941, they purchased a '41 Ford Station Wagon in which to haul ice cream. Finally before World War II, they owned a '41 Buick convertible and a '42 Chevy. When the number of Friendly's Ice Cream stores expanded from two at the end of World War II to 625 in the late 1970s, the company owned a fleet of 75 Ford and Mack trucks and 100 trailers.

Friendly's and the brothers who founded it is an American success story of the 20th century. The proceeds from their first shop on opening day in 1935 was \$27.60, and in the first year they had grossed over \$7,000 with no employees. During store hours one or both would serve the customers, and after the store closed, they would alternate in making ice cream for the next day. With only two stores, when Curt returned from the service in 1945, the chain was expanded throughout New England and then as far south as Virginia and west to Illinois. The company was sold to Hershey Foods in 1979 for \$164 million, and it was resold nine years later for \$375 million.

Curt's first "antique car" was a 1909 Reo he bought in 1948 for \$350, in which he had \$790 invested when it was completely restored. Then he bought a 1903 curved-dash Oldsmobile that was restored by the renowned curved-dash expert George Green. He took this car to the Expo in Brussels in 1958 and drove it around the British Isles before returning home on the *Queen Mary*. He owned a 1906 Model F Stanley restored by Calvin Holmes, which he drove from his home to Cape Cod and return for a steam car tour in 1966. He liked American high-end cars like Pierce-Arrows and Packards. In 1957, Curt and his father, Herb, joined six of us traveling in three Stanleys at Roxbury, New York, where we had opportunities for lengthy chats. They drove from Springfield (MA) in Curt's '36 Ford phaeton. I rode with him at Williamsburg that same year on the Glidden Tour in a beautifully restored 1920 Pierce. In 1960, Curt and his wife Aileen were members of AACA's 25th Anniversary Tour of Europe, which I operated (as a travel agent) for the Club. Ruth and I enjoyed a short cruise on his yacht at Northeast Harbor, Maine, while on a steam car tour in 1991. At the high point, he owned about 75 antique cars but has now reduced the number to less than 10. Still one of his favorites is that '03 curved-dash Olds. I wish the Blake brothers continued years of happiness in their second century.